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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Following FESTAC '77: A Dance-Critical Event

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Colette Marie Eloi

March 2024

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Imani Kai Johnson, Chairperson

Dr. Anusha Kedhar

Dr. Yvonne Daniel

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2024

The Dissertation of Colette Marie Eloi is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## **Acknowledgments**

I must start with acknowledging God Almighty, my Ancestors who made a way for me, my Warriors, and all my Guardian Angels, and my family. God's grace repeatedly blows me away, sending angels to earth to help this poor soul, to help me on my journey. Among them are the people acknowledged here.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my niece, Olubanke, and my nephew, Oulseyi.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Following FESTAC '77: A Dance-Critical Event

by

Colette Marie Eloi

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies  
University of California, Riverside, March 2024  
Dr. Imani Kai Johnson, Chairperson

This dissertation examines dance at FESTAC '77 - *The Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture*. This dissertation is a historiography of FESTAC '77, a significant festival that has been shrouded. Using theoretical frameworks on the body from Critical Dance Studies and on precolonial African dance from anthropological research, the dissertation forwards the conception of the body, a body of culture filled with divine sovereignty. FESTAC '77 enabled the sovereign body. From the '60s through the '70s, long after the experiences of chattel slavery and colonialism, Black and African people were still confronted with stereotypes, and, in Africa, many countries had just gained independence and sought acceptance in the international sphere. FESTAC '77 served as a critical way for Black and African people to peacefully convene and address

ideological anti-Blackness. FESTAC '77 created a space that would enable the *sovereign body*, an agentive body at the center of its own reality. This dissertation also considers the way the festival was a *dance-critical* event in which dance was used as a vehicle of diplomacy, and an archive of identity, and Indigenous African epistemologies. African-rooted dances placed identity *in situ* during the oppressive eras, and FESTAC harnessed them.

My methodology was multi-pronged and involved oral history interviews from US dance delegates who attended FESTAC '77, video archives of FESTAC '77 dance performances, anthropological archival scholarship of precolonial cosmologies of African diaspora dance, and information from African-rooted dance and drum specialists. As an embodied researcher, having been an African and African Diaspora dancer for over 25 years, I enter this inter- and multi-disciplinary work from an emic understanding and with personal immersion in several African and Diaspora cultures that are discussed in this dissertation. This dissertation also celebrates the US dance delegates who attended the festival, as they have become progenitors of African-rooted dance as we know it today in the US. The topics discussed are relevant not only to Dance Studies but also to many Humanities sub-fields like Black Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Gender Studies, and a wide variety of international audiences.



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## **Introduction: Following FESTAC '77**

Housed in the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in downtown Oakland, California, in the Dimensions Dance Theater office is a framed black, gold, and red poster from FESTAC '77<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 1. Poster of FESTAC '77, in Dimensions Dance Theater office, Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, Oakland, California.

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<sup>1</sup>Please watch this footage from Cleo Parker Robinson's private collection of FESTAC '77, entitled "Family Reunion – Americans at FESTAC": [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UPflmDsp7yr2geppmhkdkcuC\\_ThJg3ua/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UPflmDsp7yr2geppmhkdkcuC_ThJg3ua/view)

At the center of that poster is the 16th-century *Benin Ivory Mask of Queen Mother Idia*<sup>2</sup> below the title “FESTAC ’77.” The words “2nd World Black and African<sup>3</sup> Festival of Arts and Culture” surround the image. I would look at that poster every time I walked into the office to prepare to teach my Dunham and Haitian technique classes for Dimensions’ Rites of Passage youth program.

During the period from 2000 to 2014, I understood FESTAC ’77 to be a conference that several of my mentors/teachers had attended: Nontsizi Cayou, Deborah Vaughan, Blanche Brown, Alicia Pierce, Mosheh Milon and Tumani Onabiyi. All are notable, if not legends, in the Oakland Bay Area African and African Diaspora dance community. However, I had no idea of the magnitude of this iconic festival until 2014, when I became Chair of the Dance Department at Laney College and conducted a research project on the festival, in collaboration with all the classes in the Dance Department that year.

During that time, an online search of FESTAC ’77 yielded little information about the festival other than an article remarking on the monumental waste of money; in a search today in 2023, that article is no longer available. Regardless, I wanted to know more about this festival that my mentors/teachers described as “life-changing” and “like heaven on

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<sup>2</sup> [https://panafest.org.za/#FESTAC\\_77-John\\_Picton](https://panafest.org.za/#FESTAC_77-John_Picton), John Picton, professor of African Art at the University of London explains the controversy of this mask at FESTAC ’77.

<sup>3</sup> I adopt this language of Black and African throughout this document as this is the term used by the visionaries and organizers of the event. I later found this data on the choice of categorization. Senegal threatened to boycott the festival if North African countries were invited to participate. Thus, the festival had to be renamed, from the “World Festival of Black Arts” to the “World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture” (Ntone 2020, Sosibo 2021, IFC 1977).

earth.” Inspired by those mentors/teachers, I began my journey of “Following FESTAC ’77.”

In particular, I wanted to know more about the dances that took place during the festival, and the role that dancing played for festival attendees. In 2014, through informal interviews with people who either attended the festival or heard of it, I found vastly different accounts from what was printed, especially from my teachers. The magazine, *Ebony*, summed up the importance of the festival:

“There were millions in attendance, with a 500-person contingent from the US alone. 40,000 artists, upwards of 57 African nations, and countries of the African Diaspora performed at the month-long event. Included was a durbar, regattas... what some describe as ‘the heart’ of the conference, a 2-week colloquium of 200 scholars, artists, politicians, traditionalists, etc. gave lectures. The opening ceremony rivaled that of what one might see at an Olympic opening ceremony. Among the artists who performed at the festival included Stevie Wonder, Gilberto Gil from Brazil, Bembeya Jazz National from Guinea, Mighty Sparrow from Grenada, Les Ballets Africains, Miriam Makeba from South Africa, and Franco Luambo Makiadi. FESTAC ’77 is still considered to be the biggest assemblage of Africans and African descendants ever to take place, coming as an action of development or (re)development that used art as the take off point” (Poinsett 1977a, 48).



Figure 2. Photo by Marilyn Nance Image of FESTAC '77 opening ceremony the crowd in the National Stadium Audience, 1977 in, *Last Days in Lagos*. Onabanjo. CARA/Fourthwall Books. (2020: 14 - 15).

The Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77, was centralized in Lagos, Nigeria, from January 15 - February 12, 1977; it was a multi- and interdisciplinary gathering that displayed to the world an artful and culturally inclusive methodology for moving forward after *chattel slavery*<sup>4</sup> and colonialism. Seven years

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<sup>4</sup> Chattel slavery – the enslaving and owning of human beings and their offspring as property, able to be bought, sold, and forced to work without wages, as distinguished from other systems of forced, unpaid, or low-wage labor, also considered to be slavery. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/chattel-slavery>, Chattel Slavery from 1641 to 1888 demarcating when the last abolition of enslavement in Brazil/the Portuguese took place. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first North American colony to recognize slavery as a legal institution.

before the festival, approximately forty-three African countries gained independence from colonialism<sup>5</sup>. The event included a colloquium designed to provide a forum for Black and African scholars, to pool and exchange theory, thoughts, experiences, and research results. According to the International Festival Committee Report and Summary of Accounts (IFC<sup>6</sup>), the aim of the Colloquium was to assist Black people to become more familiar with and consolidate their cultural heritage[s] as a means of ensuring total cultural liberation and promoting the dissemination of their cultural heritage (IFC Report and Summary of Accounts 1977, 29). FESTAC '77 invited all the African nations as well as the countries from the African Diaspora, who had representatives participating in the colloquium as well. The festival proactively and strategically confronted the negative aftermath of Black and African ideology following enslavement and colonization. The colloquium theme was "Black Civilizations and Education," which was divided into ten sub-groups: Arts, Pedagogy, African Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Religion, Historical Awareness, African Governments, Science and Technology, and Mass Media. The work from these topics has been put into a 10-book collection, which is available in Nigeria's Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) in Lagos.

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It introduced a system of servitude that relied upon the destruction of human/indigenous/pre-colonial conceptualizations of the body and erased or subsumed African indigenous epistemologies, cosmologies, and ontologies in an attempted genocide of African thought and heritage—redefining the body as chattel to be bought and sold as a product. Although the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in December 1865 ultimately abolished slavery in all areas of the nation, Juneteenth captured the jubilation of the end of slavery in the Confederacy.

<sup>5</sup> The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, sponsored by the European countries discussed above, carved up the African continent and ushered in an era colonialism. It resulted in brutal government takeovers, which was further emphasized by the revamping of African institutions, including their education systems, religious systems, and economic systems in what could be characterized as epistemicide.

<sup>6</sup> Report came from Lagos, Nigeria. Courtesy of Duro Oni and CBAAC.



Again, *Ebony* magazine captured how profound and healing this event was for Black/African people:

“For 29 days, black people from the four corners of the world lived and danced and dreamed together...For 29 days, black people from everywhere – from Africa, Europe, African-America, South America, Canada, and the islands of the seas – testified to the haunting presence of blackness in the world. And what this meant, at least on the level of the viscera, was that for the first time since the Slave Trade, *for the first time in 500 years*, the black family was together again, was whole again, was one again” (Poinsett, 1977b).

In my early review of literature on FESTAC '77, this article by Alex Poinsett in the Black magazine, *Ebony*, was one of the few pieces of writing that celebrated this once in a lifetime event in a manner appropriate to its spirit and scope. His nuance of saying, “at least on the level of the viscera” speaks to the awareness of the issues that surfaced among the “black family” in the planning of the festival. Among the participating African countries approximately 35 had recently gained their independence. His acknowledgement of the previous enslavement of the “black family” provided a level of empathy that was refreshing after reading the deep criticism of the festival. The early literature I reviewed between the period of 2014 to 2018 was primarily American sources, with a few online articles and YouTube posts from Nigeria. It would be during my formal academic research of FESTAC '77 that I would come across an array of literature from different countries, in different languages, about the festival.



Figure 3. Image of Djelis<sup>7</sup> in the opening ceremony of FESTAC '77.

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<sup>7</sup> Djeli - A *griot*; French; Manding: *jali* or *jeli* (in N'Ko). A *Djeli* or *djéli* is a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet, and/or musician. The griot is a repository of oral tradition and is often seen as a leader due to their position as an advisor to members of the royal family. As a result of the former of these two functions, they are sometimes called bards. They also act as mediators in disputes (Wikipedia 2003, par 6). Also see <https://www.zammagazine.com/arts/1356-guardians-of-the-word-the-story-of-the-Djeli>, for a brief understanding of a Djeli.

This image on the cover of *Ebony* magazine (Figure 3) is extremely significant because these are African oral historians—Djeli—who date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Mali empire that had the first universities in the world and libraries of written books on all manner of subjects. The presence of these people at FESTAC '77 speaks to the festival's theme of using cultural art to reconnect and re-establish their own histories and philosophies. What appears to be merely musicians are actual descendants of an extensive line of stewards of history and culture.

These cultural artists/historians sang and danced the histories from Mali, where corporeal traditions are included into the oral traditions and point to important diverse information about Black and African people. The aesthetic and technique that generations of Djelis honed through painstaking dedication is detected in the drum-dance-story structure repeated in cultural arts practices throughout the African Diaspora. Their practice combining story through song, drumming as healing vibration and communication, and dances to further enhance the song and drumming is iconic throughout Africa and has influenced the dance and drum traditions in the Diaspora. In the book *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (2000), Eric Charry discusses the traditions of the Djeli.

Before getting into the specifics of dance at FESTAC, it is important to provide an overview. There are several events that were precursors to the materialization of FESTAC '77: One of these was the *Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* in French, also known as The *First World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture* (and referred to as FESMAN, FMAN or FESTAC '66), was held in Dakar, and another was Nafest 1974, a Nigerian

festival that showcased indigenous Nigerian dances - upwards of 6000 different dances for their approximately 250 ethnic groups (Teltsch 1972). Nafest started in 1970 and is an annual event celebrating the many ethnic groups in Nigeria through highlighting their traditional (generational/cultural) dances. This festival demonstrates Nigeria's value system, which emphasizes the importance of dance and culture.

In 1956, The Society of African Culture, a collection of Pan-Africanism-centered literary scholars, poets, and artists headed by Senegalese scholar Alioune Diop, met in Paris to hold an informal congress concerning the events of the 1960s, during which many African countries were becoming "independent." There was a second meeting in Greece, where the recently freed African nation-states conceived of a Black Festival of Arts and Culture that would take place every ten years. The nation of Senegal accepted the challenge and hosted the first one, FESMAN '66.

At FESMAN, many leading names of the African and international cultural scene convened: Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, the National Ballet of Chad, Aimé Césaire, Wole Soyinka, Katherine Dunham, and Michel Leiris. FESMAN '66 was a critical moment in the Négritude movement, a literary and political movement developed by the President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor was also a significant figure behind FESMAN '66, responsible for inviting Katherine Dunham as advisor to the festival.

Both FESMAN and FESTAC were responding to their particular politico-social issues of their distinct historic moments, as described here by Jeff Donaldson:

“Nigeria sought to ensure the revival, resurgence, and propagation of Black and African cultural values and civilization in 1977 with an estimated \$800 million from its oil-rich coffers. Resource encumbrances were significant determinants in realizing the two events, particularly size and scope. But political and economic considerations may have been outweighed by the psychological mood of the African worlds of 1966 and that of 1977, FESMAN ‘66 was an instrument of the acceptance-integrationist early 60’s; FESTAC ’77 was the product of the self-determination of the late 60’s; and the succeeding interdependence of the early 70’s. Both festivals were landmark events in African cultural history, with each, in its own fashion, achieving major objectives” (Donaldson quoted in Chimurenga 2020, 26).

This quote references the elements of the festival concerned with international development, which included an awareness of the psychological state of the Black world as put forth by Donaldson, a proponent of the Black Arts movement and journalist. Donaldson links the topics of “political and economic considerations” with the “psyche” of the people, and in doing so he is remarking upon the specific struggle for equality prevalent in the 60’s and the 70’s in the United States, but also in the rest of the Black world.

During the time preceding FESTAC ’77—the mid-1960’s following the Civil Rights movement and the Voting Rights movement in the United States—Black people were working for integration into society as citizens as opposed to being treated as chattel, or lower-class citizens, without equal rights. Though Donaldson’s point considers the United States, this was the general temperature in Africa and the Diaspora. FESTAC ’66 and ’77 were responses to the need to integrate, and later, to work from a place of self-determination where Black people relied upon themselves to improve their situation in the

world, realizing they could not rely upon outside influences tainted by colonial ideations to solely consider their best interests.

Donaldson links the topics of “political and economic considerations” with the “psyche” of the people, and in doing so he is remarking upon the specific struggle for equality prevalent in the 60’s and the 70’s in the United States, but also in the rest of the Black world. It points to the documented legal issues of inequality for African Americans (Gaunt 1997).

Donaldson’s statement points to the issues of inequality and the focus of Black people to gain acceptance to integrate in the very society in which they were discriminated. The term of self-determination was championed by President Nyere of Tanzania, who was also one of the organizers of FESMAN. His movement of self-determination was designed to empower the people of Tanzania to be economically independent not just on an individual level but also internationally as a country working together. I conclude that Donaldson is confronting legacies of anti-Blackness on a global scale and pointing to the methodologies of non-violence and internal focus of correction, as opposed to war or blame. Ultimately, he points to both festivals as significant moments in Global Black history and “African cultural history”. Though this dissertation focuses on dance at FESTAC, this point reveals the impetus of the festival, and in my research of the dances I found that these themes of acceptance—integration and self-determination—made their way into the choreographic works of the dancers and choreographers in attendance. FESTAC ’77 enlisted a multi-disciplinary approach by including a colloquium for the extensive display and celebration of Black and African arts.

However, the dance at FESTAC '77 is the focus of this dissertation and will be discussed in depth later, where we will delve into topics that consider the festival's themes of self-determination, acceptance, integration, and valorization of cultural/indigenous art to accessing the themes of the festival.

FESTAC '77 enlisted a multi-disciplinary approach by including a colloquium for the extensive display and celebration of Black and African arts. The colloquium produced a ten-volume, set of books entitled, *The Arts and Civilization of Black and African Peoples*: Vol. One "Black Civilization and the Arts", Vol. Two "Black Civilization and Philosophy", Vol. Three "Black Civilization and Literature", Vol. Four "Black Civilization and African Languages", Vol. Five "Black Civilization and Historical Awareness", Vol. Six "Black Civilization and Pedagogy", Vol. Seven "Black Civilization and Religion", Vol. Eight "Black Civilization and Science and Technology", Vol. Nine "Black Civilization and African Government", and Vol. Ten "Black Civilization and the Mass Media", edited by Dr. Joseph Ohiomogben Okpaku, of Third Press New York, Dr. Alfred Esimatemi Opubor, of the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Dr. Benjamin Olatunji Oloruntime, of the University of Ife, Nigeria. This collection is available at the Center for Black and African Arts and Culture (CBAAC) located in Lagos, Nigeria, which was also established after the festival to house the artifacts from the festival along with the video footage of the event. These books provide the perspective of African and African diaspora scholars on pertinent topics in the festival.

The iconic status of FESTAC '77 touched the African world. In Nigeria, it was a form of holistic development from the inside out. Robert Farris Thompson, an eminent art

historian recognized for his field-leading research and writing on the art, history, culture, dance, and music of Africa and the Afro-Atlantic world, remarked how artists who participated in FESTAC '77 contributed to a type of renaissance in the US ("Outbursts of Creativity"; Thompson quoted in Chimurenga 2020, 16).

FESTAC '77 created a model throughout Africa and the world for development through the arts. This development considered the psyche of those who had been oppressed in society on both the local and global levels. In the contexts of FESTAC, development acknowledges the histories of Black and African people that includes chattel slavery and colonialism, and the consequences of those social conditions, such as an absence of self-regard and internalized racism along with international barriers in the economic market and barriers to free capitalist participation. The type of development at FESTAC '77 had to be one that considered the whole person, and the various situations that Black and African people face globally, creating a stage that would allow the opportunity to display themselves to the international world. It created a powerful spark of energy in art and consciousness in the US, further fueling the 1965 Black Arts Movement, focused on music, literature, drama, dance, and the visual arts of Black artists and intellectuals.

FESTAC '77 is heralded as the most significant African event ever on the continent, surpassing all other events: sports, politics, etc. In terms of size and international reach alone. Besides having invited every African country and African Diaspora country, the festival can be considered an "African event" in its methodology which uplifted and celebrated African traditional and pre-colonial ways of organizing and conceptualizing the month-long event, especially through its use of dance. Nigeria's newly acquired oil wealth



enabled them to finance and produce this large-scale African celebration and action of development. FESTAC '77 was a joyous celebration of the humanity of Black and African people, where artful actions followed the vibration of social justice movements. Many movements both preceded and followed FESTAC '77, all addressing anti-Blackness: The Haitian Revolution 1791-1804, *Pan-Africanism 1801-1900*, *Indigenismo 1911-1940*, *Negritude 1930-1940*, *U.S. Civil Rights 1940-1968*, and *South African Anti-Apartheid 1948-1994*. These were significant political moments where Africanity, indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and the topics of acceptance and sovereignty were crucial issues.

The topic of sovereignty at FESTAC is another critical topic in its relation to dance and creating an event that accesses agency through dance. At FESTAC '77, artists were invited from around the world in a peaceful group setting to create dance, sculptures, paintings, music, and poetry that represented many political movements such mentioned above. The music from these movements were included throughout the festival. All this acknowledged what was being ignored: cycling global racialized trauma that was traceable to the chattel colonization of the Americas and the cutting up of Africa by European monarchs during the Berlin Conference. FESTAC '77 was a global meta-correction developed by previously colonized Black and African people toward international development. FESTAC '77 was a culmination of 20 years of artists from multiple African ethnic groups coming together to reaffirm who they were in the world and how they would proceed. Artists were able to tend to the psyche of the collective consciousness of people who had endured oppression and trauma using the arts.

## Understanding the Dance at FESTAC '77

The focus of my research of FESTAC '77 on dance is grounded in African understanding. This point is critical given the fact of what dance means to African cultures. In the book *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities* (2019), in the chapter entitled “The African Choreographers Envisioning”, Naomi Gedo Johnson Diouf describes what dance is for in African cultures:

“Another important difference is revealed when we consider how African dances are understood among African communities and how the non-African media, and critics especially, report and instruct audiences about African dance. Africans from all fifty-four continental countries primarily associate dance with ideals and philosophies of agreed-upon cultural principles and social behaviors. In the dance performance, the morals of African societies are made visible; values for nature itself, human, animal, and plant life, and cooperative social relations are played out in dance dramas; and life-giving parts of the body are featured and revered. In contrast, and especially until recent decades, critics have challenged African dance practices with descriptions and analyses that often-viewed lively body-part isolations and exaggerated body positions as “sexual,” rather than instruct nonnative, diverse audiences regarding African aesthetics that not only emphasize the torso as the container of life-giving organs (the heart, the sex organs, the womb) but also augment notions of vitality in dances that accentuate the life-giving pelvis. Until recently, observers of African choreographies looked at the pelvic squat, the lowered upper torso, or the shimming of the shoulders and breasts as indecent, impolite inappropriate, or ‘vulgar’ movements. On the contrary, these positions, poses, and so-called sexual movements most often reinforce African philosophies and spirituality with life-giving at their centers, provide African dancers with a firm and steady base, and, additionally, lead to exquisite execution” (2019, 167).

This dissertation looks at dance from, an African perspective. Dance in African society can be seen as a common language among the different countries participating in the festival. What could not be said could be sensed and seen through ballets and dance theater pieces. My years of dance research and fieldwork since 1997 as a folkloric dancer

revealed to me the way dance is a compass to erased, minimized, and shrouded histories (fieldwork Haiti 1997, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2017; Cuba 2000; Puerto Rico 1999; Mississippi Delta 2002; New Orleans 2005, 2023; Ghana 2008, 2017-2018, 2022, Benin 2017-2018, Nigeria 2022).

Dance “was that common meeting ground which made it possible for African peoples from the Americas, the Caribbean, and other far-flung areas to be able to identify with Africans and Blacks on the continent and as far as Papua New Guinea and Australia” (Ahye 1980 quoted in Apter 2006, 27). This quote by Molly Ahye, a Trinidadian dance scholar, was sourced from *The Pan-African Nation Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (2005) by Andrew Apter, an American historian, and elaborates my point on the use of dance as language at FESTAC ‘77.

This dissertation discusses the dance delegations from the over fifty African countries and all the countries from the African Diaspora that attended FESTAC. Due to my IRB regulations, I was only allowed to interview dance delegates who were English speaking. Dance served as a liaison. Dance was a vehicle for diplomacy for the dance delegations. If this is the case one must consider that there were over 51 countries some with multiple different languages, all present at FESTAC ’77. To understand the volume and scope of dance at FESTAC one must understand the volume and scope of dance in Africa. When living in Ghana for a year, researching dance and working with the National Theater of Ghana on a theater production I choreographed in collaboration with Stephany Yamoah, the director of the National Dance Company of Ghana, I learned that it was common to ask: “What do you dance?” This was asked in order to learn about the identity

of your interlocutor. To be clear, understanding what an African person danced reveals much of one's ethnic and cultural identity, including geographic location and affiliations with other ethnic groups. The information from what one dances will reveal information on spirituality, dress, traditional celebrations, and politics. Because ethnic groups cross country lines, so do their dances. The Ewe, for example, can be found from Nigeria through Togo to Ghana. Their dances have also made it into the Diaspora in places like Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil, and even in unexpected places around the world, like the UK and Ireland.

So, the dancers and their dances speak the language of their distinct ethnic group. Surveying the dances at FESTAC '77 allowed me to understand how the dances worked as introductions or greetings to attendees of the festival. People who were from different countries but had shared cultural lineages could understand each other through dance. Each country represented at FESTAC had a series of dances, sometimes as many as twenty in their repertoire, especially if it was a national company like Ballet Africaines. Each dance, like language, has its own precise techniques. This is why the term 'technique' as it is used today in the Western dance vernacular to mean a ballet or modern dance foundation does not apply to African dances, because all dances have their own techniques.

Ethnic and cultural dances have their own way of preserving themselves through the transmission of the technique in familiar, community, or village contexts, which installs corporeal movement in the context of cultural values, carrying history and significance of identity. These dance-languages with durable techniques can be traced into the Diaspora of African descendants, many of whom were brought to the Americas via the Trans-Atlantic

slave trade. African dance is traceable by ethnic group. These dances are performed today in both ritual and stage contexts. This phenomenon of dance as “identity holder” at FESTAC ’77 provides an element of reconnection for countries that had shared legacies of separation, now returning into a safe space of reconnection.

This allowed me access to a huge cross-section of dances to look at, contemplate, compare, and contrast that included my areas of specialty and went outside of my area of specialty into the Global African world. When delving deeper, asking questions, and dancing with the people, one can hone in on details such as specific dance movements, symbolism, gesture, costume, rhythm, song, and ritual. After years of immersion, one can see the connections between dances because of the corporeal kinesthetic motions/dances. My immersion into this series of dance includes dances from West Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, and parts of South America. Characteristic to that series of regions is their connection between each other with their origins coming from Africa, which is evident in the movement, costuming, regalia, symbols, rhythms, songs of these dances. My specific experience shaped my choice of dances to analyze as well as my analysis.

Given the cultural plurality within each African country, this topic of dance as language can be examined in many ways. This would be true at FESTAC ’77 in a particular way, given all the African countries that were present. Each ethnic group has a series of dances for various occasions in a person's life development. Dances in those specific traditions compound this for extraordinary events in that group. We will discuss these topics in depth in the case studies.

The following quote demonstrates the vast amount of dance videos from the festival, which I intended to view:

“FESTAC’s planning committee divided the black world into sixteen zones comprising seventy-five countries and communities and extending throughout Africa to include Caribbean countries like Haiti, Montserrat, and the Dominican Republic, Latin American countries like Venezuela and Brazil, as well as black communities in North America, Ireland, India, Papua New Guinea, and West Germany” (IFC Report and Summary of Accounts 1977).

Each zone represented a cadre of countries. Every country came to the festival prepared to share their heritage and contemporary dances; some countries presented more than one dance. In the chapter entitled “Dance in Search of Nation” in the book *Critical Perspectives on Dance in Nigeria* (2005), performer and scholar Arnold Udoko states that “... the purpose of dance in the society is to define an ideological focus and aid the citizenry in understanding, internalizing, and relating with their environment” (286). This quote reflects dance as a container of cosmology and ontology. In this dissertation, I lean on cosmology as it represents worldview and shapes a culture's “ideology.” Here, Udoko speaks of how dance defines and shapes ideology in Nigerian dance. His definition can be used to understand the dances of other ethnic groups. Furthermore, from this quote, it can be seen that dance plays a key role in shaping identity, as the dancing body is “internalizing and relating with the environment”. This is to say for example with dances to the Orisha Oshun, which are associated with the Oshun River in Nigeria, or the Orisha Ogun associated with Ogun state in Nigeria, are dances that directed Diasporans in the New World/Americas where those traditions continued, of their possible origins.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define dance at FESTAC '77 as the kinesthetic language of ideas connected to emotions, identity, history, trans-ethnic<sup>8</sup>, Pan-Africanism, and culture in general that also serves as an archive of culture, history, and identity. This definition better represents the dances that were present at FESTAC '77. Below is a rudimentary list showing the way event organizers categorized the dances. This list gives an idea of the dances that were presented.

Organizers divided the dances into six categories:

I. Traditional & Ritual African & Ceremonial

II. Traditional Afro-American Dance

III. Traditional Caribbean Dances

IV. Traditional Australasian Dances

V. Modern Dances

VI. Ballets

“Though by far the most predominant art form at FESTAC '77 was dance, and concordantly dance was the largest discipline and most representative of the US categories for participation" (IFC Report and Summary of Accounts 1977, 29), there has been no

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<sup>8</sup> Trans-ethnic – considers the cultural plurality of African countries like Nigeria (Udoka 2005, 288).

research on the dances at FESTAC '77, although there has been a recent resurgence of interest in FESTAC '77 and there are now more books about this festival.

Though the festival's theme was tradition and indigeneity, the aesthetic was a post-colonial representation, that is, African heritage was intertwined with European sensibilities or aesthetics and movement that were then currently accepted. The FESTAC '77 festivities also relied on structures that are part of African Indigenous dance modalities. For example, libations were poured to the ancestors in the African context.

In the Olympics-style opening ceremony, participating countries lined up and played their rhythms, sang their songs and did their most prominent dances. I will review the presence of the Bahianas from Brazil as one of my case studies. It was culturally significant that the festival was opened in the presence of several African Heads of State and other dignitaries, such as His Excellency, The Nigerian Head of State and Grand Patron of the Festival, Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo at the National Stadium, Surulere in Lagos. The festival started with firing a 21-gun salute in the presence of a Sango priest. Sango is the Yoruba Orisha, Yoruba forces of nature and venerated ancestors, who is the patron saint of the sacred Bata drums and dance. Organizers released 1000 pigeons and they lit the festival flame, which started the parade of 46 countries in their national dress and regalia, performing their dances or basic traditional steps as they processioned around the stadium.

One of the significant outcomes of FESTAC '77 was the creation of The Center for Black and African Art and Civilization (CBAAC), located on Lagos Island on Broad Street



in Lagos, Nigeria. This is where I reviewed, in-person, their FESTAC '77 dance archives for a month in December 2022. (See Figure 4 below). CBAAC's building was formerly the headquarters of the ruling colonial British in Nigeria. It now houses all the artifacts from FESTAC '77. This three-story research facility has offices, libraries, two galleries, an artifact room, and extensive video archives containing festival footage. When I arrived, I quickly realized the unreliability of electricity at the center, and black outs in Lagos, which caused significant consequences to my research. I was not able to spend as much time with the videos as I had planned.

This information gained from my previous research as an African and African Diaspora dancer and researcher allowed me access to a huge cross-section of dances to look at, contemplate, compare, and contrast that included my Diaspora areas of specialty. However, because of the vast amount of specific technical dances, I was aware that much would be outside of my area of specialty into the Global African world. This is why I see the FESTAC archive of dances as an important archive for dance researchers. This archive contains a snapshot of dances in a particular historic moment of recapitulation of Black and African culture by a collective gathering of dance and cultural specialists.

### **Notes from the Field**

I woke up at 6:30AM to do aerobics with Queen and her friends. Queen and her husband were my hosts during my month-long stay in Nigeria. Queen is an actual Queen of Yorubaland in Oshun state, Nigeria. She ran their gorgeous household, which was equipped with house staff. Doing the dance exercises with Queen and her friends in the

open air was like doing Bikram yoga in a 90-degree room because Lagos Island was hot and humid. The ladies were serious and the workout challenging yet fun. After the session, I dressed in a dyed African dress. Dola, my cousin-in-law, whom I had just met, was assigned to travel with me for my first day at CBAAC. Dola traveled from far away to pick me up from the house, which was situated a serendipitous 20 minutes from CBAAC.

Before I went to Nigeria, many people cautioned me about the trip, saying the people would not want me there and that I could be kidnapped or scammed. This type of caution was expressed to me primarily by Nigerians living in the U.S. Additionally, CBAAC held the same sort of mystery as Hogwarts or the city of Atlantis. The Nigerians I spoke with told me no such place existed, and I should be careful that the CBAAC staff I had been talking to on WhatsApp were scam artists. Even the Queen and her family had never heard of CBAAC, and it was only 20 minutes from their home.

Given the mystery around CBAAC, Dola was assigned by my brother-in-law to be my security of sorts. Honestly, I was glad he came; better safe than sorry. The car ride put hair on my chest. Driving in Nigeria is no joke. The cars drive so close to each other and make lanes where there are none. This type of driving reminded me of Haiti, but Nigerian driving was more serious. I would call Lagos Island the New York City of Africa. Between taking in the sights, holding my breath, and clutching the seat, I started to worry about whether my brother-in-law's fears were valid. But, when we pulled up to the giant mask of Queen Idia, like the one in the poster in the Dimensions office, my heart was full of joy, and so much made sense to me. Not just about the way anti-Blackness plays in our psyche but the symbolism of this journey for my life. It was like I had found some great treasure.

I took a picture and went in to find Mr. Dosumu, the Head of Research, and Ms. Joke, the Head of Public Relations.



Figure 4. Colette Eloi and symbol of FESTAC '77, Queen Mother Idia mask<sup>9</sup>, in front of CBAAC, Broad St. Lagos Island, Lagos, Nigeria, December 2022.

I had been in communication with them, and Mr. Dosumu wrote my letters of acceptance to do research at CBAAC and my letter of invitation to obtain my visa on arrival. Again, I was told I would have terrible problems getting my visa and that government or official workers would extort money from me and send me home. After

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<sup>9</sup> This mask is fashioned from the bronze mask of Queen Idia, (Iy'Oba Idia) of Benin (c.1490 – 1540). FESTAC '77 officials requested to borrow the mask which was being held by the British Museum. They refused and replicas had to be made. The image of this mask is the symbol for FESTAC festivals. For more on the mask, see the book: *FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced by chimurenga* by Edjabe, Ntone, ed. (2019, 42 – 50).

arriving in Nigeria and walking the long way through customs, I was preparing myself for a tricky situation. However, when I arrived at the 'On Arrival Visa' section, I was treated like I was in a boutique. There were overstuffed couches, and the airport attendant handed me a bottle of water and told me to relax. There was a big screen TV, which I watched as they took my papers. In no time, they were back with my visa. The visa attendant even walked me to meet my ride and carried my bags. Never have I experienced such a posh airport experience, and I am well-traveled.

I had a similar experience arriving at CBAAC. After expecting the worst, I was elated when they showed me the small studio with theater-style seating and a giant flat screen with digital viewing equipment. This is where I would be viewing the FESTAC '77 footage. This was clearly the newer room. Next door was another theater room with an old-school pull-down screen and projector. Some of the festival's dance footage has been digitized and separated out by country. However, they have rows and rows of film in canisters in another room with more footage from FESTAC '77. Though I had gone there prepared to view a specific set of dances from 30 to 40 countries, I understood this goal was lofty once I realized the time and effort it takes to watch each film.

They chose the first dance I would watch, from Lesotho, South Africa. The dancing itself was magnificent in terms of the dancing alone. The South Africans did not go out of their way to make a stage-friendly dance with sparkling costumes; instead, I got the impression they were sharing their dances the same way they might dance at home with family. Watching the dances struck me. I have watched various South African dance, like that of the Zulu people with their high kicks and flexed feet, knowing that the kick shows

the outer expression of their inner prowess, and of the integrated energy of their familial line. Even so, I could feel their virtuosic spirit through the screen. It was performed/filmed on a proscenium stage, and the costumes resembled traditional regalia yet were also extremely minimal maintenance. As a performer and researcher, I know how a proscenium stage instantly extracts what is essential from ritualistic dance.

In ritual dance, what is valued is a collective harmonic movement that brings catharsis; whereas on stage, this energy is being mimicked. Yet, as a performer who is initiated into spiritual practices, I know that in performing, there is a place where the stage becomes the ritual, or congregational space. I would say that this was apparent in the dance selection of the South Africans. However, it was the feeling of familial connection that existed between these dancers that shifted the energy from simply a performance to a shared experience. Based on interviews with FESTAC attendees, their experiences suggest that the sharing over staging was due to a sense of a familial connection and the “euphoric” energy of the event. In my interviews with FESTAC ’77 dancers and drummers, they all reported a feeling of familial connection. This feeling was carried on and off the stage including in between the formal festival times, as mentioned in personal conversations with dancers from Chuck Davis (Woolbright and Woolbright p.c. 2023) to Tumani Onabiyi (Onabiyi p.c. 2014, 2023) and Deborah Vaughan (Vaughan p.c. 2014, 2023). Below is an example of an off stage happening at FESTAC ‘77 that created a space of diplomacy for two South African groups on different sides of politics:

“... significant interaction that happened backstage between the separate groups from South Africa. It was Mark Gevisser’s biography of Thabo Mbeki

in the book, *Performing Pan-Africanism* (2019) that triggered my interest, specifically the part that covers his time in Lagos. That book reveals how Mbeki engineered the first major collaboration between factions of the South African liberation movement in exile, and I mean people who could barely stand each other—PAC’s Pan-Africanists, ANC’s nationalists, Black consciousness activists from BCM, and student leaders from SSRC. After speaking with some of the protagonists I found out that the collaboration took the form of a play about June 16 at FESTAC; a play that was artistically directed by Keorapetse Kgotsitsile and Jonas Gwangwa” (Morris 2019, 276).

More is said here below:

“Now imagine Kgotsitsile, the soft-spoken poet who left South Africa for exile in the US during the early 1960s, directing the young firebrand Tsietsi Mashinini, who had just led the Soweto uprisings a few months earlier—and was leader of a generation of activists who were most dismissive of the older guard. Imagine how heated the rehearsals must have been... We know the core of the South African delegation at FESTAC went on to lead the famed ANC Department of Information and Propaganda, the intellectual center of the movement” (Morris 2019, 276).

This quote illustrates the way FESTAC created safe spaces to reconcile differences.

I read this passage after returning to the states from my fieldwork in Nigeria and recall the video of the South African presentation. I will describe it here. In the video of the South Africans at FESTAC ‘77 it was done with a single frontal shot with a single camera with no special lighting. The stage was extremely basic, and there were no props. But they filled the stage with visceral ambiance, vibration, culture, presence, energy, and relentless confidence. This was not Lesotho-ness; this felt like the real thing, like a celebration that they were there at. I later learned of the challenges people from South Africa faced to get to the festival and would imagine how that energy of making it to the festival was transferred to their performances. It was a multigenerational performance grouped by age. The description only stated that the performers were from Lesotho. They did multiple

dances from Lesotho; Zulu dance was among them, and I saw the boot dance, too. Apartheid was still in full swing. After returning to the States, I learned from a recent article (Sosibo 2020) that Nigeria went through extraordinary measures to assist the Black South Africans to participate in the festival. During that historic moment of FESTAC '77, the Afrikaans dialect was being forced on South African grade school children in schools. In that moment of racialized restriction, dance culture became a haven of genuine identity expressed through their songs and dances. There was a sense from the crowd that they were along for the experience, that they were dancing for themselves and their lineage, while the audience cheered them on. The audience's cheers were just as visceral as the performance. In this way FESTAC '77 was a place of reunion on multiple levels.

Later, just when we were going to leave the viewing room so they could show me the rest of CBAAC, the Director General, who I had been waiting to meet, called me to her office. I had been trying to connect with her while I was still in California; she attended UC Fullerton. After all it had taken me to get to Nigeria and to finally find CBAAC, and after watching the South African dance, I was compelled to sing the Haitian greeting, *Hone, Respe - Honor and Respect*, with tears in my eyes when I walked into her office, I introduced myself and thanked everyone in the room. I did not say it, but I was thankful that the dance of my ancestors brought me there, as it had brought me to so many other places.

## **Key Concepts**

I pivot and turn now to widen and deepen this introduction. I point out the various concepts that have aided my research, which should help my dissertation readers understand and differentiate among the terms I have developed.

Dance-Critical Event: A dance-critical event is an event that is not solely focused on dance but where dance plays a critical role in the workings or theme of the event. In the case of FESTAC '77, I consider this festival dance critical in how the dances archived African and African descendant cultures that were under attack. Festival dances additionally projected ideas of modernity and futurity. Dance-critical events are distinct from tourist events, where dance and culture are commodified. Dance was, in many ways, for the performers of FESTAC '77 just as much as it was for the audience. At FESTAC '77, the dance was critical because it facilitated the themes of reconnecting to pre-colonial identity.

Precolonial Approach – Characteristics and Qualifications: By precolonial, I mean the time prior to chattel slavery and colonialism in Africa and indigenous cosmology of native people before the establishment of the New World; implicitly, this acknowledges that Blacks and Africans had rich cultures before colonialism and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The tribes that existed before the Berlin Conference in Africa remain in Africa where their traditions have been handed down generationally. These continuities are also seen in the diaspora. In this dissertation, I worked from the point of view that pre-colonial understandings of cosmology (worldview), ontology (the nature of being, the idea of self), and epistemology (validated knowledge and wisdom) exist inside Black and African



dances visible through ancient dance, and are traceable in gesture, movement, song, and rhythm. I examined precolonial cosmology, epistemologies and ontologies through ritual traditions of the Yoruba, Congo, Ewe, Fon, Igbo, Mande/Mandique, in the anthropological literature archive. Dr. Yvonne Daniel, anthropologist, dancer, and musician supervised my pre-colonial research. For this aspect of the study, we analyzed comparative epistemologies and cosmologies through direct reports from learned community and academic scholars and archival research focusing on the dance-drum modalities: the Ewe people (fieldwork with the National Dance Company of Ghana 2017; Kuwor 2021); Yoruba people (Abimbola 1997; Bascom 1980; Drewal & Drewal 1990; Mason 1992); Bantu-Kongo (FuKiau 2001); Dogon of Mali (Griaule 1965) and Fon (Yai, p.c. 2017, 1996).

The historical precolonial markers I am using are the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade starting in 1619, when the Diaspora's first shipment of enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia. The system of chattel slavery became a legally recognized designation for enslaved Africans, making them property to be brought and owned (including their offspring) forever. This was followed by the other historical precolonial marker: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. In 1884, a group of European countries arbitrarily cut up Africa, then destroyed those African government systems and put up their own colonial governments through violence. The institution of the Industrial Revolution further mechanized the body into the slaving body that exists today.

Tracing dance starts in Africa before The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, also known as the Congo Conference or West Africa Conference, which met on 15 November 1884, and after an adjournment concluded on 26 February 1885, with the signature of a

General Act, regulated European colonization and trade in Africa during the New Imperialism period. Arbitrary borders cut through ethnic groups and kingdoms. Destruction of African governments and ways of life took place. With that destruction came the suppression of African culture and the banning of dance, which included creating laws against dancing. Multiple dance scholars (e.g., Hazard-Gordon 1990, Oyewumi 1997; Welsh-Asante 2000) remark on old anthropological descriptions of African dance being described as “licentious,” “lustful,” “indecent,” “and provocative.” This created a misreading of dance. This, combined with treating bodies as property and mechanizing the body to produce, has left a legacy of dis-ease in the global human community.

As a Black graduate student in the Critical Dance Studies program, I quickly realized that discussions of the Black dancing body were often centered around a racialized body (Gottschild 2005; Fanon 2008; Kraut 2015; J. Johnson 2020). This is a topic that needs to be discussed, and I appreciate the work of those discourses that helped liberate the Black dancing body. However, I found that the discourses prevalent in the dance communities I am immersed in spoke of the Black dancing body in other ways as well, both in formal conferences, performances, and mainly through dances that have a precolonial history that has continued.

“Body” is sacred: As in the data on precolonial cosmologies, we are all born sacred and sovereign by birthright. The sovereign body re-members and considers pre- and post-colonial cosmology and epistemology. The Black dancing body, dubbed a racialized body, allows space for the richness of these prolific cultures to be better understood, appreciated, and celebrated.

Precolonial archives: Ifa/Afa Orishas and Vodouns, Dogon Celestial Mapping and Divination systems, Bantu-Kongo Cosmogram. Precolonial concepts are passed onto next-generation dancers by living Black and African dancers and through the African ethnic groups and cultures from which the dances descend.

Precolonial ritual dance practices: In dances, ritual belief systems personify aspects of divinity. The dances have “signature” movements that symbolize energies found in nature. The human and spiritual worlds come together in ritual and/or social occasions, for example, in dances of Ifa/Afa Orishas and Vodouns, Dogon Celestial Mapping and Divination systems, Bantu-Kongo Cosmogram.

Dance in Africa is not primarily for entertainment. Dance as entertainment is a capitalist phenomenon rooted in the tourist and entertainment industries. Rather, dance in Africa was used for every aspect of the human life cycle and is a significant marker in life (Gennep 1960; Daniel 2005; Kariamu-Welsh 2000; Udoka in Ahmed 2005). Some dances are performed only during particular times of the year or even only every decade. In that grouping are Masquerade dances, which were and still are used for healing the community (Drewal and Drewal 1983). Udoka discusses dance in Nigeria like this: “The purpose of dance in the society is to define an ideological focus and aid the citizenry in understanding, internalizing and relating with their environment” (Udoka in Ahmed 2005, 286).

FESTAC ‘77 choreographed in a complex weaving of economics, sociological, psychological, internal and external political dynamics to address the historic moment, “to define, and ideologically focus and aid the citizenry in understanding, internalizing and

relating with their environment” on a meta-level. Dance was critical in this process because of the way it allows a person to internalize their heritage and ontological epistemologies and the historic moment. Additionally, the Gelede Mask dances of the Yoruba are used to “soothe” the community of social ills like spousal abuse. “Dance makes virtual power visible. Carried further—into the Yoruba context—dance is virtual power and is no less instrumental than the spoken word; it brings dynamic qualities into actual existence. Thus, Gelede also has, the power of Àṣẹ, which is a Yoruba philosophy that is defined to represent the power that makes things happen and produces change (Drewal and Drewal 1983, 105). African dance in context has a purpose and attributes significant to FESTAC ’77. Dance at FESTAC ’77 was part of the methodology of social justice and positive change in these ways.

A basic step denotes a cultural group, linguistic group, a specific Orisha/Vodun/Nkisi, or divine force of nature that has its own signature dance. These ancestral and divine dance steps are signatures and compasses that can be traced from the Diaspora to specific ethnic groups in Africa. The Vodou ritual order still practiced today is essentially an event that recognizes specific ethnic groups from precolonial Africa, namely Rada/Jeje/Arara of Dahomey, Ketu Yoruba, and Bantu Kongo. These three groups are prevalent throughout the African Diaspora.

Artifacts/dance(facts): Or the dance trace survives and are maps and compasses that connect groups, peoples, and histories geographically. Through this type of tracing dance, scholars have determined precolonial dances connected to precolonial archives, which come equipped with complex and coded systems and symbols as in the case of the three I

have mentioned: Ifa/Afa Orisha Vodoun system of the Odu<sup>10</sup>, the Bantu-Kongo Cosmogram<sup>11</sup>, and The Dogon Celestial System<sup>12</sup>. Dr. Yvonne Daniel explains this concept of ongoing culture(s) through her African mentor's stories. She relays, "Culture is like an ongoing river. Some new things enter with the current, stay for a while, and get washed away or sink to the bottom; also. On the banks of the river, the waters can run thin. However, in the center, the waters are deep and steady, and the core culture is strong there. So, while culture changes over time, at the edges or borders of the river, something of the culture stays the same- at the center, at the core." Likewise, dance and the body carry that trace—the aspect of culture that continues through the dance, where tradition get retained.

In old anthropological literature, the concept of time has been manipulated to give the public an idea that precolonial attributes would be too far away to truly assess anything

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<sup>10</sup> The Ifa divination system, which makes use of an extensive corpus of texts and mathematical formulas, is practiced among Yoruba communities and by the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. The word Ifa refers to the mystical figure Ifa or Orunmila, regarded by the Yoruba as the deity of wisdom and intellectual development. In contrast to other forms of divination in the region that employ spirit mediumship, Ifa divination does not rely on a person having oracular powers but rather on a system of signs that are interpreted by a diviner, the Ifa priest or babalawo, literally "the priest's father". The Ifa divination system is applied whenever an important individual or collective decision has to be made. The Ifa literary corpus, called odu, consists of 256 parts subdivided into verses called ese, whose exact number is unknown as they are constantly increasing (there are around 800 ese per odu). Each of the 256 odu has its specific divination signature, which is determined by the babalawo using sacred palm-nuts and a divination chain. The ese, considered the most important part of Ifa divination, are chanted by the priests in poetic language. The ese reflect Yoruba history, language, beliefs, cosmovision and contemporary social issues.

