Richter Research Abroad Student Scholarship

Richter Research Abroad Program

2011

Traditional Ghanaian Dance and Its Role In Transcending Western Notions of Community

Davida Persaud
Occidental College

Traditional Ghanaian Dance and Its Role In Transcending Western Notions of Community

Davida Persaud
Supervisor: James Ford
Accra and Klikor, Ghana
Summer 2011

Introduction

> "We, the people, accept the dancer's role as the center of our lives – in his subtle flexion of hands and fingers, our prayers; in his thrusting arms – our thanksgiving; in his stamp and pause – our indignation; in his leap and turns – our frivolity – our defiance; in his bow- our allegiance; his halting steps – our reverence. Thus he dances, not alone, but with us and we with him. We are not spectators but co-creators and participants in the dramas of the African way of life"
> (A.M. Opoku 1968)

In his eloquent quotation, Professor A.M. Opoku, co-founder and choreographer for the Ghana Dance Ensemble, captures the essence of traditional Ghanaian dance as a simultaneous evocation and provocation of African community. The intricacies of traditional Ghanaian dance make it more than an art form: it is the rhythmic heartbeat of the culture itself. Traditional dance, as Opoku portrays it, flows through the veins of Ghana and renders it a country with a deep-seated sense of solidarity amongst its citizens. Each movement of the dancer's body tremors through the mass of Ghanaian society leaving a shadow of itself even after the moment of dance is exhausted. In Ghana, the fingers of several family members dance around one bowl of food while terms such as "Daavi," which means "sister" in the Ewe dialect, are sung out to neighboring women in a vast compound. It is these instances of communal living that are illustrated in the traditional dances of Ghana and as such, the dance continuously rejuvenates a sense of togetherness among the people of Ghana.

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the function of traditional dance in Ghana and how it both reflects and preserves an experience of community that continues to elude the Western world. The role of dance within Ghana challenges the very core of the Western idea of a communal society. As such, a study of traditional Ghanaian dance and its role in community provokes a comparative analysis between the fundamental bases of African and Western societies. The intent of this research is first and foremost to shed light on the powerful social

influence of the arts but this paper also offers its readers the chance to peel away the superficial layers of both African and Western societies in order to gain a deeper understanding of their communal structures.

The theoretical basis of this paper is rooted in the disciplines of Anthropology and Philosophy. The conceptual and ethnographical writings of Katherine Dunham, a female anthropologist who studied the sociological and political significance of dance in the Caribbean, has contributed greatly to the shaping of the ideas presented within this study. Her focus on dances of the African Diaspora in Haiti, coupled with her idea of "dance as a community expression," makes her research an invaluable resource in exploring the interplay between traditional Ghanaian dance and community (Clark and Johnson 515). Drawing inspiration from the literatures of Dunham, this paper studies the elusive history of a specific traditional dance in Ghana, *Atsiagbekor*, as well as the formal components that distinguish traditional Ghanaian dance from Western dance: the voice of the drum, the voice of oral tradition, and the voice of the body as it dances. In this analysis, there is a strong emphasis on the role traditional Ghanaian dance plays in cementing the bond between a Ghanaian and their community, with particular attention paid to the cultural and communal elements embedded within traditional dance.

Alongside a formal analysis of traditional Ghanaian dance that follows the theories of Katherine Dunham, this paper will integrate the ideas of post-modernist French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy's philosophy is centered upon the idea that the notion of community that exists in contemporary society is in actuality, one that is disjointed and as Ginette Michaud says "a community without communitarianism" (Michaud 104). Nancy's philosophy attempts to critique community on a global scale, however, the arguments presented in his literature and the evidential support he draws upon are exclusive to Western European culture and its intellectual

heritage. As such, there is a fundamental flaw in his theory of contemporary community that is remedied by including studies of Non-Western societies. An examination of traditional Ghanaian dance within the framework of both Dunham and Nancy presents the opportunity to excite a new theory of community through the arts.

