

**Africa: Diversity and Development**

**Flawless Fictions: The Paradox of Cross-Cultural Enchantment and  
Discontent in West African Dance in Australia**

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'West African dance' in Australia, for the purposes of this article, is a Western-influenced, African-based transnational movement and music art form that can be performed, taught and learned. It derives from several areas within the political region of West Africa and generally encompasses elements of percussive music, occasional call-and-response song and dynamic movements that accord with particular polyrhythms. In Australia it is typically taught by West African-born practitioners living in, or visiting, the country.<sup>1</sup>

The cross-cultural encounters generated through the practice in Australia tend to enamour students, teachers and audiences alike, with idealised and exotic perceptions of the Other<sup>2</sup> that can induce intoxicating highs, moments of perceived enlightenment and feelings of bliss. However encounters may be simultaneously fraught, with misunderstandings, reductionist thinking and divergent perceptions that can lead to disillusionment, frustration and disappointment as these incongruities reveal themselves.

This paradox is generated, in part, by ongoing legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Western Europe's colonisation of Africa. These major global events influenced, and were influenced by, mistaken pseudo-scientific doctrines regarding racial classification and hierarchies that became popular in the West during the nineteenth century, leading to racialised tropes such as the 'noble savage' myth or

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<sup>1</sup> However, there are classes available taught by practitioners not of West African origin or descent.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995).

romantic primitivism.<sup>3</sup> Such rhetoric, however false and outdated in current academic scholarship, persists in shaping everyday imaginings of the Other around the globe, impacting on West African dance subcultures<sup>4</sup> at home and abroad.

This article analyses fieldwork experiences in Ghana and Australia<sup>5</sup> to consider how colonisation, subsequent independence and tourism from the West have led to the commodification of the pre-colonial customs of Ghana's ethnic groups, moulding these together to create a commercially available transnational art form that provides migration paths to the West and an allure of social mobility for many Ghanaian dance artists.

It then reflects on how colonial legacies and obsolete racial ideologies work to perpetuate the superior/inferior dichotomy myth of 'the West' in relation to 'Africa'<sup>6</sup> – a construction that drives many artists' decisions to migrate to Australia, in attempts to realise career aspirations perceived as largely unavailable throughout Ghana and much of Africa.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, it considers the impact of language, education, fashion, media (including film and music) on African identity and idealisation of the West. The article concludes with an overview of difficulties faced by migrant artists in Australia, contrasting these with the artists' original expectations of life in the West.

### ***What is 'West African dance?'***

West African dance is a transnational commodification of culture, resulting from long term interactions between Africa and the West.<sup>8</sup> As Gore states, the term West African dance is a Eurocentric misnomer. She notes that:

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 3 (April 1, 1996): 247–64; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, New Accents (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> My fieldwork includes: eight weeks of ethnographic participant observation of Ghana's cultural dance troupes in Accra, Cape Coast and Kumasi; twelve months of ethnographic participant observation of West African dance classes in Melbourne, Australia (total fieldwork period from 31 October 2012 – 31 December 2013; fieldwork in Ghana from 3 September – 27 October 2013); and fourteen in-depth recorded oral history interviews (seven with Ghanaian-born migrant dance artists living in Australia and seven with non-African practitioners [students/teachers] living in Australia).

<sup>6</sup> See Said's arguments regarding the Oriental Other: Said, *Orientalism*; Ruth Mayer, *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization* (UPNE, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>8</sup> For analyses of the impact of capitalism on commodification, objectification, "reification" and "fetishism" see: Ben Agger, *Fast Capitalism: A Critical Theory of Significance* (Urbana:

“West Africa commonly denotes a geopolitical unit encompassing some 16 nation states and over 500 different linguistic groups, each with their own distinct traditions.”<sup>9</sup>

For many Westerners not familiar with the art form, its history and subcultures, a mention of the term West African dance evokes primitive, noble savage notions of African customs and traditions, indistinguishable as part of the “culturally homogeneous imagined community”<sup>10</sup> of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>11</sup> In fact, dance styles and meanings vary greatly throughout the continent, according to the purpose of the dance and each dancer’s ethnic heritage, country and town of birth, places visited (locally and overseas) and personal experiences and interests.<sup>12</sup>

