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Photo: Toni Shapiro-Phim

tD Interviews Germaine Ingram on Her Yoruba Diaspora Project

by Jonathan Stein

It has been a while since thINKingDANCE's conversation between Lynn Matluck Brooks and Germaine Ingram, physical and vocal performance artist, tap/percussive dancer and choreographer, and cultural advocate and thinker. Ingram has in recent years continued to explore her interests in collective memory, history, and social justice through a variety of collaborative works: The Spirits Break to Freedom*, on the nine enslaved Africans housed at President Washington's House at 6th and Market St., Philadelphia;* Where Heaven's Dew Divides*, on the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the late 18th C. (presented at the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts [PIFA]);* Freedom Underfoot*, on the Civil War's Battle of Atlanta; and most recently, an artist's residency and performances in Bahia, northeastern Brazil. tD's Jonathan Stein asks the nonstop Ingram to pause for a few minutes to speak about her latest interests and a project now in a research and planning stage.*

Jonathan Stein: *I confess it's tough, even as a friend, to keep up with your many interests and engagements, but a new one has been the diaspora of three related African cultures, Yoruba, Bantu, and Fon, and their history and contemporary presence in Philadelphia. Can you tell us how this emerged?*

Germaine Ingram: Perhaps the earliest seed of the idea was planted with me by ethnomusicologist/drummer Elizabeth Sayre. It might have been four or five years ago that she told me that Philadelphia does not get credit for its history of nurturing Yoruba-rooted practice. Oyotungi African Village, founded in South Carolina in 1970, is noted for its dedication to retaining Yoruba culture in the United States. But according to Elizabeth, Philadelphia has had dedicated Yoruba-rooted spiritual and cultural practitioners for at least six decades.

Another seed sprouted during my work on *The Spirits Break to Freedom*, my project on the practice of slavery at the President's House during the Washington presidency. I became curious about what political events would have inspired Oney Judge, Hercules, and the other seven enslaved Africans when they were brought from rural Virginia to the cosmopolitan environment of Philadelphia. It didn't take

much research to realize that talk of the Haitian (Dominque) Revolution was buzzing in Philadelphia at that time, and that white planters—some with slaves in tow—were immigrating to Philadelphia to escape the civil turmoil in Dominque. I imagined Yoruba adherents from Haiti channeling, through clandestine dance and rhythm, a liberation spirit to Africans at the President's House.

Then I learned that Temple University is poised to become the repository of the Arthur Hall Collection. Hall was a pioneer, teaching Yoruba and other African performative cultures at his Ile Ife Center in North Philadelphia and presenting them in concert settings when there was scarce recognition of the beauty and cultural richness of these traditions.

The seeds just kept dropping and sprouting.



Photo of Germaine Ingram by J.J. Tiziou

JS: *You have said that you often ask of those who collaborate with you:"Tell me what ignites your passion in this new research." So what ignites Germaine's passion in this new project?*

GI: I am fascinated by Yoruba's persistence, by how the power of the culture and its incorporation of the practices of local cultures—in Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the British West Indies—has allowed it to survive and to assume multiple, distinctive expressions. I am intrigued by the dynamics and impact of having multiple, vibrant expressions of Yoruba culture here in Philadelphia. How does the proximity of diverse forms in an urban space affect the ways that Yoruba tradition is preserved, transferred, and changed? How does the presence of networks of artists invested in Yoruba-rooted traditions impact the shape and quality of public urban life?

When Philadelphians like Arthur Hall, Ione Nash, Sun Ra, and Baba Robert Crowder became exponents of African music and dance, they were cultural activists, people who were challenging Euro-centric tastes and canons in their own communities as well as in the broader arts arena. I'm interested in how cultural activism is being expressed today in the Yoruba-rooted arts community.

JS: *It is likely that a few people in Philadelphia are aware of these African diaspora traditions locally present in our 50-year-old dance company, Kulu Mele, and the 40-year history of Odunde, our country's largest Yoruba-based festival, annually presented along South Street on the second Sunday in June. Are most missing Philadelphia's history and current expression of these cultures?*

GI: The point of the project is to see what we're missing in our understanding of the presence and impact of this powerful African culture in/on Philadelphia's cultural and artistic landscape. I would venture to guess that many of the thousands of people who flood South Street for the Odunde Festival each June have no idea that the impetus and sustaining force for that event is Yoruba tradition. How many Philadelphians know anything about Prince Twins Seven-Seven, a prominent Nigerian artist many of whose Yoruba-rooted paintings were made in our city?