Dunham and Nancy must be engaged together because their theories are built upon a similar foundation-how to reconceive community in the wake of a contemporized and industrialized society. The distinct differences in their approach, with respect to the regions and societies they study, is what makes an amalgamation of their theories able to provoke a reconceptualization of community in the modern world. Also, marrying the works of Dunham and Nancy allows for a multidimensional study of traditional Ghanaian dance. Dunham's research focuses specifically on the form and function of dance within its society. Nancy's philosophy, however, is centered upon the ecstatic moment of mythic performance, which he discusses as primarily oratorical. The dances of Ghana, whose function is to communicate a culture and its social values, resonate with Nancy's philosophy; however, my analysis of Ghanaian dance considers the embodiment of community, thereby expanding upon Nancy's figuring of community primarily in terms of 'voice.'By analyzing traditional Ghanaian dance through the lens of both Dunham and Nancy, this paper hopes to develop a more holistic view of community that will offer an understanding as to why the notion of community in African societies transcends that of the West.

Methodology

The research on traditional Ghanaian dance and its role in community that is presented within this paper was conducted over the course of ten weeks during the Summer of 2011. This

study relies heavily on interviews and tactile experience due to the scarcity of literature on traditional Ghanaian dance. The traditional dances of Ghana are among the most valuable assets of Ghanaian society and as such, there is a secrecy associated with the arts. In an attempt to maintain the integrity of their culture and traditional arts, Ghanaians are wary and often unreceptive of Western researchers. However, the interviews conducted over the course of ten weeks in the capital city of Accra, Ghana and the village of Klikor, Ghana were well received, thereby making the information that was accessed a privilege rather than a right.

The city of Accra was chosen as one of two research sites because it is the location of the University of Ghana, whose Department of Theatre Arts boasts renowned leaders of dance. The research conducted at the University of Ghana was centered upon gaining an understanding of the societal role of dance within Ghana. However, as a modern institution, studying dance at the University of Ghana also presented the opportunity to examine the state of traditional arts in a rapidly urbanizing space. In my pursuit to understand the role of traditional dance, particularly in contemporary society, I conducted interviews with Aristedes Hargoe, a graduate student at the University of Ghana, and Afriyie Adomako, a recent recipient of a Masters Degree in dance from the University of Ghana. Though each interview contributed greatly to my understanding of dance and its social implications, the interviews conducted with Afriyie Adomako was essential to the development of the theory presented in this paper. Afriyie Adomako's academic background, which involves a study of both dance choreography and ethnography, allowed me to draw significant connections between traditional dance and the theories of Dunham and Nancy. His interviews provided an in depth analysis of the lasting experience of community that is harbored through traditional dance. In addition to interviews, I attended dance performances at

the University of Ghana, which provoked thoughts on the adaptation of centuries old traditional dances to a modern world.

After an initial stay in Accra, I relocated to the village of Klikor to study traditional Ghanaian dance in a more rural setting where a slower pace of modernization has kept the traditions of Ghanaian culture more intact. The research conducted in the village of Klikor, though supplemented by interviews, was focused on a personal involvement in the community as well as in dance itself. I shared a compound with the family of Albert Azameti, the leader of two dance troupes in the Volta Region of Ghana: the Adzogbo Cultural Troupe and the Ganedegbe Cultural Troupe. He is also a participant in the Afrikania Cultural Troupe, which has performed and taught traditional Ghanaian dance in the United States of America. Living with a Ghanaian family was essential to the development of my research because it was an immersion into an experience of community that can only be explained through the words of Jean-Luc Nancy. The sense of community that is embedded within every movement upon Ghanaian soil is unrivaled by the West and it is through harvesting rain water with the children of the compound and cooking upon a coal pit with the women of the family that I was able to recognize this.

Albert Azameti, as a prominent dancer in Klikor, was able to organize a meeting with the director of the Ketu South District's National Commission on Culture, Eric Nketia, who furthered my research on the Ewe dance *Atsiagbekor*. Through Eric Nketia, I became involved in the Dagbe Dance Institute of Korpeyia, where master drummer Ruben Agbeli led my lessons on both the drumming and dancing of *Atsiagbekor*. The only way to gain an understanding of a traditional Ghanaian dance is through becoming a part of it and Ruben Agbeli stressed this notion throughout our meetings. As such, I was taught every movement of the slow version of *Atsiagbekor* along with the parts of all seven percussion instruments. Along with the tactile

experience of traditional Ghanaian dance, I was privileged to learn the true historical context of *Atsiagbekor* as well as the meanings embedded within the movements and the elements that surround the dance.