For the practitioners and students in Australia, the term West African dance<sup>13</sup> is commonly employed to denote various amalgamations of traditional and contemporary<sup>14</sup> performative steps and routines that have been created, learned, taught or performed by self-identified professional dancers born in Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ghana.<sup>15</sup> The art form began to develop in Melbourne around the early 1980s, when Jeff Pressing, ethnomusicologist at La Trobe University, brought famous Highlife musicians Koo Nimo and Kojo Noah Owusu to Australia from Ghana. Chris Lesser, then student at La Trobe, joined Pressing’s

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University of Illinois Press, 1989); Ben Agger, *The Decline of Discourse: Reading, Writing, and Resistance in Postmodern Capitalism* (New York: Falmer Press, 1990); György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Georgiana Gore, “Present Texts, Past Voices: The Formation of Contemporary Representations of West African Dances,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33 (January 1, 2001): 29–36, doi:10.2307/1519628. This accords with the UN’s delineation of the region, which defines West Africa as encompassing the sixteen African States of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (plus the island of Saint Helena as an overseas territory): “About the Office,” *United Nations Economic Commission for Africa*, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.uneca.org/sro-wa/pages/about-office>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “A Future-Oriented, Non-Ethnic Nationalism?: Mauritius as an Exemplary Case,” *Ethnos* 58, no. 3–4 (1993): 197–221.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on how the Western gaze distorts the Other and homogenizes diversity, see: Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>12</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>13</sup> also referred to as “African dance”

<sup>14</sup> In this case, contemporary does not necessarily denote the style entitled ‘contemporary dance’, but dance that is modern in nature.

<sup>15</sup> The availability of classes associated with a limited set of West African States is resultant from the demographics of migrant artists from the West African region that have settled in to Australia. In some cases, West African dance is taught and performed by people who were not born in these countries.

music ensemble, which led to the creation of the Ghanaian drum and dance ensemble Adzohu.<sup>16</sup>

Since that time, a host of West African-born artists have migrated to Australia to perform and teach music and dance from their homelands. These artists perform in a variety of settings, including festivals, parties or celebrations and theatres.<sup>17</sup>

Practitioners also run group classes to teach the steps or routines on a commercial basis. Classes are generally one hour in length, at a cost of approximately twenty dollars each per class.<sup>18</sup>

A central feature of West African dance is its indispensable connection to West African percussion:<sup>19</sup>

“(As a dancer) you can’t go away from music and the music cannot go away from dancing. They work together, that’s the world.”<sup>20</sup>

In Australia, classes are usually accompanied by at least one drummer or, where resources allow, a drumming ensemble. In some circumstances, teachers are instructing alone, they will bring a CD player to with music featuring percussion. Many West African dancers perform in bands and often drum, or play other instruments, as well as dance.<sup>21</sup>

The steps and routines taught on a commercial basis are commonly referred to as “djembe dances”. In some cases, practitioners teach or perform what they describe as ‘traditional’ dances as opposed to djembe dances. These consist exclusively, or almost exclusively, of steps belonging to a particular ethnic group that are designated for a specific occasion.<sup>22</sup> However, it is argued that the circumstances of teaching and performing in Australia remove traditional ‘routines’ from their customary

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Participant 4, n.d.;

<sup>17</sup> Generally, dancers are paid for performing on a professional basis: Ethnographic Fieldwork.

<sup>18</sup> In some cases individual classes are also available at a commensurate rate: Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Bellinger, “Dancing through Time and Space: African Dance and the Gewel Tradition of Senegal at Suffolk University,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 5 (October 1, 2013): 1; Doris Green, “The Saga of African Dance and Black Studies Departments,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies (Online)* 4, no. 6 (September 1, 2011): 16–37.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Participant 3, n.d.

<sup>21</sup> Ethnographic Fieldwork.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

foundations, even through the mere fact that the routines are being taught in a class format.<sup>23</sup>

This article contends that West African dance in Australia is at least twice-removed from the pre-colonial customary 'dance(s)' that constitute significant, continuing and localised rituals of indigenous ethnic groups throughout West Africa.<sup>24</sup> Firstly, deliberate nationalistic cultural constructions by West Africa's independence leaders during and after decolonisation, popularised drum and dance in keeping with the ideologies of the postcolonial independent Nation State.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, post-independence practitioners have been influenced long-term by interactions with visitors, particularly tourists, from the West.

