

GDE

GHANA DANCE ENSEMBLE



Institute of African Studies
University of Ghana - Legon



Celebrating the soul of Ghana



HISTORY

THE HISTORY OF THE GHANA DANCE ENSEMBLE

A highly successful collaboration between the Government's Institute of Arts and Culture and The Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana created the Ghana Dance Ensemble in 1962. From its inception, the Ensemble was to be Ghana's flagship for the professional, world-wide promotion of the music and dance heritage of Ghana under girded by solid field work and experimental research. The Ghana Dance Ensemble has a tradition of identifying young, talented artistes with mastery of particular dance forms from different parts of the country and training them to express a dazzling variety of dances. Many of these dancers have gone on to set up their own companies or worked with companies all over the world. The directors of the Ensemble have transformed dance in the everyday lives of Ghanaians to stage presentations. The handiwork of Professor Mawere Opoku the first Director was characterized by just enough choreography to showcase the classic movements of heritage dances. Professor Nii Yartey, his successor explored the dance vocabulary to dialogue with dance cultures from other parts of the world to bring the Ensemble into the area of contemporary dance. The current Ghana Dance Ensemble in the hands of Mr Ben Obido Ayettey maintains the discipline of the early classics but continues to expand its repertoire and to explore dance as an expression of contemporary issues. The Ensemble has had the privilege of exposure to other world class traditional artists, scholars, researchers and theatre professionals.

The Ghana Dance Ensemble together with the Ballet Africain of Guinea Conakry in the 1960s and 70s, gave the world a breath-taking apercu of African aesthetics and culture from the perspective of Africans. The Ensemble has served as a model for a variety of amateur groups in Ghana and provided the core artiste, for the National Dance Company.

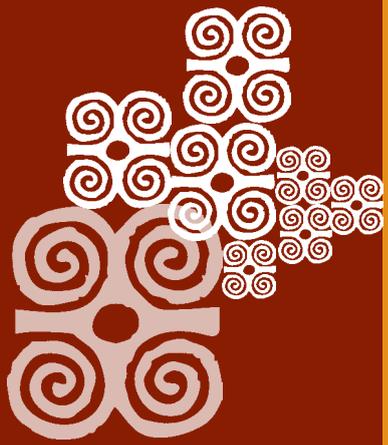
The Ghana Dance Ensemble's broad mandate has led to a decision to spawn the National Dance Company with a core membership based at the National Theatre of Ghana which caters for numerous national assignments. The research, teaching and experimental emphases continue to underlie the work of the Ensemble at the Institute of African Studies where thousands of Ghanaian and non Ghanaian students and lovers of African dance and music have been introduced to the unforgettable dance culture of Ghana.

The Ghana Dance Ensemble comes to you as an institution established to conserve the exquisite, rich heritage of Ghana's dance cultures and to stand for the exhilarating creativity engendered by the essence of Ghanaian Dance.



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CHOREOGRAPHERS

Creative Infusions

The ensemble has had the privilege of artistic direction by celebrated choreographers.



A. Mawere Opoku

The ground-breaking work of artist and choreographer A. Mawere Opoku set Ghanaian dance for the formal stage. In his hands the Ghana Dance Ensemble joined with the Ballet Africaine of Guinea bursting with the brilliant energy of new nationhood onto the world stage. His world class legacy is elegant, powerful and unifying.



Francis Nii Yartey

Learning at the feet of Mawere Opoku, Nii Yartey's creations explode in a dynamic kaleidoscope of dance theatre, seeking the meaning of life for the contemporary African. A professor of Dance, he interrogates his own heritage and dialogues vigorously with other cultures. Nii Yartey has worked collaboratively with choreographers from all over the world



Ben Obido Ayettey

From star performer of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ben Ayettey has the delicate duty of re-presenting the classic set pieces and creating his own dance dramas which directly address immediate issues in contemporary Ghanaian society. He also developed the teaching programmes of the Ensemble working with the International Students Programmes and the Dance Department of the School of Performing Arts Legon.

