

“Take the Dust off my feet”

Body and Movement Experience with Dance Students in Uganda

Annette Schwalbe (2003)

published in: e-motion, Vol.XIV No.5, ISSN 1460-1281

Thinking back on my first year of teaching dance students at Uganda’s Makerere University one thing stands out: the incredible achievement of these young people many of whom come from poor backgrounds and have taken a long and arduous path to arrive at the university – or to borrow their voices - “...the mighty Makerere!”. This expression stems from the regularly recited university anthem, and the sight of the students standing upright and tense with attention, singing the anthem at full voice resonating with pride, ambitious aspirations and boundless hope for a better future, still sends shivers of awe through my body.

Anthony’s story is representative for many of my students: “There was very little money in our family to take us to good schools; ‘Where there is a will there is a way’. Together with my mother we started devising means of how to get money to take me to a good school. She had nowhere to get money because she never went to school so she had no job, but we went on asking the people in our village who had some land and wish to employ someone to dig it. God willing, we got such work...and at the end of the holiday [I] managed to join a better school. This school was far from home, I had to walk a journey of four miles. I had no bicycle to ride, but I managed by foot and reached school on time. From this point, I became a responsible citizen – I know how to manage my time...I walked four miles in one and a half hours. When I was about to sit my Primary Leaving Examinations (1989) I was told by some friend that our family was bewitched, and there was no way one of us could become successful in education. After having had such a discouraging comment, I was instead determined to disprove it, worked so hard to oppose that, and finally, here I am: at the University!!”

Anthony is part of the group of first year BA dance students that I have been teaching over the past year in body and movement awareness, and movement observation skills. Both classes were conceived as a preparation to the second and third year foundation classes in Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). In the past, Dance Therapy had been part of the dance programme and was taught mainly from the perspective of African traditional healing rituals by the now Senior Dance Lecturer, an accomplished artist and African anthropologist. Not dissimilar from our approach, Dance Therapy was described in the Faculty Handbook as an examination of “the relationship between the body and the mind, and how dance can be a treatment to the mentally handicapped and slow learners”. When I became a faculty member, I took over this long dormant part of the BA and MA Dance course, and devised the above classes in consultation with my two Ugandan and one American colleagues.

There is much to write about this whole process, and also about my experience of teaching the introduction to DMT in the second year and my attempt to let the heritage of Ugandan dance and movement rituals flow into this class. In this article, however, I want to focus on the first year students

as they have opened my eyes and my heart to a section of Ugandan society that seems to embody at its most complex and vibrant the aspirations of this country. This group of students consists of eight young men at the age of 21 to 28. Over the year, it was fascinating to observe the transition these young men made from being recent school-leavers to becoming fully established university students. A transition that marked a significant step on their determined journeys away from their rural villages to join a new community of the young and successful in the capital of Kampala. Most poignantly, it is a journey away from poverty and political chaos which was mapped out in front of us as we explored their background, our present interactions, and their dreams of the future through our bodies and movements.

Their own life stories written by the students from the perspective of bodily experiences, movement memories and movement observations during the course have provided the bulk of direct quotations in the following text, if not marked otherwise. I have obtained the permission of my students (names changed) to use excerpts of their body-stories, and it is my aim to let them speak for themselves as much as possible.

Born into a brutal world

“...guns are rocking and he’s coming into the world? Well, let’s make a present of this AK47 [machine gun] to him”. That was the comment that soldiers of Amin’s regime made to my mum at the roadblock on her way from labour. It was wartime and I was making my entry in the universe. When the war intensified, she refused to run and take refuge as many people were doing, and handed everything to God. A month later, the Field Marshall Idi Amin was dethroned but the situation remained unstable. I started crawling at an early age, but speaking came rather late – did I want to run away from the guns?” (Moses)

Although most of the students’ lives have only briefly touched the period of Idi Amin’s brutal dictatorship (1971-79), the memory of that time is part of the fibre that weaves the fabric of Ugandan family, community and national history. It is buried alive in the soil of the city where an innocent-looking stretch of land with lush-green banana trees is a constant reminder of the days where desperate citizens would search these very grounds for the tortured corpses of their family members. It ticks in time with Kampala’s clock-tower where the father of a university colleague was hung with many others. It stares at me with the stony-grey face of Kampala’s international conference centre which housed Idi Amin’s torture chambers. It screams unheard at me in the comment of a young Ugandan man who I met at a dinner party and who I missed saying to me during a conversation about my work as a therapist: “And what would you say to a 35-year old orphan?” It was a friend who later retrieved this comment for me and at the same time explained that both parents of this man had been brutally killed by Amin’s people.