In Ghana, for example, Dr Kwame Nkrumah was handed power in 1957 as the nation's first President, as Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast, was declared independent from Britain. Nkrumah established the *Ghana Dance Ensemble* in 1962 as part of the Institute of African Studies, with the aim of "establishing a program of 'national dances' that would be representative of the cultural wealth of all the diverse ethnic groups in Ghana" thus "revitalizing and preserving" the rich dance cultures of the country that "lay fallow after colonialism's impact."<sup>26</sup>

During my fieldwork in Ghana, I found the model of the Ghana Dance Ensemble commonly replicated throughout the country in the form of the 'traditional' or 'cultural dance troupe'. These troupes tend to perform an amalgam of dances from various regions and ethnic groups within Ghana, often at a variety of events such as important cultural rituals and occasions (including funerals and weddings), folkloric shows aimed at foreign tourists, local parties, festivals and governmental and other institutional functions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The class format is a Western development – knowledge of customary movements would previously be acquired through embodied learning. See: Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> As Gore states, in West African cultures "(p)ractices construed as "dance" in many European languages...are conceived as including music, singing, play, games as well as dance." Gore, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> See: Konstanze N'guessan, "The Bureaucratic Making of National Culture in North-Western Ghana," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, no. 02 (June 2014): 277–99.

<sup>26</sup> Katharina Schramm, "The Politics of Dance: Changing Representations of the Nation in Ghana," *Africa Spectrum* 35, no. 3 (January 1, 2000): 339–58.

<sup>27</sup> Ethnographic Fieldwork in Ghana.

The structures and functions of these troupes derive from three essential sources: (1) like the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the customary rituals of local ethnic groups that make up the Nation State of Ghana; (2) the nationalistic cultural promotion heralded by the Ghana Dance Ensemble; and (3) direct interpersonal interactions resulting from Western tourism in Ghana.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the impact of tourism, for a long time now interactions between Africa and the West have revealed the exotic value placed on indigenous African practices (and artifacts).<sup>29</sup> Such exotic value has translated to economic value and, for the cultural dance troupes in Ghana, tourism provides a means for practitioners to survive:

“(t)he white people, you really appreciate the culture of dance more than our own black people, because sometimes in Africa when we do stuff we have more tourists more interested to come and see than the local people. So already we know they like us.”<sup>30</sup>

The validity of this artist’s statement rests on the attention this artist and his dance troupe has received in Ghana from foreigners, as opposed to his own countrymen. I do not accede that attention from Westerners necessarily equates with a greater appreciation of Ghanaian culture, however it is certainly true that Western exoticisation of the African Other lends itself readily to this belief. Drum and dance shows performed at tourist hotspots such as Big Milly’s backpackers’ retreat, Accra’s upmarket Holiday Inn and Alliance Francaise’s cultural hub draw impressive crowds and generally pay better than local appearances. Touristic engagements also provide practitioners with the chance to meet and engage with Westerners, which can lead to further opportunities for work or travel.<sup>31</sup>

Western attentions influence the traditional or cultural dance troupes by leading artists to focus on and develop those elements of dance practice and local culture that appear to be of particular interest to Westerners:

“Traditional, is not like, we call it traditional dance. It’s our local dance. It’s our local background. It’s like a journey...so all that stuff, it’s like, all of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The film *Heritage Africa* Kwaw Ansah, *Heritage Africa*, N/A, (2007).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Participant 1, n.d.

<sup>31</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

tradition...all about the struggle for help. And when you find Western music, go to a better place, just surviving, escaping. Yeah escaping for your life, that's traditional dance. But the tradition is from our ancestors, our forefathers, our background."<sup>32</sup>

This artist is alluding to the construction of traditional dance in a folkloric, touristic sense, for the purposes of survival and opportunities for social mobility. Some of the Ghanaian dancers who perform and teach 'traditional' dances in Australia did not begin their careers through practicing the traditions of their respective cultures. For example, a leading practitioner in Australia states:

"I didn't start with traditional; I started with what we call in Africa Freestyle. Here we call it hip hop, or in America. But in Africa we call it a free dance which normally goes with the house music. Really fast and kind of funky music. And in doing that for a while, and seeing all these American people on TV and stuff, I'm like, nah, I'm doing well, but I can't compete with them. I need to learn my culture. That's what got me into traditional dance."<sup>33</sup>