A photograph of a man in traditional Ghanaian attire, including a patterned white and brown shirt and a blue and yellow patterned wrap, playing a large, round, brown drum with a wooden stick. He is standing in front of a wall with a patterned curtain. The background is slightly blurred, showing a window with a patterned curtain and a wall with a patterned curtain.

REPertoire

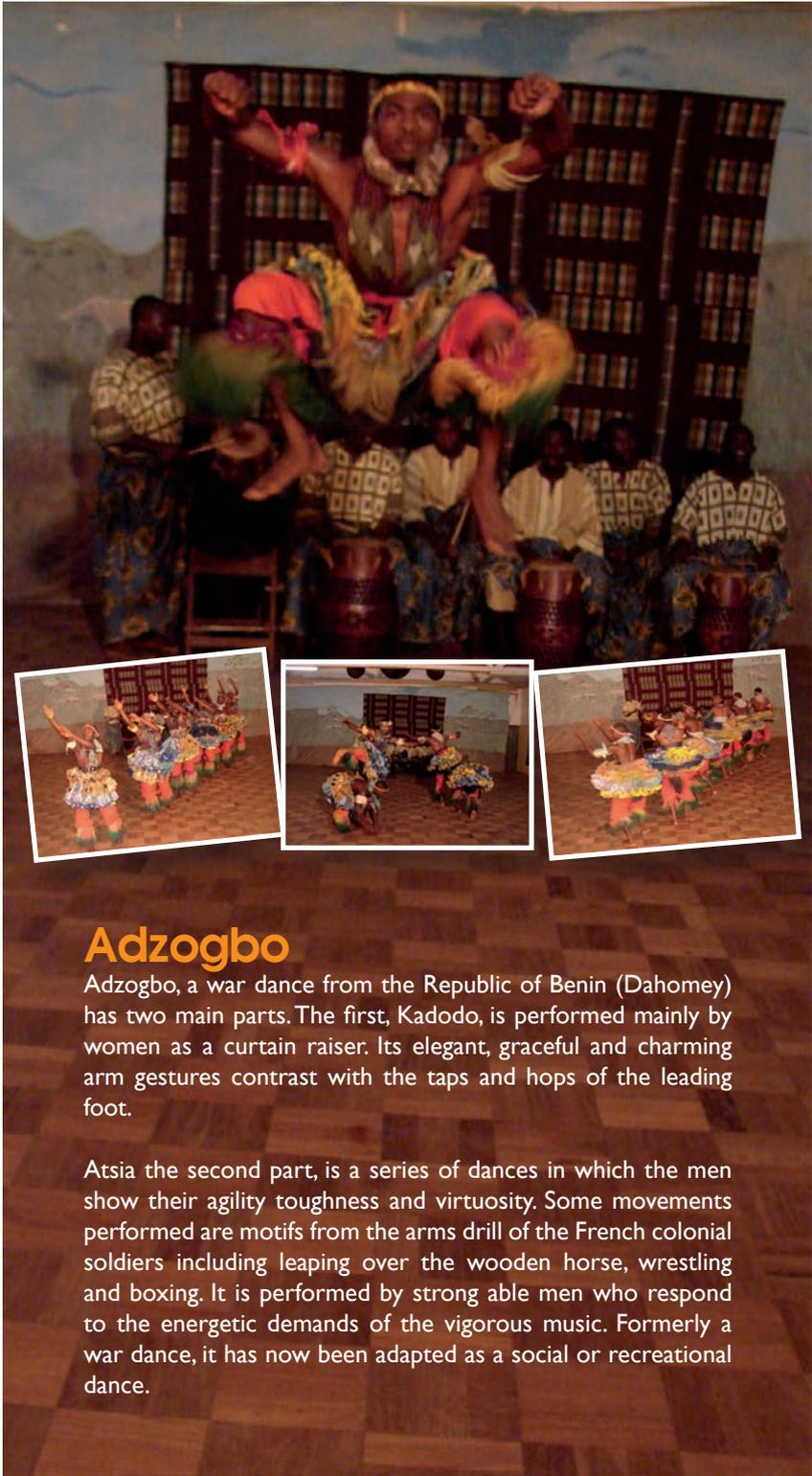
Ghanaian Classics

As a result of the generosity and insights of numerous artists of the people, and the visionary leadership of its founders, the Ghana Dance Ensemble's wide repertoire includes vintage pieces representing classics from all the ten Regions of Ghana and selected traditions from neighbouring countries. The ecstasy and mysticism of their spirituality, the elegance of their courts, the depth of their knowledge and insight, the dignity and exuberance with which they take on life and its joys and vicissitudes: the peoples of Ghana have created dances which open a window to their soul. The Ghana Dance Ensemble is the proud custodian of this thrilling and arresting heritage of music and dance which it has sensitively choreographed to bring you a Ghanaian experience you can savour.

Contemporary Dance

Ghanaian Classics are still a pulsating part of our people's ceremonial lives. But sensational leaps of creativity have been inspired by this great heritage. The Ghana Dance Ensemble therefore also has a growing package of short pieces and full dance dramas which represent the new vocabulary and symbolism of Ghanaian dance often in conversation with other creative thrusts from other cultures but always acknowledging its roots.

DANCES



Adzogbo

Adzogbo, a war dance from the Republic of Benin (Dahomey) has two main parts. The first, Kadodo, is performed mainly by women as a curtain raiser. Its elegant, graceful and charming arm gestures contrast with the taps and hops of the leading foot.

Atsia the second part, is a series of dances in which the men show their agility toughness and virtuosity. Some movements performed are motifs from the arms drill of the French colonial soldiers including leaping over the wooden horse, wrestling and boxing. It is performed by strong able men who respond to the energetic demands of the vigorous music. Formerly a war dance, it has now been adapted as a social or recreational dance.

Akan Ceremonial Dance Suite

