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#### **Author**

Osumare, Halifu

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**“The Fierce Freedom of Their Souls”:  
Activism of African Dance in the Oakland Bay Area**

**Halifu Osumare, Ph.D.**

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The Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area has long been a center of African dance, from a fledgling search for roots in the revolutionary 1960s of the Black Arts Movement-West to the current prolific 21<sup>st</sup> century West and Central African dance companies run by continental African dance and drum masters. In this chapter, I illuminate this regional African cultural trajectory, exploring the artists, dance companies, arts organizations, and community influences that established the Bay Area, and Oakland in particular, as a center for African dance and culture.

Pearl Primus opens her famous essay “African Dance” with a compelling poetic argument for what African dance does to the individual, as well as the community:

Very early in her research the investigator learned that people who truly dance are those who have never bartered the fierce freedom of their souls, never strangled their hunger for rhythmic movement, nor frustrated their joyous physical response to music and song . . . When these people truly dance, there can be no observers, for those who seek to watch soon join one of two groups.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pearl Primus, “African Dance,” in *African Dance: An Artistic Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamuw Welsh Asante (Trenton, NJ: Africa World press, Inc., 1996), 3. (Reprinted with permission by the author from her dissertation entitled “Masks in the Enculturation of Mano Children,” New York University School of Education, Nursing and Arts Profession).

Primus described one of those groups as those fearful ones who “remove themselves back to their comfortable living rooms and shut out the scene . . .” But the ones who stay “are snatched, plucked up by an invisible force and hurled into the ring of the dance . . .”<sup>2</sup> This is exactly what happened to the Oakland Bay Area as traditional African dance from the continent with its “fierce freedom of the soul,” began to infuse the community that had already been “raised” on African diasporan dance.

Through Afro-Haitian dance classes and the Katherine Dunham Technique, Ruth Beckford, a former member of the famous Katherine Dunham Dance Company, exposed several generations in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to Afro-Haitian dance that prepared us physically, psychologically, and intellectually for the community-galvanizing dances from Africa. Instead of the typical infusion of tap, ballet, “interpretive,” and acrobatic classes taught to young black girls in most black communities across the country, the Bay Area had Afro-Haitian dance that permeated the Oakland Parks and Recreation centers, with Ruth Beckford as its first Director of Dance. Live drumming was used in most of her dance classes, and her overall mission was not only producing good dancers, but to socialize her mostly female dance students into proud respectable young women of the community.<sup>3</sup>

Miss Beckford’s approach was very traditional, in the sense that dance in African societies is first and foremost a community expression that inculcates the values of the society to each generation. Beckford has often publicly stated that the use of dance as a socialization tool was her mission. Hence, African dance and drum masters defecting from their national dance

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<sup>2</sup> Primus, “African Dance,” 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Beckford. Speech to the audience, “Celebrating the Dunham Legacy,” by Katherine Dunham Legacy Northern California, Laney College Theater, June 8, 2006.

companies from countries like Senegal, Congo, and Ghana and migrating to the Oakland Bay Area, found a receptive dance community that had been trained to receive traditional African dance, and indeed Africa itself. In fact, Bay Area black dance students were eager to receive “authentic” African dance and drumming from the first African artists arriving in the Bay Area in the 1970s, such as C.K. Ladzekpo from Ghana, Malonga Casquelourd from Congo Brazzaville, and Dr. Zak Diouf from Senegal.

### **Katherine Dunham’s Legacy in the Bay Area**

Before exploring traditional African dance in the Oakland Bay Area with these African dance and drum masters, it is crucial to further examine the legacy of Katherine Dunham for which Ruth Beckford was the regional transmitter. Not only was Dunham the first to research the legacy of African dance retentions in the diaspora and put them on stage, but she intellectually conceived of the cultural relationship between Africa, the Caribbean, and the US---the Black Atlantic---as early as the late 1930s. I have discussed her conception elsewhere:

Dunham clearly envisioned the African diaspora---the Black Atlantic---long before that nomenclature was ever used. Although Paul Gilroy conceptualized the Black Atlantic as an “. . . intercultural and transnational formation...” in the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> Dunham implicitly understood and utilized this formation as both geographical and cultural in the 1930s, sixty years earlier. Her intellectual prescience illuminated crucial links between movement styles of African descendant peoples in the Americas and their overarching societies, revealing a legacy of creolized African culture in the Caribbean, the expressive dances and rhythms of which she wanted to dignify as important contributions to world culture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix.

<sup>5</sup> Halifu Osumare, “Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham’s Research to Performance Method.” *AmeriQuest* Online, Special Issue: “Migration of Movement: Dance Across Americas,” ([www.ameriquets.org](http://www.ameriquets.org)).

Katherine Dunham's emphasis on dignifying African diasporan dance on European and Euro-American stages was key to the Dunham legacy. African dance heritage permeated Beckford's and her protégés' Afro-Haitian dance classes in Oakland and San Francisco for three decades.

Utilizing the late Caribbeanist scholar VèVè A. Clark's development of French historian Pierre Nora's concepts concerning memory and history<sup>6</sup>, the Bay Area became a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) where an Africanist cultural memory was conjured. As we performed the five levels of *yanvalou* to 6/8 rhythms in Beckford's classes at Good Hope Temple on 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Shattuck Avenue in Oakland or Peters Wright Studio on Fillmore Street in San Francisco, we delved into African-derived movements that had been repeated over centuries and generations. Indeed, Clark first analyzed Dunham's methodology in her 1994 "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-87," which applied to Dunham's foundational dance technique as well as her creative stage choreography. In this seminal essay, Clark reminds us that, "When the dance steps, music, and other cultural forms were transformed for stage representations, they became *lieux de mémoire*, reworkings and restatements of historical danced events whose memory Dunham had also preserved in writing and on film."<sup>7</sup> In Beckford's Bay Area dance classes, after the strenuous Dunham barre, and center floor isolations, Haitian dances, re-enacted in progressions across the floor, were the moments of *lieux de mémoire*, where our spirits would be awoken to a cultural memory to which

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<sup>6</sup> Nora, Pierre, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> VèVè A. Clark, "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-87," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 190.

we had been unaware; but if we were lucky, it surfaced in our sweat and behind our eyes. We would “remember” our African heritage through our bodies and the rhythmic movement in Afro-Haitian dance and Dunham Technique.