Throughout each interview and each experience as both a witness and participant of traditional dance, I applied the theories of Dunham and Nancy in order to gain a better understanding of the social and communal significance of traditional Ghanaian dance. Experiencing the moment of mythic performance as both a dancer and a spectator allowed me a physical experience of community within the arts that is the cusp of Nancy's philosophy. However, I was able to experience the community that Nancy says does not exist outside of the moment of performance even after dance. By living in the type of communal society that Dunham speaks about in her studies, I was able to appreciate the philosophy of Nancy outside of the context he wrote it in. The means through which the research presented in this paper was conducted is deeply rooted in engaging Dunham and Nancy together. Thus, the methodology employed is essential to revolutionizing the contemporary understanding of community through a study of how traditional Ghanaian dance unifies individuals in a way that is unparalleled by Western societies.

Understanding Community: Africa and the West

The way in which community is discussed throughout this paper builds upon the theories of Dunham and Nancy by invoking their ideas in a new time and space. Both Dunham and Nancy penetrate the surface layer of their respective regions of study and explore the subtle nuances of each society in hopes of unearthing their frameworks of community. Dunham, who became aware of the communal values of primitive societies through the arts, develops her ideas

of such communities through a deconstruction of Western society. In a vastly different approach, Nancy critiques contemporary societies for being absent of community while offering them redemption through the performance of myth. Although myth conventionally refers to fantastical origins, here the term designates a way of collectively engaging the past, present, and future. In order to understand and appreciate the community of Ghana as it is portrayed and fueled by traditional dance, one must first understand the differences between African and Western societies as conveyed by both Dunham and Nancy.

The modern societies of Africa and the West have been shaped by drastically different histories that have inevitably impacted their social and political dispositions. The Western world has always followed a linear trajectory in the quest for an ever-changing "better civilization" whereas Africa is still struggling to recuperate from a violent and tragic past. The modern society of Africa is taking footsteps toward the future while gazing upon a past and this is precisely what distinguishes the communities of Africa from those of the West. In looking upon a society's past, one gains an understanding and a respect for the origins of their culture and by extension, themselves. Such a society develops steadfast bonds between its people because they all share an appreciation for a common past and thereby, live in a common present.

Realizing the depth of history that resides within the traditional arts of primitive societies and its impact on community, Dunham criticizes the West for inviting a lack of community by running from a rich history. She attributes Western societies' distance from its own history to a fear of primitivism, which induces an obsession with industrialization. Dunham explains the West's fear of primitivism when she writes: "We are tempted to feel that if we allow ourselves to reflect on our true tradition, on our heritage, that we will tend to stagnate and never catch up" (Dunham 540). Though traditional arts are the most potent representations of history and culture

that can exist in a modern society, the Western world strives to ignore it for fear of being plagued with criticisms that say "they are uncivilized and unworthy, that our creative thinking and expressions are savage, pagan" and every other negative identity that is so sadly, yet so easily, associated with Africa (Dunham 540). It is this fear that fuels the West's desire to desperately pursue industrialization and this, in turn, perpetuates a disregard for not only the arts, but also, the cultural roots that bind a people together.

In her discussion of industrialization, Dunham says that "Man has become so specialized in the industrialized world that he has separated himself almost totally from his arts except insofar as they occasionally fulfill some far-fetched need during his moments of leisure" (Dunham 545). In specializing in a single arena, one inevitably disregards the factors that are seemingly unrelated to their own industry. This is what fuels a disconnect between beings and provokes the individualism that is associated with the Western world. In place of what could be an experience of community through an appreciation for one's culture, is a society of individuals.