The ceremonial life of Akan communities is rich and eventful. The Akan Ceremonial Suite was created by Mawere Opoku to “re-present” the spectacular gathering of royalty and the people in a display of mutual interdependency through the symbolism of the arts typically seen during festivals such as the Aadae. The piece depicts the Chief and Queen mother in their resplendent ceremonial attire accompanied by their courtiers carrying the paraphernalia of office and other officials of the court. Their graceful, powerful movements interpret with dignity their mandate for leadership while the community envelopes them in euphoric acceptance.

Akom

A suite of classic religious dances, Akom evokes the traditional spirituality of the Akan people. These sublime dances are used mainly as a means of releasing priests from trances into which they must fall in order to act as mediums. The popular notion that priests dance themselves into a trance is false. However, the rhythm of this dance is such that it has been known to have diverse effects on adherents and onlookers. After an act of healing, the priest walks around greeting people and dispersing powdered clay in the same manner that Christian priest use holy water. S/He acknowledges God who is the spirit of the earth, the source of physical strength and material well being. He also acknowledges the "four winds" which carry to him/her the words of God. The dances are organized sequentially. They begin with the Ntwaho, circling in a series of pivot turns to illustrate the perfection, wholeness and oneness of God.

Then follows Adaban (i) a retreating and advancing movement of great power and fascination, combined with spins and turns in the air. Some of the dance motifs are versions of secular and popular dances. This is one dance in which the dancer is observably in control of the changes in musical rhythm. Akom is traditional to the Akan and the Ga people.

Asafo

Akan communities of Ghana ensured their security through people's militia groups. Today these militia serve a social role, mobilising members of the community to remember their heroic past, engage in communal work. In its original manifestation, Asafo was a warrior dance which led armies into battle. It is made up of both fast paced group regimental movements and displays of individual prowess. Asafo dance is inspired by a rhythm and powerful songs whose lyrics drive away fear and fill the fighters with only one desire which is to fight for their motherland. It is danced also in jubilation after the fight. A special feature of Asafo is the flag-bearer who embodies the soul of the group and executes exquisite and agile steps assisted by his attendants.