Dunham had chosen anthropological fieldwork in the Caribbean during the 1930s for her master’s thesis at the University of Chicago. The Caribbean became a *milieu de mémoire* (environment of memory), where our West Indian cousins had retained more of the direct African heritage in drum patterns and dances, particularly Haiti and Cuba. The Caribbean became crucial to Dunham’s conscious motivation to find and articulate the fundamental nature of African-derived dances. She chose Trinidad, Martinique, Jamaica, and Haiti to examine African dances remaining in the Americas. After her sixteen months of fieldwork between 1935 and 1936, she started her dance company that would become one of the most famous internationally touring U.S. dance companies.

Dunham replenished her company at every port of call with auditions for new dancers, making the Katherine Dunham Dance Company into a little cultural United Nations. Ruth Beckford had auditioned for Katherine Dunham when the company appeared at the Curran Theater in 1940 in *Cabin in the Sky*, starring Ethel Waters. The young Beckford was a teenager still in high school, but she passed the audition and became “the youngest and newest member of the company, [and] I was graciously given help by everyone.” Beckford remembered, “Miss D herself was always patient, giving instructions and corrections in a calm, encouraging manner. I definitely wanted to please her. I was determined to be good.”<sup>8</sup> After several weeks of intense rehearsals, Miss B went on tour with the company from San Francisco to Canada, with her mother accompanying her, and becoming the “mother of the Dunham company,” during

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Beckford, *Katherine Dunham, A Biography* (New York; Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1979), 2-3.

Beckford's tour. After Beckford's tour with the Dunham company, her mother allowed her to make the decision between signing a seven-year contract with Miss Dunham or going back home to finish high school and attend the University of California, Berkeley. Fortunately for the Bay Area she chose the latter, and the Dunham dance legacy became entrenched in our region. Three generations of Dunham dancers and teachers have served the Oakland Bay Area, including professional dance companies like the Naima (Gwen) Lewis Dance Experience (1968-1978) and Deborah Vaughan's Dimension Dance Theater (1972-present). This Dunham legacy, through Beckford, was what nurtured and ripened the Bay Area black dance scene for the African dance masters that were to come.

### **The African Dance Triadic Foundation in the Oakland Bay Area**

The African dance scene in the Bay Area is founded on three major master drummer-dancers: Zakarya "Zak" Diouf of Senegal, C.K. Ladzekpo from Ghana, and Malonga Casquelourd from Congo-Brazzaville. All three of these African masters came to the Bay Area in the 1970s, and worked primarily in the Oakland Bay Area. All three became integrally involved with the African American community, training and educating young dancers and drummers to build their public classes and eventually their dance companies, which have become Bay Area institutions. During the 1970s, the city of Oakland, with a population of about 360,000, was approximately 47% African American and 62% people of color. Oakland was viewed as the "colored" East Bay city; Berkeley was the intellectual counterculture small town with the University of California; and San Francisco was considered the cosmopolitan city. African immigrants arriving in the Bay area would have more immediate access to a black community in the East Bay, consisting of not only Oakland and Berkeley, but also Alameda and Richmond. Although all three African masters settled in the East Bay, as their dance companies

grew, they also taught and performed in San Francisco's major venues, like the annual Ethnic Dance Festival.

### **Zak Diouf & Diamano Coura West African Dance Company**

I begin with Zak Diouf, the one with a direct connection to Katherine Dunham before coming to the Bay Area. He arrived in Oakland in 1973 and began studies in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). Somewhat of an anomaly, Dr. Diouf had already received a Ph.D. in Biochemistry from the University of Chicago (1971). He had completed all requirements while working with Katherine Dunham at her Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) in East St. Louis, Illinois. Miss Dunham was responsible for bringing two Senegalese master musicians to the U.S.: Zak Diouf and master drummer Mor Thiam, having met them both in Dakar with the National Ballet of Senegal during the First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966. Miss Dunham had just disbanded the Katherine Dunham Dance Company and working in Senegal was an interim period between her world tours and her settling in East St. Louis with a new position as Artist-in-Residence at Southern Illinois University.

Dunham was impressed with both Diouf and Thiam as master artists and convinced them to come to East St. Louis to help her establish her PATC community arts project, as an experiment in the arts to uplift the city's residents out of the downward spiral of poverty and gangs. In an interview Diouf stated:

Dunham was a smart cookie. She always got the best drummers; she had modern dancing and Haitian dancing, but she didn't have African dancing. So in 1967, I came to work with her in East St. Louis, and she pushed the University of Chicago to give me a scholarship for ten years. Every Monday and Wednesday, I made that five-hour drive to Chicago to attend classes and returned to work with Miss Dunham in East St. Louis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zak Diouf, Personal Interview, Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, Oakland, CA., April 23, 2015.



In this way Zak Diouf helped Miss Dunham build her community arts school after a long choreographic and cinematic career, and at the same time he earned his first degree in the United States. Eventually he moved to California where he earned his second degree.

Indeed, Dunham usually chose the best, because Zak had already been the Artistic Director of Ballet Mali, as well as having acquired an MA degree in African History, studying with the renowned historian Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986). Culture became an important tool in the struggle to develop unified polities out of the newly independent African countries, during the immediate postcolonial era. The result was the birth of several national African dance companies that utilized their country's various ethnicities' festivals, rituals, and rites as source material for staged productions.<sup>10</sup> Zak revealed that after the independence of the Francophone countries of Senegal, Guinea, and Mali, they formed *one* dance company and Diouf was the Artistic Director of the conglomerate company called the "Mali Dance Ensemble." Unfortunately, nationalism prevailed in the end and the tri-national dance company was short-lived, splitting into separate national dance companies. Dunham saw Mor Thiam and Zak Diouf in the resulting National Ballet of Senegal.

Zak originally came to the Bay Area to accept a job offer in biochemistry; however, always the student, he deepened his music and dance expertise with doctoral studies in ethnomusicology at University of California Berkeley. "I got tired of Chicago and St. Louis, and came here, after Suzette Johnson of Dimensions Dance Theater came to take classes with Dunham, and invited me to come to the Bay Area because she was working with Elendar Barnes

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<sup>10</sup> For a study of the role of African dance companies in nation building during the postcolonial era in Africa see John A.A. Ayode, "The Culture Debate in Africa." *The Black Scholar*, (Summer/Fall 1989), xx-xx.

and Deborah Vaughan.”<sup>11</sup> This statement by Zak establishes one of his motivating reasons for choosing the Bay Area. By coming to work with Dimensions Dance Theater, one of Oakland’s first black dance companies (and now, certainly the most enduring black dance institution), he came in direct contact with the dance populations that Ruth Beckford had readied.

