

“The Clave Comes Home”: Salsa Dance and Pan-African Identity in Ghana

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Abstract: While salsa dance is popularly, and now globally, understood to be a symbol and expression of Latin identity, its adoption in non-Latin contexts has produced new meanings and cultural configurations. This is particularly the case in West Africa, where salsa is not only catching on among urban youth, but is becoming understood and approached from an African perspective. This article explores the ways in which salsa dance in Ghana serves as an innovative, embodied expression of a contemporary, pan-African identity. This is seen in Ghanaian dancers’ ideological reinvigoration of salsa’s African history and in the physical incorporation of local styles and presentations. Salsa in Ghana is recast through global networks, which in turn contributes to its global character while refashioning it to better suit local motives and desires. Thus, rather than emphasizing salsa’s African roots alone, dancers in Ghana equally engage with the complex *routes* of the dance.

Résumé: Alors que la danse salsa est populairement et globalement comprise comme un symbole et une expression de l’identité latine, son adoption dans des contextes non latins a produit de nouvelles significations et configurations culturelles. C’est particulièrement le cas en Afrique de l’Ouest, où la salsa ne se contente pas seulement de gagner la jeunesse urbaine, mais elle est également devenue comprise et approchée d’un point de vue africain. Cet article explore les manières dont la danse salsa au Ghana sert en tant qu’expression innovante et personnalisée d’une identité panafricaine contemporaine. Ceci est évident non seulement dans la revitalisation idéologique des danseurs ghanéens de l’histoire africaine de la salsa, mais aussi dans leur incorporation physique des styles et des présentations locales.

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Simultanément, les danseurs de salsa au Ghana remanient le genre, contribuant à son caractère global tout en le remodelant pour mieux correspondre aux significations et désirs locaux. Ainsi, les danseurs du Ghana, plutôt que de mettre l'accent sur les racines africaines salsa seules, s'engagent également avec les nuances complexes de la danse.

Keywords: Salsa dance; youth culture; cosmopolitanism; pan-African identity; Ghana

Introduction

I first discovered salsa dancing as a graduate student in anthropology in 2002. I had just returned from extensive fieldwork in southeastern Nigeria, which included a lengthy and intense initiation into a Mami Wata healing society.¹ Afterward, one might say that I was particularly open to trying new things. My initiation challenged me to move my body in new ways and required that I dance to the rhythms of the ekwe.² *Tap, tap . . . tap, tap, tap.* Little did I know I would hear those same rhythms again back home being tapped out on the clave in the Latin music I would come to love. *Tap, tap . . . tap, tap, tap.* Just as the Igbo drummers in Nigeria rely on the ekwe as the foundation for their rhythms, so to do Latin percussionists build upon the simple strength of the *clave*, or key. And while it is this key that holds the musicians together, it is equally important for the dancer. In the back room of a small coffee shop in southern Illinois, I watched as dancers moved their bodies to the salsa music pumping from the DJ's speakers. Through those speakers, I heard rhythms I first learned to embody in a small village in Nigeria.

The connection between African and Latin rhythms became even more apparent to me on a recent field stint in Ghana. Just before my departure from the U.S., I conducted a quick online search of salsa dance opportunities and stumbled across a few news clips and blogs that mentioned a weekly salsa event at an upscale hotel in the heart of Accra's embassy district. Every Wednesday night, urban middle-class youth from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds swarmed to this outdoor venue to receive lessons and show off their moves poolside. While most of the music and moves were familiar to me (songs by Celia Cruz and El Gran Combo and dance steps such as the cross-body lead, sombrero, and revolving doors), there was still something distinctly Ghanaian about it.

Salsa dancing in Ghana can be viewed as a rather apt example of what Robertson (1995) refers to as "glocalization," a term that originally described a Japanese marketing strategy in which global goods and services are marketed to adapt to local environments. But this term is also helpful in understanding the complex processes of cultural globalization. By combining the terms "global" and "local," it reminds us that the local and the global are not separate, but rather are intertwined and shape one another, one acting

upon the other. As Hannerz points out, the local is “an arena where various people’s habits of meaning intersect, and where the global, or what has been local somewhere else, also has some chance of making itself at home” (1996:28).

Indeed, salsa music and dance, with their European, African, Caribbean, and Nuyorican influences and worldwide travel, are perhaps better understood as having *routes* rather than *roots* (Clifford 1997). What I am most interested in for the purpose of this essay is the movement and return of salsa dance to West Africa and how this dance form subsequently undergoes a process of “domestication” by “incorporating fragments from a multiplicity of sources into local stylistic configurations and social strategies” (Barber & Waterman 1995). We see this not only in Ghanaian *salseros*’ (salsa dancers) ideological reinvigoration of salsa’s African history, but also in the practical incorporation of local styles and presentations. Moreover, salsa is *rerouted* through global networks, which in turn contribute to its global character while at the same time refashioning it to better suit local motives and desires. Thus, salsa in this West African context is conceptualized as new and old, global and local, modern and traditional—a global dance with a local heritage.

I discuss these processes using White’s (2002) notion of “rooted cosmopolitanism” (as a more nuanced example of the glocal in this context) and the concept of “homecoming” (Collins 2002) to understand how, in addition to emphasizing salsa’s African roots, dancers in Ghana equally engage with the complex routes of the dance. I suggest that this reclamation of salsa dance by Ghanaian *salseros* is steadily contributing to a larger pan-African identity—one that draws upon a global African dance aesthetic and consequently publicizes and celebrates Africa’s contribution to the dance world.

I draw primarily on my field research as a participant (dancer)-observer in Ghana from 2008 to 2010 and over ten years of experience dancing and teaching salsa in the U.S. Dancing was an integral part of this research, as it allowed me to get a better sense of individual dance styles and techniques, not to mention greatly aiding me in becoming accepted as a member of the salsa dance scene, particularly in Accra. During my fieldwork in Ghana, I visited nine different formal and informal salsa venues and events in Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast cities, where I spoke with dancers, spectators, event organizers and hosts, DJs, and competition judges. I conducted fourteen formal interviews with individuals who had been dancing salsa for at least a year and were well established in the salsa scene in these cities. I also spoke informally with more than forty other dancers during and after dance events and conducted content analysis of Ghanaian salsa promotional sites, videos, and social media.