The knowledge of Ifa has been preserved within Yoruba communities and transmitted among Ifa priests.  
<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ifa-divination-system-00146>

<sup>11</sup> His information on the concept of the "V" is coming from a school he attended at the Lemba Institute in Manianga, the lower Congo where the author was born. The school was one of the five major institutions that existed since the ancient Kingdom of Kongo prior to the colonial era. Only initiates of the school were allowed to enter. However, the institution of these five secret schools that was for women, was opened to all women once they had menstruated. These schools were closed down by the colonizers because they were deemed too dangerous, with the teachers of the schools being executed or jailed for life. So, the schools went underground for hundreds of years. The Congo Cosmogram is a theological symbol in these traditions (Fukiau 2001).

<sup>12</sup> The Dogon have long been known to study the astrological constellations and discovered the Dog Star long before the invention of the telescope. They have dances that are done according to the celestial rhythms.

(Fabian 2014). Johannes Fabian speaks about this concept in his book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (2014). *Time and the Other* is a classic work that critically reexamined the relationship between anthropologists and their subjects and reoriented the approach literary critics, philosophers, and historians took to the study of humankind. Johannes Fabian challenges the assumption that anthropologists live in the "here and now," that their subjects live in the "there and then," and that the "other" exists in a time not contemporary with our own. He also pinpoints the emergence, transformation, and differentiation of a variety of uses of time in the history of anthropology that set specific parameters between power and inequality. In this edition, a new postscript by the author revisits popular conceptions of the "other" and the attempt to produce and represent knowledge of other(s). However, in the case of dance and what I have just unpacked, dance can identify precolonial basic dance steps and extrapolate the cosmology, epistemology, and ontologies from it to understand cultural connections. That is, dances can be read when precolonial basic steps are present. These steps make up the canon of dance. There are more dances from FESTAC '77 that I could have remarked upon, but they are outside this research's scope. I present this idea in hopes that researchers aware of other precolonial archives connected to dance would add to this canon.

It was important for this research to realize that people outside of my own cultural group view the world differently when researching dance. Specifically, I am interested in data received from pre-colonial archives -- like the symbolism embedded in Central African Kongo Bantu cultures or oral archives in West African cultures that rely upon the *Djeli* or griot system of retaining knowledge, but also elaborate divining systems like the

*Odu* system of the Yoruba (connected to dance-drum) or the *Ifa/Afa/Fa* system of the Yoruba, Beninoire people, connected to Vodoun dance, and is the spiritual practice that includes the dances of the Orisha and the Vodoun. These dances empower people. Dances like these come from dance modalities connected to lifestyles and ways of seeing the world and living in it.

From an African American perspective, a “precolonial perspective” considers identity before passing through "the door of no return;" it views the state of chattel enslavement as the Maafa, Black Holocaust, or the trans-Atlantic slave trade/trafficking. The term also considers how precolonial Black and African dance remaps the geographical lineages of African descendants undoing the arbitrary borders created from the Berlin Conference, decolonizing conversations regarding territories on the African continent. This concept helps give corrective historical reframing of African dance and African Diaspora dance. This concept relies on and upholds African indigeneity and African empires before enslavement, especially as revealed through the structure of dance rituals in the Diaspora. Within that is the use of dance as a meditative form of transcendence in multiple types of African Indigenous ritual dance practices.

A moniker of precolonial dances is the structure of dance-drum-orature. One of the oldest traditions that uses this structure are the Djelis. The Djelis have Precolonial dances which have inscriptions of agency, firstly from the sacred sovereign body. I also have tracked these types of dances prior to my work with Dr. Daniel: Mande (Charry 2000; Djeli Cissoko p.c. 2020; Djeli Kouyate, p.c. 2019); Fon ethnic and linguistic group (fieldwork with Benin Conservatory of Dance 2017; Agbotounou, p.c. 2017). I researched and used a

pre-colonial perspective from dance modalities like Orisha dance and Dogon Masquerade dance to consider the perspectives of Black and African people. These modalities/systems of dance come with their own philosophies, cosmologies, histories, epistemologies, and ontologies.

In many dance modalities, early African empires are remembered and embodied. As forwarded by traditional and heritage dance, an indigenous perspective of the body recognizes its symbiosis with the earth and the cosmos. People are connected to land by name and familial lineage. Also, “precolonial” refers to dances derived from African ethnic groups that remember their histories through oral tradition, as with the Mande, Mandigue, Malinke Djeli/griot lineages (Charry 2000). Other archives of remembrance for Black and African people are the Odu system of stories (a dance-critical system) that dates back before the Chinese system of I Ching and tracks a series of 256 stories that portray the behavior and destiny of humans in interaction with other humans and the cosmos (Abimbola Manson p.c. 2020).

This dissertation recognizes the similarities that exist in the worldviews or cosmologies that are consistent among most groups within the “the belt of Africa,” as well as with North African nations, like Egypt above the belt and with southern nations, like South Africa (Diop 1989; Ephraim-Donkor 2010; Fu-Kiau 2001; Griaule 1975; Kuwor 2013; Mason 1992; Olupona 2016). This dissertation also recognizes a pre-colonial metropolitan Africa, where ideas were shared, adopted, and hybridized; therefore, it accepts shared pre-colonial cosmologies.



The African-rooted Dance Corpus: My dissertation refers constantly to a concept that focuses on and cares seriously about ancestral and heritage dances from or rooted in distinct African cultures. Specifically, a dance corpus is the body of knowledge from within Black and African dance. It considers all that is discussed in the pre-colonial perspective above and stretches into the future to all the possibilities that come from Black and African dancing bodies and their traditions. The idea of each dancing culture body as “a canon of text” is a helpful way to consider the amount and scope of dances. Likewise, this idea carries more weight when considering spirit or heritage dance (Daniel 2005). Dances that consider the movements of the divine spirit ignite and engage adept dancers who share divine knowledge. A canon form inside the corpus of knowledge of one nation might be understood when considering cultural dances. After the British stopped controlling Africa, they had reduced Nigeria to 9 regions, and currently, 16 regions are recognized with 53 ethnic groups with their own collection of specific and coded dance techniques, accompanying songs, rhythms, and contexts. If we were to extrapolate Nigeria from the fifty-plus countries of continental Africa, not to mention the Diaspora, thousands of dances are included in this corpus or body of knowledge.

Thus, the African-rooted Dance Corpus is the body of dances either directly found in or descended from Africa, spanning from pre-colonial Africa to the present day and including “Urban” dance and other contemporary labels for Black and African dances. Though this definition is still growing, as a dance researcher I saw this as an established starting point to take into consideration into the field of Dance Studies. Additionally, with this definition, this researcher also considers the Djeli and griot families’ (African singing

historians and storytellers) cultural arts practice as a reoccurring structure of African-rooted dances where dance is an integral point along with drum, singing, and regalia to tell stories, share and preserve histories, and give commentary. The artistry of Malian Djelis, for example, can be traced back to the 15th century. Their design of storytelling and history-keeping through multidisciplinary arts, which is based on deeply coded practices, speaks to ontology, cosmology, epistemologies, geographical locales, culture or specific societies, kinship, gender, healing, and the natural and physical sciences in nuanced ways.

The Dance Corpus considers the idea that dance in the African context, often, is connected to song, story/history, and rhythm/vibration, also known as drum and dance traditions. Over time, these elements have shifted but they remain intact to a great degree. Many of the dances considered as ritual dance or ceremonial dance have a basic step. That basic step and the ways people put their own energy into the dance is the entirety of the dance. In some cases, these dances either are elaborated upon and make it to the stage or show up again, possibly through the workings of epigenetics, in popular dances. Dance veteran, LaTanya Tigner, formally tracks this phenomenon in her examination of “dance-lines” from Africa to, and between, the Diaspora. The internal aspect of the dance gives it its Africanity marker (Gottschild 2005; Thompson 1985).

The corpus also references the *body-self-being* and the experiences of that lived body. Thus, I am privileged with a dancing *body* that has lived within multiple dance forms over an extended period and, in some cases, 'houses' or embodies more than one cultural dance style. Most often, distinct cultural groups [as well as people who are not near each other or who don't share lived experiences] remind each other of their shared

understandings; this happens with dance. In a year-long conference entitled *Back to the Root* (2020 – 2021), participants analyzed this phenomenon in the Black and African global community through Zoom.

Holistic Development: I include development in this dissertation because the festival was a form of development through the arts. African countries are referred to as “underdeveloped” in academic discourses of economics and politics. In the chapter entitled “Pan Africanism in a Global Context: The Relevance of a World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture” by Duro Oni<sup>13</sup>, in his book *Striking Expressions: Theatre and Culture in National Development* (2017), he discusses the four phases of Africa: 1) Africa was not a singular place in the idea of Africans, though they shared some ideological ideas. “Thus, in fact, there were no Africans, only Zulu, Xhosa, Yoruba, Asante, Somali, Galla, etc. Empires, such as the Oyo, Songhai, Benin, and Sokoto existed, but none were continental in actualization or intention.” I tend to agree with him because like America and Europe, Africa came together as a direct result of certain socio-historical processes.” 2) Africa took on the shape it has become today by way of “imperialistic imposition” as written by Oni. He continues to explain the way Africa became an “economic unit” ... “a source for almost unlimited cheap [free] labor, raw materials and a market for other products” (369). He cites 1885 [the Berlin Conference] as the beginning of that phase. Where the focus in the first phase dealt with the issues between ethnic groups, in this phase

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<sup>13</sup> Oni was part of the technical crew during FESTAC '77 and went on to specialize in theatre and became the Dean of the University of Lagos. He has written 8 books, many of which discuss the festival. He has also served as Director of CBAAC for many years, which I had the pleasure to visit in-person in Lagos, Nigeria and also interview him (see Appendix for full transcript).

Oni writes, “whether ethnic groups liked it or not, they were all defined and treated as ‘commodities.’” 3) The Diaspora is created and is creating a “concerted reaction to imperialism and racism by Africans in the Diaspora and on the Continent.” This new resistance then turned Africa into an “oppositional alternative,” a socio-historical context of theories. It became, in fact, a dialectical reaction to imperialist and racist exploitation and oppression, a defiant acceptance of self and ideological and practical rejection of imperialist conquest and racist contentions and assumptions” (370). Pan-African movements were then born to “counter racist assumptions and projections of imperialism”: Negritude, Africanity, African personality, Soul, Ethiopianism and a host of other ideological assertions to say, “I accept myself and I reject your definition of me” (371). When a person who was turned into chattel or a commodity states their opposition to such a thing, it is considered an attack to the oppressor’s way of life and economy, not unlike the situation of the Civil War in the United States. 4) Oni ends his lesson on the phases of African development by saying Africa is in a time of “formative possibility, but at a higher level of self and human awareness.” He quotes M. Karenga’s words from a speech given in 1977 at the FESTAC Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education: Colloquium proceedings. This was entitled “Relations between Africans on the Continent and Africans in the Diaspora: History and Possibilities.”

In an interview with Oni, he also explained to me that representatives from other third-world countries who saw FESTAC ’77 came to FESTAC organizers for consultation on how to create such a festival for their country (Oni p.c. 2022). This point is relevant to

the way FESTAC '77 created a model of development through the arts that could consider ontology, especially for countries that had been colonized.

Thus, the topic of development is central to the festival and gives important insight for the analysis of the dances I reviewed, as development and self-determination were stated by the festival planners as central to the reason for creating the festival. These issues give the socio-historical context to the festival's theme and thus to the dances performed there. They also relate to the previous organizers of FESMAN in 1966 who were progenitors of the Negritude movement, an arts and literature movement that concerned itself with ideological development of Black and African people. The term 'development' is used in the context of the political and economic status or condition of countries or nation-states - the developed<sup>14</sup> vs. the undeveloped world.

Since gaining independence, many African nations (and African descendants in the Diaspora) have proceeded with an awareness of the underlying cycling and recycling of colonialism, FESTAC festivals could be seen as a strategic response to cycling oppression. At FESMAN and FESTAC, festivals that aimed to develop African countries, Senghor and other organizers recognized that development for Black and African people must start with ideas of the self. Considering epidermalization<sup>15</sup> as discussed by Frantz Fanon

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<sup>14</sup> In Development Studies discourse, the idea of development includes "modernization" and is considered as the way of "the successful," called the "developed world," the Global North, the First World. This is the world of the "white man", which is often presented as the model of development, industry, modernity, and culture and which is placed in a binary position to the Global South or Third World, the world of "the other" or the Black man. In this Eurocentric model, development of those colonizing countries of Trans-Atlantic slave trade is merited as being produced by the ingenuity and innovation of colonial powers as opposed to the 400 years of free labor and creativity that was labored by oppressed beings.

<sup>15</sup> Epidermalization (Fanon 1997, 195) is a term coined by Franz Fanon and is described as the ontological insecurity of the racialized body as it experiences its 'being through others'. This definition does not articulate that the construction of

(2008[1952]) and the globalization of that idea, dance at FESTAC '77 served to begin holistic development. Development that considered correction of racist ideology projected onto Black and African people. Dance at FESTAC '77 provided an internalized energizing response to internalized racism from colonial miseducation by way of pre-colonial dance that rejects racialized identities and rhetoric and offers alternative and holistic views of self. I coined the term, "Holistic Development", after learning about FESTAC '77 as its mission to enact "cultural revival" following cultural cleansing, to "propagate" the values of the Black man to forwarding independent and/or cooperative action.

Holistic development is a philosophical, economic, political, and psychological movement that considers the people and their pre-colonial ideas of wholeness ontologically. This notion breaks from white imperialist ideas of development based on economic constructs of modernization. White imperialists have benefitted from exploiting "Third World" countries while blaming them for their situation (Rodney 1972). Holistic development is considered a process that happens in the mind first, decolonizing the minds of traumatized people who have been assimilated by imperialism (Fanon 2008). Holistic development brings awareness to how a Black and African body was commodified during centuries of chattel enslavement (Rodney 1972).

Transhistorical perspective: A transhistorical perspective is effective in understanding and contextualizing historical significance by tracking recurring patterns. This is a Bantu-

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hegemonic racism also causes those who do the othering to mis-perceive themselves. Thus, we all suffer from epidermalization.

Kongo concept that is used for tracking the life pattern of a person, in Bantu cosmology. This is fitting for dance modalities that have dance lines (Tigner in BTTR 2021), that go from ancient times to contemporary times. This was a topic we discussed at the Back to the Root: The Healing Power of the Spine and the Pelvis in African Diaspora Dance Online Conference. This concept of dance-lines relies on the dance movements and the viewer's ability to read the dances. Similarities between dance movements in black dance and the nuanced ways specific dances from Africa cycle into contemporary times allows a view of time that takes note of significant events. I used this concept for tracking ancient or traditional dance movements to review the FESTAC '77 dance footage. Transhistorical conversations where an event or dance can be looked at by different transhistorical mappings, like transhistorical anti-Blackness and transhistorical forms of resistance. Resulting in a "transhistorical analysis or transhistorical view."

This transhistorical approach, derived from the Kongo cosmogram (FuKiau 2001[1980]), is a theological symbol in Bantu-Congo that is seen throughout the Diaspora. It is a symbol that conceptualizes the world and one's life path in it. It is a circle with a cross at the center dividing the circle into quarters vertically and horizontally on both the x and y axes. When drawn on the ground, the circle of the cosmogram is perceived as a vertical spiral, extending in both directions, representing time and the repeating of time. This symbol represents a person's spirit/life path from birth, adulthood, death, and rebirth. I use this concept to consider a transhistorical view of Black and African people concerning FESTAC '77, anti-Blackness, and its responses. This visual concept delineates looking at a specific topic over multiple critical time periods that have something in common. This

allows the researcher to track recurrences over time, offering new perspectives on any singular topic. I use this concept to discuss the patterns of the Black and African body at FESTAC '77.

I developed this term and perspective from the Bantu-Kongo concept to add a conscious element to tracking history and events. For this project, this term helps to understand how multiple historical events, in this case, racialized events, and the responses to those racialized events, are always in conversation and require a particular analysis that considers cycling destructive energy and the uplifting of humanity. The Bantu-Kongo cosmogram also implicitly considers a body-being at the center of its world. This is another way of considering the integrity of the body-being. Applying that centering principle to FESTAC '77, symbolically, Africa stands at the center of its cycling history and decides to make its own choices. My aim of using this concept in my dissertation also enacts the agency involved in the meta-correction of anti-Blackness.

Centering African ways of knowing to understand research is critical to my work. Transhistorical encompasses a view of time that takes note of significant patterning as perceived by the theology of the cosmogram.

### **Dissertation Thesis**

This dissertation asks what role dance played at FESTAC '77 and how FESTAC '77 enabled a *sovereign body*, a liberated and unencumbered body at the center of its reality. How did a sovereign body surface in the lives of pivotal dance communities in the



United States? And finally, how can dance be seen as an expression of ontological healing? My theoretical framework for these questions is derived from the fields of Critical Dance Studies and Anthropology.

### **Methodology History**

I developed a methodology for researching dances from the African Diaspora as a young artist in the artist collective entitled Project Reconnect aka Reconnect, in Oakland, California. As a group of diverse Black people—from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Oakland, Texas, Ethiopia, dancers, drummers, and folklorists—we were enthralled by the connections we found between the African diasporic dance styles we had access to: Congolese, Senegalese, Liberian, Haitian, Brazilian, Cuban, Colombian, Peruvian and more. We would attend classes; like fiends<sup>16</sup>, we would discuss what we had learned. We would each try to learn more songs than the other one: Haitian and Cuban songs especially. Then one day we were invited to do a gig and we became busy performers after that. We traveled to Haiti, then Puerto Rico, then Cuba. In Cuba, some members were initiated into the religious systems the dances we studied came from. When we returned, we did ethnographic-style performances: *Celebrating Haiti* (1997), *Bahia Bacheche*, *The Funk from the Bay* (2000), etc. Additionally, on and off, I have danced professionally in Haitian,

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<sup>16</sup> We called each other fiends because we had a healthy obsession to learn and unearth all the connections that existed between the different dance-drum traditions in the African Diaspora.

Cuban, Brazilian, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, and African/Black vernacular dance from the period of 1997 – present (not consecutively).

These experiences have given me knowing eyes to read dance. These dances, though quite different, require the viewer to understand where the dance comes from, not just historically or culturally, but from within the body. Where is the one in the music? Where does the impetus of the step begin? Is the movement grounded or up/bouncy? And so on. Being able to read these nuances will allow the viewer to differentiate between the dances from separate places in Africa and the Diaspora that may look very similar. I had two experiences in my dance career with teachers who attended FESTAC '77, namely Blanche Brown and Deborah Vaughan, who have shaped the way I understand and conduct dance research.

In some cases, FESTAC '77 would provide experiences of African dances in proximity to each other that would lead my teachers/interlocutors, who attended FESTAC '77, to make connections that materialized in their dance productions. These performances would educate audiences and their students on dance genealogies or lineages that exist among dances in the African Diaspora. This methodology of researching African-derived dance is also examined in detail by Yvonne Daniel, my mentor, in her book, *Dancing Wisdom* (2005). Also, both the production of *Àgò* (1996), which was conceptualized and produced by Blanche Brown, Director of Troupe Petit La Croix Haitian Dance Company, and the production of *Down the Congo Line Series, I, II & III* (2012), which was conceptualized and produced by Deborah Vaughan Director of Dimensions Dance Theater, illustrated and celebrated Africanist aesthetics in connection to each other.

To understand African-derived dance, I rely on the pervasive presence of African-influenced aesthetic values and practices in American performance, or what Brenda Dixon-Gottschild refers to as Africanist aesthetics, in her book, *Digging the Africanist Aesthetics* (1996). Through *Àgò* and *Down the Congo Line*, Brown and Vaughan, respectively, found common threads through their research and lived experiences in dance and spirituality, which they then wove together in collaboration with master artists from three geographical regions that share aesthetics. Their work contributed to what is American performance.

*Àgò* followed and choreographically emphasized specific aesthetics within Dahomey dance cosmology. Brown enlisted three dance companies, her own Troupe Petit La Croix, Fogo De Ropa Brazilian Dance Troupe under the direction of Carlos Aceituno, and Jose Barroso's Cuban Dance Company to demonstrate the connections between three different places that use the term *Àgò*, a word defined by the Yoruba that is associated with Esu, Elegba, Legba, the Orisha of opportunities and messenger at the gate to the other Orishas. The word *Àgò* refers to announcing the protrusion into something. *Àgò* is also said when entering someone's home, or in folkloric singing as a way to signal a musical change. The production of *Àgò* featured the dance for Ogou, which I had the pleasure of performing. Ogou, a male Orisha of justice and fight, is present throughout the Diaspora and exists in the countries Brown presented in the production. Other dances, songs, and music further illustrated the connections between Diaspora sites that also reconnected them to Africa.

*Down the Congo Line* followed and choreographically emphasized specific aesthetics within Kongo dance cosmology, like the circular hip isolations and how

grounded the dance movements were. The differences were also highlighted through costumes and visuals. The production of *Down the Congo Line* featured dance from Brazil by Isaura Olivera, Second Line Dance from New Orleans by LaTanya Tigner (which I also had the pleasure to perform), and Cuban dance choreographed by Jose “Cheo” Rojas, with Congolese drumming by Fua Dia Congo featuring Kiazzi Malonga. I was honored to be part of the dance workshops that accompanied the performance, which were represented in the series of classes; mine were on Haitian dances from the Congo lineage: Petwo and Congo. Both productions were collections of dances from various places in the African Diaspora with linked lineages traceable through aesthetics associated with dance. Aesthetics were readable through movement, color, orality, epistemology, and music in a relational context through specific dances and spiritual practices.

For instance, throughout the Diaspora in places like Yorubaland in current Nigeria and Benin, among the Fon linguistic groups in Togo and Benin, as well as in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, etc., some songs accompany dances that include the word *Àgò*. This word is an old-world word that is not typically used today but is prevalent in folkloric dance modalities like those found in Vodou, Santeria/Lucumi, Candomblé, and Orisha/Shango traditions in Trinidad and other places in the Caribbean and Latin America. All are extended from the Yoruba and Dahomey traditions from Benin. This network of culture within African-derived dance and my lived experiences observing and participating in the creation and evolution of these choreographies, which included workshops with master practitioners, greatly influenced my way of researching the dances at FESTAC '77 and was a major impetus for this dissertation.

In my interview with Blanche Brown in 2023, she explained how she came to understand the connections between the dances of Black and African people from different countries after becoming initiated into Ifa, the religion of the Yorubas and some people from Benin. Blanche Brown also explained, “I did my own prayer that led me to be initiated into the Orisha tradition” (an African religion where dance plays a critical role). She went on to explain that “after having studied Haitian dance for years, and later becoming initiated, it was through the Orisha spiritual tradition that I was made aware of the connections that exist between places, deities, and danced oral traditions between the Yoruba, Dahomey or Benin, Haitian Rada/Dahomey, Cuban Orisha, and Brazilian Candomblé traditions.” This awakening led her to create the dance production, *Àgò*, which highlighted these connections (Brown p.c. 2023).

I was fortunate to be educated in dance by Blanche Brown, a priestess of the tradition. From 1993 – 2000, I studied and danced with Groupe Petit La Croix. Dancing in Blanche’s dynamic and soulful choreographies and being part of her multi-Diaspora show allowed me to embody Africanist aesthetics and ideologies that have blessed my life and body, providing me with a particular type of understanding of reading dance that I counted on for this research. Furthermore, as a Haitian child living in California, her company allowed me access to a beautiful aspect of my culture.

Similarly, Vaughan’s *Down the Kongo Line* (2014), tracing the African Diaspora dances rooted in Kongo dance modalities, symbolism, and cosmology from Brazzaville, Congo to Cuba, the US (New Orleans), and Brazil recognized the extraordinary contribution that Congolese culture has made to the music and dance of the Americas.

Vaughan's work and methodology were like those who participated in FESTAC '77's, engaging traditional artists from the Diaspora to create contemporary work that is both rooted in their own community's traditions and also reflecting their Congolese origins. These contemporary pieces that took place decades after FESTAC '77 spoke to the way attendance at FESTAC, the multi-Black cultural festival, would inform the trajectory of the young artists in attendance, which subsequently shaped their students—including me.

I have danced, taught, and choreographed for Dimensions Dance Company's adult group as well as for their youth group, Rites of Passage, since 2000. I recently returned from a project with Dimension's principal dancer LaTanya d. Tigner in New Orleans, where she is extending the work of tracing the lineage of dance through her project *5<sup>th</sup> Quarter Bantaba*, which demonstrates the connections between HBCU drumline and drum major traditions and Doundouba, a Guinea West Africa dance referred to as “the strong man dance”, and Sabar drumming from Senegal and the Gambia in West Africa. This project included Jackson State and Grambling Universities' dance teams, Alsenye Soumah, a master Guinean dancer, and Magette Sow, a multi-Grammy award-winning percussionist, who provided drumming for the multimillion-dollar film production of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.

Eventually, the combination of being immersed in the rich dance culture of the Oakland and San Francisco Bay Area, participating in a plethora of productions like the two described above, led to my initial desire to find the choreographers of the works I hoped to examine. My interest as a choreographer and dancer was not to merely “speculate” possible choreographic meanings but rather to understand the choreographer's

intention for the piece and the traditions associated with the movements. Instead, inspired by Dr. Imani Kai Johnson's Book, *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: The Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop* (2022), I made inquiries into what happened in the "in-between time" of the festival and the types of exchanges of information and dance knowledge that was being shared and enacted in hopes of learning about the dances. Though I did not learn about choreographies in this way, I learned that much of the education received by my interlocutors happened in the time in between performances where they learned about different African cultures and dances. Performers of each contingent would practice out in the open and conversations took place and lifelong friendships made.

Because anti-Black ideology has made analyses of Black and African culture problematic, I was interested in finding a way first to understand the cultures I was examining from their worldviews and ideas about the body before "speculating" about anything. When we performed as Reconnect, our hopes were always that the audiences, if they were from the culture we were representing, would resonate with what they saw. We were interested in the oldest ways we could find. We wanted to go to the remote areas in the country to see the dances in context. This is what we did.

These immersion experiences were further accentuated by attending The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, San Francisco Carnival, and The Black Choreographer's Festival (which was started by Dr. Halifu Osumare, who is also credited with opening the Malonga Center, formerly known as the Alice Art Center). Working for Dimensions Dance Theater for 25 years put me in collaboration with amazing artists: like Alsenye Soumah,

the principal dancer from Ballet Guinea, my drummer for my classes Mohammed Kouyate, a direct descendent from the Kouyate lineage of Djelis, Kendra Kimbrough, who took over The Black Choreographers Festival, LaTanya Tigner, who remains the director of the Rites of Passage Program and is the principal dancer of Dimensions Dance Theater, and Diamano Coura, the West African Dance Company, which is housed in the Malonga Center along with Dimensions and has an annual festival of African dance that would bring the finest African artists to the Malonga Center for several days. When you walked into the center, heard the booming rhythms, and saw the line of divas dancing down the row in a sacred sweat, you could feel the ancestors in the room. I was entrenched in these environments in Oakland and I learned a lot. Additionally, I created my own company: ELWAH Movement Dance and Research, [www.coletteeloi.com](http://www.coletteeloi.com) (“ELWAH Movement” 2005).

My methodological approach is endogenous and multilayered. I rely on experiences as a dancer. My overall methodology has been primarily qualitative analyses of archival materials, ethnographic interviews, and close readings of various dances. I have referenced books, articles, and living archives of specific dance forms at FESTAC '77, much in the fashion of Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, in their book *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba* (1983). I rely greatly on oral tradition in deriving the meanings of contemporary and traditional dances. I also called upon veteran experts in dance from various locales to help me fill in the gaps of my data. I also use the comparative methodology of anthropologist Yvonne Daniel in *Dancing Wisdom* (2005); I



consider the cross-cultural connections of dance traditions and show where they are shared and where they cease to exist.

Finally, my methodology is influenced by Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000 [1990]), where she includes the "lived experience" as part of valid epistemologies. In the case of ancestral/heritage dancers, their dances can be and are "lived experiences" with centuries of validity. Therefore, I extend precolonial epistemologies when relevant, as a restorative form of theorization practice. This is an example of how my research might be considered as a correction of lost epistemologies, thus adding to the Corpus of Dance as I have delineated above in the Key Concept section.

My project has a community component that has utilized the expertise of African and African diasporic dance specialists from the "Back to the Root Conference", 2020-2021. The FESTAC '77 Reunion that I attended in Nigeria in 2022 gave me additional information and confidence in completing this research project. This dissertation relies upon information from master instructors in various genres of dance.

After I gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) certification to conduct oral history interviews with some of the artists and organizers of FESTAC, I created a list of questions based on the criteria established by the IRB office at University of California, Riverside (UCR) for conducting interviews. Throughout the last research year, I also networked and had intermittent conversations with FESTAC '77 archivists like Marilyn Nance and Dr. Dosumu, head of research at CBAAC. Moreover, I am grateful to have received funding from UCR that partially funded my research and the writing of this dissertation.

My viewing process for the archived dance video footage from FESTAC '77 had to be revised due to intermittent and unexpected rolling blackouts that also caused budgetary constraints regarding fueling the generator. My process eventually involved the following steps: 1) viewing the dance once just for pleasure and for what the dance might register within me; 2) viewing again to track the changes in the organized structure of the dance that I am able to glean; 3) noting the types of costumes and any references to dramatic stories and meanings; 4) taking note of the music: song lyrics, verbalized rhythms, languages, dialects; 5) assessing corporeally, gauging the gross- and fine-motor movements of the dancers along with their proximity to the earth and among/between performers; 6) determining the focal point and purpose of the dance; 7) noting the stance both corporeally and ideologically; 8) marking the transhistorical conversations within the dances; 9) investigating/noting the culture and cosmology of the people performing the dances and significant events and places connected to the dances, and getting specialized guidance when needed; 10) discussing assessments with seasoned dancers/artists of the form.

In my preliminary community work as Dance Department Chair at Laney College in Oakland, California, I assigned my class the project of researching FESTAC '77 because we wanted to create a FESTAC Oakland in 2014. For that project, I began my collection of oral histories from primary sources: four artists who now reside in Oakland and who attended FESTAC '77. In that work, we learned about the significance of the festival in the lives of iconic Black dance figures in our community, namely Deborah Vaughan, Blanche Brown, Tumani Onabiyi and Mosheh Milon. Their descriptions of the festival

were very telling of the impressive effects the festival had on its participant artists, which provided a commentary on FESTAC '77 that had not made it to print, especially regarding the dances. Pre-doctoral research was a primary resource; for example, I interviewed a Nigerian scholar who was in Lagos during the festival as a small boy, in 2014, 2018, and 2022. His perspective on FESTAC '77 has changed considerably as the spiraling events of violence continue, due to anti-Blackness. Consequently, later, I was influenced by the book, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* by Alessandro Portelli. I so admired the way that his analysis of primary sources created insight into complex situations that included the workings of institutions and a diversity of opinions (2012). In that vein, I re-interviewed the artists whom I had previously interviewed, this time for a transhistorical analysis.

### **Significance and Intervention of the Research**

My research on FESTAC '77 is significant in the following ways: 1) No one has researched the dances at FESTAC '77 broadening the Dance Studies archives; 2) This research liberates information about FESTAC '77 addressing the minimization of a significant event; 3) This research validates African and Black cosmologies and epistemological ontologies; 4) It provides proof against ideas of Africa as a monolith; 5) It addresses issues of representation in the fields of Anthropology and Dance Studies; 6) It seeks to ideologically liberate the commodified Black body by introducing the concept of the sovereign body, by enlisting an endogenous analysis to the body beyond remaining in the mechanism of racialization; 7) Lastly, this project provides new theory and analysis methodology for African Diaspora dance.

My analysis of FESTAC '77 considers the festival in multiple layers, allowing for several levels of analysis; it is thereby able to demonstrate the festival's relevance to the archives within Dance Studies and the Humanities. FESTAC '77 is an untapped archive. The potential implications of my research project are that I am contributing to the existing knowledge base of pre-colonial dance analysis. Therefore, other researchers can use my data and conclusions as a basis for further research on the subject. Moreover, my research on the dances of FESTAC '77 works to combat anti-Black ideology and the effects of anti-Blackness that invisibilizes cultures and histories and marginalizes or disregards the perspectives of African and Black people altogether. I underscore the work of Frantz Fanon who viewed “socializing the black subjects” from a different cultural background or cosmology into an “othered” subject due to skin color, as with “epidermalization” (Fanon 1952)—a term that describes the racialized Black person and the internationalization of colonial subjugation—comes with violence to the psyche and physical body, explaining the mechanisms of anti-Blackness.

Part of anti-Blackness is an erasure of Black histories, cosmologies, and epistemological ontologies. Due to this fact, most information on African and Black people that has been written in recent years needs to undergo decolonization. From the moment the African human was put on the auction block, a legacy of extraction, labeling, exclusion, commodification, epidermalization, discrimination, abjection, and reduction of identity has ensued. That labeling exists to this day and is in books, colloquialisms, societal perceptions, and directed actions toward people designated as “Black.” Furthermore, Black people exercise anti-Blackness toward each other.

FESTAC '77 centered on the disenfranchised and did not work to reinforce the more common binary. Instead, it broke a false construct by representing the great diversity in African cultures and her Diaspora, inviting all Black and African people, and excluding none. Instead of collectively deciding to wage war over Black/White issues, Africans sought a productive method to confront colonial ideology and ontological trauma by using cultural arts like dance, a modality known to them as a healing power. Thus, FESTAC leadership provided a model for the world that is needed today. In my dissertation analyses, I privilege these voices.

Specifically, in terms of the historic erasure of FESTAC '77, there was “a conspicuous ignoring of FESTAC by most of the American press” (Poinsett 1977, 48), an erasure I explore in depth. However, in my early research on the topic, my students and I found that this erasure came in multiple forms. Some critics questioned the validity of almost every aspect of the event, calling it a waste of time and money (Apter 2005; Omojola 2009).

There is a tension that exists in the world about "things African" that somehow brings balance, as in the situation with Fela Kuti, a Nigerian musician and activist. Fela, who might be considered the godfather of Afrobeat music, found FESTAC '77 to be "too traditional" (Chimurenga 2019); however, ironically, his music is deemed successful because of his use of traditional elements. Another example I discovered while in Nigeria was that anti-Blackness toward FESTAC '77 was there as well but revealed itself in a unique way. In a direct interview, a Nigerian who grew up in Lagos during the time of FESTAC '77 explained how there were rumors that the problems in Nigeria following the

festival were brought about by the “fetishes and altars” constructed and utilized by participants at the festival (Akintunde 2014). Hopefully, my research findings help to not only explain some of these tensions, but also put them to rest.

### **Dissertation Structure**

Each chapter in this dissertation builds on the prior chapters. As this dissertation focuses on the dances at FESTAC '77, I first present abridged analyses to demonstrate specific points in the Introduction's section entitled, “Notes From the Field”, which is on South African dance. Also in this Introduction, I have situated my journey to understanding the history of a festival that greatly impacted my teachers' and mentors' lives. Additionally, I have presented a glimpse into the first day of my research in Lagos, Nigeria with the FESTAC '77 dance video archives to give the reader a glimpse into my research journey. I review the scope of the dances at FESTAC '77, and why an analysis of the festival through dance is important. I also describe the key concepts, like dance, for the dissertation along with the dissertation thesis and methodology, ending with a section on the significance of the research.

Chapter One, entitled “What was FESTAC '77?”, gives a review of written materials that illustrate the different views and attitudes toward the festival. I provide a critique of some of the thoughts on the festival and I discuss Nigerian dance. I include a brief analysis of one of the dances performed by the Nigerian contingent of dances called *Children of Paradise* to further demonstrate the way dance functions in Nigeria and to

present African notions of “precolonial” dance. I provide information on the genesis and approach of the research as well. The analytical tool that situates the work of this dissertation to understand the dances at FESTAC ‘77 comes from my readings with my mentor Dr. Yvonne Daniel for my qualifying written exam, entitled *Pre-colonial Cosmologies, Ontologies, and Epistemologies of African Diaspora Dance*.

The archival research of precolonial African Diaspora dance was an inquiry into the shared underlying cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies among Diaspora descendants from specific African ethnic groups, empires, and regional sites. This precolonial archival inquiry shaped my approach to understanding the use of dance at FESTAC ‘77. The precolonial data from that inquiry is used for the excavation of the sovereign body which does not exist in the discourses on the body within Dance Studies that I reviewed in my archival research.

I review some of the more prominent discourses on the body in Dance Studies in Chapter Two entitled, “Conceptualizing the Body for FESTAC ‘77”. This chapter was created with the mentorship of Dr. Anthea Kraut and was designed to alert the reader to the ways scholars have conceptualized *the body*. I provide a cross-section of the discourses of the inscribed body within Dance Studies. This analysis led me to introduce the concept of the sovereign body into Dance Studies discourse. Due to the tremendous breadth of dances that were presented over the 29-day festival, with dances being performed every day, I have limited this dissertation analysis of the dances at FESTAC ‘77, and I feature three full case studies.

I provide two extensive dance analyses in Chapters Three and Four (Brazil and Cuba). In Chapter Three, entitled, “Brazil, Sacred Feminine in FESTAC Opening Ceremony”, I discuss the dancing Bahiana body in Candomblé Orixá dance at the FESTAC ’77 opening ceremony, and delve into questions of gender and race intersectionality. In Chapter Four, entitled, CUBA, *Sulkary* – Reading Dance”, I present a case study on the Cuban choreography, *Sulkary*, where I propose a *precolonial perspective in analysis and corporeal footnoting for African contemporary dance analysis*. I read the dance from a precolonial perspective and note the problematic issues of reading dance from sheer speculation. For these in-depth case studies of dance at FESTAC ’77, I chose African Diaspora countries with shared cosmologies, epistemologies, ontologies, and legacies from history to add contour to the dissertation. I reviewed choreographic and cultural meanings within the dancing bodies of Cuba and Brazil. Their shared dance genealogies, and the historical heritage that exists between them, is important to this dissertation and understanding of dance at FESTAC ’77. These two chapters address ideas of footnoting ancient gestures and themes that surface in contemporary choreography.

Chapter Five, entitled “US Legacies Dancing Ontological Healing”, reviews oral history interviews that were taken with US dance delegates from the festival. I discuss how ontological healing, and the liberated/sovereign body was accessed in connection to the festival, and give an analysis of Cleo Parker Robinson’s *Creation, Destruction*, which was performed at the festival. Chapter Five starts with a history of the pre-FESTAC pioneers in African and African Diaspora dance that influenced the US dance delegation who were my interlocutors: Mosheh Milon, Deborah Vaughan, Blanche Brown, Marcea



Daiter, Tumani Onibiyi, Norma and Ngoma Woolbright, Lynette White, and Cleo Parker Robinson, who all attended the festival. I also situate the historic moment and movements that birthed FESTAC '77. Dancer voices offer a historiography of negative criticisms and bring clarity to the great significance of this iconic festival, which has been shrouded by anti-Blackness. The continuing work of my interlocutors is highlighted here. Their continuing work has extended FESTAC's original methodology of holistic development and displays the meaningful impact FESTAC '77 had on "American" dance. The dissertation concludes with a brief recapitulation and closing thoughts.

## Chapter 1. What was FESTAC '77?

*“Diasporic can also mean a movement toward the center.”*

*(Obasanjo Grand Patron of FESTAC '77).*

This chapter discusses the limited written literature on FESTAC '77 and my thoughts over time regarding the multiple assessments of the festival. When I first started learning about FESTAC '77 in 2014, I came across disparate perspectives on the festival. It was described in either utopic reveries of unity or as a fetish chimera cursing the economic future of Nigeria. I found in my preliminary research that the latter perspective was written, apart from a few articles such as in Ebony magazine, while the former perspective was what I heard from my teachers and other artists who attended the festival in person. Several years later, I met a Nigerian living in the US who was a child during FESTAC '77. He said it was something of a taboo to talk about FESTAC '77; it was problematic because “it brought too many fetishes to Lagos” (Akintunde 2017).

My interest in the festival as a specialist in African Diaspora dance culture was gaining information regarding its dances, music, drum rhythms, myths, and histories. The festival was an essential and critical archive because veteran master artists from both Africa and the Diaspora had been in conversation. The festival program could potentially map the connections between Africa and her Diaspora. As I continued to ask around the Black dance community of Oakland and research what I considered an iconic event, I saw this particular festival as a critical moment in Global Black History. In the following pages, I map out my research findings as I have continued to investigate its history and its legacies.

## **A Review of Thoughts on FESTAC '77**

Andrew Apter—Africanist scholar, and American historian—has been the most prominent scholar of FESTAC '77 and is the author of the book, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (2005). Aside from this book he has also written several scholarly articles and given multiple presentations on the festival.

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the festival with the publication of two significant works: *Last Day in Lagos* (2022) which was compiled from the author, Marilyn Nance, and her 1,500-photo collection of the festival. In this book, Nance, a photographer for the US contingent of the North American Zone, offers an insider view of the festival as a contracted photographer, but more pertinently as a Black woman who grew up in the 60s in the United States, from an internal place in her afterword she writes:

“Just two generations separate me from the condition of enslavement...If you believe in community archiving, in preserving your own history and moving it to the future. If you believe in the power of people traveling and talking with each other, if you believe in destroying boundaries, if you believe photography, if you believe in education and the transfer of knowledge, if you believe in the power of women, and young people, and African genius, if you want to hold something real in your hands, you need to hold this” (280).

Marilyn Nance's book is in many ways a photo journal of her experience at FESTAC '77. She was not just there as a photographer on location doing a job, her lived experience and actions as an activist give depth to her photography. The story is told through her experience as a Black woman. Nance's “body” is in the book; from a Dance Studies' perspective she has “skin in the game”, understanding the festival from the view of a person seeking liberation. Her work encompasses the “why” of the festival from an

international perspective. Nance discusses her pre-FESTAC experience where she participated in the Civil Rights Movement, what she refers to as the Freedom Movement, the Student Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement. The above quote from her book speaks to the "why" of the festival for Black and African people who had experienced oppression.

The second newer FESTAC '77 publication I reference here is the unconventional book, *FESTAC '77 - decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced by Chimurenga*<sup>17</sup> (2019), by Ntone Edjabe. This book was inspired by Toni Morrison's *The Black Book* (1974), a collage-like book, which explores the history and experience of African Americans in the United States through photographs and images of all sorts of documents: legal transcripts, proclamations, sheet music, etc. from 1619 - 1940. Edjabe's book works to offer a view of FESTAC '77 using the same methodology as Morrison. The book starts with the survey given to attendees of FESTAC '77 and includes newspaper clippings and images of a wealth of documented information exploring and revealing the history and topics associated with the festival. No personal analysis of the festival nor critique is offered, but rather, a wide collection of printable artifacts that allows a more objective read of the festival, where a lot of the minutia of the festival can be displayed in primary source form, allowing for great detail. The book is like a portable archive of FESTAC '77.

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<sup>17</sup> Chimurenga is a project-based mutable object, workspace, and pan-African platform for editorial activities. Founded by Ntone Edjabe in Cape Town in 2002. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/chimurenga/>

These two more recent publications represent a distinct shift in the literature on FESTAC '77 that take into consideration the issues of anti-Blackness in scholarship with marginalization of the effects of colonization in education in regards to imperialist language and viewpoint as well as representation. Additionally, both publications were written by Black authors, one from the US and the other from South Africa. Both authors worked in the arena of liberation.

Apter's 2005 book is written from the outsider's viewpoint of a Western white male, although he did attend the festival. In the introduction, he writes how he initially came to Nigeria to study Bata music associated with the spiritual religion of Ifa but changed his focus to the festival. Apter's book focuses on Nigeria's internal issues and the countries new oil wealth, during the period just prior to the festival. He ultimately is not convinced that the festival is demonstrating culture and instead criticizes the festival planners put in place by the then acting political power of "staging" or providing "only a production<sup>18</sup>" towards its political future. Apter's analysis misses the international "why" of the festival and the reader must rely upon his perspective to understand the festival; however, both Nance and Edjabe cover the "why" in their own ways Apter does not acknowledge the workings of the British colonial power in post-colonial Nigeria. Apter does not consider the continual and residual role of the British in the newly independent Africa. Apter's focus on the specificity of cultural practice and its effect on nation building is interesting, as the

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<sup>18</sup> Guyer, Jane I. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 30, no. 2 (2007): 328–30.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24497381>.

issues of cultural plurality are a very important topic among African scholars. However, in my analysis, I consider African empires and ethnic group boundaries and the way those boundaries were turned into the colonial zone of Nigeria during the Berlin Conference and the hand played by the British in post-colonial Nigeria, as well, in order to understand that Apter's analysis begs for a broader perspective.

Additionally, the Center for Black Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) in Lagos, Nigeria, recently celebrated the 45th anniversary of FESTAC '77, called FESTAC@45, in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria, from December 7–13, 2022. CBAAC was established by Decree 69 of 1979, following the successful hosting of FESTAC '77. The Center houses the core collections and artifacts as well as rare cultural items that were exhibited during FESTAC '77. The CBAAC organizer writes, "The decision to hand over these materials to Nigeria was to reinforce and build on the gains of the historic Festival. The center was established to fulfill Nigeria's pledge to keep the materials in trust for the 59 Black and African countries and communities participating in the festival" (FESTAC@45 anniversary celebration in Abuja, Nigeria 2022). In its vision statement, CBAAC positions itself as the foremost agency to encourage, initiate, facilitate, and coordinate the retrieval and restoration of the natural and cultural heritage of Black and African people for the purposes of preserving and protecting them for enhanced understanding and appreciation. CBAAC holds art exhibitions, cultural festivals, performances, conferences, lectures, workshops, youth programs, and other activities, both locally and internationally, that promote Black and African Culture. CBAAC also has a library, an audiovisual center, an art gallery, an

art studio, and a Hall of Fame with varied collections of significance to Black and African peoples worldwide.

### **Genesis and Approach to the Research on FESTAC '77**

I was interested in the large presence of dance and the way dance worked at FESTAC '77. My investigations prior to the review of the above readings greatly influenced my impetus to consider the dances at FESTAC '77, and thinking for this dissertation project proved to me that dance had put identity *in situ* for those who had their identities attacked and were demoralized from the processes of chattel slavery and the Berlin Conference. Therefore, my approach had to consider the dances that were performed at FESTAC '77, a festival aiming towards “self-determination” and “development.” Sparked by my early dance experience and fieldwork as an African-rooted dancer, this informed my impetus, pulling from years of information gained both verbally and non-verbally as an African and African Diaspora dancer with Lynn Coles, Blanche Brown, Michelle Martin, Madame Gauthier, Florencia Pierre, Ramses Pierre, Teatro Nacionale de Cuba, Jorge Alabe, Tania Santiago, Jose Barroso, Reconnect Dance Collective, Emese - Messengers of the African Diaspora Collective. Drumming further augmented my understanding of dance as a language and cultural container, studying with Fisner Augustine, Yagbe Onilu, and Fode Cissoko. My academic archival research into oral histories of African Diaspora dance would also inform my decision to analyze the dances at FESTAC '77 because of the specific ways Black and African dance holds culture

and history (Daniel 2005; DeFrantz 2002; Deren 1953; Drewal and Drewal 1990; Hazard 1990; I Johnson 2022; Kuwor 2021; Sloat 2002; Udoka 2005; Welsh 2000).