During the intervening four years of ethnomusicology, Zak established himself in the Bay Area’s black dance and music scene. The Wajumbe Dance Ensemble, founded by Nontsizi Cayou at San Francisco State University, was one of the first black dance companies to hire Zak to teach traditional rhythms to its drummers, to prepare them for their first trip to Africa and for representing San Francisco at FESTAC, the second World Black Arts Festival in Lagos, Nigeria in January 1977. “I came with the *djembe* and trained their drummers,” Zak remembered, “like Michael Bass, Cedric Wilson, and others. I’m teaching my fifth generation of students now [in Oakland].”<sup>12</sup> With the help of Zak Diouf, the black dance community was learning traditional dances and the *sabar*, *djembe* and *kutiro* rhythms of West Africa, pushing beyond cultural memory to specific rhythms and dances that would become its regional trademark.

Zak Diouf founded Diamano Coura West African Dance Company in 1975 and with his wife, Naomi Gedo Diouf (from Liberia), developed the company as one of the earliest African dance companies in the Bay Area. Today they are the dynamic duo behind Diamano Coura, which means “Those who bring the message” in the Senegalese Wolof language. As Artistic Director, Naomi Gedo Diouf teaches the majority of the company’s community dance classes, and teaches West African dance at Berkeley High School to over 400 students per semester. Four of Naomi and Zak’s children, Esailama Artry-Diouf, Madiou Diouf, Ibrahima O. Diouf, and

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<sup>11</sup> Zak Diouf, Personal Interview, April 23, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Diouf, Personal Interview, April 23, 2015.

Kine Diouf dance and drum with the company, making it an Oakland family dynasty. Yet, the company is also populated with several African Americans who have studied for years with the Dioufs. Additionally, the professional choreographer and former Director of the Liberian National Cultural Troupe, Nimely V. Napla, has also been a member of the company, simultaneously having his own company, the Nimely Pan-African Dance Company in Minnesota and California.

Although Zak and Naomi represent two West African heritages--Senegal and Liberia, the senior dancers-drummers of Diamano Coura, over years, have also encompassed the dance cultures of Mali, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and the Gambia. This has made their performance repertoire rich and eclectic. Besides, the usual traditional dances that have become staples in West African dance across the US, such as *sabar* of the Wolof, the national dance of Senegal, *mandiani* of the Malinke or Maninka of Guinea and Mali, and *lenjengo* of the Mandingo people of Senegal, they have also featured dances of the Kpellé, Kru, Vai, Gio, Loma and Grebo ethnic groups as well.

In an interview for a 2014 memorial celebration for Nelson Mandela in San Francisco, Naomi expressed her image of the Bay Area African dance dynamics over the decades:

It operated [in earlier days] on a smaller scale, but there was a passion and a desire among people to make this thing bigger—a desire to get back to their roots. People came from all over to be part of the African dance community in the Bay Area. There was this unity in the community that was fantastic. It's not that it doesn't still exist, but it was on a different scale—it was much more intimate.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rob Taylor, "Bringing the Message; Naomi Diouf and Diamano Coura West African Dance Company." *Dancers Group: Promoting the Visibility & Viability of Dance*, July 2014. Accessed June 19, 2015. <http://dancersgroup.org/2014/07/bringing-message-naomi-diouf-diamano-coura-west-african-dance-company/>.

Naomi's assessment of the Bay Area African dance community in the '80s and '90s reinforces my perspective of an enthusiastic roots community that was thirsty for a sense of "authenticity" that she and Zak installed. As Zak told me, "This is the center for African and African-derived dance. Oakland and the [larger] Bay Area have a gift. The people here are so conscious about blackness and dance. That is what saved them."<sup>14</sup> The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area--as the political home of the Black Panthers, the cultural home of the Black Arts Movement-West, as well as the initiator of Black studies in higher education--was ripe to become one of the main centers for African dance in the United States.

Diamano Coura's biggest event is their annual Collage des Culture Africaines, usually held in early March. The event is a four-day dance and drum conference, including panel discussions, dance and drum classes, and performances. The 2014 conference, titled "Reflections – Looking at Where We Have Been," was their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Collage, and featured sixteen master classes taught by African and diasporan artists from ten major cities in the United States. Master classes were taught by Oumou Faye of Senegal, Mabiba Baegne of the Congo-Brazzaville, Assane Konte of Washington DC's Kankouran West African Dance Company, Senegalese Idy Ciss based in Chicago, Guinean dance master Youssouf Koumbassa, Senegalese Mareme Faye based in Los Angeles, and Malian Djeneba Sako based in Denver. Headliners of the performances included Julia Tsitsi Chigamba and Chinyakare from Zimbabwe, C. K. Ladzekpo's African Music and Dance Ensemble, their own Diamano Coura West African Dance Company, and Bay Area diasporan dance companies Dimensions Dance Theater, the premiere Bay Area Brazilian dance company Fogo Na Roupá, and Mahea Uchiyama, an African American Hawaiian hula and Polynesian dance master with her company.

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<sup>14</sup> Zak Diouf, Personal Interview, April 23, 2015.

In their press release Naomi put their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in context: “Our culture is strong and alive and it’s what binds the community. We come from all walks of life to display our journey from Africa to the West Indies, North America, and South America; we come to celebrate!” The activities were held in two important community locations: the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, the cultural center for African dance in Oakland (to be discussed below), and the Farnsworth Theater at Skyline High in the Oakland hills. The 2014 Collage des Culture Africaines was, in fact, a culmination of the decades of the unique African and diasporan focus of the Oakland Bay Area, where African dance masters recognize the diaspora, and vice versa, promoting a Pan-African consciousness that is unique to this area. Diamano Coura has also grown over the decades as a stable non-profit organization that has received funding from major funders. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary African Culture Conference was funded by the City of Oakland, Alliance for California Traditional Arts, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation.