The Transculturation of *Tumbao*

The term “salsa,” as it is used today, describes a complex blend of Afro-Cuban rhythms that were introduced to New York City in the 1950s by Puerto Rican

and Cuban immigrants.³ It was not until the late 1960s, however, that artists and producers began using the term to popularize and market these sounds. Today these rhythms are deeply associated with Latin American identity both within and outside the U.S. While its exact Latin origins are still under debate (Duany 1984; Boggs 1992; Sánchez-González 1999), the African roots of salsa music have never been contested. West African bell and drumming patterns made their way to Cuban sugar plantations through the transatlantic slave trade, where they would eventually form the foundation for Cuban popular music (Daniel 1995; Roberts 1999). The basis of Cuban rhythm comes from the clave, which plays out a two-three or sometimes three-two contrast within a two-measure phrase. A direct descendant of West African rhythms, the rhythm known as clave mimics the call-and-response format often typical of West African musical patterns (Roberts 1998).

Scholars and musicians agree that salsa is a syncretic musical form, a “mixture of mixtures” (Duany 1984) that reflects the African diasporic influence on the Caribbean as well as the immigration of Latinos to the urban United States. Yet this globalization of rhythms has not stopped here. Afro-Latin music found its way back to Africa in the early 1950s, where the advent of the gramophone had rumbas, mambos, and merengues filling the soundscapes of homes and clubs throughout the continent (Collins 1992; Shain 2002, 2009; White 2002).

While there is an ample amount of scholarship on the transculturation of Cuban popular music (Padilla 1990; Aparicio 1998; Roberts 1999; Waxer 2002; Chasteen 2004), we cannot forget that with the music comes the dance.⁴ Salsa dance is just as much a “mixture of mixtures” as the music it celebrates. The distinctive steps and styles that make up salsa as a dance complex have been shaped by and reflect a long history of European, African, American, and Caribbean influences. For instance, the uprightness of the upper body and the partner embrace between male and female are both legacies of European dance traditions (Gottschild 1998; Daniel 2002), whereas the pelvic motion, flexed knees, and polycentric movements that characterize salsa dance draw from an African dance aesthetic (Gottschild 1998; Thompson 2002).⁵ The conga rhythm, or *tumbao* as Afro-Cuban musicians refer to it, can be expressed through the dancing body, as expressed in Celia Cruz’s popular merengue song “La Negra Tiene Tumbao” (The Black Woman Has Rhythm). A good salsa dancer must follow the clave and have *tumbao*.

Scholarship has pointed to the role of salsa in the creation, expression, and elaboration of Latin American identity. It has been argued that salsa among Puerto Ricans and other Latino communities “represents a new phase in the evolution of Afro-Hispanic culture: that of the urban industrial working class (Duany 1984:206). And while it alludes to urban life in *el barrio*, it also conjures up images of the *jibaro*—the hard-working peasant farmer in rural Puerto Rico—and *el monte*, the raw, rural mountains of Cuba where African slaves often fled when escaping the plantation. It has been described as an expression of liberation from a colonial past (Berrios-Miranda 2004)

and of the creolization processes that have shaped this past (Duany 1984). In examining the dance in Los Angeles night clubs, Garcia (2008) approaches salsa as a performance of pan-Latin identity, or pan-*Latinidad*, that blurs class and geographic boundaries on the dance floor and produces a global Latin identity.⁶

As it takes on a more global form, salsa is invested with new meanings that reflect the social and political contexts in which it is performed. For example, as racial politics continued to marginalize Hispanics as nonwhite in the U.S., Puerto Rican youth began to deemphasize their Spanish heritage in favor of an African ancestry, one that was celebrated in salsa's rhythms and movements (Blum 1978). The Afro-Cuban music that formed the foundation for what was to become salsa has been embraced by Cubans as an identity marker representing an authentic past and a response to colonization, slavery, and U.S. imperialism (Moore 1997).

Today salsa has been described as the "biggest international dance craze since the advent of rock n' roll in the 1950s" and the prominence of tango in the 1920s (*The Economist* 2008). It also competes heavily with hip-hop as one of the most popular, and some would argue most commodified, dance forms in the world. One can find salsa in Japan, China, and Canada, all over Europe and Latin America, in the Caribbean and Australia, and in parts of the Middle East. Surprisingly, there has been very little discussion or research on the spread and growth of salsa dance in West Africa—the very site that has been argued to be the birthplace of the clave rhythm (Washburne 1995; Roberts 1998).

The Ghanaian Salsa Scene

It is hot, dark, and smoky inside the Vanity nightclub nestled deep in Accra's Osu district. Known for its upscale clubs and restaurants that cater to middle-class Ghanaians, expatriates, and tourists, Osu is a symbol of cosmopolitanism and the perfect place to host a salsa venue. The club is packed with young Ghanaian men and women of various ethnicities—Ga, Ewe, Ashanti, and Fanti—as well as some Japanese, American, and British visitors. Many are partner dancing on the small, crowded sublevel dance floor in the center of the club. Others lean over the railings to observe from above or rest at the bar cooling their bodies in front of the air conditioners. The DJ keeps the music flowing from his glassed-in sound booth in the back and moves seamlessly from salsa to merengue to bachata to soukous. Every couple takes full advantage of their small space on the floor. Feet are spinning, hands are caressing; posing and framing and skirts and hair defy gravity.

All of the fourteen Ghanaian dancers with whom I conducted formal interviews attested that the salsa dance scene in Ghana began around 1997. Nine of these dancers attributed the birth of this scene to a specific Jamaican-born woman, Patsy, who began teaching salsa to friends in her home while working for the U.N. in Ghana. As interest began to grow, she and a small group of instructors founded a salsa club and began offering

salsa lessons at a local restaurant. Later in 2001, one of her students began a student salsa club at the University of Ghana, Legon, and soon more and more clubs began to offer salsa dancing and lessons as social events. Today salsa clubs and venues can be found all over Accra and in other major cities such as Kumasi, Tema, and Cape Coast (see figure 1).

Salsa is steadily traveling beyond the borders of the city as some dancers choose to teach it at local schools in their home villages or perform at local social events. Ghana is also credited with having planted the seeds of Nigeria's salsa dance scene in 2004, as it is a Ghanaian who claims to have been the country's first established salsa instructor and organizer.

Salsa dance did have a prior presence in Ghana, emerging in the 1970s as a later addition to the colonial legacy of Western ballroom. Four of my interviewees claimed that their parents had learned some salsa through ballroom instruction, but argued that salsa tended to be limited to formal settings and was not as popular as it is today. According to twenty-four-year-old Eddy, an Accra dancer for four years, "Salsa never looked like this [pointing to

Figure 1. A couple dances salsa at a nightclub in Kumasi, 2010



the salsa crowd at a nightclub in Osu district]. It's much more popular today. So many people are dancing salsa and it's part of the nightlife here, you know, the club scene. You don't see that with ballroom. It wasn't as accessible back then."