...and all the while I spend time chatting with some of my students in the cafeteria, sharing a fried piece of the very banana fruit; everyday we all sit in the boisterous traffic that pushes itself around the clock tower, and on Sundays Uganda’s well-known dance company ‘Ndere Troupe’, run by one of the MA students, delights the audience of children and adults on the lawn in front of the international conference centre. More significantly: while I am writing this, the news reach Uganda that Amin is apparently lying on his death bed in Saudi Arabia.....I wonder what is going on in the minds of the Ugandan people and particularly my students and colleagues at this very moment.

Unfortunately, trauma and deprivation did not stop with Amin's defeat and escape into exile. The aftermath was marked by continued political chaos, economic collapse and civil war under the regime of Obote and Okello: "Once again, the country slid into chaos and gangs of armed bandits roamed the cities, killing and looting. Food supplies ran out and hospitals could no longer function." (Finlay & Crowther, p.397) This lasted until 1986, and it formed the context for the students' early life and body experiences:

"It is said....that by the time I was born, it was as if I was prematurely born because I was tiny. However, they just gave me enough time and my growth was promising. Again, by that time (1983), Uganda was hit by a guerrilla war up to 1986, and this meant that for three years, I grew up in an unsettled situation (refugee situation). As if my problems couldn't just go away, after this guerrilla war, our district (Mpigi) was invaded by the notorious killer disease measles. This threatened my life in 1987, and what I am assured of is that it affected my life up to now. James who had begun to put on some weight, slimmed to his previous size. And from then up to now, I am somehow slim." (James)

The fight against an epidemic and the direct experience of the diseases' devastating impact on the body seemed to have marked others, too:

"A wave of polio hit the area....and I remember how mum used to rush us to hospital now and then for immunisation and we survived the disease. This served to bring us closer. Our friends in the neighbourhood contracted the disease. This helped me realise how bones can cripple, deform and corrupt us. My curiosity brought me in friendship with polio victims to know how they manage. They can't do the cartwheel, somersault, play football or dance. Always in the wheels – and I would do anything at their command....Dad taught me to be natural with them, and not to be a hypocrite, never to stare away at an awful sight of him or her." (Moses)

"One of my earliest movement memories....is at around the age of 6 years when I was forced to go for polio immunisation at the near by primary school of about 2 km....as we went, I properly marched up to the place and I was immunised, but while coming back I just had to crawl from the school for one kilometre, then tried to move, and again crawled up to home." (Sam)

Finally, and most significantly, rural life, parental care, economic poverty and the need for hard physical work played an important role in childhood movement memories:

"I was told by my mum that she had labour pains for a month....On the fourth week...., she was taken to a dispensary nearby... At last, after having enough pain according to her, she gave birth to me on her second day in the dispensary at around 5.00 am on November 6th 1981 and gave me the name Omollo which is given to any baby boy delivered at around 5am in our culture. She said to the nurse: "This baby is so special to me, I won't beat him due to too much pain". My earliest movements were joyous and controlled by my mum because I was given a lot of privileges and special consideration during my earliest growth...I had enough time to be carried around for 8 years, 4 years at home and 4 years to school and then back home on a bicycle. I could climb mango trees on our compound, run in the compound while playing. The privileges given to me made me move boastfully...[and] I experienced my body as very special and delicate....[Later] we lived in a rural mud house with a rough wall and a small forest nearby. The rural rough house made me move with a lot of shyness especially after touring places of high standard....This happened when my father retired from his job and there was no money for me to continue with my [school] bursary and privileges. So, all the privileges vanished due to poverty and even mum began beating me contrary to what she told the

nurses, and then I began moving with a lot of shyness, shock and wonder. As I was growing and my soft life had vanished, me myself wanted to promote it, so I resorted to lumbering in the nearby forest. I moved as if lame due to the heavy logs on my shoulders, I was very shabby and dirty. I looked tired all times and moved like a sick person suffering from bone disease, and I experienced the world as full of misery, hardship, and sweating.” (Philip)

Sitting in the dirt of poverty and humiliation

As the academic year progressed, I became increasingly aware of the significance of dirt in its associations with poverty and inferiority and how it also impacted on our interactions in class. Teaching always takes place in the university squash course where the floor is frequently covered with dust. I had repeatedly been struck by the care the students took to dust off or change their clothes after class. At some point, one of my second year students even came up to me to remove the dust on my own trousers at the end of the class, obviously worried about how I would present myself on campus. I had noted the nervous giggles when I first suggested we all sat down in a circle on the floor to share experiences after a movement exploration. I had also been repeatedly struck by the amount of attention that goes to shoes, immaculate looking and frequently changing in style, and the expression of disbelief and disapproval on the face of Judith, our cleaning lady at home, whenever I left for university in shoes with little dust marks.