The gaping separation between the peoples of Western societies can be further understood through Nancy's theory of immanence- a concept that speaks to the prevalent individualism of the West. Christopher Fynsk, author of the foreword of Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, explicates the theory of immanence when he writes: "Nancy calls the passion of the absence of community: the ecstatic experience of the impossibility of communion or fusion in a shared, immanent Being" (Fynsk xxviii). What this means is that immanence is, in essence, an unconscious resistance to the experience of community that is rooted in a sense of isolation between the people of a society. Immanence, as it is commonly referred to, is a permeation of a divine force in the mortal world. The way that Nancy discusses immanence is much like a presence of a self-proclaimed divinity within each individual. Nancy's immanent

Being is one who believes themselves to be limitless and uninfluenced by any force outside of his or her own flesh. For Nancy and for myself, immanence amounts to an unwillingness to acknowledge the limits of selfhood that make community necessary and makes individual life possible. Nancy's critique of immanence, ultimately, is a critique of individualism. To relate this notion to Dunham's work, one could say that immanence is the compartmentalization of individual's into categories that ignores their interrelatedness.

However, Nancy introduces the theory of finitude, which promises the experience of absolute community among a society of immanent Beings. Absolute community, as it is understood in the context of mythic performance, is the experience of an emotional relation between individuals that contrasts with conventional notions of community, wherein individuals co-exist in a common space but do not feel a bodily or spiritual connection to others. Finitude, then, is "the passion of a singular being drawn to its limits and drawing out those limits, communicating them as the limits of community itself" (Fynsk xxviii). The antipode of individualism, finitude is a person's recognition of their limitations based on elements beyond and outside of themselves. Nancy suggests that the experience of finitude, and thereby the experience of absolute community, can exist solely in the performance of myth. He describes myth as the oratorical means through which ancient societies discovered their history and values and as such, discovered a commonality among themselves. Myth, as Nancy discusses, "communicates the common" and "it also reveals the community to itself and founds it" (Nancy 50-51). During the moment of mythic performance, the immanence that shrouds one in an isolated individualism is ruptured and finitude ensues, which allows each being to understand his or herself as a part of a larger whole. The historical and social undertones embedded within myth reveals a common force that binds a people together and it is this that provokes a relation-in

being, a finitude, an experience of absolute community, during the moment of mythic performance.

Traditional Ghanaian dance is, following the logic of Nancy, a mythic performance in its form and function. The synthesis of creativity and historical relevance within traditional Ghanaian dance aligns it with the myth discussed in Nancy's philosophy. Thus, it retains the same potential to evoke an experience of absolute community that Nancy's myth does. The finitude that occurs during the moment of mythic performance captures perfectly the communal experience of traditional Ghanaian dance. However, Nancy believes that the experience of absolute community in the presences of myth is as fleeting as the performance itself.

By examining traditional Ghanaian dance, this paper hopes to disprove the idea that a dangerous sense of individualism is restored after the moment of performance. African societies, as understood through Dunham's discussion of primitivism and urbanization, are deeply aware of their cultural histories and thus, are in a constant state of absolute community. Traditional Ghanaian dance, as a pre-modern art form in a modernizing society, functions to constantly remind the population of the commonality they share in history and culture. As such, traditional Ghanaian dance revives and intensifies a finitude that already exists before and will exist after the moment of performance. Absolute community is an ever-present force within Ghana and it is this sense of community that is reflected and preserved through traditional Ghanaian dance. An understanding of the form and function of traditional Ghanaian dance with respect to Dunham and Nancy's theories of community will explain the role traditional Ghanaian dance plays in transcending Western notions of community.

Atsiagbekor

In order to better exemplify the theories of Dunham and Nancy in this study of traditional Ghanaian dance as it relates to community, this paper will continue to allude to a traditional dance of the Ewe people: *Atsiagbekor*. *Atsiagbekor* is a war dance that celebrates the success of Chief Kinney in retrieving a land that belonged to his people. Before the war, Kinney and the chief of a neighboring village both expressed interest in the same piece of land. However, after Kinney's grandfather discovered that the land was rightfully theirs, Kinney sent a message to the neighboring village declaring war. Following the courtesies of war, Kinney waited until the opposing village was ready for battle before approaching with his troops. Though Kinney acted as the commander of his battalion, it was what the Ewe people refer to as *awoja-soshe*, or Kinney's spirit, that truly headed the battle. Without an *awoja-soshe* of his own to protect him, the opposing chief fell at the hands of Kinney who, to prove his winning of the land, beheaded his victim and took it as a token of victory to his own village.

