

KOTCHEGNA DANCE COMPANY STUDY GUIDE

Kotchezna, meaning “messenger” in the Ivorian language of Mahou, is a seasoned dance company founded in the Western African nation of the Ivory Coast by master dancer and choreographer Vado Diomande. Kotchezna has traveled across the United States and around the world promoting Ivorian culture through chant, mime, dance, and music.

Audiences of all ages are captivated by Kotchezna’s innovative choreography, spectacular stilt dancing and pageantry, and pulsating rhythms. *The New York Times* raved about Kotchezna after watching the company perform at Lincoln Center’s annual Folk Parks program, stating that “the best aspect was the drumming: nonstop, high-speed, feverishly intricate rhythms and cross-rhythms from a team of drummers who knew countless ways to subdivide a beat and make it jump.”

With a core ensemble of 6-8 musicians and dancers, Kotchezna performs in concerts, residencies and festivals, as well as instructs through educational programs, dance classes and workshops.



MASK DANCES

- According to traditional African customs, masks are used in rituals as powerful tools of communication between the spiritual and material worlds
- Dancers who wear masks are possessed by spirits and therefore serve as channels between tribes and ancestral deities
- Purpose of communication between deities and mortals: maintain harmony between spiritual and material worlds
- The mask functions in:
 - ◆ Public ceremonies and dances that include audience participation
 - ◆ Private occasions only attended by members of secret societies
- Common themes in ritual ceremonies:
 - ◆ Mythic and legendary heroes
 - ◆ Animal stories
 - ◆ Fertility
 - ◆ Agricultural cycles
 - ◆ Ancestral cults
 - ◆ Initiations
 - ◆ Healing
 - ◆ Divination
 - ◆ Fighting of sorcerers
 - ◆ Talismanic protection
 - ◆ Funerals
 - ◆ Casting of spells
 - ◆ Disaster prevention
 - ◆ Welcoming of chiefs and visitors
 - ◆ Hunting
- Only through strict observance of sacred ancient traditions can the effectiveness of the dance ritual be guaranteed
- Pre-ritual guidelines that dancer must follow:
 - ◆ Purify oneself by observing certain taboos, such as maintaining sexual abstinence
 - ◆ Make offerings of sacrifice to spirits one is about to invoke
 - ◆ Maintain impersonality
 - ◆ Make sure that only the initiated help one dress
 - Reason: those who are uninitiated may not be able to handle the powers of the mask and costume
- Masks that are exported to other countries lose their spiritual potency as they are separated from the dance rituals in which they were used
 - ◆ To complete separation, a “spiritual washing” is usually performed in country of origin

MASK DANCES PERFORMED BY KOTCHEGNA:

GUE-PELOU

- “God of the Sacred Forest”
- Protects earthly beings and chases away evil spirits
- Walks on 9-foot tall stilts
- Dances and performs acrobatic feats
- Performed by Director of Kotchegna, Vado Diomande, who acts as the intermediary for the spirit of the mask

GBEGBE (Pronounced Jbe-Jbe)

- Funeral dance
- Traditionally danced by soldiers to alleviate pain from injuries and feelings of loss

BOLOHI (Pronounced Bolo-HEE)

- Panther character
- Dance represents stalk of animal

ZAOLI (Pronounced Zah-oh-LEE)

- Female deity made of different animals

INSTRUMENTS

In West Africa, drumming and dancing go hand in hand. In fact, drumming is meant for dancing and not for listening. As a result, dances require live drummers, who respond to the movements of the dancers. The following are instruments that provide the dancing beat:

DJEMBE (Pronounced JEM-bay)

- Goblet-shaped hand drum covered with skin of goat or antelope
- Originated in Wassoulou region in southern Mali (located north of the Cote d'Ivoire), where women play an especially important role in traditional music making
- Has very wide sound spectrum, but is especially known for its high pitches
- Open-mouth shape of barrel is purported to have originated from the traditional grain grinder
- Known as "soloist drum"
- Can optionally be played with vibrating rings attached:
 - ◆ *Kesingkesing* – vibrating sound enhancer tied to the rim of the *djembe* in the form of two to three metal plates surrounded by small rings adorning the outer edge
- Also spelled "*djembé*" or "*djimbe*," depending on variations in African/French/English transcription

DOUNDOUN (Pronounced doon-doon)

- Literally means "lower drums"
- Double-sized cylindrical barrel covered with a thick cow or goat skin
- Ranges from highest in pitch and smallest in size to lowest in pitch and largest in size:
 - ◆ *Kenkeni* – smallest in size and highest in tone
 - > functions as time keeper
 - ◆ *Sangban* – mid-sized with medium tone
 - > also called *songba* or *sangbé*
 - ◆ *Dununba* – largest in size and lowest in tone
 - > fabricated from large 55-gallon oil barrel
 - > played standing on one face
 - > struck with wooden club
 - > functions as bass drum
- Also known as *dunun*, *djundjun*, *junjun*, *diun diun* (in Sénégal), and *dondoumba*
 - ◆ Name is modified according to differences in dialects in various regions

BALAFON (Pronounced BALA-phone)

- A West African predecessor of the xylophone made with strips of wood increasing in length that are tied together with thread. Attached to the bottom of the wooden keys are hollow gourds of different sizes that act as resonators, which give the instrument a greater tonal range
- Also known as *bala*

Contemporary ensembles can consist of three to six *doundouns*, in addition to three to ten *djembes*. Usually, more *djembes* are employed than *doundouns*.