Some of my male students also told me once how much they loved high heeled (men’s) shoes as it kept them high above the ground, and I was reminded of Joseph’s passage in his body story: “When I was in primary [school], I would win the best pupil’s award of cleanliness. So every time I would do all was possible to look smart and clean. This continued up to today, because I find myself hating a dirty place...”

When it came to the stage of exploring the meaning and various forms of bodily grounding in class, I was wondering how my own pleasure of bonding with the ground and my concept of grounding derived from Western dance and DMT training would relate to my students’ life and body experiences. I decided to bring my above observations into discussion with the students, and a long exploration of personal and cultural attitudes towards the ground ensued. We did this first through verbal free association and movement expression in the group and then by addressing specifically the experience of contact with the ground in this particular class.

In line with most of the students’ rural upbringing many spontaneous associations with ground were linked to the variety of directly experienced textures such as hard/soft, cool/hot, juicy, rocky, sloped, cracked, bare, slippery, smooth, bushy, jagged, stony, sandy, and edgy. A second strand of associations concerned the fact that the ground “consumed” the dead. This aspect of the ground evoked sadness and desperation about the many family members who have died, whether of dictatorship, war, disease (with malaria and HIV/AIDS figuring at the top these days) or simply old age. Feelings of anger were expressed in the stamping movements of the Ugandan traditional dance ‘Ekizino’ which is accompanied by a song with the chorus line “The ground is your worst enemy!”. But also resignation and acceptance of death as a fact of life were part of the students’ attitudes as reflected in the Ugandan saying “Nobody will ever escape wearing the skin of the ground”. In contrast, a third group of associations was appreciative of the ground as fertile and life-bringing, and deploring of the “parasite-like” exploitation of the natural ground by humans: “Those who misuse the ground don’t understand its importance.” (Ugandan saying)

When I asked the students how they felt when my American colleague and I started teaching them and first asked them to sit and move with their whole body on the floor, I was in for a surprise! The remembered reactions were stronger than I had expected and included feelings of outrage (“I felt it was so unfair!”), humiliation (“I felt humiliated since in our culture, men don’t sit on the floor, only women, but then also with a mat under them.”) and indignation (“When I came to university I expected to find more comfort and cleanliness.”). To my relief, one student said that he had simply accepted it was something new and to another one it felt familiar because of previous contact with the practice of meditation. I was, however, shocked by the reaction of Peter who associated my invitation to move on the floor with military punishment: “It made me think of certain practices in the army, where they make you walk on your knees, crawl and roll in mud for punishment and humiliation.” As he said this, I remembered an instance when my husband and I had driven past Kampala airstrip which, these days, is used mainly as an army parade ground. In the middle of the vast open space, we could see a soldier walking and gripping by the sleeves another soldier moving on his knees at the side of the first one. It had a chilling air of brutality even from the distance and the image stayed with me for a long time.

I was also reminded of stories by other people about how they got punished in school by having their shoes taken away which they experienced as “embarrassing and degrading”. Finally, the comment by a student from a different class brought the issue back to rural life and the desire to leave this life behind. He described how it was common during visits of relatives in the village to have to kneel in front of older, respected people, how tiring and dirty that was, and how this was contributing to many city dwellers’ “dread of going back there”.

With all these associations and connotations I started to fear for my role and impact as a culturally different teacher. The question of going down to the ground in front of each other seemed to bring up not only issues of touching the ambivalent ground of their home soil but also brought to light issues of power and status in relationship with me, a white woman teacher. I was, however, relieved to find that despite the rocky start of the semester and the sometimes ambivalent relationship between us, we had gained some trust and common ground over the past months of working together. As Anthony put it: “At first, we didn’t understand how you as a teacher could take your shoes off when teaching and sit with us on the bare ground, but then we got used to it and thought ‘She is a friendly teacher’.”

After the class of our ground explorations, we went outside to do some movement observations of passing students. Since our usual location – the steps on the side of a building - was in the direct sun, we made out a spot on the lawn. Tongue-in-cheek, I asked the students whether it was okay for them to sit on the bare ground with me and they laughed: “No problem for us, but you should sit on something.” So I took out my plastic folder as seat, kicked away the bone of a dead bird and sat down like a respectable woman and teacher. Currently, the mother of one of the students is weaving a large straw mat which I ordered for us to sit on in class while sharing movement experiences.