Today, the informal, improvisational style of street salsa has merged with the standardization and technical focus that comes with ballroom. Thus, dancing salsa is viewed as a skill, one that requires focus, commitment, and creativity. Not only have Ghanaian salseros taken on the challenge of salsa dance—they are quite good at it. For some serious dancers salsa may open up new professional paths. One dancer, frustrated with the lack of corporate sponsorship in Ghana, moved to Nigeria in 2009 to work for a Latin dance studio. Other dancers give dance lessons or DJ on the side to supplement their daytime jobs as marketers, bank tellers, and cell phone reps or in addition to their university studies.

Ghanaian youth have a long history of incorporating global music and dance forms into local innovations, a term I refer to elsewhere as "inventive dance traditions" (Carwile 2016). For instance, *kpanlogo*, a contemporary dance of the Ga ethnic group, combines earlier Ga dance forms with accentuated hip movements inspired by Elvis and 1950s American rock and roll (Collins 2002). Hiplife, perhaps one of the most popular forms of music and dance to emerge in Ghana since the 1990s, blends the rap performance and stylized beats of American hip-hop with previous forms of Ghanaian highlife music (see Shipley 2012). Salsa dance in Ghana also involves a complex blending of foreign and familiar—the familiar easily allowing for new locally informed innovations while its foreign qualities provide room for flexibility and new possibilities, including the construction of globally informed identities.

Before discussing the ways that Ghanaians make salsa familiar with their own local histories and aesthetics, I first trace the most popular global routes of salsa in Ghana. The transnational movement of people across borders (ethnoscapes) as well as social interactions and exchanges through Internet technologies (technoscapes) (Appadurai 1996) are two primary ways in which salseros mediate between the local and the global. In the process, they earn cosmopolitan status and membership in a larger global dance community. By participating in salsa competitions, hosting salsa congresses, and posting their own videos on the Internet, Ghanaians reroute salsa, contributing to the constant flows of salsa knowledge and aesthetics.

Global Corporealities: Salsa's Routes and Reroutes

The ways in which African salseros are introduced to, learn, and perhaps even come to teach salsa reflect the inherently global nature of the dance. For Ghanaians, salsa is easily constructed as "modern" because it comes from outside—through foreign intermediaries, global technologies, and institutions that have historically been presented as pioneers of modernity and progress (i.e., churches, universities, and colleges). Ten of the fourteen dancers I interviewed referred to salsa as a "global" dance and attributed this to its

foreign qualities, including the fact that the music is primarily in Spanish. They also used the words “foreign” and “global” interchangeably on many occasions. Among advanced dancers who were deeply involved in learning and teaching salsa dance, the use of the term “global” coincided much more closely with Clifford’s notion of *routes*, as it emphasized Africa’s and Latin America’s contributions to the dance as well as its subsequent worldwide movement. For instance, one advanced male dancer in his early thirties who was the host of a weekly salsa event in Kumasi told me, “Yes, salsa is Latin. But you see, I cannot ignore the fact that it has its foundation here in West Africa and that salsa is now everybody’s dance.”

The international encounters brought about by increased travel and migration played a major role in the initial spread and growth of salsa dance. The fact that Ghana’s salsa scene can be traced back to a Jamaican woman working for the U.N. in Ghana attests to this. Ghana’s relationship with Cuba was also mentioned as an important factor in introducing Afro-Cuban music and dance styles. While taking a break between dances at a local salsa venue in Accra, one thirty-year-old Ghanaian who had been dancing salsa for seven years told me about his first exposure:

When I was growing up in the north, there were a lot of Cuban doctors up there. I remember watching them dance salsa but at the time I didn’t know what it was. Later after learning it from a friend of Patsy [the Jamaican woman] I went to a Cuban party here in Accra and they were so surprised to see me dancing salsa better than them that they hired me to give their daughter lessons!

Salsa venues also tend to become transnational spaces where locals from various ethnicities, and tourists and expatriates of different nationalities dance and socialize together. On one Wednesday night at an upscale hotel in Accra, I danced with partners from Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ukraine, Japan, China, the U.S., and Canada. It is during these moments that Ghanaian salseros make important transnational connections with other members of the global salsa community. Twelve of the fourteen dancers I interviewed used Facebook as a way of maintaining these relationships with dancers both locally and abroad.

Indeed, salsa in Ghana currently thrives in an environment of youth and technology.⁷ Having access to these technologies increases salseros’ knowledge of salsa and hence their status within the dance community. Because traditional dance instruction through dance studios and person-to-person lessons is still relatively expensive, the Internet has proved to be an important site for gaining salsa knowledge. All of those I interviewed used the Internet as an important source for educating themselves on salsa moves, technique, trends, and history.⁸ A twenty-four-year-old dance instructor in Accra admitted to me that he had learned most of his advanced moves from salsa instructional sites such as addicted2salsa, YouTube videos, and DVDs sent to him by a Canadian friend. Another dance instructor who

teaches weekly lessons at a nightly salsa dance event in Accra explained, “Just this morning I watched some YouTube videos on my phone of some fresh moves that I really liked. Then I worked on mastering them for a few hours and will teach them in my lessons tonight.”

Ghanaian salseros use the Internet for more than simply receiving salsa information; they also publicly post their own dance videos and in the process, reroute salsa’s global flows. The most common video postings I observed were of individual couples dancing and video pans of dancers on the dance floor at various venues in Ghana. While these videos serve to promote local dancers or salsa events, they are also aimed at a global online audience. One instructor I spoke with frequently posts YouTube videos of salsa dancing in Accra, using titles such as “Ghanaian Salsa,” and “Salsa in Africa.” He told me, “I want the world to know we are here and that we have something to offer the salsa community too.”

While the use of virtual technologies is typical of many salsa communities worldwide, Ghanaian salseros stressed that this was an integral part of a larger process of becoming part of and contributing to a larger salsa community. By tapping into global technologies, one gains access to the global salsa community and by being part of this global dance community one becomes a member of the “global village.”⁹ Damilare, a Nigerian salsero and founder of Salsa Abuja, who was well connected with the Ghanaian salsa scene at the time of our interview, explains,

I don’t just feel like part of a community. I actually belong to the community. Some non-salseros see us as a cultlike group because we are all so close together. Salsa has given me membership into this community. It has opened up the world to me.