Asante Adowa

Asante legend has it that the dance originated from antelope movements hence the name Adowa. These were not the movements of an ordinary antelope for,

there was once a queen mother in Asante called Berea Tutuwa who fell ill and when the gods were consulted, they requested a live antelope as sacrifice. The Asafo warriors promptly set out into the forest and what they brought back was no ordinary animal. The people saw to their amazement the antelope jumping and making very strange movements. After the queen mother was cured, the women, in an attempt to imitate the movement of the antelope in jubilation, started the Adowa dance.

It therefore became a women's performance in several Akan communities. Adowa music and dance filled with moving lyrics and gestures draw in the bereaved to express themselves, providing solace for them during funerals in Akan communities. The Adowa dance however, is a remarkably flexible dance and has been transformed into a recreational dance for both sexes. The Ghana Dance Ensemble presents the classical, delicate Adowa steps in a joyous mood.



Asante Adowa

Atsiagbekor

War has for centuries defined the status and aspirations of societies and individuals. From the Volta Region, we present the Atsiagbekor dance of the Anlo people. It is a medley of dances performed after a successful battle to demonstrate to people at home symbolic movements of the battle field. To watch Atsiagbekor is to watch scenes which have their original forms in these battles fought long ago. The dance is made up of choreographed inventions based on the regimental movements. These are a serious expression of prowess, suffering and hardship by a people who once fought battles through hostile territory in search of peace. Atsea like the Twi Akyea, means to “show off” or to “strut your stuff”. The dancers tend to show off with movements which display agility, strength and pride. The Ghana Dance Ensemble presents it in a slow and fast format.

Atsia (Togo)

The magic of Atsia lies in the precision of its movements. This dance is choreographed for women and features dexterous, movements with horsetail whisks. Atsia is a powerful dance which is nevertheless executed with fine, delicate movements.



Atsea (Togo)

Ayika

This is a recreational dance of the people of Greater Accra Region. The dance is believed to have been created by a woman, who paid the debts of her sister after several demands. She was able to redeem her sister's debts only after the fishermen had made a big catch from which she drew her profits. The various stances are to illustrate the incessant demands on her.

Bamaya

Bamaya is a popular social dance of the people of Dagbon in Northern Ghana whose dances are marked by dignity, gracefulness and controlled gaiety in expressive dance movements. It stands out because it features cross-dressing. Men in female costumes today poke fun at the women in the society with their exaggerated make up and gestures.



Oral tradition however has it that Bamaya was originally a religious dance in honour of the Earth god - Tingban of the area. It is alleged that the dance evolved as a result of the people's search for water which eluded them for a very long period. In the early 19th century, a great famine occurred in Dagbon as a result of a severe drought. All sacrifices made by the rain makers to their god proved futile. Yet there was an answer. It lay in the long neglected knowledge that prayers by women to the Tingban got a quicker response. To avert a great calamity the young and strong men in the village dressed in women's clothing marched to the head priest drumming, and requested to be accompanied to the abode of their god. The (wo)men vigorously danced several times around the grove, the god was touched by their plight and sent down a heavy rainfall. The people's gratitude and joy expressed for having the rains brought the name Bamaya meaning "The river (valley) is cold (wet)". The Ghana Dance Ensemble translates onto the stage this brilliant example of isolated hip gyration mastered

by many African societies. The quirky costuming is ever contemporized with new accessories.

Bawaa

The Dagarti people make their home in the Upper East Region. They have been masterful cultivators of grain for centuries and have traditionally acknowledged the gods of the land for their role in their agricultural fortunes. Bawaa is thus a series of harvest dances which provides the final phase of enjoyment in a tribute to community wellbeing. Both old and young of both sexes participate in these dances. The seasonal dance session is preceded by the pouring of libation to the gods and ancestors for providing a rich harvest. The master drummer holds the key. A special quality of these dances is that cues for the many variations are given by the master drummer. Vibrating with energy, the circle of dancers surges forward into an optimistic future.



