

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: *AKWANTUO: PLIGHT OF THE IMMIGRANT*

Mustapha Braimah, Master of Fine Arts, 2018

Thesis directed by: Associate Professor, Maura Keefe, School of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies

Akwantuo: Plight of The Immigrant was an evening-length dance concert performed March 9, 10 and 11, 2018, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree from University of Maryland's School of Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies. This paper addresses the creation of the original piece, which blends African and contemporary dance with Ghanaian dance theatre. These styles have been linked to the ramifications of the development of dance in Ghana before and after independence. The project situates the choreographer's personal experience arriving from Ghana at a US airport. This work tackles the feeling of vulnerability, injustice, frustration, humiliation, disappointment and sheer terror of being at someone else's mercy when being denied a visa or entry into the United States of America. In sum, this paper is a documentation demonstrating the inspiration, research, movement motif, creative process, and conception of the project.

AKWANTUO: PLIGHT OF THE IMMIGRANT

by

Mustapha Braimah

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Maura Keefe, Chair
Professor Alvin Mayes
Professor Adriane Fang
Professor Patrik Widrig

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Dedication

This is written in memory and celebration Prof. Mawere Opoku, Prof. Ofotsu Adinku, and Prof. F. Nii Yartey. This research would have not been possible without the immense contributions and support from many great people. I express my sincere appreciation and thanks to all of them.

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To my Siblings; Sadat Braimah, Fati Braimah, Kwesi Banning Acheampong and Kofi Adjei Acheampong

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“To Professor F. Nii Yartey, whose legacy and advice led me to pursue dance in higher education”

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Introduction: The Art of Being

I was born in Akim-Tafo in the Eastern Region of Ghana, West Africa. Tafo was a village without electricity so after sunset, the young men and women gather around the ever-flaming bonfire to witness storytelling about etiquette and morals of life, told by some specific elders selected by the chief¹. These stories are told with songs, dance and instrumental accompaniment. At the end of every story there is a theme that is echoed by the audience in a form of “call and response” song². These songs are mostly infused with specific gestural movements. I was drawn to and became interested in the songs and instruments played at these gatherings, so I volunteered for the role of a song caller and drummer. My new role lasted for barely a year when we moved to Accra, the capital city of Ghana because of my mother’s government posting after she graduated as a medical nurse.

Accra is a cosmopolitan city. I arrived there when I was about eight years old. I was enrolled in Ga West District Council Middle School, but I initially felt uncomfortable because I could not speak either English or Ga language, all I spoke was Twi, which I had inherited from the land of my birth. About a year later, I began to understand both new languages and was able to engage people in communication on a regular basis. I started becoming more involved in the community activities. In

¹ Selection of elders is based on elders who are of good societal morals and etiquette. Someone who is always present at communal labor, a leader and welcoming individual

² Call and response song is a musical form where there is a distinct phrase and the second phrase is a direct repetition of the first verse. In a group of singers, there is usually one caller for the first phrase and the rest will respond by repeating the caller’s lyrics.

Accra homes are equipped with electricity and most have television sets. I used to tell my mother about how I missed the storytelling sessions in Akim-Tafo, especially the songs and playing drums. After several weeks of nostalgia, my mother got a television set and a VHS player with Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* VHS tape.



Fig. 1 Michael Jackson's VHS tape. Album: *Dangerous*(November 26, 1991)

I fell in love with all the songs on this album. In time, I started noticing the movements to the beat. I started mimicking some of the steps and strived to get it right. Sometimes, I saw myself as Michael Jackson. I became good at retaining and executing the choreography in most of the videos.

Soon I started attending the Michael Jackson Dance Competition and two years in a row (1995 and 1996) I emerged the winner and was nicknamed "*Micky Jacko.*" I was featured in several music videos and commercial advertisements and I became quite popular in my community. This is how my dance journey began. Even while competing at Michael Jackson, I remained interested in the traditional folk singing and dancing and during one of my video shoots for the Ministry of

Culture, I met then Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Professor F. Nii Yartey and the company at the studios of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC). I saw the group performing the Adowa Dance and singing some of the songs I learned from my village when I was a child.³ I was excited and entranced by the group. I spoke to Nii Yartey about my desire to join the group. He advised me to focus on my education first. He discussed that once I am able to finish my high school education, the company would welcome me with open arms. His words lingered and knowing that I would be able to join the company motivated me to do better in school.

I started going to the Ghana Dance Ensemble's residency every weekend at the National Theater of Ghana. My main goal was to join this internationally renowned company. In 2008, I received a phone call from the Artistic Director asking me to be a part of the company and *Noyam* African Dance Institute, also based in Accra and directed by Nii Yartey—it was a dream come true. I started working with the company while obtaining my BFA degree. The company, through Nii Yartey, taught me so much as a dancer and educator.

I toured sub-Saharan Africa with Ghana Dance Ensemble in 2009. I have performed dance and drum repertory from numerous African ethnic groups, collaborated with international artists and participated in local cultural exchanges in more than 32 African countries. Touring provided me with a wealth of repertory, movement vocabulary, and theatrical approaches from across the whole of Africa. I

³Adowa, the most popular dance of the Akan speaking people of Ghana, is inspired by the movements from an antelope that, based on legend, saved the life of Queenmother, Abrewa Tutuwa. It's considered a women's dance and is performed at ceremonies and festivals.

continue to draw from these experiences in teaching African based technique, repertory, choreography, and percussion classes.

I graduated with a BFA in Dance in 2010 from the University of Ghana. I spent a year as a Teaching Assistant while working with the G.D.E and *Noyam* intermittently. Then in the summer, I attended the American Dance Festival (ADF) in Durham, North Carolina. Coming to North Carolina was a tedious process for me. I was supposed to be attending the six-week school program but I could not get there until two weeks into the program. I was awarded the stagecraft apprentice scholarship with valid documentation but when I arrived at the embassy I was denied by the consular for no apparent reason. This is the conversation that transpired between me and the consul:

Me: Good morning!

Consul: Where are you travelling to and for what reason, Sir?

Me: I am attending the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina

Consul: (With a stern face going through my documents) I am sorry, I am not able to give you a visa today (handing me a paper telling I should reapply).

I was in shock because prior to this denial, I had been denied once before when I was touring with the Ghana Dance Ensemble and got invited to perform in Texas. I reapplied and was issued a visa this time. When I arrived in Durham, the ADF six-week school program, had already commenced so I had a one-on-one Orientation with Nicole Wasserman who was then the program/students facilitator. She did not understand when I told her I was denied a visa twice. She just could not

connect the dots. It did not make sense to her. This experience is the foundation for my research and where my story begins.

The introduction of this paper reveals my background and decision to choreograph on the subject of immigration while an immigrant in the United States of America. Chapter One unpacks extensive background research into historical development of dance in post-independence Ghana. It also enumerates dance forms, institutions and individuals that inspired me to be the artist that I am. This chapter is the heart of this paper as I purport to dispel stereotypes by revealing diverse dance forms that exist in Ghana.⁴ Chapter Two details the project, revealing the chronological retelling of the piece. Chapter Three documents my creative process and choreographic choices as well as how I built the piece. It highlights the rehearsal process and how I arrived at the decision to use five performers including me. Chapter Four investigates the post-show aftermath, critical reflection, and future applications. This thesis is based on personal experience of the choreographer; who I am is and what has accelerated my decision to choose immigration as a choreographic subject.

Why Immigration?

This project about immigration and the complexities of crossing borders includes boiling issues with which I have personal experience. As a young child

⁴ This chapter seeks to untangle my skills and abilities as an artist/scholar. I have always been perceived as the “African Dancer” who only does traditional forms. I am creating an opportunity for my reader to know about all the different styles I teach and employ in my choreographic works, which this project sums it up in a profound way.

growing up in Ghana, West Africa, I was raised by a single mother, Margaret Asamoah who worked as a medical nurse. We were being transferred almost every couple of years. My mother became frustrated and complained about the frequent *migration* orders by the government. This period was the first time I heard the word *migrant*. By virtue of my mother's attitude, I had always perceived the word as negative until I was eleven years old. In 1994, my mother told me a story about the year I was born and what was going on at the time. She told me a story about Ghana in general. She started by saying "the year 1983 perhaps was the harshest year for me and Ghana's modern history...I conceived you and migrated all over the place to survive the drought." Between 1981 and 1983, Ghana was hit by a severe drought causing famine, which led to food and water shortages.⁵ The situation also caused families to eke out livelihoods by trading their most expensive clothes and jewels for food and water.

After her lecture, I repeatedly asked her about the word "immigration" and finally realized that it is not a bad thing to migrate after all. She explained that migration happens in many forms; it all depends on the motivation behind it. I have also learned that circumstances cause people to migrate even though they are aware of venturing into the unknown.⁶ People migrate to seek refuge somewhere they deem safe. For example, the UNHCR refugee agency in 2015 reported that there are about 65.3 million displaced people seeking refuge for various situations in their home countries.⁷

⁵ I was born in the year 1983

⁶ Eggers, Dave. 2006. *What is the What*. San Francisco, California: McSweeney's.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2015. *Global Trends Force Displacement*. February 12. Accessed February 20, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/>

Because Ghana has been categorized as one of the most peaceful and politically stable countries in Africa, there are very few Ghanaian refugees at this point. The 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, affirmed this assertion and called on other African countries to emulate Ghana in their quest of modeling democracy. With that said, the aforementioned factors are not enough to be granted visa or admission to the United States. One has to be Ghanaian-Plus to fit in the category for visa acquisition.⁸ By demonstrating my citizenship as a Ghanaian with all legal documents is not enough. Birth certificate, passport, and other government issued Identification documents will not be enough for a typical Ghanaian to acquire a visa.

The diagram below depicts a comparison of visa refusal rates by the US State Department. Ghana is one of the countries (with 63 percentile) in Africa where most visa applications are denied.⁹

⁸ I am creating this word deliberately and using this term consciously to describe a Ghanaian with a prestigious status. People who acquire visa with no problem are those of the political class, business tycoons or those affiliated with prestigious institutions. I do not belong to any of the above-mentioned group of people hence, my toil in acquiring a visa and going through TSA to enter the US.

⁹ Times, New York. 2017. *The New York Times*. March 16. Accessed January 29, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/16/us/visa-process-united-states.html>.