As this comment suggests, the sense of community created through the practice of dancing salsa is both local and global. That is, on the one hand there is a localized dance scene in which members know each other on a face-to-face basis and come together frequently to dance, perform, and socialize with each other. On the other hand, there is a much broader sense of community expressed by salseros as well, one that goes beyond the local scene to include members from all over the country, the continent, and the world—an imagined community (Anderson 1991) whose awareness stems from online discourse and occasional interactions with nonlocal dancers.

Burrell and Anderson (2008) note that “in the popular imagination in Ghanaian society, ‘abroad’ is the source of innovation, opportunity and material success.” Dancing salsa fits neatly within these aspirations, as it provides a number of opportunities to make transnational connections and conveys status to those that master this global dance. In his discussion of urban rappers in Ghana and Nigeria, Adenjunmobi makes a similar argument:

The ability of urban musicians to occasionally rap in languages like English and French confirms their familiarity with specific cultural trends

circulating globally in a part of the world where knowledge of such material and cultural resources is a possible indicator of well-being and prosperity. (2004:168)

Thus, learning the “language” of salsa, so to speak, and being part of a larger global salsa network has the potential to place a dancer in a different social category and may offer a new avenue for constructing his or her social identity.

For example, public salsa performances and competitions, like sports and beauty pageants, provide moments for dancers to represent something larger than themselves—for instance, their school, their country, or their continent. Nii Dagadu, events manager for Citi 97.3 FM in Accra and host of Salsa Mania, one of the largest and most popular weekly salsa events in the city, explained: “They go on YouTube and other sites on the Internet and they download videos to learn the moves. They want to be able to compete with the rest of the world.” While I was interviewing Shon, a salsa instructor and performer, one night at a private salsa party in Accra, he reached into his pocket, took out his cell phone, and began playing a video of Eddie Torres, a renowned salsa dancer from New York who developed his own unique style of salsa. “This is my inspiration,” he said, smiling and pointing to the screen. “I want to dance better than him!” To learn, compete, and perform on a global scale is a common goal expressed by many serious salsa enthusiasts, and Ghanaians are no exception.

One key symbol of the global salsa community today is the salsa congress. Much like an academic conference, salsa congresses are large-scale, locally sponsored events that boast all-day workshops and performances with some of the best locally and internationally acclaimed “scholars” in salsa dance. They bring in large audiences and charge hefty registration fees. To be able to host a salsa congress is often seen as direct evidence of a city or country’s membership in the global salsa scene. In 2007 Ghana hosted the West African Nite of Salseros in Accra. While it was by no means as large as a congress, many Ghanaians viewed the event as an integral step toward becoming a major salsa contender and being the first to represent Africa by eventually hosting the first African salsa congress.

This possibility has been met with reserve on the part of some African salseros, who feel that congresses tend to standardize and commercialize the dance too much. In response to a web posting on the possible organization of an African salsa congress, one commentator had a rather scathing critique. The response is worth quoting at length:

Unfortunately, the only thing African about this congress appears to be its location. Like missionaries of an ugly time long past, these salsa dancers will go into the birthplace of salsa and “convert” our brothers and sisters to this new religion . . . West Coast/Los Angeles-style salsa. Instead of dancing from the spirit and soul, they will begin choreographing their movements, incorporating showy acrobatic moves, and

wearing shiny rhinestone tops and skirts. Instead of dancing to please the spirits of the ancestors, their dance will be one aimed at pleasing those in front and back of the recording camera and television set. (RandBSalsa 2007)

This blogger's reaction is clearly concerned with preserving African identity and reflects larger concerns about globalization, commercialization, and the loss of culture and heritage. In many ways it can be read as a call to re-Africanize salsa—to own it on one's own terms by connecting it to earlier dance traditions and the ancestors.

I would argue, however, that it is precisely because salsa is not about ancestors that it is popular today among youth. Several dancers mentioned that they specifically enjoyed being able to dance for the sake of dancing, rather than for the sake of tradition. "We have our traditional dances, yes. But I enjoy being able to move to the music without thinking about it as a social obligation" (Bennett, Ghanaian salsa instructor in Accra, 2009). This is not to say that Ghanaian salseros do not respect their dance traditions; they clearly do and, as I discuss later, they find ways of incorporating traditional dance styles into their salsa practice. What I am suggesting is that because salsa is viewed as an entirely new form of dance that is not structured by or immersed within traditional cultural practices, it provides a more flexible space for the construction of new identities. And because they acknowledge the African origins of salsa's rhythms, West African salseros are less likely to be seen as a threat to African traditions.

Homecoming: Finding the Familiar in Salsa

A number of terms have been used to describe the transatlantic return to the continent of African-derived cultural practices, especially within the realm of music and performance. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy describes the influence on Africa of African American cultural forms, including music, as "feedback loops." Similarly, John Collins (1987) uses the term "jazz feedback" to refer to the fusion of local African music traditions with imported ones. Angeloro (1992) refers to the return of Afro-Cuban music to Africa as "reverse transculturation." The term I find most useful in describing this return, however, comes from Collins's (2007) later study on Goombay, an eighteenth-century drum and dance practice created by Afro-Caribbeans and later introduced to Sierra Leone by freed slaves from Jamaica. In this study, Collins refers to Goombay as a transatlantic "homecoming." This term fits well with my ethnographic findings in Ghana, particularly in the ways that salseros attempt to gain a sense of ownership over the dance.

It is through the concept of homecoming that Ghanaian and other salseros in Africa domesticate salsa on a conceptual level by emphasizing its African origins. It would be a mistake to view salsa dance (and music) as a

simple borrowing; for in the discourse circulating among African *salseros* it is a re-owning. The mission statement of the Latin Dance Club in Nigeria begins, “To bring back salsa into our culture . . .” (LatinDanceclub.com) and the trial website for a possible African salsa congress in Nigeria sports the motto, “The Clave Comes Home . . .” (naijablog.blogspot.com). Just recently, in fact, Ghana hosted the Accra International Salsa Congress. The beginning of their promotional YouTube video begins with “The Latin dance world’s finest dancers are returning to their roots in West Africa.” The concept of homecoming can also be found in Kenya, where a Nairobi blog advertises a poster for the event, which is called Salsafari. After highlighting the international acts, it states, “Our own local talent will also be on stage, showcasing the true roots of salsa” (nairobinow.wordpress.com).¹⁰

As consumers, Ghanaian *salseros* do mimic and borrow from larger global representations of salsa (i.e., particular dance moves or combinations and clothing fashions), yet how they have come to understand and embody the dance is often distinctly different than it would be for other non-Latino dancers.