In looking to the future, Diamano Coura has established a junior company of fifteen members. The junior company is a part of the company’s Youth and Arts-in-Education Program that not only performs and gives classes in the Bay Area, but also in San Diego and Los Angeles areas as well. As Zak has focused his artistic work across the state of California, he continues to affect youth statewide. The emphasis on a youth company means that the company will continue to replicate itself, bringing the socialization through the arts process, which is a primary function of dance and music in traditional African societies.

During my interview with Zak, he discussed African dance in relation to contemporary U.S. modern dance and ballet. When I asked him what he perceived had change over the decades in the Oakland African dance community, he reflected and said:

Modern dance used to be much more popular. The old-timers knew it all, which made them much easier to work with, because [of] their knowledge of other dance forms along with their craving for African dance. Now today, they are coming only from a social dance background.<sup>15</sup>

Zak remembers when he worked with Dimensions Dance Theater in Oakland and Wajumbe Cultural Institution in San Francisco in the 1970s. Their artistic directors had trained in Dunham Technique, modern dance and ballet, which gave them a body and stage awareness from which he could build his African repertoire. Many of today's African dance students have eschewed that kind of formal dance training. Zak perceives that omission as an artistic deficit, which he bemoans today.

In fact, Zak and Naomi appreciate other cultural dance forms, and have worked with the San Francisco, New York City, Tulsa, Singapore, and South African ballet companies. For example, in 1993 Zak collaborated with San Francisco Ballet's choreographer Val Caniparoli on the ballet *Lambarena* that blended West African dance and European classical ballet to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and traditional music of Gabon.<sup>16</sup> This unlikely dance collaboration is happening more and more in the United States, as African dance becomes entrenched in the American fabric. Companies like Diamano Coura understand the history of dance in their chosen home of the Bay Area and are willing and eager to bring local communities together through their humanistic approach to African dance and music.

### **C.K. Ladzekpo & African Music and Dance Ensemble**

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<sup>15</sup> Diouf, Personal Interview, April 23, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohV2zVhq8bI>, "Fusion: *Lambarena* by Val Caniparoli for a rehearsal of the piece and a commentary about the collaborative dance process.

C.K. Ladzekpo, of the Anlo-Ewe ethnic group of southeastern Ghana, also arrived in the Bay Area in 1973. As Zak Diouf had been in University of California, Berkeley's (UCB) music department, it was acclimated to some extent to African Music, and C.K. was able to assume an adjunct faculty position almost immediately. Whereas Zak was focused on academic studies, and only occasionally teaching a music class, C.K. established a strong public persona at the premiere academic institution of the Bay Area. Since he came with impeccable credentials, he quickly formed a company, the African Music and Dance Ensemble, and became Artistic Director, choreographer, and lead drummer. He had come originally from one of the most famous musical families among the Ewe of Ghana; he had been a lead drummer and instructor with the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies, and the Arts Council of Ghana; and like Zak, he had performed at the highest levels of dance and music in his native country before coming to the U.S. Thus, upon arriving at UCB, he was immediately able to introduce the Bay Area to traditional Ghanaian music and dance.

His classes were primarily taught for enrolled music students at UCB; but they became hugely popular in the 1970s and community people flooded his courses also, including myself. He had actually been recruited by noted African American composer and musicologist Olly Wilson, and was to come initially for only one year, while on hiatus from the University of Ghana, Legon (UG-Legon). He developed The African Music Ensemble within the Department of Music, and later a corresponding dance course through the African American Studies Department. C.K.'s popularity grew further, particularly through Richmond's East Bay Center for the Performing Arts. He ended up staying in the U.S. and becoming an important fixture in Bay Area African music and dance.

Not only did C.K. become an established figure, but his brother Kobla Ladzekpo came to the U.S. and joined the department of Ethnomusicology at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Kobla started his own performing ensemble, the Zadonu African Dance Company, and today is Emeritus Adjunct Assistant Professor. Together, C.K. and Kobla became the performing Ladzekpo Brothers throughout California. When asked why he chose to remain in the U.S., the UCB Department of Music website records his answer:

C.K. responds that he enjoys the new challenges of representing West African music to American students and audiences. Deeply interested in developing teaching methods to effectively communicate his music to foreign students, he has mapped out a process that involves lots of transcriptions of traditional repertoire from which new pieces for presentation can be created.<sup>17</sup>

To C.K., teaching, therefore, is equally important as his performing.

The model developed at the School of Music, Dance, and Drama (SMDD) at UG-Legon, with which C.K. had honed his skills, represents the dances and music of the primary ethnic groups of Ghana. Similarly, C.K. built his classes and the repertoire of his own African Music and Dance Ensemble on several Ghanaian cultures. The UG-Legon curriculum consisted of various traditional dance and music techniques of the Ashanti, Fanti, Ewe, Dagomba, Lobi, Dagari, etc. Coming from the Ewe Volta Region of Ghana, he was the department's expert in Ewe drumming and dance; but the format of the SMDD was to learn the music and dance of the other ethnic groups as well. C.K.'s UCB classes included not only the music and dances of the Ewe--- *agbadza*, *gahu*, and the dynamic *atsiagbekor* war dance<sup>18</sup>---but the Ashanti *adowa*, Ga

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<sup>17</sup> African Music Ensemble Description/History, Department of Music, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://music.berkeley.edu/performance-opportunities/african-music-ensemble/>.

<sup>18</sup> These first three Ewe dances are the staple dances of Ewe people of Ghana and Togo. *Agbadza* is their signature dance that today is performed at social occasions, belying its war dance origins. This fun dance is often called "the chicken dance," because both male and female dancers use



*kpanlogo*, and the Dagomba *damba* and *takai*.<sup>19</sup> In this way C.K built his student clientele, as well as his own performing ensemble that drew from his consistent university students. Among these students, he found his African American wife Betty Ladzekpo, who has been a principal dancer with the company since 1974, as well as Val Kai, another long-term member of the ensemble.