DIRECTOR'S PROFILE

Vado Diomande

The artistic director, founder, and choreographer of Kotchegna established *L'Ensemble Kotchegna D'Abidjan* in his native Cote d'Ivoire in 1989. Five years later, he moved his troupe to the United States, where it is now known as *Kotchegna Dance Company*. Dancing since the age of four, Vado was recruited to the National Ballet of the Ivory Coast at age 14, where he performed as a principal dancer for over 15 years and absorbed over 60 different ethnic dance traditions. Since coming to the US, Vado has choreographed and performed with many companies, including Urban Tap, Ancestral Messengers, Maimouna Keita, Haitian-American Dance Theatre and others, and has been a guest artist touring Europe and Mexico. Vado teaches dancing and drumming throughout the metropolitan area, and is based at the Djoniba Dance & Drum Center. He is also a renowned drum craftsman, making and repairing djembes and other drums for an extensive and professional circle of musicians. His goal is to enrich and illuminate the world with the dynamic musical culture of the Ivory Coast."

LA CÔTE D'IVOIRE (IVORY COAST)

Slightly larger than New Mexico, Cote d'Ivoire is a tropical West African nation with a population of over 16 million people representing over 60 ethnic groups. Little knowledge exists about this coastal country prior to the arrival of European explorers in the 1460s. What is known, however, is that Cote d'Ivoire was the hub of major African trade routes during the Middle Ages. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, major ethnic groups migrated to Cote d'Ivoire from surrounding areas: Liberia (southwest of the Cote d'Ivoire), Burkina Faso and Mali (north), Ghana (east), and Guinea (northwest).

Compared to its eastern neighbor, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire did not suffer very much from the slave trade, as its harbor was not as hospitable as others along the coast. The French first came into contact with Cote d'Ivoire in 1637 when missionaries landed on its eastern border with Ghana. Exposure was limited, though, due to unfavorable conditions at the shoreline and apprehension of the natives. It wasn't until 1840 that France took a further interest in the territory and persuaded local chiefs to grant French commercial traders a monopoly along the coast. Fifty-three years later, in 1893, the Cote d'Ivoire officially became a French colony.

The main mission of the French was to produce exported goods, including coffee, cocoa and palm oil crops. Of all colonies in Western and Central Africa, Cote d'Ivoire was unique in that it was the only country in West Africa that was inhabited by large number of settlers. In other colonies, the French and British largely functioned as bureaucrats. Due to the increased involvement of foreign settlers in Cote d'Ivoire, one-third of the country's cocoa, coffee, and banana plantations were controlled by the French. This, in turn, led to the proliferation of the despised forced-labor system, which became the spine of the economy.

Following sixty-seven years of colonization, the Cote d'Ivoire was by far the most affluent West African nation, with a booming agricultural industry that contributed to over 40% of the region's exports. It was during this time of prosperity that the nation won its independence in 1960 through the machinations of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, a successful cocoa farmer and local chief who also had a background in medicine. After becoming the Cote d'Ivoire's first president, Houphouët-Boigny, unlike other leaders of former colonies, maintained close ties to France. Ironically, the French population mushroomed from 10,000 to 50,000 post-independence. The majority of the expatriate community consisted of educators and advisors who engineered an agricultural growth strategy that was often referred to as the "Ivorian miracle". Houphouët-Boigny granted farmers favorable prices to further stimulate production. As a result, in 1979, Cote d'Ivoire became one of the world's leading coffee and cocoa producers, as well as Africa's leading pineapple and palm oil exporter. For two decades, the economy maintained the highest growth rate of Africa's non-oil exporting countries at over 10% annually.

After enjoying a period of prosperity, good times came to an end in 1999 and 2000, when falling cocoa prices and political turmoil sparked an economic downturn, which led to rising debt. On Christmas Day 1999, the first military coup in the history of Cote d'Ivoire overthrew the government led by President Henri Konan Bédié, Houphouët-Boigny's hand-picked successor after his death in 1993. Presidential and legislative elections held in October and December 2000 were neither peaceful nor democratic. Violence erupted due to the exclusion of Muslim opposition leader Alassane Ouattara. In October 2000, ten months of military rule came to an end when Laurent Gbagbo replaced junta leader Robert Guéi as president. Three months later, in January 2001, another coup was attempted, which led to the jailing of certain opposition members and blaming of bordering

nations for causing instability. Since the end of 2001, some positive developments have occurred to help work through ethnic and political differences. Today, the Cote d'Ivoire remains one of the world's largest producers and exporters of coffee, cocoa beans, and palm oil. Despite government attempts to diversify the economy, it continues to be largely dependent on agriculture and related activities, which employs roughly 68% of the population.