Boboobo

Boboobo is a contemporary social dance created by the youth of the Volta Region of Ghana and performed by both sexes. It is an exuberant, choreographed group dance in which dancers pride themselves for their endless permutations of movements complemented by the dexterous twirling of handkerchiefs. The deep, pulsating rhythm of the master drum directs the dance which peaks with the sound of the bugle. Boboobo has been adopted by churches in the Volta Region and is therefore mostly accompanied by Christian songs.

Damba Takai

The people of Dagbon, now in the Northern Region, belong to an imperial tradition with an elaborate culture at court. The Ghana Dance Ensemble has put together a series of dignified and classic Dagbon court dances. The dance suite is accompanied by donno and brekete drums.

Damba and Takai are essentially dances for princes which are enhanced by the calculated activation of the graceful flowing Batakare smocks through pivot turns and torso swings accompanied by stamping of handsomely booted feet. A festival dance of the people of Dagbon, the Damba is for the royals and elders, while the Takai variations can also be performed by the citizenry.



Tora

The women of Dagbon, not wanting to be left out invented their dance movements to the stirring rhythms of the court dance, Takai. This recreational dance was originally danced before the chief by his wives to entertain him. Tora is now a popular social dance for women in the Northern Region of Ghana.

Fontomfrom

It is a series of warrior dances which form a suite for showing the prowess of a valiant fighter and uses, in its many forms, symbolic gestures to mime combat motifs. It is an Akan court dance. The Akantam, The pledge for instance, is danced to seventy-seven proverbs or maxims played on the drums. It is a processional dance of the civil guard. Fontomfrom is a dance of victory, harassment and achievement on the field. It is a dance of victory which narrates the return of the warriors during celebrations in which they assert their supremacy.

Gahu

The origins of Gahu are intriguing as the dance comes to Ghana from Nigeria via Benin, Gahu originated from the Yoruba of Nigeria. It is spontaneous and gay. The Dance derives its name Gahu from the Fon language of Benin literally meaning “money dance.” “Ga”, means money or very important personality and “Hu” refers to drum or musical type. The dance is flexible, light hearted and is shared between couples. There is a studied coyness as the girl moves away from the advance of her partner. Executed in a circle it is also communal and delightfully flirtatious

Gota

Gota is a cult dance from the Republic of Benin. This dance is used mainly as a means of expressing gratitude to the cult after one has undergone an ordeal in order to show and justify the power of the cult. Gota has been absorbed into the Ewe tradition of south eastern Ghana and is performed by both men and women.

Kete

Kete has always been a court dance for chiefs “Amanhene” “Abrempon” and members of the royal household. It is, and has always been, the favourite of the Asantehenes over the ages. This dance is noted for its courtliness and for the contrasts between the graceful movements of the women and the strutting display of masculinity by the male dancers. The full Kete includes the Kete drums, voices and odurugya flutes. In Asante land, the full Kete is only performed for the Asantehene’s private entertainment in the palace, where the Asantehene acts as orchestral leader, keeping time with a red covered rattle, which he uses as he dances with his wives. When dancing with the Queen mother, he guards her with a gun. The performance presented in the repertoire includes the full Kete adapted for the theatre. We also present the more socially accessible version of Kete which is now widely performed on important social occasions and at funerals.

Kolomashie

Kolomashie music and dance are a testimony to early influences of popular Western European Culture on the Ga people of Ghana. It started as a youth game for only males who were trying to imitate the “Whiteman’s” way of life. It has now become a social dance performed at gatherings to provide light entertainment. Highlife music and dance as these evolved in the middle of the 20th century owe a lot to Kolomashie.

Kpanlogo

Kpanlogo is a dance of the 1960s, born with Ghana’s independence. It is believed that the basic movements of the dance are derived from the leisure dances of a group of Liberian fishermen staying in a section of James Town, Accra, known as “Kru Town,” as well as from religious dances like Kple. Kpanlogo is a vivacious urban dance explosion.

It is rich in mime and theatrical expressions with sexual undertones and gives scope for both comic and serious interpretations. It is part of the neo-traditional performance culture of the Ga but has gained national popularity.