The multi-ethnic model of African dance companies grew from the national dance companies in the African postcolonial era, in which various ethnic groups configured under new African countries established by their colonial masters. The challenge for the master drummers and dancers, chosen under this multi-ethnic model to represent the newly independent nations, was to learn the many dances of each group and play all the various drums styles of groups beyond their own. For example, C.K. was already an expert at the Ewe master drum, the *atsimevu*, which instructs and leads the Ewe drum battery--- *sogo*, *kidi*, and *kaga*---along with the *axatse* rattle and the *gankogui* bell. He had to also master the *atumpans* of the Ashanti and

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the arms and elbows to the side of body in an up and down motion like a chicken. *Gahu* is a group dance performed in a circle with an emphasis on swiveling hips. Each dancer holds the hips of the person in front of him/her and helps the dancer move the hips more vigorously. *Atsiagbekor* is originally a war dance performed after battle when warriors returned from war. Now it portrays historic battle sequences and strategies at social occasions. An important feature is the interaction between the master drummer and the dancers.

<sup>19</sup> These latter named dances are staples in the repertoire of the Ghana Dance Ensemble at the University of Ghana, Legon, representing its commitment to ethnic diversity within the repertoire. *Adowa* is the signature dance of the Ashanti people and is performed as a solo dance, particularly at funerals. The skilled *adowa* dancer can express many Ashanti proverbs through intricate hand gestures. *Kpanlogo* is a well-known dance of the Ga people of Greater Accra, and has the distinction of being a relatively new dance. It was an innovative dance of the 1960s by Ga youth that was influenced by American pop music; however, it is accompanied by old Ga drumming traditions. *Takai* is one of the oldest rhythms and dances of the Dagomba people of Northern Ghana, and tells how the Dagomba became close to the Mossi people of that region and Burkina Faso. Male dancers, wearing large woven smocks, form a large circle and hold rods in the right hand and strike the rod of another dancer, forming another percussive rhythm with the drumming.

the *brekete* and *dondon* drums of the Dagomba in Northern Ghana. When he taught his classes and his company performed these varied cultural dances, he was introducing the immense diversity of West Africa. His instruction at UCB prepared me well for my 1976 trip to Ghana to study at UG-Legon, as well as for my travels throughout several regions to directly learn the dances and rhythms. I had a chance to study *adowa* with Auntie Grace Nuamah from the Ashanti region, and Ewe drumming from Kwashi Ameduvor, who eventually came to the US to also teach at UCLA. Indeed, C.K. Ladzekpo became an important African drum and dance master in the Bay Area for generations of Americans interested in Ghanaian dance and music.

An important aspect of African dance and music is its functionality, and the many roles it plays in its social and cultural contexts. For example, even the rhythmic *structure* of the music serves significant purposes on various levels. As C.K. states:

Africans learned a long time ago that music is functional . . . We may have several beat schemes going simultaneously, [and] when those beats agree, you have peace; when they don't, you have tension. These simulated stress phenomena or cross rhythmic figures are embodied in the art of dance-drumming as a mind nurturing exercise.<sup>20</sup>

Because this understanding is cultural and particular to traditional African settings, when C.K. brought these same rhythms to the U.S. some of his students did not understand why they were attracted to the complex, yet compelling, African rhythms. He reflected in the early 90s about the historic racial and cultural dimensions of the rhythmic transference across the Atlantic: “There are white kids who may be confused because they like this black art form . . . We let

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<sup>20</sup> Shimon-Craig Van Collie, “What is African Dance in America?” *Dance Teacher Now* (July/August 1992): 63.

them know that there's nothing wrong and that these rhythms and movements have been a part of their culture [part of the Americas] for a long time."<sup>21</sup>

There have been key moments of recognition of African dance in the U.S. by the concert dance world, and *African Dance and Music at Jacob's Pillow* in Lee, Massachusetts in 1987 was one. The performances at "The Pillow" were the brainchild of Liz Thompson, who joined the staff in 1980, and according to The Pillow's website, Thompson "initiated an artistic resurgence by welcoming new artists and audiences."<sup>22</sup> African dance performance was one of those new initiatives for Jacob's Pillow in the late 80s. The film documentary was written and produced by Nancy R. Savin for Connecticut Public Television, and featured a who's who in African dance and music including, Pearl Primus, Gambian griot Foday Musa Suso, Swazi Women Singers and Dancers from Swaziland, and from the Bay Area Malonga Casquelourd's Fua Dia Congo and C.K. Ladzekpo and his ensemble with his brother Kwaku Ladzekpo. It is noteworthy that the primary dance companies were from California---Fua Dia Congo and the African Music and Dance Ensemble---while the many fine New York African dance companies, which were closer to Massachusetts, were not included. Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times* dance critic, was thoroughly impressed: "It is one of the most thoughtful and engrossing programs of African dancing, singing, and instrumental virtuosity to be seen in this country in many years."<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Van Collie, "What is African Dance," 64.

<sup>22</sup> "The Jacob's Pillow Story," Jacob's Pillow Dance. Accessed July 4, 2017. <https://www.jacobspillow.org/about/pillow-history/jacobs-pillow-story/>

<sup>23</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance: 'Dance and Music of Africa' at Jacob's Pillow." *The New York Times*, 22 July, 1987. Accessed June 23, 2015. <https://home.comcast.net/~dzinyaladzekpo/Ensemble.html>.

important event in the dance world was a chance to showcase Bay Area African dance and music within a larger context of the national dance scene.

For its presentation at “The Pillow,” the African Music and Dance Ensemble featured the *atsiagbeko* traditional war dance drumming suite, which prominently demonstrates C.K. Ladzekpo’s virtuosic mastery. It obviously impressed the audience and Kisselgoff alike, when she wrote:

In contrast to the graceful if exuberant {Swazi] women’s group, the dancers and musicians of the Ladzekpo Brothers and the African Music and Dance Ensemble were energy personified. In their dances of the Ewe people of Dahomey, six women and two men, holding whisks, spurted into staccato bursts of movement. Yet these were collage-like phrases, performed in place: gestures, steps and torso contractions erupted and ended suddenly like the torrent of drums accompanying them. The dancers held themselves in flattened, angular shapes---those that had inspired Picasso’s Cubism, perhaps. The group directed by C.K. Ladzekpo, includes faculty members at various universities in California.<sup>24</sup>

Kisselgoff’s recognition of the aesthetic of the Ewe *atsiagbeko* dance coincides with analysis by Africanist performance scholars, like Roger Abrahams, who have brought attention to the short text-like tendency of black performance in general:

[There is a] circular, vertiginous organization of performing groups; heavy emphasis on involvement through repetition of sound and movement; retreat from closure in favor of the ongoing and open-ended; *tendency to break up performance into short units or episodes, each of which is a whole, related to the other units because of intensity of contrast* (emphases added by this author).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kisselgoff, “Dance: ‘Dance and Music of Africa’.”