This quote demonstrates that some dance practitioners in Ghana learn the customary rituals of the country's various ethnic groups in order to compete in international markets. This artist has realised the cultural capital and exotic value of his nation's 'traditions' and his ability, as an indigenous person of Ghana, to capitalise on these, despite his previous beliefs that (to him at least) "traditional dances can be a little bit boring."<sup>34</sup>

Touristic interactions have also created migration pathways to the West, either through entertainment visas, or more frequently for the participants of my research, through marriage.<sup>35</sup> For the dancers who are brought up in the poorer, lower-class sections of society in Ghana, marriage to a Westerner provides opportunities for social mobility that are not readily available at home:

"You know, to come to Australia, you can't come alone by yourself, it's hardly. So, if you wanna come, you have to get married with someone. A woman."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Participant 3, n.d.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Participant 1, n.d.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork and participant interviews.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Participant 3, n.d.

This article does not delve into the issues regarding these relationships, suffice to say that these marriages are consensual and often based, in part and openly, on the artistic aspirations of one or both parties:

“She like the idea of what I want to do. Yeah. So when I came to Australia, here, she said ‘hey, go and do what you said you want to do in your life, and I will...support you.’ Yeah. And I like that. I like that. She’s good to me and I’m good to her.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***The African Dream***

Under the above conditions, whether arriving through marriage or professional sponsorship, most Ghanaian dancers migrate to Australia with dreams of discovering fame and fortune in a utopian West. This article argues that, as a result of consuming intergenerational constructions about the superiority of Western European and North American cultures<sup>38</sup> over their own, these artists travel to Australia (as a relatively unknown country assumed to be of ‘Western calibre’) with hopes of opening their own academies, being paid to travel the world, living in great material wealth and providing financially for family members back home.<sup>39</sup>

As one artist from Ghana states:

“I think umm for every artist coming from Africa to Australia have a very big expectation cos all the bigger stuff happens in the West.”<sup>40</sup>

This artist is speaking with regards to dance specifically. However, from my travels throughout the Horn of Africa, East and West Africa,<sup>41</sup> there seems to be a consensus among many locals (particularly those who can and do take time to speak with me, as a Westerner) that life in the West is somehow bigger and better than life in Africa, and that this dichotomy is linked to the innate ‘intelligence’ or ‘capabilities’

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> For the purposes of this paper, ‘culture’ is defined as the “customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society”: Konstanze N’guessan, “The Bureaucratic Making of National Culture in North-Western Ghana,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, no. 02 (June 2014): 277–99.

<sup>39</sup> Ethnographic Fieldwork.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Participant 1, n.d.

<sup>41</sup> Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ghana



of the two distinct groups, which are often framed in terms of 'black vs white' or 'Africa vs the West'.<sup>42</sup>

As Fanon argues, African, or black, identity is entrenched within the cultural and socio-historical context of colonisation, where white, or the West, is portrayed as the norm and black, or Africa, is portrayed as a deviation from that norm.<sup>43</sup> Bhabha, building on the work of Said and Fanon, rejects the binary of the colonised and the coloniser and there is definite merit in his concept of a shifting continuum.<sup>44</sup> However, this article focuses on the perceptions of the West African dance artists that form my research. It is clear from my fieldwork that the aforementioned dichotomy, whether or not it is an oversimplification of more complex processes, impacts the thinking and identity of my participants.

Travels across the globe indicate to me that such perceptions are not specific to Africa, but are relevant to people of all continents, nations and ethnic groups that find themselves on the underside of the global development divide.<sup>45</sup> The legacies of European imperialistic stratagems, which have themselves been instrumental in constructing this divide, have likewise fostered formulaic, linear 'West is best' perceptions of development, with a focus on neo-liberalism, democracy, materialism and scientific technology.<sup>46</sup>

### ***The superior / inferior dichotomy as African identity***

More than once throughout my fieldwork in Ghana, I listened sadly as dancers made self-deprecating statements about the 'African' condition, comparing themselves, as part of an African, or black, paradigm, to an archetypal white, or Western, counterpart.

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<sup>42</sup> Where 'the West' is considered to essentially encompass Europe, North America and Australia: Ethnographic fieldwork; P. D. Marchant, "What Is The West?," *The Australian Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 1956): 48–57.