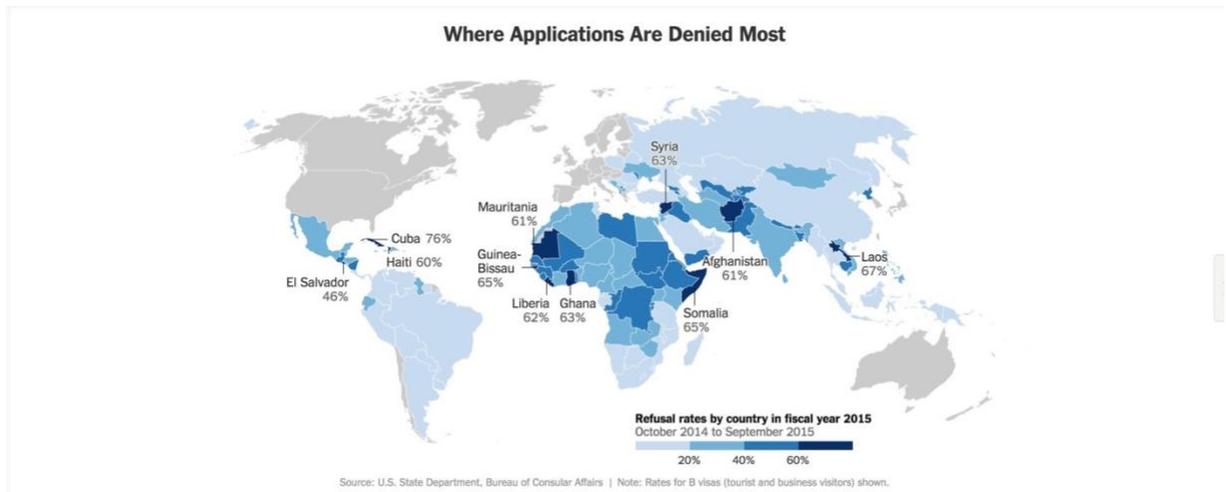


Fig 2. Showing countries where visas are denied most. Source: US State Dept., Bureau of Consular Affairs

The investigation for this project has revealed what baffled me nine years ago. I toured with the Ghana Dance Ensemble and performed in many African countries, traveling without obstructions until the company applied for a visa to travel to the United States. I was taken by surprise when we were invited to perform at The University of Texas in Austin and were denied visas. Out of 30 company members, visas were granted to only three people (Director, Deputy Director, and Stage Manager) because they had the Ghanaian-Plus status. The trip had to be canceled because the administrators were not the performers and the US embassy did not take that into consideration. On rare occasions when a visa is issued, upon arrival at the airport, American customs officers do an additional round of behind-the-scenes screening. One is questioned by US Homeland Security officers and may be screened again. I remember being detained on two occasions at the JFK airport. I was held in a transparent room for about twelve hours while they go through my background. I was directed to several TSA kiosks to be asked the same questions repeatedly. These events are what and why I am dancing about immigration. This is why I am using my

artistic skill and collaboration to reveal the situation to a predominantly American audience member who may or may not know about these obstacles.

I have been searching for a platform to start a conversation ever since the visa denial of the Ghana Dance Company. I have looked for a platform where I will be heard and visible in examining the recurring cycle. Getting a visa to visit or enter the US is a long and extensive process, yet it is not guaranteed that a visa will be issued. For me, the entire visa application process for the typical Ghanaian begs for a lot of questions such as: has this process deterred many young Africans from applying and going for an interview at a US consulate? What is the actual process that a Ghanaian must follow to avoid visa denial? The whole process is a tedious, confusing yet expensive. I remember presenting all necessary documents to the consul and yet I was refused. This partially addresses my curiosity about the death of some Africans on the Sahara Desert while trying to travel to European countries.

Figure 2 shows countries where most visa applications are denied. It is reported that people from underdeveloped countries embark on a dangerous journey to Europe and America in search of a better life.¹⁰ This is a true statement as I have some friends who endured the ordeal of attempting or embarking on this perilous journey. I listened to Zambian economist and writer Dambisa Moyo launch her book called *Dead Aid*.¹¹ In her book she speaks about how former colonies are being given aid by the west and how this generous gesture affects the economy of African

¹⁰ Udeze, Bona. 2009. *Why Africa?: A continent in a Dilemma of unanswered question*. Bloomington: Xlibris Publishing Company.

¹¹ Moyo, Dambisa. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

countries.¹² She lamented that aid is killing Africa. She posed many questions: Why is it that Africa alone among the continents seems to be locked into a cycle of dysfunction? Why is it that out of all the continents in the world Africa seems unable to convincingly get its foot on the economic ladder? Why in a recent survey did seven out of the top ten “failed states” hail from that continent? Are Africa’s people universally more incapable? What is it about Africa that holds it back, that seems to render it incapable of joining the rest of the globe in the twenty-first century?.¹³ I realized that visa applications are not as stressful and tedious process to countries whose economy is not in a deplorable state. These are questions for an economist but spark concerns for me as an artist. Reading her work also stimulated my creative inquiry which goes a long way to typify that economic analysis goes beyond this project, *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*.

As an artist born and bred in Ghana, to whom the above questions matter, I have always looked forward to revealing the unknown and mysterious immigration process Africans go through to finally arrive in the United States. I have been waiting for the slightest opportunity...and the time is now.

¹² I listened to this interview on BBC Ghana in Accra in June 2015

¹³ Moyo, Dambisa. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Chapter 1: Background Research

This chapter delves into the primary sources I drew upon while creating *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. It also points to the kind of artist I have developed into and the individual(s) I tend to gravitate towards in terms of teaching, performance, choreography, and my artistry as a whole. My research explores a diverse scope of artists, institutions and dance disciplines that has inspired me as an artist-scholar. These disciplines include, colonialism, post colonialism, political independence, identity and harmful stereotypes about Ghana and Africa at large. In four sections, “Progress of Dance in Post-independence Ghana,” “My time with Nii Yartey: *Noyam* African Dance Institute,” “Self-Discovery: Becoming a Dancer,” and “Dance Forms that Influenced *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*,” my goal is to cement my identity and conceptual foundation of the thesis project. This project is informed by the experiences I have gained in my dance journey growing up in Ghana and immigrating to the United States.

Progression of Dance in Post-Independence Ghana

I first lay out a brief history to evoke the context in which my dance life began, by examining how the history or context of Ghana shaped dance and then in turn shaped your personal experience of dance. My focus is on Ghana, a British colony for 113 years and the first black African nation to obtain its independence

from Great Britain in 1957. After decades of military rule, Ghana is now in its 4th Republic and working towards democracy.¹⁴

Globally, in the past fifteen years or so, a new dance form is emerging from the footprints of the previous phases of dance developments in their respective countries. This form is being referred to as “Contemporary African Dance” in many parts of the continent and beyond. The term “contemporary” by its definition can be ambiguous, for it refers to present day ideas, and does not reflect any tangible traits or characteristics of artistic presentation. In my opinion, the terms “contemporary” and “modern” are not synonymous and are used to define different genres of dance.

Further, Nii-Yartey in his attempt to explain Contemporary African Dance, states that:

What the word “contemporary” represents here, is in many ways different in the African context from what pertains in the Western parlance. Whereas Western Contemporary dance seeks to deviate from its traditional roots, Contemporary African Dance on the other hand, is being created from the traditional and classical dance traditions of Africa. Furthermore, its language, inspiration, content and symbols are drawn from the African experience.¹⁵

Nii-Yartey’s explanation that Contemporary African Dance draws its existence from the dance traditions of Africa seems to support the statements of Nkrumah, Opoku and Adinku. Some of the pioneers, whose writings, choreographic works and performances are helping to push the artistic boundaries in the area of Contemporary African Dance in their respective countries include, Germaine Acogny of Senegal, Alphonse Tierou and Adiatu Massidi of Côte d’Ivoire; Kofi Koko of Benin; and

¹⁴ Diamond, Larry. 2011. "Democracy’s Third Wave Today." *Current history* 209-307.

¹⁵ Nii-Yartey, F. (2009). Principles of African Choreography. In J. Butterworth, & L. Wildschut, *Contemporary Choreography* (pp. 254-268). Oxon: Routledge.

Kariamuwelsh of the USA.¹⁶ The way these artists have contributed to the evolution of “Contemporary African Dance” is ingrained in both my teaching and performance approach to art education as well as choreography.

Even though dance and other traditional art forms in Ghana suffered a great deal during the colonial period¹⁷, the introduction of conventional theatre practices has fostered a steady development of dance activities in Ghana. This was achieved through careful application of theatrical conventions, technical resources alongside existing traditional norms and practices, spearheaded by pioneers like Mawere-Opoku, Saka Acquaye and others. In a conversation with Prof. Ofotsu Adinku during my undergraduate degree at the University of Ghana, he lamented that the colonial master looked down upon the dance and choreography in Ghana. He explained that the newer generations are fortunate to create with infinite ideas and concepts. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that, until the 1960s the performing arts in Ghana and other colonized African countries were regulated by the erstwhile colonizer. It was not until post-independence that the Ghana Dance Ensemble was established with Mawere Opoku as the Artistic Director. Saka Acquaye was in theater, they both created works that highlighted African culture and values.

This trend ushered in the development of new artistic and creative momentum resulting in the proliferation of experimental dance at different levels in the country (which includes Contemporary African Dance). Out of this has emerged a dance

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Nkrumah, K. (1970). *Africa Must Unite*. New York:: International Publishers.

company, which Nii-Yartey refers to as “*Noyam*.”¹⁸ Nii –Yartey spent his life developing *Noyam* through many years of research and experiments. He believes that the current educated and enlightened choreographer has the responsibility to help create dance forms that speak to his or her generation based on both old and new experiences to be inherited by future generations.

In pursuit of this conviction, Nii-Yartey established the *Noyam* Contemporary African Dance Project in 1998. In 2001, The *Noyam* African Institute was fully established as a Dance Institute with endorsement by the Ghana Education Service as the first privately operated dance school of its kind in Ghana.¹⁹ “*Noyam*,” represents Ghana’s version of Contemporary African Dance, as well as the techniques of this dance form.

The *Noyam* company gave opportunity to young and enthusiastic dancers and musicians who did not have formal education to thrive in the dance world. Others in dance academia, like me, also benefitted immensely from the training and discipline *Noyam* modeled in Ghana. I was a member of *Noyam* as a percussionist, musician, and dancer for nearly a decade. While at *Noyam*, I interacted with several world-renowned African artists including Germaine Acogny of Senegal/Benin. Germaine whom I discussed in Chapter 3, is one of the most important choreographers to ever emerge on the continent of Africa. She has received many accolades including “mother of Contemporary African dance” from poet and ex-president of the republic

¹⁸ A Ga Adamgbe language expression meaning, moving-on or development. That is the name he adopted for his Company. Noyam African Dance Institute

¹⁹ Francis Nii-Yartey, ‘The Performing Arts: Identity and the new Social Paradigm’, in *Helen Leure et al. (eds), Identity Meets Nationality: Voice from the Humanities* (Legon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2011)

of Senegal, Léopold Sedar Senghor. She is one of the people who looked at indigenous traditional dances and its surroundings with a new perspective.

The style and vocabulary of *Noyam* are based on the philosophy that the human body is a tool for the creation and diffusion of dance and it should not be limited in its ability to absorb movements wherever they come from.²⁰ The main objective of the establishment of *Noyam* is to develop new and innovative ways of creating, teaching and presenting African dance. This is done through a unique and conscious blend of the old and new dance forms in the African creative philosophy and principles; the use of improvisation; repetition, multiple movements, circular images, and symbolism; the use of conventional dramatic elements, and modern artistic ideas among others. All these opened new chapters in my artistry. I was exposed to possibilities and avenues to think beyond the horizon as an artist. This is what has guided me in crafting *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*.

My Time with Nii Yartey: *Noyam* African Dance Institute

In this section I will discuss *Noyam* African Dance Institute, specifically highlighting the founder, Nii Yartey, and some of the major techniques and philosophies I learned under his tutelage and mentorship. As I illustrate below, Nii Yartey's training methods guided my own approach to teaching, performance and

²⁰ *ibid*

choreography by deepening my understanding of Contemporary African Dance and projecting my identity as a reflective of my work.

Over the fifteen or more years since the *Noyam* African Dance Institute has been in existence, the field of Contemporary African Dance in Ghana has thrived through the many national and international performances. The Institute started with four males and one female students and later that year the number rose to twelve – three females and nine males, all Ghanaians. In addition to the Ghanaian students, many foreign students attended the institution at different times.

The teaching structure of *Noyam* is guided by Nii-Yartey's belief that if young choreographers are exposed to the right attitude, practical and theoretical background in Traditional African Dance and other global dance ideas, they can discover and identify their skills in creating Contemporary African Dance. The first part of the training was to build a strong Traditional and Neo-Traditional Dance background, so teachers/artists from the traditional areas of Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon as well as from the maiden Ghana Dance Ensemble, were invited to train the students.