My early research revealed the importance of FESTAC '77, and guided the way I interpreted its importance in my later research. Beyond dance and drum, a couple of the important sources that shaped my view were Andrew Apter's focus on the Nigerian Oil Boom. His research led me to consider the festival from the viewpoint of economic and international development. Nigeria had just come out of British colonization in 1960 and was experiencing a gigantic oil boom by the 1970s. President Obasanjo had witnessed colonial oppressors routinely breeding political discord by favoring certain ethnic groups while disenfranchising others. One of the ways he attacked that practice was through the mandate of FESTAC '77 to be very inclusive of all ethnic groups in Nigeria. The festival's explicit foundational methodology of national development through celebrating Black and African culture, starting in 1966 festival, involved several presidents of newly independent African nations: Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Obasanjo of Nigeria, Sekou Touré of Guinea, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, etc. This collection of presidents came together to collectively map a way forward developmentally after colonialism, taking the common African saying "It takes a village" to a whole new level. Professor Duro Oni, one of the festival's technical directors, explained to me in conversation how countless other countries (some newly independent) came to the organizers of FESTAC '77 for consultation on how to create a festival like FESTAC '77 in their countries, to ignite development. Through contacts such as Professor Oni, CBAAC, Mr. Dosumu, and my research in Nigeria, including attending FESTAC@45, I augmented the political and



sociological resources and the anthropological literature that I surveyed to build a strong research foundation.

My approach to analyzing the dances was influenced by a pre-field work community event, "Back to the Root Conference" 2021-2022, for which several African and African Diaspora specialists presented dance in ways that included the spoken language connected to the dances. Presenters were asked to teach the participants the dances and share the histories and uses of the dances. Organizers picked dances that have movement that was focused on the pelvis and the spine. We learned that the spine holds deep spiritual significance when undulating or flexing and releasing, as is done in multiple African and African Diaspora dance forms. Our research revealed how the movement of the spine in African dance activates the workings of the vagus nerve leading to healing on the physical level in multiple ways (Porges 2017). Our research also revealed the symbolism of the pelvis as equivalent with the cosmos, the earth, and a sacred region that holds great significance when danced. This data pushed against ideas of pelvic and hip-oriented dance as purely commercial. This research would work to consider dance beyond the context of race and consider the role of the spirit and the physical healing effects of these dance forms.

### **Critique of Data**

Here, I examine some diverse evaluations of the festival in 1977 and start with an evaluative quote from the Nigerian Anniversary Gala 2022. In an online newspaper article, journalist Greg Odogwu wrote, "Former President Olusegun Obasanjo on Monday said

that FESTAC '77 was a celebration of Africa's diverse and rich cultural heritage and not a fetish festival as erroneously believed" (*Punch*, September 28, 2017). President Obasanjo further stated/described, "Culture is the totality of the way of life of any group of people," adding that "...a people who lost their culture had lost their identities. Our culture enables us to remember our past, which is history, and this is why history is important in our schools; to forget history is to lose our memory" (2017).

Africanist anthropologist and historian Andrew Apter also provided generative data for my research on dance at FESTAC '77 in the chapter entitled, "Choreographing the Nation, in his book entitled, *The Pan African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (2005, 109-120). His perspective is that Nigeria used the cultural production of the festival toward nation-building and its theme of cultural recovery to capitalize on the moment and centralize itself as the leader of a would-be Black New World. His prominent critique is that the attempt of the Obasanjo regime to use dance as a form of nation-building in Nigeria at FESTAC '77 was problematic; the processing of dances from the different ethnic groups in preparation for stage performance at FESTAC '77 commodified the dance. I agree that the stage tends to commodify dance instantaneously. However, to mention the commodification of dance and not the commodification of humans seems like it is missing the point of the festival. As a researcher, he has done extensive investigations into World Fairs.

In *Performing Pan-Africanism*, Ntone Ejabe made this statement in conversation with David Morris, one of the members of the Chimurenga group (an innovative archival group that has done innovative research on FESTAC):

“FESTAC is so grand that you cannot make sense of it, and it remains invisible, or more accurately, unwritten. Its traces are heard everywhere in the black world, but the only full-length analysis I’ve seen is Andrew Apter’s book, which of course has its own anthropological agenda” (Morris 2019, 275).

Apter writes from a Western-European perspective, and his audience seems to be the White world, since he does not acknowledge the centuries of anti-Black experiences Africans and Diasporans have had. He sees the festival as a “failed cultural project” that did not care for the Nigerian people. Moreover, his overarching tone for the festival alternates between cynicism and sarcasm—except when discussing art. He starts by saying he went to Nigeria to study the *Dundun* drums but insinuated that the art form was too complex, and he left that inquiry to someone else: “The linguist principle of Yoruba drum language and the multiple meanings of drummed proverbs and utterances proved far too difficult an area to penetrate” (2005, 1). Instead, he started following FESTAC ’77 and ultimately focused on oil.

The broad scope of Apter's analysis of FESTAC ’77 was nonetheless generative for my research. His analysis of the festival's programming provides interesting information on the traditional dances and on what he calls neo-traditional dances. In his chapter entitled “Choreographing the Nation” (109-120), his focus is dance, and he offers a comparison to other festivals, like Nafest’74, a Nigerian festival held in Lagos that he identifies as structuring the selection of dances included in FESTAC ’77. I admire the amount of data he collected. “As a choreographic grooming ground for FESTAC ’77, Nafest’74 represents the most sweeping and systemic effort to view, catalog, and classify traditional Nigerian dances to promote cultural awareness and national unity” (Apter 2005, 110)”. He continues: “In sheer numbers alone, 6000 dances were initially previewed at the village or

divisional level, from which the then-twelve states selected 1,305...in this way, every minority was represented” (Apter 2005, 110). Thus, his data fascinated me and reinforced my ideas and questions regarding what dance is and what it means in the Black and African world.

In “Dance in Search of a Nation: Towards a Sociopolitical Re-definition of Dance in Nigeria,” in the book titled *Critical Perspectives on Dance in Nigeria* (2005), Arnold Udoka adds emic dimension to Apter’s argument of commodification. Like Apter, he mentions Nafest 1974 but reveals the series of large dance festivals held directly following the country's Independence in 1960, drawing attention to “dance as a liberating, socializing and unifying element in the polity” (Udoka 2005, 277). Udoka also explains how Nafest was put in place by the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon and celebrated the main Nigerian traditional dances as an annual event. He discusses the success of *trans-ethnic* dances in Nigeria, writing “trans-ethnic dance format, therefore, is perhaps the only theatrical method to encapsulate the spirit of nationhood, but it is presently handicapped by the resurgence of the pre-war ethnic fears, distrust, and disaffection (290). He is commenting on a piece that took place at Nafest 1974, which brought together a collection of ethnic group dances to enact an allegorical piece that he described as “spellbinding and beautiful to behold” (290). However, Udoka does not mention FESTAC ’77 at all in his discussion of trans-ethnic dance.

This brings me to discuss Demas Nwoko’s piece, *Children of Paradise* (1974). In my conversations with Nigerians about the festival, Demas Nwoko’s piece, *Children of Paradise* was the most frequently mentioned piece. Though I was unable to see footage of

the piece, I am compelled to discuss it briefly because of its response to the historic moment. I will give the historical backdrop first.

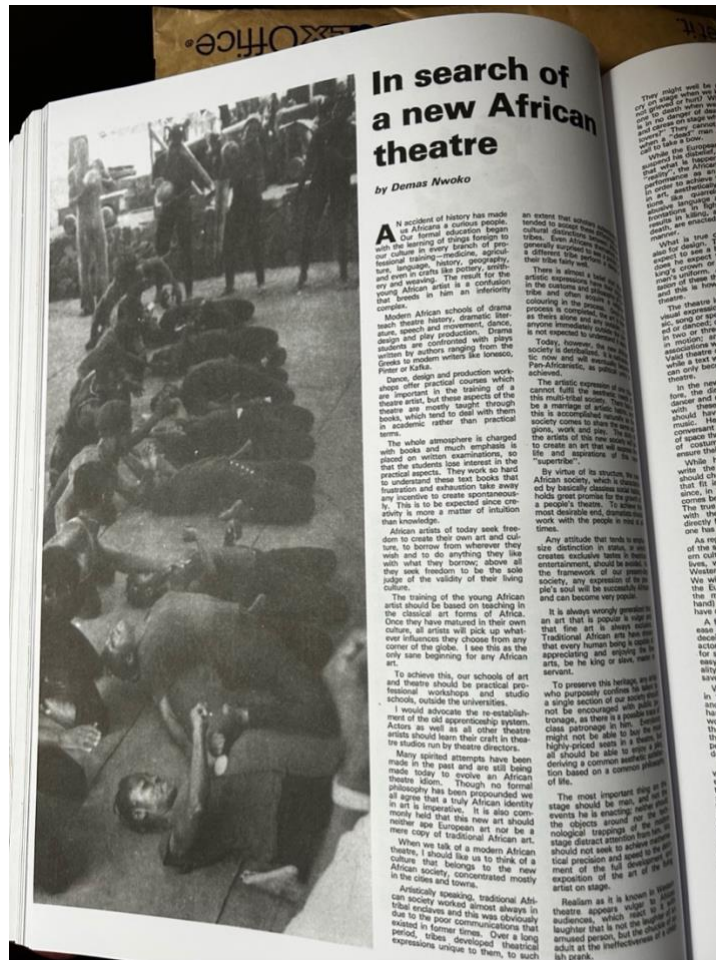


Figure 5. Image of Demas Nwoko's Nigerian dance submission, *Children of Paradise* (1977). Photographer unknown. Image from the book by the Chimurenga Group, *FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced*. Cape Town: Afterall Books. (2019, 134).

In my research on FESTAC '77, I felt it necessary to understand the country where it was being held and the issues of the moment. In Nigeria before its independence in 1960, the then-President, Obasanjo, made a point of recognizing Nigerian ethnic states that the

previous British colonial powers had not. “The regime has been credited with several achievements, which are as follows: First, the regime created seven additional states in 1976, increasing the total number of states created: Benue, Bauchi, Niger, Anambra, Ondo, Cross River, and Gongola. The regime strongly believed that the creation of additional states and local governments would bring government closer to the people and fast-track development” (Ogbogbo & Okpeh 2021, 114).

The Obasanjo regime also hosted the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos in 1977, which brought several African countries together. This information is vital to the makings of FESTAC '77 during the dawning of a new Nigeria, one that had been under British control since 1884. Seventy-six years later it would have a huge feat to tackle. Not only would its people have to decolonize themselves, as mentioned in the quote by Donaldson (Chimurenga 2019), they had to be “accepted” by the World Market.

Nigeria’s great fortune was that they experienced an oil boom when they gained independence. Their focus became development. What is most significant for this dissertation is that the arts, and dance in particular, would be used to reconnect to pre-colonial ways. I was intrigued to learn that this same regime looking to develop Nigeria created FESTAC '77. Nigeria could have done many things—waged war against their colonizers, focus on themselves, etc. Yet they made the extraordinary choice to host the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture.

Therefore, FESTAC '77 was a corrective move against colonialism, considering every stratum of Nigerian individual in the country was waking from a nightmare in a

sense. However, here is where my idea of precolonial takes on a deeper dimension: the pre-colonial issues between ethnic groups would return. FESTAC '77 was a response to the newly found cultural plurality following Nigeria's Independence (Udoka 2005; Ogbogbo and Okpeh 2021). The fact that the Nigerian government would give time and resources to viewing these dances speaks volumes for understanding the importance of inclusivity. It demonstrates the awareness of the power of dance in Nigerian thought. Though they had to narrow down the representative dances to those that could represent the nation they were trying to build, the job must have been beyond daunting; still, every group was allowed to access adjudicators and be recognized. This is a key point and calls into question Apter's Marxist thought on the ills of commodification by the nation.

Choreographer, architect, and educator, Demas Nwoko, choreographed *Children of Paradise* (1974), which became the central stage performance for FESTAC '77. The Nigerian participation in the Dance event was in two main parts: the traditional dance in which each Nigerian State in the Federation was represented and the contemporary dance, for which an entirely new Contemporary Dance Theatre group was created.

The subject of the dance was chosen to conform to the spirit of FESTAC 77. It was a review of colonial experience and the assertion of freedom. The medium of expression was operatic: songs, music, dance, and poetry. The Contemporary Dance Theatre group ran into difficulties each time it performed. Usually billed on the festival program to perform full length, other groups' arrangements made it impossible to utilize staging aids fully. Overall, the troupe performed twice during FESTAC '77: "at the National Theatre

on the 20th of January and at the Tafawa Balewa Square on the 4th of February 1977” (IFC Report and Summary 1977).



Apter comments on the piece in this quote,

“Demas Nwoko had more immediate problems to contend with. In addition to trimming the traditional dances down to size and finalizing arrangements with the states, he was also producing *Children of Paradise*, his own dance drama, and holding nationwide auditions in Benin City, Ibadan, Calabar, Kaduna, and Kano to recruit a representative nation cast with at least one member from each state for grooming and training in Ibadan. An allegory of colonial devastation followed by African revolution and recovery. *Children of Paradise* is set in “a land flowing with milk and honey, and land of music and of dance of precious minerals and priceless artworks.” There, the children of paradise are attacked by albinos who prevail by dint of their superior weapons. A Black Moses is born in the figure of Ogun, who cuts out the white heart of the Albino King where he is abused and killed by albino loyalist. At his funeral, mourning becomes revolution as the people overthrow the albinos and regain their rightful place in paradise” (Apter 2005).

Apter makes an astute comment on the processing or, as he puts it, “choreographing” of these culture-rich dances into possible national dances; he says the attempt to nationalize is problematic due to the extraction of the dances' authenticity in training for performance. This topic also makes me revisit Foster's inscribed body (Foster 1975), which I discuss in great detail below, but speaks to the theme of the festival dealing with the Black world's desire of “acceptance”. Apart from the fact that I yearn to see all the different dances discussed, the people of Nigeria had to contend with being inscribed by the violence and anti-Blackness of colonialism, then the commodification intrinsically tied to the stage, and finally the need, imposed by the nation, to consolidate themselves.

But Apter's level of criticism of Nigeria feels out of place since, in this chapter, he does not remark on colonialism's role. In contrast, Udoka's analysis understands the issues of cultural plurality following Nigeria's Independence. For instance, Apter speaks of the

festival's symbol, the Queen Idia mask, but does not speak of Britain's refusal to return it or lend it to FESTAC '77 organizers at a price. When he talks about the hanging of a particular protestor from the Dutch Shell oil company, Apter blames only Nigeria and not the Dutch (Apter 2005).

Apter's analyses focus on Nigeria's oil boom and bust and regarding FESTAC '77, which I think is a mischievously brutal comment in its level of reductiveness. Here again, he does not acknowledge the coming together of countries that shared the brutal legacy of enslavement and colonialism. Overall, he manages to dismiss almost everything about FESTAC '77, and he is extremely critical of the International Festival Committee (IFC), the festival's organizing body that carried out the mandates of the organizers. This group produced a report entitled "FESTAC '77 Report and Summary of Accounts" (IFC Report and Summary of Accounts 1977).

Apter gives compelling information about the neo-traditional dance movement that grew from Nafest. Still, he needs to cite where he is getting the information from, and readers should keep in mind that he is not a dancer. Apter's list of Indigenous Nigerian dances supplements my list of Nigerian dances. But for Apter, "...FESTAC '77 culture made money and sense, ratifying the role of visitors like me" (2005, 2). Here, he makes a valid point of how FESTAC '77 can also be considered from its tourist standpoint.

Still, Apter spoke of FESTAC '77 as a "staging" of national culture in a recorded lecture on YouTube, entitled "Author Series." He critiques FESTAC '77 as an exercise in cultural production with a taxonomy of colonial conventions. His most prominent

argument in that presentation was regarding the inauthenticity of the *durbar* or Nigerian horse parading at FESTAC. In that YouTube posting, he shows photos of a British feudal *durbar* and compares them to the *durbar* held at FESTAC '77, stating that the Nigerians were mirroring the British imperial tradition.

Where Apter refers to Nigeria treating FESTAC '77 as a "coming out party," it relates to the agreement at the end of the first FESTAC '66 in Senegal that Nigeria was elected to host the second FESTAC due to its economic wealth and recognition of its strong cultural heritage. However, Nigeria emerged then as the "cultural" star country at the Dakar festival.

The South African Chimurenga Archive group offers an innovative and eclectic take on FESTAC '77. They have been bringing attention to this festival since at least 2014. That group has been working to decolonialize and reimagine how research on African culture is accumulated, and they have turned their intentions into physical actions. They offer diverse ways to do scholarly research, present the archive, and provide commentary. They merge art with access to knowledge. Their archival presentations are multilingual, value objectivity, and consider the festival by way of the music. Below is a conversation between Ntone Edjabe, member of Chimurenga group, with David Morris:

"There are no books about...FESTAC '77, but I can count over 40 albums by African musicians...which announce, praise, promote, critique or just merely document the event. This is remarkable, considering these are independent initiatives and produced by the artists themselves. So FESTAC might not be something you can read, but you can listen to it. Its archive exists primarily in the world of sound. And so, at various stages of the research I would produce a mixtape that sounds out some of the key issues that I pick up. In some ways the mixtape is the appropriate form of writing here—you collect these bits from

personal archives and bring them into a sort of affective proximity. Overall, our research methodology is often closer to detective work, replete with entirely unexpected, fortuitous coincidences, even encounters with ghosts, allegorical and otherwise” (Morris 2019: 283 - 284).

I appreciate this quote for the detail it provides for my research of the dances. I first encountered the Chimurenga group in 2014, when they collaborated with the San Francisco Public Library. The library hosted an exhibit of FESTAC '77 books curated by the Chimurenga group, which my students and I attended. I understood the group to be concerned with confronting the effects of anti-Blackness in its way of invisibilizing and marginalizing African and Black histories.

Given that the festival had seemed so obscured from the public eye at the beginning of our research in the early months of 2014, on the San Francisco Library's website, there was a description of the FESTAC '77 events the library had hosted in 2014 with the title: *Collaborative Intervention: Chimurenga Library*. “This interactive installation is co-presented by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) as part of the *Public Intimacy* exhibition until June 29 and as part of SFMOMA On the Go: Live Projects 4” (SF Public Library website).

The installation at the library was wonderfully interactive and captivating. When we arrived and ascended into the museum's foyer, red lines on the floor went off in all directions of the library. If you followed the lines, they led you to books and information on the FESTAC '77 Festival. We discovered events in the past that centered on FESTAC '77. The installation organizers also displayed old film footage of FESTAC '77 events on television monitors placed on pedestals. A representative of the Chimurenga who

organized the exhibition discussed how they wanted to bring more attention to this iconic festival. My students and I decided to create a show in honor of FESTAC '77. (The details of that production can be found in the appendix.) Quite a few books referenced FESTAC '77; however, between 2014, when I first searched for information on the festival, and the present, the topic has grown in popularity. In 2020, as mentioned before, the Chimurenga group produced its unique publication, entitled *FESTAC '77: decomposed, an-arranged, and reproduced* by Chimurenga (2020) filled with printable artifacts, stories, newspaper clippings, and images, from all over Africa and the Diaspora pertaining to FESTAC '77. The first page is a copy of the survey that was given to the participants and the publishers' information is on the back page. Everything about the book is unique and it is clever in its objectivity. After visiting The Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) I noticed that some of the information was the same. Their book is like a mini portable CBAAC. It is a solid resource in that it lets the reader or viewer assess for themselves what the festival was like, what it was about, who and what was there, and what it accomplished.

Musician and author Randy Weston wrote of the Nigerian festival, “The array of folks in Lagos was incredible. For example, “I’d have breakfast, and my table mates might be Louis Farrakhan, Stevie Wonder, and Queen Mother Moore, and a heavy Sufi master named Mahi Ismail” (“African Rhythms - Autobiography” n.d.). This American jazz pianist and composer of Jamaican parentage was in synchrony with Tumani Onabiyi, an Oakland drummer and community scholar, who talked with me and my students in 2014 about his participation at FESTAC '77.

Tumani Onabiyi has been a folkloric artist of African and Diaspora culture for 50 years and is also an award-winning photographer, television producer and co-producer of FESTAC Oakland, was part of Nontsizi Cayou's *Wajumbe* dance company, which was a pioneering Black dance company in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. Tumani shared his experience participating in the competitive auditions, which determined the US contingent going to FESTAC '77 and its funding by the US State Department. He nostalgically shared his experiences with great enthusiasm upon arriving in Lagos for the festival: "It was like coming home" (Onabiyi 2014). He noted that race issues worldwide were at a significant height during the time of FESTAC '77 and that horrific incidents were occurring. For example, he told my students that, just weeks before *Wajumbe* members boarded the plane, a Black man was stabbed with an American flag; also, South African Apartheid was a hot topic in the current news.

Tumani Onabiyi shared a story of the US contingent's flight to Africa, during which played the movie "Roots," a crucial African American story of enslavement in 1977. The film is based on Alex Haley's famous novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. It was published initially in 1976 and is about the author's ancestors and their harrowing experiences during the era of chattel slavery. The racial climate the artists had just left, and the disheartening scenes of the movie, framed their touchdown in Lagos so profoundly that everyone was crying tears of joy, and some were even kissing the ground when they arrived (Onabiyi p.c. 2014).

Tumani's proclamation of the deep healing that occurred was profoundly inspiring to my students and me. Tumani recounts that there was dancing and hugging in the streets;

people greeted each other like long-lost family members. My students and I were so thrilled by this personal account from someone who had attended FESTAC '77 that we decided to produce our own festival, named “FESTAC Oakland: Stances, Connections, Leaps, and Bounds.”

A media student who had enrolled in my class set up a FESTAC page on Facebook, entitled "Laney College presents FESTAC Oakland", where we uploaded traditional cultural dances that portrayed what some students referred to as, “real” African culture. Tumani also uploaded a short clip of the opening ceremony of the original festival in the stadium. He said the positive energy was palpable. One could ascertain from the footage alone that the festival was clearly epic. As a result of the festival, the Nigerian National Council of Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77 Village, and the National Theater of Lagos were formed, as well as the Center for Black and African Arts and Culture (CBAAC).

A further extension of my research resulted in a novel pathway into the critical analysis of FESTAC '77, a pre-fieldwork community project entitled "BACK TO THE ROOT" (2021- 2022). This year-long, online conference was created to steer discussions away from commodified perceptions of dances that were descended from Africa and instead center them on the actual cultures of Africa. Conference presenters and participants considered FESTAC '77 as significant Pan-Africanism. They also categorized the festival, among other Pan-African culture festivals of the 1960s, as “laboratories for the development of new, worldwide politics and cultures” (Sosibo 2020).

FESTAC '77 organizers and performers did an exceptional job of subsuming centuries of trauma, even encompassing the purposeful ignorance of dominating colonial powers. Deep pain, grief, loss, and even hate was turned into a humanistic display. The previous colonial Nigerian educational system would have expected obedience rather than the national self-assessment of emotions and sensitivity that characterized preparations for the festival and the festival itself. The ethnic groups that had been ignored and consumed by colonial society were now made visible and Nigeria was not alone in this reversal; other newly independent nations were similarly involved with constructing national dance ensembles that could represent their histories and differentiated cultures in the contagious and joyous media of dance and music (Kuwor 2013; Opoku 1965). There were no rumors of starting a war at FESTAC '77 or paying retribution for the trafficking of humans, torture, killings, or theft.

In the case of the US contingent and on an individual level, dancers came to understand information about being “Black” in Africa that did not exist in the educational system they were reared in. Dance facilitated that point and artfully and conversely showed connections, allowing some to trace genealogies through dance movement and meaning. FESTAC '77 allowed emotions to be processed, opinions to be expressed, new concepts to be embodied, and African indigenous identity to be removed from a colonial box. Was there controversy? Of course, what family reunion does not have its share of controversy?

The President of Nigeria, President Senghor of Senegal, and other African intellectuals agreed that the organizers' aims were not only to reclaim identity but also to use the festival as a taking-off point to move politically, economically, historically, and



emotionally beyond the classification of a "Third World country" (IFC 1977). They were collectively envisioning and realizing their future, where they were no longer 'slaves', the commodities, or, as Cedric Robinson argues, "the object" Robinson ([1983] 2000, 2020). They were not the 'colonized' but the 'creators.' During the preparation and execution of FESTAC festivals, Africans were choosing how they wished to be presented to the world after being enslaved, colonized, and freed - gaining their independence and experiencing substantially more freedom than previously.

Africans' staging and creation of FESTAC festivals was a holistic, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and all-inclusive frame designed for continual and multi-level development - political and economic, mental, spiritual, and physical. As a researcher of cultures, I know that the continent of Africa has many hundreds or thousands of pre-colonial oral tradition systems in which dance, music, and art have played integral parts within an overall cosmology that contains history, socio-political aspects of people, economics, science, modernity, and development. Connections were being made within FESTAC communities on all fronts, connections between traditionalists of Africa and the African Diaspora, connections among indigenous artists within the continent, and connections among people who love African culture, music, and dance.

### **Why FESTAC '77 is Important**

While some viewed FESTAC '77 as a beautiful act of self-determination and development, there were others who did not consider the effects of anti-Blackness on

society, culture, and human beings, who typecast the festival in reductive ways. There are many people in this grouping, Black, African, and other folks who had negative critiques of the festival. How does one determine the correct amount of money to be paid for a festival considered as a homecoming of Black and Africans who experienced chattel slavery and colonialism? How much money was made by the descendants of those people who created and executed chattel slavery and colonialism over centuries? How do we acknowledge the generational trauma of the institution of slavery, and povertization of the Third World to Build the First World? How do you recover from centuries of enslavement and oppression? How do you enter and begin dealing in a global market where you were once considered as a property to be sold, and your country a place to take raw materials from? FESTAC '77 was an answer to these questions. However, Nigerians did not come to this conclusion on their own; it was discussed decades before by Pan-Africanists.

In the process of following FESTAC '77 to write this dissertation, I have come to see FESTAC '77 as a humanitarian festival of development where dance functioned as a vehicle of preservation, and an archive of Black and African culture during a critical moment of history, though that story has not been adequately told. Still, as a dance scholar, I find it exhilarating to learn of such an enormous dance archive facilitating a space of ontological healing. I alone cannot access the full importance of the festival because it is too vast. However, considering the viewpoints of those who attended the festival, which I interviewed for this dissertation, the festival was an awakening, uplifting their lives and the community of African and African Diaspora communities. Those people would go on providing beautiful and profound images of themselves that push against colonial ideation.

It seems that negative critics of the festival capitalize on it the most. The festival was priceless and should continue!

## Chapter 2. Conceptualizing the Body for FESTAC '77



Figure 6. Photo of Lynette Matthew White, Chuck Davis Dancer at FESTAC '77 (1977). Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Lynette Matthew White's private collection.

*“O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”*

— *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008)*

From a Critical Dance Studies perspective, the above quote is about the way the body knows. Though Fanon discusses the negative perceptions projected onto Black people in society (2008), he also remarked on the body's intelligence to assist the individual in society. The bodies at FESTAC '77 held a consciousness of self and being that assisted in maneuvering beyond the trauma of centuries, especially in terms of spiritual dance. The African-rooted dance corpus at FESTAC '77 assisted Black people during a critical moment when Black and African people had undergone the dis-embodiment that accompanies being classified as chattel, colonial assimilation, and acculturation in dehumanizing situations. The African-rooted corpus at FESTAC '77 questioned ideologies of colonialism, anti-Blackness, and imperialism by celebrating their ancestors and their personhood, their beings. The archetypes within precolonial dance question ideas of an enslaved and colonized body and mind. Chapters three, four and five will provide my justification of these statements as these chapters offer nuanced information on the workings of precolonial dance modalities.

The dancers' bodies at The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture might be considered by Dance Studies theorists firstly as Black bodies. In contrast with Dance Studies, a Marxist might consider the bodies at FESTAC '77 as post-colonial and colonial subjects. Scholars of Globalization, on the other hand, might regard FESTAC '77 bodies primarily as bodies from the global south. However, here in this dissertation, the body is considered beyond the tendency to racialize Black and African bodies. The

bodies at FESTAC '77 will be considered complex, bodied beings from around the world with rich cultural roots that require discussions that include Indigenous African ideas of culture, spirituality, worldviews, history, politics, sociology, nature, physiology, and the psyche. My perspective as an embodied researcher of dance relies upon both pre- and postcolonial Indigenous African cosmology, ontology, and epistemology of dance as a decolonial method used to understand the dances at FESTAC '77. In the context of FESTAC '77, cultural bodies are rooted in African corporeal intelligence that considers the body a sacred vessel of the spirit and an instrument that transmits complex expression. This dissertation renders the bodies at FESTAC '77 as bodied beings.<sup>19</sup>

The theoretical framework for understanding the body as one with sacred sovereignty has evolved with ideas from dancers, from ethnographic research in oral histories, and from analyses of dances. Dance at FESTAC '77 was essential in redesigning the future for Blacks and Africans in the way that it preserved African descendent identity. The body itself is the material identity, serving as a fantastic tool assisting humans through their life cycles. Ideas of what makes a bodied being are foundational to many dances. Through the performance of both heritage and contemporary African dance, which took place during the festival, bodied beings presented pre-colonial corporeal archetypes. Performances theorized on socio-political issues and states of being, as they entertained

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<sup>19</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation and our conversation about the dancing body at FESTAC '77, we're pushing against Cartesian concepts of a physical body being different from the brain/mind. But instead, propose that the being is one's soul. In which case, we are bodied beings, with the souls being likened to balls or sparks of light. "The question about body, soul, and spirit has been part of most contemplative traditions over the millennia and has likewise been at the center of philosophical and theological enquiries both inside academia and beyond." <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-45874-001>

and educated audiences; additionally, the dances worked through emotions and questions. Here, I discuss several conceptualizations of the body from a selection of Dance Studies perspectives to help illuminate how the body is considered and can be analyzed.

### **The Inscribed Body in Dance Studies: How Has the Black Body Been Written About?**

Possibly the most recognized and copied Black choreography is “Buked” by Alvin Ailey. Through the sinewy musculature of the Black body he wrote onto the proscenium stage, in abstract and elegant form, what is perhaps the most common discourse of the Black body in America: the Abject Body. A Body that has been “buked and scorned”, as the lyrics go, which accompany this iconic modern American work of fine art. However, the Black body, like Ailey’s masterful work, possesses a power, dignity, and movements of divine personhood that manages to transcend both the lyrics of the song and the ideological pressures that exist for Black people. The field of Dance Studies certainly echoes this sentiment, explicitly and implicitly in the discourses that are brought to the floor. As an African-rooted dancer and researcher for over 25 years I felt inundated by this idea of the abject Black body, a very real hauntology of slavery and colonialism, which lives legally, even to this day, given the fact that the Black person is still written in as only three-fifths of a human being. All things that are legal are not just, and those who see themselves as authorities are often the true thieves. Positive attributes of the Black body, however, can be revealed through the excess appropriation of its attributes, gifts, labor, and even suffering, though those borrowings are scarcely acknowledged. How has the Black body been written about? They are not written about as having sovereignty, heroic, resilient, as a loveable body with pillowy kisses, and soft and compassionate bosoms that

consoled even the children of the slave master. They do not write about the Black body in the way my favorite choreographers have written about the Black human through choreographic strokes: as a person who is tenacious and incredibly cool-headed. Despite stereotypes applied to the Black body, like “Super Predator”, “Savage”, and “Grotesque” by prominent politicians and scholars whose descriptions sound more like the words of bullies than studied people. This brings me to the epistemic body, this is not the body of the “white” person but rather the imaginary body of “The West”. Even the term, the Black Dancing Body, is forced into an abject place because where is the White Dancing Body, the Red Dancing Body, or the Yellow Dancing Body? That would be absurd.

In the field of Dance Studies, a field that might be considered the “other-ed” in academia, Susan Leigh Foster provides the general perspective of The Dancing Body and the way that “body” is created, in the introduction of her book, *Corporealities and The Dancing Body* (1995). She states: “It [technique] also instructs them in the rhetorical relations that bind the body to self and to community” (259). This binding for the Black Dancing Body is scathingly specific. Carrie Noland, in her book, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009), sets out to look for the agency in the Dancing Body to resist the imposition of the subject and the object. This shaping of self and identity takes on additional meaning for a buked Black body. This was a topic I explored through my research of FESTAC ’77.

There is an elaborate choreography that takes place between The Africana Body/African Diaspora Body, The Black Body/Commodified Body, and the Epistemic Body/Western Ideal Body. There is a tug between external acceptance, signifying of pure



self and self-actualization. For the most part, the Black Body is written in the binary to the Epistemic white body, and not in binary to a Yellow Dancing Body or a Red Dancing Body or even The Pre-White Dancing Body. The Black Dancing Body has been given a particular place that neoliberalism, and Marxism, insists cannot be shifted.

Onlookers perceive the body as a structure before it even starts to animate. Personal perceptions created from the personal experiences of the onlooker are projected on the body before it does anything, including dances. Training or passing along of movement materials becomes part of the bodied being. One throughline among dance scholars' thinking was conceptualized by the aforementioned anthropologically trained dance theorist, Susan Foster, who vivified “the study of bodies through a consideration of bodily reality, not as a [sic] natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience” (Foster 2005, xi).

Looking at how training in a particular dance technique creates specific types of bodies equipped with both corporeal and socio-political sculpting of their own belief systems, Foster also discusses how market demands further shape different bodies. She states, “It [technique] also instructs them [the dancers] in the rhetorical relations that bind the body to self and the community” (2005, 259). Foster’s focus is on Western European dance techniques. She conceptualizes the body as being able to take on specific “bodily consciousness(es)” through dance training. This training offers the dancer the ability to theorize through movement. Foster’s use of “ephemeral” signals a body that is moved and moves based on intangible as well as tangible, producing that which is also both tangible and intangible. This was the case at FESTAC ’77, bodies that were assimilated/inscribed

by colonial oppressors and turned into both objects to be bought and sold and subjects of the colonial state on the lowest rung of hegemonic structures within their homelands took on the task of un-inscribing and re-inscribing themselves.

Extending Foster's ideas of bodily inscription, I consider the African-rooted dancing body as a body full of agency able to access divine sovereignty. In many African ethnic groups, dance is passed down through life experiences, not necessarily through classroom training, as Foster discusses. However, her point is even more applicable in African-rooted dance, where dance is part of major rites of passage ceremonies and familiar events that serve as significant milestones for families and their larger communities. In these settings, dance is aestheticized cultural identity as with the traditional dance of Mandjiani, a West African coming-of-age dance or guiyad, the dance done in Haiti during their version of Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), called Fet Gede (Ancestor Part). This point is relevant to this dissertation because of the invitation given to each country to bring their indigenous and cultural dances. The more than fifty African countries each with their prolific ethnic groups and the numerous African Diaspora countries could rely on their cultural dances, to some degree, as a means to celebrate and uplift their pre-colonial cultural identities at FESTAC '77, thus re-inscribing their ontological ideas of personhood and the self.

In the case of FESTAC '77, the dances were both being relied on for carrying the inscription of their cultural identities that had been shifted by colonial rule and forced assimilation, but also a self-imposed inscription directed towards a desired "acceptance" by a larger international community. The aesthetic of dance as an enticing way to capture

the attention of an international audience was also at the crux of organizers in harnessing dance at FESTAC '77. Dances that had been done for familial settings were proscenium-ized for international audiences. As stated by Ngoma Woolbright (p.c. 2023), anytime a dance is removed from its indigenous context and put onto the stage, something is shifted: be it the intention of the dance, the experience of the dancer, etc. Included in the proscenium-ization at FESTAC '77 were elements of individual nation-building and Pan-African world-building.

But the element that this dissertation is most concerned with was the ontological healing element of the dance space created at FESTAC '77 and its effects on the lives and community of the FESTAC '77 dancers. The FESTAC '77 dancers were, in this case, re-inscribed and inscribed. These types of inscriptions cause multi-directional socio-cultural sculpting of dance: from in-to-out and from out-to-in. Also: from one dimension to another. The “bodily consciousness” that Foster refers to in her discussion of bodily inscription was aligned with consciousness movements for liberation. Epistemology and socio-political ideas, which were enlisted toward an aesthetic project that trained the mind, body and spirit of FESTAC '77 dancers to uplift themselves and their communities. These dances were given to the international world. FESTAC '77 dancers reworked colonial inscriptions of the Black dancing body for themselves and their communities.

Foster discusses the body as something that can be sculpted. She does not reference here the freedom that exists inside of a body, which Noland considers as agency (2009). Carrie Noland's book inspired me to consider the sovereign body in the Dance Studies discourse. The body for Noland is trained by exercises and ideas combined, like Foster.

However, Noland conceptualizes the body as such, "The body remains mysterious and ephemeral, a convenient receptacle for their new theoretical positions" (236). Furthermore, as mentioned before, Foster does not delve into African rooted dance and ethnicity.

In the case of dance in Africa which serves as a communicator beyond aesthetics, this idea will, and has generated prolific amounts of information, from scholars like Hazzard-Gordon (1990), Daniel (1995, 2005, 2020, 2025), Gottschild (1997, 2005), Kariamu-Welsh (2000), DeFrantz (2002), DeJesus (2014), George (2020), J. Johnson (2020), Kuwor (2021), I. K. Johnson (2022), and many more. These dance scholars have focused on African-rooted dance as a means of revolution, a way to connect to ancient wisdom and the embodiment of power, the way Black bodies have been stereotyped and type-casted. They have also gone into specific ethnic groups to research specifics within a singular group and theorized about what dance is for Black people. They have discussed the role of God and ancestral divine spirit in dance to shift the material world in African Diaspora context as well as in the African context and have looked at the African aesthetics of dance and how those aesthetics show up in contemporary dance forms like breaking cyphers.

Foster's focus is on Western-European dance techniques, valorizing ballet as the epitome of dance, as I have reviewed a collection of pre-colonial dance cosmologies to understand the way bodies are inscribed by African-rooted dance prior to colonization, from an indigenous thought process that includes the body as part of the whole. I found that the African rooted body is also inscribed (physically and mentally) by dance training, done outside of studio settings, but most importantly, spiritually.

Having taken in what Black dance scholars have revealed about Black dance, examined precolonial cosmologies and considered Foster's pioneer theory of inscription in Dance Studies, my theoretical position combines all these ideas and extends Noland's concept of dance and agency. I theorized that the African-rooted dancing body is a body able to take back sovereignty using multidirectional socio-cultural maneuvers contextually, always finding agency. For my research, the set and coded dances in Africa and the Diaspora will continue to bloom as scholars consider precolonial perspectives in African-rooted dance in order to present a Black dancing body that is not one perceived as buked, never able to be released from neoliberal imaginings of it, is added to the discourses inside of Dance Studies. This statement takes on new meaning in terms of the African-rooted dancing body because it also considers God, venerated spirit, phenomenological dimension shifting, and spirituality shifting – mind, body and soul are considered, which allows agency to be harnessed in a way that also allows perception to be shifted, which ultimately can shift the material world. These theoretical propositions are based on the information that I have danced from precolonial allegorical stories and archetypes of empowerment. Life and living taught through the African-rooted dance keeps the person inside of their own body connected to self, the divine and a healthy community. In this way dance technique is more than an instructing idea. It was, and is, a mechanism of protection in the face of colonialism. This is especially true for spiritual dances; however, this also lives through the social dances of, and related to, Africa.

A concept that is also crucial to FESTAC '77 is that it is a dance-critical festival, because festival dances retell identity. This retelling happened in a multilayered way at

FESTAC '77, where organizers, dancers, and culture bearers brought back dances that were previously restricted under both colonial laws and British-controlled education. These dances were re-embodied and footnoted choreographically in the vast “family reunion” that was FESTAC '77. Critics argued that the re-embodiment was predominantly about imperial nation-building for Nigeria.

However, I posit that multiple things were happening simultaneously. Here, the technique for Black and Africans served as a protection of culture and embodied nostalgia, both of which liberated the Black and African body from the pains of historic enslavement and colonialism. Furthermore, the methodology of the FESTAC '77 to use art and culture to address development and foster advancement in the “developed” world also created a space of reconnection, unpacking experiences with people who shared legacies of anti-Blackness. Just as the bodies were being uninscribed, they were also re-inscribing themselves based on their own design after releasing their assimilated ways. Foster explains how, through choices, such as reiterated daily routines, each technique introduces students to the set of metaphors out of which their own perceived and ideal bodies come to be constructed.

In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (2003), dance historian and theorist Brenda Dixon Gottschild discusses the body as inscribed by race within the world of dance. In her book, Gottschild “...interrogates the Black dancing body through personal experience, critical analysis of visual and print documentation, and through the eyes of the 24 contemporary dance practitioners interviewed for the book” (1). In so doing she is essentially discussing how Black and white bodies were described by

these particular dance practitioners, who are, in fact, racialized bodies that have been categorized or divided according to racialized notions of what is considered normative in the dance world.

Gottschild is concerned with the way those racial markers create perceptions, such as a *normative body* vs. *the "Other" body*, and/or, *auxiliary body*. She re-sculpts the colonial inscriptions of the "Black Dancing Body" and decolonizes the perception of the *human body* that we all possess, writing that we are "Muscle memory constellations of cultural traits...we practically are our brothers. We are the human family" (2003, 299). Writing through her own experience, her own sensing, and her agentive body, she inscribes a self-defined body into world perception. "*The black dancing body* (a fiction based on reality, a fact-based upon illusion) has infiltrated and informed the shapes and changes of the American dancing body." With this statement, Gottschild repositions the Black body from one of being defamed and stereotyped to one that gives shape and dimension to American culture. Gottschild's conceptualization of the body refuses the Western European hegemonic structuring of race altogether, and instead recognizes and emphasizes the humanness of us all. The FESTAC '77 body names itself Black and African and then defines itself in appropriate ways. IFC officials went through extensive surveying of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria with the intent to show a global community what Nigerians considered to be their best dancers and dances. In this way they were exercising their humanity by re-claiming their definitions of self. Furthermore, the body at FESTAC '77 came equipped with an entirely different cosmology from previous propped-up histories; it reconsidered topics of hybridity, and what I call multi-Blackness.

Anthea Kraut considers the law and the body in *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (2016). She is a dance scholar who does rigorous legal analysis that exposes the way the legal system, in terms of copyright law, is not always for women, people designated as Black, or the lower classes. Kraut conceptualizes the body as both gendered and/or racialized; she discusses a body inscribed by law and injustice. She examines cases that molded late nineteenth and early twentieth-century efforts to copyright choreography, which adds an interesting legal backdrop to popular dances and choreography.

Kraut discusses several types of bodies, both explicitly and implicitly, and examines the inherent biases in the legal constructs of ownership, authorship, commodification, and subjecthood. *Choreographing Copyright* offers a critical expansion of the Dance Studies archive along with the ideological implications of understanding these oft-contested ideas through legal and federal regulation histories. Among several types of bodies that emerge from Kraut's work, she emphasizes the "*Rights-bearing subject body*", which is a white male body/Lockean body, a body considered in law to possess the natural right of possession of self and rights (2016, 13). This body owns whiteness, whether male or female, and occasionally, depending on who it is facing in a court of law, this body is allowed a certain number of rights and freedoms, that is, white privilege. The Black and African bodies at FESTAC '77 contested this idea of a Lockean body and claimed their "natural right" to sovereignty.

Dance scholar Jasmine Johnson approaches the body as a complex and layered body. In "Flesh Dance: Black Women from Behind" (2020), Johnson discusses how a body



holds two opposing inscriptions, one imposed and the other embraced from within. She features what she describes as “booty dances.” When I tell people that I specialize in African Diaspora dance, they too often respond, “Oh, can you teach me to shake my booty?” This racist and closed-minded inscription is simply due to the ignorance of colonized minds to understand dance.

Johnson eloquently explains:

“Flesh dance, I argue, activates these attenuated meanings. I use the term both to examine the role of dance in reinscribing “property relations” and to suggest that these relations tell us more about the “collective function” of the Black woman than they tell us about Black women’s interiority. I suggest that Black women’s flesh being ‘marked’ should not be confused with Black women being legible” (Johnson 2020, 71).

The concept of *the marked body* is not a new one; rather it is used in everyday discourse and has been written about by prominent dance scholars such as the celebrated psychologist and scholar Dr. Franz Fanon and, later, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz. They highlight “blackness as a result of enslavement causing an existential and corporeal reality” (Fanon 2001, 11), aka racism - and the existential racialized body. Foster also refers to these inscriptions as a market body, i.e., a body formed by the demands of the market (Foster 1995). This is a commercialized or neo-commodified body branded from the era of chattel enslavement. She explains this idea here, the marking of price. A Black woman’s flesh was unprotected because the institution of enslavement exploited her form to generate wealth; a Black woman only carried gendered potential when her body increased her owner’s stock (158). This idea elucidates just how far enslaved and oppressed people were dehumanized through commodification.

Performance theorist and literature and poetry specialist Carrie Noland borrows from anthropologist Marcel Mauss's style of inscription, "socially acquired techniques of the body to bring biological bodies into being" in her introduction to *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009, 5). Mauss discusses how the body's motility is society's first vehicle to express its values and perpetuate itself; his point is critical to dance as an expression of culture from a specific group.

Dancing is almost always an expression of freedom and consequently, Noland's concept of the "agentive body" privileges the "sensing body" (Noland 2009). In rethinking the field of Dance and Humanities, I am pushing against (not rejecting) ideas of culture as an all-consuming objectifying power; instead, Noland sees culture as a differential rather than oppositional force, allowing her to study a whole range of deviations from what she calls normative behavior while simultaneously construing the normative as equally wide-ranging in its modes of acquisition. The colonial body has been forcibly normalized.

Noland further states:

"I intend to privilege corporeal performance and the sensory experience it affords in the hope of yielding a theory of agency fully implicated in the embodiment, which I take to be that ambiguous phenomenon in which culture both asserts and loses its grip on individual subjects" (2009, 3).

In short, Noland forwards great variation in habitus. Her interdisciplinary lens - art, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, and neuroanatomy - bolsters her point as she argues that kinesthetic experience—the sensory awareness of one's own movement—can encourage experimenting, modification, and sometimes rejection of the routine. This is why, I believe, so many people love to dance. Dance, though, can be very

demanding and inscribing, shaping the body and the mind, as Foster discusses (1995); it also can be very liberating in its ability to sense and shift as Jasmine Johnson discusses (2020). Noland privileges corporeal performance, and the sensory experience it affords, to find a way beyond constructivist theory's inability to produce a convincing account of agency. Noland observes that despite the impact of social conditioning, human beings continue to invent surprising new ways of altering inscribed behavior. The agentive body is, in fact, like my sovereign body, the only true body. There is the body of the gazer, the "subjectifier," the commodifier, and the body that feels itself; this last body has the highest power of sovereignty.

Another inscription of the dancing body is found in dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel's *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (2005). Daniel discusses a body inscribed by generations of cultural and spiritual beliefs, a body inscribed by the forces of nature, Lwas, Orishas, Minkisis, ancestors, and one's highest self.