<sup>25</sup> Roger Abrahams, “Concerning African Performance Patterns,” In *Neo-African Literature and Culture: Essays in Memory of Janheinz Jahn*, eds. Bernth Lindfors and Ulla Schlid (Wiesbaden, Germany: B. Heymann Publishers, 1976), 40.

Indeed, the rhythmic virtuosic *atsiagbeko* dance is a perfect example of the rhythmic danced *text* of traditional African dance, with drum breaks that insure episodic spurts of movement verbosity. And, as dance journalist Shimon-Craig Van Collie says, “African dance and music grew out of the need to communicate and to find ways to cope with life’s passages and stresses.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Mandeleo Institute & “The Africans Are Coming”**

The Ladzekpo Brothers---C.K., Kwaku, and their brother in Southern California, Kobla--are not only consummate artists, but effective organizers and administrators as well. Kwaku and C. K. started the Mandeleo Institute as a non-profit African Heritage coalition that was dedicated to conserving African folklife in the United States. As their stated history says, “It was developed from a group of Bay Area African teachers, master artists, and ethnomusicologists who began offering African cultural arts workshops and classes in 1974.” In 1979, the group produced its premiere season of the critically acclaimed annual African Cultural Festival, popularly known as the “Africans Are Coming!”<sup>27</sup> Kwaku, as Executive Director, continued to develop this festival until the mid-1990s.

The Ladzekpo brothers produced the festival in a union venue, the Henry J. Kaiser Center in Oakland, while in San Francisco it was the Cowell Theater at Fort Mason Center. It became a central and reliable production where many of the increasing African dancer-drummers coming to the Bay Area could perform to a large audience. The annual “Africans are Coming” concert

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<sup>26</sup> Van Collie, “What is African Dance?” 63.

<sup>27</sup> Kwaku Ladzekpo, “Organizational History & Purpose.” 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual African Dance Season at San Francisco program. Cowell Theater, Fort Mason Center, February 8-9, 1991.

became a much-anticipated African cultural event, drawing about one thousand people annually, and becoming the precursor to Zak and Naomi's current Collage des Culture Africaines.

The Ladzekpo brothers conceived of their non-profit umbrella organization to develop African culture in relation to the growth of Oakland: "Mandeleo maintains four professional African repertory dance companies in-residence and is credited for the emergence of the city of Oakland as the major center for African music and dance activities in the United States," stated their 1991 concert program. It was the quality of the dance companies like their own African Music and Dance Ensemble, Diamano Coura, and Fua Dia Congo, as well as their administrative expertise that increased the visibility of African dance and music in Oakland, and which corresponded to the city's history of black consciousness and activism.

In fact, it was this Bay Area black cultural history, along with the African triad of Zak, C.K., and Malonga Casquelourd (explored below) that attracted other African dance and drum masters to the area. Master Senegalese dancer Alassane Kane and master drummer Abdoulaye Diakite arrived in the early 1990s and founded Ceedo Senegalese Dance Company in Oakland. Also the Zulu Dance Theatre of South Africa, consisting of defectors from the South African musical *Ipi Tombi* that toured the U.S. in the early 1980s, found their way to Oakland. Together with Bay Area long-term dance company Dimensions Dance Theater, directed by Ruth Beckford protégé Deborah Vaughan, Chicago-born drummer Mosheh Milon, Sr., who moved to the Bay Area in the early 1980s and formed Bantaba Dance Ensemble, as well as Brazilian-born Jose Lorenzo's Batucaje Dance Company that became prominent in the late 70s, the African and African diaspora dance community flourished and was highly organized in Oakland during the 1990s.

### **Malonga Casquelourd and Fua Dia Congo**

Congo-Brazzaville's Malonga Casquelourd, was the third African pillar of the early Bay Area African dance community. He first lived and worked in East Palo Alto, and arrived in Oakland in about 1975. Malonga and I had crossed paths from the beginning, bringing us together in many artistic projects while developing a life-long friendship. I first met Malonga as a fellow teacher at the original Every Body's Dance Studio in Oakland at 51<sup>st</sup> and Broadway in 1975.<sup>28</sup> After a year studying dance and music in Ghana, I returned to buy the dance studio, turning it into a non-profit organization called Everybody's Creative Arts Center in 1977. Malonga was already an established teacher of Congolese dance, who simply came with the sale of the dance studio, cementing our decades-long relationship.

Malonga was born Auguste Leonard Malonga Casquelourd in Douala, Cameroon, while his Congolese father, Malonga Fidel, was stationed as an officer in the French army in Cameroon. Malonga's daughter, Muisi-Kongo Malonga, paints a picture of him as a youth leader in Congo Brazzaville, who as the fifth child of ten, "became an influential organizer and major force within a network of youth-led militias whose purpose was to create a climate that would lead to the Congo's independence."<sup>29</sup> Malonga and I had many conversations about African politics that would leave me in disbelief at his command of African history and politics, belied by his usual casual, playful, and humorous demeanor.

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<sup>28</sup> Every Body's was a dance cooperative, started by Michelle Berne, Ferolyn Angell, and Sharon Arslanian, seven years before the start of the non-profit organization Everybody's Creative Center, which I created in 1977 (after buying the business from Angell and Arslanian). There, local dance teachers successfully planted the seed of a center for dance instruction beyond ballet or modern dance, i.e., emphasizing and sharing ethnic and folkloric dance forms that were taught by local and transnational teachers (personal communication from Yvonne Daniel, as corroborated by Sharon Arslanian, June 13, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Muisi-Kongo Malonga, "Malonga: The Spirit of a Master Teacher." *Movement Stories: I've Known Rivers: The MoAD Stories Project*. Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco, January 2006. Accessed July 8, 2015. <http://www.iveknownrivers.org/read-2.0.php?id=56>.

In the Congo, he had become a principal dancer with the national Congolese Dance Company in his teens, subsequently leaving for Paris where he joined Le Ballet Diaboua in his early 20s. He then moved to New York and along with fellow Congolese dancer, Titos Sompá, founded the first Central African dance company in the U.S., Tanawa. Yet, he would make his greatest artistic and cultural impact in Oakland California. Muisi-Kongo muses, “And it was here in Oakland that he found a home. A home that was full of people with familiar faces and eyes that longed for him to share his culture and history with them, a longing that he was happy to oblige.”<sup>30</sup> This was Oakland’s black cultural legacy that was the fertile ground on which Malonga’s legacy could be formed.

