COBA REFERENCE: TRADITION VERSUS TRADITIONAL – A BATTLE FOR BALANCE

BY: BAKARI EDDISON LINDSAY, M.A. B.ED

"In the [African Diasporic] context, there are three main attitudes towards the question of tradition. The first is a blind adherence to traditional values and a near total rejection of modernity. The second is the superiority of modern systems over traditional ones, [with total ignorance to] the importance of tradition. The third is one of reconciliation between forces of tradition and modernity with the aim of reaching a state of equilibrium. Such reconciliation is generally approached either by adopting a modern theory and projecting it on a traditional system, or by selecting positive aspects of tradition, which are compatible with modern attitudes and therefore making the traditional values fit into a contemporary framework." (Waleed, 1995, p.1)

I would place myself within the third grouping, although I can recall several instances where I could easily fall squarely into the first category. In developing A-Feeree – The Physical Language, my third-grouping psyche was at work, which brought forward serious concerns from my first-grouping thinking colleagues. These concerns were centered around the introduction of contemporary concepts to, or within, African tradition with a particular focus on the development of A-Feeree. There is support for development of this physical language, but there are also concerns that the uniqueness and physical mystery of African dance culture is rooted in oral tradition and the development of a physical language might be in some way diminishing traditional values. On some level A-Feeree could definitely be viewed as a departure from tradition, or, is it a departure from traditional methods of practicing tradition? This is where the battle begins.

In imperial China, historians of each dynasty not only made great efforts to preserve, annotate, and interpret records, they also followed diligently the forms, styles, and moral principles established in these early histories to compose their own histories. For them, ancient histories stood for a cultural tradition that was always impeccable. Interestingly, the term "tradition" also has different connotations in Western languages [than] in Chinese. In English, tradition means knowledge or doctrine handed down from past generations to new generations. The process is an active and selective one in which "surrender or betrayal" occurs at the same time. In other words, new generations not only pay respect to tradition; they also betray it as necessary.(Wang 1995)

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According to Wang, westerners preserve tradition with a duality of surrender and betrayal. The betrayal Wang speaks about can be interpreted as development or adjustment within tradition, but nevertheless is inherent in westerners' practice of preserving tradition. So then, what is to account for the huge divide when it comes to perceived modernity or development within African tradition as practiced within a Canadian society? A possible answer could be ego. "Taking control of one's own destiny [heritage] reflects ego," according to Mark Sunkett in his book, <u>Mandiani Drum and Dance, Djembe Performance and Black Aesthetics from Africa to the New World</u> (1995, p. 161). There is definite agreement in all camps that the preservation of African culture in all forms, and in every method possible, is important to shape the identity and destiny of Diasporic Africans in a highly industrialized western society. This importance is magnified and evident in the rise of African-derived names among children of African descent since the early 1960's or before. Names like Kwabena and Quammie from Ghana, and N'dere from Uganda, are a few samplings. Coupled with African-derived names there are also the self-imposed titles such as African American, African Canadian and Afrocentric that are all used to replace the charged title "Black" for Diasporic Africans. In the light of this rising "consciousness" about heritage, African tradition is a definite link to the "motherland", and any and all perceived dilutions to that tradition, no matter how well researched or culturally sensitive, could be met with strong resistance.

However before proceeding, let me establish a basic framework for considering the words "tradition" and "traditional," which will create a platform for discussion within this inquiry. Webster's dictionary provides that tradition is "the unwritten or oral delivery of information, opinions, doctrines, practices, rites, and customs, from father to son, or from ancestors to posterity; the transmission of any knowledge, opinions, or practice, from forefathers to descendants by oral communication, without written memorials." While traditional is defined as "pertaining to tradition; derived from tradition; communicated from ancestors to descendants by word only; transmitted from age to age without writing; as, traditional opinions; traditional customs; traditional expositions of the Scriptures." *(1996)*

In 2002, in interviews with Quammie Williams, Patrick Parson, and Vivine Scarlett, all Toronto-based artists, and Sis Robin Hibbert from Buffalo, New York, two questions were posed. The first was, "Is there a difference between tradition and traditional and if there is, what is that difference?" The second question was "How do you consider African dance when it is performed on a concert stage?" There was a unanimous response to the first question, that there was no difference between

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tradition and traditional; however there were varying viewpoints on the second question. These viewpoints ranged from Patrick Parson's opinion that "once the dance is placed on a stage and given a colonial gaze it cannot be considered traditional" to Quammie Williams and Vivine Scarlet commenting "it doesn't really matter where it is done once the aesthetics and context are retained, it should be considered traditional." Looking at both these questions with Webster's definition whereby tradition refers to "practice" and traditional to "outcome or product of this practice," both points of view are well founded, but what about modernity or development within tradition? Among Diasporic Africans in Canadian society this question or concept seems to have two fevered camps, for and against, while Hibbert, a traditionalist at heart, is in strong support of development as long as it is rooted in traditional values.

The goal of this inquiry is not to convert traditionalist thinking to modernity. Traditionalist's point of view creates the platform on which the development of A-Feeree – The Physical Language stands. However, it is important that users of A-Feeree understand the viewpoint from which it has developed, acknowledging that it complements tradition, and is supported by traditional values. David Gross, in his book, <u>*The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity*</u>*, wrote: "tradition is a particular type of behaviour, a way of thinking about oneself, a way of regarding others or interpreting reality. All of these are examples of tradition when they are active and alive in the present, even though they originated in the past." (1940, p. 8) A-Feeree is responding to reality. It was developed with the goal of enhancing the physical accessibility to the African and African Diasporic dance culture. T*radition is not just bygone practices that should be preserved for the purpose of heritage. If made relevant in the present we may be able to discover something meaningful about contemporary life and problems through tradition. *My vision for African and African Diasporic dance culture transcends personal heritage that is stuck within a traditional framework that does not reflect present realities. This vision moves within tradition and, although A-Feeree is not a traditional method for the means of heritage, it is a language towards a better understanding of traditional movement within its history and context to a larger African social structure.*

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