Learning Through Drum and Dance

"It is inside dancing and playing that laughter prolongs"  
[Dagomba proverb]

Approximately forty students participated in the course, "Music and Dances of Ghana," a four week intensive study of the traditional drumming, dancing and singing originating in the West African nation of Ghana, which was held during summer (1991) at York University in Toronto. The instructors, Abraham Adzenyah and Helen Mensah, taught, respectively, drumming and dancing. They had shared responsibilities for the teaching of traditional songs. Ghanaians by birth, both were, for several years, leading members of the internationally renowned Ghana Dance Ensemble before leaving it to pursue professional careers and to further their education in the United States.

Perhaps our biggest challenge, as participants in the course, was the fact that we were taught holistically, through an oral tradition. Helen avoided giving verbal instructions, for example, as she preferred to demonstrate, physically. Students could observe and follow until they were comfortable. Only when they felt that problems occurred did she stop to analyze the movements verbally. Helen also preferred to show entire dances or large sections from the dances instead of analyzing their individual steps in sequence, as often occurs in Western dance instruction. Abraham also taught in a holistic manner. He insisted, for example, that all of the drummers (which varied in numbers from 5-12 depending upon what piece was being played) continue playing while they taught individual parts. This technique seemed to lessen tension on the individual being taught and improve his/her capacity to learn complicated rhythms.

The instructors' heuristic methods seemed to emphasize the group more than the individual. For example, Abraham constantly reminded us that it was more important to coordinate one's playing with that of the group than it was to develop a virtuosic solo technique. In addition, individual parts were usually taught only once by Abraham, thus leaving it up to the students to teach themselves. The instructors also emphasized the fact that in Ghanian society (and in most African societies) most dancers must learn how to drum, and most drummers learn how to dance. Indeed, both Helen and Abraham were exemplary of this tradition as each could easily identify and correct any misfit combinations of rhythmic sound in the group's playing. Eventually, most of our class developed at least some skill in both disciplines.

In addition to the actual drumming and dancing, we watched films depicting traditional Ghanaian culture and had many informal discussions with our instructors, thus enabling us a vantage point for the customs and values of the various traditional and contemporary cultures which exist in Ghana.

Not surprisingly, both instructors included what I would call 'Western' methods in their teaching of the summer course. These methods were, however, treated less favourably by the instructors and seemed, in fact, to have been used partly in order to conform with the academic environment of York University. For example, the printed handouts we received (which included modern interpretations of the origins of Ghanaian dance forms, a discography/bibliography and an "Introduction to African Music") were seldom referred to by the instructors, and therefore seemed more supplementary than essential to their teaching. We were also allowed to take notes. The instructors preferred, however, that if we felt we simply had to copy something down, it should be the words of the songs and not the melodies and rhythms of the music, as copying the latter, they thought, would 'confuse us even further' (They were right, of course.) Abraham, who, incidentally, never writes down the music he composes, often jokingly referred to written notations as 'chicken scratches.'