To gain academic insight and understanding into the aesthetics and performance philosophies of various traditional dances, the students also go through theory classes. Scholars and experts were brought to teach practical and theoretical aspects of theatre performance art. Under the notion that the human body should not be limited in its ability to express an array of movements, researchers and teachers were also brought from overseas to work with the students. In this regard, I was not only exposed to dance vocabularies from Ghana and a host of African countries like South Africa, Mali, Cameroon, and Senegal, but also dance forms like ballet, jazz,

modern dance, hip-hop and, butoh. By the end of my three-year training session, my worldview and capacity with respect to dance and performance art had significantly broadened. I remember Nii-Yartey choreographed *Noyam*'s first Contemporary African Dance piece, *Koom*²¹. The creation of *Koom* combined the essential traditional performance ideas like symbolism, circular imagery, abstraction, proverbs, metaphors, and movement isolation; elements that form the core of *Noyam* choreographic approach. These ideologies are ingrained *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. Although both pieces tackle different issues, their process is related in terms philosophical underpinnings.

Koom, which literally means water in the “*Dagbani*” language of Northern Ghana, follows the journey of four men in their quest for water. Some traditional performance elements in *Koom* include the metaphorical use of water to represent knowledge, power, wealth, etc. The young men spend energy and time, going through hardships and conflicts looking for water which they waste by splashing it and throwing it into the air. Nii-Yartey incorporated stylized traditional dance movement motifs and textures from dances like *Bawaa*, *Wong*, *Agbekor* and, *Fontomfrom* to develop *Koom* choreography. *Koom*, being the first Contemporary African Dance piece, introduced a completely different and unique movement in its performance. This is where I got the prowess and inspiration in crafting *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. I deconstructed dances such as *I Adzogbo*, *Gazo*, and *Agbekor*.

²¹ Before *Koom*, Nii-Yartey experimented with the National Dance Company to create *Sal-Yeda*, arguably Ghana's first Contemporary African Dance piece. *Koom* was premiered in 1999 at Nii Yartey's residence in Madina, Accra before the National Theatre of Ghana.

In terms of my movement execution and reference to *Koom*, I maintained African dance textures like the “undulating movement of the spine”²² and the use of curved and angular shaped body postures. I remember Nii Yartey used to tell me not to point my feet as it defeats the African philosophy of performance. Incorporating ideas from traditional rituals and events, the dancers (referred to as “immigrants”) perform a rendition of a traditional African dance in a Ghanaian setting. The piece started with five immigrants coming through an airport. One was denied entry. The others had hopes of getting in, which was far from certain. It ends with all five immigrants being denied entry at a US airport, but the irony is that their journey takes them back where they started with the use of the *Adinkra* symbols (This will be detailed in chapter two). *Koom* had similar philosophical attributes and form in terms of choreography.

My informal discussions with Nii-Yartey, he revealed that the problem of “brain drain”²³ in Ghana seems to be one of his great concerns. The performers in *Koom* seem to echo this concern when they waste the water that they fought so hard to find – thus being forced to go back to where they started. The above theme is evident in other works by Noyam; like the *Power of dance* and *Threshold*. Even though it employs the same choreographic approach as *Koom*, *Sochenda* (the traveler) which Nii-Yartey says was choreographed in celebration of departed ones can be described as an emotionally charged piece and makes extensive use of facial expressions (with some of the performers even in tears). These philosophies were

²² Acogny, G. (1988). *African Dance*. Frankfurt: Verlag Dieter Fricke.

²³ A term generally used to describe the loss of human resource to other countries

employed in my thesis concert. I had a video projection of the performers in tears to spark and accelerate the audience member empathy into the performance. In some cases, I invite my dancers to employ the use of facial expressions to highlight their various characters.

I got feedback from some of the faculty at TDPS after they saw my thesis concert that facial expressions defeat some of the intentions of the dance. Therefore, the body should be able to express any feeling without having to use the face.²⁴

Noyam is of the opinion that movement has a special place and space in the communication of Contemporary African Dance idea. Therefore, it enhances the final artistic product provided they are used appropriately. Nii-Yartey goes further to elaborate that every dance has its own life, and once the dancers understand and connect to the emotional state of the dance, their facial expressions will synchronize with that of the emotional requirements of the dance.

From performance feedback, and interactions with various dancers and choreographers both locally and internationally, there are growing concerns as to whether Contemporary African Dance should have a defined and consciously developed form of its own or should be left to the interpretation of the choreographer. However, it is the view of practitioners like Nii-Yartey, Acogny, and others that for an art form to gain respect, it must have some defined structures. As much as freedom is given to the choreographer, just as in the traditional dances, a character has to be defined so that modern choreographers do not just mix and match ideas and call it Contemporary African Dance. Without firm guidelines and structures to set the right

²⁴ Sara Pearson revealed during a conversation in MFA choreography class (2015).

parameters, Contemporary African Dance will be like “giving birth to a child without giving it a name and the necessary family upbringing”²⁵ What Nii-Yartey is advocating may seem to invade the space and freedom of the artist; but there can be some merit to his insistence on definitive structures to characterize this form in the case of other art forms of the world.

Even though there are many stylistic approaches to choreographing, Nii-Yartey reveals two general ideas for creating Contemporary African Dance choreography. He describes the first as having the formal characteristics of *Sochenda* or *Koom* by *Noyam*, and *Ori* by Ijodee of Nigeria, where most of the resource and inspiration relating to movement structure, costume color and texture, music, symbols and images are drawn from the traditional African culture and the second, where the ideas are mainly reflective of western influences.

Nii-Yartey believes that choreographers should be conversant with the first approach where almost all the materials are essentially African, before the experiment with the latter. The first approach is when you receive stimuli and the latter is making final decisions on choreographic material. Nii-Yartey’s advice seems reminiscent of Nkrumah’s postulations on the African genius, where he asserts that unlike Senghor’s idea on negritude, it is not the image which expresses Africa, but a holistic demonstration of all aspects of African culture. In this regard, Nkrumah states that:

When I speak of African genius, I mean something different from negritude, something not apologetic, but dynamic.... I do not mean a vague brotherhood based on a criterion of colour, or on the idea that Africans have no reasoning but only sensitivity. By the African genius I mean something positive, the efficiency and

²⁵ A personal conversation with Nii Yartey at the University of Ghana campus, while I was studying for my BFA, Dance

validity of our traditional statecraft, our highly developed code of morals, our hospitality and our purposeful energy.²⁶

From Nkrumah's and Nii-Yartey's approach, it is evident that for choreography to qualify as a Contemporary African Dance, there must be recognizable African elements in the creation of the work. The final work has to be informed by the socio-cultural structures that have influenced the symbols, codes, vocabulary and themes found in Africa's traditional performance aesthetics.

Self-Discovery: Becoming a Dance Educator

I became more comfortable in the performing arts upon realizing the power of being creative is infinite. Professor Nii Yartey pushed me to do more and become mentors to the generations to come. He explained how I can dig deeper into the traditional dances and use those skills to inform our original creation. He would often mention to me that culture evolves and calls for the need as artists to utilize the evolution phenomenon.

I grew to understand that indeed culture is not static; it is dynamic. I deeply understand the inter-ethnic exchange and cannot dispute the fact that over the centuries Africans have borrowed ideas and philosophies as they interacted with one another, and then synthesized them to serve their developmental and artistic needs.²⁷

The migration of the "hour glass drum" from Northern Ghana, to the South and *Fontomfrom* and *Atumpan* drums from the south to the northern regions of Ghana are

²⁶ Nkrumah, Kwame. 1970. *Africa Must Unite*. New York:: International Publishers.—.1967. *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah*. London: PANAF BOOKS LTD.

²⁷ Opoku, A. M. (2005). "The African Choreographer's" Problems. In I. Etwaroo, *Dances of our Ancestors* (pp. 5-12). Pennsylvania

evidence of how people interacted and shared across ethnicities. As Africa and the world continue to undergo the same kinds of cross-cultural interaction on a faster and much larger scale, perceptions are broadened and expressions like “indigenous culture” are becoming challenging or ambiguous to define.

The progression of dance in Ghana while growing up did not only changed my perceptions on how dance is created, presented, and patronized, but have also generated deep connection and curiosity about finding my artistic voice. There are approximately twenty public universities in Ghana, but the University of Ghana has enjoyed a monopoly of power in terms of dance studies in higher education. In the past couple of years, almost all public and private universities have started dance programs and this phenomenon is competing with the monopoly power that the University of Ghana has enjoyed.

This initiative by the Ministry will facilitate the escalation of dance development in Ghana. This means that the country will have increasing numbers of people investing in the arts. Dance will develop significantly in a short amount of time. Hopefully, there will be more people who will question the fundamental role the traditional genre has played and how we as artists can expand on the existing status quo. Being a part of the Ghanaian community and a perspicacious traditional dancer, I have mostly questioned how we can push the envelope to unravel the reliance on the traditional dance form.

The questions I myself and few of my colleagues in Ghana have asked are: should our traditional dances remain the way they are? Do we as African artists modify them to reflect the aspirations, experiences, and vision of today? I hold the

conviction that artists of indigenous or traditional background must keep up with the ever-evolving trend of the dances so that our style is not static but rather inspiring for the next generation. My challenge in this project is to look at this emerging new dance form, in the light of the extensive work being done by the *Noyam* African Dance Institute. *Noyam*'s position as the torchbearers of Contemporary African Dance in Ghana will provide a strong basis for my research investigation and movement inquiry.

Perhaps, with the exception of research conducted in our traditional forms spanning over the past sixty years by J.H Nketia, Mawere-Opoku, Ofofu Adinku, Nii-Yartey and a few others with similar views on dance development in Ghana, very little has been done to investigate the creative process in as far as “personalized” dance vocabulary is concerned, especially the area of Contemporary African Dance in Ghana. Therefore, the situation begs for an epistemological inquiry into the relationship between the researcher and the research to open doors for a contemporary inquiry. With the exception of Nii Yartey and Adinku, the aforementioned writers and researchers have relied heavily on the traditional dances and I think it is time to shift the paradigm.

There is an opportunity to analyze the creative philosophy and artistic process of the work of *Noyam* through the development of a choreographic production, which will unite my experiences and the work of *Noyam* as well as dance program in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) at the University of Maryland. Some of the objectives in my thesis project include the effectiveness of the process *Noyam* employs in extracting movement vocabulary from the traditional, neo-

traditional and present-day movement ideas for creating a dance vocabulary/choreography. Furthermore, I employed these vocabularies to the creation of a Contemporary African Dance-theatre production that reflected my personal experiences with *Noyam*, the School of Performing Arts and my outlook for the future of Ghanaian dance.

As a new form, Contemporary African Dance provides choreographers and dance practitioners opportunity and the challenge to help shape its direction in a way that would help the development of dance generally in Ghana. The significance of this research will contribute to the existing knowledge of dance and create a better understanding of this new form of dance. The incorporation of ideas from Contemporary African Dance, traditional and neo traditional African dance into the final staging of my Contemporary African Dance and Ghanaian Dance theatre production will serve as a model for prospective choreographers, especially products of the School of Performing Arts (SPA) and TDPS.

Influenced Dance Forms: *Akwantuo*: Plight of the Immigrant

In this section, I will discuss the dance forms and styles that informed my creative process while crafting *Akwantuo*: Plight of the Immigrant. Specifically, I will discuss neo-traditional dance, dance drama, as well as Contemporary African Dance in a chronological manner. I highlight each of the distinct forms to illustrate that African dance does not exist within a monolith. In other words, African dance encompasses a range of history, styles, approaches, technique, and forms. These are the forms that I comingled within my artistry, which have significantly informed

Akwantuo:Plight of the Immigrant. When the forms are merged, they create something new and unique.