<sup>43</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970); Pramod K. Nayar, *Frantz Fanon*, Routledge Critical Thinkers. (Taylor and Francis, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Novel Metropolis," *New Statesman & Society*, February 16, 1990; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994). Cited in: Wesley Shumar, "Homi Bhabha," *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 5, no. 2 (June 2010): 495–506, doi:<http://0-dx.doi.org.alpha2.latrobe.edu.au/10.1007/s11422-010-9255-9>.

<sup>45</sup> In fact, many on the upper-side would agree and continue to perpetuate Western ideals as more 'evolved'. I consider Western perceptions of Africa and development further in my thesis, however this is outside the scope of this article. For an example of views advocating the supremacy of the West, see: Jeffrey Hart, "What Is the 'West'?", *Modern Age* 47, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 362–66.

<sup>46</sup> See: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the Mind," *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (December 1, 1998): 101–4.

Two examples of such statements are: “you white people are more advanced than us blacks”<sup>47</sup> and:

“So what is different between Ghana and here? So, because you, you’re, you are white people? And the white always have good brain? The blacks have black brain. Bad life, man. That is the secret. It’s like that. You use your brain to do good thing. See you, you are doing aeroplane. Ghana we can’t do aeroplane. Do you understand me?”<sup>48</sup>

These statements of self-reflection exhibit entrenched feelings of African inferiority, which results from a number of factors that result from the colonial context, as articulated by Fanon.<sup>49</sup> These statements were both made in the present, about present issues facing these two particular migrant artists, as they compare their old situations at home with the new context they face in Australia.<sup>50</sup>

However, the statements indicate that access to transferrable understandings regarding Africa’s role in industrialising the globe, firstly through the labour and capital provided as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade<sup>51</sup> and secondly through the use and abuse of Africa’s land and natural resources during and after colonisation,<sup>52</sup> are not readily available throughout Africa. In fact, it is argued that such understandings are not readily available worldwide.<sup>53</sup> This is particularly true for those who are of lower-class status in countries like Ghana, as they are subject to

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<sup>47</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Participant 2, n.d.

<sup>49</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the artist who voiced the second statement did so after comparing Australia’s constant availability of electricity to her home’s intermittent supply.

<sup>51</sup> See: Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Edward Barbier, *Natural Resources and Economic Development* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); M. Humphreys, “Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (August 1, 2005): 508–37; Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, “The Curse of Natural Resources,” *European Economic Review*, 15th Annual Congress of the European Economic Association, 45, no. 4–6 (May 2001); Clarence Westphal, *African Heritage: The Story of Africa’s Contribution to the World* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison, 1960).

<sup>53</sup> Certainly, one would need to purposely seek out such information in Australia, as mainstream media and education (at primary and secondary levels) rarely avail such interpretations of history. For a discussion on how “the socio-spatial construction of Indigenous life for white and other Australians has enabled both aggressive and neglectful policy instruments” through which Aboriginal issues are put “out of the sight and mind of social and political actors” see: Rowland Atkinson, Elizabeth Taylor, and Maggie Walter, “Burying Indigeneity: The Spatial Construction of Reality and Aboriginal Australia,” *Social & Legal Studies* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 311–30.

limited education opportunities, which are, in any case, often Eurocentric in nature (as I will discuss further below).<sup>54</sup>

Conversely, notions regarding the superiority of Western technology, intelligence and 'civilisation' over African knowledge, beliefs, customs and habits are impressed upon the minds of African peoples in all corners of the continent from a very young age. Deliberate efforts by colonial powers to 'colonise the minds' of indigenous peoples throughout Africa, first during the slave trade and later through the colonial period, have had monumental and ongoing consequences for citizens of all African nations post-independence.<sup>55</sup> At worst, colonial legacies have generated horrific and enduring civil wars and armed conflict, causing widespread death and long term suffering, devastation and destitution for generations of people and communities within Africa.<sup>56</sup> However, the lasting effects of imperial tactics are also apparent on more subtle levels, even in countries such as Ghana and Senegal that are considered to be two of the most peaceful, democratic and developing nations within Africa.<sup>57</sup>

Factors that hold significant influence over African identity include (but are not limited to) education, media, language and fashion. With regards to language and education, UNICEF recognises that:

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<sup>54</sup> Although most likely still a minority, there are many African people, born within Africa and still living in Africa, who do have various levels of understanding of the contributions that the peoples of the African continent have made to today's global society. This is despite education levels, as 'education' as an institutional imperative does not take account of alternative learning paradigms relevant to many cultures of Africa, such as oral traditions. However, I would argue that even when there is this understanding, identity is somewhat split, with the acknowledgement of self-worth and the strength of one's own people constantly being undermined by racist fashionings and stereotypes of the African and the African condition. *Ethnographic fieldwork*; See: Ali A. Abdi, "Oral Societies and Colonial Experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the 'de-Facto' Power of the Written Word," *International Education* 37, no. 1 (2007): 42–59; Joseph Calder Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, Kent: W. Dawson, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> Thiong'o, "Decolonising the Mind."