Kpatsa

The Dangme are said to have learned Kpatsa from the haunting music and dance of dwarfs. Kpatsa is said to be associated with the limping gait peculiar to dwarfs. The name of the dance itself evokes this uneven walk. Kpatsa is a recreational dance performed by both men and women. It can also be seen at festivals such as the Asafotu Fiam in Big Ada; during the durbar of chiefs and funerals. The dance is fast becoming the major traditional recreational music of the Dangme.

Kple

The Woyei, priestesses of the shrines of the Ga people of Greater Accra, speak ancient tongues and chant the migrations of their people. The haunting chants of Kple are accompanied by the unmistakable rhythm of the dance of the gods, for Woyei are chosen mediums of the gods and must be ready interpreters of their messages. “It is Homowo - the festival upon which we hoot at the hunger of our past. Mothers of the shrine, dance Kple for us and call down blessings on us, for the future is unknown!”

This ancient Ga-Dangme dance from South Eastern Ghana reminds us of the fact that the Ga Dangme society was governed by a theocracy. Kple songs and dance hold texts which embody their historical, cultural and religious heritage. Dancers of Kple are priestesses whose entire beings are put at the disposal of the invisible gods as they seek a physical medium through which to communicate with society. Movements are graceful and dramatic, with an



Kple

other-worldly aura mimicking personalities which the gods wish to depict. As a religious dance it is done very selectively on important occasions such as the annual Homowo festival of the Ga people.

Kundum

This is a dance which expresses the spirit and sentiments of the Nzema and Ahanta people during the Kundum festival in the Western Region of Ghana. In character, the Kundum is a warriors' dance. While the men dance to express bravery, prowess, endurance and determination, the women inspire and hail them as conquerors. As a Harvest Festival Dance, it also expresses thankfulness for the symbolic rebirth of the earth and for its fruits. Kundum is a mass dance whose fascination lies in the harmonies achieved by synchronization of powerful movements and its use of plantain leaves, raffia and bamboo as props and as part of the costume.

Lobi Dance Suite

These dances are adapted from the working song and movement of the Lobi



(Upper West Region) to express their love for communal labour. Houses are built communally and this provides an opportunity for the Bobina dance, performed by two girls with a chorus. Then follows the Sebire, a dance for young men, characterized by infectious abandonment, energy, manliness, dignity and fascinating rhythms. A tremolo of fast contraction and release is the special technique of the Lobi dances. Dynamism, dignity and controlled inner strength are characteristic of the Sebire dance. The tremor in the upper body implying restrained power and strength was used in the past to frighten enemies.

Nagla

Nagla dances were originally performed at funerals, but today, even though they still maintain this role, they are danced on all important occasions by the people of Paga in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The movements of the dance reflect the spirit of togetherness which the people aspire to and remind one of the supple movements of the sacred crocodile.

Sanga

Sanga was a popular Asante dance in the early to mid 1900s. The drums and their rhythmic patterns suggest Northern Ghanaian origins. Women dancers wear bustles to attract the gallant young men who engage in exaggerated advances. This is a naughty, humorous dance similar to the Can Can. The arrangements presented here emphasize the humour and artifice of the dance.

Sikyi

Developed in the 1920s, Sikyi an infectiously joyful dance, is a special choice from the Ashanti Region. Carefully costumed to reflect the period of its heyday, the dance portrays innocent and playful flirtation between boys and girls. Its movements include strutting, bobbing up and down and a display of theatrical elegance. Sikyi has inspired great highlife artists of Ghana, and its influence still draws highlife lovers to the dance floor.

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MUSICAL MOODS

Adenkum

Adenkum is the music of Akan female bands. It is named after the instrument that is used in the performance - a gourd with a long neck and bulb end. Occasions on which Adenkum is played include ceremonial and festive occasions as well as funerals. Women sing of their lives and loves; of joys and sorrows. Oral traditions state that the wives of the Akan kings would perform for the delight of their husbands in the privacy of the inner palace walls. Today Adenkum may be accompanied by men playing the dondo drum among the Fante, or the Prepensoa among the Asante.