Neo-Traditional Dances

Neo-traditional dances are indigenous dances that have been taken out of their original context to be performed to fit a particular setting. Performing a dance out of its context does not make it a traditional dance; thus, a Ghanaian traditional dance performed in a proscenium theater is an example of a neo-traditional dance. Nicholls provided an insight into the nature of neo-traditional dances when he states that, they “... are based on the traditional format, they have been uprooted from their customary social context in time, place and motivation. Costumes are often changed, and sometimes new musical instruments are added to the original ensemble”.²⁸ This adjustment introduces the dance into a new form and an audience has access to it from a different point of view than its traditional function and philosophy. South African ethnomusicologist, choreographer, and dancer Peggy Harper who dedicated much of her life studying Nigerian traditional dances, adds another dimension to what neo-traditional dances are when she referred to them as, “dances which are derived from traditional forms but serve a fundamentally different function in a non-traditional context”.²⁹ I relied heavily on this style in the beginning of my *Akwantuo*:

²⁸ Nicholls, R. W. (1998). African Dance: Transition and Continuity. In K. W. Asante, *African Dance* (pp. 41-62). Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc.

²⁹ Harper, P. (1969, May). Dance in Nigeria. *Ethnomusicology*, 13(2), 280-295.

Plight of the Immigrant. (See figure 3...) This dance, instruments, and other paraphernalia's in the space created a theater in a round with audience being part of the performance hence, bridging the gap between audience member and performers.

In a traditional setting, not only does the physical stage performance affect the final form the dance takes, but the participation of the audience is also a transformative and participatory aspect of the emerging dance. The audience usually forms part of a traditional dance performance in its original setting; whereas in the conventional theatre, the audience may be separated from the action on stage.³⁰

Harper also cites the audience as a crucial factor that can affect the development of the neo-traditional dances:

The spectators attend a performance to appreciate and assess the re-enactment of the familiar and to assure that new elements accord with the dance tradition. In many cases, they participate in the dance formally or spontaneously, and the spatial limits of the performance are set by their physical presence. There is seldom a definite time limit set to the dance, as the repetitive rhythms form a focus for the overall rhythms of the life of the community.³¹

These ideas about space and time may be traditional but I find them relevant in the creation and reflection of my project. Part of the opening of my thesis performance attempted to encapsulate a total traditional sense of performance, where the audience is also part of the setting in the village community. Choreographing the village community in the atrium allowed for the opening of the audience personalities, which closely resembles what occurs in a typical Ghanaian community.

³⁰ Newman, A. (2015, June 2). Dance Development in Ghana. (Personal Interview conducted by Mustapha Braimah)

³¹ Harper, P. (1969, May). Dance in Nigeria. *Ethnomusicology*, 13(2), 280-295.

Since the homogenous community that Harper referred to is replaced by performers who may not be indigenous or even representative of the communities where the dances originated, and the performance is taking place before a “passive” and mixed cosmopolitan audience with differing educational, religious and cultural orientation, the presentation will necessarily:

...demand a variety of material and economy in a presentation to hold their interest over a limited period of time. The meeting of these demands immediately affects the form of the dance: movement patterns are simplified, spectacular elements are stressed at the expense of more subtle rhythms and movements, and definite limits in terms of time and space radically alter the ground plan and overall organization and attitude of the dancers towards their own performance.³²

The problem Harper outlines does not pertain to Neo- traditional dances from Ghana alone, but is broadly evident in many dances of African communities. For example, Guinea’s *Les Ballets Africains*³³ and the National Ballet of Senegal³⁴ have all had to restructure their traditional dances along with the ceremonies and rituals associated with them to develop new concepts of dance creation and presentation:

Dancers who usually danced towards the musicians or encircled by them in the course of the performance were redirected to allow greater visibility of the movements of the bodies from different angles. Important movements, which otherwise might not attract the attention of the audience due to the distance created by the conventional stage setting were also ‘amplified’ for clarity. Modification of costumes was done in a way as to maintain their specific cultural nuances and authenticity.³⁵

³² Ibid

³³ The Guinea National Dance Company. It was first founded by Fodeba Keita in France while Guinea was colonized. After Guinea gained independence in 1958, the company was moved to Guinea under the auspices of the first President Ahmed Sékou Touré.

³⁴ Castaldi, Frances. 2006. *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

³⁵ Harper, P. 1969. Dance in Nigeria. *Ethnomusicology*, 13(2), 280-295.

This assertion from Harper personally resonates with me and unleashed creative idea during my creative process which, I will be discussing into details in my next Chapter.

The creation of dances is a communal affair in traditional Africa; the dance creator is subject to direct community control. The modern choreographer, however, becomes the central feature. The choreographer is responsible for setting the parameters for his or her creation. To find acceptance in the community, however, the choreographer's work must conform to the principles and philosophy of dance creation and practice of his community. Because I was performing the greater part of my work in a proscenium setting with contemporary and dance drama style, I had to adjust to the situation, which required me to be both an African and a modern dance choreographer.

Dance Drama

After the development of neo-traditional dances, a form of dance-theatre presentation, which is referred to as “dance-drama”, emerged. As the term may imply, this form of dance presentation incorporated dramatic elements such as a definite plot and characters in a narrative form in its presentation. “...The common feature of dance-drama is that they all attempt to describe an event or series of events through the medium of dance movements”.³⁶

³⁶ Abloso, Akua. 2007. *Dance Theatre and Social Change*. Accra: University of Ghana.

After Nii-Yartey took over as the Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble in 1976, he soon started experimenting with different choreographic approaches and introduced:

“.... new forms of representation. Instead of simply continuing with Opoku's choreographic style, Nii-Yartey started to combine elements of different traditional dances with free steps and then connected them by means of a story - so-called dance dramas from now dominated the repertoire.”³⁷

Under his direction, the company expanded its standard neo-traditional repertoire to include the creation of new dance-drama pieces like the *Lost Warrior* in 1978, which according to him, was inspired by Opoku's *Liberation Dance Suite*; but considered his version of dance-drama as dance-theatre. He later created major pieces in this genre such as the *Legend of Okoryoo*, the *King's Dilemma*, *Bukom* and others.

Dance-drama allows for the integration of many other art forms like drama, poetry, music, mime etc., as may also be observed in traditional African dance. It advances this process by taking advantage of the limitless theatrical elements and innovations available³⁸, allowing this genre of dance to captivate, challenge and communicate better with its mixed and in some cases, international audiences as seen in the village scene. My thesis performance had mostly US citizens but the atmosphere in the atrium was different as audience members clapped, sang and participated in the dance. This was different in the Dance Theatre which is a proscenium stage.

³⁷ Schramm, Katharian. 2000. "The Politics of Dance: Changing Representations of the Nation in Ghana." *African Spectrum* (Institute of African Affairs) 35: 339-358.

³⁸ Scott, Eleanor Jewel. 2010. *The Movement of Pan-Africanism: A Choreographic Treatment of Ideology*. Accra: University of Ghana.

Contemporary African Dance

Nketia outlines three categories of cultural change that have occurred in Ghana's history in his article *Changing Traditions of Folk Music in Ghana*. He describes the first as "resulting from the cumulative effect of the creative efforts of individuals (largely anonymous) or groups of individuals within a given society of a fairly homogenous character".³⁹ The second change arises from the interactions between "homogenous African societies" resulting from economic or political pursuits like war and alliances. The third is the change resulting from the impact of a dominant alien culture. Because of the possible differences in cultural practices, the interaction of these two cultures resulted in a local culture, having to sacrifice aspects of its customs and practices in the process. I find the first and third occurrences perhaps, the more relevant to this chapter as well as the thesis performance.

Ghana's interaction with the west did not only affect the Ghanaian political, religious and social institutions but also had a major effect on the Art forms. Some western mannerisms or gesticulations such as waving and clapping are being transformed and manifested in post-colonial Ghanaian traditional dances. For example, in *Kpanlongo*,⁴⁰ there are gestures that mimic the Queen of England and her colonial officials. The re-contextualization of indigenous dances into neo-traditional dance forms became fashionable. The interaction with the west also influenced not just the art forms but also the social life of the Ghanaian. New ideas of costumes and props emerged and were incorporated into the existing traditional dance

³⁹ Nketia, J. H. 1959. "Changing Traditions of Folk Music in Ghana." *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 11: 31-36.

⁴⁰ One of the recent traditional dances among the Ga ethnic group.

performances. As Africa and the rest of the world develop, distance and time have become relatively insignificant. Globalization is inadvertently employing this generation to share ideas and culture more effectively and impeccably. The world has become demystified in recent times.

As the world gradually moves towards globalization, there is perhaps the need more than ever, to embrace the *African Personality* concept that gave birth to the Ghana Dance Ensemble and other institutions in the early 60s. Even though globalization offers choreographers a vast pool of vocabulary, philosophy, identities and performance modes, it also raises some important concerns for the African choreographer, especially with the issue of identity. I am prompted to ask questions like: *What is my role as a Dancer/Choreographer in the development of my community? How do I ensure adequate representation of African values and identity in this global village? How do I create work(s) that are representative of both the past and present; and at the same time find relevance in the future (as most of my traditional dances have modelled this function)?* I came to the conclusion that I was not the only African artist who is concerned and curious about these questions. Several Contemporary African Dance practitioners who came before me share in my concern and curiosity. Specifically, Germaine Acogny, who explains her personal view that:

The artistic movement into which I insert my own work, even though it is deeply rooted in popular traditions, is not at all a return to the roots. On the contrary, we pursue a way that is altogether different and resolutely urban, reflecting the modern context within which so many of us, Africans of our time, must live, move, and

have our being. The Africa of skyscrapers, the Africa of international alliances.⁴¹

Scholars such as Nketia and Opoku will find the above statement insignificant because they encourage artists to create from their roots. However, Acogny raises the important point of duality; that the African of today is a cultural hybrid of old and new ideas. Therefore, returning to the old and staying there will be, as Nii-Yartey puts it “a crime to one’s self,” but returning to the old and building on, as a foundation for developing new ideas and concepts is progress. My thesis project brings to life the ideas of Acogny and Nii Yartey, which serve as a benchmark for the development and shaping of *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant* whose “... language, inspiration, content and symbols are drawn from the tradition”.⁴²

There may be the tendency to equate Contemporary African Dance to “modern” and “contemporary” dance of Europe and America. The concept of Contemporary African Dance is however different to what exists in the West. Contemporary African Dance draws from its traditional classics rather than depart from them, as is the case with modern dance. This is where globalization makes it possible for easy accessibility in diverse disciplines. It gives the artist freedom, alternatives, and pool of movement to explore, which is one of my strengths in this project. This is what I did with my piece by shifting from a mainly neo-traditional form to Contemporary African style from different settings and venues.

⁴¹ Acogny, Germaine. 1988. *African Dance*. Frankfurt: Verlag Dieter Fricke.

⁴² Nii-Yartey, Francis. 2009. "Principles of African Choreography, some perspectives from Ghana." In *Contemporary Choreography, a Critical Reader*, by Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut, 254-268. Oxon: Routledge.

Kathryn Speer, an American dancer/choreographer who lived in Madagascar for many years explains that:

African contemporary dance is not a sub-genre of contemporary dance, but a product of the Contemporary thought process. Contemporary dance is inspired by lived cultural knowledge which becomes embodied in the dancer's performed identity, and thus reflects the culture with which the dancer identifies.⁴³

My own artistic philosophies, represented in my project and in my teaching, support the notion of African contemporary dance as an embodiment and reflection of identity. Spear's views on Contemporary African Dance resonate with the views of scholars like Nii-Yartey and Acogny. They both believe in conceiving and deconstructing the existing tradition, shifting it into a new art form. However, the traditional artist needs to be aware of these shifts and apply them consciously.

