An Afrocentric Cultural Study of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and
Perceptions of its Relevance to African (-Canadian) Students Between
the Ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education
University of Regina

By
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Regina, Saskatchewan
April 2017

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Thomas Jing, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, has presented a thesis titled, *An Afrocentric Cultural Study of Buum Oka Dance Yaounde and Perceptions of its Relevance to African (-Canadian) Students Between the Ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina*, in an oral examination held on April 25, 2017. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

This is an Afrocentric cultural study of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde in Cameroon and perceptions of its relevance to African (-Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. The study is pitched against a national backdrop in which African (-Canadian) students experience disproportionately high school drop/push out rates. This is just one of many others problems associated with various forms of racist discourses and practices which harken back to the days of black enslavement. An enduring legacy of slavery and Western colonialism has been the continuous distortion of African history and culture, which are sometimes used to justify marginalization, injustice and various forms of oppression. An Afrocentric approach to this study seeks in part to counter colonial and oppressive discourses, thus serving as a tool for emancipation. The study ascertains whether the introduction and promotion of cultural practices such as Buum Oku Dance could serve as a tool for effective resistance and emancipation. Drawing mainly on written and oral sources, the inquiry has used Johnson’s (1986/87) “circuit of cultural production” of the dance, that is, its historical production, its representation and audience reception to determine to what extent such a dance could serve as tool for liberation. Its findings, based mainly on interviews of six students, three males and three females, from the City of Regina, illustrate the perceived relevance of the dance in creating community, reinforcing family values and traditions, promoting greater cultural and gender inclusion and equality, in asserting group identity and in combating low self-esteem and high dropout rates. These actions constitute forms of resistance which illustrate the possibilities of dance as a credible tool for human liberation from oppression.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the Western Grassfield of Cameroon, during important festivals such as the village annual dance, just before the event kicks off, as soon as the xylophones strike up and the drums start to roll, the kam, as the lead dancer is called, struts alone into the circle of assembled villagers and dances around until he reaches the grandstand where the Fon (king) and notables are seated, he goes down in prostration in acknowledgement of the accomplishments and services, not only of the dignitaries but of the villagers whom they represent. Harkening to that tradition, I express in writing similar acknowledgement for the contributions of all those whose actions have helped in making this research come to fruition.

I begin by expressing my most profound gratitude to Dr. Ken Montgomery, my thesis supervisor, who has been with me and showed me all the tricks of the trade of research at every step of this investigation; to Dr. Patrick Lewis, Dr. Valerie Triggs, Dr. Ann Kipling Brown, and Dr. Claire Carter who accepted to become members of my thesis committee and have provided me with invaluable information and advice on this research process. The gratitude also extends to Dr. Carol Schick, Dr. Paul Hart, Dr. Jennifer Tupper, Dr. Marilyn Miller and other members of the university teaching staff from whose fount of knowledge I drew inspiration. I would like to thank Dr. Barbara McNeil who provided me with some invaluable tips on how to conduct research with high school students and within the black community in Regina; Naomi Frecon, who gave me numerous books and rides on my way to school; April Chiefcalf for her advice and car rides; and the staff at the office of the Faculty of Education and at the libraries of both the Universities of Regina and the First Nations for their assistance.
Of tremendous importance to this research has been the contribution of the Caribbean Folk Arts Dance Troupe which trains at the Multicultural Council Building downtown Regina on Broad Street. My special thanks go to Nimone Campbell, the main instructor, who made it all happen by inviting me to her dance school and encouraging her students to participate in the research as well as providing me with literature on her school and the Saskatchewan Caribbean Canadian Association; to Kweira and Kabari Quaye, Jennifer Kuger, Isaiah Bennett, and to Sierra, the dance students who sacrificed their time and other pressing matters to take part in the interviews.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, in Cameroon, my greatest thanks go to Dr. Peter Ntaimah, my greatest collaborator, who mediated this research at all levels in Yaounde and Oku as well as provided me with abundant literature and explanation on the dance and on Oku. As president of Buum Oku Dance, he encouraged me to select his dance for the inquiry, agreed to have an interview with me and convinced the entire troupe to give me full assistance. He was gracious to abandon pressing family and work issues in Yaounde to travel with me to Oku where he introduced me to Francis Jick, a veteran of the dance, as well as Fai Baimenda, the village notable who heads the lineage that owns the original Subi dance in Oku. The interviews I conducted with these personalities as well as members of Buum Oku Dance, such as Gladious Keja, Dr. Dinsi Stanley, and Nsakse John, had profound impact on the research and for that I am highly indebted.