Upon his return home, Kinney was met with much praise and glorification and to ensure that this historical moment would be commemorated by forthcoming generations, it was recorded through the medium of the dancer's body. In its strife to represent the war led by Kinney, the structural arrangement of *Atsiagbekor* mirrors the battle. The dancers are organized into a rectangular formation, which gives the impression of a battalion ready to embark on a mission. Also, the master drum embodies the spirit of Kinney himself as it boldly serves as the commander of six supporting instruments. *Atsiagbekor* is separated into two versions: a slow *Atsiagbekor* and a fast *Atsiagbekor*. Thus, the movements of the dancer's body express both the stealth of approaching battle and the vigor of the fight itself.

It is important to note that each performance of *Atsiagbekor* differs slightly based on the stylistic approach of the dancer and choreographer. At the Dagbe Cultural Center in the village

of Korpeyia, Ghana, the dancers begin their performance with a call-and-response exchange between the leader and the dancers that excites a passion for battle. Then, as the master drummer beats his command, slow *Atsiagbekor* begins. Bent slightly forward from the waist, the dancer takes three steps to the left, arms, head and eyes following the direction of his feet. On the forth step, the dancer gently throws his foot and arms into the air, eyes still following. Coupled with a costume that includes a knife and a horsetail, this movement is understood as a warrior's cautious yet brave approach to battle.

The dancers repeat this motion until the cue of the master drummer signals a variation. There are hundreds of variations to choose from, such as a salutation to a divine force that is depicted when the dancer throws his arms into the air and, with eyes raised to the sky, utters "Ayee!, Ayee!" for a total of three times in rhythm with the drum. After each variation, the dancer returns to the original movement. Fast *Atsiagbekor* follows the same structure but, with the change in rhythm and tempo of the drums, it serves to depict the fierceness of battle.

The meaning that is communicated through each movement of *Atsiagbekor* is meant to connect each participant, be it dancer, drummer or spectator, to a larger cultural and historical context. It is through a study of the form and function of *Atsiagbekor* that this paper is able to analyze the relationship between traditional Ghanaian dance and community in terms of the married theories of Dunham and Nancy.

Traditional Ghanaian Dance: The Makings and Experience of Community

Traditional Ghanaian dance boasts an implicit societal function that is unparalleled by the forms of dance prevalent in Western societies because, as a pre-modern style of dance, it holds the capacity to remind a people of their common history and values even as the society continues

to transform in response to industrialization. The formal structure of traditional Ghanaian dance accommodates the makings of absolute community because it harbors an appreciation for the history of a culture- a sentiment that Dunham explains is absent in the Western world. As discussed earlier, Dunham's critique of Western community is rooted in the disregard for cultural history that accompanies its incessant pursuit of industrialization. It is these values that have diluted the social influence of Western art forms because they instill a desire within art to constantly modernize itself, leaving behind the meaning of the past. In light of its ceaseless desire to be perceived as constantly evolving, even post-modern, the popular dance styles of the West diminish its potential to evoke the spirit of absolute community.

The effect that Western social values have on dance is best explained through the words of Dunham:

> "Laymen who attend dance concerts, dance teachers, and even performers are usually unconcerned with the function of dance. Instead, they are concerned, largely, with its aesthetic principles, its technique, the ideology of modern forms, and the form of the choreography."
> (Dunham 502)

As Dunham's quote reveals, Western forms of dance have become little more than an aesthetic expression of physicality and this is a fundamental difference between Western dance and traditional Ghanaian dance, and by extension, the fundamental difference between each respective community.

The unique form and function of traditional Ghanaian dance makes it more than an aesthetic performance- it is, rather, a spiritual and emotional performance that provokes a deep sense of connection between its participants and audience alike. The function of traditional dance, as exemplified through the story of *Atsiagbekor*, is to record historical milestones in a way that will ensure its celebration among future generations. This pre-modern style, in addition

to synthesizing a past and present, engrains an appreciation for a common culture shared between a people, thereby laying the foundation for an experience of absolute community.