Opoku summarized this need when he advised that the "choreographer in his society has to compose in movement terms works which are based on the old structures but can be understood and appreciated by a modern audience."⁴⁴ Opoku's notions are compatible with those of Spears as they project the same artistic ideology. To appreciate Opoku's statement, the contemporary choreographer will need to acquire an extensive knowledge of traditional performance aesthetics and principles to guide his or her creative processes. There is also the need to be circumspect with the incorporation of foreign performance elements in creative works "for in the past

⁴³ Speer, Kathryn. 2008. *The Globalization of Contemporary Dance in Francophone Africa*. January. Accessed April 2, 2017.

http://www.katespeerdance.org/Speer_Discovering%20the%20New.pdf.

⁴⁴ Opoku, Albert Mawere. 1969. "The African Choreographer's Problems." *Institute of African Studies Research Review*, 5-12.

nothing prevented traditional artists from looking at new elements nor did it prevent them from making creative use of them where possible”.⁴⁵

Contemporary African Dance has experienced an explosion on the continent in the past two decades as choreographers explore creating an identity for their various styles. In Ghana, the *Noyam* African Dance Institute is attempting to create a Ghanaian style of Contemporary African Dance, which is guided by the traditional philosophies of dance creation in Ghana. This was spearheaded by Nii-Yartey, who is a former student of Mawere Opoku. He is of the view that the performing artist should create to reach the larger world rather than just preserving the traditional dances.

Conclusion

In a graduate choreography course in the fall of 2016, taught by Professor Sara Pearson I was introduced to an English dancer of Bangladeshi decent Akram Khan. His background is rooted in classical kathak and contemporary dance. I have only seen few short excerpts of his work online but was drawn to the richness of his movement vocabulary. I watched a 3-minute trailer of his 2011 work, *Vertical Road*, in which he demonstrated possibilities and composite use of the body to evoke uniqueness and reality. I find his work inspiring and captivating. In the same vein,

⁴⁵ Nketia, J. H. (1963). The Artist in Contemporary Africa: The Challenge of Tradition. *Okyeame*, 57-62.

choice of movements served the purpose of the work he is creating rather than moving for its own sake. These are some of the ideas I thought of while creating the all the non-verbal message sessions in Chapter Three. This chapter encapsulated various choreographers whose works have influenced the dance traditions of Ghana and *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. I have interrogated the concerns surrounding the development of Contemporary African Dance and how the *Noyam* African Dance Institute has taught me to navigate through the demands of conserving traditional Ghanaian performance aesthetics by applying them to contemporary performance methods. I have also elevated my decision to choreograph on immigration and how my experiences have guided through the process. I believe that my work encompasses the parameters of Contemporary African Dance, traditional, Ghanaian dance theater and post-modern while challenging the notions of dominance traditional dance forms.

Chapter 2: *Akwantuo*: Plight of the Immigrant – The Story⁴⁶

In the Fall of 2016, I was set to propose this project in a form of movement in Studio 2 at TDPS. I also experimented on the idea of giving a shared experience with both audience member and performers. On December 12, 2016, I proposed this project to the entire faculty who contributed a significant amount of the audience. I took them through the same experience with audience member and TSA agents in the thesis performance. During the talk back section of the proposal, the faculty shared with me how thrilled they were with the experience. They shared with me their experience via constructive feedback.

One of the unforgettable moments Alvin Mayes shared and encouraged me to do was to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. For Mayes, my journey as an immigrant was reminiscent of how he understood the Holocaust experience through the memorial. I would never have thought to make that connection. However, in reflecting on my own experience of visiting the memorial, the connections became clear. After my visit, I reflected on how my experience at the Holocaust Memorial Museum was reflective of my arrival at a US airport from Ghana. This is the feeling I am envisioning for the audience member.

Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant started in the atrium in front of Studio 2 and the production office in the Clarice Building following the end of *Equinox and*

⁴⁶ *Akwantuo*: Plight of The Immigrant is not divided in scenes to the audience member, rather, it is an ongoing piece by five dancers going through shared experiences.

Solstice by cohort member Chunhui Xing. Just after the previous cast had taken their bows, the audience's attention was redirected through the announcement that informed them to exit the theater in order to see the next performance. As the audience walked out of the theater, front-of-house staff handed a (replicated) passport to each audience member. The passports represented two different countries: The United States of America and The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The passport was the key each person needed to get back into the Dance Theatre. The audience members are drawn to the atrium by unique echo of the dunun ensemble.⁴⁷ Accompanying the ensemble is a *shekere*, hour-glass drum, clapping and call and response song.

Apart from audience member and the drummers in the village,⁴⁸ there were other objects which were being used as props by performers. These include three sedan size car tires, firewood, oil drum, drying rack with colorful fabrics hanging

⁴⁷ A dunun is a rope-tuned cylindrical drum with a rawhide skin at both ends, most commonly cow or goat. The drum traces its origin to the Mande people of Mali. The supporting drums for dundun is kinkini and sanma. Together, they are a family.

⁴⁸ It is my choice and representing my identity by creating from the influences and dance forms I have acquired throughout my artistic journey. As discussed in Chapter one, my background traditional African dance, Contemporary African, and Dance drama were all a priority for me unleash into this project. My reason is to register the mood in the Atrium versus the Dance Theatre, so I invited a dance company, Soul in Motion Players (SIMP), which was not affiliated with TDPS, to be part of the piece's initial section. SIMP is a West African dance and drumming group founded by Michael Friend, who has also been a drummer in the company since 1983. SIMP has typically nine drummers and ten dancers (including me) who perform in African based programs in the DC metropolitan for events such as Black History Month and library lecture demonstrations on African cultures. I have performed in many events with the company, hence my decision for this collaboration in my thesis performance. Not all the members were present; the women who performed with the cast were Pamela Lassiter, Amber Golden and Carla Lewis. The drummers were Michael Friend, Isaac Adjetey, Mamadi Victory and Abdou Muhammad. SIMP brought the necessary catalyst to achieve realness of a Ghanaian community in the atrium. Ideally, I wanted all the members but the atrium with audience members would have been chaotic.

from them local coal pot for cooking (See fig. 3). These props were in the space to give the audience a sense of being in a Ghanaian village. SIMP drums and props were set in a periphery creating a theater in the round where performers as well as audience member had a shared experience.



Fig. 3 Dancers in the Village (Theater in the round)

The atrium is designed in a Ghanaian village setting with lighting effect highlighting sunset. My goal was to enact some of the attributes of dance in a typical Ghanaian community. I tried to relive my childhood memories, as I explained in the introduction of this paper. In my “Dance in a Global Context” class taught by Professor Miriam Phillips (Spring of 2017), I was introduced to the “dance event framework.”⁴⁹ This is a term coined by dance anthropologist Joann Keali’inohomoku

⁴⁹ Keali’inohomoku, Joann M. W. 1969-70. “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance, *Impulse: Extensions of Dance* no. 20, pp. 24-33.

in 1976. The framework talks about the total happenings of dance in a particular place and time and the function it serves to the communities involved. This is what I envisioned for this part of the piece and I was pleased to observe the recognition and interconnectedness of the participants involved. There was not a formal choreography for this part. I relied on the improvisatory training of my performers. It was all improvised, so each night was unique albeit with a different feeling. That was the most efficient way I could achieve a village scene here in the space. We played like I did in my childhood when I will go and listen to storytelling after sunset. Pushing tires and handclapping was paramount in everyday life in those days. Audience member were also invited to participate in playing, clapping, dancing, drumming and singing.



Fig 4. Reliving my childhood story.

These events started shifting with performers (apart from SIMP) each grabbing *Adinkra*⁵⁰ symbols and heading to the Dance Theatre, which was transformed, by means of set and projections design into a U.S airport. After Soul in Motion stopped drumming and singing, the audience followed the dancers and was confronted by TSA agents. The audience members were asked for their passport and directed to one of the four entrances and exits of the Dance Theatre. The directions one received solely depended on the type of passport each person had been given while exiting the Theater after the first piece.

While passports are being checked by TSA agents, there are a periodic announcements in English and Spanish through the P.A system. The announcement and the presence of TSA and audience moving from the atrium to the Dance Theatre created an airport atmosphere. Below is the announcement:

English: Have your passports ready for security checkpoint

Spanish: *Tenga sus pasaportes listos para el punto de control de seguridad*

English: Unattended item will be confiscated.

Spanish: *Todos los artículos desatendidos serán confiscados*

English: Do not leave your items unattended.

Spanish: *No deje sus artículos desatendido*

English: Make sure you are aware of your luggage and personal belongings at all times.

⁵⁰ Adinkra are visual symbols that represent concepts and identity. These symbols were developed by the Asante ethnic group of Ghana and can be found everywhere in Ghana: on cloth, pottery, walls, etc.

Spanish: *Asegúrense de estar al tanto de su equipaje y sus pertenencias personales en todo momento*

These announcements are being read intermittently while audience members are being directed to their assigned door as indicated by the passport.

In sum, the show went from a community in Ghana to the John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queen, New York. Being in the piece as a performer, I felt the shift from the atrium to the Dance Theatre. The contrast was heavily felt by the audience as well as the joy and ebullience they exhibited in the Atrium were gradually turned into a moment of grief with the heavy mood of fear enacted by the immigrants.

The village scene lasted for about fifteen minutes, and audience had to use their passports to go through TSA for the rest of the show in the Dance Theatre. I also recruited eight TDPS students as TSA agents to echo the narrative content of the piece. I had a meeting to discuss the piece with all of them. I told them some of my experiences going through TSA and how they should act as they play a very paramount role bet the atrium and the Dance Theatre These agents also served as the transit from the atrium to the Dance Theater. The Dance Theater has four entrances and exits and each had two TSA agents inspecting audience passports and giving them further instructions to their seat for the show. Audience member were directed with stern face and straight to the point.



Fig. 5. TSA Agent directing an audience member to the Dance Theatre

With a great sense of fear⁵¹ is how *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant* continued in the Dance Theatre when performers had to present their *Adinkra* symbols one after the other to a TSA agent. My goal was to drive home and reflect the deep feelings of vulnerability, injustice, frustration, humiliation, disappointment, and sheer terror of being at someone else's mercy when being shown a red flag for no apparent reason. In order to bring this to life, I incorporated specific gestures that are paramount in the daily activities of Ghanaians. For example, a dancer interweaving fingers and placing them on top of their head is a gesture depicting grief or pain. I

⁵¹ This is how I felt when I visited the Holocaust Museum I the summer of 2014. This same fear arises anytime I arrive at a US airport and going through immigration check point with US border officials. This sense of fear is what I put my audience through when dancers presented their *Adinkra* symbols.

also selected compelling movements from *Atsiagbekor*⁵² and *Adzogbo*⁵³ dance forms and deconstructed movements to exude its contemporary form. The shift into the Dance Theatre culminated into my amalgamation of traditional, neo-traditional, contemporary African dance, Ghanaian dance theater, and post-modern dance forms, which sums up my dance background.



Fig 6. Immigrants showing grieving

I did not envision how projection design would support this piece until “dry tech”, a technical rehearsal involving my stage manager and projection designer. The projections represented boundaries and stumbling blocks that needed to be decoded to appear more appropriate to go through TSA. The bottleneck, delay, and

20 *Atsiagbekor* is among the oldest traditional dances of the Ewe-speaking people of Southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Originally a war dance performed after battle when the warriors returned to the village, it is now performed on many social occasions.

21 *Adzogbo* originated from Benin (Dahomey) as a *Dzovu* (spiritual/religious) music and dance). The southeastern Ewe of Ghana now performs it for entertainment during festivals and other social occasions

disappointment were represented by a door. I thought of a door as a very important component when it comes to movement; it represents being free or able to move without restrictions. We should not forget that doors are made by humans and keys to the doors are handled and controlled by others. In this case, the doors are controlled by the TSA agents and it is up to them to decide who gets approved to go through the door. Immigrants were denied several times throughout the performance, culminating with the end of the work when they tried for the last time and were denied.