I also wish to thank Dr. Martha Ngum of the University of Buea for granting me an interview as well as providing me with literature on Oku; to John Tatah Gamse in Douala, first bam eykum of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and cultural adviser to the dance troupe Mawe in that port city, for his interview and literature; to Dr. Tatah Mentan, a
Professor at St Joseph’s University in Minnesota and an eminent authority in Oku history and culture for his in-depth analysis and clarifications which greatly reinforced the inquiry; to Dr. Bill Ndi, a professor at Tuskegee University in Alabama whose sound knowledge of West Cameroonian Grassfield traditions, institutions and dances gave me a clearer picture of the subject under investigation; and to Professor Moses Nyongwa who drew from his experience in Nkongsamba to enlighten me on the political upheavals which rocked the region before and after Cameroon’s independence.

My thanks go to some of my family members who made my stay and this research possible: to Judith Selambi and her husband Christopher; to Major Emmanuel Jing of the Cameroonian military and his family; my beloved nephew Ndifor Selambi at the Catholic University in Buea; to Pa Ngufor Jing in Douala and his entire family; to Freda and Evaristus Joko in Old Town Bamenda; Tangie Ndiforndeh and his family in Buea; to Vincent and Hilda Ndumu for their warm reception at their Bamenda hilltop mansion; to Christopher Ntembi and Ayeh Fidelis Jing, for taking care of the family homestead while I am away studying at the university; and to His Royal Highness Fon Fongwa II of Bamendankwe for his incisive observations on Grassfield folkdances.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance and encouragements of the following: Madeleine and Clement Marchildon of Prince Albert, Celena Kalusky, Felicity Vindevoghel, Dr. Beatrice Wamey, of Donna Chouinard, Kaity Rossmo, Jason D’Souza, Clement Burikukiye, David Deng, Mabior Alier, Rev. Fr. Okai of St Jean-Baptiste Parish, of Chris Taylor at the Education Computer Centre, of Gillian Nowlan, of Chip and Dale Company in Regina, and of Focus Studio in Essos in Cameroon.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the following:

To my late parents Joseph Fombui and Rosaline Ndobih Jing, who both knew the value of good education even though they never had the opportunity to attend school; and whose entire lives of sweat, tears and toil had one main purpose: to ensure that I obtained the best education in order to become what they had only dreamed of;

To my siblings, Rose Chefor and Anna Sirri Jing, now of blessed memory, and to Freda Joko, whose love and support for me throughout my life have been totally unconditional; and to my nephews Ayeh Fidelis Jing and Christopher Ntembi who have borne with remarkable stoicism the bulk of family responsibilities while I am away studying in Canada;

To my beloved uncles, Dr. Martin Ngu Ndumu, whose keen observation and incisive mind helped me to develop a critical spirit; to Tamajung Ndumu, Cameroon’s first engineer, and a man from whose vast fount of knowledge I drank deeply; and to Jing Ngwanueh, a towering cultural icon whose exceptional intellect and sense of vision raised the bar of achievement high for me to emulate;

To His Royal Highness Fon Sintieh III of Oku and the entire Buum Oku Dance troupe for setting high standards in the revival and promotion of an important aspect of our African cultural heritage that is still floundering in the whirlpool of cultural assimilation and westernization;

And, most importantly, to those Canadian students who have to contend with problems arising from racism, sexism and classism as they face up to the challenges of education and society.
Map 1: Oku and its villages and surrounding districts
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 A personal journey

Throughout Canada, African-Canadian youth continue to face disproportionately high drop-out/push-out rates as well as significant challenges associated with racism, colonialism, and other forms of social oppression, including but not limited to SES and gender. These problems are part of a legacy which goes back to slavery and Western colonialism; it is a legacy in which African history and culture are misrepresented, often as a means to conceal if not justify marginalization, injustice and various forms of oppression directed against black people. This is the backdrop against which this investigation is pitched. Conceived as an emancipatory project, it is an Afrocentric cultural study of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and perceptions of its relevance to African (-Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. The aim of the research is to ascertain the extent to which the preservation and promotion of cultural practices, such as the Buum Oku Dance, may be important in assisting marginalized youth to counter what Young (2001) calls “cultural imperialism.” The investigation draws on R. Johnson’s “circuit of cultural production” (1986/87, pp. 46-47) and comprises three main components: the historical production of the dance, its representation and embodiment as well as audience reception. The historical production explores the dance’s main features, its origin, evolution and the key players responsible for these developments. Its representation and audience reception are based on a 15-minute video shot in situ in Yaounde. While representation focuses on the macro-micro elements of the dance as well as its embodiment and meanings, audience reception
analyzes the interviews of six students, three males and three females between the ages of 18 and 25, who come from the City of Regina and have watched the dance video.