She states:

"The body is mapped by the divinities themselves, and the specialized tissue of a given part of the body, with its associated internal organs, is understood in terms of its anatomical and resulting physiological function. In Haitian Vodou, for example, a particular body part is associated with one of the Lwas and often with one of the nasyons or [African] nations" (2005, 74).

In this statement, Daniel is referring to the dancing divinities that encompass the ontology of many African Diaspora people while taking the conversation into the physiology of the body, pointing out the body parts and the particular relationships that

certain divinities are known to have with specific body parts. These are ways of knowing and understanding the body that can also be recognized within scientific knowledge and principles. The dancing divinities are the knowledge and wisdom observed and codified through oral tradition. Furthermore, Daniel states, "The dancing body is a method of perceiving and understanding the human condition; it permits knowing another cultural value system, and this is what I have been practicing for the past few decades" (2005, 269). She approaches the body as one imbued with its own intelligence and inscribed by divinity.

Daniel's use of the word 'embodiment' applies to both the embodiment of cultural dance practices and the embodiment of spirit. It is used in the same way that Aisha DeJesus writes about the "copresenced or transcended body" (DeJesus 2014, 503-526). This type of embodiment means more than is understood in dance styles like popular Western European representations of somatic dance. Whereas these dance modalities, like Contact Improv and dances of the Judson Church do focus on embodying self-awareness, movement, and ideas, the African Diaspora dancing body or *the body*, as I use it here, also embodies the same ideas plus divinity and ancestors.

This might account for the similarities between cosmologies and epistemological ontologies in West and Central African ethnic groups. In the pre-colonial scholarship that I surveyed, all contained references to the way the different and distinct copresences/deities/divinities come with extensive stories (as in the Yoruba case with Odu scripture, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3. Here the transcended body that embodies wisdom brings balance and understanding to what Daniel calls the "social body" or

community. In this case, the body is not a singular person but the congregation, all who come together.

### **The Sovereign Body in African-Rooted Cultures**

The most significant question about dancing bodies at FESTAC '77 concerned African national sovereignty. Through colonial violence and dehumanization in the past, sovereignty was the most important part of independent organization. At FESTAC '77, the question of what it looked like to take hold of national sovereignty was combined with concepts of both the individual and collective sovereignty of the Black and African body, self-ownership, and ownership of what one created.

This gets to what I call a “sovereign” or “liberated” body, which, as I stated in the Introduction, is “an unencumbered body at the center of its reality.” This point is critical; it names or identifies FESTAC bodies as agentic, ontologically sovereign, with multicultural epistemologies, both pre- and post-colonial (Daniel 2000; Gottschild 2003; Johnson 2020; Kraut 2016; Noland 2009). Many of the conceptualizations that are referenced here provide a decolonial approach, either by detailing those societal structures and actions to reveal their imposition of Western European colonization or by offering non-Western European conceptualizations of the body, thus broadening the discussion of the body in Dance Studies. My conceptions of the inscribed body push against the idea of a Black dancing body and present a multi-Black dancing body and a body that draws from several of the named theorists, namely from Noland and her agentic body.

The dancers who came to FESTAC '77 knew they would be a part of the global Black and African body; they were aware of how the Black dancing body was usually typecast in a hegemonic system, but they wanted to signify to a global audience exactly how they wanted to represent their people. They used traditional dance to inscribe a healing methodology for change and, as my next chapters detail, this was pre-colonial body intelligence. I posit that 1) through the body participating in ancestral dances, it learns (is inscribed) and takes on knowledge and 2) through the zones of the body where Spirit resides...the body holds principles.

At FESTAC '77, the thought that spirit dance could bring healing was not a foreign idea. Through the body being occupied by another spirit, ritual possession/trance/copresence/transcendence, the body becomes its divine self, a divine body that is able to strengthen a person or another transcended body, providing valuable help to the community. This divine body is grounded in the collective consciousness of African spiritual or ritual dance, a complex body that perceives and responds with agility and virtuosity.

The African-rooted body validates Vodoun and Ifa philosophies that speak of a sacred body, and ideas of the “being” as one that can transcend. The psyche is part of the being and has levels. These philosophies are animated in the traditions of the Djeli where consciousness itself is personified and it has a partner. The African-rooted body embodies power and agency and materializes its own reality. These dancing philosophies are sensed and ignite memory. To further elaborate on this topic, I apply a term used by Vévé Clark in her article, “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness” in *Theater*

Survey (2009). Though this point speaks to literature from the Negritude movement, it applies to dance:

*“Diaspora literacy<sup>20</sup> defines the reader's ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed indigenous perspective. The field is multicultural and multilingual, encompassing writing in European and ethnic languages. In the current textual environment, diaspora literacy suggests that names such as *Popol Vuh*, Legba, Belain d'Esnambuc, Nanny, José Martí, Bigger Thomas, and Marie [Vieux-] Chauvet represent mnemonic devices whose recall releases a learned tradition. This type of literacy is more than a purely intellectual exercise. It is a skill for both narrator and reader which demands a knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political development generated by lived and textual experience. Throughout the twentieth century, diaspora literacy has implied an ease and intimacy with more than one language, with interdisciplinary relations among history, ethnology, and the folklore of regional expression. Only recently has literary theory applied to Afro-Caribbean texts become indispensable” (50(1), 9-18).*

At FESTAC '77, African and Black people danced together in proximity to each other. Their dances of cultural heritage gave commentary on the condition of the world and the place performers had in it; dances of intangible treasures reminded national performers who they were as much as they also reached into the future to shape a better world. *One's body* holds complex meaning -- signifying, reflecting, and embodying ideas and knowledge. Information on one's body grounds the conversation in humanity, people's lives, and their stories.

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<sup>20</sup> This term was developed originally from Dr. Veve Clark's analysis of *Hérémakhonon* developed as a paper during the 1984 African Literature Association Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. The definition here has been revised and expanded by Clark. I expand upon it again to be used for dance. See "Developing Diaspora Literacy: Allusion in Maryse Condé's *Hérémakhonon*," in *Out of the Kumbia: Womanist Perspectives on Caribbean Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989), 315–31.

### **Chapter 3 - BRAZIL, Sacred Mother Principle in FESTAC Opening Ceremony**

Although there were hundreds of dances at FESTAC '77, and despite that fact, they were scantily discussed in much of the literature about the festival. However, understanding the dances adds a profound dimension to understanding the festival's significance, especially considering how dance holds identity and worldview. The dances are a reflection of the people, and the people archive and elaborate upon the dances. As dance reflected the people and their history in conversation with the discourses of self-determination and development, these concepts were sensed.

In this chapter, I discuss the Bahiana at the Olympic style opening of FESTAC '77 by applying a close reading of the dancing Bahiana body in space and time. The dance of the two Bahianas that were available on the video recording provided by the photographer assigned by UNESCO, as well as on the footage available at CBAAC, showed only a moment of the two women from Bahia dancing their traditional Orixá dance around the stadium with the other attendees in a counterclockwise circle.

The Bahiana immediately caught my eye as a symbol of the Diaspora at FESTAC '77, equipped with a complex and long-lived cosmology distinct from Africa but very related. The necklaces around her neck signify her connection to specific Orixá, male and female, and signals to me that she is from a tradition where one person may embody a male or female energy, thus uniquely representing women as ungendered from a Western perspective. These women are not simply the jovial nanny figures of the colonial era but women who embody a range of identities of power both male and female, including forces of nature. One might rather consider them multi-gendered in this way, where ideas of what



is feminine and what is masculine takes on new meaning. I will discuss this point at length later in this chapter.

The second aspect of the Baianas at FESTAC '77 was seeing the Bahiana dancing around the stadium of the opening ceremony in a counterclockwise circle. Especially knowing the significance of the circle as a symbol of generating energy in African-rooted dance. In the realm of African Diaspora dance dancing in a counterclockwise circle holds great significance. It is a sacred time in space that cuts across dimensions, with its own set of understandings. It is a space that allows in ancestors and divine spirit. I have joined circles of Cuban Orisha initiates and felt the force of something outside of myself and fell into tears over the beauty held within the circle, over sensing loving spirit. Below, Dr. Yvonne Daniel discusses the importance of circles in her book *Dancing Wisdom* regarding three religions, one of which is the religion of the Bahiana, Candomblé.

“In Bahia, there is a revered spot at the centermost point of a *terreiro*<sup>21</sup> where initiates circle while dancing. Dancing takes place in a counterclockwise circle with the circling performers encircled by family and community guests of visitors. The ritual community is a site of energetic spirit or life force, called *espri* (or *nam*, “soul) in Haiti, *ache* in Cuba, or *axe* in Bahia” (81).

In many ways, this description is very reminiscent of the events of FESTAC's opening ceremony with onlookers and extended family members of the Pan-African world in the bleachers as well as on the floor outside of the circle. Daniel goes on to discuss the way the circle is a space where the visible and the non-visible worlds intersect. I see it as

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<sup>21</sup> Terreiro – yard, shrine, spiritual space.

a non-hegemonic structure -- a three-dimensional vortex cutting through planes of existence where practitioners, divinity and ancestors interact. The circle maps the space of the bodied-being in the cosmos, which is sovereign and functions outside of the realm of the simply visual and concrete. This mapping speaks to the power of the Bahiana dancing for the Orixá. She is dancing in a realm between the living and the un-living, simultaneously as a human and as a divine being. When I attended durbars in Ghana this was also the configuration; however, on a much smaller scale. Dr. Imani K. Johnson discusses the importance of the circle, or what she describes as “cyphering”, in her book *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: The Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop* (2020). Though her focus is on hip hop, she gives an extensive definition of the circle in Africanist Aesthetics concerning breaking cyphers dance, which helps to explain the significance of the Bahiana dancing in a circle with the other FESTAC participants.

“The knowledge, wisdom, and understanding evident in breaking cyphers [circles] are embodied and kinesthetic, taught through repetition of practice, and full of the possibility of the incalculable, expressed in competitive and improvisational exchanges to music.” (21).

Referring to this “unnamed” force as dark matter, this is a physics concept describing non-luminous matter, believed to comprise the majority of the universe. Unlike a black hole, where light cannot escape, dark matter *is* matter with no visible light, though luminous matter interacts with it. Dark matter is “seen” and understood by way of its gravitational influence on surrounding visible matter. Thought to be five times more prominent than visible matter and over six times its density, dark matter plays a greater role in the universe’s formation than visible matter because its abundance has a

gravitational field powerful enough to hold together galaxies and connect distant ones.<sup>22</sup>

“Dark matter” elaborates on the substantive presence of things unseen.

“For my interests, dark matter is the very presence of possibility in the universe. As a metaphor, it also speaks to the unseen and unknown within Western approaches to knowledge production (evident in my earlier discussion of aural kinesthetics). By using the language of the hard sciences to speak to embodied experiences, the dark matter metaphor troubles a hierarchy of knowledge that devalues and delegitimizes embodied knowledge” (27, 28).

For the participants at FESTAC '77, the opening ceremony was teaching through enactment the gathering of the Pan-African world and fathoming the possibilities for a new way of thinking and being. The Bahiana was a part of that group manifesting. Dancing in a counterclockwise circle is what is done in the spiritual tradition of the Bahiana as in many African diaspora traditions. This embodied kinesthetic way of moving in ceremonial form can be traced to many precolonial traditions as with the Dogon whose dances replicate the pattern of planetary choreography. Kariamuwelsh discusses how dance in Africa is not necessarily about the steps but about what it provokes or invokes. Furthermore, here in Drewals' Chapter 5 - The Dance: Texturing Time and Space, this is elaborated more:

“But if voicing words evokes or, more accurately, invokes vital force, bringing it into actual existence, then what are the implications for dance, or what Suzanne Langer (1953:175,187) calls the illusion of “virtual power”? Dance makes vital force virtual power and is no less instrumental than the spoken word; it brings dynamic qualities into actual existence. Thus Gelede also has the effect, the power of Ase” (105).

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<sup>22</sup> For me, Dark Matter is the *nam*, ache, and axe that Daniel references in the circle of Candomblé. In the first part of Johnson's definition, she discusses the way the circle is a place of learning how to be as well as a place symbolizing possibility.

This is true for the Bahiana at FESTAC '77. She is a living breathing blessing dancing the African philosophies of the Orixá that had been further evolved in Brazil. She is an archive of her culture. A hero to her people. An image of humanity. When considering this idea the colonial conceptualization of chattel in Western European systems of colonialization is shifted to one that centers the essence of being. This is what the Dancing Bahiana at FESTAC '77 represents. She is texturing time and space with recovery, healing a return to revitalize herself and her community.

This is how I read the Bahiana at the opening ceremony of FESTAC '77. To see the notion of limitless possibilities, or in the case of the Bahian in Nigeria, their beautiful and floating dance could be read as a child of Africa overcoming insurmountable obstacles to return home to do what they did ancestrally in Africa and carried to the New World, praying in a circle to return home.

I also chose to read the body of the Bahiana as a symbol rather than attempt to discuss her dance movements. Rather, I will delve into the repertoire of Orixá dances commonly embodied by the Bahiana. The Bahianas processing the FESTAC track was like evidence of the power of our ancestors. Additionally, I frame the Bahiana through the concept of Aje, feminine power, and femininity which has a broader scope. Initially, this section was entitled Non-Western and Imperialist perspectives of gender. However, inspired by the readings and learning about the work of Black Women toward liberation for all in the US, and wanting to center the work of Black Women, I want to approach this with nuance to display the attention to detail needed to understand gender outside of Imperialist framings. I also wanted to celebrate the contributions of Black Women in the

discourse of Feminism. What I have come to realize is that the assessment of gender must take into consideration culture and historical legacy. In terms of FESTAC '77, this analysis of African notions of femininity that are not exclusively based on Western gender dynamic but instead takes into account endogenous views on gender, (Drewal and Drewal 1990; Hill Collins [1990]2000, 2023; Omolade in Sheftall 1995; Oyewumi 1997; Mason 2016). In my analysis of the Bahiana at FESTAC '77, though I refer to her as Sacred Mother, my definition is from a broader perspective.

John Mason uses symbols and images in his book, *In Praise of Our Mothers* (2016), to reveal the deeper meaning of mother in the African context pushing against colonial concepts of femininity. Mason himself is an initiate of the tradition which gives him an emic view. He discusses the female Orisha and what was most important to them and what their occupation was. For instance, Odu, is a female Orisha with large-set eyes. The word, Odu, means God and is in all the Yoruba words that describe God. I learned that during the time of post-colonization in Nigeria before FESTAC, the term Odu was replaced with Olu which is a male Christian idea of God (p.c. Oni 2023). Mason describes the different Odus as portals, each signified by an Orisha which makes Odu the dark womb of possibilities. In a class I took with Mason, he lectured on the way female power and its disempowerment is akin to “misogyny against the planet”. He discusses how Mother-ness is the primary agent female Orisha, though the idea of mother is much broader and is a principle rather than a distinct form that can be part of the makeup of man or woman.

In his book, he discusses how African women who were entrepreneurial, craftswomen, warrior trainers, etc. were venerated into Orisha. All Orishas are principles.

Yemo, another female Orisha created Ifa, the religion itself. Women who did not give birth to children, but who care for children, are considered mothers - caring for the sickest children and the ones left behind. These are Gods. Furthermore, women invented the Egungun (masquerade costumes). The Egungun or ancestral spirits, Drewal and Drewal discuss the work of Egungun masquerades by the Gelede women of Yoruba land in their book *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (1990). They discuss how Egungun dances are used to teach the community and to soothe society using feminine energy.

Mason talks about the connections of many systems or cosmologies that exist inside of Ifa/Fa, and other African religious practices, stating that “no one system has all the answers.” In this way, everything is connected and spirit is in flux. He also discussed the liminality of both gender and age. Those who become Orisha are those who shifted the paradigm. The Orisha’s lives reflect both the ecological interaction of the land and also the state of the people in their development. But he also states that “Orisha is a reflection of society not the exemplary, necessarily.” Oriki (songs to the Orisha) marks a development in the journey of the Orisha.

Mason discussed in his class that a type of gender transference took place in Yoruba traditions during colonization. He talks about the collective re-emergence of knowledge and political loops. For instance, Ayekoto: “The world denies truth.” He discussed how with colonization ideas of the woman that once saw her as divine and essential were denied. Egungun was celebrated and consulted by women to champion women’s causes.

To forward this point I enlist *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) by Oyeronke Oyěwù mí. In this book, the author's major point is that the "cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world." She writes that "in cross-cultural gender studies, theorists impose Western categories on non-Western cultures and then project such categories as natural" (11). Furthermore, she states that the gender organization that one sees among the Yorùbá people today is the result of the imposition of a "gender-saturated colonial epistemology" (2). Binary perspectives of gender are enlisted to organize hegemonic systems of society that go against the social systems of the people. Oftentimes colonizers' push to assimilate will bring in countering systems of organization. For instance, if the Yorùbá system of hierarchy is based on eldership and age, it is replaced by colonial powers or disturbed with the hierarchical system of gender as binary specifically. Not gender as dual and equivalent. This type of colonial intrusion distorts pre-colonial systems of community organization and development and place men at the top of society. This gender-saturated perspective runs the risk of misreading how gender works in non-Western Imperialist systems of gender and destabilizing African communities.

She sees gender as a colonial tool constructed against African society. Oyěwù mí contextualizes what the West does to Africa, in terms of imposing their ideas of gender on cultures other than their own, both in colonialization as well as in the research and theorization of Africa. She goes about proving this point by considering Yoruba indigenous

ways in terms of gender and language and the mechanisms of colonization of the Yoruba people. Her point is important because it considers the inside or what she names as the “endogenous views on gender” among the Yoruba people. This insider cultural perspective reveals that there is, in fact, no word for “woman” in Yoruba culture; thus, binary to a man who is hegemonically ranked below. Furthermore, she states that their system of culture is not based on the binary but rather rank is determined by seniority of age. This seniority-based organization is dynamic, fluid, and in some ways more egalitarian in that all members of the lineage have the opportunity to be senior or junior depending on the situation. The seniority-based categories are relational and do not draw attention to the body. This is very much unlike the gender or racial hierarchies, which are rigid, static, and exclusive in that they are permanently promoting one category over the other (71). A final important point by Oyěwùmí that is reflected in the next section of the book is that of “the view of female power” in African society. There is a type of relationship with the mother, “matripotency”, that projects the way African cultural systems revere mothers. The power of women is revealed and seen as gender equivalent to men’s power. This is a different understanding of gender than that of dominant Western European gender systems’ relational approach that is reflected in the work of many authors and offers an alternative to Western European Imperialist notions of gender (Oyěwùmí 1997).

First, explaining my analysis process and giving a brief historical framing is appropriate. My precolonial analysis of dances incorporates elements of a close reading of movement, with a holistic consideration of rhythm, song, costumes, relevant socio-political commentary, and other contextual factors. This evaluation does not concern itself with



video shots and angles, as much of the footage was shot from a single forward-facing camera. To explain the Yoruba dominance within my selected dances, I offer a brief historical timeline for the arrival of Africans to the Americas in general for readers to understand the level of indigenous/precolonial thought that exists within dances.

The precolonial significations of identity from Yoruba people and Dahomean people inform my reading of the Bahiana body; therefore, it is Sacred Feminine from the precolonial African perspective. The institutions of chattel slavery and colonialism were designed to erase the cosmologies or “ways” of the African people; however, the body maintained the deep knowledge of their traditions. So, the charge of Africans trafficked in the Americas came saturated with a deep understanding of body sacredness and sovereignty. Historical archival research assists in understanding the ethnic backgrounds of trafficked Africans. Yvonne Daniel's interpretations of African and Africanist historians' research (Butler 1998; Sweet 2003; Thornton 1998[1992]; Thornton and Heywood 2007), applied to dance, points to the earliest and largest dispersal over five centuries of Africans in the Americas who were Central Africans. West Africans, mainly from the Dahomey Empire, comprise the group that we have categorized for simplicity's sake, as West African #1, also referred to as WA1. This group was followed by the predominance of Yorubaland Africans (West African #2, also referred to as WA2), who populated multiple places in the African Diaspora, including Cuba and Brazil. The late arrival of WA2 explains the pervasiveness of Yoruba traditions in the Americas today. Kongo or Central African and Dahomean traditions are now among the oldest

Diaspora heritages. Their songs and dances are often interspersed with colonial languages, except in Haiti, which was isolated more than any other site.

On the other hand, Yoruba traditions are the youngest Diaspora heritages that mushroomed from relatively few hundreds and thousands of Africans during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to massive numbers of enslaved humans in the nineteenth century. Their traditions have had more possibilities for endurance due to this rise in the enslaved population, resulting in the longevity of enslavement and sugar production in Cuba for example, and the extended colonization and enslavement on Brazilian plantations. In Diaspora terminology, the Congo, Dahomey/Rada/Jeje/Arara, and Yoruba traditions—the three descendants from distinct African empires—maintained traditions that still exist in the orature (dance and oral history) to this day:

“...three phases of African emphases (Central African, West African #1, and West African #2) did not always occur simultaneously on each island or mainland territory of the Americas; distinct spiritual orientations permeated American locales in the same general sequence and ultimately created and secured African-centered religious structures. This pattern yielded combinations and interrelationships, especially between Native/First American belief systems and African groups; the pattern was different only in Cuba, where each African religious orientation remained relatively separated, even until today” (Daniel in Daniel and Eloi, in press, 9).

Distinct ethnic groups' dance traditions did not experience mixing to the extent often assumed in discussing identity in Caribbean culture. The practice of Candomblé in Brazil would allow enough distinction to facilitate reading dances of particular ethnic groups. This phenomenon is also true for Lucumi in Cuba, which I discuss in the following chapter. Dance scholar Joanna Dee Das discusses Dahomeyan dance at World Fairs in the late 1800's (2020). She reads colonialist archival data to extract characteristics of

Dahomeyan people. As someone who has traveled to Dahomey to conduct the research of the dances, I find her examples to cause nostalgia of my fieldwork and the things I learned about Dahomeyan culture. In another instance, Christopher Robert Reed asserts that the performers were Fon [Jeje] people, subjects of Behanzin, King of Abomey (2000, 144). They may have been from other ethnic groups; however, by the 1890's Dahomey was a polyglot kingdom that included Yorubans from what is now Nigeria and Afro-Brazilians who had returned from enslavement in the Americas (Bay 2008, 3-5).

This understanding of Black and African people speaks of a person with a whole historical past, a complex and diverse present. Das goes on to speak about ideas of femininity in Dahomey:

“‘Amazons’ or female soldiers in King Behanzin’s army, captured the American imagination more than any other aspect of Dahomean culture. Myths multiplied about these women warriors, known in Dahomey as *ahosi*, ‘king’s wives,’ or *mino*, ‘our mothers’” (Das 1993, 245).

Their existence contradicted Victorian gender ideals of female passivity and domesticity, and visitors to the fair clamored to see Amazons in battle mode, naked to the waist and waving weapons (Das 62). The Dahomey Village also reflects a diasporic conundrum articulated by Paula Ebron:

“Not only colonial powers but also people of African descent have conflated the lived realities of people in Africa with the performance of Africa, eager to ‘sustain their own oppositional version to the ill effects of Western culture’” (2003, 3).

Performance “is thought to provide a sense of hope and possibility for the powerless to speak back, indeed, to act out, in response to the West” (5). Ebron criticizes two of the characteristics dance scholars have used to define Africanist aesthetics—

namely, polyrhythm and “community feeling”—for “constrain[ing] the range of possibilities” of what Africa can be (33-34). “Pinning hopes of resistance on performance threatens to reconfirm Euro-American regimes of representation that continuously fail to imagine African people as full, complex subjects” (Das 57).

Das’s analysis combines ocular with (re) interpretation and informed speculation of dance as a Dunham Institute member to give a historical analysis that speaks of the complexity, scope, and dimension of Dahomeyan dancers. This reaffirms my fieldwork which provided me with data that Dahomeyan dance, like many dances from different ethnic groups, are multiple and have dimension and contrast. Das’s analysis includes her knowledge that liberates the Dahomeyan body from one that is singular and monolithic.

In my precolonial analysis I add dimension to Das’s analysis by adding a spiritual and cosmological rendering of Dahomeyan dance as part of Orixa dance of the Bahiana. Conceptualization of the body from Dahomeyan and Yoruba world views is specific and unique.

### **Notes from the Field – Dahomey/Benin**

During my fieldwork in Benin in 2017, I went to the Conservatory of Beninoire Music and Dance in Cotonou and met with the director, Albert Bienvenou Akoha, a tenured professor of linguistics at the University of Abomey - Calavi in Dahomey, present-day Benin. The cultural heritage of Benin remains rich with drum and dance and an abundant destination for research of African Diaspora dance. Akoha is the President of the Academy of Ceremonial and Royal Dances of Abomey and author of several publications on the Fon

Language and culture. He is also the Director of the Centre for Research and Documentation on the Songs and Dances of Benin which carries various research works on Fon, Dendi, Ditammari, Aja, Gen, Yoruba Baatomnn languages and cultures. I took Dahomey dance and song classes with his troupe and learned about the Ado dance group. The genre called “Ado” and “Zandle” is part of the dances of the Royal Court of Abomey created by King Agadja (1711 – 1740), the 23<sup>rd</sup> son of King Glele. His mother, Nanye Kpodjito Henoudo, a follower of the voodoun Hebioso, (Sango) is the daughter of Godjo, a descendent of Houegbadja and native to Sahe. I was excited to learn of this connection of Sango to Dahomey when I was doing fieldwork in Benin. This links Dahomey cosmology to Yoruba cosmology. King Agadja was appointed and consecrated by his father the King to be the custodian of the history and traditions of Danxome. He befriended King Behanzin, his elder brother, who enrolled him into the College of Leaders to ensure a strict observance of the Danxome tradition.

Though he later was employed by colonial oppressors in Benin and appointed by them as King, this recount of his life gives the Bahiana and her connection to the Jeje traditions in Candombe in Brazil a precolonial perspective of what she might be returning to as she circled the opening ceremony at FESTAC '77. Ado dance and drum has a long history in Benin. “Ado” is distinguished by its allusive songs made of short texts, but full of history, culture, hidden meanings, pre-suppositions and even unsaid things. It gives emphasis to the beauty of oral poetry. The songs of “Ado” also contain explicit references and allusions to the context, life and the use of the power. This information about the

kingdom of Dahomey further elucidates the histories of the Bahianas who are connected to the Jeje aspects of Candomblé as they are associated with Dahomey (Akoha 2014).



Figure 7. Photo by Marilyn Nance Image of FESTAC '77 opening ceremony the Brazilian contingent, 1977 in, *Last Days in Lagos*. Onabanjo. CARA/Fourthwall Books. (2020, 18).

The Bahianas of Brazil stand out in the opening ceremony of FESTAC '77. They were represented in the UNESCO footage and were photographed by Marilyn Nance in her book *Last Days in Lagos* (2020). These powerful, often mature Africana women practice their African heritage in Brazil. I first saw the representation of a Bahiana in Oakland in

Carlos Aceituno's, Brazilian dance group Fogo Na Ropa. There was a gorgeous and large dark-skinned woman dancing in a petticoat and Caribbean whites with a headwrap. Her movements were like a floating butterfly, while her hand gestures indicated that she was adjusting the cosmos and nature itself. I thought she looked like the mother of mothers. As a young dancer, I had never before seen this body and aesthetic, portraying power and softness in a large, dancing Black woman in the dance world. At the time, I thought the word "Bahiana" must have meant something like queen mother.

The term "Bahiana" means "woman from Bahia." Bahia is the fourth largest Brazilian State. It is the epicenter of Afro-Brazilian culture and the birthplace of the popular Brazilian dance, Samba, and the martial art form called Capoeira, from Africa which made its way to Brazil. It is also the home of the African-rooted spiritual dances of Candomblé. Bahia is one of Brazil's capital cities and known as an area of Brazil known to be occupied predominantly by Black people. Brazil has the largest population of Black people outside of Africa. During the enslavement period, Bahianas sold food to buy back their enslaved loved ones. They sold traditional dishes from Africa, which evolved into dishes now considered quintessentially Brazilian. Many of these dishes are the same foods that are served to the deities of Candomblé, Brazil's largest African-based religion (Amara Tabor Smith, dancer, Stanford professor, p.c. 2023).

Today, the tourism industry commodifies the image of the Bahiana as the charming Black or Brown woman who sits in front of colorful buildings in colorful costumes selling food, or one might see them dancing at Disneyland. Today, professional dancers dressed like Bahianas bring the "It's a Small World" ride at Disneyland to life. Some consider

Bahianas as marketplace women, while others equate them with Candomblé. There are also African Diaspora artists/culture workers who present heartfelt contemporizations of Brazilian dance rooted in Candomblé Orixá dances, using the image of the Bahiana. The Bahiana carries an ideology of the different faces of mother. She is an archetype full of meaning in the world of dance. Candomblé is an African spiritual practice that incorporates and preserves African traditions and is practiced in daily life. Participants of this tradition practice Orixás (like saints and/or deities) worship. Initiates dress in all white clothing. Impressions and representations of initiates are visible in the dance world, in Carnivals and stage productions. Orixás each have their own set of regalia, with specific colors, accouterment that represent the vibration of the Orixá, and most importantly, their dances. Their dances are like signatures that allow the congregation of Candomblé participants to recognize when they arrive at a ceremony, embodying an initiate. Participants of Candomblé embody the Orixás, which usually occurs within a ceremonial process and is displayed through their dancing bodies. Specific and coded gross motor movements and gestures (like cleansing one's self, clearing the way, crossing oneself or another form of protection) take place within the dancing Bahiana body. Such movements are interpreted as corporeal statements related to the ocean, wind, river, strength, love, power, etc. The fine motor movement tends to have a pulsing sternum (the area at the heart chakra), a supple undulating back that dances regeneration, rolling shoulders, and/or rapidly shifting/vibrating hips.

Often these movements are in a polyrhythmic orchestra of movement that signifies specific Orixás like Yemoja the mother or Oya the warrior woman that is represented by



the wind. Bahianas also embody male Orixás like Ogou and Shango, the blacksmith and regal warriors. The practice of embodying power through dance is like corporeal affirmations that strengthen the will and spirit of the participants. However, a Bahiana is also the symbol of the prayerful mother in Africa and the African Diaspora, where her prayer includes dance-drum and song. The dances in the Candomblé tradition are performed in praise of the Orixás, the divine forces of nature that are personified by initiates and adepts (spiritually gifted people). Orixás represent the religion and the culture of the Brazilian people from Salvador da Bahia (another name for Bahia), from the West African lineages of Yoruba, with connections to Ile Ife in Nigeria, Dahomey (Benin) and the Congo.

An important point on dances of the Bahiana as an African-rooted dance is addressed by Barbara Omolade. In chapter 5 of the anthology, *Words of Fire* (1995) edited by Guy-Sheftall, we see a step towards understanding the root of the identity perceptions of Black women in America by looking at the first encounters of white colonists toward women in Africa. Here, an African woman's voice is foregrounded to decode the body politics of Black women. Omolade writes in the essay, "Hearts of Darkness" about "a black feminist rendering of the complex sexual history of the United States" (Omolade 361). "From the beginning, the founding fathers assumed the patriarchal right to regulate and define the sexual behavior of their servants and slaves according to a fusion of Protestantism, English Common Law, and personal whim" (Omolade 354). She explains that in reference to "the crotch dance" "The African sexuality confronted by European men was an integral part of sensuality that permeated music, dance, and religion....However

tactile, pleasurable, and comfortable these daily creative art forms, they were not necessarily indicative of sexual promiscuity.” Not giving a one-sided idea of sexism in favor of Africa she goes on to say, “African cultures taught men and women to use their bodies in fluid, rhythmic ways, within a sexual code of behavior that frequently supported murdering women who committed adultery and often practiced female clitoridectomy” (Guy-Sheftall 1995, 362). This statement simultaneously brings attention to the need to read different systems of culture from their own cosmologies while commenting on a form of sexism that exists in Africa.

Candomblé is significant to those who practice the religion as much as it is significant for those who do not because of the history that is associated with Candomblé, especially through the cultural practices like dancing (Tania Santiago, Brazilian master dancer from Bahia, p.c. 2023). When the Bahiana initiates of Candomblé embody the Orixás, they take on the attributes and are physically embodied principles or philosophies in motion. Those philosophies have been put into songs that recount the history of significant figures from Bahia. The Bahiana is traceable.

Orixá dances, in context, take place in ritual settings but are also performed on the concert proscenium stages in expressions of art, and in carnival settings as expressions of tourism, though lines are drawn when performers are initiates. The Bahiana wears colorful necklaces that represent the different Orixás are part of her spiritual identity. Initiates take on Orixás who have characteristics that bring balance to their own personality. My experience with Bahianas and Orixás is primarily through dance produced for the stage as an artform, though I am familiar with the ways Orixás dance within Brazilian ceremonial

contexts. Their performances are similar to Orisha dance in Cuba and all types of dance forms that embody forces of nature or venerated spirits.

In my collaboration on The Second Volume of *The Cambridge History of the African Diaspora* in the chapter on “African-Centered Religions Contesting Colonization, Enslavement and Coloniality,” with Yvonne Daniel (2025, in press), we pointed to the significance of spiritual practices in tracking the historical and cultural context of diasporic people. Bahiana Candomblé culture can be traced to the influx of Yoruba/Orisha and Dahomey/Jeje/Vodoun religions and their spiritually based ways of life. However, simplistic definitions rarely elucidate all those religious understandings symbolizes through the Bahiana dancing body. Bahianas are occasionally referred to as “Nagô” or “Black women”. For example:

“In 1938, a decade before Pierre Verger's arrival [to Brazil], another important character in this scenario arrived in Salvador: Ruth Landes. This is how the anthropologist introduces us to the Bahiana, ‘Negro women were everywhere, in colorful skirts and turbans and white blouses reflecting the sun. Usually, they were older women, powerful in appearance and self-confident, and keenly interested in the work at hand’ (Landes 1996[1947] in Cruz 2016, 17).

This gendered and colonial view where a Black woman is defined by work created the rhetoric of how we continue to think of these women today. They become the pictures on tourist brochures, mammy-type characters, a notion discussed by Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987). However, there is another interpretation. Landes reads the Bahiana as a Brazilian worker; however, when I look at the Bahiana from a precolonial perspective, I see a community “Othermother” as discussed in Patricia Hill-Collins’s book *Black Feminist Thought* (Hill-Collins 1990) and

a living manifestation of Aje (Woman God) energy (Washington 2014). This bodied-being, the Bahiana/Black woman, is a transformer who adapts to the context and situation, and who as quoted in Collins, has the characteristic or frequency of “an ethic of socially responsible individualism (189).” The ungendered point of this statement, which is of the utmost importance, is the way the Bahiana ideological dance is a frequency of social responsibility.

For example, in the YouTube clip filmed by Michael Pluznick, percussionist, entitled "Yemaja Drum and Dance Class in Bahia Brazil, Choreography to the Orisha (Orixá) Yemaja in Bahia, Brazil" (Yemaja Drum and Dance class in Bahia Brazil), we are given brief instruction on movement on one of the dances in the repertoire of the Bahiana – Yemaja. The Bahiana symbolically in the African Diaspora canon is always Yemaja, always the mother; however, this mother has dimensions of fierceness just as she has dimensions of sweetness. The class was taught by Maestro Bira, who, in this video, describes Yemaja as a Black woman from enslavement time who would be the one who breastfeeds even the master's child; she breastfeeds all the children. The archetype of Yemaja as mother to all is a quintessential portrayal of the Bahiana when considering her historic connection to slavery. She does not just represent the practitioner/dancer but a divine being/idea/philosophy, which is further forwarded through the dance. She is the cosmic mother whose amniotic fluid birthed all humans, with the cosmos under her skirt.

Yemoja is a force of nature known in Yoruba-based Afro-Atlantic religious cultures for her ability to dominate natural phenomena, especially aquatic zones of communication, trade, and transportation such as oceans, rivers, and lagoons. She is also associated with

women, motherhood, family, and the arts. One translation of her name in Yoruba is “mother of fish,” metaphorically capturing her essence as the mother of all living things. In transnational contexts, she is also known by multiple names: for example, Yemayá in Cuba and Yemanjá, Iemanjá, and Janaína in Brazil. She is also associated with other water deities, such as Olókùn in Nigeria and Mami Wata across West and Central Africa. Scholars have explored her close relationship with the river deity, Oshun (Cruz 2016). O Mio Yemoja! When we/I see Yemoja steps being executed in the opening ceremony in the counterclockwise circle at FESTAC’77, it is as if the force that was essential in getting her children back home across the Atlantic — dancing like an embodiment of Harriet Tubman.

The Bahiana who moves with the forces of nature, is a shape shifter who adapts to her environment and cares for others. She embodies both women and men. She is liminal and fluid in gender and power dynamics - in her identity and power personified. In her dance are all her children who had been stolen away into slavery and now at FESTAC ’77, they were home again, with new dances to tell. At FESTAC ’77 she symbolized re-creation in many ways. If we talk about Mother Africa, she, Yemoja, is the Orisha that would embody those words, as she is an entire archetype of philosophies that direct Orisha communities. Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola discuss this dancing archetype in, *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* (2013).

They write:

“In highlighting the fluid nature of the figure of Yemoja, we emphasize the importance of Orisa religions in creating a complicated public discourse with important ramifications for understanding especially Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diaspora religions on a global scale. Yemoja traditions negotiate community identity in bold ways that emphasize the shifting nature of belief and cultural practice in our world today” (Otero and Falola, xxvi).

The Bahiana dance movements for Yemoja are first in the upright philosophy of the tradition. This is not to romanticize Candomblé because some use it to extort or control; however, philosophically the Bahiana dancing Yemoja is about feminine power. The body is carried by subtle swelling power and healing grace, as she is the sea, salt water. Her hand gestures to her head speak to Yoruba cosmology, where the head or *Ori* is the seat of the Orixá. Some gestures stylize touching the head front and back; such gestures clear the way energetically, and/or lift others up.

One such gesture danced by the Bahiana in her repertoire of Orixá dance is a movement that is animating creating and destroying and creating again, employing her spinal undulations from the top of the crown of the head down into the abdominal body. Though her body is dressed in a circular skirt with a petticoat (which initially reads to me as colonial garb for women), I found that men in Benin/Dahomey dance in remarkably similar skirts, which problematizes my initial reads of the Bahiana dancing in terms of regalia because I initially attributed her skirt to an offshoot of a colonial bustle but after seeing the skirts of the men in Benin where the Bahian has genealogical connections I had to rethink the meaning of the voluminous skirt, however, that aesthetic may also be pulling from the Benin regalia for men which has a voluminous skirt. As an archetype,

she is rooted in ancient Africa and carries the stories of the Odu (Odu/Olodumare/Oduduwa which are names of “God” in Yoruba translation). An Odu is a sacred story of an Orisha, that is used as allegory to understand life. Odus have dances and symbols connected to them. Odu or Oduduwa carries the Odus in her womb, which are all the life stories of humans. When she materializes in the ceremony, she comes to bring motherly advice, sometimes empathetic, sometimes stern. Her dance has a sway like the rocking of the sea - mesmerizing and soothing. She is also a waterspout or tsunami crashing at the shore. She is the pulse of life itself.

Though the Bahiana’s most simple form is a woman from Salvador, Bahia, the Bahiana has become an archetype of feminine power and a character associated with dance philosophy specifically. As a dancer, I was often soothed by dancing her dances, as the calmer aspects of the dance are like being rocked by the ocean or embodying the nurturer to then bless myself. The warrior versions empowered me to connect to my inner strength. The dance reminded me of my grandmother, who was a seamstress but also a traveler, who had a reputation for healing people through singing prayers, as she did for me when I first met her. She would sing from her seat, with a bullhorn in the Pentecostal church I grew up in. She would sing, sometimes, in the middle of the pastor's sermon. He would stop for her. I recall how someone would catch the spirit and speak in tongues while someone else interpreted God's words. For me, that first look at the Bahiana in Fogo Na Ropa made me recall my Grandmother. Embodying healing power was something I learned through my grandmother, so when I saw the practice of Candomblé Orixá dance it made sense.

Dances of the Orixá via the Bahiana, like dances of the Lwa<sup>23</sup> in Haitian dance, instructed me to be profound like she was; I was also instructed in recognizing and wielding my power, through the stories connected to the dances. These stories are often about people rebounding from problems and poor decisions. Though I have taken classes from many amazing teachers, I learned the most about corporeal movement of Candomblé Orixá dance from Jorge Alabe (Brazilian folklore and Candomblé dance teacher), Tania Santiago (Brazilian folklore), and Jose Barroso (Cuban folklore). When I saw Yemoja manifest in a ceremony, I could feel the largeness of her vibration. She is the first Orisha I identified with, as I love being in water. As a lover of dance, I used to equate dance technique and fine dance with svelte and athletic bodies; however, I learned again that technique can also be refinement and subtlety, power and difficult to execute in genres outside of Ballet and Modern dance. When I see the Bahiana dancing at FESTAC '77 I know that it is a body of agency.

There are different roads of Yemoja with different dance movements: the turbulent warrior, weighted and crushing with accelerating turns like whirlpools. Conversely, she also walks majestically, with confidence, slowly and deliberately with her head held high, and her gestures command attention. This type of God on earth (Cissoko Djeli 2020), has fluidity in gender, embodying both male and female deities, and represents mother, warrior, Love, Healing, artisan, businesswoman, and herbal medicine healer (Mason 1992).

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<sup>23</sup> Lwa are the Haitian equivalent of Orixá in many ways though they are also different. They are venerated ancestors and forces of nature.



## Women's Aje Power

The Ifa divination verse, the Odu *Osa Odu Meji*, sets the stage for thinking about women's ritual power in Yoruba religious discourses:

*“Nigbati won nbo l’aye  
Awon obirnrin, won ko ri nkannkan yan  
La t’odo Olodumare . . .  
Olodumare lo gbe ase fun awon obinrin  
O ni awon aje ko gbodo maa lo lati  
Di ‘ya je ‘nikeni*

When women were coming to the earth

Women had no powers from Olodumare . . .

Olodumare promised them a power greater than that of men

Olodumare gave women power over men

Women were instructed not to use the power indiscriminately.

Olodumare endowed women with the power of *Aje*”

(translation by Olajubu; Oyeronke 2003, 27-28).

The women in the photo above (Figure 7), Bahianas, dance the repertoire of a conglomerate of venerated African ancestral venerated deities/vibrations that are enlivened through their dance modalities and empower the body-beings they inhabit or dance. The Bahiana Candomblé initiate (a person that accounts for the spirit[s] as essential in discussions regarding the body). The term *Aje*, like many African terms, cannot be easily defined; however, in the contemporary world of Africa, *Aje* is equated to a witch. This, like the term, *fetish*, is a remnant of epistemological genocidal

colonialism. Precolonial approximations for Aje would be "Feminine Deep Power/Blessing." Her attributes deal in the realm of Creation (in its largest sense), Destruction, the Cosmos, and the All. In Africa especially across the belt of Africa, God is a Woman in many cultures. (Drewal & Drewal 1983, Washington [2014], 2015, Mason 2016). There Black Woman was seen as the center of the community, mother, wife, sister, daughter, business owner, spiritual being, the closest thing to God on earth, warrior, warrior trainer, she was called God - Aje and her womb - perceived as the universe and her amniotic fluid ocean itself. In most cases she was perceived as an essential and valued part of the community, oftentimes being the center of the community or the matriarch - the woman with the power of land ownership. These disparate examples of Black Women in Africa as opposed to in the New World speak to an identity that was carried over in the Middle Passage but not often discussed in the discourse on Feminism, nor Black Feminism.

Theresa Washington (mother, academic, author) researched Aje power in her book, *The Architects of Existence: Aje in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*, where she professes Aje is the mother of "All" is heralded as "the generous and dangerous mother" (Lawal, Gelede Spectacle 93 in Washington ([2014] 2015, 19). Aje is a force that Yoruba spiritualist Samuel M. Opeola elucidates in the Yoruba ethos by revealing that "Aje, actually, is Odu". In other words, Odu the God and Aje the power is one ([2014] 2015, 19).

Linguistically, words in the Yoruba language take great shifts with subtle changes in vocalization and intonation. Washington says, "Aje is untranslatable" and has no foreign

equivalent ([2014], 2015, 59). The meaning of Aje is also evident in the movement practices of Yoruba women as demonstrated in the gestures of an African matriarch who is re-opening to re-tie her waist African wraps, along with numerous other gestures and the pantheon of Orisha dances. However, this innocuous gesture of the opening and closing of the waist wrap demonstrates Aje power. This concept of God as Mother is prominent throughout Africa and the Diaspora. This concept does not enter a tug of war over power with a male God but considers ideas of balance as referred to by Cheikh Anta Diop, doctor, scholar of Egyptology, and historian, as “harmonious duality” (Diop in Washington [2014], 2015, 110). This concept is also represented in the choreographic stage exit of *Sulkary*, which will be discussed in the next section of this dissertation and is illustrated in Figure 8 below. Where feminine frequency and male frequency merge to make an even larger power. Therefore, deciphering the large colonial skirt of the Bahianas' regalia also lends itself to ideas of the prowess of these spiritual women's Aje energy, which Washington directly associates with the Vagina.

This energy would be connected to the gift and responsibility of carrying and bearing children, and an African concept of motherhood characteristics in the larger sense of mother. Hence, the dancing Bahianas at FESTAC '77 could be read as the return of Aje feminine-power to the world and a turn away from the war of colonialism. Her visual presence and corporeal movement are loaded with complex statements, vibration, history, and wisdom. This information is extremely valuable for descendants of Africa, as it speaks to a culture that might have been lost due to colonialism.

Today the spiritual spaces of these women are still being attacked even though these women are known for caring for the community. In John Mason's book of many translated Yoruba songs, proverbs, and Orisha stories, *Orin Orisa: Songs for Selected Heads* (1992), he offers praise to the ancestors through his scholarship in this quote:

“Yemoja, Oya, and Osun the great mother and her two powerful daughters are now saluted. Reverence for feminine salt water/maternity power, wind-fire/transformer power, and sweet water/sanitation-comfort power accompanied Lukumí<sup>15</sup> captives into the Americas. These are three of the most powerful philosophies that Lukumís (name of African religion group) rethought, expanded on, and used to base their new lives, in exile” (Mason 1992, 77).

Mason elucidates the specific attributes connected to mothers, Aje energy; these mothers are also referred to with term for mother, *Iyami*. During the period of chattel slavery and colonization, in the “New World”, daughters of Aje energy, Indigenous African feminine energy was attacked through systems that sought to control their power when African women were forced into the Western (North American and European) economic institutions built on enslavement and where the bodies of Blacks and Africans were commodified, considered objects to be owned, and treated worse than owned animals. These women's bodies were used to populate the plantation of colonial traffickers as breeders for new workers. This practice lasted centuries and left an indelible mark on Black and African Women that is present in the world today.

Another dance of the Bahiana or women from Salvador, Bahia, is the Samba. However, this Brazilian dance of Kongo-Angolan heritage with a gestural navel bumping is the highlight of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, and is equated with svelte women, scantily clad in elaborate costumes made of plums and rhinestones. Samba, possibly more

than any other African Diaspora dance, has been appropriated, commodified, and over-sexualized. A dance that was typically done barefoot is now most often done in high heels and performed in nightclubs, cruises, and all types of tourist events. Though Samba is a dance of Brazil, it was not what was performed at FESTAC '77.