From the atrium: Some audience members were authorized by TSA agents to step in a red box on red square box spanning from upstage to downstage right. This depends on the passport you present. Audience member are held waiting in the red box until the box turns green, where they all walk through the projection led pathways to their seat. Below is a detailed narrative of what unfolded at the airport (Dance Theatre):

Scene One – Arrival



Fig 7. Immigrants being scanned upon arrival at a US airport

Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant opens in the Dance Theatre with performers/ immigrants from their country (Atrium) to a US airport (Dance Theatre). The performers/ immigrants fearfully presenting their *Adinkra* symbols, one after the other, to a TSA agent. The mood, emotion, environment, projection pathways, light, presence of TSA agents, and the cadence of a mysterious heartbeat combined with sound of scanner evoked a sense of terror in the process. This tremendous fear was felt more when one of the five “immigrants” was denied entry and set the parameter for the essence of the piece. The four immigrants are left in shock after seeing the rejection of their own. As a way to cope with this event, they become a team that is determined to make it legally through the immigration doors. They teamed up to search for necessary solution to avoid being denied by TSA agent.

Scene Two – The Search



Fig. 8 Immigrants searching for solution(s) to approval

After witnessing the denial of their own, the immigrants begin to strategize about how to avoid being a victim of denied entry. To them, they think the fifth immigrant was not treated fairly so they were cautious as they speculate it might happen to them as well.

Using specific contemporary African gestural dance movements, the immigrants illustrated a search for answers: what are the right things to do? And when should we do it? And where shall we do it? They are wallowing in a world of the unknown as they sense a jinx on their next encounter with TSA agents. Here, performers used all the spaces available on stage. They went from upstage right, through center stage to downstage left searching for answers. They continue strategizing until the TSA agents appeared with the door at upstage right. Performers ran from downstage left towards the door and to their surprise, they were

denied by the door shutting loudly. Two TSA agents moved the door from upstage right while immigrants follow it across the stage. The agents (in their own timing) teased immigrants by pushing the door towards them or pulling it away. Yet the immigrants followed with determination. Finally, the door was settled at center stage. The TSA agents opened the door, signaling immigrants to come through. They started running towards the door with optimism, but before they can reach the door, they were denied access.



Fig. 9 Immigrants getting denied on their second attempt.

Afterwards the denial, immigrants thought of coming together upon realizing all they have is each other. They invited the fifth immigrant who was denied upon arrival and encouraged him to join them for another trial since, they are all victim of denial and humiliation.

Scene Three – Unity is Strength



Fig. 10 Immigrants (joining hands) Uniting for a goal.

The immigrants are all back together after being denied the second time. They plan to try one more time with a different option. This time, they worked in smaller groups. This is where the choreography made use of a solo performance, duet, trio, and quartets. Employing my practice and scholarship training in Chapter One, two women spoke, one man spoke, two men spoke, three women spoke, two men, one woman spoke and, at the end of the small groups, all immigrants spoke and brainstormed about their new strategy. They decide to bring their ideas together to knock on the door and try to convince the TSA agents to let them in. But the TSA agents were also being strategic. They presented an illusion/ copy of the true entry door to confuse immigrants and cause them to give up their quest. The illusion door appeared on stage left and disappeared while the immigrants ran toward it. The door re-appears on stage right and disappeared in the same manner. Then, the real door appeared at center stage, the same spot they got denied the second time. All the good

intentioned immigrants ran to the door with hope and optimism but were denied again. This time with a huge emphasis, which was felt when the top of the door and its environs turned red color.



Fig. 11 Immigrants denied entry to the United States

Scene Four – The Symbolic Message

Out of sadness and helplessness, dancers journeyed to send a message to the controller of the door with their *Adinkra* symbols. Among the Dagaaba people located in the Upper West region of Ghana, they believe that a person brings what he/she/they loves when he/she/they embarks on a journey. These symbols were situated behind the SIMP, which immigrants carried for their journey. These symbols are what they love and represented. These symbols were shown by each dancer stomping a specific rhythm in harmony until the curtain closed as seen in the figure below.



Fig. 12 Immigrants sending a message through *Adinkra* symbols. From left: Unity in Diversity, Creativity, Safety, Freedom and Emancipation, and Loyalty.

The *Adinkra* symbols were selected to represent my identity as Ghanaian cultural ambassador. I incorporated them consciously into the piece as a sign that I immigrated from my home country to the United States with what I love, which encompasses what is referred to as the American dream. I look forward to the day TSA agents and embassy personnel will acquire the psychologic skill and ability to find out what Ghanaians love, in order to reduce the rampant denial of visas.

Chapter 3: The Creative Process

Having known that the performance utilized three forms of theatrical settings, I will be referring to them as seen in Fig. 5. The three settings are as follows:

- *Theater in the round – The Atrium*
- *Thrust Theater – The hallway and around the Dance Theater*
- *Proscenium theater – Dance Theater*

Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant is considered a Ghanaian traditional, Contemporary African Dance-drama production whose choreographic features are a result of concepts and ideas inspired by my scholarly and artistic research on trends in Traditional, Contemporary African Dance, and dance-theatre traditions in Ghana (See Chapter 1). These dance genres are different and unique in their presentation and form. The atrium, which is set in a theater in a round is the village scene. This is where I married neo-traditional dance and Ghanaian dance-theater approach to evoke the audience sense of belonging in a shared community.

Even though primary focus of the project is dance, its style of presentation incorporates my interpretation of Ghanaian traditional performance methods like drama, live music, mime and songs etc.; it further employs contemporary theatre performance devices like visual projections and recorded sound, which we saw in the Dance Theatre. Movement extraction and development for the choreography is guided by the experience gathered from studying and training at *Noyam*, and traditional African performance aesthetics as exemplified in works my experience with *Noyam* African Dance Institute.

Designs and spatial arrangements in this project represent the rather unique positioning of performers in the performance space as symbolic tools in the overall presentation. This is illustrated in the circular arrangement of the dancers is used to represent the continuity and spirituality of the community in juxtaposition to linear and angular arrangements to provide the necessary contrast. This idea features prominently in the choreographic presentation of *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. The circular arrangement of performers (as seen in DSL where the fifth dancer entered) represented the above idea which was in contrast to the angular spatial arrangement of the grieving male scene. By manipulating the placement of dancers on stage as they execute the various movements, balance in the overall design is achieved on stage.

Part of the performance space for this piece is set in the proscenium stage where the areas are divided into a back-stage, performance area and an audience space (auditorium). Unlike the circular nature of most traditional performance spaces which bring the audience closer to the performers; the proscenium stage ‘alienates’ its audience. The contrast is felt as audience member trickled from the atrium through TSA agents to the proscenium auditorium in the Dance Theatre.

Juxtaposing the atrium performance, the TSA section, and the Dance Theatre was a herculean task for me, considering the fact that they are each distinct theatrical setting. Throughout the process, I was envisioning the atrium theater to take form of a theater-in-the-round, the TSA section of the performance taking place within a thrust theater atmosphere, and the final segment taking place in the Dance Theatre which was modeled in the form of a proscenium stage. As such, the task was how to unify

these unique stage settings in order to immerse the audience into the experience, without losing the essence of the work while journeying from the atrium through the TSA scene to the Dance Theatre.

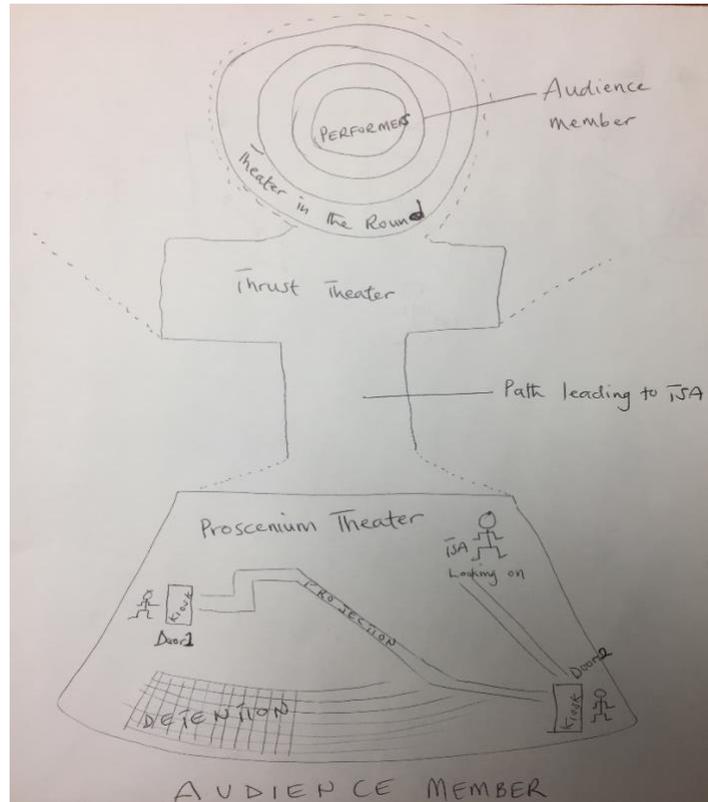


Fig 13. Showing the three performance settings.

One of the key elements in my initial process was finding a title for the piece that would not just encapsulate the idea and theme but represent my African-ness. I searched for a title that would generate curiosity, a title that would provoke thoughts and spark conversations about the choreographer and the subject of immigration.

Below are some of the titles I initially conceived:

Immigration: The Journey of a Choreographer

Immigration: Struggles of the Undocumented

The Dark Journey of the Immigrant

The above titles and many others did not work satisfactorily as I realized they did not capture my identity. I wanted to represent myself as a Ghanaian and a native *Twi*⁵⁴ speaker, but these representations were lost in the above titles. After several attempts, I arrived with *Akwantuo: Plight of The Immigrant*. The term “*Akwantuo*” is a Twi term that means “journey.” Accordingly, the title of the performance symbolizes my journey as an African immigrant.

After resolving the title issue, I succeeded in structuring the sections of the piece. I was able to build a complete storyline with the choreography. Throughout my journey from Ghana to the United States I kept a little notebook and a pen to document my experiences of traveling by air and going through strict security. As such, I was keen on my TSA experience at the airport. My experience with TSA, specifically with international travel, found its way into my thesis performance because what I deciphered as rich theatrical elements. In other words, the TSA workers and protocols were very performative, embedded with actions that not only heightened my own identity, but informed me of what was to come as an Ghanaian immigrant. I decided to tap into my entire experience as an artist, thinking deeply about the movement vocabulary and how it would enrich the piece while representing the story.

I started assigning roles by envisioning my dancers’ level of experience in performing. Next, I decided to work with them separately, in a trio, duet, and solo for the first couple of weeks, before unifying the entire cast. I challenged myself to find

⁵⁴ Twi is a language spoken by the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa. The Akan people occupy southern Ghana and few other areas getting to the middle of the country

the gestalt of each section. Then I started addressing the questions; “How do I immerse my audience by engaging them throughout the performance?” I resolved this task by clarifying to my dancers each section’s significance, theatrical elements, meaning, and flow. I expressed my view that movement can catalyze and sustain action when words struggle to generate lasting change. After having a conversation about intentions and movements, I cemented the ideas by showing videos of me executing movements. I then challenged the cast to emulate my sense of timing and performance.