When salsa is brought to a new setting, often just the steps and turns of the dance are culled. How the total body moves, particularly the posturing and isolations, cannot be easily reproduced, as these corporealities are the product of the years of acquired knowledge and informal practice that an individual garners from being part of a culture. Consequently, those elements that render the dance “authentic” can often never be fully seized. (Pietrobruno 2006:117)

Pietrobruno’s argument certainly holds merit when one is examining the challenges that some non-Latino dancers face when attempting to master salsa and other Latin-based dances;¹¹ this difficulty does not ring true, however, for the *salseros africanos* I spoke with. This is especially the case for the understanding of the clave rhythm and the mastery of the hip movement, or “Cuban motion,” as it is referred to in dance instruction. The vast majority of Ghanaian dancers I spoke with seemed to find these elements of the dance to be trivial; it was the technical aspects of the dance (footwork, turns, and combinations) that required the most attention. With sweat beaded along her forehead, a twenty-nine-year-old woman with whom I spoke briefly at the bar during a weekly event in Kumasi exclaimed, “The hips and steps are not unlike what we already know in our traditional dances. I just had to learn the arm work and how to follow.” Consequently, capturing the authenticity of the dance was not an issue for these dancers, which, in turn, solidified a sense of ownership of and historical connection to the dance.

Upon asking Bennett, a Ghanaian salsa dancer now teaching dance in Nigeria, about his first encounter with salsa, he said, “The first time I saw it I knew I wanted to learn it. It was so different, yet the rhythms were familiar to me.” While many of my informants were attracted to the newness of salsa—or some might say, its foreignness—several (like Bennett) also commented on the ease of learning its rhythms. Although most were initially unaware of

Africa's contribution to salsa, they all became aware of this fact through their dance instruction. This, in turn, solidified their interest and commitment to the dance—it was no longer just a new dance form but a part of their history.¹² With this historical knowledge, many *salseros africanos* develop a sense of ownership of the dance that goes beyond the technique and style. It is this individual development of personal ownership, coupled with the global processes that have introduced salsa to West Africa, which creates a powerful potential for new identities to emerge. Salsa's African beginnings and subsequent global journey can be viewed as a symbol of the continent's contribution to the world of rhythm and dance, one that, as I argue later, solidifies a sense of pan-African identity.

Salsa as “Rooted Cosmopolitanism”

While Afro-Cuban music and dance became a means of celebrating an African identity in the Americas, for Africans it was being used as “evidence of participation in a world of cosmopolitanism that was trying to break free of the confines of racial identity” (White 2002). As White argues in his discussion of Afro-Cuban music's popularity in the Congo, “The success of Afro-Cuban music was due in part to this structural ambiguity, which made it possible to function as a torch of authenticity for some and as a marker of cosmopolitan modernity for others” (2002:668). It may be more accurate, however, to see *salseros africanos* as combining elements of both sides of this structural ambiguity: a blending of emphases on authenticity and “tradition,” on the one hand, and foreign and modern on the other. For urban West African youth, salsa's popularity may have much to do with its potential to simultaneously be global/cosmopolitan and local/authentic: what White (2002) refers to as “rooted cosmopolitanism.”

According to Hannerz, cosmopolitanism is “a state of mind” or “a mode of managing meaning” (1990:238). For an individual to be cosmopolitan, he or she must be open to cultural diversity and have a “willingness to engage with the Other.” Furthermore, Hannerz argues that cosmopolitanism entails a certain competence in and mastery over cultural practices and ideologies different from one's own; the cosmopolitan becomes an *aficionado* of the foreign. This curiosity for the global, however, does not imply a shunning of one's own culture. As White notes,

If there is anything specific about this cosmopolitanism today, it has to do with the extent to which it is rooted in a particular place, the extent to which it is a rooted cosmopolitanism. When Congolese musicians experiment with new dance steps and shouts, they keep their ears very close to the ground, but unlike their competition in the market for “world music,” what they are listening for is rumblings from home. (2002:682)

Thus, “rooted cosmopolitanism” is a way of looking beyond one's borders and perhaps embracing the global while maintaining a local sense of identity

and connection. This is very much in line with the national discourse on modern culture in Ghana, which encourages and promotes a flexible society—one that is open to the adoption of useful (and often foreign) technologies, resources, and cultural practices while still valuing history and tradition (Heath 1997). This flexibility is encapsulated in the Akan concept of *sankofa*, often represented in the symbol of a bird reaching back over its shoulder. The proverbial expression for *sankofa* is “go back and fetch it,” or in other words, look to your past to improve your future. Ghana’s cultural policy elaborates on the importance of this concept for a modern Ghana:

The Concept of SANKOFA in our culture does not imply a blind return to customs and traditions of the past. Sankofa affirms the co-existence of the past and the future in the present and embodies, therefore, the attitude of our people to the confrontation between traditional values and the demands of modern technology, which is an essential factor of development and progress (Cultural Policy of Ghana, cited in Heath 1997:267).

Sankofa encapsulates the complex yet symbiotic relationship between the past (origins) and the present (innovation and progress). Thus, while celebrating salsa’s global associations, Ghanaian *salseros* also engage in attempts to rearticulate and reclaim it in a way that acknowledges its routes as well as its roots.

This position is clearly communicated in the mission statements of West African dance associations. For instance, *Salsa Naija*, a Lagos-based Nigerian dance organization, describes itself as “a social network dedicated to promoting, connecting and uniting all lovers of salsa and other Latin dance groups with shared ideas all around the world spiced with Nigerian Flavor. It showcases on an international scale the vibrant and highly sophisticated salsa dance in Nigeria to the rest of the world” (danceandartalive.com). Having “highly sophisticated” salsa dancers is clearly a mark of mastery and global competence, yet it is still “spiced” with “Nigerian flavor” before it is recast to the world. *Salsa Naija* not only has a strong connection with salsa clubs and organizations in Ghana, but it markets itself outwardly through its Facebook site. Consequently, West African salsa communities, like many of their global counterparts, view the world as their audience as they perform on their own local stage.

In addition to reconceptualizing and reinterpreting salsa to fit local expectations and desires, there are also plenty of ways in which Ghanaians domesticate salsa dance on a practical level to conform to the local milieu. For instance, every summer the Ga people of Accra celebrate *Homowo*, a traditional harvest festival.¹³ Over three summers that I conducted research in Accra, one outdoor salsa event located in the heart of Ga territory was consistently canceled in accordance with the festival’s ban on public drumming and noisemaking. Salsa events are now being hosted as a way to celebrate national holidays such as Independence Day and are performed in key places such as the National Theatre. In Accra, I observed salsa performed at beauty pageants, local parties, and church socials and was told by

one Nigerian interviewee in 2008 that he had even seen salsa music and dance at a funeral just outside of Lagos.