The hatred of African descendants that exists in the literature from salvage anthropology to Hip Hop lyrics recount a misogynist contempt and ingrained prejudice against Black women. Misogynoir is a word that represents how sexism and racism manifest in Black women's lives to create oppression. This long-lived negative ideations against Black women has been brewing over centuries. The tendency today to capitalize on everything unfortunately and disturbingly is very prevalent today among Black women who now “super sexualize” and “demoralize” themselves for social media “likes” and money. This idea is justified because of money, while we are missing the shift to a culture of capitalism at FESTAC '77. Nowhere in the data suggested that organizers were interested in making a profit. Rather the festival appeared to me more of a sacrifice. The irony of anti-Blackness is present when Black people capitalize on African traditional concepts in reductive and sensational ways, where ideas of Aje are reduced to capitalizable aesthetics. The concept of sacred being-body is both denigrated and commodified because of coloniality in these cases.

I am by no means aligning with “respectability politics” because dances of Black and African people do not shy away from sex, but instead introduce the concepts of sacredness in sex. Dances of the pelvis that are prevalent in Congolese precolonial and traditional dance, where the waist is circled in tight isolations, can be connected to Aje

energy, where the womb is the earth, a place to carry creation. Though they use the pelvis in Yoruba-based spiritual forms, they do not move the pelvis for the same sacred reasons. But what is similar and clear is that precolonial notions of the female Black body are associated with ideas of power, healing, sacredness and creation.

Today in mainstream culture worldwide, people are almost completely disassociated from the idea of the Black and African female body as sacred. The insult and attempt to demoralize the Black and African female body are intrinsically tied to female flesh, especially the vagina, in a way that is mixed with the toxic patriarchal tendency to rape and use sex as a form of control and to denigrate one's "body-being" and character as an ideological form of control as well, this is the effect of coloniality where the oppressed continue to denigrate themselves.

Jasmine E. Johnson, professor of Africana Studies expounds on this topic in "Flesh Dance: Black Women from Behind" (2020) and quotes Hortense Spiller:

"But I would make a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography... Flesh is that which stands forth, unbounded, discontinuous, open, vulnerable. *Flesh is aboriginal. Flesh designates a borderless, discontinuous object, previous to its being sexed, before its being raced*" (Spiller in Johnson 2020, 53).

Judith Butler, Third Wave feminist, American philosopher, and gender studies writer states,

“The “body” is constituted by the discursivity of “sex...Sex is...not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility...The “body”—through sex, through rhetoric—is a categorical coherence, it is a theological-philosophical concept of enclosure, a grammar and logic producing something like bodily integrity (Butler 54).”

Spillers’s analysis includes race and sex while Butler’s analysis considers sex.

Spillers’s definition would better apply to the Bahiana though Butler’s quote helps to elucidate the ocular assumptions place upon women. But with the Bahiana that bias is twofold. Spillers’s analysis points to the aspect of flesh as a beginning, “aboriginal” connecting to indigeneity and to the planet is outside of the scope of colonizing man/woman’s ideology or ideation and recalls freedom. Spillers’s use of aboriginal harkens to ideas of women in Bahia that are associated with nature. The turn against nature would seem to be related to the turn against women. Bahiana Orixa's culture lives in this space. This freedom has a type of agency that allows for self-definition. I quote Spiller through J. Johnson’s work because she renders the idea that black women are illegible, not easily read, despite the stereotypes she has been marked by. I feel this point not only for myself, as a Black woman, but as a note of correction for Western Scholarly interpretations of African and Black culture like that of the Bahiana. There is a place of indetermination that must be referenced so that scholars can reconsider ocular assessments of culturally rich material. J. Johnson finds the agency to combat the sexism

and racism that Spiller and Butler point out. This is why I use these quotes. John Mason's book *In Praise of Our Mothers* (2016) gives the correction to stereotypes. This book discusses gender in the Yoruba culture in specific regard to females. Women can be Iyalodes and rank higher than a man. "Women are the contained and the container." In terms of gender and this list what stands out the most is that "Under certain circumstances, Orisha are male or female. "He presents women/mothers descended from Yoruba and Dahomey as mothers, fighters, hunters, basket weaving, dying, commerce, earth mothers as doctors, herbalists, chemists, and embodiments of the forces of nature themselves. He also discusses the importance of children do to high mortality rates. He presents the matriarch as an essential person of the society; among them they are considered Female Chief (Oba Obirin), builder of roads, teacher of the art of battle to the fiercest warriors, geniuses, rich businesswomen. It is understood that women give birth to money; therefore, they are wealth themselves. Ultimately Mason's research renders portraits of the female gender of woman as an entity that doesn't need anyone to give her power because she is power. Mother-ness is the primary agent.

These are definitions that can be connected to the earth and the cosmos itself. Orixa dances that the Bahiana performs contain ideas of ontology, the nature of being, that are pre-discursive, pre-raced, and pre-gendered, but rather transformational and sacred. The ontology of the Bahiana by way of the philosophies of the Orixa creates illegible and indeterminate life, full of potential that is not governed by anyone except God. The God that lives in one's own head or Ori, which is where the word Orixa comes from. In Orixa cosmology the Ori is infused with its own power. I would name that flesh as a divine



manifestation of beingness. Bahiana bodies become politicized in as many ways as a person who is different for epistemic ideas of self. Historically, she was not a Lockean body as discussed earlier in chapter two, as proposed by Kraut. In colonial history she did not own herself, her work, or even her children. I understand her to mean the *gazed-upon body* or *talked-about body* as a body that has been imposed upon by ideas outside of itself. For Brazil, and, in fact, all over the globe, the Black and African female body is gazed upon and stereotyped distinctively, connected to the need to control and capitalize upon her. This experience of misogynoir that might be considered by some as crippling; however, Orixa culture of the Bahian provides many women a way out. Orixa dance cosmology is grounded in African precolonial ideas that when applied to the traumatic issues of Bahians in colonial Brazil allowed them to recall their power and harness agency to endure.

Unfortunately, she is the most sex-trafficked, and ideas of her sexuality have been imposed upon her. These racist-sexist ideas that women of color must face have imposed themselves on today's Black and African women, while ideas of the divine sacred woman are associated with being a witch. This concept shrouds the Bahiana for what she is or wants to be.

The Bahiana is initiated into a tradition with vastly different and less oppressive ideas of a Black and African female body. I see Candomblé with its precolonial inscriptions about the sacred body and Indigenous epistemologies that deepen Butler's idea of "body." Furthermore, I find that the term *body-being* considers the soul of the person, imbued with divine sovereignty, which walks with the spirit(s) of their revered

ancestors. Today, the gazed-upon Bahianas/Aje-infused Black and African body-being traverses multiple worlds, continents, and philosophies but is misunderstood and what Jasmine Johnson describes as “illegible” (J. Johnson 2020) in all the scorn and disenfranchisement projected upon it (Butler 2015; Spillers 1987). Neoliberal discourse and rhetoric attempt to diminish her so she does not remember her divine self. Oppressive colonial institutes attempt to decide her value; however, she is beyond priceless; she is a sacred spirit, as are all bodied-beings.

To consider Butler’s argument in the case of Black and African spiritual women, especially those who are grown (beyond mature, aware of the workings of the world, survivors), is to see this as problematic since her argument shifts when considering Aje energy. Since the discursivity of sex and race constitutes the body of the Black and African woman in the New World, her culture and way of seeing the world is not considered by mainstream society. The repertoire of Bahiana dances demonstrates her identity, philosophies, perception of self, and ways of living that counter-imposed identities from toxic patriarchy, misinformed feminist discourses, and sensational capitalistic lyrics in music by men and women. This is my issue with interpretations of Black and African people; many do not recognize or refuse to accept the way a person, any person, chooses to refer to themselves. This is why I find it necessary to consider categorizing a person or theorizing about dance from the perspective of one’s own traditions. Where I know this can still be problematic, the best choice would be to simply ask the person when possible.

The image of the woman representing Brazil in the procession at FESTAC ’77 was accompanied by three more. They animated my mind beyond the basic steps of the

movement, and I did not need to see the sign that was being carried by their contingent to know that that was the archetype of the divine mother from Bahia, Brazil. When I first started following FESTAC, I saw the footage of Phillip Gaunt, FESTAC videographer<sup>16</sup> (Gaunt 2009), and saw that Yemoja was present at the opening ceremony. I thought to myself, “Of course, the Queen Mother of the African Diaspora would have had to be present at a reunion such as FESTAC. She returned home as an international water deity.”

Today, from globalizing interactions of dances worldwide, many learn that almost every indigenous culture has an Aje archetypal dance. I would even say that ancestral dance elements define indigeneity and speak to the innate environmentalism of Mothers. However, Yemoja is not the gendered idea of mother that pops into the mind of someone reared in the West (North America and Europe), “Yemoja traditions situate gender and sexuality in society as transformative and fluid modes of being and doing” (Falola and Otero 2013). I use this quote to explain the complexity of Black Woman and specifically the Bahiana at FESTAC. A precolonial reading of her understands she is sacred, the representative of God on earth; she is divine; she is a nurturer and warrior; Big Mama. She is Africa returned at FESTAC '77.

When Aje energy was danced at FESTAC '77, she brought “grand” mother, primordial mother, mitochondrial DNA mother, breeder Mothers from chattel slavery, and syncretized Catholic Mother as saint. She also brought wise men, warrior men, Orixas of every age and ability. Ultimately, the Bahiana at FESTAC '77, brought *possibility*.

## Chapter 4 - CUBA, *Sulkary* - Reading Dance

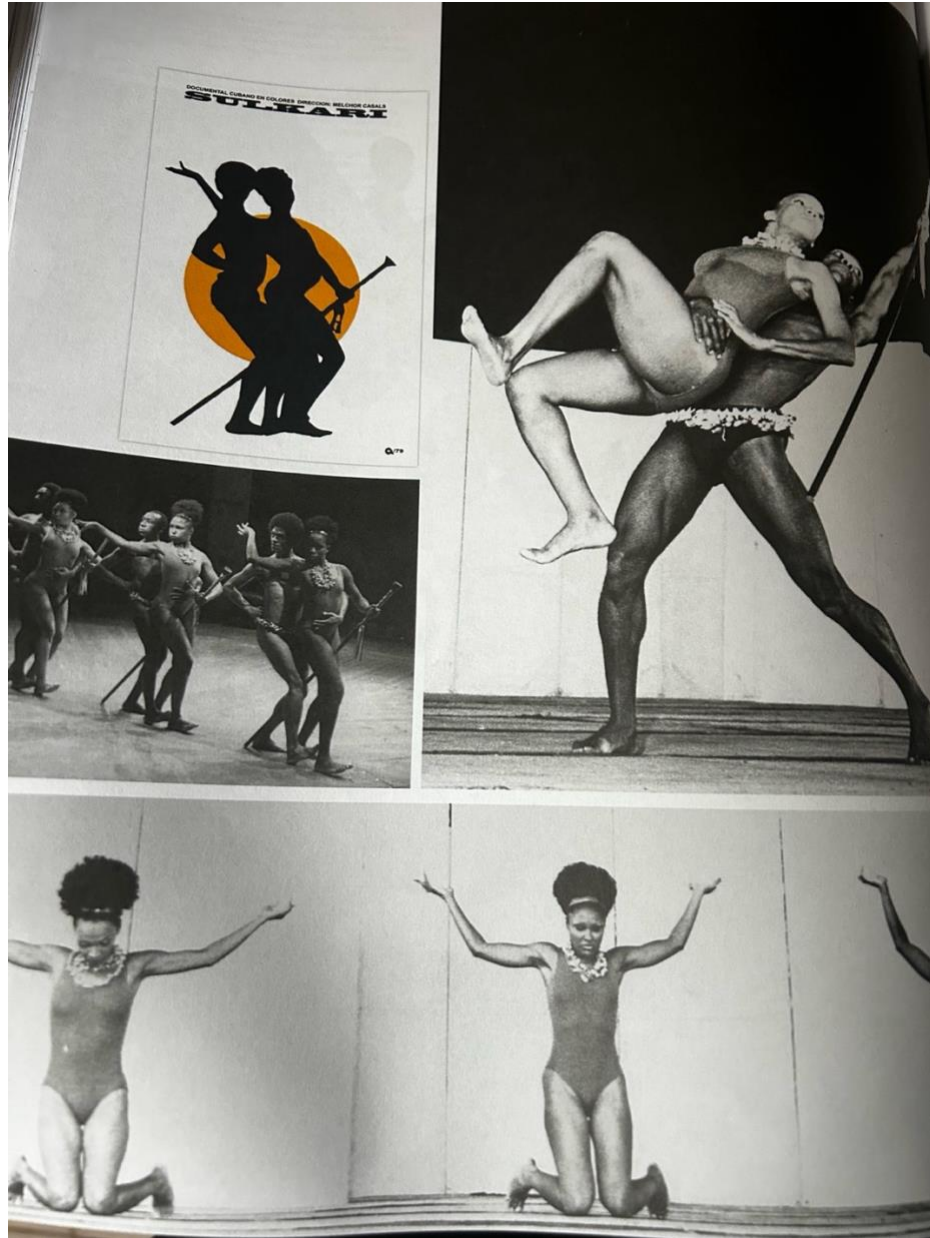


Figure 8. Image of Eduardo Rivera's Cuban dance submission, *Sulkary* (1974). Photographer unknown. Image from the book, *FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced*. Cape Town: Afterall Books. (2019, 202).

I chose *Sulkary*<sup>24</sup> because it combines precolonial elements with contemporary elements and exemplifies the theme of FESTAC '77 to develop or modernize while preserving heritage and tradition. I am most familiar with Orisha dances, as they exist in multiple sites in the Diaspora. I know the dances, songs, and specific Cuban and Brazilian Orisha dance rhythms. I have either danced or witnessed these dances on multiple occasions outside of FESTAC footage viewing. I present my close reading of *Sulkary*, vying for a precolonial perspective of reading dance, and I compare and contrast a reading of *Sulkary* done by historian Elizabeth Schwall.

### ***Sulkary* Description**

When I initially conceptualized this study, I imagined that I would be able to see the dance pieces that the festival contingent from Oakland had performed in, and I would then be able to ask them about the choreography and their experience dancing in it. However, when I arrived at CBAAC to view the videos, I found that I would be limited to the videos that they had readily available. Faced with the need to shift my entire project because they had no full footage of US dances, I chose to view a piece that I was familiar with and have always been drawn to, *Sulkary*.

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<sup>24</sup> Danza Cuba Original Footage of *Sulkary*  
<https://youtu.be/QJUcrMXCmL8?si=oshVp9hN4p3h2xqm>  
<https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/art-culture/40-years-of-sulkari/>  
<https://youtu.be/SBQasRJVhXQ?si=BpY5OZMC0oKrVxvd>  
[https://www.ecured.cu/Danza\\_Nacional\\_de\\_Cuba](https://www.ecured.cu/Danza_Nacional_de_Cuba)

During my time in the archives of the dance footage at CBAAC, I was able to do initial viewings of approximately 30 dances. There were many traditional dances, as well as contemporary, but one of the most prevalent dance presentation styles was dance theater, which utilized indigenous precolonial elements and contemporary staging and themes, fusion in costuming, and projections into the future. When watching art, just as when writing, no one is objective, including myself. This piece is about art making, not about traditional ritual as in heritage dance, though the choreographer clearly pulls from those sensibilities.

My evaluation of *Sulkary* is drawn from precolonial ideas and experience with the dance styles, and symbolism in the movement. The piece is the choreographer's own composition of Danza or Cuban Moderno, combined with a sprinkling of straight Cuban Orisa Folkloric dance. The piece is contemporary in its abstraction of traditional Orisa dance and in its nonceremonial use of music. Despite the decomposition of the elements of traditional dance, the combination of music and movement fills my mind with ideas of creation, and especially, the symbolism of the number three, which is representative of Legba and "openings", as in openings to opportunities, or the next iteration.

Additionally, the serpentine undulation of the spine carries its own symbolism of rebirth, transformation, and pure life. The sonic choice of the choreography, starting with humming and moving from a song to Bata drumming back to the song, and finishing how it started with humming, also adds ambiance that is audible, visible, and kinesthetic, but for people aware of the stories associated with the Orisa songs and their variations, it is as

if there is additional scenery shifting the piece because the songs are full of Orisa story and imagery.

Looking at or reading these dances from the precolonial perspective, which can be considered as reading dance through a cultural perspective, spurred me to look up the specific songs in the book *Orin Orisa, Songs for the Orisa*, by John Mason and to have personal conversations with Orisha song expert Pablo Campoamor (2023). I reached out to confirm that the singing in *Sulkary* was Yoruba and then Dahomeyan. Because both tips of songs are sung with a Cuban accent in the choreographic work I would not decipher the change on my own. Below I shared information on these two cosmologies: Yoruba and Dahomeyan and their associated African forces of nature to demonstrate how understanding that knowledge adds dimension to this choreography along with discussing the work.

What hit me immediately is the sinewy muscularity of the Black and brown bodies on stage. They make me think of African statues that have come to life. You see their virtuosity before they even move. They play between the lightness of their steps and movements that notate ancient history as they dance with the pull of gravity in deeply bended knees giving homage to the earth and earthy frequency. I see the dance for Asojano and Obatala. Asojano is a Dahomey deity in Cuban Rada traditions who is equated with Babaluaye and the Catholic saint of St. Lazarus. Obatala is the frequency of wisdom, being sober and being pure of heart from Yoruba traditions in Cuba. It would seem that these ideas would have no connection to the dance of *Sulkary* that might off the top be described simply as an Afrocentric modern dance with traditional movement aspects. But the nature

of African-rooted dance allows for deep reads that add dimension and storyline that might shift the typical gaze and interpretation.

*Sulkary* was created in the early 1970s, before 1977, and aesthetically reflects that time. The piece takes on a transhistorical dimension when considering the mix of ancient dance elements (Orisha dance) and yoga, as Eduardo Rivera, the choreographer, incorporated in his creativity and teaching, which is evident in this work. The contemporary elements of the dance are represented through the abstraction of ceremonial movement and music. The choreographer produces a majestic interaction of three duets. Their interaction might be interpreted as the workings of something divine or the cosmos. The structure of the work is in three movements:

- I. Dancing Female Power - A trio of women dance together, then each solo.
- II. Dancing Male Power - A trio of men dance as the women watch, then solo.
- III. Harmonic duality - An ensemble section of three duets exits the stage.

This movement of three can be considered in an ungendered way where these dancers represent elements that, when brought together, create chemical reactions. More specifically, the beginning with the three women is distinctive. The movements of nature are visible in the accentuated torsos, like snakes and deliberate and grounded footsteps evoke the idea that the women are dancing specific patterns with significance. Their dance is grounded yet sleek.



The humming in the piece shifts the vibration of the space as women awaken life, first in statue-like poses that replicate ancient African sculptures, especially those with spiritual significance. When they begin to undulate their torsos, it harkens to the breath of life, animating the *sculptures* – animating beings. During those musical shifts noted above, they dance movements of two Orishas: Obatala and Asojano. The women dance in unison and then perform solos. Following this section, three men enter while the women sit on the ground to watch. Their costumes, like those of the women, suggest nudity. The music changes to an Arara/Dahomey song, and the men's dance is energetic and air-bound, whereas the women's movements are sensual and fluid (water-esque). Each man performs a solo. There is another music change when the women stand again and begin dancing with the men, creating more sculptural shapes in male-female duets. The shapes reflect the joining of male and female beings.

The spine is ignited, and they start to dance more, falling in line and into rhythm with the music. The movements forward are Obatala-like (regal and wise) to Batá (mainly sacred) drums. There is a single female solo. The first woman is moving slowly and deliberately. Then we see the second woman. She dances to the imagery of a bird with her arms and a snake with her spine while walking in plié. The last woman dances to a song to Olofi the supreme God. Her movements are a bit more energetic. They come together in a circular trio facing toward the center, then rotating the circle slowly in a circle. Then the song changes to a song for Oduduwa. Oduduwa is a primordial deified ancestor. Obatala (male) and Oduduwa (female), or heaven and earth, resemble two large calabashes, which, when once shut, can never be opened. They do quick *chaîné* turns

(quick tight moving turns across the floor) in plié interrupting their statue-like posing, until they are seated, in a horizontal line on the stage. This whole movement section by the women is predominantly grounded and gives an earthy vibration overall. I imagine red African clay dirt when I see this piece, as if the dancers came up out of the red clay and began to dance.

The humming returns, marking the entrance of the men, who are each carrying a staff. They are dancing Asojano-type steps in a trio with the staff either horizontally on their shoulders or vertically as a walking staff in a regal position. The three men consecutively do solos each with their own flavor, while the women watch seated.

At the end, all six dancers come together in three duets, to the slow Oduduwa's song again. They go through a series of poses now as men and women dance together in a circle. The circle becomes a diamond. There is a moment where there is a *case/break* or feeling of elevation, followed by the group turning the circle once. They go in and out of the circle. There is another segment that seems more personal between the couples. Here is the moment of having symbolic sex, where the woman sits on the knees of the man with the staff between both of their legs. Then the men carry the women on their shoulders and parade around the stage. Each man, now loudly hitting the stage with his staff, places a woman down and the three pairs exit slowly, intricately - intimately connected. The elements of Oduduwa and Obatala suggest these two divine deities in the process of creation; however, the elements of Asojano and resurrection and rebirth suggest the frequency of healing in this harmonizing dance between powerful equals. This is my precolonial culture-directed assessment.

At FESTAC '77, *Sulkary* was Sankofa-esque; that is, evoking the African concept of looking back to move forward. Choreographically, *Sulkary* combined ancient Yoruba Orisha dance and music, Dahomeyan cosmology, and music with European and Western Modern dance aesthetics that were popular in the seventies to craft this quintessential Cuban Moderno dance piece. The significance of this piece is in the perspectives of the dancers, those who performed this dance over and over, which created an energy associated with the piece that young dancers today still feel. Performing this piece is like a rite of passage for young dancers. In interviews on YouTube, the dancers in the photo described how this piece is like a rite of passage, allowing the performers to actualize, initiating them into an ancient tradition from a new perspective that was focused on excellence and beauty.

This idea of *Sulkary* as a contemporary style of an initiation dance is still prevalent and discussed among young Cuban dancers given the coveted opportunity to perform *Sulkary*. There are intangible riches associated with *Sulkary*. Below I share the spiritual stories associated with dance and compare precolonial cultural interpretation to "speculation". I close with socio-political perspectives that reshape the corporeality and perspective of the piece aesthetically, specifically the way ideas of Africa shifted in Cuba, reshaping ancient stories associated with the dance but leaving something relevant for the viewer.

*Sulkary* premiered in Cuba on May 13, 1971; Eduardo Rivera, its choreographer, was a Cuban of Jamaican descent. The film version premiered in 1974 and the director of choreography was Jorge Haydu. *Sulkary* was displayed at FESTAC '77 only six years

after its premiere. Today, it is still being presented worldwide, and though it is Cuban, other countries have added it to their repertoires. Rex Nettleford, the Jamaican choreographer, sociologist, and former Prime Minister of Culture, included it in the Jamaican National Theatre's programming as a tribute to Rivera's shared heritage with Jamaica.

*Sulkary* is the foundational piece that set the standard in terms of aesthetics for everything that followed in the genre of *Danza Cubana*. Eduardo Rivera was a devout student of Cuban dancer and scholar Ramiro Guerra, founder of the Teatro Nacional de Cuba and primary progenitor of much of "proscenium dance" in Cuba. *Sulkary* is about fertility and procreation. In addition, when taking a deeper look, the neo-traditional dance makes what I call "corporeal footnotes" to a canon of stories in the corpus of the Ifa and Afa or Odu divination systems of Yoruba and Ewe ethnic groups in West Africa. African divining systems open the ideological world of the Orisha (divinities, deities) and give depth to *Sulkary*. Rivera's modern dance piece brings together multiple elements of African spiritual culture: sculpture, song, and rhythm/vibration. All dances in this heritage category are filled with distinct spinal undulations and/or alternately accentuate the shoulders.

The piece gives holistic vibrations of wellness in its Dahomeyan imagery of Damballah and Ayida<sup>18</sup>, the rainbow spirits or *Vodunes* of Cuban Arará and Vodú spiritual orientations, but also of Haitian Rada and Brazilian Jeje orientation. Specifically, I am referring to the way the couples wrap themselves around a tall staff, which might be understood as an ancestor staff or the spiritual center post of a Vodoun temple. Ayida Wedo is a female "rainbow snake", called Da, Dan, or Damballah in her male form. As

arched protection above the earth, the two snakes cradle the living world and are the most recognized Dahomey/Vodou divinities within ancient Dahomey or present-day Benin, Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana.

This dance projects and re-establishes precolonial understandings and in almost exact dance replication across the Diaspora. The spine is viewed as the sacred snake that symbolizes a revitalizing force, transformation, rebirth, and purity. This poetic conceptualization of a sacred physical body part, in this case, specifically the spine, combines with the notion of the rainbow that the male and female spiritual entities make together in the sky and in so doing, promise a bright new day or infinite potential. The symbolism of Metrès Ayida and Papa Damballah can be seen today in the medical symbol of entwined snakes that accompany the caduceus staff on most medical doctors' diplomas (Eloi in Daniel and Eloi in press, 17).

The idea of the African principle of duality opposes a binary construction of gender. It emphasizes the divine essence of harmonic coupling, ultimately becoming one, as we see at the end of the piece as the six become three intertwined beings exiting the stage in tight couples that are now one. The idea of snakes is accentuated by the luscious undulation of the women's torsos and the overall fluidity of their backs.

The dance movement of the three men and three women also suggests ideas of a Yoruba Orisha story which is implied through the sonic transmission of the singers and *Batá* drum players. The humming opens to the vocals or chants, which tell of Oduduwa, the Yoruba God of creation. Oduduwa's etymology means *the principle that created the*

*physical reality*, which permits the Yoruba-literate viewer to advance to continual layering of symbols, to meanings and ideas that speak to a Black and African aesthetic. Later, the song changes from a Yoruba song to an Arará (Dahomeyan heritage) song for Asoje/Asojano/Aswano or the Yoruba and Cuban Lukumí Oricha, Babaluaye, a version of the Christian or Biblical Lazarus. The aesthetic choice to start with humming the song to Oduduwa allows the viewer to go through a threshold into another dimension, whether they are aware of the stories connected to these three beings or not.

When the ear catches hold of the solo flute, the abstract comes full circle and provokes the audience member to allow the abstraction of classic African cosmology. These ideas put the three women and three men on the proscenium stage into another dimension that the literate audience member senses and feels, but others sense as well, as evidenced by the popularity of the choreography. However, the literate audience member understands that the dancers on stage are non-gender specific and yet must be paired in opposites in the African aesthetic of creation. The orature or oral traditions of the Yoruba people mix history with spiritual understandings of the Orishas, such that these are liminal divine entities in the process of creation.

Therefore, a simple reading that points out gender and sexuality would give a reductive reading of *Sulkary*. Other popular views of Oduduwa define this person as a Yoruba divine king and legendary founder of the Ife Empire, who has been elevated through ancestorization to be considered a creator deity in Ifa (Yoruba/Cuban Lukumí religion). During his time on earth, Oduduwa was the progenitor of several actual royal dynasties in Yorubaland and was considered a non-mythical founder. He was deified as

an androgynous Orisha who helped facilitate the creation of Earth with Olodumare and Obatala. However, even more contemporary renderings of Oduduwa reflect Isele (precolonial nongendered) definitions of Oduduwa as “the Galactic Mother of All” (Washington 2014, 2015, 25).

This story is relevant because it changes the Western gaze of this dance into an alternative storyline that adds depth to the choreographic movements. Oduduwa is also another name for the Ifa divination system (Odu). Described as the woman Oduduwa or Odu’s womb is the calabash that carries all the possibilities of life, births of kings and Gods. Yoruba cosmology specialist John Mason writes about the obscuring of Odu that started in the colonial period and continued into the post-colonial period. Each Odu of the divining system, with some exceptions, has its own dance. Oduduwa is the mother of all allegorically. However, I have not seen, nor do I know if a dance exists for Odu/Oduduwa. Therefore, I see in *Sulkary* - the choreographer personifies Odu through modern dance.

While taking classes at the Teatro Nacional de Cuba in 2000, I saw a rehearsal of *Sulkary*. I was told that this dance was about Oduduwa. The person telling me this then described Oduduwa as a woman. I was moved by the piece, and I even wore my hair in the style of the women in the piece for years. I would later see this dance performed at Carifesta in Haiti in 2009. It was one of the few dances in the show that evening that elicited a standing ovation. The piece speaks to many different African Diaspora cultures in diverse ways while simultaneously representing modernity. This is something many countries coming out of oppressive politics strive for.

The second song in the performance to Asojano is considered a profound healer. The dancers accentuate this theme through movements with a bowed head at flat back and bent knees. As the story goes, Asojano was forced to leave his home in Dahomey because he was covered in smallpox. Before he left, he was given a raffia skirt to cover himself and a small broom to swat away the flies. He is essentially an outcast. Asojano traveled to Ile Ife and was shunned throughout his journey as he was covered in smallpox. However, when he reached his journey's end and neared Ile Ife, the sacred city in Yoruba cosmology, the word spread about Asojano's journey. By the time he reached his destination, he was considered a deeply spiritual man, like a Buddha. He is considered King of the World now because he embodied disease and took it away from all others. His story is an allegory about health. Disease is powerful because it will take out even the wealthiest or most popular person, but not Asojano. In Ile Ife, he healed the sick and ailing with his broom.

This story is connected to inoculation methods and speaks to the African concepts of medicine in the precolonial empire of Ile Ife. The first man's solo represents Asojano, who walks heavily bent over because he is carrying the afflictions and disease of the community. The folkloric movements for this deity are considered healing brushes, wiping away disease and petulance with his broom, his hands or with branches of leaves.

The Western tendency to consider the entire dance to be provocative, erotic, and gendered stultifies the aspect of the dance that allows space to imagine other ways of knowing. I recognize that this is art that is open to interpretation; however, my commentary in this chapter comes from the different conversations I have had about



*Sulkary* with many artists and many Cubans. Rivera employs these two songs to give definition to what can be considered an absolute abstract modern dance composition, creating ambiance, and carrying significance that brings texture and nuance to interpretations of the piece. Most significant is that these ancient songs have withstood the test of time and, despite enslavement and colonialism, have provided viewers with not only impressive artistry but also relevant ancient African orature, aesthetics, and cosmology.



Figure 9. Image of Batá Drummers for *Sulkary* Cuban contingent, at FESTAC '77 (1977). Photographer unknown. Image from the book, *FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced*. Cape Town: Afterall Books. (2019, 203).

### **Rendering *Sulkary* in its Root Form**

*Sulkary* is a modernization of different elements found in African cosmology, music and drumming, including visual art, religion, Orisha *patakines* (stories) through song, and Batá drumming. As three Black women of various skin shades, costumed to portray nudity, a common element in African statues, shift and change between different statuesque positions, viewers can see them create the poses that would be the king's seat or the different goddesses they emulated within common sculpture from African culture. The women continue the poses until they break the rigidity of the torso with supple undulations of the spine. Spinal undulations in Cuba's Dahomey/Arará religion represent the symbolic snakes of rebirth, transformation, and the continuity of life. When the men enter, they are holding staffs. Staffs in Arará tradition are ancestor sticks. This double entendre of the staff and the penis is an aspect of African religion that de-commodifies the movements of conception and views intercourse as a doorway to the ancestral realm.

Silvio Divo, a dance teacher who is a native of Santiago, Cuba, mounted a traditional Babalu Aye (Lukumí, Dahomey Asojano) dance for my Laney College students in 2014. He performed with the students, embodying the deity Babalu Aye, who represents healing and is syncretized with Saint Lazarus in the Catholic tradition. Babalu Aye's healing is administered first by taking on the ailments of the distressed person; in the dance his movement is hindered, jerking, and almost disjointed. His gait is feeble, tentative, and irregular as if he will fall. As the drumming increases in intensity and the rhythms of the dance shift, his transformation is ignited until he expels the sickness from himself with powers from within himself. First, he entered the stage doing the basic Babaluaye steps in

a pattern that he set. He choreographed the dancers to surround him in a way that the audience could not see him, but also in a way that looked like the congregation was praying for an ailing person. The dancers in the circle increased their intensity of the dance as Silvo the soloist and teacher also related to this energy until he danced upright in rhythm and with spectacular style within the Babaluaye aesthetic. He is then urged on by the vibration of the Batá drums and the sonic sound from a chorus of singers. It is at this point that he danced with everyone in a contagious catharsis, which continued in jubilation until the end of the dance. Divine spirit, Orisha, transcendence, copresences were ignited by the congregation.

There is a space in African Diaspora performance where acting and actuality meet. This was what happened with Silvo Divo that day. The class was particularly affected by this dance, in many ways. There were at least eleven drummers for this piece; so, the sound alone was palpable. Silvio and the other Cuban drummers sang, and there was a familiarity for these particular African American students. The students were extremely engaged and invested in the technique and community work of the dance. They were equally moved by Silvo's performance as well as by their own. They said it felt like their own culture, like their experiences in Baptist gospel churches. They also said they felt the Holy Ghost. They seemed like they underwent a rite of passage that day, even though they were merely participating in a staged performance. This dance brought students together, and that energy resonated throughout the other concert pieces. I attribute this to the fact that all the drummers, approximately eight total, participated in all the rehearsals; so, the day was filled with continuous 'family' feelings.

A dance they had never performed before reminded them of something familiar. When the students danced the first part of Silvio's Babalu Aye piece, many immediately said they felt like they were in a Baptist church. When we watched Silvio go through the progression of infection, woundedness, and disfigurement to being literally filled with highly expressive strength and strong spirit, we remembered aunties and grandmothers "catching spirit" as they do in the Baptist Church. We remembered the party at the end of Church that included food, laughter, and family. The way Silvio demonstrated a specific movement with a *droop, drop, and lift* (a movement that looks like the performer will faint from an extreme burden, but then rises up again), made it seem like an electric shock coming up the spine. Sometimes the shock hits at the heart and churchgoers touch their chests, shake their heads, or raise their hand to the Almighty. These gestures and movement sequences are pure African corporeal orature-religiosity.

Global corporeal language was being interpreted by people from diverse backgrounds through dance and music without verbal explanation, except for the intermittent auralities like, "uhmmm." These meaningful gestures and emotional sounds happened throughout FESTAC '77; the sovereign body signified its core/deep culture, in a multisensorial way. Some of my interlocutors who attended the festival commented on the way the event was about mutual comradeship. In fact, these corporeal movements are intuitive, sensed and carried in the stances, gestures, movements and embodiments of Black and African archetypes. Groups of people who share location, language, traditions, cosmologies, religions, food, dress (the list goes on) create and maintain culture—even over large expanses of time and space.

### **Speculation/Interpretation Example**

Dance historian Elizabeth Schwall asks the following question about *Sulkary*, “What does Rivera’s sculptural, sensual work reflect about dancing politics in 1971?” In the beginning of Schwall's article, she describes how the creator of the Teatro Nacional, Ramiro Guerra, had presented a piece considered pornographic by some. She gives no date for the piece and emphasizes little about the dance itself beyond being danced in hetero pairs.

She speculates:

“...the “ancestral confrontation” accentuated gender difference and heterosexual attraction. Soaring Yoruba chants set a mystical, solemn tone. Three women wearing nude leotards move through space slowly and heavily. The air surrounding their bodies appears viscous as they advance forward and flow in and out of various poses. The women dance in unison and then suddenly break away into different sequences to suggest a universal femininity that has both individual and collective aspects. When the women end their opening section, three men enter wearing nude loincloths and holding staffs. They parade out to more energetic vocals, moving their chest and shoulders to pulsating rhythms as the women watch, seated. Each man has a solo, captured in turn by the camera. In contrast to the heavy, grounded women, the men jump, turn, and enact showy handlings of their staffs. After the men complete their solos, the music pauses, the women stand, and the aural ambiance becomes quieter, though still charged. Now in three couples, the men and women dance together, creating sculptural designs with their bodies, including those suggestive of copulation. The final sequences feature the women on their male partner's shoulders and then back down on the ground, pressed to their male counterparts. Each couple has become one, and in this fused state, they leave the stage” (Schwall 2020, 310).

Her analysis makes sense when randomly speculating on a work of art after hearing about the scandal between those who found the piece pornographic and Guerra. She further speculates, “On the surface, *Sulkary* seems to dodge conventional political messaging, instead choosing to meditate on the beauty and vitality of African aesthetics. It is possible

that after the scandal of Guerra's *Decalogo*, Rivera sought to avoid controversial material by portraying heteronormative relationship onstage" (Schwall 2020). However, what is being dismissed by Schwall as simply aesthetics is a way of life that is valuable to people who had undergone enslavement, colonization and attempted epistemicide.

One's speculation is always built on one's own experience or, in some cases, a politic. And, as a Black Haitian woman who trained in Danza Cubana, who does not fit within the rigid US European framing of gender, and who is aware of anti-Blackness and the ongoing attack against African spiritual practices, I read the dance differently. I view *Sulkary* as a work inspired by African sculpture and fertility rites. It features three men and three women who dance in various groupings—Rivera, the choreographer—who was trained in Danza, folklore, and cabaret genres, fuses elements of Danza and Cuban folkloric dance to craft this piece.

Schwall also describes *Sulkary* from her observation of the film version:

"Ancestral confrontation accentuated gender difference and heterosexual attraction. Soaring Yoruba chants set a mystical, solemn tone. Three women wearing nude leotards...strong and lyrical at the same time as male and female dancers interacted in a 'harmonious, ancestral confrontation' (Danza Moderna 1974). According to Burdsall, a US dancer who danced and researched with Guerra, the choreography reflected Rivera's impressive talent, which she described in a letter to her family as 'more organic than Ramiro' and resulting in works that 'would be a hit anywhere in the world'" (Schwall 2020, 303-20).

Others consider *Sulkary* as a "fetish" dance piece. Fetish is a racist term indoctrinated by colonial oppressors to label any material object of spiritual significance

for African people. Despite the residues of colonial rhetoric, new waves of dancers take on this piece under the guidance of its premiering dancers and see performing in the piece as a rite of passage. Several generations without any professional training danced *Sulkary* as their consecration dance. They all confess that they were better artists and human beings after their debut under the iron hand of the demanding choreographer.

Eduardo Rivero was known among his dancers as the “God of Cuban Dance”. He turned his instructions into an atelier, where he profiled and magnified the Rivera style. Most of his choreographies came out of Guerra’s training. Santiago province reaffirmed itself as the dance capital of the Caribbean, due to the reception given to Rivera's work and specifically this piece staged in most of the region's dance companies. It became a classic in Santiago /Oriente Province of Cuba, and in other Caribbean Island repertoires.

*Sulkary* is a complex dance to assess. In the rendition of the performance offered by Silvio Divo in 2014, he dances Asojano with a corporeally visible catharsis or what appears to be transcendence, signaling healing. His version of Asojano was more like ritual theater than *Sulkary*, which is modeled for the international dance market. I can recall wanting to make the costumes glitzier because I love sparkles and such, and he refused, wanting the dancers to look like traditional ritual dancers, with a plain head wrap tied to the front and a white dress with arms covered and a circle skirt that did not necessarily need to have a big flare to it.

This minimal costuming brought something out in the student’s corporeality. There was no costume to hide behind; furthermore, the costumes suggested nudity, possibly



harkening to Adam and Eve. From a socio-political standpoint, when examining *Sulkary*, the time was the 70's, a time when young artists were traveling to other countries, and sexual liberation was a major topic. Guerra had just been suspended from the national company because of a choreography he presented before *Sulkary* that was considered pornographic by some of the higher-ups. All these elements give depth to the artistic creation, interpretation, and speculation of *Sulkary*. In *Sulkary*, the Asojano is the grounded step, what Schwall calls the "heavy step" (Schwall 2020).

From a precolonial perspective, I would add nuance to this because that movement is an earthy dance. Asojano is like Sakpata in Dahomey, who dances an earth dance. It is not just heavy in an exploration of weight and matter, but it is grounded as in other Orisha dances. It came from the earth and the body dancing. Furthermore, Asojano and Sakpata are healer spirits from the earth, so when I see what Schwall refers to as the heavy step, I consider the vibration of red clay earth, green lush plants, and wellbeing. It also considers the power of this body to heal itself. *Sulkary* in my reading with the men is an exploration into the wonders of the body, in its rawness - its raw power.

A key point to consider is the creation of the form Danza itself. *Sulkary* was created by a Cuban trying to fuse Afro-Cuban heritage and contemporary dance so that it could be presented on the world stage. Guerra, Rivera's teacher, created what came to be known as Danza with a group of artists, a couple of whom were not Cuban, though part of their work together was to define Cuban movement. Guerra combined Cuban folkloric movement, yoga, and modern dance to create Cuban modern dance or Danza. This can be seen in the movement choices of Rivera. Ideas of Spirit, co-presence, and *the drop then lift* that I

discuss in Silvo's rendition of Asojano are replaced by the meditative catharsis associated with yoga.

Those who are literate in Cuban ritual dance will read the piece differently from those who have notions of "exotic" Latin and Caribbean people. Those with political perspectives might find something else in the piece than will artists, dancers or Africans with cultural connections to the dance. My interest is to ensure that the perspectives of the artists and dancers are included in the assessments. Included in the views of the artists and dancers for *Sulkary* is the history, cosmology, epistemology, and ontology behind African aesthetics. There are lessons on life and living inside *Sulkary* that stand as counter-narratives to enslavement and colonial control, that are liberating and demonstrative of humans as sovereign beings. In the West African world: dance is art; dance is about the art of cultural practice; and in that practice lives wisdom.

### **Synthesizing *Sulkary* and the Bahiana at the Opening Ceremony**

In my analysis of these dances at FESTAC '77, I found it interesting that both dances represented Aje energy in vastly different ways, though they share historical lineage by way of Yoruba and Dahomeyan spiritual traditions of Ifa (Yoruba) and Fa (Dahomey) and dances of the Orisha/Orixá/Oricha. What is illegible, using Jasmine Johnson's term, is that these two dances that portray different body types, in different costumes, and different ages, all represent Aje energy - not to be confused with Western ideas of femininity but rather inscribed with infinite possibility. In the case of these Brazilian and Cuban dancing

bodies what is most critical is that they are inscribed with Ashe (*axé/aché/asë*) or a divine blessing, a powerful energy within everyone and in everything; it is also a major aspect of the Ifá divining system within both Lukumí and Candomblé. Ifá has been preserved through memorizing and chanting its tenets, which are contained within hundreds of storied verses within each of 256 *Odus* or figurative patterns, made by throwing chains and kola nuts (in other forms, cowries, or coconut shells). The stories utilize the psychological tendencies of human beings concerning each other and serve as a deciphering tool to understand how to maintain spiritual balance in the material world (Daniel and Eloi, in press, 19; cf. Abimbola 1975; Mason 2016).

This example of dance illustrates how dance at FESTAC '77 portrayed archetypes of liberated bodies to access an unencumbered body in the case for Black women. From these two dances and the dance discussed by my US interlocutors most of whom were Black Women revealed to me how FESTAC '77 was a space that was inclusive to Black Women, where all bodies were liberated and sovereign. The Aje dancing archetype projected agency in a multiplicity of ways. The dances of the Orisha/Orixa liberated the psyches of colonial minded people offering alternative views on living. Because ways of thinking and behaving were preserved in the dancing bodies of Africans who landed in the Americas. The academic practice of continually reifying the colonial-based epistemologies (a practice that even new discourses rely upon) will perpetually have scholars chanting negative ideas on the Black and African female body, continually branding it, stealing from it, disregarding it and her ideas and right to self-interpret. The sovereign dancing body is the body outside of the colonial education box. As stated before and according to *Ebony*

magazine, the FESTAC Colloquium was about decolonizing education and was referred to as the heart of the festival. If the colloquium was the heart, the dances were the sparks of life that stimulated the heart to keep beating.

A distinct aspect of colonial rule is the process of education and assimilation of oppressed people. dances have liberated and will continue to liberate the colonial subject and descendants in the “New World.” Though critics claim that FESTAC ’77 was a failed cultural project that produced culture from the appropriation of imperial Europe and incompetent and corrupt Nigerian leaders, these statements are misinformed tools of neo-colonialism, reducing Black and African culture to that which the Western gaze can cannot read. Those who agree with the slanted or negative information surrounding FESTAC ’77 are unaware of all the information within and between dances and the actual people who participated in the event, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 5. FESTAC ’77 made a profound move to unite all that information, mind, body, and soul. In African traditions, dance, which encompasses all the Humanities, increases the overall agility of a person's mind, body, and soul, as in many other indigenous dance traditions.

This integration, while intangible, manifests visibly within the Diaspora dancing body. For instance, we find deep religiosity and spiritual vibrations in Orisha dancing bodies of Cuba and Brazil while dancing through the bodies of Orisha worshipers, offering transcendence and alternate reality. Haitian Vodou trance dancing also manifests the intangible through heightened religious and dance expression. Also, masked dancing bodies found in Cuba, Martinique, Puerto Rico, Afro-Mexico, Afro-Venezuela, Afro-Columbia, Afro-Uruguay, as well as in New Orleans' masking Black Indians (who practice

US Voodoo), display the intangible in heightened performative levels combining history, myth, strength, protection, and redemption, juxtaposing restricted and explosive movement.

An essential aspect of African Diaspora religious orientation is the deep-rooted connection to indigeneity, which is firmly intertwined with the natural environment and divine Spirit. Indigeneity yields belief in a divine birthright and grants the inherent sovereignty, independence, and self-determination of individuals. Also, the dancing religions are grounded in ancient divination systems that contain narratives on living in harmony with the environment and the cosmos. The data collected by Dr. Yvonne Daniel and me on the topic of spiritual practices points to a Diaspora dancing body like those of the Bahiana and the dancers of *Sulkary*, features vibrational energy and purpose, historical lineages, and respectful belief in eldership and ancestors. Concepts of personhood are established that consider sovereignty a divine birthright, and challenges colonial ideas of sovereignty. FESTAC '77 contended with this notion and dance played a critical role in that protrusion.

FESTAC '77 took on a spiritual approach through the use of dance. Dr. Imani Kai Johnson's book, *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: The Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop*, where she discusses “invisible connective tissue” (I. Johnson 2023), that takes place in break dancing cyphers. These intangible connections exist in other dances of *Sulkary* and the Candomblé Orixá dances. Dr. I. K. Johnson's discussion considers evidence of non-verbal markers in Black and African dance. This is pertinent to this dissertation because it considers movement analysis from a felt and sensed place. The

dancers at FESTAC '77, many of which did not speak the same language as other dancers but watched their dances, came to sense ideas and themes of self-determination, self-acceptance, and integration into something larger than themselves. I use this type of informed sensing in my reviews of *Sulkary* and the dance of the Bahiana at the opening ceremony of FESTAC '77, as well as in the description of Cleo Parker Robinson's *Creation, Destruction*, which is directed towards what she felt and spirited. In these examples the dancers are benefiting from dancing whether someone is watching them or not.

Furthermore, they embody archetypes that empower people who read the dances from precolonial and transhistorical perspectives. This gives ontological integrity. Allowing identities that are taken from colonial boxes, which possesses liminality, and finds power in alternative value systems. Dance ethnography does not have to be solely ocular when it incorporates precolonial and transhistorical approaches. In its regalia, the archetypal body takes on information and cultural inscriptions without verbal instruction. The collective community of dancers and practitioners then can apply dance to a body that is not necessarily fully dancing all that it represents though the potential is within their presence, as in the case of the Bahiana. This speaks to what I understand as a dance practitioner. My experience also influences my interpretation style regarding the case studies, which can be culture-sensitive or cultural interpretations.