Today Oakland’s major center for African dance now bears Malonga’s name. The dance center that I founded in 1977, Everybody’s Creative Arts Center (ECAC), eventually became one of the anchor tenants in the city-owned Alice Arts Center on Alice St. at 14<sup>th</sup> St. in 1986. When Malonga was killed in a tragic car accident in 2003, there was an overwhelming effort by the African and African diaspora dance community to name the entire center after him. ECAC had become CitiCentre Dance Theater (CDT) in 1987 and finally became defunct in 2005, but the Alice Art Center itself became the *Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts*, and in 2005 the building was designated Oakland Landmark #138.

However, this honor and recognition of the African dance community was hard-won. The vital African dance program at the Alice Arts Center in the early 2000s, during the mayoral administration of Jerry Brown (now Governor of California), was put in jeopardy, prompting Oakland’s historic black activism to be reactivated. When the primary black arts organizations, including CitiCentre Dance Theatre, were first established in the Alice Arts Center in 1986,

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<sup>30</sup> Malonga, “Malonga.”



Judge Lionel Wilson was in office as the first black mayor of Oakland. The arts organizations had gone through several business arrangements of occupancy, from paying full downtown rental rates to becoming rent-free by the time Jerry Brown was elected in the early 2000s.

Denise Pate, former dancer with Dimensions Dance Theater and now the Cultural Funding Program Coordinator for Oakland, elucidated the central issue around the fight for the Alice Arts Center and its renaming. Jerry Brown was elected with a “10k Housing Plan” that included an Oakland School of the Arts. His projected plan was to bring in 10,000 new residents to live in downtown Oakland, and a school of the arts was to be part of the attraction. As the Alice Arts Center already had a vital dance community with many weekly community students, there was ostensibly a school of the arts already. If Brown had recognized this, his plan would have been a boost to the African dance community. However, Mayor Brown saw his Oakland School of the Arts as an actual full-time charter school, with the dance curriculum based in ballet and modern dance. Hence, there was a lack of comprehension of Oakland as an established center of African dance, at the heart of the city’s identity.

There was also a severe lack of communication with the already existing anchor tenants of the arts facility. There was a concerted attempt to remove these arts organizations and put them in another inadequate location.<sup>31</sup> Artists like Zak, Naomi, Deborah Vaughan and Malonga, along with Judith Smith of Axis Dance Company, Edsel Matthews of Koncepts Cultural Gallery, and Carla Service of Dance a Vision Entertainment, began to realize the need for arts activism in order to save their flourishing community in the Alice Arts Center. Journalist Chiori Santiago wrote for *Dance Magazine* about the competing political interests that become a performing arts crisis in Oakland:

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<sup>31</sup> Denise Pate, Email Correspondence, July 10, 2015.

Oakland's latest charter school could be a model for other public arts schools interested in sharing space with dance centers. But there is a cautionary tale here. The road to Oakland School of the Arts may have been paved with good intentions, but an explosive mix of art and city politics quickly dropped the project into a sinkhole filled with facility issues and misunderstanding, delaying the school's opening for a full year and alienating a part of the arts community. The Alice Arts Center has a national reputation as a center for music and performance particularly those forms derived from African traditions. City-subsidized rent and a downtown location have made it a haven for then nonprofit enterprises, including AXIS Dance Company, Diamano Coura West African Dance Company, Dimensions Dance Theater, and Oakland Ballet.<sup>32</sup>

The confrontation between the anchor Alice Arts Center organizations and city officials grew to a crescendo in 2003. Representatives of the Alice Arts Center testified at two City Council meetings about the need to preserve and support the current arts organizations in the Alice Arts Center. Following that, according to Denise Pate, **representatives from??** the Cultural Affairs Commission of Oakland attended a meeting convened at the Alice Arts Center to continue to negotiate the artists' concerns. In Spring of 2003, a huge representative group from the Alice Arts Center community marched to City Hall and held a rally in Frank Ogawa Plaza during the meeting of the Oakland City Council, complete with African drumming and dancing, and with signs saying, "Save the Alice!" and "The School of the Arts Must Go!"

Soon after the protest demonstration, Malonga Casquelourd himself insisted on a meeting with Mayor Jerry Brown, according to Denise Pate, "to discuss his concerns about displacement [of the Alice organizations and the African dance community.]" Tragically in June, Malonga was killed in the car accident, and Jerry Brown ended up speaking at his funeral. The Mayor

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<sup>32</sup> Chiori Santiago, "Lessons Learned at Alice arts Center: Art and Politics Don't Mix at New Arts-based Charter School." *Dance Magazine*, February 1, 2003. Accessed July 10, 2015. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lessons+learned+at+Alice+Arts+Center%3A+art+and+politics+don%27t+mix+at...-a097174133>.

said, “Malonga told me not to touch the Alice!” And, from that point onward the intention of moving the anchor arts organizations out of the Alice Arts Center was never mentioned again.

Malonga had taken an activist stance: he met with Mayor Brown to represent the arts community that had built Oakland as a center for African dance for decades, about which the (white) mayor had no real understanding. Malonga’s articulate stance, coupled with his untimely death, had convinced Jerry Brown that the character of Oakland’s dance scene was already established, and he backed off from his plan for a school of the arts, realizing that it already existed in a *black* form. African dance is central to the identity of Oakland, California, because of the long-term teaching, performing and community activism of Malonga Casquelourd and the other African dance and drum masters since the 1970s.

One of Malonga’s primary vehicles for promoting Central African culture was (is) his professional dance company, Fua Dia Congo, which he started in 1977. The company’s name means “Congolese Heritage,” which is what Malonga was all about. Denise Pate (as already stated, a former dancer and Executive Director of CDT) has written about the company. She illuminates Fua Dia Congo’s purpose:

The stellar dance and music ensemble draws its repertoire from the religious, social and military traditions of the Kongo Kingdom, which includes the modern day Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Gabon and the Central African Republic.<sup>33</sup>

The company is also known for its colorful and authentic costuming. Many of the dances call for braided raffia, painted red from a rare Congolese plant called *mpussu*, to signify spiritual power. The dancers and drummers alike wear *dibu* ankle rattles, adding extra rhythms to their feet movements accenting the drumming. Congolese rhythms and movements, in particular, are

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<sup>33</sup> Denise Pate, “Fua Dia Congo: Dancing Malonga Casquelourd’s Legacy,” *Dancer’s Group – Bay Area Dance Service Organization*, December 2007. Accessed July 8, 2015. <http://dancersgroup.org/2007/12/fua-dia-congo-dancing-malonga-casquelourds-legacy/>.

an important foundational cultural aesthetic underlying many African diasporic forms, such as Brazilian *samba*, Cuban *rumba*, and U.S. *funk*.