It was a choreographic choice to give specific directions to performers (including TSA agents) to act when and what they felt. It was my intention not to rehearse movement or conversations between TSA agents and audience members. The thesis idea for the entire concept has been influenced and inspired by a plethora of events. First and foremost, the conception was revealed in the fall of 2015 (a few weeks after I started the MFA program), when choreography professor Sara Pearson took students in her choreography class through a series of site specific projects in choreography class. This was the beginning of *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. We were asked to explore and choose a site within and around the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center to create a site-specific piece. I chose the main entrance to the Grand Pavilion (*See Fig. 14*) to play with the doors and the space between the inner and outer door. I used about twelve dancers for a three-minute piece. Following the performance, during a critical feedback section, some of the dancers shared their experiences about being restricted in the space, which restricted their movement. Hearing these words from fellow artists took me back in time where I was first trying

to get into the United States with a valid visa. The exploratory stage started with having conversations with people in general to have a sense of their awareness of how immigrants like me ended up in the US.

I realized this was the opportunity to research and create a project that best describes my experience as a young Ghanaian artist travelling abroad. The concert was specifically about my experience acquiring a visa and traveling to the US and going through immigration for the first time at the John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. I started the process by putting some ideas together and thinking about where would be conducive to staging the concert. I arrived at using the site-specific method in the same space in the Grand Pavilion of the Clarice. I was certain about that space and mapped out all my ideas in a form of sketches and writing in my little notebook. I started brainstorming through movement and writing. Sometimes I engage with fellow artists in conversation about my plan.



Fig. 14 Main Entrance to the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center

Digging Stimulus

In the Spring of 2017. The School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies and The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center had renowned contemporary African dancer, teacher and choreographer Germaine Acogny and her husband Helmut Vogt as guest artists. After a lengthy discussion on my thesis project, she asked me many journalistic questions. One of the questions that struck me is: *What are you choreographing?* I was silent for a second. She continued: *consider what you are choreographing.* And concluded in French “creuser plus profondément jusqu'à ce

que vous trouviez votre aura intérieure," which Vogt translated into English as, "Dig deeper until you find your inner aura." These words really spoke to me and guided my quest to carve a concise concept for the choreography. I was motivated and agreed to dig deeper and go above and beyond to spread more colors on my choreographic palette. I gave much attention to the process of stimulus. After the stimulus is received, choreographic exploration follows with the creation of movement representation of that stimulus; rather like words are made of single letters; sentences are made of words and paragraphs made of sentences and so on. Similarly, I broke down my choreography in order to be clear about my movement motifs, philosophies, rhythm and forms.

Writers and teachers like Maura Keefe, Germaine Acogny, Nii-Yartey and Janice Pomer, Alvin Mayes, and Patrik Widrig also inspired the choreographic process of *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. They advised on techniques for the various stages of choreographing; from the first step of receiving a stimulus that forms a framework for the development of movement motifs and phrases, to improvisation, movement extraction/treatment, transitions and other choreographic processes that would see these motifs and phrases composed into a final dance production. An overview of my choreographic process is represented in the figure below.

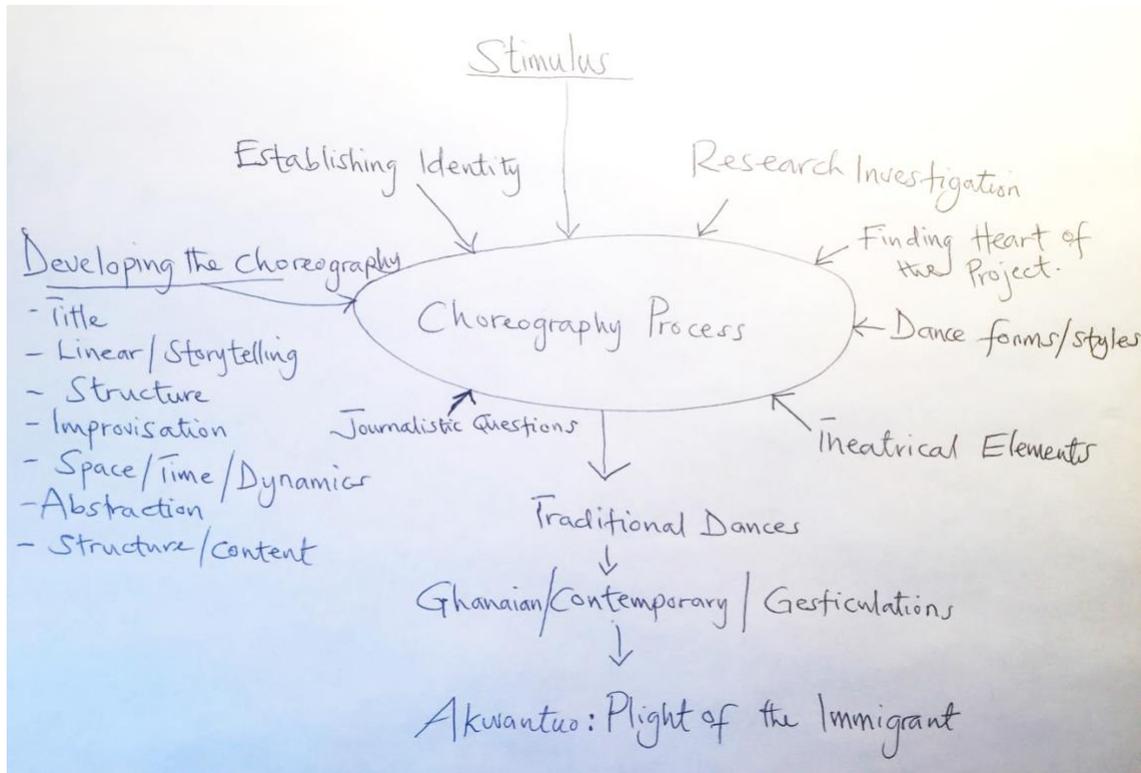


Fig. 15 Depicting Choreography Process

The above figure depicts my approach to choreography, specifically how I tackled *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*. It depicts the various processes and the ideas I chose from my choreographic palette. I begin finding the stimulus, which choreographer Sara Pearson usually refers to as ‘gestalt.’ I could not connect this word to choreographic process the first time I heard but now everything makes sense to me. I took the meaning as grabbing the bull by the horns. This idea made it necessary in the initial process in receiving stimulus.

Stimulus

The many processes that occurred before the presentation of my final choreographic work is more often than not triggered or inspired by what Jacqueline Smith-Autard

terms “stimulus” which will produce a physical, emotional and mental response that the choreographer may want to represent in the form of dance (Smith-Autard, 2000).⁵⁵ She has worked extensively in secondary and higher education. She is an experienced consultant in dance education and is recognized as an expert, both nationally and internationally.

The stimuli for *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant* came from three events, the first being a sentiment of a spiritual teacher and author Marianne Williamson that I find profound: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.⁵⁶ Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure"(Williamson, 1992).⁵⁷After reading this statement, I began to infer its possible implication and relevance to me and my work. I have two important realizations from Williamson’s proclamation. First, even though she was talking in a broader sense, her words have defined me as an artist. Second, I am someone who has the limitless power to create an alternate universe and draw his audience into it. This later realization is somewhat political given the dynamics of power relations in Africa. This statement summarizes for me the concept of responsibility and self-sacrifice, which is also linked to the idea of the dynamics of power relations in Africa.

⁵⁵ Smith-Autard, J. M. (2000). *Dance Composition* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.

⁵⁶ An American spiritual teacher, author and lecturer

⁵⁷ Williamson, M. (1992). *A Return to Love*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Selection of Participants

I have mostly had challenges with casting since I started my MFA program at the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) at the University of Maryland. In teaching West African Dance, I have noticed that many students are hesitant to try dance styles that they deem out of their comfort zone. They are not willing to diversify their dance styles and venture into new spaces or forms. I had many dancers decline the opportunity to work on the project. Knowing this about students, I extended my search to not just dancers who were technically proficient, but people who were ready to explore new ideas.

I had plans to conduct auditions, but I dreaded that idea as I was concerned about the number of students that would express interest and show up. Instead, I invited one non-TDPS student named Asia Wyatt and one former Ghana Dance Ensemble dancer Lesley Adjetey Klufio who now resides in Laurel, Maryland, Georgina Gabbidon and Brandi Bertie. Fortunately, I made the right choices of selecting dancers who have the potential to execute a wide range of movements and performance stamina.

To assess what I was looking for in dancers, I composed a 24-second dance sequence that was taught to all participating students. I had about eleven TDPS students including eight dance majors and three non-majors. Their performance was judged according to their ability to perform the sequence. Even though the focus was placed on how well they executed movements (since movement generation on their part was not a primary requirement), special consideration was given to those who showed a strong improvisational sense and performance. By repeating the sequence

several times with each time faster than the preceding one, their level of stamina was assessed. These processes guided me in recruiting Brandi Bertie, Georgina Gabbidon, Leslie Adjetey Klufio and Asia Wyatt. It must be noted that I had four more performers who could not stay through the entire process.

Rehearsal

Many stages of rehearsal sessions occurred throughout the production period. There was a developmental stage where experiments with ideas and concepts were generated and possible movement sequences, idioms, and vocabularies developed using improvisation, kinesthetic memory, and other techniques acquired from analyzing gestures and deconstructing movements suitable to the project. Most of my cast are American citizens so I consistently share some personal thought and moments with them to evoke their urgency to the work. The consistency of my story and rehearsal sessions helped the cast internalize movements and gained performance proficiency and range. In addition, I conducted one-to-one sessions with the entire cast. From the beginning, when most of the work hinged on movements ideas and sequence development; rehearsal sessions with the entire cast was minimal.

All rehearsals were held in the dance wing at TDPS, University of Maryland. To accommodate the different school schedules, family, and work time of my cast, rehearsal periods were scheduled by the end of the day, between 5:00pm and 8:00pm. Practice sessions with the stage manager, Tarythe Albrecht and individual dancers were held outside of this period, with several rehearsals occurring in the studios and

sometimes in The Dance Theater. As the performance date drew nearer, the number of rehearsals and intensity increased from twice a week to three times.

Discussions on Style and Form

Since Contemporary African Dance is a relatively new idea to most of my cast, it was necessary to hold discussions at the beginning and end of each movement phrase in the choreographic process. Discussions first involved only the Design team where the concepts and process to be worked on was deliberated. After that, ideas were solicited from each collaborative member. Then, a general discussion was held with the entire cast and the outcomes of the production meeting with the crew was made known to the cast. As a collaborative project, their input was also taken into consideration and the decision on a final course of action taken by myself. These discussions allowed the cast to understand the various concepts that were necessary for the realization of the various scenes and events that unfolded in the piece.

Teaching Movement Vocabulary

My movement vocabulary or what some will refer to as technique draws from Sub-Saharan African traditional cultural forms and philosophies. During the pre-professional period of my dance career, I did not have to take a dance technique class to learn these movements or dances. I learned by participation and observation but placed more emphasis on the participatory aspect. I started off as a musician/percussionist before I migrated to be a dancer when I realized that there is

less or no attention whatsoever for the musicians. During rehearsals of *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*, some of my dancers have often demanded to know the type of technique I employ in my creative approach. I cannot over emphasize that technique gives the dancer ability to efficiently execute movement. I agree that there is the need to have some level of technique in one's creative and movement investigations. Nii Yartey observes in his recent book:

“There can be no substitute for experience of moving in a finely tuned instrument through space, with mind and body in subtle harmony...To the African dancer however, a finely tuned body may not necessarily be a slim and athletic physique. Rather, it is the kind of body that has the ability to respond to the subtleties, as well as the energy, required by the movement and musical complexities of African dance – whether it is a big or small, tall or short, young or old, male or female body”.⁵⁸

As an African who has been vibrant in the performing arts for over two decades, this is a true statement. Nii Yartey shared with me during my time at *Noyam* that technique goes beyond the abilities to control movements. A typical Ghanaian dance movement is an integration of music, drama, poetry, costume, and chants. I applied this process and the amalgamation of my recently acquired experience in post-modern and contemporary dance as part of my thesis performance in the Dance Theatre after journeying from the atrium.