A discourse was developed in the Bay Area. African and African Diaspora dance held alternative identities to simply racialized bodies. The presence of the powerful Black woman emerges, liminality in gender, reconnection to cultural heritage, etc. These

discourses exist in New York and Chicago, which led to shows like *Àgò*, produced by Blanche Brown, artistic director of Group Petit La Croix and one of my teachers. Like Dr. Yvonne Daniels's book, this shows displayed Haitian, Cuban, and Brazilian dance within the same show. It was entitled *Àgò*, a word used in all these dance modalities but has Yoruba origins.

Additionally, performances like Cuba Caribe, the Black Choreographers Festival, San Francisco Carnaval, and The Ethnic Dance Festival would display different dance styles from Black and African people that would show connections. Dimensions Dance Theater, under the direction of Deborah Vaughan, my mentor, did a similar show to Blanche Brown's performance of *Àgò* (1999) and Dimensions' *Down the Congo Line* premiered in 2012. Vaughan expounded upon the work and it was presented in the round at the Yerba Buena Theater in San Francisco. She conceived the project after traveling to the Congo in 2011. She saw the obvious connections and invited several artists to express their lineage and influences from the Congo. This performance using veteran artists of different genres, presented dance from three Diaspora areas of Cuba, New Orleans, and Brazil. There were also Congolese artists contributing to the work. Vaughan masterfully choreographed a full-length performance that heightened the commonalities between the regions as well as the cosmologies/philosophies of the dances.

Viewing the video footage of dances in the CBAAC archives, I had to narrow my selection to just three dances that would be further analyzed or "read." Regarding the case studies, I picked dances from cultures I have been immersed in of which I share a connection either through initiation, immersed field work as participant-observer, or years

of dance studio study with Master teachers or professional performances, which tends to accompany a learning process that is more informative than just taking studio classes. In the case of *Sulkary*, it came from Cuba (Campoanor 2023) and dance teachers, Sifredo, Emese, Royland, Teatro Nacional de Cuba (Summer Intensive in Cuba) and I received my Guerreros in an Ifa House of Orumilla in Florida.

In terms of Brazilian dance, as symbolized by the Bahiana in the opening ceremony of FESTAC, I did all the above but have yet to travel to Bahia, Brazil, and I am not initiated in Candomblé. My perspective is based on my knowledge of Orisha dance from Cuba and my familiarity with the Odu system. I did this because I wanted to test my own theory about the precolonial perspective in dance and wanted to create a model that would allow people who work in different dance styles/groupings to utilize the CBAAC archives in ways that apply to them. I chose African Diaspora dances for my case study because I have the most experience with them, especially Haitian dance, which is the culture of my bloodlines. I have traveled to the African countries of the African Diaspora dances I researched, including Nigeria and Dahomey/Benin, which encompasses both *Sulkary* and Bahiana dances.

From precolonial anthropologic and historical research with Dr. Yvonne Daniel, I found similarities between the regions that allowed me to make educated guesses about the dances at FESTAC '77. For instance, dance embodiment of epistemic principles and philosophies and ancestor veneration is prevalent among the forms I have discussed. The personification of forces of nature. Dance takes from these elements and puts them in conversation through corporeal language. The physical movement, corporeal step, wisdom



of the culture, depth of the epistemologies, and the vibration of the movement created the choreographies that were presented at FESTAC '77. In dance, a major component is knowing where the movement starts, as LaTanya Tigner said in an interview. This point is essential corporeally and in terms of history or origin story. Where the movement begins and what initiates the movement, and how it shifts contextually.

When older people dance, they are steeped in the wisdom of the dance. So, without a lot of excess, they make complexity authentic. Conversely, I have encountered children with as much swag but not the experience that would give that kind of funk. Writing about the intangible, I access spirit through dance, singing, and drumming. Observing dance has a level of empathy which I sense from discussions with my interlocutors that was critical at FESTAC '77. When all those things are happening, I feel like I am inside of everything, like a created vortex. I feel like my ancestors speak to me through dance. After dancing, I sometimes feel like I do after sleeping: a sense of clarity as if I have the answers.

The non-verbal and intangible parts of the dance are what is felt and provokes utterance and orality. It is the energy within us all to call down spirit which is vibration in my perspective. When I dance, I feel like I am inside of something. I feel danced; I feel the arrival. I feel like I am in communion. I feel like I had a night full of dreams that made me wake up with clarity. Dancing is like my own personal sweat that brings clarity and strengthens me. The ocular is part of the non-verbal in the case of the Bahiana who makes you remember Big Mama.

## Chapter 5 – Ontological Healing at the Family Reunion



Figure 10. Image of Marcea Daiter, dancer with Darlene Blackburn Dance Company US contingent, on the cover of Nigerian Daily Times at FESTAC '77 (1977). Photo courtesy Marcea Daiter's collection.

At the opening ceremonies for FESTAC '77—which had over 41 countries processioning around the huge stadium, dressed in their traditional garb and doing their traditional dances with an audience of approximately 100,000 people (about the population of Montana)—the largest applause was given to the Africans who had been uprooted [African-Americans and Diasporans] (Gaunt 2009), as seen in the UNESCO video: *FESTAC '77 - Lagos Festival*.

The quote below and photo above speak to the energy and the way the US participants at FESTAC '77 was “overwhelmingly” well received:

“Of the many US groups singled out for special mention in the Nigerian Press, [Nontsizi] Dolores Cayou’s Wajumbe (Far West) was praised for its spellbinding work in the cavernous National Stadium. The Darlene Blackburn Troupe (Midwest) was praised for the strength of its dance effort and was rerun on TV several times during the festival. The DC Repertory Company (Upper South) and Julian Swain’s Inner City Dance Theater (Midwest) were thunderously applauded for their scheduled and impromptu performances. The dynamic Dimensions Dance Theater (Far West North) was a sustained sensation. Perhaps the greatest FESTAC ’77 tribute to the dance contingency was the choice of the Chuck Davis Dance Company (NY) as one of the international acts to perform for 60,000 persons in the final Gala Night of Stars. The Davis Company performed a traditional Yoruba ritual involving authentic dances and music, including language and instruments. The ceremony was repeatedly interrupted by applause led by thousands of Yorubas in the audience. Likewise, in the final FESTAC ’77 Gala night, ‘symptomatic of the mood, genius and talent fusion was the inspired multicontinental 20-odd piece orchestra assembled in a single day by Stevie Wonder” (Donaldson in Chimurenga 2020: 33-39).

During that historic moment of the sixties and the seventies, many Black people in the US were not yet aware of Black people around the world. They were just coming to realize that Black people live all over the world on every continent and speak many different languages. Today with the advent of the internet and the increase in travel to Africa and the Caribbean, Black people are more aware of our own diversity and connections.

In a personal interview with Tumani Onibiyi, he explained how during the period of the FESTAC ’77, besides the issues of discrimination there was a great divide between the many different Black people around the world.

Below is an excerpt:

**TUMANI ONIBIYI:** You don't understand because we didn't think we were going to get there [FESTAC '77]. The Black Caucus had to step in for us to be able to be there. It was so heavy when we finally made it. It was surreal, people didn't want to sleep at night. You were sitting in the dirt making sign language to each other, scratching out pictures in the sand to communicate with people who didn't speak your language. If you met a guy or girl, you had to break it down to the most basic level to communicate.

African Americans who participated in traditional schooling might have gone through every level of education including the college level and not been made aware of the African Diaspora or the diversity of Africans and their cultures. However, many Black people in Africa and the Diaspora knew of African Americans, though there were not connections between the groups, as we see today due to the internet and the increase in Black travel groups etc.

FESTAC '77, like FESTAC '66, allowed a moment of reconnection that would shift ontological perceptions of self for many of the artists from the US as I imagine it did for all who attended. The US artists who went to FESTAC '77 had access to an array of African and Caribbean dance teachers during the period from the 60's to the 70's. They would also travel to New York, which was considered a vital epicenter for arts and culture, especially in places like the Bronx where heavily diverse African Diaspora communities flourished with cultural music and dance. However, nothing would compare to what the US participants would experience at FESTAC '77. In the following interviews, I conducted

with US dancers and drummers who attended FESTAC '77, the consensus on the festival was that it was an overwhelmingly beautiful and epic experience. Those budding African American artists who traveled to FESTAC'77 would be part of an event that brought together the most accomplished cultural artists from all over the African world. Moreover, this collection of performing culture bearers from Africa, the US, Latin America, Europe, and the Caribbean invited to participate at FESTAC '77 allowed African Americans to see a cross-section of African styles and find the connections that exist between them and other African-based styles and people. They were all baptized in the multiplicity of cultures on the continent at FESTAC '77.

FESTAC '77 would provide a space for US artists that would transform them into the prolific progenitors of African Diaspora Dance as we know it today. People like Chuck Davis, founder of *DanceAfrica*, in Brooklyn, New York, Deborah Vaughan, director of *Dimensions Dance Theater* in Oakland, California, and Cleo Parker Robinson, of *Cleo Parker Robinson Dance* in Denver, Colorado were propelled into their life purposes of being culture workers through the arts. The 482 US delegates from North America traveled as gifted artists at the beginning of their careers in dance and music. They would become the teachers of thousands and thousands of young people and audiences of every race and nationality, educating them and sharing beautiful African cultural wisdom, accessing joy, awakening agency, and dancing power, with people worldwide. That trip to Nigeria would be the richest lesson in their early careers, rooting them to decolonized ideas of African culture and people.

During the period before FESTAC '77, the urgency of movements of equality played a large part in preparing the psyche of US participants for the festival. In the following quote by Marilyn Nance, she elucidates on the state of America and the experience. Marilyn Nance, one of the official FESTAC '77 archivists, produced a book of photographs about FESTAC '77 entitled, *Last Day in Lagos* (2022), with images of the festival.

In her book, Nance describes the environment she was steeped in prior to the festival:

“I grew up in the era of the Civil Rights Movement, but my teenage years were during the period known as the Black Arts Movement. Those in my generation didn't know it by name then, but that's because we were just in it. We went to Black cultural rallies, listening to recordings of Malcolm X, Pharoah Sanders, Nina Simone, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. We would see the plays of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and Ed Bullins. I was a member of the African American Students Association, which met on Saturdays in the offices of the African American Teachers Association. We learned so much about history and music just being around each other and elders like Queen Mother Moore and Jitu Weusi” (Nance 2021, 43).

And as we know, with music is dance. Dance scholar Halifu Osumare also writes about the period of the 60's and 70s as a dancer in her book *Dancing Blackness* (2021). In her book, she comments on the way she, like many artists of the time, used dances as her primary form of expression as a young Black artist during the period around the Civil Rights and Voting movements. Osumare, like my interlocutors, had access to African American dance pioneers who started their work as early as the 40s. Iconic dancers, dance-researchers, and dance-scholars like Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, whose journeys in their careers in academia was as much about their research as it was about excavating

their identities as African Americans. Another remarkable ingredient to the pre-FESTAC history is the training US participants gained from master African artists who migrated to the United States.

For instance, in the Bay Area, artists like Director of Fua Dia Congo Malonga Casquelourd from the Congo, co-Directors of Diamano Coura, Zak Diouf and Naomi Diouf from Senegal and Liberia respectively, CK Ladzekpo, from Ewe-land in Ghana, and Sano Sanel who was the former director of Les Ballets Africaines from Guinea and Jean-León Destiné from Haiti, would inscribe US participants who studied with them, like Deborah Vaughan, Blanche Brown, with dances that had their own philosophies that feature Africanist cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies.

The aesthetic dimensions of the pioneering pre-FESTAC artists' cultural dances questioned stereotypes with which African American people were being labeled. Sanel and Diouf's work pointed to precolonial histories of Malian Djelis, and Ladzekpo's Ewe dances like Malonga's Congo dances, featured the aesthetic of life force regeneration. All the above dances are ancestral dances for the Haitian dances that Jean-León Destiné taught, whether US artists were aware of it or not during the early 70s. All these dances venerate ancestors, and profess the sacredness of the body, while the songs and rhythms demonstrate connections to land, experience, legacies, and ways of life. The political moment was met with aesthetic responses that promoted healthier perceptions of the body-being for African American dancers and drummers in the 60's to the 70's through African-rooted dance, setting the stage for what the US participants of FESTAC '77 would essentially build upon with greater dimension in their work at FESTAC '77.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Katherine Dunham assisted with the organization of FESTAC '66. Her contribution to FESTAC festivals cannot be overstated. Her anthropological view of African and Black dances revealed the ways dance is a critical aspect for African Americans or anyone in the Diaspora who developed ideas of self from colonial education, that often erased, dismissed, or shrouded Black and African cultural connections, significance, and histories.

The poem, "For My People", by Margaret Walker, was used as the official FESTAC '77 anthem for US participants. The first nine stanzas serve as a compilation of challenges endured by African Americans since their bodies, designated as chattel, were trafficked into slavery. The legacy of that atrocity would follow them through the Jim Crow era, into the Civil Rights era, and is reflected in the poem. The poet provides a recapitulation of African American history disconnected from precolonial Black and African Identity, reads as dismal and lacking in possibility as in the fourth stanza of the poem: "...in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different, and nobody cared, and nobody wondered, and nobody understood." The ending stanza of the poem serves as a statement praying for something better, invoking the chant: "let a new day arise." This new day for the US artist was their experience at FESTAC '77.

In many ways, FESTAC '77 allowed a profound moment of recapitulation, for the collective psyche of the Americans who attended, allowing ontological healing from the identity of downtrodden to a sacred body-being with agency. It was as if the US collective ancestral consciousness made a 360-degree turn, when they processioned around the



stadium in the opening ceremony of FESTAC '77 (as discussed in Chapter III). Though my interlocutors are primarily English-speaking, as necessitated by my IRB regulations, FESTAC dance participants had access to a cathartic awakening that would shape their lives as artists in the world. The artists, dancers, and drummers I interviewed came from socioeconomic backgrounds that allowed them to go to advanced levels of schooling.

It would be through their activities as artists, dancers, and musicians that many of the US participants encountered dance and positive examples of Black identity prior to traveling to FESTAC '77. To be clear, African Americans have always been surrounded by culture. heritage exists in stories, children's games, participation in churches with "Shouting"<sup>25</sup> cultures, praise dance and choirs, drill teams, Black fraternity and sorority dances, or studio and community center classes like tap, modern, jazz, Afro-Haitian dance, and a plethora of ways that were in plain sight, though to understand these dances would come later from these FESTAC participants.

Haitian dance would be the first form of dance many African American people would encounter in the United States through Katherine Dunham<sup>26</sup> and Jean-León Destiné<sup>27</sup>. Dances of Haiti speak to ideas of divine sovereignty and political sovereignty from the international system of slavery, along with ideas of harmony, and as well as an

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<sup>25</sup> A shout or ring shout is an ecstatic, transcendent religious ritual, practiced by enslaved people from Africa in the West Indies and the United States, in which worshipers move in a circle singing, while shuffling and stomping their feet and clapping their hands. Polyrythmically with a particular aesthetic filled with African rooted religiosity.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200152685/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-Diaspora/jean-leon-destine/>

array of topics designed to educate the dancer on being spiritually cleansed, healed, and whole, as from the dances like Yanvalou (Haitian dance or rejuvenation), Petwo (Haitian dance associated with the Haitian Revolution), and ancestral Haitian dances like Kongo and Ibo, that point to African precolonial identity. Given the fact that Haiti was the first and only Black Republic that liberated itself from chattel slavery, those danced epistemologies of humanitarianism and sovereignty in dances from the Petwo Haitian dance lineage started to be steeped in the American body as far back as 1804, the year of Haitian Independence.

Here, I will list some of the pioneering cultural workers in dance-drum traditions who influenced the pre-FESTAC '77 dance knowledge bases in the States. These pioneering artists valued African, Caribbean, and Indigenous dance heritages and included the necessity of research in their art forms. Black experience as well as epistemologies and ideas of self and the world would be communicated through dance training and the choreographic works of these people.

Some of those pre-FESTAC '77 teaching pioneers were: Katherine Dunham, international dance icon, anthropologist, and activist; Pearl Primus, African American, dance icon, African dance progenitor in the US; Jean-León Destiné, iconic Haitian dancer born and raised in Haiti; Lavinia Williams<sup>28</sup>, African American dance icon and Haitian dance progenitor; Ruth Beckford<sup>29</sup>, Northern California dance icon and Haitian dance

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<sup>28</sup> <https://archives.nypl.org/scm/25573>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/ruth-beckford-40#:~:text=In%201953%2C%20Beckford%20taught%20at,Beckford%20African%2DHaitian%20Dance%20Company.>

progenitor; and Darlene Blackburn<sup>30</sup>, Chicago dance icon and African and Caribbean dance progenitor.

These pioneering artists/anthropologists/soul-seekers from the United States looked to Africa to better understand themselves. Katherine Dunham opened her first dance school in 1933 in Chicago. She traveled to Haiti to conduct research on Haitian dance in 1934 and would go on to open her New York school in 1944. That same year, Trinidadian Pearl Primus would create her first piece entitled, *African Ceremonial* (1944), inspired by her early studies of her Black heritage. In 1948, Primus received a Rosenwald Foundation scholarship to travel to Africa to study dance, which would become the first of many research trips, to countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. Lavinia Williams was a student of Katherine Dunham from 1940 to 1945 and the star dancer of Alvin Ailey. Williams would replace Jean-León Destiné, working with the National Dance Company of Haiti, playing an influential role in the development of modern and folkloric dances in Haiti, as well as in Jamaica, Guyana, the Bahamas, and the United States. Williams merged US modern dance sensibilities into the presentation of Haitian dance.

Jean-León Destiné brought Haitian dance to the United States in 1941. He studied Haitian dance in a studio context in Haiti, but also assigned a primary importance to research. Along with his students, Destiné researched Haitian dance in its daily and

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/darlene-blackburn-39>

ceremonial context. While in Haiti, he would bring his students to attend Haitian dance in context in the countryside and ritual settings. In the US, he would bring his dance expertise to both coasts.

Ruth Beckford, who studied in New York and taught at Dunham's New York studio starting in 1953, went on to open the Ruth Beckford African-Haitian Dance Company when she moved back to Oakland, California. This is where Beckford, a former principal dancer in the Katherine Dunham Company, set up shop teaching Haitian and Dunham technique, where she is recognized as "Mother of Black dance." Ruth Beckford helped found the Black Dance Association in 1965, and in 1970 she worked in the same capacity for the Cultural Ethnic Affairs Guild. She closed her studio in 1975. Deborah Vaughan, choreographer, and culture worker, whose interview is below, was a student and protégé of Ruth Beckford.

Dr. Halifu Osumare speaks about Ms. Beckford in her book *Dancing in Blackness* (2018).

"Ruth Beckford was the hub for the serious black dancer and those white dancers who felt the call of 'a different drummer.' Miss Beckford (Miss B) became a teacher-mentor to Drs. Naima Gwen Lewis, Yvonne Daniel, and Albirda Rose, as well as Nontsizi Cayou, Deborah Vaughan, and me, all of whom helped establish variations on the Dunham Technique legacy in the Bay Area and across the country. Every one of Miss B's classes was strenuous, with a meticulous approach to learning the Dunham Technique and Haitian dance, all leading to nothing short of self-mastery... Moving across the floor was divided into two parts: (1) what Miss B called 'sight-reading' ... Sightreading trained our eyes to become aware of subtle nuances of movement without being verbally instructed.... Over a semester of classes, it was also amazing to observe the change in the keenness of our observations that '**sight-reading**' developed in Miss B's students. It was, in fact, an ingenious method of developing our ability to learn choreography quickly. These were the elements

of dance I was acquiring from a completely new cultural perspective in Ruth Beckford's Afro Haitian dance classes" (2021, 23-24).

Ms. B's 'sight-reading' would become the hallmark of necessity for dancers in the Bay Area who aspired to be African-rooted or African Diaspora dancers. This inscription included in Ms. B's training would allow Vaughan to travel to FESTAC '77 with a method of seeing the differences that exist between African styles. This would go on to affect her choreographic ability which lead her to be a prolific researcher-choreographer of African and African Diaspora traditions in Oakland and she discusses the vital role of FESTAC '77 in her life history, and the way it allowed her to see the many dimensions of Black culture and dance.

Darlene Blackburn started her formal training in Jamaican dance in 1967. Blackburn became the Artist-in-Residence at Purdue University in 1974, and she remained there until 1976. The following year, she, along with ten members of her dance troupe, would be invited to participate in FESTAC '77.

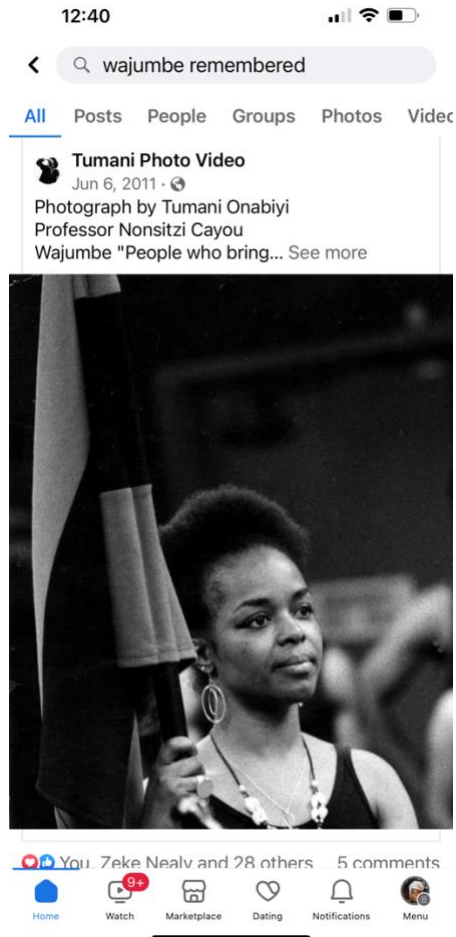


Figure 11. Photographer: Tumani Onabiyi. Image of Nonsitzi Cayou, founder/choreographer, Wajumbe Dance Company, San Francisco, CA, US contingent at FESTAC '77 (1977) in Lagos, Nigeria, from Tumani Onabiyi's, Wajumbe Remembered Facebook Page.

The Black dance scene in Oakland as we know it today was shaped by Nonsitzi Cayou<sup>31</sup>, director of Wajumbe from San Francisco, California. As a young dancer in the nineties in the Oakland Bay Area, I often heard stories of the fierce Wajumbe dancers.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.postnewsgroup.com/dr-nonsitzi-cayou-82/>

Blanche Brown<sup>32</sup>, dancer, as well as Tumani Onabiyi, drummer, were members of Nontsizi Cayou's dance company, Wajumbe.

“Nontsizi Cayou eventually became a seminal figure in the development of the black dance movement in the Bay Area. In fact, over time, she helped Bay Area black dance add its voice to the revolutionary artistic mix with her dance company Wajumbe Performance Ensemble that included African-based dance forms. Expanding beyond classical modern dance, Cayou started this dance company out of S.F. State University (formerly S.F. State College) to reflect an increasing black consciousness that was about reclaiming African culture as a part of a critical “new” self-perception. Dancers such as Blanche Brown, who went on to form the Bay Area Haitian dance company Group Petit la Croix in the 1980s, started with Wajumbe, as well as the late Katherine Dunham Technique instructor and dancer Alicia Pierce. Cayou was able to negotiate a slot for Wajumbe at the 1977 FESTAC (Second World Festival of Black Arts) in Lagos, Nigeria, testifying to the company's hard work to become a dance representative of the Bay Area. San Francisco State University became a primary site of a new black consciousness, not only through student political activism but also through dance and cultural activism. Yet this was not the region's first experience of African-based dance” (Osumare 2018, 22).

Blanche Brown, Director of Troupe Petit La Croix, said that Cayou's choreographic style heavily influenced her, often remarking upon Cayou's incredible facility of choreography. Brown studied with Jean Leon Destin  and Mona Estime from New York, and she traveled to FESTAC '77 as a Wajumbe dancer, along with Tumani Onabiyi (whom readers met in Chapter 1), who studied with Malonga Casquelourd, and was a drummer in Fua Dia Congo, and was a member of the Nairobi Project at San

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.worldartswest.org/blanche-brown.html>

Francisco State University that advocated for African American students and Black Studies programming.

In 1988, Brown formed the dance troupe Group Petit La Croix. Brown created the troupe to fully express and visually explain Haitian culture by combining Western choreography and techniques with traditional Haitian dance and drumming. Her choreographic style relied more upon ritual movements than dramatized athleticism, which gets layered on most African and African Diaspora representations of dance. However, her overall aesthetic remained close to folkloric structures of choreography with staging that gave the theme of rituals in motion in real time. This aesthetic might be an attribute of the fact that she became a priestess of the Orisha Oshun. Blanche had the only professional Haitian dance company on the West Coast for years and was the mother of almost every Haitian dance company that originated after Petit La Croix, on the west coast, including Project Reconnect Oakland; my company, ELWAH Movement, LA and Oakland; Rara Tou Limen, Oakland; Ase Dance Ensemble in New York; and Banyan Dance, Ohio. In 1977, after returning from FESTAC '77, she was the first dancer to be appointed to the San Francisco Arts Commission and served from 1977-1981. Today, Brown still teaches and challenges people from all social classes at The Oberlin Dance Commons (ODC), in San Francisco.





Figure 12. Photo by Marilyn Nance, FESTAC '77 closing ceremony: Wajumbe Dance Company, US contingent with Moshéh Milon and Blanche Brown, 1977 in *Last Days in Lagos*. Onabanjo. CARA/Fourthwall Books. (2020, 81).

In the history presented above about what US FESTAC '77 dancers and artists experienced prior to traveling to the festival, I have outlined how African American dance anthropologists, culture workers, the influx of master African artists, and the movement toward authentic equality and humanization of Black people in the US from the 1940s to 1977, shaped the artist that would travel to FESTAC. I have also introduced some of the interlocutors who traveled to FESTAC and their dance lineages to pre-FESTAC dance pioneers. What should be added to this list but was not included in my analysis are the communities of immigrants from different places in Africa and the Diaspora that fortified these dance communities, outside of the studio and the stage was where they started to learn of the foods and spiritual practices that are extended from the dance-drum traditions they were learning, and performing in pre-FESTAC era.

The above history offers a frame for the dance knowledge that was accessible to US FESTAC artists prior to traveling to FESTAC '77. From my analysis, I have come to understand that during the 40s – 70's, African Americans received a glimmer of the scope and volume of Black and African dance as a genre of art and culture, preparing them for their sojourns to FESTAC '77. Places like New York, Oakland, and Chicago - epicenters of Black and African Diaspora Dance, continued to flourish on their return from FESTAC as we will see in the next set of oral history interviews.

The budding genre of African Diaspora dance at FESTAC '77 went through transitions and evolutions, only recently started taking on new nuanced dimensions because of the work of progenitors like Deborah Vaughan and Blanche Brown. They were only touching the tip of the mountain top in the states and would be ever changed by the actual

magnitude of the Black and African cultural dance they would be part of at FESTAC '77, affecting their “work” of cultural restoration and identity for African Americans. dance modalities allow people who have a history like the one referenced in the poem, *For My People*, shared by my interlocutors to contend with the geopolitical state of anti-Blackness, through dance. However, it must be stated as several of these artists are my teachers, they did not teach the different styles they studied as reactions to racialized situations, but rather as proactive ways of life.

As a dancer in Blanche Brown’s *Petit La Croix* and Deborah Vaughan’s *Dimensions*, I was having the time of my life. Dancing in their companies helped me to become more aware of my historical cultural background and to understand the necessity to celebrate them and continue them, not simply as a Haitian, African American, Black dancer, but as a human being.

For me, like my teachers, I danced dimensions of archetypes that looked like us, forces in nature, images of Gods, heroes, heroines, lineages, and alternative ways of knowing and seeing a world that centered, valued, and respected Black and African people. This was through choreography artists like Nontsizi Cayou, Deborah Vaughan and Cleo Parker Robinson that would theorize their imposed identities. African culture and art provided people who had been disenfranchised a space to embody aspects of themselves that would elevate them in life and elevate their artistic contributions in their communities.

In the oral history interviews that follow, my interlocutors describe exactly how FESTAC provided a space to reimagine, reconnect, and reaffirm, ideas of self, personhood,

and engagement in the world as a Black person living in the United States. The first interview is with Baba Mosheh Milon, prolific artist, drummer, drum maker, mindfulness practitioner, and resident artist for numerous arts organizations and institutions.

Baba Mosheh is one of the resident artists at the historic Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in Oakland, California, and his photo was on the Malonga mural, which has been lost due to gentrification in Oakland. He has performed locally, nationally, and internationally. Moreover, Baba Mosheh has taught drumming, as a meditative art form, to thousands of children drumming. He started the dance company Bantaba.

**BABA MOSHEH.** The moment you stepped on the African soil!! It's like you could faint, from joy. Wow. It's like you were brought back to your birthplace. Back to where you started. Your ancestors started this journey. It had people crying together who didn't even know each other, joyful, screaming... all kinds of things; it was a wild scene. And since then, my life has been dedicated to bringing people together to find their roots. I never saw any negativity. Everything was beautiful. Everybody was just so happy. Everybody was open and, you know, happy and sharing. It is very hard to describe the moment. It was great! I was 23 years old when I went to Nigeria with the Darlene Blackburn Dance Company. Prior to traveling to Nigeria, I was a part of a company called MUNTU Dance Theatre of Chicago, which is still going on right now. [At FESTAC] we had the opportunity to learn a lot and do many different things. We did several shows in different venues. We performed at the African shrine with Fela Kuti.

In my interview with Baba Mosheh, he articulated his experience at FESTAC '77. His description reveals the way simply arriving in Africa was a cathartic experience that would memorialize the festival as a place ushering in a new day for Black people. Their perceptions were changed in every way. He explains that arriving in Africa was like returning to a home he did not know. For the African American dance delegation from the United States, being in Africa would give them a new understanding of self, where one was not racialized for being Black because in Africa everyone is Black.

I can attest to the catharsis of traveling to Africa as a Black woman. I felt stereotypes associated with being Black in America fall away. Seeing the president, officers, schoolteachers... everyone, being Black like me meant that I did not have to be guarded about racism and epidermalization. In my fieldwork in Africa, I traveled to the “doors of no return” in Nigeria at Badagry Slave Dungeon, in Ghana at Elmina and Cape Coast Slave Dungeon/Castle, and In Benin at Ouidad Door of No Return. I learned from the oral historians there, that names like Jackson, Johnson, Gibson, and Robinson, were created from the taking of the slave trafficker's name, like Jack, and adding” son” to the end. This was quite an awakening. However, as an African-rooted folkloric artist, I also recognized names like Badagry, Ogou Badagri in Haitian and Cuban cosmology, and Ouidad, the name and town associated with Wedo the Rainbow snake deities in Brazilian and Haitian cosmology. These names were like signs in a road map to my origin story as an African American, Haitian, and descendant of the African diaspora. The origin story of those US artists were rewritten from colonial histories where that represented slavery as

the beginning of history for Black people. Instead, their histories might have started in Mali, Ghana, or Nigeria.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Oh, wow. This is interesting because one might be able to track the changes in the sound of the music in the US following FESTAC '77. I also find it interesting, when I was doing archival research and again when I reached Nigeria, I hear from several people including Duro Oni, dean of UNILAG, that Fela Kuti actually protested the festival saying that that the focus was too traditional. Kuti was interested in a more contemporary sound. His music is invariably known for its Afrofuturistic sound though it maintains African indigenous epistemologies and can be categorized as African Jazz. Today one might call him the King of Afrobeat. The sensibility that created that type of music I imagine was prevalent during that era because the choreography of Wajumbe and Dimensions Dance Theater can be compared to that type of fusion of historic moments, African rooted epistemologies staged in contemporary modern, jazz motifs. In this way these choreographers gave commentary on the world around them, while creating beauty and extending the stories of their ancestors. This transhistorical element of the choreography influenced my methodology for this dissertation.

**BABA MOSHEH.** That trip gave me a springboard into African Arts and culture, though I was always that type of person. I was in Chicago and I would get in my low, raggedy car and drive to New York to hang out with new people in New York because New York was the place that we were looking up to when I was coming up because they had Ladjie

Camera, they had Chief Bay and he had all these great artists and various dancers that were coming out of New York because New York was always known as a nuclei for dancers. A dancer who wanted to do well went to New York for African dance and the same was true for drumming. So, in essence, FESTAC was a springboard. And anytime I'm writing anything, or I'm applying for anything, FESTAC always comes up. Because they want to ask you, where did you start? When did you get this idea of drumming? And I always mention FESTAC.

And I will say for sure, drumming is healing. I didn't mention that earlier. But it's very healing. And if you ever look up [Google], "why play drums?", you will understand why it is healing. I work with various therapists and people who deal with mindfulness. Of course, I teach mindfulness. I work with the therapists and counselors in the juvenile justice system as well as the prison system to support the youth. I also work with children attending prestigious arts schools like the Oakland School for the Arts, which I just left on my way here. And every time we work together, we have these circles to *check in* - circles where people *check in* and the children nowadays need to *check in*. They don't like to talk. They don't like to share because they are more comfortable with the phone, or a screen, as opposed to people. The pandemic exasperated this issue. They are attached to a computer or screen most of their day. So, if you even say hello, they don't respond, maybe they nod their head or not. So, we have these conversations about their dairies, to help them learn how to express what they are thinking in a group and work on their socio-emotional skills in public. Yes, the drum in African culture is perfect for that because rhythms are conversations. I teach the children that they cannot just beat their drum louder over

someone else; in polyrhythms, you must listen to what was already there and compliment it with your drumming. I explain to them the drums are a family, that listens to each other and compliments what they hear. It is essential that they are harmonious. Everyone benefits from a harmonious community.

The difference now, compared to back in the day when I was coming up, people used to talk to each other. You get your information from your elders talking about how we did this when we were young, and I'm upset nowadays that children don't want to listen to that. If you say who was Baba Mosheh? And what's his name, how do you spell it? And you know, they're gonna go Google me. And they're gonna try and find out what he's doing. If I'm not in the mix that much, you become less interesting to them, because you're not there online, you're not on social media every day, like, “look at me,” “look what I'm doing.” And therefore, they go to the next person. However, when they touch the drum and drum together, they enjoy it, and it puts smiles on their faces. They have no choice but to appreciate the moment.

**BABA MOSHEH.** They [the youth] see how healing it is. One day I was teaching them, and I was seeing how the polyrhythms of the African rhythms were very confusing for the students. I shared with them that when they gain a handle on staying in rhythm, how much healing that's going to be for your brain. The fact that you could take these parts, put them together, and stay in your place, and not move – that is great focus. It's like being mindful, because drumming focuses you to be present in the moment, appreciating the music of the moment - removing the noise.



It was after FESTAC, that I began to be interested in the meditative element of drumming or mindfulness. In use this mind-body-spirit restorative work in restorative justice as well, to confront trauma educate on the different types of agencies within African wisdom. Meeting Fela at FESTAC - a rebel revolutionary of West Africa - was great as well, people that were standing up, and being a voice for the voiceless, and trying to help those that were underserved, disenfranchised. This is the work I'm doing right now.

The work has shifted recently, and artists need to be aware of the socio-economic situation of the children. Because we have a lot of social-emotional anxiety and mental health crisis issues in the world and certainly in Black and Brown communities. So, if you go somewhere and you want to drop a dance to entertain, you can do that as well, but if you call yourself a teacher, artists must be aware of mental health issues and engage the arts to support and heal the children.

**COLETTE ELOI.** I love it. You are like what they say in Africa—one of the “big trees” in the realm of drumming. You are like the big Baobabs; you carry so much history and profundity in regard to African drumming and you are generous in sharing that wisdom as role model. You are an antenna for the Bay Area that sets off positive light and grounds people and grounds the community, and the work that you do is priceless. [*His office is a school of drumming and a small museum full of drums and photos, in three rooms*]. He has pictures of all the drummers and the wonderful people from the Bay Area, New York, Chicago, and Africa. We can see through Zoom [*he gets up and walks around showing all walls covered in photos of dance and dancers and drummers. There are also drums and instruments to make drums neatly arranged in the room. It is a cultural space*].

**BABA MOSHEH.** Do you see this picture right here? Yeah, that's Darlene Blackburn. That's where we performed. Do you see the FESTAC bus? That was in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. But there is a lot of need to navigate the work we do to heal. It is always about healing. But oftentimes, we don't see that part of it. [The children] have a lot of anxiety - rushing the rhythm; can't be still and unable to express themselves. In my observation as an artist in residence at the different facilities where I teach drumming, this is too common in children.

I've worked at probably 100 schools in the city of Oakland. Right now, I'm presently at about six schools. And I don't do many hours a day. I do one or two here one day, and I'm over at the Hall of Justice with the young people and the juveniles working with them, and you know, a lot of them like to do hip hop and this and that. You try to redirect their language a little bit to be more respectful to each other. I focus the conversations towards healing and uplifting others, with music. I don't only do drumming as an African artist; I also work with different bands: Afro-Cuban bands, jazz bands, blues bands, Second-line bands, and Hip-Hop artists.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wonderful, and you had—Bantaba—that had many of the badass dancers from the Bay Area.

**BABA MOSHEH.** Yes, right next to the amazing Dimensions which I'm next to on the first Malonga Center Mural. We are all family, we improvise and grow from each other and serve as mirrors for each other; Dimensions, Diamano Coura, Samba Funk, and all the other dance groups that work out of the Malonga Center.

**COLETTE ELOI.** I feel like your generation has contributed something that is invaluable, and then, as a Ph.D. candidate, I believe it is important that people know about your colleagues and contemporaries and the type of work you all do.

**BABA MOSHEH.** It's because we have generational energy, across multiple communities.

I have worked with Baba Mosheh and though he speaks about the way young people have a more stoic affect, he manages to bring something out of them, and they love him for it. The next oral history I will present is Deborah Vaughan, a protégé of Ms. Beckford. Ms. Beckford was a legendary dancer, choreographer, teacher, and actress prior to going to FESTAC '77. Beckford's famed Defermery Park dance classes were wildly popular, and people would wait in line to register for a spot in the class every semester for decades. One of her requirements was that all her students should earn a master's degree. As a result of this criterion, she produced the bulk of dance department lead faculty members throughout multiple schools in the Bay Area. Included in that group are: at San Francisco State University; Elendar Barnes, first Chair of Dance at Laney College; Deborah Vaughan, Dance Department Chair of Contra Costa College and formerly at Laney College, Director of Dimensions Dance Theater; Dr. Yvonne Daniel, first contracted Dance Department faculty member in Peralta District (Laney College and Alameda College), later Professor Emerita at Smith College; Dr. Halifu Osumare, Professor Emerita at UC Davis, former Dunham certifier; Dr. Albirda Rose, former Department Chair of San

Francisco State University and former Dunham certifier; Lynn Coles, Dance Department Chair at Laney Community College, to name a few.

Nontsizi Cayou, the Director of Wajumbe Dance Company, dancer, educator, author, choreographer, and international and community activist, started teaching jazz dance at her alma mater, San Francisco State University, in 1963. She began to pursue an interest in African-derived dance and culture. A dance student of Ruth Beckford, she performed professionally in many dance theaters, musical revues, and dance ensembles throughout the United States, eventually founding her own ensemble of dancers, poets, and musicians in 1969, which she called Wajumbe. A Kiswahili word that means ‘people with a message,’ the group Wajumbe was anchored in Cayou’s Project ACE, an Academic and Cultural Enrichment program for under-served children in San Francisco. As Cayou mastered more dance forms—Haitian, Afro-Cuban, and Afro-Jazz, she taught master classes throughout California, and Wajumbe came to represent the vanguard of the Black Arts Movement on the West Coast.

She set the foundation of fusion in African Diaspora dance like the piece she created for FESTAC ’77. Cayou also created a lineage of arts administrators who would continue to create arts programming. Cayou was one of the first arts administrators who would either arrange for African and Caribbean artists to come to the US and/or create programming for them while they were here.

## **DEBORAH VAUGHAN**

Deborah Vaughan is considered a queen mother of Black dance in the Bay Area, though she is unsung in Dance Studies literature. She extends the work of Katherine Dunham and Ruth Beckford in African-rooted dance and has been a force of nature in her work as a community culture worker through the arts, especially through her Rites of Passage Program (ROP) which I had the pleasure of working for many years. The program provides high-quality courses in dance, culture, and self-actualization training for thousands and thousands of students in the Oakland Bay Area, free of charge through grants her team secures. Dimensions ROP has done this work for decades. Some alumni of ROP attended, they called me as I was in Los Angeles and couldn't attend the production in Oakland. One of the students is working in the White House, another just became a lawyer, and another created their own clothing line. This is the norm for students who participate in ROP. This is what makes this program exceptional, the way it was designed harness dance as a means to assist students to develop positive self-esteem. We have students who went on to dance with Alvin Ailey, and many others who went on to college and university, and others who became college professors, K-12 teachers, entrepreneurs, and doctors. Ms. Vaughan supports emerging and up-and-coming artists as well. Dimensions is a pillar in the Oakland Bay Area. Dimensions is also one of the resident arts groups in the Malonga Center for the Arts in Oakland next door to Baba Mosheh.

She is the Artistic Director of Dimensions Dance Theater, which initially was co-directed with Elendar Barnes. Recently, they had a Rites of Passage show. Deborah Vaughan was also one of the founders of the first Ethnic dance inclusive dance departments

in the nation, at Laney College in Oakland. She was a special protégé to Ruth Beckford. Deborah's company danced at FESTAC '77. In her interview about FESTAC '77 that follows, she references the strife from which her family left the South and the way her generation combatted the unexpected racialization of people in the North. She ends by expressing what she wants to see in the next generation.

The works of Deborah Vaughan in dance are prolific. She has traveled to almost every continent studying traditional dance including North Africa, the Congo, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Senegal, Haiti, Brazil, and Jerusalem. Her works deal with topics like accepting difference, gentrification, African cultural lineage connection, honoring ancestors, slave narratives, African American migration, Civil Rights fight for equality, and a host of other topics. Ms. Vaughan workshops her pieces to deepen what she learned in the field. Her work is characterized by collaboration and artistic and research integrity. Most of Dimension's dancers have been with Vaughan for a minimum of ten years or more since the company's founding. Dimensions is an institution in her own right. For the last 50 years, Deborah Vaughan has been doing the work to give voice to those whose voices have been taken or distorted, through her soul steering choreographies. She has produced countless amazing pieces and full-length performances touching audiences and changing lives with her artistry that extends beyond the stage and into the community. Ms. Vaughan is very unassuming despite her profundity. Below is an excerpt of our interview together:

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** My name is Deborah Vaughan. I am the Artistic Director at this present time for Dimensions Dance Theatre. But this just didn't happen. My journey started as a part of the Dunham legacy, maybe at 12 or 13 years-old in California, in the Bay Area. Ms. [Ruth] Beckford was a part of that. Dunham and Beckford's work really helped me discover who I was. My family migrated from New Orleans, Louisiana to Oklahoma. And so other parts of our family also came to Oakland, we formed a family unit there. And as I was growing up, I always felt – movement [dance], but my family could not afford lessons. So, one of my friends in middle school introduced me to Ruth Beckford. And that's where I really started my studies and really learned that there was a culture beyond Oakland.

So that was the beginning for me. And I was just so inspired by that, so I continued that journey. And that journey consisted of dance forms from Africa, and dance forms throughout the Diaspora, specifically Haiti. So that's part of the Dunham Legacy that Beckford passed onto California. And like I was saying to you a little earlier, it seems as though there was always a disconnect between California, the Midwest, and New York. We— being in California, it always seemed as if you were so far away. You were not in connection with the Midwest and New York.

**COLETTE ELOI.** One of the things from your work in the world that has inspired my life is your methodology as an Artistic Director/Choreographer. I have observed how you travel with your company going to places in Africa or the Diaspora, returning home and workshopping what you learned, and creating a piece. Could you talk briefly about what made you start doing that? What was the first thing that you did?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** I think that what started me about that was the research that I did with Ms. Dunham. And that also came through Ms. Beckford, but it's kind of like any work that you create, you need to research in terms of what you want to say, or how you want to express about a recent or past culture.

Even though we do that, regarding contemporary art forms, you still need to research, even if it's about a feeling, even if it's about a historical event, or revolution, or whatever—you need to do some research. So that was kind of like my introduction to how I wanted to approach work. And it was always about research. Before you even put it onstage. Because it's going to become different when you put it onstage—because it's coming from you, and not necessarily exact history. You know what I'm saying? Because you might want to express something that contributes to history. Or that's from history. So, that was my inspiration: research.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Do you consider yourself an anthropologist?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Not really, I mean, because that was never how I saw my work, it was just like the work. And so, in doing the work, it was just really about the work. It wasn't about a title. People considered us artists, but it was never about a title. It was about the work—the work—and how you got to put it on stage.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wonderful. What was it like to be at FESTAC? What insights did your time there provide for your life?



**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** First of all, just getting there was a challenge. Just as the world is like right now, not many places and spaces were open to African Diaspora work. The challenge at that time was getting there.

The other thing that was very inspiring to me was seeing like: Oh, my God, this is a whole world! [Africa and the cultural arts of Africa] You know, that was the inspiration. That was an inspiration. Because we weren't getting that here in America, right?

Even though everybody borrows from what African American culture offers, it never gets its due respect. In terms of, like, where does this come from? Where does this come from? How are we acknowledging this artform, whether it's music, whether it's dance, whether it's writing, it's all there. But whatever it is, we don't get the credit for what we do. And so, as an African American—I was coming from America—but it was just like, a whole world opened up in terms of like—oooohh! And that's how Dimensions Dance Theater came about.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Tell us about the name of your company.

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Dimensions Dance Theater. Because Dimensions grew out of the Black Arts Movement in the 60s, but that is what was happening in America at that particular time.

But the experience in terms of going to FESTAC helped me realize that there was so much more that we had to offer, not just as African Americans, but as world culture, which is just so often overlooked. Just like, as a company, we can do this, this, this, this,

this! You know, that was the inspiration for the dance company; there are so many diverse cultures in African dance.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wonderful, wonderful. Describe the vibration, the energy, and the environment at FESTAC'77.

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** It was quite inspiring because there was just so much happening. We were in a different culture, we were being introduced to what their culture was, versus what our culture was.

I think the most magnificent thing for me was seeing all the different arts organizations from around the world present their different art forms. That's what was inspiring for me. And to some extent, it really helped me realize that there were really no limits in terms of what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to present. And it just helped me realize that it could be anything that I wanted to do.

You know, as opposed to what I was seeing here in America. And to some extent, that wasn't a good thing. But it was a good thing for what I wanted to do. And to some extent, I don't know if it's still a good thing.

Because people don't want to really look at history, historical events, current events, to talk about current situations because people don't necessarily want to hear. But I think if you hear it through art, that's probably one of the most important ways that you can hear, understand, respond, and walk away with some thoughts and offer some conversations.

Because even though people don't think that art is political—it is. It's just artists expressing what they see and feel. When you look at Fela, you know, when you look at different artists that have expressed their feelings—it made an impact. So anyway, I hope that we continue to contribute thought processes, some feelings and connection to the globe.