Where are the sites of remembrance of the practice, sites that are being paved and built over, and that are fading from memory as the pioneering masters and practitioners are passing on? Who are the new masters, the home-grown ones and the ones that are immigrating to our city from places in the Yoruba diaspora, from places where the spiritual and secular practices are under pressure and assault? How does Philly's jazz heritage reflect the influence of Yoruba thought and performance practice? What are the questions we don't even know to ask?

JS: *Your research in Philadelphia has led to your all night presence to 5 a.m. at a Vodun, Afro-Haitian religious ceremony in the Olney section of North Philadelphia. Can you describe the experience and what you bring from it to your project?*

GI: I am not authorized to discuss that experience on a public site.

JS: *This experience, among other explorations, raises issues that you have acknowledged of how culture workers engage other organizations with related issues of ownership and authorship. Can you elaborate?*

GI: Being a long-lapsed Baptist—not myself a Yoruba practitioner—I often question what responsibilities I must shoulder as I work to frame a project around a culture and traditions for which I am an outsider. I know that I must proceed from a place of humility and curiosity—a place where practitioners and general audiences are encouraged to join me and others in a process of deep and respectful inquiry. I have felt the tension between, on the one hand, my passion and excitement for seeing this project find the right group of collaborators, a generative structural framework and supportive funding, and on the other hand, my recognition that there are other people who have far more at stake than I do in the process and potential outcomes of implementing this concept. I trust that with curiosity, humility, integrity, and respect for the true keepers of Yoruba culture, I can serve effectively the potential in this project idea.

JS: *I know you give considerable thought to process and methodologies in collaborative work which has included creating an artistic leaning community before your PIFA performance of* Where Heaven's Dew Divides*, and a website that you described as a kind of memoir. What performance-related strategies and devices are you envisioning for this Yoruba, Bantu, Fon diaspora project ?*

GI: One of the many things that excite me in this project is the potential to explore ways that performance can retain the qualities of exploration and research. We are considering using story circles—as practiced in processes used by Roadside Theater, Junebug Productions, and Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements*—as a principal means of investigating the history and current expressions of Yoruba in Philadelphia. We would invite participants to bring their songs, dances, and touchstone objects to the circles, and we would be attentive to how gesture, silence, and facial expressions around the circles shape the narrative space and inform the individual and collective stories. We would look for ways to use performance as a strategy for bringing audiences into the exploratory process, and for sharing our learning and evolving inquiries.

JS: *Your interest in the African diaspora has also led you to explore parallels in preservation and evolution of culture in the Jewish diaspora. Is there new, common ground here for African-Americans and Jewish-Americans?*

GI: I am intrigued by the possibility of parallels between Philadelphia's role in the preservation and evolution of Yoruba-rooted

performance traditions and Philly's distinction in the history of Klezmer music. We've had exciting discussions about how a comparative look at Yoruba performance practice and Yiddish performative practice can help us understand how cultural traditions are preserved and the significance of place in that process. Both Yoruba and Klezmer have powerful histories and presences in Philadelphia.

How are the strategies of preservation, transmission, and evolution similar and different between the histories of these great diasporic cultures? I think this can be fascinating stuff, and a way of bringing new audiences to both traditions.

This year's Odunde Festival will be held on South Street on June 12th, www.odundefestival.org.

Festival founder, Lois Fernandez, will have the book launch of her memoir, *Lois Fernandez: Recollections (Part 1),* on June 10th at City Hall, 6—8 p.m.

Further in June is the music, dance, sound and light world premiere of Afro-Caribbean percussionist Pablo Batista's *El Viaje* ("*The Journey"*), and the forced emigration of slaves from Africa to the Americas and their cultural and spiritual resilience in the diaspora, Temple Performing Arts Center, 1827 N. Broad St., June 25 and 26, elviaje.pablobatista.net.

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