<sup>56</sup> Examples include civil wars in Sudan, Congo, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sierra Leone and South Africa's Apartheid: Philippe Le Billon, *Fuelling War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013); Robert O. Matthews and Taisier Mohamed Ahmed Ali, eds., *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); Marina Ottaway, "African Instability Is the Legacy of Artificial Colonial Borders," *Foreign Policy*, no. 114 (Spring 1999): 13–25.

<sup>57</sup> R. G. Casey Building Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Senegal," fact sheet, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/senegal/>; R. G. Casey Building Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Ghana - Countries and Regions," index, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/ghana/>.

“In many post-colonial societies, the curriculum remains strongly Euro-centric and completely ignores the local culture. New generations thus become estranged from their own cultures.”<sup>58</sup>

Classes across Africa are generally taught in the language of the colonial power of each nation, which is predominantly English and French throughout West Africa. On speaking with one Senegalese artist living in Australia, he lamented to me over his experiences of being forced to learn French language and grammar by rote during his primary education. This was a task he despised at the time, though he noted that, as a child, he did not fully comprehend why. He now realizes the imperial bearings on his nation’s educational policies and has gained insight into why, as a young boy, he felt so uncomfortable practicing this foreign language via foreign means.<sup>59</sup>

This artist similarly recounted stories about the general demeanour of his teachers and their external attitudes towards Westerners during interpersonal interactions. Subtle cues further led him, and many other young people privy to the actions of their communities’ respected Elders, to succumb to widespread impressions of Western superiority over their own people:

“Imagine, when we go to school, we have a teacher that everybody is scared of. He will yell at us, beat us and control us. And you know what we see is that the only person this man is scared of is the white man. When the white man comes in, we see him telling our teacher what to do. The teacher smiles and bows his head and changes in front of our eyes. What are we to think, apart from ‘how amazing this white man should be to make our scary teacher bow to him’?”<sup>60</sup>

Fashion has similarly been an issue of contention for African peoples, since the times of colonisation when parts were shaved into African heads, to mimic Western hairstyles and the business suit was impressed upon Africans over traditional costumes.<sup>61</sup> International backlash, in the form of dreadlocks, ‘Afros’ and the rise of

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<sup>58</sup> “The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children,” accessed October 13, 2014, [http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/unicef\\_the\\_two\\_faces\\_education\\_in\\_ethnic\\_conflict\\_peace\\_buil.pdf](http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/unicef_the_two_faces_education_in_ethnic_conflict_peace_buil.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Hildi Hendrickson, ed., *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, Body, Commodity, Text (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

transnational 'Afro'-inspired contemporary fashion is apparent,<sup>62</sup> however there are ongoing issues in this field, championed by activists such as Kenyan born Ngugi wa Thiongo.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the media, colonial advertising was instrumental in continuing imperial aspirations to debase African peoples as inferior to Europeans, in both a physical and cultural sense, skipping hand-in-hand as marketing and advertising still does, with fashion and consumerism. For example, the Pears Soap advertisement that first appeared in the Christmas edition of *The Graphic* in 1884, during the Scramble for Africa,<sup>64</sup> depicts a light-skinned boy washing a dark-skinned boy 'clean', simultaneously removing the dark skin to uncover the dark boy's lighter skin, through the civilising act of washing with soap (Appendix. 1).<sup>65</sup>

Ramamurthy states that the advertising of Pears and other soap companies were dehumanising images that both constructed and reflected racist imperial ideologies of the time.<sup>66</sup> As she notes:

“There could be no more powerful apology for imperial expansion than the accepted projection in British popular culture of an image of Africans desiring to be white and in effect accepting their inferiority”<sup>67</sup>

This is but one of many overtly racist advertisements from the colonial era that indicate a clear intention to depict the African, or indigene, as uncivilised and thus inferior to the European, or white, coloniser.<sup>68</sup> Arguably, such advertisements were precursors to the modern marketing of skin bleaching products. Skin bleaching is a

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<sup>62</sup> See: Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, 1st American ed (Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 1987); Jean Daniels, “When the Question of Dreadlocks Leads to Knowledge and Empowerment: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Its Legacy of Westernized Education,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 82–85; Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, *African Dress : Fashion, Agency, Performance*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> See: Ngugi wa Thiongo, “Time for Africa to Reclaim the Black Body,” *New African*, July 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>65</sup> *The Graphic*, Christmas Number, 18 December 1884, cited in: Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising*.