Ghanaians' domestication of salsa is perhaps even more obvious, however, in the blending of salsa music and dance with local music and dance styles. For instance, while the music played at salsa venues in Ghana is quite similar to what might be played by DJs in the U.S.—from Marc Antony and other Top 40 artists to classic songs by El Gran Combo and Oscar D' Leon—I did notice that the popular Senegalese salsa band, Africando, was played frequently throughout the night at many of the Ghanaian events I attended. Africando is a wonderful example of the recuperation of Afro-Cuban music by Senegalese, and later other African musicians, who blended the early African rumba sounds of the 1940s and 1950s with current Latin sounds to become a staple on any salsa DJ's playlist.¹⁴

Many salsa clubs in the U.S., particularly those geared to a younger crowd of dancers, feature salsa, cha-cha-cha, and the Dominican rhythms of merengue and bachata. Toward the end of the night some DJs will signal a "break time" when dancers can rest or participate in group or line dances. This is most commonly cued when the DJ begins playing reggaeton—an urban music with strong hip-hop elements and rap sung in Spanish—or *merengue electrónico*, a more digitally reproduced version of merengue. In Ghana, the most common break-time music is soukous and *azonto*, with the most popular style of dance being line dances, or "salsa line-ups," as they are locally referred to. Soukous is a popular Congolese dance music known in the 1960s as African rumba.¹⁵ When it is played at salsa venues, dancers quickly separate to form a line as the upbeat guitars and horns kick in. In unison, they proceed with an elaborate memorized choreography of hip shaking, spinning, and a variety of leg movements that challenge even the most competent dancers. The other popular break-time music, *azonto*, is a digitally produced, repetitive-beat music that many Ghanaians consider to be a type of hiplife. *Azonto* has also developed a distinct set of dance moves characterized by the pivoting of one foot accompanied by the pumping of one arm down toward the foot and then up toward the sky, intermingled with a display of pantomime expressions. In all of the nine different salsa venues I observed, *azonto* music was incorporated into line-ups. Some actually fused the dance with salsa steps and, in the case of one venue, gave it the clever label *salzonto* (Carwile 2016).

This fusion of salsa with local dance styles is becoming more and more typical of the Ghanaian salsa scene. The Salsa Close-Up Dance Fiesta, a competitive dance show aired on Ghanaian television, YouTube, and Facebook, kicked off its 2014 season with a whole segment of "salsa fusions" leading up to the first episode. Hosts of the show offer brief lessons on how to dance "salzonto," "sal-highlife," and "salkaida" (a combination of salsa and *alkaida*, a more hip-hop influenced successor of *azonto*). In a previous season of the show, when contestants were asked to create and perform their own fusions of salsa and Ghanaian traditional dances, one couple fluidly moved from the slow, rhythmic music and dance of kpanlogo into a quick salsa while still wearing their kpanlogo attire.

In June 2012, dancers in Ghana finally pulled off the first-ever Accra International Salsa Congress. Although it was organized like other international salsa congresses, with instructors and acts from around the world, some obvious differences included a workshop on African contemporary dance and performances that incorporated local dance traditions into their routines. One couple began their salsa performance with *Atorkor*, a dance originating from Ghana's Volta region, characterized by a strong forward and back motion of the shoulders—emanating from the middle back muscles and shoulder blades—and rhythmic walking with knees bent in a slightly crouched position.

By combining local forms of both dance and music, salsa venues in Ghana open up a whole gamut of possibilities for hybridizing the foreign and familiar. The fact that salsa is already a product of several fusions, and that salsa venues often celebrate a host of Afro-Caribbean rhythms and dances, make it an ideal platform for experimentation with other local forms. As Kwame explains, “[Salsa] is already a mixed-up dance, you know, with so many cultural influences. It's a product of Africa. It's a product of the world. We have no problem adding our own dances and styles to it. Some of our music and dances already have the clave rhythm.”

In the summer of 2010 I attended the Inter-Tertiary Salsa Competition held at the Aviation Social Centre, a fitness and recreational club located in the upscale airport district of Accra. Several couples representing different local colleges and universities performed and competed in front of a large audience and a panel of judges for the title of best salsa team. The overall framework for the event was similar to popular Western television dance shows, with judges, performers, an audience, and local sponsors. Below I include selections from my field notes of this event to highlight some of the ways in which salsa is presented in a cosmopolitan venue but also how dancers attempt to localize and re-root the dance.

While [the event] was scheduled to begin at 7 pm it did not officially start until 9:40—what many locals would humorously refer to as GMT, or “Ghana Man's Time.” Finally it begins, and the ladies start off the event with a salsa line dance. Clad in short dresses made from colorful local Ghanaian printed cloth but accessorized with Western high heels, they roll their hips and slowly lower their bodies towards the floor in unison. The gentlemen follow with their own line dance; they too [are] wearing locally printed shirts that correspond to the dresses of their female partners. This segment was followed by all of the couples performing the same salsa routine and being judged by both the panel and the audience's response. This marked the end of the first half of the competition and as the dancers walk out to change and prepare for the next dance, the audience is entertained by a variety of young local aspiring male singers. Artists take turns with the microphone, singing to a pre-recorded popular song of their choice. While the majority of the performers choose hip-hop songs and dress in an urban attire (one performer wears a coat with “New York” imprinted across the front, sunglasses, ball cap, baggy jeans and three gold chains dangling

from his neck), the second most popular performers were rastas, sporting long dreads and singing Jamaican-inspired dancehall songs. Once these artists finished, local popular music as well as salsa was played to allow members of the audience to come up to the dance floor and showcase their moves.

After intermission, the dancers return to the stage in full Western-style clothing (women wearing tight dresses or short skirts, men wearing dress pants and dress shirts), with the exception of one couple. This couple dons what might be deemed more “traditional” attire—the young man is shirtless and carries a fly whisk while the woman is wearing flats and colorful beads around her waist [see figure 2].¹⁶

The song begins with only slow drums, and the dancers’ movements appeared more typical of indigenous dance styles—they walk slowly toward each other in a crouched position with feet following one rhythm, their backs straight and their shoulders gyrating to a different rhythm. The drums stop and then the music picks up as a full salsa song. The dancers quickly join hands in closed position and begin demonstrating their salsa technique with multiple spins, low dips, overhead tricks, and floor splits—reminiscent of competition-style salsa in the U.S. When they are done, the host brings over the microphone and asks, “So tell me, why did you choose to wear this kind of clothing for your performance?” The young male dancer takes hold of the microphone and replies, “Well, we know that salsa comes from Africa, so we are celebrating our African roots!” His answer earned a loud, supportive response from the audience. As this event came to a close, the host ended by reminding the audience to refer to their Facebook page for salsa events in Ghana. And as the couples came together for one last dance, one could not help but be drawn to one male dancer’s bright red T-shirt that read “Viva Latin.”