**COLETTE ELOI.** How old is Dimensions now?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** 50 years.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wow. It's amazing! That's just amazing. Okay, so how did you become part of FESTAC? And did you audition to be in FESTAC '77? How did that come about?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** I remember it was the application process. And it was very difficult. I think it took us like maybe over a year.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Oh, wow. So that process—that preparation process—was long?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** And it was long because it wasn't just us. It was from people all around the world that were applying to be a part of this festival.

My experience and understanding of what FESTAC was to connect all the African Diaspora members to come together and put your art form on a stage. And so, we were just part of the process. And so like, you know, we submitted the application, we didn't have any money. And we had to go to the State Department to be part of this. It was a long process. It wasn't like, oh, fill out the application, and you get to go. For us, it wasn't that.

The whole process was almost as if you were going through immigration. Or you have to have a visa. Why are you going? You know all of that? So.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Okay. Do you know that Tumani was telling me that they held auditions in the Laney gymnasium? Did you all participate in that?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** You know, I think we did. But I don't remember the details.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Okay. So FESTAC '77 was about art but also international development and recovery from slavery and colonialism. As a FESTAC dancer, how would you expand upon or refute this idea?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Well, I think it was about everything. It was about countries becoming sovereign. And also, separation from colonialism and building their own countries.

But it was also about culture. And so, culture—culture is really everything, it's how countries survive. You know? Maintaining whatever is part of the culture—whether it's like the cultural practices, religion, whether it's part of food, whether it's part of dress, and whatever other art forms—there are, I think that this was an opportunity where people and countries were stepping out to say: we're independent now, we can do whatever we want to, and we're going to express who we are. And so just looking at all the different cultures that were part of this movement, it was kind of an opening for me to see and understand new things.

And then being an African American, and a lot of times people don't really look at that, nor understand it. They look at the countries in Africa, and some of the countries in the Caribbean, which also includes South America that carried on some of those traditions, you know.

So, it just was the opening for me to see, and realize respect—it all has value. Because I think that that's one of the problems that we have experienced for over 400 years; we have not been really valued because of slavery. Even people coming here to America, what I'm learning, or what I have learned over the years, is that some of those people are being told, don't respect African Americans. And not so much from other countries, but particularly African Americans. because they're "criminals" which contributes, in my opinion, to the divide between unifying this nation.

You know what people are being taught. And I mean, you know, there's a history of that, I don't need to go into that, but there's a history of how that is kind of a part of American culture. But even so, American culture has survived. It has still been so much a part of what we are as America, in terms of, I will say, everything! Even, I mean, religion, to some extent, music, dance, theater—everything. But I think that people don't know that, and I just...

The important thing is that we need to be credited for that as people. And it doesn't take away from any other ethnic group.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Yes. It's important to say. I'm going to go back just a bit, because earlier you talked about what was happening at FESTAC was not happening here in the

US. Do you recall that historic moment? What was happening here in the US in Oakland? Right before you went.

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Okay, so I went in the 1970s. But there was a heightened time during the Black Arts Movement, where there was just so much happening in America. Ah [*Sighs*]...A lot of it has to do with the same struggles that we're dealing with today. Police violence. That's how, to some extent, the Panthers evolved.

You know what was very interesting? It's just like, most of our parents—our parents who are African Americans—came from the South. And you know what? Most of our parents didn't want to talk about that. It was kind of like almost being shielded or protected, it was like that didn't exist. But as we became teenagers and young adults, we saw what was happening right here.

And I think that was to a great extent what happened in the Black Arts Movement. You know, that's what was happening here. It's just like, oh, we got to respond. Or we might, we're not going to have the guns and the shoot outs; perhaps we can express it in art. And then it just helped us to look back about all of those people like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston—and look, that was almost, that was decades before our time. It made us pay attention to like, okay, this was going on then. This was going on even before then. What can we do? What is our responsibility or response to what's happening now?

**COLETTE ELOI.** That is a wonderful response. Thank you. Okay, do you recall the name, type and meaning of the dance you performed at FESTAC '77? Were there any improvisational features to the dance?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** You know what the one dance that I remember: this dance was not choreographed for myself. We did “My People”, and “My People” was the music that was poetry that was created by Langston Hughes. People can look it up on the internet — “My People”—you know, it talks about like, poetically talked about, like, you know, the different hues we came in, the struggles that we had. And just, he was just saying, these are my people. You know, I remember that piece. I can't remember everything else.

**COLETTE ELOI.** That's fabulous. Do you remember at all—I know, this was a long time ago—the feeling you had when dancing that piece on the African continent? And at that huge festival?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** We were just so proud we were able to do it. And I'm going to tell you—the theater. Do you know that theater was in the shape of a military camp? It was just unexplainable. It's just like, wow, we got to do this! We worked for it! We planned for it! You know? And this is what we got to do. It was incredible. Just like this energy and feeling like, wow, we got to do this! Yeah, the feeling of it.

And you know what? We thought that this was going to continue, that there would be another and another. I think that was the last one. You know, I think that was the last one. But the other thing that I want to say is that this just goes to show you—you cannot take art for granted.

I know that there have been attempts to try to have another FESTAC. But it seems as though there was not enough investment. So, this is my opinion. If there's not enough investment, it's kind of like almost dismissing to some extent, even though we're going to

do it, we're going to do it. But bringing all those people together? Okay, so we can say it's financial, we can say it's political, but whatever you want to say, it didn't happen. It hasn't happened. Even though I understand that people have wanted it to happen. But it hasn't happened. And I think that that would be more than spectacular for there to be another. And maybe it doesn't have to happen in Africa, because it seems as though when America has a cold, Africa has pneumonia. So, I mean, maybe...You understand what I'm saying?

So, I guess it would depend on all the people who are part of the Diaspora, as well as our allies, to invest in an event like that. And I don't know, maybe it would be to, I don't know, start small and build. But I do think that it's something that needs to happen, just because of all the influences that Africa has had throughout the globe. That's just my opinion.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Thank you. I'm going to go back one more time to that part that really touched me and made me think about how you said most of your parents came from the South that migrated to Oakland and started the Black Arts Movement. And you said they didn't really talk about it. So, could you talk a little bit about what you, what is it that you know, or were thinking they weren't talking about—?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** We're talking about escaping from the South. And the disparities, the violence, lack of opportunity. I think that's why they left the South. They wanted to get away and the other thing is I thought that they thought that there would be a different opportunity here on the West Coast. And there wouldn't be prejudice. But there was. But it was still better than the South. You understand what I'm saying?



Because at the time that my parents were leaving the South, there were lynchings, and I mean murders. Again, you know, my father was from Oklahoma. And so, his family would talk about Tulsa, you know, because that was like Black Wall Street. And then my mother's people would just talk about all the things that they saw and the differences in terms of how people were treated. If you were white, you were treated differently. If you were "Passé Blanc", you were treated differently. You know? And just the opportunities that were offered. But the one thing that held them together was their religion, music, and dance. Okay? That was like glue, you know?

**COLETTE ELOI.** Okay. Thank you. This is great. After you did your performance at FESTAC, do you recall Africans coming up to you to say anything? Or what were some of the responses that you got from Africans?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** That between all the groups for us to see, not us, not Dimensions, but for all of the organizations to see our artistic expressions in terms of how we felt about our own experiences in our own countries and cultures—I think it was very much appreciated. Very much appreciated.

I've never heard any strife or disrespect. We never heard any strife or disrespect because we all knew that we were coming from different places, and everybody had their own experiences. Because they had their own experiences. I mean, it was not one to be compared or disrespected. No, it's just like, oh, that was also my experience. This is okay. This is what they do in this country. This is part of their culture. So, in my opinion, it was all good.

**COLETTE ELOI.** What did you learn from? Did you learn anything in particular, like in the video, it talks about those nine official moments when dancers were free to talk to each other, from different companies and cultures to share dance and movement? Do you have any moments from any of those kinds of downtime backstage moments that stayed with you?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** It's kind of like we almost didn't really have an opportunity to spend much time. Comparing it to what we almost experience here is just like: you're on, you're off. And as I was saying, previously, in the village and towns, people kind of understood like, Oh, you're here for the festival. People appreciated that. The people that lived in Lagos appreciated that. It was a magnificent experience. I wish we could repeat that.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Oh, yeah. Me too. I wish we repeat that. So, in hindsight, what is the primary significance of FESTAC '77 in your life? I feel like you've said it, but that's the next question.

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** To me, it [FESTAC '77] really was the acknowledgment of who we are—as a people—and what our contributions are, continue to be. For the most part, it was like, wow! Because sometimes, if you're just in your own bubble, and for us—like, even though we knew the history of like Africa, and the African American experience—it's a different thing to see it and how different people express it.

So, to me, that was a revelation. And it emboldened us to continue what we were doing as a dance company, you know. That it didn't have to be this. It didn't have to be that.

We didn't have to apply to...you know, there's this thing about higher art— High art. It's just like, well, you know what?

Who gets to say what art is higher? Because in my opinion, y'all borrowing from us! We could also be part of high art, you know? Oh, it was just like this distinction between, you know, the ballet, the symphony, the opera; this was like high art. And everything else is not. I'm not buying into that. I'm not buying into that. That's not part of what I believe or want to express, or how I want to respect or acknowledge all the art forms that are in the world. Whether they're African American, whether they're Asian, I mean...it just an opening for me to look at culture in general, and how important it was to all of the people of the world.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wonderful. Okay. Did you feel like FESTAC was against white people or against anything?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** No, I never did. That's like one of the things that I see now. Even though when I was at FESTAC, there were white people there. But it was a Black experience. It was a whole bunch of Black folks. You know, even now, when I look at the arts world, I mean, of course, there's Black people in it. And there's a lot of festivals that feature us.

I just felt like, and I still feel like this to this day: culture, dance, music—it brings people together. It brings people together! I think that when you look at America and some of the history, how we have, like, it's been a thing, how to divide people. It's been a thing and even now: how to divide people?

But if people could share cultural experiences, from history, and even contemporary experiences, they can see through the separation. Art is the one thing—cultural expression is the one thing—that brings people together.

And, you know, we see that the center, we see that the Malonga Center; I mean, it's people from all the diversity in Oakland. You know, people from the Latino community, people from the Asian communities, people from the Caucasian communities. It's just a mix and a blend. But isn't that what we want the world to be? That's what we want the world to be. And I think that's what the world could be. And I also think that that's one of the powers of art, and maybe they don't want that to happen. The powers that be? Maybe that's part of the reason. You know, they don't want people to realize that there is a way that we connect. And one of the things that I have the most trouble with is this: anytime there are cuts, what's the first thing to go?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** You know, it's the arts, because it has power. It has power. And I just think that maybe they know that, just like we know that. You know? They don't want that to happen. But art has power in terms of bringing people together, in terms of helping people to understand each other, and build communities. Just saying.

**COLETTE ELOI.** How do you feel that you are continuing FESTAC in your life?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Well, I just think that through the dance company, we extend opportunities for people to see other artistic expressions from various parts of the Diaspora. And I think that that's really important because we're not a monolith. Okay? And people want to see us in that way. And we're not. That's why we named ourselves Dimensions.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Yes. What would you like the next generation to know about FESTAC'77?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** What I think is most important is that they just know about history, understand what history has contributed, but then for them to be a continuance in terms of like, how do they see the importance? How will they see the importance? What do they want to happen? And what are their contributions to the work that has already been done almost 50 years ago? You know? But if they don't know about it? Yet I think that they'll find their way. And we understand now that hip hop is like, a way that many young artists are finding their way. And I think that's fine.

I just think that the history, you know, when you talk about the griots, when you talk about the music, when you talk about improvisation, when you talk about syncopation, when you talk about just artistic expression—just know that all of that, even though you have your own artistic expression—there is a history. You know, that's the thing that I wish for them to know. And for them to create their own history. You know, for them to create their own history in terms of like, however they want to express it.

And my other thing? It's to document, document, document. Because that's not what we were doing, like in 1977, or even before that. We didn't document. But now it's available. You know? So, that's one of the lessons that I've learned. It wasn't documented.

**COLETTE ELOI.** And that's what I want to say to you. And that's what I want people to understand, too, as you are a choreographer. Like, how many dances would you say you have choreographed? When you talk about the work? I don't think people understand what

that means. What is the work? How many dances do you think you have choreographed? And what is the process of you choreographing a dance, how much time goes by in your production of a dance?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** I think that if I selectively look at work that I've done with the company, and work that I've done with the college, because I taught at Contra Costa College for 37 years, it'll probably be over 100. And I don't know, my process has been kind of a two-way thing. Number one is working collaboratively, but helping artists to understand what the intention of work is. What is the intention of the work? I mean, the intention of the work, the purpose of the work, how do they connect with it? How do they need help with them? And I would say, beyond movement, even. You know, because part of it, movement is one thing.

My intention has never been to just entertain people. But I think that's what happens a lot, you know, in the Diaspora. But what is the intention of the bottom line? What do you want the takeaway to be? But that's just me. Everybody else doesn't have to do that. But for me, it's this: what do you want people to take away? You know, even if it's one thing besides "you dance good." [*Laughs*] You know? I'm just saying, that's just me. Other people don't have to do that. But it's always this question of what is the intention of the work? How do people understand it, what do they want, what can they take away to have a better understanding of our culture, being part of the African Diaspora?

**COLETTE ELOI.** Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

**DEBORAH VAUGHAN.** Dimensions work has always been about social justice. And a lot of the work created was created to address issues in our society that we don't necessarily want to talk about.

But that's been from the beginning. But I was going to say that in the Rites of Passage program, we had two spoken word artists. This was in May. Still, it takes a village. We invited a poet laureate to participate in the annual "It Takes a Village" program for our Rites of Passage Youth Program in Oakland. And she was a mixed-race person. Her poetry was about what her experiences were and how the world needs to accept everybody. We don't ask to be here. We get here how we get here.

We strive to be more inclusive and embrace everyone. I mean, what we're going through because it's real. And we are here just trying to help the kids understand. I mean, this is what's happening in the world. You know?

## **CLEO PARKER ROBINSON**

I pivot now to another stellar performance that received loud applause. Cleo Parker Robinson's work (Midwest) was well appreciated, and I was able to speak with her recently - on September 10, 2023. Cleo Parker Robinson<sup>33</sup> is the founder, artistic director, and choreographer of the 50-year-old Denver, Colorado-based artistic institution: Cleo Parker Robinson Dance. I caught her on the phone as she was running into a rehearsal for her

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<sup>33</sup> <https://cleoparkerdance.org/about-us/>

upcoming anniversary concert. Cleo Parker Robinson leads a professional Dance Ensemble, Youth and Junior Youth Ensembles, a Dance Academy, an International Summer Dance Institute, a 240-seat theater that bears her name, and myriad community outreach programs. She is the recipient of honors and awards from civic, community, and artistic organizations around the world and is called on by myriad organizations and performance venues to bring her Dance Ensemble for performances and to conduct workshops, master classes, and motivational seminars.

Her philosophy of “One Spirit, Many Voices” is reflected in all she does and is the vision she brings to everyone she meets, everywhere she goes. I can attest to this and can’t help but think that her experience at FESTAC ’77 might have something to do with her philosophy.

When I interviewed her on the topic of dancing at FESTAC ’77, Cleo Parker Robinson said, “Your experience at FESTAC never leaves you. It remains in your soul.” She recounted the early years of her life before traveling to FESTAC ’77 and becoming a vanguard for dance in Denver. She studied with Rod Rodgers in New York, whom she referred to as a “radical choreographer” at that time, and also with Eleo Palmares. She danced with both Rodgers and Palmare at FESTAC ’77.

In my impromptu interview, which was the first time I ever spoke to her, Parker Robinson recounted a story to me that she said she had never shared with anyone before. It was about her interaction with Spirit in the conception of the piece she choreographed and subsequently took to FESTAC’77 entitled *Creation, Destruction*. She explained the



piece by saying, “I realized we, as women, and mothers, have the power to create and destroy in everything we do, sometimes with intentionality and sometimes not. The music for the piece was composed by jazz musician Donald Byrd and sounded like free jazz. I was young and wanted to make a statement.” She explained to me that the piece was originally choreographed for a male to dance the lead role, and he had rehearsed and learned it. However, she said she had a spiritual experience when she tried on the mask that was created for the piece.

She said, “Everything shifted when I put it on. The mask had me transition, and I realized that I needed to play the role of the creator because we birth the babies.” She explained how Spirit was speaking to her from the sky. She told the lead male that she had to play the role. He said, “Absolutely.” She said, “I felt it should be female, but it wasn’t really female or male.”

When she traveled to Nigeria, her father accompanied her. He happened to have experience working in theater tech. Since the National Theater had just been erected in Nigeria with a new state of the art theater, the Nigerian tech crew was unable to work the new lighting board. Cleo Parker Robinson’s father turned out to be extremely helpful in helping the Nigerian crew navigate the new system. She went on to explain how it would be her father that would light *Creation, Destruction*.

Parker Robinson explained how the theater was built on a slant, and there would be 70,000 people in the theater, with standing room only, on the night she would perform the piece. She took her place starting from far back in the audience. She explained that there

was a malfunction and her contacts even fell out of her eyes. To that she said, “One must never let their ego get involved with the work. The Spirit does the work.” After that she said she allowed Spirit to take over and her choreography and her performance received thunderous applause.

What was so remarkable to me about this story was that this impromptu interview happened right when I was writing about *Aje* or powerful woman energy. In fact, her return call to me interrupted my typing. So, as she told me this story, I was flabbergasted because I was writing how the Bahianas in Brazil brought Aje energy back to Africa. Apparently, so did dancers from the United States, as recounted by Cleo Parker Robinson.



Figure 13. Chuck Davis dancer and drummers performing at FESTAC '77. Drummer with hat: Balogun Ron Love; djembe drummer: Yomi Yomi John Robinson; djembe drummer: Ngoma Woolbright; dancer: Luther Suliman Wilson. Photo courtesy of Lynnette Matthew White's private collection.

### **Dancers From Chuck Davis Dance Company – Mr. & Mrs. Woolbright**

As with the example of the Chuck Davis dance company, who performed the traditions of the Yorubas, that ephemeral moment of performance would have profound and long-lasting effects that would affirm feelings of African Americans about their ancestry, spiritual sensing, artistic connection as it opened the door to historical lineage, shared epistemology, and ideas of the body-being or self.

**COLETTE ELOI.** How was it at FESTAC '77?

**THE WOOLBRIGHTS.** It was wonderful! Amazing!! Though there were problems, there was a profound spirit of cooperation. We knew we went there to share our culture. We went on the second wave, which was good because they had time to regroup to better prepare for us. A lot of the plumbing wasn't working with the first group. It was unexpected, but because so many of us were invested in the success of the festival, it all just fell into place.

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** 14 of Baba Chuck's group members came because Chuck and Abdel had to do a stateside residency.

**MRS. WOOLBRIGHT.** There were several compounds for each country. People were rehearsing night and day. We would go to the different compounds and watch and learn. We spent the most time at the compound for Les Ballet Africaines of Guinea.

**COLETTE ELOI.** What dance did you all perform? I read in a book that you all were moved by the crowd the most.

**MRS. WOOLBRIGHT.** Really, maybe it's because of the song we sang. Olatunji, one of the teachers of Baba Chuck and many others, had taught us a Yoruba song while we were still in New York. When we performed it [and] when we went to the second chorus, the crowd went wild and started singing with us. The ancestors were there. So that's probably why the book made that remark. We had to perform it again because the President caught wind of it and asked if we would sing it for him.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wow. What an amazing story. Did you make any long connections with the people there?

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** Yes, with Mamadou from Guinea, who was there with Ballet Africaines. On the religious side, a Yoruba priest, Baba Ibeji, gave all of us a reading, and I used to call him occasionally for consultation. We also connected with other US dance companies from DC and Detroit.

**MRS. WOOLBRIGHT.** We would go from compound to compound to see them rehearsing. We saw and met with other artists from around the world. We could also watch from the balcony. It was like an ocean of dance. We would travel together with them on the FESTAC buses to go and see their performances. But we chatted most with Ballet Africaines.



Figure 14. Image of FESTAC dancers rehearsing at FESTAC Village with onlookers. Photographer unknown. Image from the book, *FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: decomposed, an-arranged and reproduced*. Cape Town: Afterall Books. (2019, 122).

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** That was [like] the first time I went to Nigeria. When I got off the plane and saw the people, I thought some of them were spitting images of my family. I felt like I was home when I got off the plane. I felt like I was from that place. I thought, “I’m from these people; they look like me.” I felt like I had a connection with the people.

**MRS. WOOLBRIGHT.** When you stepped off the plane, you said this is where my ancestors are from. We represented both sides of the water, Africa, and the US. There were military and machine guns everywhere; past that, we knew we came to share and perform and share our stories. It was 24-7, all day and all night, dancing, singing, drumming, and rehearsing. Oh, and it was HOT! We thought casually oh, we are going to get used to the heat and acclimate. No-oo-oo, that didn’t happen. It was too hot. We were looking for a twig, for anything to get under. But it was all very wonderful!

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** Going to FESTAC ’77 gave me insight into what this [Nigerian/African] culture is like and what the people are like and about. I learned that they are all about family. They are about living and functioning together harmoniously.

As an artist of dance, I have learned that with these dances, once you take the dance out of the country, it becomes theater. In its context, it is everyone’s dance, and everyone knows what it means. They are all dancing for a reason, and everybody knows that reason. Like Hip Hop here, everybody understands it, but when we performed Hip Hop for the Africans there, they didn’t know what it was about. A lot of the Africans from the different countries wanted to go see other compounds like the Americans and the Brazilians. There was a lot of trade of information and skills. They asked us what our dances and traditions

were, and we responded by saying, the Blues, Jazz, and church music, but we won't be doing that. You'll have to come to the US to see that.

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** We were fortunate that in 1977, Chuck Davis was the first to dance at *DanceAfrica*, it was so well received that other dance companies approached him to participate. This energy of FESTAC '77 fueled *DanceAfrica*, and today it is performed in multiple cities across the nation: Dallas, Miami, Pittsburg, DC, and it had a US tour called *DanceAfrica America*. Chuck had the name trademarked in 1978. We are celebrating its 47th Anniversary. *DanceAfrica* started in a small black box theater and is now performed in the opera house in New York. We have an affiliate company in North Carolina, and we put art in the school through New York.

**COLETTE ELOI.** What would you say is important to the next generation of culture workers and artists in dance?

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** Whatever you do, it must be community-based. That is Africa. The art form honors elders and children. *DanceAfrica* events have a spirit of family; even the vendors leave their tables to come and dance together with the people, and we would have hundreds of vendors.

**COLETTE ELOI.** Wow. Simply phenomenal. The topic of Spirit keeps coming out in the interviews I am doing.

**MR. WOOLBRIGHT.** If you went there and had a soul, you felt something.



I would agree with Mr. Woolbright's comment. Dancing on the block with friends is different from dancing on the stage. Similarly, shouting in church is not quite the same when performed, even if it is improvisational. In one, the movement of the spirit is natural, and in a show, it is performance. Also, I found it interesting that even though critics said that the festival was not for the people, FESTAC '77 certainly invited all the people, and somehow, they all understood that the moment was extraordinary. So much so that they did not sleep because, as Tumani said, "You felt like if you went to sleep, you would miss something."

In my discussions with several of the dancers from FESTAC '77, they seem to remember most the way that Spirit moved in their experiences, like the two interviews with Parker Robinson and the Woolbrights from Chuck Davis's company.

In a Zoom interview with the dancer Marcea Daiter, she explained an interaction at FESTAC '77 with an African man that she had never met before. She said he approached her, picked her up, kissed her, and handed her a flower. She said her dance colleagues looked at her and asked who he was. She started crying, unable to speak. She explained that she knew it was her father who had just recently passed, and the flower was like those he kept in his yard in the US.

These stories that include spirit made me think that dance is the ancestor's language. The divine sovereign body has a purpose, and it is not to be a "subject" to the power-hungry. It is a cultural dance technology that connects families and maintains

connections that cannot be seen, only felt. I have always known that my ancestors come dancing with me when I dance.

The African Americans traveling to Africa for FESTAC '77, many for the first time, had already been unearthing their identity through art. There were 212 US contingents/participants from Oakland. In Jeff Donald's journal entry about the US contingent's arrival in Nigeria, he talks about the news that the funds set aside to house them had been misappropriated by another group in the US. As described in the Chimurenga book, the US contingent became extremely disgruntled. After having gone through grueling competitions to be selected and being held in limbo over several years, to finally arrive at this situation made them ready to give up. Then...

“Freedom Fighters from newly liberated Mozambique appeared on the scene and began to sing their battle songs. The effect was electric, witnesses claim, and produced a complete mood reversal among the US delegation. Discussions were now focused on positive responses to the major problems, and makeshift solutions began to emerge. Though conditions improved only slightly...the US contingent revived ancient survival skills, adapted and coped” (Donaldson in Chimurenga 2020, 32).

In an early interview with Deborah Vaughan, she did not tell me of the situation of misappropriated funds but shared with me that the FESTAC apartment that was slotted for her and other dancers who would be sharing the space had fallen through. Arrangements were made for her to stay with a Nigerian family. She remarked simply upon their beautiful hospitality and the way they made her feel like family. She said it enhanced her stay.



Figure 15. Image of Stevie Wonder performing on drums at the closing ceremony of FESTAC '77, US Contingent. Photograph by Marilyn Nance, 1977 in *Last Day in Lagos*. Onabanjo. CARA/Fourthwall Books (2022, 202).

## **Concluding Analyses of US Interviews**

Though the title of this chapter references the attendees themselves, the true legacies are their students and their students' students, and so on, spanning four decades so far. The pre-FESTAC moment in the states provided public classes and performances that would serve as a means of broadening the general knowledge base of dance culture, reshaping perceptions of racialized Black Americans to their African origins. This had an impact on dance productions, and the life choices of the US participants. Their time at FESTAC '77 touched them spiritually and inspired their life-choices to provide FESTAC like programming in the United States.

Furthermore, because of the collection of different dance styles in existence in the States during the pre-FESTAC period, the proximity of related cultures - African, Caribbean, and Latin American - revealed connections in aesthetic and epistemological understandings. Especially, the effects of the drums would influence choreographic works of the participants for years to come and further shape the state of dance today.

Through my discussions with interlocutors and through analyses and comparisons of their histories, I came to realize that though FESTAC was a professional gig, it had a personal impact on each participant. Among the US contingent of dancers, the issues of cultural plurality and tribalism did not shape the way they saw Africa, as discussed by several of my interlocutors (p.c. Milon 2023, Tumani 2023, Vaughan 2023, Woolbright 2023). They did not pick and choose which style to study based on DNA testing or tribal allegiances, but rather they embraced and celebrated the whole of African art and culture

through each form they learned and saw. Understanding African culture filled in a gap for them in terms of ideas about themselves and their identities.

I found it interesting that Alice Art Center in Oakland, California was founded in 1977 along with Chuck Davis's *DanceAfrica*. In New Orleans, the Sanchez Multi-Service Center in the Ninth Ward was also dedicated in 1977. All three of these institutions propitiate African culture and provide a space for Black and African arts and culture to be shared and thrive. African and Black culture was at the root of a cultural renaissance that took place across the nation in the US, fueled by FESTAC '77. In this sense, FESTAC is the largest healing ceremony that recognized all Black and African cultures globally.

In the case of The Chuck Davis's *DanceAfrica*, it began touring across the nation and internationally following FESTAC '77. It toured around the country, sharing African culture as African Americans. Chuck Davis dancers were ambassadors to the nation that represented a more equal America. The rich educational experiences of the twelve Chuck Davis dancers materialized new energy into their touring performances as remarked upon in my interview with Abdel Salaam, a protégé of Chuck Davis who started the celebrated dance company, Forces of Nature, in New York, and who was one of the company members and later, administrator of Chuck Davis Dance company and current director of The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). Salaam stated: "Dance promotes and propagates culture. Dance encompasses the social, spiritual, and cultural and has a way of settling a being inside of their body to align with their purpose. Dance is as old as humans and holds great significance in Black and African culture." These sentiments explain the way FESTAC '77 was a dance-critical event. Dancers from the Chuck Davis Dance troupe who

traveled to FESTAC continued with illustrious careers in dance. Normadien Woolbright went on to direct the African American Dance Ensemble (AADE) which was founded by Chuck Davis, out of Durham, North Carolina.

The most common theme from these interviews dealt with spirit. All these years after FESTAC '77, stories of spirit were what participants remembered the most and were compelled to share with me. At FESTAC '77, there was an intangible element of dance combined with socially expressing one's ancestral heritage, your power, that greatly shifted the lives of participants at FESTAC '77 in personal ways. This cohort of dance practitioners went on to be notable culture bearers in the United States.

All of these points speaks to the way the festival served as a space of ontological healing for African American participants. Like the title of Cleo Parker Robinson's video, it was a Homecoming for the US contingent of dancers who saw reflections of themselves all around them that would affect them for the rest of their lives. I initially thought that FESTAC '77 initiated an understanding of dance; however, now I believe that attending the festival awakened something that was already in these artists and in a month, showed the "limitless" possibilities that "springboarded" them into their purposes in life. FESTAC empowered them to see themselves as more than the identities projected upon them from a society that treated their bodies like objects to be sold. They were now forces of nature, able to manifest positive large-scale projects and institutions in the world.

The dances they performed at FESTAC '77 signified their current situations at home yet reflected epistemologies. Dance is about the expression of spirit and interaction

with spirit and the psyche. The trauma of slavery and colonialism left us, in some cases, devaluing our own meta-ontologies. During that moment in history, Black and African people could not keep reifying the interstitial epistemologies that underpin our current unhealthy/flaccid/hegemonic paradigms. The psyche of oppressed people was in distress and seeking liberation. These dances of meaning, of relation, of connection, actualize new possibilities in the world. These possibilities were materialized in generations of these artists' students and audiences, and the institutions they created.

We are all affected by the ideology of psychogeopolitics. Anyone alive today is entangled in a complex ideological net of semiotics, sound bites, images, shaping one's perspective which is shaped by one's political, biological, socioeconomic, and ethnolinguistic positionality. These elements create cultural groups, and cultural groups create the world. It is necessary first to decode and encode and, depending on one's historical situation, recode our meta ontologies before adopting and forwarding the ontologies of those bringing oppression and violence. FESTAC '77 addressed these issues in a positive non-violent way that blessed the nation with beautiful culture.

In this globalized world, where resident ideations that are so crucial to the future can be discussed by people with socio-emotional intelligence who have fostered a genuine track record of working for the good of the many must take place, just how it was essential for FESTAC '77 to take place. Trying to climb out of the box of centuries of imperialist logic steered by power-sick people must be cleansed. The creation of a safe (not safe as in fragile, but where power dynamics are not impeding humanitarian progress) space for learning and sharing between people is desperately needed, a space of human

understanding that can come together in harmonious processing to discuss, enliven, examine, and assess what is crucial for humans. For the sake of our future, the future of the planet, our children and human consciousness itself, it is imperative.

One of the key concepts in this discussion of ontological healing and connection to spirit is awakening. FESTAC '77 awakened US participants coming to scream out their dances and claim their sovereignty with people who understood. This brings the body into the discussion where we as a culture are speeding towards the de-embodiment of ourselves, our indigenous and aboriginal non-manipulated selves, as discussed by Baba Mosheh. The youth are becoming detached. Our spirits work in tandem with our bodies and our spirits can be so maligned when they are not tended to in positive, loving ways.

Dance holds you up, dance teaches you to face the impossible, dance lets you feel your ancestors. This is what dance did at FESTAC '77 for the US contingent. The bodies or energies that are wired to control others are contagious. When we come together to enliven our whole beings through harmonizing systems like dance, those energies are defused. This is why dance was seen as medicine in precolonial times in Africa. The US Contingent of dancers and drummers from FESTAC '77 took their sovereignty and used it to help free the spirits of other humans.

Deborah Vaughan's Dance Company and Rites of Passage Youth Program are commemorating 50 years of deep philosophical and physical work within the Oakland community in October 2023. The Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Company and Youth Group in Denver are also celebrating their 50th anniversary with a concert in October. Chuck



Davis's Dance Company, *DanceAfrica* is also celebrating its 45th anniversary in New York at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in October. And The Darlene Blackburn Dance Company celebrated 60 years of dance in Chicago this year.

The mission statements of these half-century-old Black dance institutions articulate the grounding principles that were emphasized and proliferated at FESTAC '77; they are also the same grounding principles held within dance that were taught to me from many of the people discussed in this chapter, and that I teach to my students within the practice of dance as a culture worker. In fact, this is what the indigenous dance of all cultures does: harmonize bodies. The basic teachings within the dances are about loving the sovereign body and using that to embrace ongoing precolonial (non-imperialistic) and divine bodied-beings, understandings about living with all sorts of people and all sorts of circumstances in life.



Figure 16. Photo courtesy of Tumani Onabiyi Video Archive. May 18, 2014. Colette Eloi with Deborah Vaughan, Ruth Beckford, Yvonne Daniel, Elendar E Louise Barnes, Latanya Tigner and more<sup>34</sup>, FESTAC Oakland 2014 Roundtable discussion, Laney College, Oakland, CA.

### **Conclusion - FESTAC '77**

FESTAC '77 might well be remembered as a turning point in modern African politics,” writes Antonio de Figueiredo, in a Nigerian periodical. An activist, journalist, and broadcaster, Figueiredo campaigned tirelessly for the liberation of Portugal's African colonies (Figueiredo in Chimurenga, “The Power Behind Black Culture, 2020, 18).

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<sup>34</sup> Left to right 1st row: Linda Johnson, Geraldine Washington, Mary Vivian, Tracee Henson, Deborah Vaughan, Ruth Beckford, Elendar E Louise Barnes; 2nd row, Yvonne Daniel, Amara Tabor Amara T. Smith, Zak Diouf, CK Ledzepko, Latanya Tigner, Denise Pate, Yagbe Awolowo Onilu, Colette Eloi, Tumani Onabiyi; 3rd row, Henry Burton, David McCauley, Butch Haynes, Tamgsanq, Ralph Eaglefeather; Festac Oakland 2014 Panel, Laney College Oakland (From Tumani Onabiyi Facebook).

FESTAC was a meta correction that used dance as a form of diplomacy to reconnect and uplift their cultural memories and preserve Black Culture and Civilization that had been attacked by colonization.

This dissertation has discussed the role dance played at FESTAC '77, has shared the viewpoints of the US dancers, and artists who attended the festival, and has demonstrated how FESTAC '77 enabled a *sovereign body*, a liberated and unencumbered body, to be seen at the center of its reality. It has examined how African-rooted dance can excavate the divine sovereign body as presented through the stories of my interlocutors. For them, dance should be seen as an expression of ontological healing. It has examined how a sovereign body can surface in the lives of pivotal dance communities in the United States specifically, and in the Black and African world.

My analysis focuses on the United States artists though it serves as an example of the emergence of the sovereign body in the lives of pivotal dance communities across the globe in places like: Brazil, Cuba, South Africa, Nigeria, etc. The methodology of FESTAC '77 was adopted in other countries coming out of colonialism (p.c. Oni 2022). Moreover, the 2022 FESTAC@45 Anniversary Celebration of FESTAC 1977 expanded the cultural work of FESTAC to go beyond Black and African people with an even more inclusive vision on “Deepening Intercultural Dialogue and Integration for Global Peace.”

The dissertation analyzes a festival that provided a stage for newly liberated and colonized nations to embody their sovereignty in Sankofa and Futurism style dance presentations with a global community of people who shared the legacies of chattel slavery

and colonialism and the use of dance as an international language, and archive of history and identity. The dances they performed prior to their accomplishments as seasoned artists, that is, while at FESTAC, spoke of the wounds that needed healing and connections that existed that were felt though not fully understood. The process of making dances served a processing space of diplomacy for South Africa and other African nations in post-colonial eras of Apartheid South Africa and multi-Black Nigeria. FESTAC '77 was the lifting of the dances and dance-critical cultural thought that was in situ, during the periods of chattel slavery and colonialism and shifting of stories and ideas. Some of the revelations and gains of that historic milestone in African and Black culture would not be seen or felt until years later, as in the work of US artists.

The festival's use of dance was an ingenious way to include precolonial African heritage into its collective re-mapping of sovereignty. The canon of African-rooted dance called upon at FESTAC '77 mirrored what was discussed as the African personality in the colloquium, especially the aspect of that personality that stands against genocide, exclusion, and liberates identities from hegemonic framings and racialization. Thus, the most common topic at the heart of FESTAC '77, the colloquium, was de-colonizing perceptions of African Indigenous ways across a list of topics that made up the 10-volume set of books: education, religion, science, technology, history, arts, and culture etc. Issues relevant to the Black world could be processed on multiple levels: self-centering development and use of culture as memory were significant topics to contest the derisive narrative of colonialism. The topics of the colloquium permeated every level of the festival including the dance. From my research I found that the canon of dance includes an

awareness and value system that acknowledges and engages the inner dimensions of the self, from an African spiritual perspective. In the eighth volume of *The Arts and Civilization of Black and African Peoples* (the ten volumes of books from the colloquium) or "*Black Civilization and Science & Technology*" in an article entitled "Searching for the African Personality in the Traditional Medicine-Man of Africa: The Cameroon Experience" by Professor Dan N. Lantum of Cameroon, he writes:

"The task before the African Indigenous medicine-man today and which is indeed a formidable one, is to redeem his former personality, by achieving legal recognition and open support of the communities in the modern governmental systems, so that he can also set up his own institutions and contribute without prejudice to the socio-cultural and economic development of his country. Further, in his freedom he can again develop the healing science and art to cope with the new health problems that the ever-changing society of Africa is witnessing every day" (Lantum 1986, 45).

Dance-drum is part of the medicine of African Indigenous medicine men. Dance itself is a decolonizing medium in the way the body is used as the means of expression, allowing the body of the person to express, narrate and navigate their own direction. FESTAC used that medium of dance to speak internationally. Culture workers like my interlocutors became traditional healers where dance was the work – the medicine; for example, Vaughan speaks of dance as her tool to decolonize the minds of Black and African people. Mosheh Milon's mindfulness-drumming is the work—the medicine, against mechanized socialization—which can be considered a great, great grandchild of the zombifying Industrial Age. Cleo Parker Robinson, and Chuck Davis created legal institutions that contributed, without prejudice, to the socio-cultural and economic development of their country and global brothers and sisters. I cannot go into all the topics discussed at the colloquium; rather, I give the suggestion to read the books from the

colloquium of FESTAC '77, because the aesthetic of the dance is laid out in eloquent nuanced details in those books. In summation, colloquium books, like the dances, are about re-education, clarification, reinterpretation, retelling, and agitating stale ways of thinking and working. But most importantly, they are about embracing the Black and African body-being.

Finally, the dissertation has encouraged a fresh approach to analyzing dance, especially in the Diaspora, outlining eight points to be considered by analysts and theorists of African Diaspora culture.

First, the precolonial data from my inquiry has determined that the body is seen as sacred. My research is through the lens of Indigenous African or precolonial constructs of the body, where I have used the emic and indigenous understanding of the body or the "body-being" as sacred. The sacred body in precolonial or Indigenous African thought is at the root of the chattel slavery and colonialism counter-narrative.

Second, my precolonial perspective of dance reveals that dance is also an archive of tradition and deep knowledge (Daniel 2005). As revealed in the case studies of Cleo Parker Robinson's *Creation, Destruction*, Eduardo Rivera's *Sulkary*, and through the semiotics of the Bahianas' presence at the festival's opening ceremony.

Third, precolonial archives of African rooted dance should be included in academic writing and discourses on Africa and the African Diaspora.

Fourth, when aware of the connections through the dance cultures in the African Diaspora, theorists should become literate in the languages and lineages of the dance-drum

movement vocabularies and traditional songs, which would allow them to cite gestures, allowing deeper reads of African-rooted choreography.

Fifth, analysts and theorists will need to be aware of the power dynamics and anti-Blackness remnants of imperialist rhetoric that have shaped the discourses and eyes of scholars. Sixth, African rooted dance is a generative compass.

Seventh, with this study, I have started the development of a precolonial perspective of Black and African dance analysis that is contextual and changes with nuance when considering that Black and African culture is not monolithic.

Eighth, there is always a political and economic dimension associated with or at play in choreographies of dance, due to the legacies of slavery and colonialization, that scholars should make themselves aware of when possible.

Dance was so crucial at FESTAC '77 that it allowed the process of embodying sovereignty in different ways for Diaspora Africans. The dance contributions of Cuba and Brazil at FESTAC '77 focus on dance genealogies, lineages, that exist and trace back to the Southwest areas of Nigeria and Eastern areas of Benin/Dahomey especially. In my review of choreographic and cultural meanings within the dance *Sulkary* from Cuba and within the dances of the Orixás from Brazil, performed by Bahianas, embodying Orixás can be seen as embodying agency as discussed by Noland as an agentic body. The Bahiana is a symbol of the women of Bahia, Black women who perceive themselves as sovereign beings, independent and free to practice their life principles in Candomblé, even under challenging conditions. Similarly, *Sulkary* at FESTAC '77 pushes against ideas of

tradition, modernity, and who can claim and possess “modernity.” The Cuban performance of *Sulkary* was a contemporary sovereign action on an artistic level, while precolonial ethnic identity of Yoruba and Dahomean culture were present, not as vestiges of a long-gone era, but as projections into the future. This choreography forwarded topics from the Women liberation and Black liberation movements of the 60’s and the 70’s, where Black women were also. When considering the choreographies at FESTAC ’77 my analysis revealed that FESTAC was a space where Black women were elevated. And for US women who suffered from both sexism and racism, at FESTAC ’77 those power dynamics were pushed to the back, allowing Parker Robinson’s *Creation, Destruction* to be played by a woman. These case studies prove the necessity of a precolonial perspective that taps into “limitless” possibilities, as Vaughan also related.

In FESTAC ’77 featured Nigerian dance production of *Children of Paradise* (1974), the choreographer Nwoko combined 16 Nigerian ethnic dances with contemporary dance to create a theatrical dance work, utilizing characters from popular allegories to theorize and present a plot that considered Nigeria’s interaction with colonialism. Nwoko's use of ethnic dances reinforced what I emphasize - Indigenous African dance. Because Indigenous African dance allows access to precolonial identity of both Africans and Diasporans, I have gained a deeper and more nuanced understanding of precolonial analysis in the Diaspora versus on the African continent. The term “precolonial” for continental Nigerians raises the issue of cultural plurality, which unfortunately unearths old African animosities and issues of tribalism, in the process of international development (Udoka 2021). For instance, for Nigerians, the distance of precolonial dance traditions, in



terms of time and space, is not far. It is tangible and all around them, despite the role of colonization, because those Orishas exist in nature. For instance, the dance for the river goddess Oshun exists in Nigeria where there still exists an annual festival and where the attendees travel to the Oshun River, whereas for African Americans, “precolonial” feels far and non-existent, especially prior to the festival (Onabiyi 2023).

My research also revealed the need to reconsider the use of the term “Blackness” when considering an African perspective of ethnic dances in Nigeria, and by extension, in the Diaspora. I came across a new category of dance that I had not heard about in the States, which Arnold Udoko referred to as trans-ethnic. This was African dance that included the dances of multiple ethnic groups. Udoka referenced a dance of many different Nigerian ethnic groups coming together, using their movement vocabulary to make a single choreography, and the significance of such a dance for a place overrun by tribal fighting. Those groups do not neatly fit under the title of Blackness.

I found that continental African choreographers were empowered by FESTAC ’77 to tell their trans-ethnic stories in their own languages and perspectives. Those dances—pieces from Mali, Gabon, Lesotho, and Nigeria—were as complex in the way they presented trans-temporal aesthetics, using African allegory in a contemporary context to project into the future. These trans-ethnic dances served as spaces of diplomacy and discussion for feuding ethnic groups. Udoka’s perspective reinforces this study’s idea of precolonial perspectives in dance as a map of connection across Africa and even the Atlantic Ocean. But Udoka highlights the issues connected to precolonial focus in

Nigeria's development. This aspect of the study would be relevant to the 43 newly liberated countries who were present at FESTAC '77.

In comparison, the findings from the oral history interviews, taken from the US Diasporan dancers at FESTAC '77, revealed how precolonial perspective in dance served as a form of ontological healing (Vaughan 2014, 2023; Onabiyi 2014, 2023, Woolbrights 2023, Daiter 2023), revealing sacred sovereignty. For US participants interviewed for his study, precolonial elements of African dance that were available in the US served as a compass to identity and evidence of connection with people in Africa (Woolbright 2023). While the concept of precolonial is always associated with non-colonized perspectives, my fieldwork experiences especially provided a different reality and now offers a nuanced perspective for this researcher of dancer/culture worker.

In the course of this research, I came to understand the Nigerian President Obasanjo, who provided poignant information on the festival in his International Festival Committee Summary and Report of FESTAC '77. The President of Nigeria and scholars like Professor Udoka, and Dr. Duro Oni have the actual emic perspective of the festival, which was not in my early research of FESTAC '77. Their information is crucial when considering FESTAC '77 as a strategic action designed to mobilize newly sovereign countries, quell the qualms among different tribal groups to unite Nigeria, and present a model of development for the continent of Africa.

Cultural dance was a vehicle towards President Obasanjo's vision and played a critical role. Obasanjo understood the power of dance and harnessed it as a method of

development in the face of cultural plurality. Dance was a common language despite differences, and artwork like *Children of Paradise* (1974) highlighted the Obasanjo ideation that Nigerians working together towards a much-needed nationalism might bring about their ability to contend in the World Market, following years of colonialism since the Berlin Conference.

African Americans' use of dance in this dissertation was different from the Continental Africans' use of dance. In the case of Africa, Udoka gave this critique to scholars and capitalizing artists:

“But the essence of art [dance] as an indispensable tool for generating social consciousness and change exists if only its practitioners are fully aware of the dynamics of nation-building and are therefore capable of evaluating, influencing, and articulating the ideological contents of the society in the attempt to contribute meaningfully to social development and engender national integration through creativity. Unfortunately, the majority of the culture workers and theater practitioners are not politically conscious to the extent of influencing policy development” (Udoka 2021).

Udoka's critical words, though directed toward Nigerian artists and scholars, what he calls Town (artists) and Gown (academics)—those who make the most money from art [dance], should be applied to everyone who deals in the arts as they are a sacred and powerful form of expression.

In terms of this dissertation, I sought to highlight the use of dance by those US artists who were successful with “social development and national integration through creativity,” like Chuck Davis, Cleo Parker Robinson, Deborah Vaughan, Duro Oni, Mosheh Milon, etc. Chuck Davis's work was about diversifying America; Vaughan's work was about showing the many beautiful dimensions of Blackness; Robinson's work

elevated Black Women; Oni was a messenger of the FESTAC methodology on an international scale; and Milon extended the healing of African-rooted dance-drum practices.

Between 1957 and 1977, encompassing the historic period from FESMAN '66 to FESTAC '77, FESTAC gave forty-three newly independent or sovereign African countries a dance-critical space to fathom moving forward. FESMAN '66 and FESTAC '77 was both responses to colonialism and chattel slavery and should be considered as part of the lineages of Pan Africanism, Indigenismo, The *Negritude* Movement, and the Black Arts Movement, as well as the anti-Apartheid movement. It was the utilization of precolonial cultures and a precolonial worldview that decolonized systems of oppression and galvanized energy and creativity, albeit in different ways. FESTAC '77 extended Black Consciousness that was present globally prior to the festival and continued to influence Black Consciousness after the festival.