Malonga was an equally strong dancer and drummer, often strapping his *ngoma bakongo* master drum around his waist and dancing *zebola*, his signature Congolese dance. He would dance around the stage with his punctuating hip-swiveling movements and infectious smile, never missing a beat. After Malonga's untimely death, his four children, the long-term members of Fua Dia Congo, and the Congolese community in Oakland unified to continue the dance company and the community dance and drum classes. His oldest daughter, Muisi-Kongo, the daughter of noted linguistic scholar Dr. Faye Knox, became the Artistic Director of Fua Dia Congo, while his youngest daughter Lungusu helps teach many of the community dance classes. The oldest son, Kiazi, became the company's Music Director, drumming for and also teaching many of the classes, calling down the spirit of the Congo as his father did in the past. The youngest son Boueta has become a noted drummer and performs with the company as well. The elder members of Fua Dia Congo continue, bringing their years of experience to the performances, such as Congo-born Regine N'dounda, Sandor Diabankouezi, and Matingou Rafael, along with the long-term African American members, Regina Calloway, Erica Simpson, and Janeen Johnson.

The power of Malonga's cultural and artistic contributions to the Bay Area continue through his children and the many dancers and drummers that he taught. Kiazi Malonga embodies so much of what his father taught him when he illuminates Congolese culture:

Drumming and dancing are codependent. There can't be drumming without dancing, but if the music is good, you want to move. I think that they feed off of each other. The drummer provides the music and support for the dancing, and the

dancing in turn inspires the drummers. If the drumming is sweet, the dancing level rises.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, this scenario can be witnessed during the Saturday mid-day Congolese dance class first established by Malonga back in 1975, and continues today with his children, as he smiles as honored ancestor. Malonga Casquelourd's legacy also continues in his namesake building, the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, the hub of African dance in Oakland.

## **Conclusions**

Oakland and the Bay Area have had a long history of black cultural and political activism. As the African dance community grew, it took on this proactive socio-political stance by establishing its prominence as a dance genre. Oakland has become a center for African dance and music because of the cultural and personal expertise of the continental Africans who migrated to the city. Black consciousness at the historical foundation of this region of California provided a ripe environment for these particular African cultural forms to thrive among enthusiastic performers, as well as among huge audiences of committed fans. From the Ladzekpo Brothers and their Mandeleo Institute's annual production, "The Africans are Coming" (since the 1990s), to Zak and Naomi Diouf's annual four-day conference with its performances, workshops, and panels within Collage des Culture Africaines today, the African dance and drum masters who chose the Oakland Bay area have consistently provided comprehensive proactive African cultural programs and organizational institutions that can compete anywhere in the world.

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<sup>34</sup> "Fua Dia Congo – Oakland Based Drum and Dance Group---Interview Excerpts with Kiazi Malonga." *Music Ethnography of the Bay Area*. Accessed July 8, 2015. <https://musicethnographybayarea.wordpress.com/bay-area-musics/fua-dia-congo-oakland-based-congolese-drum-dance-group/>.

Moreover, the Oakland Bay Area region had an early latent propensity for African dance and music of the highest order with the Dunham dance and cultural legacy through Ruth Beckford and her protégés. Deborah Vaughan's Dimensions Dance Theater has fostered this legacy for fifty years through her African, diasporic, and modern dance aesthetic. Deborah has taken the Dunham legacy to a 21<sup>st</sup> century level, with projects that have not only illuminated the political legacy of the region, such as her "Project Panther" about the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense that premiered in 1996 and was revived in 2016 for the Panther's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but also by developing strong African and diasporan dance collaborations. In the early 2000s Dimensions premiered "From Africa to America," an international collaboration between the company and Cuban choreographer Isiais Rojas and Zimbabwean mbira player Stella Chiweshe. These African diasporic productions have earned Deborah Vaughan respect from the African dance and drum masters.

The black cultural activist tradition of the Oakland Bay Area, which has usually included a Pan-African consciousness, has produced both a receptive black community and a large multiracial regional community for African-based dance and music as well. Such a distinctive regional community has provided willing and knowledgeable students and company members for the triad of African dance and drum masters that I have explored in this essay. Additionally, the audience base remains strong nearing the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When the 2003 Alice Arts Center crisis occurred threatening the physical center for African dance, support from this regional African dance and music constituency rose up in protest in front of Oakland's City Hall. The legacy of cultural passion and commitment to the great African legacy that underpins the cultural development of the United States is alive and well in the Oakland Bay Area. Dedication to this legacy, as a counter narrative to one in which African dance and music are

somehow inferior to European classics, which was suggested by the Oakland School of the Arts proposal in the early 2000s, only made the community more cohesive and articulate in promoting its counter narrative. Now the center for African dance in the Bay Area is forever etched in Oakland with the name of one of the culture's main proponents, Malonga Casquelourd.

The observations of Mama Pearl Primus in the 1950s about the power of African dance can be observed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century within the African dance community in Oakland: "People who truly dance are those who have never bartered the fierce freedom of their souls, never strangled their hunger for rhythmic movement, nor frustrated their joyous physical response to music and song." African dance and music have bolstered "the fierce freedom of their souls," from the training and performance of the triad of Oakland African masters---Zak Diouf, C.K. Ladzekpo, and Malonga Casquelourd----to the next generation of African-based artists in the Oakland Bay Area, including other dance and drum masters of Bay Area African dance companies, as well as the children of these masters like Muisi-Kongo, Kiazi, and Esailama. The African dance and music community in Oakland has never retreated to a safe ground, but instead, as Mama Pearl reveals, it has been "snatched, plucked up by an invisible force and hurled into the ring of the dance...."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Primus, "African Dance."