Figure 2. A couple incorporates traditional attire and dance styles into their salsa routine for the Inter-Tertiary Salsa Competition in Accra in 2010



This event was loaded with a variety of nuances in foreign and local practices—a glocal happening that asserted Ghanaian identity while demonstrating competency in cosmopolitan forms. As we see with this example, common ways of rooting the dance include integrating local dance forms, music, and costume into performances. It was also quite clear that salsa dance is becoming an important part of urban youth culture; in this case, it was highlighted over other forms of popular culture such as hip-hop or reggae. One Ghanaian *salsero* explained to me that he preferred salsa over hip-hop because it was not associated with the violence and “street” culture of American hip-hop. This suggests that the cosmopolitanism that hip-hop might bring is different from that which comes with practicing salsa. Consequently, West African *salseros* are choosing a type of cosmopolitanism, one that is associated with sensuality and sophistication.

It is also important to note that Africans have always been cosmopolitans. Even prior to the colonial experience, they have looked beyond their borders, expressed curiosity about the Other, and attempted to domesticate foreign images, practices, and beliefs that had been introduced to their lifeworld. What makes salsa different is that while it was cultivated in the U.S., it is not perceived to be an American or Western dance, but an Afro-Latin one. It implicitly conjures up a pan-African experience of displacement, slavery, and racism while at the same time acknowledging and celebrating a pan-African proficiency in rhythm and movement.

Salsa’s Pan-African Movements

Salsa in Ghana provides much more than just a leisure activity or skill; it is more than just a dance. It may aid in constructing a new identity, one in which West African youth can see themselves as part of, and in some cases competitors in, the global world rather than as victims of it. As Berrios-Miranda (2004:168) claims, “The international stature and visibility of salsa liberated millions of urban Latinos from the oppressive illusion that their culture had no value.” Similarly, when African *salseros* discover the African roots of salsa, they come to see themselves as producers and owners of it, as contributing to a global practice. “Salsa is Latin, sure, but it belongs to the world now and we are gonna dance on that stage too!” Kwame claims as he laughs and shimmies his shoulders in his seat. Or, in Damilare’s words, “Salsa is everyone’s business.”

Dance has historically served as a way for white people to racialize and essentialize Africans and other peoples of color, producing and emphasizing distinctions between mind and body and those who think versus those who move (Desmond 1997). Yet if we accept dance as a performance of cultural identity, it seems clear that *salseros africanos* are actively carving out one that is not just transnational but pan-African. This pan-African identity appropriates essentialist constructions of the black dancer, reformulating it into a celebration of roots and rhythms and an embodied knowledge that embraces the homogeneous category “African Dance.”

For one thing that Africans can be certain of is their globally recognized influence and superiority in the realm of music and dance: “Our throats are deep with music, our legs full of dance while our bodies tremor with rhythm. The proper subtitle for Africa should have been ‘Land of music dance and rhythm’” (Chisiza 1962, cited in Primus 1998).

It is through music and dance that Africa “continued and still continues to ‘rule’ while others ‘govern’” (Nettleford 1998: xvi). This assertion was reflected in a lecture I attended at Southern Illinois University by Robert Farris Thompson on the aesthetics of the New York mambo when he looked out at the audience and asserted, “We are all African here.” Whether it is the mambo, the tango, the samba, the jive, hip-hop, krump, flamenco, or the Charleston, Africa has made its strongest presence in the world through rhythms and dancing bodies.

It seems only logical that Africa’s dominance in dance would be embraced as a means to foster a modern pan-African identity. While it may not necessarily be the political and economically critical pan-Africanism espoused by such figures as Nkrumah and Du Bois in the nineteenth century, it is what McCall (2007) refers to as “the Pan-Africanism we have,” one that uses popular culture and the arts to engage in a global discourse about what it means to be African. Salsa, in particular, conveniently lends itself to this agenda as a complex symbol and expression of African history, style, and aesthetic. First, it blends the African emphasis on improvisation with the formal training and partnering that is more common in European dance traditions, reflecting the realities of colonization and slavery as well as the strong perseverance of African dance styles under these pressures. Second, while it is perceived as foreign, it is not perceived to be white or Western—in particular, it represents Latinos and African diasporic populations, including Afro-Latinos, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans. Third, salsa is truly global. This gives it the potential to cut across race and class distinctions while carrying the story of its African legacy to every corner it reaches.

In both Ghana and Nigeria, salsa is already becoming part of processes of nationalism and the creation of larger group identities that cut across ethnic and religious differences. Nigeria’s Latin Dance Club website sports the following statement on its home page: “Salsa is now recognized on the Nigerian market as a barrier breaker, a bonding activity that brings people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age groups, religious beliefs together and offers them the opportunity to share the same passion: Salsa!” (www.thelatindanceclub.com). Indeed, the strong relationship between Ghanaian and Nigerian salseros serves as an example of the pan-African advances being made within the continent already. The West African Nite of Salseros, held in Ghana in 2007, featured dancers from both Ghana and Nigeria, and in 2009 the Ghana Naija Salsa Fiesta played up this relationship even more overtly. Photos of these events were posted on Facebook with comments such as “We are one family. You can’t separate the two salserian nations.” As these quotes attest, salsa brings people together and it requires an openness

to global culture and diversity. More fundamentally, it carries a pan-African message, one that has the potential to link a global community of *salseros africanos*, including African migrants and diasporic communities.

While salsa is taken up steadily throughout the continent, African Americans are also hearing its pan-African calling. Black dancers who frequent salsa clubs in the United States often echo the same sense of familiarity and resonance with salsa that was expressed by the Nigerian and Ghanaian dancers I interviewed. This “diasporic intimacy,” to use Paul Gilroy’s (1993:16) phrase, is played up through organizations such as AfriSalsa, an Atlanta-based association formed in 2004 that specifically aims to educate the populace on the cultural connections African Americans have with salsa. According to Anana Harris Parris, founder of AfriSalsa: “We are more than just descendants of slaves inquiring about a dance. . . . We are Louisianans, Georgians, New Yorkers etc. who are as much a part of the salsa ‘scene’ as anyone else” (quoted in Sheppard 2007).