Atenteben

One of the many traditional melodic instruments found in Ghana, the Atenteben bamboo flute is popular and readily adaptable for concerts of traditional and contemporary African Music. It has a beautiful and powerful tone and can be played alone as a solo instrument or in an ensemble. The Atenteben is often used today to render dirges during funeral ceremonies and may be supported by percussive instruments. The absorption of Atenteben into the creative arena can be attributed to the diligent research and innovativeness of Ephraim Amu, a pioneering musicologist who worked for many years at the Institute of African Studies, Legon.

Gonje

Fiddling is part of Dagomba culture and fiddlers are found in the market place and at special social events where prominent citizens are praised. The Dagomba fiddle, Gonje, has either one or two strings normally made of horse hair and played with a bow. The resonator is a calabash covered with snake or lizard skin. The fiddler accompanies his lusty songs with his instrument and may in turn be accompanied by one or more rattle players.

Seperewa

It is a Ghanaian traditional harp which originated from the Ashanti Region. The name “Se” is an Akan language which literally means “To Speak or To Talk”. “Pre” means “Touch” and “Wa” means “Little or Small”. Therefore this instrument can speak when it is touched. This instrument disappeared when the guitar was introduced in the early 1900. In the 21st century, the seperewa is enjoying a revival largely due to the encouragement and nurturing of artists in the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD) under the auspices of Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia. The major proponent of the art form Osei Korankye is a member of the Ghana Dance Ensemble.



Gonje

Nmani

Nmani is performed by the maidens of Dagbon in the Northern Region of Ghana. Traditionally restricted in the types of drumming that they can do, Nmani is a tribute to women's inventiveness as they turn their everyday cooking utensils into musical instruments. At work as at play, calabashes are hardy, versatile companions of young maidens all over Northern Ghana. Nmani is music! Nmani is play! Delicately, the maidens tease a joyful rhythm out of their calabashes with metal rings. With lilting voices, they sing praises to their creator and thank those who have brought them up. In the past, young women played Nmani for their own delight but today they may do so on social occasions.



DANCE DRAMA (Selected Pieces)

Nsrabo (Drill)

This short piece is a light hearted army drill which calls on the youth to be prepared to defend their nation at anytime. It was inspired by the dominance of the military in public life between the early 1970s and the 1990s.

Kusum Gboo

Kusum Gboo, (The Tradition Goes On) is a dance drama through which the choreographer, Obido Ayettey seeks to interpret his experience of the Ga religious, social and performance culture. He does so by portraying a young couple who seek assistance from the gods for a child. They are granted their request but do not subsequently show the necessary gratitude.

Blanza

This is an energetic choreographed piece by men and women. The strong beats of the Dundun drum provide the core rhythmic force to this neo-African piece. The name "Blanza" is the creation of the choreographer, Obido Ayettey.

The Legend of Okoryoo

This piece by Nii Yartey takes a plunge into contemporary African dance and blends dance, theatre and poetry, enacting a Pan African version of universal spiritual story of creation. The legend of Okoryoo uses sound in a unique manner, going beyond regular patterns to the depiction of atmospheric cosmic elements and human moods.

The King's Dilemma

Nii Yartey's 1978 piece is built around the dances of Northern Ghana. Set in the imaginary kingdom of Nyindongo, it is based on a Dagomba legend portraying a king of little wisdom whose foolishness leads to a grave injury to an innocent warrior. The women of the kingdom play a major role in restoring justice.

Lamentations for Freedom Fighters Sohu, Husago, and Atsia

Sohu and Husago are Yeve cult dances. The Yeve have a secret language of their own which, together with their beautiful and stimulating dances, they teach to converts during initiation. In this repertoire, the Husago and Atsia are used as a lament for departed heroes. In its original form the Husago is a special funeral dance for the ancestral priests. In the present arrangement, the slow, sad Husago theme sounded by voices and drums creates a mood of sadness and loss. Atsia follows as a second movement to show the defiance, fighting spirit, courage and strength of the heroes and the knowledge that they will continue to fight as invisible hosts in the other world. This piece is the first dance-theatre production in Ghana and was choreographed by Mawere Opoku in 1965.



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