Teaching while a graduate student at Ohio University, Dance in Non-Western Cultures and the University of Maryland West African Traditional and Contemporary

⁵⁸Yartey, Francis Nii. 2016. *African Dance in Ghana: Contemporary Transformation*. London: Mot Juste Limited.

Dance, inspired my belief that African dance pedagogical practices, rooted as they are in interdisciplinary approaches, community building, and mind, body, spirit integration have much to offer first-world students. Afro-centric movement can help students transcend harmful African stereotypes and dangerous misconceptions and foster intercultural understanding and expansion of personal possibilities. That is why I have made it my mission as an educator to not only develop artistic excellence in African based dances, but to foster a community of engaged citizen artists that is open to all.

Deconstruction: Movement Development

The first action I employed was the development of movement motifs and concepts in isolation of the body. These motifs are taught to the dancers then developed into the desired form using the combination of various choreographic devices. Some of these devices I relied on were repetition and retrograde, and reversal but sometimes the entire sequence is not reversed fully. I used these approaches in parts like the *entrance of the cast and scanning; the denials; the grieving* sections in the piece. Furthermore, since most of the cast did not have any prior experience with my movement vocabulary (Ghanaian traditional Dance, Contemporary African Dance and Ghanaian Dance Theater) and choreographic method this process became a learning tool for them some of them.

The second technique employed is essentially an extension of the first, but in this case, I demonstrated a series of movements intended for the basic motifs for a particular scene. The dancers would then form groups with each group or individual

working on their respective roles to perform the movements as close to the original as possible. Dancers were encouraged to improvise based on the given motif. The outcome of this exercise, as was expected, showed differences in movement texture and quality. These differences provided the needed variations to help shape the movements into its originally intended choreographic purpose.

The last technique I used involved guiding the dancers to extrapolate the movements from a specific set of dances and ideas. This technique was mostly applied to various sections in the piece because dancers had prior experience with this method of movement extraction. By carefully guiding, encouraging and challenging them throughout the process. I was able to bring out relevant movement ideas from their kinesthetic memories and tap into their own experience in the field.

I proceeded to choreograph only after the extraction and development of various possible movement vocabularies intended for the various sections of the piece, and the process was partially completed. After reviewing and selecting the material generated to help me articulate the intent of the various sections, I moved on to work on solos and duets, small groups and finally spent a considerable time working on larger groups in the piece.

Chapter 4: Feedback and Reflection/Future Applications

Feedback

One of the satisfying moments for me was the opening night Friday March 9, 2018. One audience member came to me after the show and said that I reminded him of how he immigrated from Senegal to the United States. He was fascinated by the projection designs, TSA agents and the doors. He concluded that the depth of the work deeply spoke to him. My colleague Chunhui Xing, (with whom I shared the evening concert) also stressed on how he the piece compelled him to reminisce some horrific experiences at a US airport. Also, I have heard positive comments about the beginning experience in the atrium. Every audience member I interacted with thought it was indeed an immersive experience. I was fortunate to have had few immigrants from Ghana and few other sub-Saharan African countries. To them, the piece took them back home while reminding them about their present abode. Here are some of the responses:

Mustapha effectively depicted the plight of an immigrant extremely well. For example, there was a moment where the dancers were sitting down and facing the audience. Then, a projector revealed a zoomed in image of every dancer's face. The faces of each dancer reflected vulnerability, sadness, and fear. It was a moment where the audience could look into a face that desired to step into a new world of opportunity but were denied of it. A creative choice that Mustapha made was

ensuring the dancers were still (during that moment) so that the audience had no distractions as they viewed the projections.

HONR239C Student

I enjoyed this part of the piece more, because I felt like I was back home. I felt like this whole piece resonated more with me because as an Immigrant also from Ghana, I experienced similar situation not only coming here but while I was here; especially the fear and rejection. While Braimah experienced a lot of these emotions trying to get into America; I experienced more of these feelings around my peers. As a young black African girl, I was seen and treated by my fellow peers as an alien, simply because I didn't sound or acted the same as them.

DANC 138 Student

These responses deepen my quest to put my story out there. I am excited to know that there were immigrants from Ghana and other African countries who connected deeply with the piece. Not only did the piece resonate with African immigrants, American audience member were also struck.

However, I was surprise to read a response by a student who thought my piece “*was too short as it began and ended in the atrium.*” This student had a specific perception about how an African will present a dance. The stereotype is deeply ingrained such that reading the program could not trigger a different perspective. Some of the overarching ideas of this project is to debunk the fact that all “African dance” is about and wearing colorful clothes drumming. I also want to bring to bear

the various dance genres that has developed and currently trending in Ghana so as to clear the stereotypical fog.

Critical Reflection: Battling Stereotypes

I battle with stereotypes both on stage and at times by interacting with my colleagues, students and other professionals here in the States. My M.A education in the African Studies program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio was a wakeup call as I witnessed many stereotypes about Africa in the Southeastern region of Ohio. Knowing this phenomenon, the Center for International Studies at OU created a program which is sponsored by the Ohio Valley International Council (OVIC). The goal of this organization is to promote cultural and Global sensitivity to combat stereotypes by offering cultural presentations to K-12 schools and professional settings in the communities. I was appointed as a cultural coordinator for the 2013/2014 academic year. I recruited cultural consultants from various parts of the world and we visited about 12 schools per semester. During the presentations by the cultural consultants, the kind of questions they (students and members of the community) ask is breathtaking.

First of all, they assumed that all Africans are from one “country” called Africa. They also asked to know about how we ended up in the United States as students when in fact we sleep on trees and wear no clothes. These allegations prompted me to be aware of my interaction with people in Athens and the University community. This was not surprising to me when then Vice President of the United States Joe Biden referred to Africa as a nation during the U.S Africa summit on

Wednesday August 6, 2014. Nancy Pelosi, the current minority leader also tweeted and reechoed that Africa is a country while she was attending the same program.

Below is her tweet:



Fig 16. Showing Nancy Pelosi's tweet. Retrieved from the Washington Times 01/17/2018

The struggle I experienced in the traveling process to the United States from Ghana is not only at the airport but culturally, I have had some pushback and people misunderstanding me as African and a Ghanaian. I still experience people here in the States perceiving Africa negatively. This clearly was in the process during my first production meeting with my collaborators. I have gone through different levels of challenges by trying to disseminate information to my collaborators about the beginning of my piece at the atrium which is set in a Ghanaian home. Sometimes I felt as though I was misunderstood or just being ignored when I articulated some of my choreographic ideas. Unfortunately, I was not on the same

page with most of my collaborators until about a couple of weeks before the show. Although I had clear ideas of what I wanted, I was open to my collaborators bringing ideas to the table and helping make this project a success. I never tasted success until the opening. I realized a new chapter had begun during the opening of the show on Friday March 9. Every goal that is met is a beginning of another task. After all, as an artist, when I look back at my work which I deem complete I can still make changes even after it has been performed and received positive feedback.

I thought it was all lost when I first proposed the Grand Pavilion as the location for the beginning of my piece and was turned down. I just remembered where all the confusion started. My initial idea was to use the Grand Pavilion as my airport and the Dance Theatre as the Ghanaian community scene. When I got turned down, several weeks after my presentation to collaborators, I did not have a clear idea of where my thesis would begin and end because the production manager Cary Gillet had asked me to wait until she gave me a final answer upon consultation with the Clarice staff.

Tech week was educative and entertaining. It was time to face reality. This is the time in the process where all matters discussed during the production meetings come to bear. All the technical words used are now being unfolded as a team by all collaborators. Also, this was the week when I was finalizing choreographic idea. It was difficult for me to stop but the demands of tech and the time constraint by production managers forced me to. The Designers had the chance to try some of their ideas in the space. In communicating with I had to be clear and succinct as much as possible for them to be able to unpack what I was envisioning. Some of the

conversations went well, others were not clear either from my side or from the designer's perspective.

Despite the misunderstandings with some of my designers, I must say we all handled the situation well and did a great job supporting the idea of building a village and an airport. That idea resonated across the entire audience, which is what I wanted to achieve. Moving forward, I will be more clear about what I want, when and where I want it. This is the first time I collaborated with a set, sound, costume, lighting and projection designer, which is a great learning experience for me. I have now found the language to use for each design department for my future artistic endeavors.

I adopt contemporary issues such as racism, oppression, fascism and inter-ethnic conflict as a basis for experimental work, which allows me to integrate traditional African contemporary, African contemporary, and modern dance influences in my choreography. In my latest choreographic work *Akwantuo: Plight of the Immigrant*, I am pushing the frontiers of an already existing traditional dance movement vocabulary by experimenting with how contemporary, traditional African and modern dance intersect. The work also explores how a composite view of dance affects the psychology of the dancer and a true connection with the audience. This process works in tandem with my scholarly research.

My scholarly work involves the investigation of a Ghanaian contemporary dance aesthetic rooted in indigenous performance traditions and informed by contemporary art forms. This investigation is underscored by the philosophy behind ethnic festivals and funeral rites. I conduct ethnographic research on movements and all the accompanying art forms which make up the concept of "African Dance." This

research informs my creative works utilizing diverse approaches in applying 21st - century skills and creativity including improvisation. My choreography and performance training, coupled with my scholarly endeavors illuminates a path I pursue in my artistry.

Future Applications

This opens a new chapter for me as a choreographer. I plan to apply for the International Funds Supporting Culture sponsored by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for restaging this work for as many American audiences as possible. My hope is to tour European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Italy etc. Like a typical US airport, being in the airport of these countries with an ECOWAS passport can be terrifying. I will also try an audition next time targeting mostly performers who have been denied visas before, just to explore the emotions of the piece. I plan to recreate this piece in Ghana with the Ghana Dance Ensemble, current and past students of my former school, University of Ghana. Ideally, I am planning on using this piece to open a conversation about ethnic bias in the Dance Ensemble while bridging a gap between the company and the school. This project will reveal to participants that there is strength in Unity and that when traveling to Europe or America, support and guidance through the process is utmost necessary. This will also be a learning for the students and aspiring choreographers. The different yet unique styles I employed in creating this work will open avenues for other choreographers which they can apply in their future projects.

As I conclude my paper, major themes come to mind. From the conception of this idea in late 2015 until its culminating performances, my colleagues have linked it to the immigration policies of the Trump administration. The project coincided with the current president of the United States' election and his ideas on immigration. He proposed to build a wall on the border of Mexico and the US and placed an immigration ban on seven Muslim countries denying people from these countries entry to the United States.⁵⁹ Again, many have given in to believe that I am doing this as a result of the vile immigration reform by the US president. The current political climate only reinforces and contributes to my ideas and motives but this project addresses my experiences as a Ghanaian artist coming into the United States legally.⁶⁰ It is non-political as I do not intend to challenge or resolve immigration issues of Ghana or the United States. *This is my story...what is your immigration experience?*

⁵⁹ New York Times, January 27, 2017

⁶⁰ A couple months after President Donald Trump was sworn into office he signed executive orders about immigration petition, restricting entry and tighten border entries to the United States. His Secretary of State tweeted that "'To our allies and partners around the world, please understand this order is part of our ongoing efforts to eliminate vulnerabilities that radical Islamic terrorists can and will exploit for destructive ends.'" (Rex Tillerson, March 6, 2017). I may be from Ghana, but I bear a Muslim name from my father. Perhaps this is why I have always been flagged while coming into the United States legally. Immigration in the United States is arguably the most burning political issue in recent times. I understand the existent of terrorist, illegal immigrants, and the ramifications and pressure it brings to the American economy.

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