However, the function of traditional Ghanaian dance cannot achieve an experience of absolute community independent of its unique form and structure. The formal components of traditional Ghanaian dance reveal the makings of a community and, because it mirrors the structure of Ghanaian society, it also expresses the communal values of Ghana. In an interview with Afriyie Adomako, he explained the function of traditional Ghanaian dance through its form when he noted that dance is recognized for "fostering unity and diversity in the sense that [we] have dance and [we] have instrumentalists" (Adomako). This alludes to the three formal components of traditional Ghanaian dance: the voice of the drum, the voice of oral tradition, and the voice of the body as it dances.

The interplay between drumming, oral tradition and the dancer's body reflects the cohesion of Ghanaian society. Western dance forms, in its reflection of what Dunham discusses as the specialization of Man within the industrial world, has compartmentalized each element of dance by isolating music from physical performance. Unlike traditional Ghanaian dance, the movements of Western dances do not correlate with a specific drum cue and as such, the dancer's body is independent of its musical counterpart. The choreography of Western dance can be manipulated to fit a new rhythm whereas the choreography of a traditional dance is dependent upon a specific rhythm from the drum.

To apply the philosophy of Nancy- the relationship between drumming, oral tradition and the dancer's body as it exists within traditional Ghanaian dance establishes fusion. The way that Nancy discusses fusion within the moment of mythic performance is that "myth represents multiple existences as immanent to its own unique fiction, which gathers them together and gives

them their common figure" (Nancy 57). Looking at traditional dance as a microcosm of Ghanaian society, each element of dance, drumming, oral tradition and the dancer's body, functions as an individual entity. However, in the moment that traditional dance is performed, each independent figure of the drum, the oral tradition and the dance must act together in order to produce the common figure: the experience of traditional Ghanaian dance. Thus, traditional Ghanaian dance is a moment in which the individuality of each element is appreciated for their substantial role in creating a communal experience. In the production of a common figure, the components of traditional Ghanaian dance are fused together in a way that ruptures a layer of isolation and establishes a community between the drums, the voice of oral tradition and the dancer.

In the moment of performance, Western dance forms must also combine the independent components of dance, namely the music and the dancer themselves, in order to express the emotion of a choreography. However, the undertone of an immanent existence in the music and the dancer hinders its fusion thereby impeding the manifestation of a community between the two. The isolation between the music and the dancer is preserved in light of the fact that they are not exclusively bound to each other and will always be interchangeable. The components of traditional Ghanaian dance, however, will always be solely dependent upon each other because each drum rhythm is linked to a traditional movement- the fusion that occurs between the independent elements of traditional Ghanaian dance is a reflection of the fusion that occurs between the beings in Ghanaian society. It is this union that is embedded within the structure of dance that reflects and provokes the experience of absolute community within Ghana.

The drumming of traditional Ghanaian dance offers a more tangible representation of Ghanaian society and speaks to the sense of community that exists in Ghana. To explain

traditional drumming, Mr. Adomako drew a comparison between the structure of a traditional Ghanaian family and the drums themselves. He said that the drums are a family of "siblings of five or six [who] all have different idiosyncrasies" yet, embodying a truly familial sentiment, the drums play "chaotic rhythms but they blend in a unifying force" (Adomako). The independent rhythms of traditional drumming combine to produce what is known as a polyrhythm. Polyrhythmic drumming is a uniquely African philosophy of music where the time signature is more complex than the four beats per measure that is prevalent in Western music. Polyrhythmic drumming is a literal embodiment of community that is best explained in reference to *Atsiagbekor*.

The drum family for *Atsiagbekor* is composed of seven percussion instruments: There is the rattle, known as *axatse* as well as the bell, which is called *gatingo*. There are three open-bottomed drums known as *kagan, kroboto, and totogee* and one close-bottomed drum known as *kidee* that all follow the lead of the master drum, *atimavu*. Each instrument produces a unique sound that is essential to the sound *Atsiagbekor* seeks. *Atimavu* plays the first rhythms of *Atsiagbekor* and at a specific cue, the voice of the *gatingo* begins to ring out. Another cue signals the joining in of *kagan, kroboto, totogee* and *kidee* and together, this layering of percussive voices produces a polyrhythm.