<sup>66</sup> For a full analysis of the Pears Soap advertisement, its meaning and its relationship to imperial ideologies, see: Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising*

<sup>67</sup> Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders*.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

widespread problem throughout Africa.<sup>69</sup> Stemming from a desire to attain the perceived superior appearance of lighter skin, skin bleaching is a clear legacy of the colonial penetration of African identity - a physical manifestation of the inferior/superior dichotomy that affects dark-skinned women's mental and physical health in Africa and globally.<sup>70</sup>

Lastly, since the rise of transnational media technology, films, television shows and music video clips from Western countries have perpetuated myths and stereotypes about Western countries as lands full of riches for all. For example, Ugandan television features Australian dramas *Neighbours* and *McLeod's Daughters*, while US-influenced Mexican soap operas grace the screens in Ghana. There are attempts to localise television shows, however this is an ongoing process, as many programs continue to mimic Western styles (for example, with presenters wearing business suits and emulating other Western fashions).<sup>71</sup>

Hollywood movies have also heavily influenced Ghanaian, indeed African, ideas regarding the West:

“People watch, people from Africa watch movies from (overseas) and they see cars being destroyed, like a nice car. You know what I mean! So they will see a video and they will see a beautiful city. You know, this kind of stuff creates a memory to people.”<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps, and paradoxically so, most damaging of all in terms of creating unrealistic fantasies about life in the West are the African-American hip hop, rap and R&B music film clips that present American citizens of African heritage enjoying extraordinary riches.<sup>73</sup> Again, there are attempts to localise music tastes in Ghana, with local urban

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<sup>69</sup> Pascal Del Giudice and Pinier Yves, “The Widespread Use of Skin Lightening Creams in Senegal: A Persistent Public Health Problem in West Africa,” *International Journal of Dermatology* 41, no. 2 (February 1, 2002): 69–72.

<sup>70</sup> Ncoza Dlova et al., “Women’s Perceptions of the Benefits and Risks of Skin-Lightening Creams in Two South African Communities,” *Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 236–41; Petra Alaine Robinson, “Skin Bleaching in Jamaica: A Colonial Legacy” (Ph.D., Texas A&M University, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Ethnographic Fieldwork.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Participant 6, n.d.

<sup>73</sup> Examples include 50 Cent, Florider, Chris Brown and Rhianna: Ethnographic fieldwork. For discussion on hip hop, materialism and consumerism see: Eric K. Watts, “An Exploration of Spectacular Consumption: Gangsta Rap as Cultural Commodity,” *Communication Studies* 48, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 42–58.

dance 'craze' Azonto finding popularity on a global scale,<sup>74</sup> however many video clips featuring Ghanaian musicians still show them driving fast cars and wearing 'bling', in line with the African American style.<sup>75</sup>

Given these influences over many Ghanaians and other Africans, it is not surprising that the general consensus amongst locals in most regions throughout the continent that a connection with the West equals increased power, status, material comfort and, most importantly of all, economic abundance.

### ***The Australian Reality***

However, the issue is far more complex. Although migrant dancers from Ghana, and other West African nations, may sometimes enjoy substantially greater material comfort than they did back home, often their dreams of fame and fortune remain largely unrealised. Romanticised expectations of life in the West far exceed reality for most, with financial, social, legal and cultural difficulties plaguing newcomers unfamiliar with Western norms.

For example, many artists find it difficult to succeed in paper-driven Australia, whereby talent must be accompanied by administrative acumen and usually education degrees:

“I would say if you are from Africa, or any other country coming here, you can't just come in and work. Everything here is about paper. You need that piece of paper...You might know how to do everything, but without a paper you can't. Back home, it's different. You know you have the experience. You just have to go there and then you will get it. It's very different. I reckon it's about paperwork...”<sup>76</sup>

Institutional racism, steeped in colonial history and favouring Western-lead neo-liberal ideologies, marginalises some migrants from non-Western countries, who find themselves struggling with the rules and regulations often imposed by Western governments:

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<sup>74</sup> Jesse Weaver Shipley, “Transnational Circulation and Digital Fatigue in Ghana’s Azonto Dance Craze,” *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (May 1, 2013): 362–81.