Walking like a man

Another insightful exploration in class was that of simple walking and associated body image. We did this at different times over the year through the individual body-stories, exploring the evolutionary and developmental progression to standing and walking, observing and mirroring each others’ ways of walking, improvising with different body attitudes and effort qualities, and observing people walk over campus.

Throughout, a concept of 'gentility' in walk and the ideal of a strong and massive body were dominating the experience of the young men. Gentility was associated in movement with body control, strength, stability, moderate pace and containment of feelings. Not to falter in movement and emotionally was seen as important. This included facial expression and confirmed my frequent encounter of 'dead pan' faces in every-day interactions with Ugandans. 'Gentle' movements were seen as part of being a respectful and respected adult man - a gentleman. It was a significant present-day concern for the students, part of their striving to become successful men in their society:

"Another social aspect is also getting a job after University and this has changed my movements in a way that I need to be neat, that all body parts are covered with clothes, for instance long-sleeved shirts and a pair of trousers, and shoes in order to look gentle....and I do this with strong and gentle movements since I see myself as being old enough and therefore I have to stop shying away from eye contact with other people....To complete almost the whole human life span, I expect to get a partner when working and this in itself has instilled in me confidence to walk like a man who is energetic, because of fears that my partner to be may say that I am weak just by looking at my movements which I feel can betray my future plans. So, to avoid this, my movements have to be of a reasonable step, pace, and gentle....because, as the movement becomes gentle even the behaviour is expected to be of a gentleman." (Sam)

"In my society, gentility is expected from everyone. This mainly emphasises discipline [and respect] especially to the older people. When greeting you have to stop if you have been moving and say hello to that person. So, the business of waving at a person while walking, that "Hey Jambo!" is a shame and doesn't show respect." (Joseph)

Associated with the norm of gentility is a strong, muscular and well-nourished body - something closely linked to the rural way of life: "The flat land mixed with savannah meant that I could move with small steps and at a very quick rate. This became familiar to me and up to now, it framed my way of moving...I used to do very hard activities like fetching water, fetching firewood and digging among others, and therefore my body became resistant to harsh conditions up to present day." (James)

Interestingly, some students deplored the vanishing of their strong and compact bodies in place of a present day slimmer and 'weaker' self and associated this with their move away from village life in pursuit of education:

"On people's comments, they used to say I am very weak and very tall with big eyes, and on my own perspective, I see my body as very weak and tall...[T]his came when I joined secondary [school], which was a boarding school, and there was not any hard work as had been at home. So I found myself very weak even when moving, and not as tall as [before] when I saw myself as if growing every day like a tree." (Sam)

For most, the equation of being fat with being powerful seemed to hold true:

"My parents and relatives used to tell me, and still tell me, that I was a brown and handsome child....that I was fat, energetic and powerful at my birth...saying...'he will be a big man when he is grown up'." (Timothy)

"When I exchange views and ideas with friends about the future, they say I will grow fat because in your family guys are not small like me. So, everyday, I check in the mirror to see if there is a change." (Joseph)

One marked exception to this particular ideal of masculinity was Moses who I suspect to be gay and/or potentially transvestite:

“To my dad I looked a real man – broad shouldered, tall, and he called me “a warrior of the modern”. In a highly patriarchal world, I was reminiscent of his great father who had been a notable and a sub-county chief back in his days. This saddled me with the responsibility and expectations of all ways of being a gentleman. But what!! I stammered, wetted the bed for quite long, stuck to the potty for long.....The world we live in is unfair...I was so close and open to my mum. I admired so much the feminine grace and beauty. I had no regrets with being a man, but I was growing in opposition with the world. My friends were mostly the girls in wheelchairs. People said: “well, he is unconventional”, others “his mum spoiled him”, and the boys: “he doesn’t do things like us”. If there are any refinements, it’s on my body. I tone up a little when I grow over-size, and I am sure my way of movement is not natural. I make a deliberate effort to affect it. It’s good mum didn’t tell my abnormalities to people, but they would have made me hung.” (Moses)