The function of this polyrhythm within *Atsiagbekor* and the qualities of community that is inherent within it suggests a polyvocality in Ghanaian community. Nancy's examination of myth stems from an oratorical perspective and as such, he discusses the communication of myth in terms of the singular voice of a poet. However, he goes on to explain that, in the rupturing of a sense of complete individualism that occurs during the moment of mythic performance, the singular voice becomes a multiple voice because it represents a commonality that is shared

amongst its listeners. What this suggests is that "one can never be a voice but in common," meaning that every individual voice rooted in the communication of myth is in fact a communal voice (Nancy 70).

Polyrhythmic drumming is therefore, a literal embodiment of multiple voices through the illusion of a singular voice of music. The singular voice of each drum is meaningless without a polyrhythmic combination because the singular voice does not have the capacity to convey the traditional dance itself. In essence, a truly singular voice cannot perform myth because myth is a communal activity just as the singular voice of a drum cannot perform traditional drumming for the dance because traditional drumming and dancing are both a communal activity. Polyrhythmic drumming inherently possesses multiple voices thus; the experience of absolute community is implicit within the traditional drumming of Ghana. As discussed earlier, drumming is a structural reflection of Ghanaian society therefore, the absolute community of traditional drumming is in effect, the absolute community of Ghana.

Though the formal structures of traditional dance and drumming serve as the foundation of absolute community, it is the communication that occurs through the medium of the dancer's body that ruptures the independent existence of beings and induces an experience of finitude. The theories of Dunham presented throughout this paper reveal the deep connection between pre-modern dances and the experience of community. As clarified earlier, the presence of history within traditional dance is what endows it with the power of social influence and community building that is absent in Western styles of dance. It is the dancer's body that must communicate a culture's history in order to rejuvenate a sense of community. However, before the dancer is able to communicate a cultural passion to an audience, he or she must first experience the feeling of community by rupturing his or her own sense of absolute individuality.

This means that the dancer must be so deeply connected to the culture and history represented within the pre-modern dance forms of Ghana that he enters into a community of self, where he recognizes himself as a finite being and the passion of culture flows through every limb and is excited in every movement. Once the dancer experiences absolute community in his own body, he can then successfully communicate the passion of a culture to his audience and share the experience of absolute community with them. At this point, the relationship between the dancer and audience is "a touching, the transmission of a trembling at the edge of being, the communication of a passion that makes us fellows" (Nancy 61). When the dancer's body communicates the passion of a culture to the Ghanaian audience, the barriers that render each body as solely independent disintegrates and the beings within the audience develop a relation to each other. This relation signals the rupturing of immanence and the establishment of finitude among the people of Ghana as they experience the absolute community of traditional Ghanaian dance.

Though the form and function of traditional Ghanaian dance is the cusp of the experience of community as discussed through the works of Dunham and Nancy, the elements that surround the dance also contribute largely to shaping of its social influences. As Mr. Adomako explains, performance space plays an integral role in evoking a feeling of community among Ghanaians because "traditional performance is more than movement in time and space" (Adomako). Traditionally, the dancers do not perform on a constructed stage and this still holds true for most performances that occur within the villages of Ghana. Without a stage, performers share a common ground with the audience, who encircle the dancers as they stand "shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another" (Nancy 43). The circle, however, is arranged in a way that honors the chiefs and as such, the chiefs are usually

seated at the very front of the circle so the dancers and drummers, who are situated just behind the dancers, are both visible. In addition to maintaining the tradition of Ghanaian culture and arranging the bodies of the audience with a closeness and proximity that creates a natural interaction between people, the traditional performance space also allows the audience to participate in the dance themselves. Aristedes Hargoe explained that "the audience often becomes the performer at communal events because they join in" (Hargoe). This interrelation between audience and performer represents the communal values of Ghana in that there is a constant encouragement for one's participation in a celebration of their culture and an attitude of inclusion for each member of society in each arena of society.