As more and more individuals become serious about salsa dancing, the more people are becoming aware of its African lineage and the more Africans and African descendants are embracing the dance as part of their own identity. It is becoming more commonplace for salsa instructors and dance organizations to validate this history in their classes and on their websites, which serves to further destigmatize and publicly legitimize salsa’s African legacy. One instructor, while teaching salsa lessons to a group of fifty-plus people at a weekly outdoor venue in Accra, yelled out: “Come on everybody! Salsa is from Africa. The rhythms are from Africa.” He clapped out the clave rhythm. “You will get it!”

Ironically, salsa began as an informal street dance among working-class Latino immigrants in the U.S., although the racial and class connotations associated with salsa have changed somewhat as it has been appropriated by other populations. Salsa in West Africa appears to be more closely linked to the educated, middle-class, urban youth and it tends to be taught, learned, and performed in an urban environment, where cell phone and Internet technologies are readily available.¹⁷ Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that salsa allows cosmopolitans to engage with other cosmopolitans. Yet rather than shrugging off salsa dancing as a practice of the urban privileged, we must recognize that it is this new generation of globally inclined youth that is most engaged in constructing Africa as part of the global world and as a contributor to larger processes of globalization.

Some dancers argue that salsa dance has become too commercialized through salsa congresses, virtual lessons, and corporate sponsorship. As Condry (2006) argues for the case of hip-hop in Japan, however, we cannot overlook the ways in which global music and dance forms are reproduced, translated, and recast in local form.¹⁸ Like many other actors on the global stage, West African *salseros* mold, interpret, and communicate salsa dance in their own unique fashion—incorporating local dance aesthetics and giving them new meanings and connotations. As different populations

take up salsa in different ways, however, *salseros africanos* enjoy a claim to ownership over the dance that other non-Latino groups do not. This has shaped the ways they endow it with new meanings—in this case, salsa is modern, global, and African.

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Notes

1. "Mami Wata," pidgin English for "Mother Water," is a generic term used to refer to a popular, capricious female water spirit who confers health, wealth, and fertility. She is often honored by dance associations throughout southern Nigeria.
2. The ekwe is a hollowed-out wooden block that is struck with a thick piece of wood. It is a staple percussive instrument among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria and is quite similar to the clave in Latin percussion.
3. The term "salsa" was not popularly used until this time. Most scholars and musicians agree that it is a homogenizing term that lumps together a wide variety of Cuban popular rhythms such as cha-cha-cha, mambo, rumba, and son (Boggs 1992). Tito Puente is reputed to have said, "The only salsa I know is in a bottle. I play Cuban music." Others have argued that the term "salsa" was used by record companies such as Fania to commercialize the music for profit (Gerard & Sheller 1989).
4. Pietrobruno's (2006) book *Salsa and Its Transnational Moves* is currently the most comprehensive and up-to-date ethnographic and theoretical discussion of salsa as a global dance complex. Other scholarship on salsa dance includes Valdivia (2003); Skinner (2007); Bosse (2008); and Garcia (2012).
5. See Carwile (2016) for a more detailed discussion of this Africanist aesthetic in salsa dance.
6. Although she argues that salsa dance helps to create a unifying Latino/a identity, albeit a temporary one, Garcia maintains that salsa performance highlights and emphasizes gender differences.
7. In 1995 Ghana became one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to establish full commercial Internet access.
8. All of the fourteen dancers I interviewed accessed dance videos using their cell phones, while six mentioned visiting local Internet cafes. It was most common for this video consumption to occur individually and then be passed on through group lessons or by working with an individual partner.
9. The term "global village" is used popularly in both Nigeria and Ghana as a way to talk about globalization and the ever-increasing interconnectedness of rural and urban through telecommunications and travel. It is also often equated with "modernity," as is evident in the following statement made to me by a member of a nongovernmental organization in Lagos in 2002: "The world is a global village and we cannot be left behind."
10. The safari, a symbol of Kenya's diverse wildlife, profound landscapes, and colonial history is used as a platform for advertising this salsa event, a sort of self-exotification that combines notions of African authenticity with Western orientalist stereotypes. This is not unlike the popular global trend, now adopted by African salseros, of representing salsa as an overtly sexual dance, an African aspect of the dance once deemed vulgar and lewd by colonizers, missionaries, and plantation owners, yet now intensified in such a way that it is not uncommon for salsa dance to be introduced with adjectives like "hot," "sultry," "sensual," or even "dirty."
11. In my own teaching of Latin dances such as merengue, salsa, cha-cha-cha, and bachata, it was very common for Caucasian students to struggle, primarily with the hip movement of these dances. This is not to say that they did not find other aspects of the dance challenging, but countless students would jokingly mention that their difficulty with the hip movement was related to the fact that they were white.

12. In the liner notes of his popular Afro-Latin album *Mambo Yo Yo*, the Congolese musician Ricardo Lemvo writes about this sense of connection to the Cuban songs he was exposed to as a child. He reminisces, “At the time, I did not understand the lyrics, but the rhythms, the melody and the spirit of the music touched me deeply. . . . In their songs I heard the drums and voices of Africa” (1998:4).
13. While the *Homowo* festival does not officially begin until August, it must be preceded by a monthlong ban on drumming and loud public noise. This serves as a resting period for the ancestors and a time for purification as a way to prepare for a good harvest.
14. Salsa remixes of American R&B and pop songs by Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Luther Vandross were also quite popular in Accra. A well-known salsa DJ in Accra explained to me that this was a popular practice because of the language barrier. Because most salsa songs are in Spanish, Ghanaians enjoyed being able to understand and sing along to the music in English. I would also add that American pop songs are held in high regard and signify a connection with the larger global music scene.
15. At one venue, a popular soca song had become one of the official songs for the line dance segment. Soca is another globally complex music that developed from the calypso of the Caribbean and now incorporates Latin, reggae, and other forms of popular music.
16. Fly whisks, usually made of animal hair, are common in traditional regalia throughout Africa and often serve as a symbol of authority and status. Waist beads are also popular in traditional female dance attire and, although they may carry a variety of meanings, they are considered to be a feminine adornment, especially during dances.
17. The youth that I refer to are not necessarily elites, nor are they strictly urban in their cultural leanings. Most are still very much tied to their home villages and lineage traditions and frequently traverse urban and rural life in a variety of ways.
18. For a discussion of the domestication of American rap music into what is now known as “hiplife” in Ghana, see Oduro-Frimpong (2009) and Shipley (2012).