<sup>75</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Participant 5, n.d.

“The rules? Hah! Oh the rules. For example you know like...in Ghana, for example in Ghana, some rules...but it’s not serious, you know what I mean. Here it’s too serious in such a way that you’ll be in trouble, or you know like, even if you do a small thing like, if you pass through like this traffic light, you’ll be in a big trouble. You know what I mean? In Ghana, you pass through a traffic light, like it’s not that...it’s rude, but actually sometimes you know people need their freedom, you know what I mean?”<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, in some cases African-born artists arrive in Australia only to see (or at least perceive) Australian-born dancers achieving financial and artistic success by embodying the customs and traditions of West Africa. Migrant artists find themselves unable to do likewise, despite their talent, drive or passion, due to sparse knowledge of Western business, arts and funding systems:

“For them...the Westerner having the business mentality, business knowledge, it works for them. But for us, we might be really good, but we don’t have that... sometimes, things are a bit rough...”<sup>78</sup>

This can lead to cries of cultural appropriation and certainly plays on the minds of some migrant artists, for a number of reasons that are outside the scope of this article (discussed in my PhD thesis). However, the end result is that many migrant West African dance artists in Australia are compelled to work within these very systems that have historically devalued and debased African cultural ideologies and ways of being:

“(Y)ou have to force and try to fit in, you know what I mean. It’s...the government or there’s one person...not only one person, this organisation that have said, ‘ok the whole country you have to do this, if you don’t do that then you’ll be in trouble.’ So it does affect the people...It’s still a problem...people still talk about that stuff. Not only that but a lot of things.”<sup>79</sup>

As artists take on the new burdens of life in Australia, many find themselves simultaneously facing overt racism for the first time. Most artists once fitted

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Participant 6, n.d.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Participant 5, n.d.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Participant 6, n.d.



comfortably within a society where dark skin was the norm. Suddenly, migrants are made acutely aware of being 'black' and of minority status:

"I've been in the buses and trains, whereby you know, this kind of racism you know, and then you start to realise you know, like in Ghana I never experienced that racism."<sup>80</sup>

These experiences combined force many migrant artists to reformulate their ideas regarding Western superiority over Africa and revise their expectations about life in Australia.

### ***Conclusion***

This article discusses the impact of pre-colonial rituals and customs, African nationalistic independence movements and tourism in West Africa<sup>81</sup> on the development of West African dance in Australia.

It then considers how language, education, fashion and media have perpetuated colonial fabrications of the inferior/superior dichotomy of black vs. white or Africa vs. the West. This article particularly reflects on how the dichotomy affects African identity and draws many Africans, in this case Ghanaians, to migrate to Australia with expectations that often remain unfulfilled.

The article discusses the difficulties that some migrant artists face in Australia, as they endure systematic racism, explicit racism and cultural appropriation as part of a coloured, marginalised minority. This arguably amplifies feelings of inferiority and simultaneously shatters utopic conceptions of the West.

However, paradoxically, many artists continue to find that through capitalizing on Western exoticisations of African bodies, artwork and culture, they are able to achieve social mobility and, in part, overcome various migration and settlement difficulties. Thus, migrant practitioners walk the tightrope of profiting socially and economically from their work, whilst avoiding the reinforcement of reductive stereotyping and the commodification of West African cultures.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Including the Western exoticisation of West African dance that is reminiscent of romantic primitivism.

**Appendix 1. Pears Soap Advertisement:**

THE GRAPHIC CHRISTMAS NUMBER 1884

*For improving & preserving the complexion.*

**Pears' Soap.**

Sold everywhere.  
unscented tablets  
6<sup>d</sup> each.  
larger tablets  
scented  
1<sup>-</sup> each.

*Recommended for the complexion.  
by Madame Adelina Patti & M<sup>rs</sup> Langtry.*

*The Graphic*, Christmas Number 1884. Cited in: Ramamurthy, Anandi. *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising*. Manchester University Press, 2003.

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