In the approximately 30 dances I viewed at Nigeria's CBAAC, one prevalent theme was dance-theater or allegorical dance that utilized indigenous precolonial elements and contemporary staging, traditional and contemporary fusion in costuming, and both were optimistic and provocative ideological projections into the future. FESTAC '77 empowered the choreographers, dancers, and musicians to tell their own stories in their own ways and from their own perspectives. In fact, a FESTAC style of dance theater emerged from FESTAC '77, rooted in African cosmology and epistemology with contemporary aesthetics as forward-minded assertions that were trans-temporal and, in some cases, trans-ethnic.

This study impacts Critical Dance Studies by presenting work that goes beyond racialized analysis of Black dance and Black choreographers in the African Diaspora and Africa. One of the most important aspects of a precolonial perspective is that it implicitly emphasizes that African Americans' history does not start with slavery. A transhistorical view of anti-Blackness reveals valuable information in any study of Black and African people, where a re-occurring problem and response spiral and cycle. My study revealed to me the way Black and African people have been dealing with the spiraling of anti-Blackness for so long- for centuries, but it also reveals where art [dance] has been a humanizing force for peace, understanding and resistance to anti-Blackness, like at FESTAC. Also, my study should signal to other researchers that there is not one type of Blackness or African rootedness. I forward the term multi-Blackness, to replace Blackness towards confronting this issue. That is, researchers must be conscious of the diversity among Africans, be it on the continent or in, and between, Africa's Diasporas.

My academic pre-research augmented my pre-academic fieldwork and was used as a means to check notions I developed over my 25 years as an African Diaspora artist and researcher. Thus, the framing of this discussion began with a cross-analysis of precolonial thought in what I refer to as root countries (the African countries where the dances that emerged in the Diaspora originated) throughout African Diaspora dance.

My dance research has stretched across the belt of Africa, from Mali to Bantu-land in Central Africa, but it can also be found as far as East Africa. Specifically, this involves Yoruba land extending from Nigeria to Benin (Abimbola 1997; Bascom 1950, 1980; Drewal and Drewal 1990; Falola 2003; Mason 1992, 2016; Washington 2015 [2014]), the

Dogon (Griaule 1964) and the Djeli of the Mali Empire (p.c. Cissoko 2020; Charry 2000), the Ewe ethnic group (Kuwor 2021), Dahomean Fon linguistic group (p.c. Daagbo 2017; Agbotounou, 2017; p.c. Yai 2017), and Bantu-Kongo ethnic group (FuKiau 2001[1980]; Heywood and Thornton 2007; Heywood 2001). These five root cultures and their dance modalities are prominent in the dances, cosmology, epistemological ontologies, sonic projections, methodology of presentation of dance and allegory, rhythm patterns, vibrations, concepts of both dance and rhythm as language, aesthetics, symbolism, food, regalia, art, within Diaspora countries (Daniel 2005, 2020).

As a dance practitioner, culture worker, researcher and descendent of Haitian parents, I have recognized obvious connections between root cultures on the Continent and within Haitian Folklore, Vodou dance, Lucumi/Santeria/Cuban Folklórico, Candomblé of Brazil, as well as Blues, Jookin, Praise dance, Second line dance (Hazzard-Gordon 1990), and Ring Shout (Raboteau 1978) performances in US traditions that I have studied and immersed myself in. Although I am discussing only three Diaspora styles in this dissertation, they are present throughout the Diaspora - in places like Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Jamaica, and throughout the Caribbean, also Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Peru in South America, and from West to East across the US and Canada in North America. Additionally, they can be found in the worldwide African Diaspora in places like Japan and the UK.

In conclusion, FESTAC '77 was a global meta-correction developed by previously colonized Black and African people. FESTAC was a meta correction by first reconnecting and bringing everyone in proximity to uplift cultural memories. In the context of a mass

gathering for one month, methods of corporeal and oral traditions, as well as written texts preserved thoughts on Black Culture and Civilization that had been attacked by colonization. There were problems even though the will of the artists to manifest something positive outweighed most issues (Apter 1993, 2005); still, there were exorbitant successes, some that seem indeterminable.

The remaining and constant question to ask is: What is the right amount of money to be spent on a move towards correcting centuries of slavery and colonization for the Black world? In that respect FESTAC was modest in its use of funding. It was a culmination of 20 years of artists from multiple African ethnic groups coming together to reaffirm who they were in the world and how they would proceed. The festival's benefits are incalculable. In Nigeria, as well as in multiple African nations, the festival opened the floodgates to development of the arts and built institutions beyond the National Theater and the establishment of the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization: CBAAC. Fifty theaters, including those on school campuses, were erected as a direct result of the festival (p.c. Oni 2023).

This dissertation simultaneously presents new conceptions of the dancing body. Precolonial inquiry has resulted in shared underlying cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies among Diaspora descendants from specific African regional sites, especially those canonized in African Diaspora dance modalities. My discussion of dance from a precolonial lens carried a set of implicit ideas that pushed against ideas of geographical borders, gender, and hybridity in African Diaspora Studies discourses.

Additionally, my study provides a new archive for the Humanities and Dance studies of CBAAC. Due to the tremendous quantity of dances that were presented multiple times a day over the 29-day festival, close readings of FESTAC '77 dance footage are possible and have informed my ideas and conclusions about dance and the body and revealed themes of development in the choreographies. Furthermore, Nigeria's opening dance was a major example of how Black dance is and should always be discussed in relation to development, the political climate, and historical moments. These are relevant points for an emic understanding of multi-Blackness and the challenge to monolithic conceptualizations of the "black dancing body".

Finally, a great deal of this dissertation research involved sitting with significant elders in the field of African and African Diaspora dance in the US and, as a result, it celebrates the US ancestral and living legacies of FESTAC '77. I have tracked their work worldwide. Their continuing work has extended FESTAC '77's original methodology of holistic development through dance and displays the meaningful impact FESTAC '77 had on "American" dance.

For my fellow dance practitioners who love to track the connections in African Diaspora dance, my interest in the festival was to gain information regarding the dances, music, drum rhythms, myths, and histories that the dances held. I believed the festival was an essential and critical archive because veteran master artists from both Africa and the Diaspora had been in conversation. The festival program could potentially map the connections between Africa and her Diaspora. As I continued to ask around the Black dance community of Oakland and research what I considered an iconic event, I saw this



festival as a critical moment in global Black history. And as such, I continue to map out and investigate dance history and its legacies.

In closing, I came across the book by Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (2005), which asked these relevant questions: “How can we produce a sense of belonging to communities in struggle that is not evaporated by the onslaught of our everyday routines? How do we build movements capable of generating the power to compel governments and corporations to curtail their violence?” I found it interesting that in many ways, FESTAC ‘77 was giving a response to the colonial-made situations of 1977, but also, to these contemporary questions as well. African-rooted Dance is a way of life that resists “the onslaught of our everyday routines” giving us the necessary agency to manifest beautiful possibilities.

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## Appendix

### Professor Duro Oni (CBAAC) Interview Transcript

#### Part 1 of Interview

**Colette Eloi** 00:02

Greetings. So is it okay that I interview you today about FESTAC?

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:07

Yes, it's fine.

**Colette Eloi** 00:08

Okay, welcome.

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:09

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi** 00:10

So, would you mind introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about yourself?

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:16

Okay. Yeah, thank you very much. My name is Duro Omi. I'm a Professor of Theater Arts in the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos. My area of specialization is in design and technology for the theater, you know, which covers of course, aesthetics. My background, I went to the University of Ibadan, you know, graduated in 1973. And then I worked briefly at Ahmadu Bello University. And after that, I transferred to the University of Lagos in 1976. And I've been here, you know, literally since 1976, but not without some breaks. At some point, I was on a graduate study leave to California Institute of the Arts. That's in Valencia.

**Colette Eloi** 01:12

Oh, okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 01:13

I did my MFA at Cal Arts.

**Colette Eloi** 01:16

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 01:17

Yeah. And then came back, you know, from that program. And then continued my work in the University of Lagos. I was in California for two years. And since then, I've been here at some point and started to work towards a PhD. And then went back to the University of Ibadan and took a PhD. Okay, so that's it. I've had a good career here. You know, I've moved from being a Senior Arts Fellow to being a Senior Lecturer. Part of the

period that I was here, I was also the Director of the University of Lagos Center for Cultural Studies.

**Colette Eloi 02:00**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 02:01**

And at some point, also, I was on a leave of absence, I was Special Advisor to the Nigerian Minister of Culture and Social Welfare, then Youth and Sports. And at some point, also, I was Director, Chief Executive of the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization. That was from 2000 to 2006.

**Colette Eloi 02:22**

Six. Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 02:24**

So at the University of Lagos, I've been a professor since 2005, of head positions. I was head of the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos, I was Dean of the Faculty of Arts outside in Lagos with seven departments. And then I was also Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos, which is like being Vice President in the United States education system.

**Colette Eloi 02:50**

Wow. That's...

**Professor Duro Oni 02:54**

That's it.

**Colette Eloi 02:55**

Amazing prestigious career. Oh, very, it's such an honor to sit with you. It's such a blessing. So yes, I'm very interested in just anything you have to say. But specifically, if you could talk a little bit more about CBAAC. So you said that you were the deputy...

**Professor Duro Oni 03:19**

I was the Director, Chief Executive Director, Chief Executive at CBAAC. I was the overall boss at CBAAC.

**Colette Eloi 03:27**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 03:27**

From in year 2000 to 2006.

**Colette Eloi 03:30**

Okay, can you tell us a little bit about that center? [CBAAC] And yes.

**Professor Duro Oni 03:38**

Yeah, the center was created immediately after FESTAC. FESTAC took place from

January 17 to February 15, 1977. And after FESTAC, the number of countries that came had a lot of materials, artifacts, video films and all of that, and the Nigerian government persuaded them to leave all those materials that they were going to set up an establishment where they could keep all those materials and anyone from around the world who wanted to do some research or was interested in the materials could always come to Nigeria to do that. So that's how the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization was created. The first director, there was a gentleman called Mr. Zedas Ali (sp?). He was the director there. The very first one, I'm not sure when he started, but after him was Professor Yunion Adubuldi (sp?), who was also there from 1992 to the year 2000. Then I took over from the year 2000 and stayed till 2006

**Colette Eloi** 04:59

Okay

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:00

And then, you know, tried to grow the center, if you like. We had a lot of activities, we had a lot of events, we had a lot of international conferences and seminars and symposiums, we had lectures. What I did during my time at this CBAAC was to try and have a program every quarter.

**Colette Eloi** 05:22

Okay

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:22

That's every three months, we had to have a major program. Because the board of the center also meets once every quarter, four times in a year. So every time they were coming, always had one major event so that they could all be part of it as the board. And this worked very well. So you could say, for the six years that I was there, we had like 24 major activities. Wow! Bravo. You know, so that's, that was the thing. You know, we had some international conferences, I have a couple of...like, what they may call handing over notes for when I left CBAAC.

**Colette Eloi** 06:03

Oh, okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 06:04

So it will detail all of those activities that we had over that period of time.

**Colette Eloi** 06:09

Oh Wonderful. Okay. So, I'm very interested in what do you feel like FESTAC did? Well, first for people in general, for Black and African people. And then for Nigeria? What do you feel like FESTAC did as a festival?

**Professor Duro Oni** 06:36

It was a reawakening of all the ideas and all the issues relating to Black and African arts and culture. I mean, there were the dances, there were the exhibitions and all of that. But the major part of FESTAC job was in the FESTAC colloquium, where they had to

address several issues relating to Africa, the Black people, the Black race, and all of that. And they had, you know, this was covering areas like Black and African arts and culture, civilization, education, artifacts, and the rest of them. And in all, they had the, at the end of it, they produced 10 volumes of works. I think I did have, I added, you know, one set of the colloquium papers, I'm not too sure where they are now, that but I'm sure that they still have several copies of it of FESTAC. But for Nigeria, we saw FESTAC because, one, it helped us to build a whole new town, you know, FESTAC Town, which, of course, originally was FESTAC Village. But that was where they camped. All the artists from different parts of the world and Nigeria ordered these long Marco polo buses, that were ferrying people from FESTAC Town to the different venues at the National Theatre, Addis Ababa, la voz Quoi (sp?) and all of that. So it was quite a festival to reawaken, you know, the Black consciousness. And quite a number of, you know, Black artists, from all over the world, we are present from Africa. And if you know that, that was the second Festival of Arts and Culture, the very first one was held in the Dakar in 1966. And Nigeria was to follow with another one in 1970. You know, it didn't quite happen, then it got shifted, and there was a change of government. And then it was to be held in 1975.

**Colette Eloi 08:52**

Oh,

**Professor Duro Oni 08:53**

And in 1975, there was another change of government. You know—

**Colette Eloi 08:57**

I didn't know this part!

**Professor Duro Oni 08:58**

The president of the country was removed, you know, via a military coup.

**Colette Eloi 09:03**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 09:03**

And then eventually, FESTAC happened in 1977, from January to February. And this was on that. The military head of state at that time was only Shabaab (Sp?) passenger. So, he was the one that played host to FESTAC.

**Colette Eloi 09:20**

Wow, thank you. I was about to ask you for historic context, and you already gave it to me. Thank you. Wow, that's, that's wonderful. It created a whole town. So FESTAC is an institution of itself. That it was seen and I hear that it's housed in the same place where the British rule of Nigeria was previously housed. Is that right?

**Professor Duro Oni 09:50**

You mean we are?

**Colette Eloi 09:51**

CBAAC?

**Professor Duro Oni** 09:53

CBAAC? No, I think it was the former National Library of Nigeria.

**Colette Eloi** 09:58

Okay. Thank you for that.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:00

But what was it used for before it became the National Library? I may not have that background information.

**Colette Eloi** 10:06

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:07

But that was where the National Library was. And the National Library had to move when the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria moved to Abuja. Okay. So they then gave the, the former library was given to CBAAC. We are now in the heart of Lagos Island.

**Colette Eloi** 10:26

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:26

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi** 10:27

Okay. So I'm very interested in the dances that took place there. What can you tell us about the dances that took place at FESTAC '77?

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:38

Well, there were quite a number of...I mean, I think in all maybe 57 or 59 countries, you know, participated in FESTAC. There were, of course, I mean, tons of communication. You didn't need the language, you know, to enjoy dance productions, and quite a number of those countries that had dance productions, the beginning, you know, Syria alone, Mali, Ghana. You know, Ethiopia. We had loads and loads of those performances, and they were held in different venues. Some were held at the National Theatre. Some are held at the basketball pitch of the National Stadium, and some were held at the Tafawa Balewa (sp?) Square. I was very much a part of FESTAC because I was the Technical Director, along with a couple of colleagues of mine that was able to operate the National Theatre Main Hall.

**Colette Eloi** 10:57

Wow. Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 11:46

Where most of the performances took place.

**Colette Eloi** 11:49

Yes.



**Professor Duro Oni 11:50**

But Nigeria also had a presentation.

**Colette Eloi 11:53**

Yes,

**Professor Duro Oni 11:54**

They had a drama presentation, you know, which was *Langadu* (Sp?) by Wally Abu Amin (Sp?) and was directed by DARPA Luba (Sp?).

**Colette Eloi 12:03**

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni 12:04**

Then they had the dance production, which was tied to *Children of Paradise*, and was directed by Dimas Nwoko.

**Colette Eloi 12:11**

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni 12:11**

So those were the Nigerian entries to FESTAC because each country had to have a major...listen, if you look at that book, the other one? Yes. It would even give you information about the venues.

**Colette Eloi 12:27**

Oh, wonderful.

**Professor Duro Oni 12:28**

Yes, and which performances happened in what venues? You know, it says the FESTAC itself, the opening ceremony, the events that you know, drama, music, dance, film, literature categories for anthology, the program of events itself, and then the exhibition venues. So all of these were all there, and there is a table in this report, which details all the performances that were held in different venues. You know, this is like 15th of January opening ceremony. Main Hall of the National Theatre, they had music and dance, you know, then Ethiopia and Nigeria performed.

**Colette Eloi 13:26**

Okay, so this is the agenda.

**Professor Duro Oni 13:29**

This is the program.

**Colette Eloi 13:31**

Yes. I've been asking for that at CBAAC.

**Professor Duro Oni 13:33**

No, it's only in the report itself.

**Colette Eloi** 13:36

Oh, wonderful.

**Professor Duro Oni** 13:38

You know, that they had the program.

**Colette Eloi** 13:42

Okay. Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 13:45

So that's quite a number. I mean, if you scroll through this, it even has the financial records, as I said, of how much money was spent on building the National Theatre or purchase of vehicles, on kitchen equipment, wages for temporary stuff. So if you look at this now, you've got all the performances that were held. You know, if something, Somalia, had the drum, then valley to Senegal, and then Sudan folk troop, then the Colloquium. Then Cuba. Rembos, Marishas, (sp?) Tanzania traditional dance from Gabon.

**Colette Eloi** 14:43

Wow!

**Professor Duro Oni** 14:44

Ensemble folklore from Côte d'Ivoire. So you know, all of these are the events that are held and it has the venues also listed. So it's very important document that you'd have different different venues. You know, heartbeat of Africa was the performance from Uganda. Then the Le Castro Nationale from Zaie (sp?) The modern pop ensemble from Nigeria, Balin Nationale (sp?) from Mauritania.

**Colette Eloi** 15:21

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 15:22

Khumba, the battles from the USA.

**Colette Eloi** 15:26

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 15:27

Yeah. So it's all listed here in terms of all the things that happened and then some of the choral music, then Ethiopian festival of group Ethiopia and dance of Trinidad. So it has the entire program of what happens. And in the National Theatre conference, hall, the colloquium was also going on simultaneously. Okay, so this is a...it's a document and it just says report and summary of accounts of FESTAC. There should be a copy of this in the CBAAC, you know, but a gentleman who had to prepare the reports gave this to me when I was developing the paper that I was writing on the National Theatre.

**Colette Eloi** 16:23

Okay, yeah. Okay, wonderful.

**Professor Duro Oni 16:25**

But we'll make a photocopy for you.

**Colette Eloi 16:27**

Thank you.

**Professor Duro Oni 16:28**

So at least you will be able to have that for your records.

**Colette Eloi 16:30**

Thank you, that will be fabulous. Okay. So this is great. Is there? You were talking a little bit about the controversies around FESTAC. Can you tell us a little bit about what type of controversies were following Festac and kind of stop people from delving into really understanding what FESTAC is?

**Professor Duro Oni 16:56**

Well, part of that was really on the religious side. You know, the church. And the people felt that during FESTAC that a lot of idols, a lot of fetish materials were brought into Nigeria, and that the problems of Nigeria started off with that, those kinds of things being brought to the country. But I just think that's a totally misguided view. Because I mean, that's...what does that got to do? I mean, we worked at CBAAC, and we're living with those materials, working with those materials for six years, and we are not affected by them. So I can't...

**Colette Eloi 17:34**

Yeah, uh huh! Your life is very blessed. (Laughs)

**Professor Duro Oni 17:48**

Yeah. Yeah. (Laughs.) I mean, it's just one of those things that you get from people who, in a way are misguided in terms of this. So there was that controversy. I mean, some people felt that it was a waste, to bring in a lot of dances, dancers and dances and art exhibitions and stuff like that, that it was a waste to bring them. But it was very important for us who are in the arts, that we were able to bring in so many artists into Nigeria, it was the revival of, you know, nationalism, a cultural revival. There were too many performers. The Nigerian economy, as far as we're concerned, was boosted by that influx of so many tourists. I mean, if you have people coming from 59 countries, some of them had, like 100 people on their team. 200.

**Colette Eloi 18:46**

Wow, wow

**Professor Duro Oni 18:47**

The Nigerian entry was also massive. You know,

**Colette Eloi 18:51**

Do you? I'm curious, in this book, did they take an account of some of the money that came into Nigeria?

**Professor Duro Oni 19:00**

I don't think that would not be reflected in this, maybe would have been reflected in some kind of economic report or something.

**Colette Eloi 19:09**

Because it seems that people who are saying it was a waste of money are only calculating the expense, but didn't calculate the benefits.

**Professor Duro Oni 19:18**

They did not.

**Colette Eloi 19:19**

Yeah, because I'm sure it brought in so much money. And then like you said, it built a town, that is still here today

**Professor Duro Oni 19:25**

That's right! And the theater--

**Colette Eloi 19:27**

And the National Theatre. Which is still generating funds.

**Professor Duro Oni 19:30**

That's right.

**Colette Eloi 19:31**

How many festivals do that? You know? So I think I'm curious if...I'm gonna look to see if anyone do any kind of economic calculations of

**Professor Duro Oni 19:41**

Yeah, you might be able to find some materials online. You know, respect of that. But you know, that's not really my own area. So I've not really investigated that but obviously people came in and they spent money. There were traders. There were people that were selling artifacts, that were people I was selling food, although they provided the catering services for all the contingents. You know, but of course, people will still go out and buy things and all of that. So it must have boosted the economy during that period.

**Colette Eloi 19:56**

Yes, I did read the article about, like, vendor style women who were incredibly happy with FESTAC because they did well from their sales. So,

**Professor Duro Oni 20:29**

And the musicians, there were lots of music around Festac, around the theme, you know, apart from the anthem that they will compose for FESTAC and all of that. There were quite a number of people that would have made quite some money. I mean, you know, the major musicians are near Durban (Sp?) in South Bay (Sp?) and the rest of them.

**Colette Eloi 20:51**

Right, yes. Let's go back one more time to the issue of fetishes. So they, so they're saying, it's the fetishes that were brought in? Did they say, was there any specifics about that? Or was it a general thought? Like, was there...were they saying that these came from some particular country? Or just in general?

**Professor Duro Oni** 21:17

No, I think it was more in general. And this was part of the religious indoctrination. I mean, like, even in families where they had shrines, you know, people are now encouraged that if they were not making progress in their families, it was because they still had those shrines. So they had some people in various parts of Nigeria who went to destroy the shrine,

**Colette Eloi** 21:43

The family shrine

**Professor Duro Oni** 21:44

So as to be able to make progress in the modern world.

**Colette Eloi** 21:47

Oh, okay

**Professor Duro Oni** 21:48

And some who had names that were listed as holy shayome (sp?) that you know, like, it's the orisha that saved us by changing their names to oluwa oluvu. You know, they were anglicizing and turning them into Christian names.

**Colette Eloi** 21:49

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 21:49

You know, People will say Ogusaya (sp?) like the God of Wu (Sp?) that would be Ogusuya they will change it to Olusaya (sp?) Or Lu is (sp?) God, you know, the Supreme Being. So they had all those fears. You know, it was an indoctrination, perpetuated largely by most of the Pentecostal churches. Okay, so people who are, you know, taking out the, their own real names, you know, because they were associated them with some fetishism and all of that.

**Colette Eloi** 21:52

Yes Oh,

**Professor Duro Oni** 22:44

And converting those names into, you know, Christian-like names.

**Colette Eloi** 22:50

Interesting! Oh, so this was something that was happening across Nigeria while FESTAC was happening.

**Professor Duro Oni** 22:55

Across Nigeria. Yes, yes.

**Colette Eloi** 22:55

While FESTAC was happening.

**Professor Duro Oni** 22:57

Yes. Yeah.

**Colette Eloi** 22:57

So they got pulled into that.

**Professor Duro Oni** 22:59

Yes.

**Colette Eloi** 23:00

And it continues. Oh, you have really

**Professor Duro Oni** 23:03

So quite a number of people change their names from, you know, Orisha, change that to the new god, you know, the Christian God...

**Colette Eloi** 23:13

Yes.

**Professor Duro Oni** 23:14

And it was, I think it's just misguided... I mean, I'm a more liberal person in that sense, but I just couldn't be bothered with change our names, you know? Yeah. I mean, they actually did. Some did officially change their names. Yes.

**Colette Eloi** 23:30

So this, this, this...when did this phenomenon start taking place? Like, right around? 1977? Or did this start happening earlier?

**Professor Duro Oni** 23:39

I'm not...I'm not too sure. I mean, I could, you could make some inquiries in respect of that. But I mean, I even know a couple of professors in the university. Yeah. Who changed their names from Ogunyale to Ogunyale (sp?), and all of that.

**Colette Eloi** 23:40

Oh! That's so interesting.

**Professor Duro Oni** 23:55

So it was all over, you know, they was perpetuated by the Pentecostal churches,

**Colette Eloi** 24:01

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 24:02**

You know, and in the east, it affected them a lot, in the eastern part of Nigeria, We had, you know, shrines that they had had for hundreds of years.

**Colette Eloi 24:13**

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni 24:14**

Were destroyed in the name of, you know, the Christian religion.

**Colette Eloi 24:18**

The eastern region-- is that, Ileyife? (sp?)

**Professor Duro Oni 24:20**

No Ileyife is the West. It's the Southwest. Ileyife is close to the east.

**Colette Eloi 24:28**

What's the major towns?

**Professor Duro Oni 24:30**

Oh, Enugu or Nija. (Sp?)

**Colette Eloi 24:33**

Ogun (sp?) states like

**Professor Duro Oni 24:34**

No, yes, those are the most states Anambra State (Sp?). Oh, Haviar (sp?) state and all of that. Nigeria is there truly like divided into that is enough, you know, that is not west not east, the middle belt, then Southwest is Lagos. Ifa and Dared (sp?), then south east, would be those areas of Enugu and all of that. That used to be called the Eastern Region. Okay. Okay, those are the Ebo (sp?) people.

**Colette Eloi 25:06**

Oh, that's the Ebo people who are affected by that? Yes, a lot of them which is destroyed their own Heritages and shrines. Because they thought that they are now Christians and so couldn't take part in such fetish things. Is that area, like, economically valuable? Is that piece of land valuable to outsiders? I'm curious why...

**Professor Duro Oni 25:35**

They don't have that much land in the south east. You know, they are very enterprising.

**Colette Eloi 25:40**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 25:40**

They are good traders, quite a number of them are in the Southwest in Lagos. They buy property, they trade well, and all of that. That was where the old Biafra (sp?) ?

**Colette Eloi 25:55**

Biafra. Could you explain what that is? Biafra?

**Professor Duro Oni 25:58**

You know, Nigeria had a civil war from 1967 to 1970.

**Colette Eloi 26:04**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 26:04**

And it was the Eastern Region, the South East wanting to break away from the country. And then, you know, the rest of the country said, No, and that was a civil war that lasted for like 30 months (about 2 and a half years). And then the rebellion was quelled, and a lot because they actually declared an independence, called the Republic of Biafra.

**Colette Eloi 26:30**

Oh, really? So they were trying to like split

**Professor Duro Oni 26:34**

Carved themselves out of Nigeria?

**Colette Eloi 26:36**

Oh! What year? Say the year again?

**Professor Duro Oni 26:39**

Yeah. 1967 to 1970. To January 1970.

**Colette Eloi 26:46**

You are such... like a book. And you hold all of the dates. That's fabulous.

**Professor Duro Oni 26:52**

Yeah. But I mean, it's for me, it's contemporary history. I mean, I lived through the period.

**Colette Eloi 26:58**

Yes. Right. Yes.

**Professor Duro Oni 26:59**

So I do know the dates. Yes.

**Colette Eloi 27:01**

That's wonderful. It's a pleasure to interview you. Okay, that...you have just...that was a very interesting expansion on this whole idea of fetish, what you have just shared, and then the economic piece. And then I heard that there were some artists, like Fela Kuti, who was bit, not wanting to participate in the festival? And is, were there more than just him? Or what were your thoughts on that? Or what was? What was going on around that?

**Professor Duro Oni 27:39**

Fela was a phenomenon. I mean, you know, he's a man of himself, and all of that. He



identified with the Black community in the United States and all of that, But he just didn't seem to have keyed in, into FESTAC. You know?

**Colette Eloi 27:57**

To me the irony of Fela is he preferred the contemporary modern, but because he, but he represents globally: Africa.

**Professor Duro Oni 28:11**

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi 28:11**

You know what I mean? So he wasn't into the traditional, but he was a bridge to the traditional.

**Professor Duro Oni 28:19**

Yeah. Yeah. Because I mean, I mean when, in the United States, I mean, the first time I visited the United States was 1978. You know, a part of it was being in California. And there was this Lady Rihanna or Ivana or something, you know, and she was Fela's friend. And you know, and they would all hang out together and all of that and a few of them that were Nigerians who are musicians. And Bruce Campbell also lived in California. Yeah,

**Colette Eloi 28:19**

So I think it was fine what he did, but um, it's ironic that actually he really connect people to Africa. Oh I didn't know Fela used to

**Professor Duro Oni 28:59**

He didn't live there. He used to visit.

**Colette Eloi 29:02**

Oh,

**Professor Duro Oni 29:03**

And he had like, she was like a girlfriend. I think her name was Rihanna or something.

**Colette Eloi 29:08**

I didn't know was in? You know, I'm from California.

**Professor Duro Oni 29:10**

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi 29:11**

I didn't know that was in California, where he met her.

**Professor Duro Oni 29:15**

Yeah, but I can remember someone that would have had that information passed on a couple of years, Shumagin (sp?) was a filmmaker, you know? Worked with Stevie Wonder a bit, did some things with the... There was this Ghanaian president who had his two daughters. One of them was a lecturer and they lived in California.

**Colette Eloi 29:46**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 29:48**

Yeah, we used to go to this...is like a club in downtown LA, where they had all the Black major artists and all that would gather. I've forgotten the name of the place and we used to hang out there.

**Colette Eloi 30:02**

Oh, wow.

**Professor Duro Oni 30:04**

This kofi kofi (sp?) What is it? You spent time in Ghana?

**Colette Eloi 30:09**

Yes, Obustia (sp?) was it Obusha? (sp?)

**Professor Duro Oni 30:11**

Obustia...yeah. Yeah. Yes, yes. Right. Cause she married? The sister married Stevie Wonder. That's right.

**Colette Eloi 30:17**

Yes. I went to their house.

**Professor Duro Oni 30:19**

Yes. Yeah. We used to go to those places in California in the early 80s.

**Colette Eloi 30:25**

Oh, that's awesome.

**Professor Duro Oni 30:27**

Yeah,

**Colette Eloi 30:27|**

That's so. Okay. That's awesome. Okay, I'm gonna push stop for a minute and let us take a little break. We did thirty minutes.

## **Part 2 of Interview**

**Professor Duro Oni 00:05**

You could go ahead. Yeah. During the FESTAC, the University of Lagos, you know, and I just joined the service not too long before them was also running a parallel FESTAC.

**Colette Eloi 00:18**

Oh, okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:19

What we call "fringe FESTAC." You know--

**Colette Eloi** 00:23

Okay yes!

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:23

FESTAC on the fringe. Yes. So we did that. And we had a lot of the groups that performed at the National Theatre also performed in our 1000 seat auditorium.

**Colette Eloi** 00:36

Oh, wow. Thousand seats!

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:38

Yeah, we have the seats. Yeah, we have a theater that seats 2000.

**Colette Eloi** 00:41

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:42

So we have performances there. In fact, some of the performers first performed here at University of Lagos before I've been performing—

**Colette Eloi** 00:52

Oh,

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:53

—At the National Theatre.

**Colette Eloi** 00:54

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 00:55

I remember particularly, you know, The Mighty Sparrow.

**Colette Eloi** 00:59

Unh!

**Professor Duro Oni** 01:00

You know?

**Colette Eloi** 01:00

Yes!

**Professor Duro Oni** 01:01

Because he was from Trinidad and Tobago . One of the technical directors that we worked together at FESTAC was Dexter Lindsay (Sp?), you know, from Trinidad and Tobago, who had lived in Nigeria for a while and was my lecturer at the University of Ibadan. So he arranged for Mighty Sparrow to perform at the University of Lagos even before his performance.

**Colette Eloi 01:24**

Wow!

**Professor Duro Oni 01:25**

That at some point, they were looking for Mighty Sparrow at the National Theatre for FESTAC only for them to know that he was already at the University of Lagos performing. And all the other groups—Ethiopia, Guinea and all that—they also performed here at the University of Lagos, those to extend beyond the venues of FESTAC.

**Colette Eloi 01:46**

That's great.

**Professor Duro Oni 01:47**

Yeah. So we had quite a number of those shows [unsure of word].

**Colette Eloi 01:50**

Okay. That's great. I did start reading a book that was talking about that. Unilad (sp?) FESTAC On the Fringe.

**Professor Duro Oni 02:00**

Yes. Yes. You saw something.

**Colette Eloi 02:02**

I did see that in the CBAAC library.

**Professor Duro Oni 02:05**

If you...if you let me... if it's something that was electronic, you can send it to my email. Also, I'll be glad to... because I was in charge of that also. You are in charge of that.

**Colette Eloi 02:13**

Wow,

**Professor Duro Oni 02:13**

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi 02:14**

You're a man of many hats and many places. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Wonderful. And so, you know, I just recently took a picture of your books. You have many that stack? The stack of books here.

**Professor Duro Oni 02:32**

Yeah, those we were putting them together because my kids want to use it to do a birthday cake.

**Colette Eloi 02:39**

Oh, that would be so wonderful...

**Professor Duro Oni** 02:42

Retire at 70. So my birthday comes up on the 15th of December. Okay, So that is the official day that I retire from the service of the University of Lago. Because you can't stay beyond the 70s.

**Colette Eloi** 02:57

Wow. Okay, okay,

**Professor Duro Oni** 02:59

You can't, you can't do. So the books stacked up so that they could take photographs and then use it to make the birthday cake. So that's why I have them. Out there. Yes. But the person who was supposed to come and take the photographs has not come yet. I hope they show up one of these days.

**Colette Eloi** 03:20

Okay. So since I'm in the presence of excellence, what do you attribute your excellence to? What do you attribute: your longevity? Your sharp mind?

**Professor Duro Oni** 03:35

Well— (laughs)

**Colette Eloi** 03:36

And do you feel...? And did you know your purpose in life? It seems like you found your purpose and grabbed it with two arms.

**Professor Duro Oni** 03:45

One thing that I can say is that from secondary school days, you know, from when I was like, 13, 14, 15 and all of that, I was already involved in a lot of dramatic presentations,

**Colette Eloi** 03:59

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni** 04:00

I used to do some shows in the school onstage. And then at some point, we also graduated to doing some of those shows for television. So I never wanted to be anything else but a theater artist.

**Colette Eloi** 04:14

Uh huh.

**Professor Duro Oni** 04:15

So I went straight into it. And I've remained in it almost for 50 years or 70 years. So that really is it. You know, because I don't...I didn't try to be a medical doctor. I didn't want to be an engineer. I just wanted to be a theater artist. And that's what I've always done. And that's what I've stuck to, but I believe in what you call self-improvement efforts.

**Colette Eloi** 04:43

Yes.

**Professor Duro Oni** 04:44

So at every point, I wanted to stretch myself a little higher, a little higher, and I think eventually it has paid off. I mean, I've held, if you like, quite a number of positions.

**Colette Eloi** 04:57

I—

**Professor Duro Oni** 04:57

You know,

**Colette Eloi** 04:57

Yes, I've heard

**Professor Duro Oni** 04:58

At the University of Lagos. And also in, in, in Nigeria, with the government and all of that.

**Colette Eloi** 05:04

So when you're in a role, you do the role, but you're always thinking, Well, what can I do next?

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:09

Yes, that's right. What is the next step? What's... Yeah, so that's... I always want to go one step further.

**Colette Eloi** 05:16

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:17

I mean, when I started working here at the University of Lagos, you know, I told the Vice Chancellor then that, look, I'd like to go for an MFA. And it was like, people should be coming to study under you for your own MFA.

**Colette Eloi** 05:31

(Laughs)

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:31

Not you going there. And I said, Look, yeah, but I can't award myself.

**Colette Eloi** 05:35

(Laughs)

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:37

So I must go, you know, and my stay in Cal Arts in California. It's on the Interstate-5. You know, Valencia towards Magic Mountain.

**Colette Eloi** 05:46

Yes. By Disneyland. It's like, it's like only an hour from where I grew up in California. I grew up in Carson. I don't know if you ever went to Carson.

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:55

I'm sure I probably did. You know

**Colette Eloi** 05:57

It's by Long Beach.

**Professor Duro Oni** 05:59

Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So I spent some time there. And you know, the school, it's during the MFA program, and only four falls into lighting design, because that's my real major area of concentration.

**Colette Eloi** 06:13

I see you have a book on it?

**Professor Duro Oni** 06:15

Yes. Yes. I have a book on state lighting design that they had covered that. I think it was probably, like 20 years...or something.

**Colette Eloi** 06:28

I love the cover. Would you say that you create...? Is there anything that is quintessential your style in lighting?

**Professor Duro Oni** 06:39

Oh, yeah. I mean, I'm, for a long time. Until the technology changed, I was like the major lighting designer in Nigeria. Some would even say in Africa—

**Colette Eloi** 06:49

Really?? Oh wow!

**Professor Duro Oni** 06:49

You know? Yeah. But, I mean, I've done a lot of design work for television, for stage. I even designed the lighting for the stage adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

**Colette Eloi** 07:08

Oh, is that right?

**Professor Duro Oni** 07:10

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

**Colette Eloi** 07:12

Oh, wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 07:13

And did some shows in [Santa Monica] California, Morgan-Wixson Theater, and all of that—

**Colette Eloi** 07:18

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni 07:19**

So that's been my major area. But of course, the technology has changed. And it's quite difficult catching up with some of the new trends and equipment now. You know, the... you don't use filters anymore on stage lighting. I mean, the colors are changing from control boxes and stuff like that. So yeah. So that has changed a bit. So that's really it. I've tried to do all what I can. I'm trying to write an autobiography. I was hoping to be ready for my 70th birthday. But obviously not because there's so much that may be missing. So much has not been included. So I thought there's no point in wanting to try to rush that one. So I can always do it after one year or something.

**Colette Eloi 08:08**

Yeah, you don't have to rush.

**Professor Duro Oni 08:10**

Yeah.

**Colette Eloi 08:10**

So since you've...since I'm a new writer. What is your writing practice like? When do you write? Especially you're so busy. When do you find time to write? What is your practice like?

**Professor Duro Oni 08:24**

You see, my routine is pretty...I'm not an early morning person. You know, probably won't get out of bed until 8am In the morning, you know, unless of course, if I have to catch a flight to somewhere and then I'll get to the office at about 11. And then I'll stay till about five then I'll go to the staff club. We have a university staff club, have a couple of beers, and you know, banter and stuff like that, then get home at about 10. And then I'm up till about one.

**Colette Eloi 08:57**

Oh, you're a night writer.

**Professor Duro Oni 08:58**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So working on my laptop till about one o'clock and then struggle to go upstairs and then (laughs). And so that's really my routine.

**Colette Eloi 09:10**

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni 09:10**

yeah.

**Colette Eloi 09:11**

Okay. So you've managed...that's good to know. You've managed to write all these books by doing this and you'd have a balance in your life because you go and hang with your friends.



**Professor Duro Oni** 09:22

Yes, yes. From five o'clock to about 9:30 every day.

**Colette Eloi** 09:27

Every day. But you're consistent.

**Professor Duro Oni** 09:30

Yes. Yes.

**Colette Eloi** 09:31

Do you write on the weekends too?

**Professor Duro Oni** 09:33

Yeah, if we haven't had too many parties.

**Colette Eloi** 09:36

(Laughs). I love that you get the parties in

**Professor Duro Oni** 09:40

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We haven't had too many parties

**Colette Eloi** 09:44

—and exercise; you're so fit! What do you...?

**Professor Duro Oni** 09:46

Yes, I do... Today...now I have my phone as a counter. So before I have a...I live on campus, I have a larger compound so I can walk around my compound. But I've done 3,896 steps today.

**Colette Eloi** 10:03

Oh, wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:04

So the minimum I do is 6,000 steps every day. That's minimum. Okay. Sometimes we'll go to 7, 8, 9, 10.

**Colette Eloi** 10:16

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:17

And if you step out of a corridor, here is 150 steps from the one corridor to the end. So when I work for a while I just get out there and I walk.

**Colette Eloi** 10:27

Yes. You just go back and forth.

**Professor Duro Oni** 10:29

Yeah, about maybe 10 times. And that's like 1,500 steps, then I'll come back in and do some more work, then go and do that again. So.

**Colette Eloi 10:39**

Wonderful

**Professor Duro Oni 10:40**

That's the routine.

**Colette Eloi 10:41**

And how many children do you have?

**Professor Duro Oni 10:43**

Four. They're all grown up, they're all married.

**Colette Eloi 10:47**

Okay. Nice.

**Professor Duro Oni 10:48**

Two boys and two girls.

**Colette Eloi 10:50**

And grandchildren?

**Professor Duro Oni 10:52**

Five grandchildren.

**Colette Eloi 10:53**

Nice.

**Professor Duro Oni 10:53**

Yes. Three boys and two girls.

**Colette Eloi 10:56**

And your wife? What does she do?

**Professor Duro Oni 10:58**

She's also a theater artist who graduated from the University of Calabar.

**Colette Eloi 11:04**

Okay,

**Professor Duro Oni 11:04**

And then she was head of the Film Corporation.

**Colette Eloi 11:09**

Oh, wow.

**Professor Duro Oni 11:10**

In Lagos Yeah. Does Gallegos Bondi [spelling of words unsure] headquarters in Jos (sp?)

**Colette Eloi 11:15**

Wow.

**Professor Duro Oni 11:16**

As in the north of Nigeria. So she's also in a similar field, but

**Colette Eloi 11:22**

And your children? Are they in the field?

**Professor Duro Oni 11:23**

No, no, no, not one of them.

**Colette Eloi 11:25**

Not one of them? Oh well.

**Professor Duro Oni 11:27**

I know, you know. They are into their own things. I mean, they're all graduated from University of Lagos to different degrees: psychology, health education, and human kinetics, then estate management.

**Colette Eloi 11:46**

Okay. So beautiful. Congratulations.

**Professor Duro Oni 11:51**

Thank you.

**Colette Eloi 11:52**

And blessings as your life continues to blossom. It's bringing me back to FESTAC. If you were to say... this is kind of like, you know, artists, this is a very artistic question. If you were to say what was the vibration of FESTAC, you said it was like an awakening, but all those different people from different places in one place? What was the vibration of FESTAC?

**Professor Duro Oni 12:20**

It was a lot of fun.

**Colette Eloi 12:22**

(Laughs)

**Professor Duro Oni 12:22**

A lot of fun. Even if Fela didn't take part in the FESTAC, but a lot of the people that came were running to Fela's shrine every night, you know, to see the performances and smoke marijuana. I love that, you know? So it was a lot of fun. And people were just generally happy. I mean, the nightclubs were full. That was Bobby Benson's nightclub on Nickelodeon (sp?) Road. Everyone visited there. So a lot of people just really, it was a lot of fun. It was like, it's not the sense of a street carnival. But every night at FESTAC Village where the artists stayed, they all had like carnivals, and you know?

**Colette Eloi 13:10**

It must have been amazing—

**Professor Duro Oni 13:11**

Yeah, they had fun.

**Colette Eloi 13:13**

That's what my teachers said, that my teachers were like, from Wa June Bay, (sp?) Nontsizi Cayou, she and Deborah Vaughan, Blanche Brown, they said, it was like, when they came, they said it was like coming to heaven. They thought this thing would happen every year. They kind of waited and it didn't happen again. So...

**Professor Duro Oni 13:40**

No...FESTAC has not happen, because what Nigeria did was on a scale that was unprecedented.

**Colette Eloi 13:48**

It was unprecedented. Yes.

**Professor Duro Oni 13:50**

Yeah,

**Colette Eloi 13:50**

Yes. That's it.

**Professor Duro Oni 13:51**

Yeah. Yeah. You know, it was so huge. I mean, bringing 59 countries 58, 57 countries into Nigeria. And a lot of the protocol. Also, because very many of the countries that came, came with their Heads of States.

**Colette Eloi 14:10**

Wow, they came with their Heads of States—that's amazing!

**Professor Duro Oni 14:12**

Yeah, yeah. Heads of States, you know, led the delegations and so there was protocol, they have to be met at the airport, they had to be ferried into the state house, they had to be provided, you know, accommodation that was adequate and all of that while also taking care of the artists in FESTAC Town. You know, quite ... it was a huge affair.

**Colette Eloi 14:36**

Huge affair.

**Professor Duro Oni 14:37**

You know, in Lagos. Yeah.

**Colette Eloi 14:39**

And I'm sure it employed so many people. It must have employed so many people—

**Professor Duro Oni 14:44**

They did. And all the people that was selling things. Yeah, I mean, the Oshas (sp?) has the drivers. Each country depending on their size. They had this huge Marco Polo versus [spelling unsure], you know, and FESTAC was decorated...it's The Robert Mapai [sp?]

does some artist who was given the contract for 2 million naira to decorate all of Lagos so he had flags, he had FESTAC logos and all of that all the way on kuredu road [sp?] all the way to FESTAC—

**Colette Eloi 15:17**

Oh, can you say his name slowly again?

**Professor Duro Oni 15:20**

Era Bo Amilk Pie. [sp?]

**Colette Eloi 15:22**

Okay wow that's the artist...the visual aesthetic for FESTAC.

**Professor Duro Oni 15:27**

Oh yeah. I mean he was huge. He passed on a while but I can type his name. He's quite popular: Era Bo. Yep. That's the way the name is spelled. So I'm sure if you can.

**Colette Eloi 15:53**

Okay. Thank you.

**Professor Duro Oni 15:55**

Yeah, is available. He's got a Wikipedia page. Okay. And his son is also of course into the arts too.

**Colette Eloi 16:06**

Okay, wonderful.

**Professor Duro Oni 16:08**

Along with Ben Oh (sp?), he died in 1984.

**Colette Eloi 16:11**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 16:12**

From 1934 to 1984. So it must be like contemporaries of Vilisha Enkai (sp?). The rest of them Nigeria's copter moralists (sp?), graphic artist and painter, was regarded as one of the pioneers of Modern Arts in Nigeria. Some of his notable works includes the bronze replica of the ivory mask of Idia that was used as the official emblem of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture.

**Colette Eloi 16:42**

Okay.

**Professor Duro Oni 16:44**

And a popular painting of phenomena. He's also responsible for the decorations on the four entrances of the National Arts Theatre in Nigam. So does Izomo By (sp?) You know...

**Colette Eloi 12:40**

Had the World Cup been hosted in Nigeria prior to this?

**Professor Duro Oni 12:44**

No, no, no, no, no.

**Colette Eloi 12:45**

Well, so they created this schema.

**Professor Duro Oni 12:48**

Yes. Yes. The World Cup in South Africa, one, because they got much better infrastructure. But it hasn't been hosted by Nigeria, except for maybe the all-African games and all of that.

**Colette Eloi 13:01**

So Nigeria has...before this had never done anything of this magnitude?

**Professor Duro Oni 13:07**

No, we are done the all Africa games. I think that was in 1972 or 1973.

**Colette Eloi 13:12**

Okay. Yeah. What is that the

**Professor Duro Oni 13:15**

Sports. It is a sports fiesta. Yes, but not Cultural Festival.

**Colette Eloi 13:21**

And that, did that include 59 countries?

**Professor Duro Oni 13:27**

I don't know how many countries because I'm not really into the sports thing, but quite a number of people. But I know someone who would easily have the answer to that.

**Colette Eloi 13:39**

Oh, I would love to Yeah. Curious. Because all of these things just seems like so many, just in terms of like creating a workforce that is savvy to do these complex protocol. Yeah. You know, it was quite an investment of like, you know, all investments are not money some when in terms of development, I also studied Development Studies, right. So in terms of development of a country, it seems like it was very powerful. Okay. Okay. Good, stop.