Economics and politics aside, Cote d'Ivoire possesses a rich culture with distinct differences among ethnic groups. Three major groups include the Baoulé, the Yakouba, and the Senufo, who are all famous for their wooden carvings. Baoulé masks are realistic, as they are often used in commemorative ceremonies to represent individuals who could be identified through facial marks or hairstyles. The most prevalent Yokouba mask is one of a slightly abstract human face, while another common carving is a large spoon that rests on human-like legs, which is used for serving rice. Masks of a very stylized nature come from the Senufo tradition, the best-known being the "fire spitter" helmet mask that combines features of an antelope, wart hog, and hyena.

Approximately 34% of the population are Christian of the Protestant denomination, although two of the world's largest Catholic cathedrals are located in the Cote d'Ivoire. Slightly over a quarter of Ivorians are Muslim and live mostly in the north. Many others practice native religions involving ancestral worship in which deceased relatives are believed to remain in constant contact with the world of the living through rituals. Magic is also quite prevalent, as spells keep evil spirits at bay. Medicine men or priests distribute charms, tell fortunes, and advise people on how to avert danger. The Senufo culture has particularly kept its traditions alive. Children are secretly initiated into their society after being taught the history and moral principles of the Senufo people.

Ivorian food is eaten with the hands. A popular place to eat is the *maquis*, a typically economical open-air restaurant that lays out chairs and tables in the sand. Often served at the *maquis* are braised chicken and fish topped with onions and tomatoes. An accompanying side dish is the popular *attiéké*, which is similar to couscous, but made from grated cassava. Of the street-vended foods, one that stands out is *aloco* – a ripe banana in palm oil, flavored with chili and steamed onions. As a nice accent, a meal can be enjoyed with the local palm wine, *bangui*.

G L O S S A R Y

A cappella	Vocal music that is performed without any instrumental accompaniment.
Arrangement	An adaptation and orchestration of a musical composition to a different medium than what it was originally intended for.
Balafon	A West African predecessor of the xylophone made with strips of wood increasing in length that are tied together with thread. Attached to the bottom of the wooden keys are hollow gourds of different sizes that act as resonators.
Band	A group of musicians performing together.
Bass	A musical instrument that produces tones in a low register (e.g. – electric bass, double bass, and tuba).
Beat	A steady succession of rhythmic units.
Call and response	Exchange between the lead singer's improvisations and a group's recurring response.
Chorus	The section of a song that a group of singers or musicians repeats at certain intervals.
Composer	One who writes music.
Djembe	Goblet-shaped hand drum covered with skin of goat or antelope
Doundoun	Double-sized cow- or goat-skinned cylindrical barrel
Ensemble	A group of musicians, singers, and/or dancers.
Harmony	The relationship between chords, their progression and structure that result in a sound that is pleasing to the ear.
Improvisation	The unplanned and spontaneous creation of music during a performance.
Interpretation	A performer's expression of a particular conception of a musical composition.
Kora	African harp made from large hollow gourd attached to a wooden neck to which 21 strings are fastened.
Lyrics	The words in a song.
Melody	A succession of notes that forms a distinctive sequence; a tune.
Musical Director	One who oversees all aspects of an orchestra's musical production and often serves as the conductor.
Percussion	The sound produced by beating or striking a musical instrument, such as a drum.
Pitch	The quality of a sound that is correlated its frequency. A high pitch is associated with a higher frequency, while a low pitch is linked to a lower frequency.

Polyrhythm	The simultaneous overlaying of distinct rhythmic patterns that interact to form a more complex rhythmic pattern.
Pulse	A single stroke of sound. Rattles and jingles add strong pulses to music.
Repertoire	The list of songs and dances that an artist or ensemble is prepared to perform.
Resonance	Prolongation or intensification of a sound achieved through vibration (e.g. – echo).
Rhythm	The regular pattern of sounds at a particular speed or tempo.
Slap	The highest-pitched sound on the <i>djembe</i> , attained by striking the drumhead with slightly separated fingers. The focus of the blow is concentrated on the fingertips.
Solo	A composition or passage performed by one voice or instrument, with or without accompaniment.
Syncopation	The act of stressing unaccented beats.
Tempo	The speed at which music is played.
Timbre	The quality of sound that differentiates one instrument from another; tone color.
Tone	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) A note. 2) A particular <i>djembe</i> hit marked by striking the drum with all four fingers together, along with the creves of the hand hitting the edge of the rim.

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Pelhu mask dance



Zaoli mask dance



Djembe drums



Doun doun drums



Balafone