In the cities of Ghana, however, the performance space has been Westernized to include a proscenium stage rather than an arena setting. This therefore poses a challenge to dancers in retaining all the communal qualities and pre-modernity of traditional dance. The proscenium stage creates a definitive gap between the performers on an elevated stage and the spectators in chairs directly in front of them. In the West, the proscenium stage contributes to the emotional disconnect between performers and audiences because it establishes the sentiments of a spectatorship rather than a relationship. As discussed earlier, Western performance art is centered upon aesthetic technique and as such, there is little to no emphasis on audience involvement and evoking a unity in light of one's culture.

However, when the proscenium stage is used as the performance space in Ghana, dancers and choreographers attempt to bridge the gap between the performers and the audience by dancing off stage and among the audience. Often, dancers and drummers will not enter from backstage but rather, from the common theater entrances and they play and move as they walk down the aisle towards the stage. Audience participation is also not limited as it is in the West

because the traditional roots of each song and dance often make it common knowledge between performers and spectators as seen when people in the audience begin to sing or dance. The way that dancers and choreographers utilize their performance space reflects and perpetuates the social values of their community. In Ghana, the performance space is manipulated to become a center for communal relation between beings through not only expressing the form and function of traditional Ghanaian dance but also by working to include the audience in the moment of dance. This is what fuels the experience of absolute community that is embedded not only in the moment of traditional Ghanaian dance, but also, in the larger context of Ghana itself.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the role traditional Ghanaian dance plays in creating an experience and an understanding of community that is yet to be conceived in Western societies. In studying traditional Ghanaian dance, this paper took the works of Katherine Dunham and Jean-Luc Nancy outside of their original contexts of time and space and applied it in a way that offers a new perspective of community through the microcosm of each society's art forms.

In so doing, this study exposes the way in which traditional Ghanaian dance functions in its society to transcend Western notions of community. The social and political values of both Africa and the West are what have shaped their sense of community as it is reflected through their arts. Western societies, with a desperate desire to disassociate themselves from primitivism, have long been preoccupied with rapid industrialization and a consistent pursuit of a better

tomorrow that requires a turn away from the past. These social values have had the disheartening impact of ignoring a history, a culture and in effect a deep commonality among people. A staunch individualism has pervaded Western societies in a way that prevents a true, emotional connection between beings. Nancy suggests that the only experience of absolute community that can exist is during the ecstatic moment of mythic performance. Outside of the moment of myth however, the barriers of independence are reconstructed between individual.

The form and function of traditional Ghanaian dance disproves Nancy because it ignites a sense of community that exists before and after the ecstatic moment of performance. The moment of traditional Ghanaian dance does evoke an ecstatic depth of emotion and connection between beings however, Ghana does not succumb to the restoration of individualism after the performance has ended. Rather, Ghana is privileged with a continuous experience of absolute community due to their ever-present reverence for the history, culture and values that bind a people together. The simultaneous evocation and provocation of culture that occurs in the pre-modern style of traditional Ghanaian dance is what ensures that the people of Ghana are constantly reminded of their commonality.

Ghana serves as a model of community because, even as the industrialization of its cities begins to trickle into its villages, they retain an interest in celebrating the history and culture shared amongst its citizens. This sense of community extends outside of Ghana's traditional art forms and shapes a way of life. With every drumbeat and leap of the traditional dancer, the community of Ghana grows stronger in a way that eludes the Western world. Traditional dance-the heartbeat of Ghanaian culture- will continue to flow through the larger body of Ghana, always evoking a passion and provoking an experience of absolute community.

Bibliography

Clark, V. and Sara Johnson. *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham.* Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Michaud, Ginette, and Roxanne Lapidus, "In Media Res": Interceptions of the Work of Art and the Political in Jean Luc Nancy. *SubStance*. 34. 106 (2005): 104-128.

Nancy, J. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Etwaroo, I. *Dances of our Ancestors: Honor, Memory and Celebration.* United States, 2005.

Hargoe, Aristedes. Personal Interview. May 2011.

Adamako, Afriyie. Personal Interview. June and July 2011.

Azameti, Albert. Personal Interview. June 2011.

Agbeli. Ruben. Personal Interview. July 2011.