In Ugandan society homosexuality is an often denied reality and laden with many, predominantly Christian, taboos. A highly charged debate recently unleashed at Makerere University and in the whole of Kampala when a well-known female human rights professor, Sylvia Tamale, spoke out in support of gay rights. Just to give you a flavour of the vehemence (and sometimes hilarity) of this debate, here is an excerpt of a reader’s letter published in ‘The Monitor’, one of Uganda’s leading newspapers: “Biblically, God created man, and having realised that this man (Adam) needed a helper, made woman (Eve) for him. God never made another man for Adam. Put simply, the purpose was to fit the word Adam onto the letter “M”, to make “Madam”. Biologically, the anatomical structure of a male reproductive organ is created in such a way that it fits into a female reproductive organ, just as the word male fits into the letters “FE” to make the word “fe-male”. Or the word “man” fits into the letters “WO” to make the word “woman”. People like Sylvia would never have been born if their parents had been sodomites or lesbians!” (M.L., 2003)

For Moses, however, his dance training and the artistic community of our department seems to provide him with enough breathing space and an accepting audience in front of which to express his difference. At the end of the first semester, as part of his choreography class, he performed his own dance “Cinderella”, clad in a red dress and an ‘ihirizi’, a bead chain traditionally worn by women around their waists.

Moving into life

For their end-of year practical exam in my class, I asked the students to make individual masks based on the semester-long explorations of their personal movement preferences. The results were impressive, and after detailed and proud presentations of their masks, I led the students through a guided movement improvisation the aim of which was to fully embody the mask and to enter into relationship with fellow movers. I have never seen my students move with such concentration and inner involvement, and it seemed as if they were entering a different world in which they became alive as the men and community they wanted to be.

James’ mask was dominated by the pictures of two elephants who seemed to encapsulate the qualities of a masculine body and ‘gentle’ movements as discussed above. In his written account of his experience, he describes how he was moving with strength, solid grounding, and gradual and stable weight shifts “...under the influence of the elephant ...when coming from a valley-like area while

skipping some holes and reaching with its trunk to get tree leaves.” He also highlighted his sequential movements (“movements of the trunk of an elephant when bringing leaves from the tree to the mouth”), wall-like body shape, sustained effort (“I was under the influence of an elephant which is always sustained in its movements, and I was trying to inherit it and imitate it...”), and free effort as in the movement of the elephant’s tail. “In conclusion, the mask replaced the whole of myself and indeed, it was as if I had moved into my life which had never happened to me.”

Joseph’s account was entitled: “Reality about Joseph”, and he writes: “...my movements when putting on the mask were more strong, massicular [author’s note: muscular and/or masculine?], energetic and bound...The mask...removed the fear in me by making me feel a different person.”

Addressing the sense of a newly-found community, Peter writes: “One of my experiences was that I no longer viewed my fellow movers as the usual fellow students we always dance with, but we had formed a new family because we resembled. There was a relationship inside my mind which I felt joining us together...I have got an image of certain animals within their habitat but interacting in a harmonious way.”

One of the movements that stood out most for me during the improvisation was Moses’ spacious, light, free and indirect unfolding of his upper body in big and three-dimensional waving arm-movements. The sense of air streaming into and around him was mirrored by the big balloon that he had attached to his mask as a symbol of breathing. I would like to let Moses conclude this article with the description of his experience which, for me, beautifully captures not just his own sense of becoming but also the whole group’s year-long journey with its echoes of the students’ collective past and aspired future:

“I once got a cocoon of a caterpillar out of the bark of a mahogany tree and held it in my hands. I breathed on it the warm breath and capped it in my hands. After 10 minutes, the pupa hatched itself prematurely, tried to move but could not, the wings had not yet developed and after a minute, it died. ‘Guilty of murder!’

Before the improvisation, when I was silent with no movement. I felt like my life was at a stop, just being prepared for a crucial encounter; not yet switched into action. Only my breathing mechanism was working and my heartbeat normal but with an inner composure. To me, this state seemed like that of a cocoon before being hatched to life. It breathes, eats, but still. Finally, the cocoon gets hatched when the temperature rises, the newly hatched creature opens its virgin wings to life and the world to embrace it. But before, it starts with simple movements around itself. This directly connects with my initial improvised movements where I first moved my head, later my torso and lastly my legs and hands.

When it matures into a butterfly, it flutters its wings in the air and space, comes in contact with other butterflies. This was how I felt when I started going out of myself, to stretch hands, legs, moving in circle with Joseph, with Anthony, and meeting other masks....I got a feeling of...coming together for warmth and protection as the basic needs of man...and later disintegrating to independence, the basic need of life.”

References:

Finlay, H. & Crowther, G. (1997) East Africa, London:Lonely Planet Publications

L.M. (2003) "Homosexuality is against God's plan", The Monitor, 18 February 2003