As an Afrocentric project, this study seeks in part to counter colonial and oppressive discourses, thus serving as a tool for the emancipation of Africans. Emancipation is a thread which runs throughout world history; but nothing attests to its very elusiveness than the simple fact that the bulk of humanity still languishes under various forms of oppression and tyranny. Thus, emancipation displays certain elements of a mirage. So, an important question with regard to this study arises: do I have what it takes to embark on a scholarly undertaking which strives to “emancipate?” This question is an appeal for my own subjectivity, to write my own story into the investigation, as it is required by Afrocentric research practice (Reviere, 2001; M. K. Asante, 1988, 1993). That story begins with my own cultural epiphany in Ndop, a rural community that was part of the territory once referred to as British Southern Cameroons. Ndop is located about 250 miles northwest of Yaounde, the national capital of Cameroon. My father, a blacksmith, had moved to Ndop in the forties from Bamendankwe, his birthplace. Back then, Ndop was the seat of the local government since the days of the British colonial administration.

Neither my father nor my mother had been to school; but they knew the value of good education. My uncle, my mother’s older brother, was Cameroon’s first civil engineer; and her father was very fluent in German, having attended a German school in Bimbia, a district along the coast of Cameroon; and having served as court registrar, tax collector and interpreter when Germany administered my country as a colony (Ebune, 1992; Ki-Zerbo, 1978; Rudin, 2013). The idea of having such towering figures for a
father and a brother might have caused my mother not to consider any career option that was not illustrious. This is another way of saying that I had to be Western educated. In ways that I could never have imagined, this stance had farreaching implications on my personal development.

Since I was born and raised in Ndop, this location was central in shaping my worldview; as a result, I grew up knowing very little of my parents’ village. Ndop is a vast fertile plain set in the midst of hills and was once at the crossroads of Tikar and Chamba migration. These two major ethnic groups in the area were largely responsible for the current ethnic configuration of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. As a cultural crossroads, an administrative headquarters, and economic hub, this district often hosted numerous important events. One of such events was the annual Agricultural Show, an occasion used to showcase the most modern food production and processing methods as well as the best farming implements. Important as agriculture was and still remains to this day in this part of Cameroon, organizers knew back then that it needed more than one activity to attract the kind of population that often made such events a success. So, in addition to agricultural activities, the occasion was also used to promote other aspects of development such as culture.

Fortunately, the kind of obsession with which colonization attempted to destroy local cultures in most parts of Africa had really not taken hold in this part of Cameroon. Lord Lugard, a pillar in British imperial venture and the initiator of Indirect Rule, attempted, through this policy, to ground British control over the territory by using local leaders. Since local leaders were in charge, the policy helped in reducing friction and in preserving and even promoting local cultures. Part of this policy carried over in the post-
colonial dispensation when local leaders saw cultural preservation and promotion as a means to enhance their people’s progress and development (Che, 2013, pp. 27-30). It came as no surprise therefore that during Agricultural Shows, there were cultural manifestations and competitions among the participating ethnic groups in the region. In no aspect of culture was this competition fiercer than in traditional dances. Even though I watched and sometimes participated in traditional dances, they really did not mean much to me. I had overheard my parents proudly talking about the extraordinary performance of Tamukung Dance from their village. Out of a sense of ethnic pride and loyalty, it was normal for them to talk that way, so I attached no particular significance to the gesture. It was a perception that was about to change and alter the way I viewed culture and folkdance.

The Agricultural Show was fast approaching. A few days before the event, Jing Ngwanueh, my uncle and the manager of Tamukung, came to Ndop to register the dance for the competition. Since he was someone I greatly admired and held in high esteem, the registration immediately aroused my curiosity, which only seemed to grow, when on the eve of the Agricultural Show, members of Tamukung troupe arrived in our compound in a mammy wagon: an old truck converted into a kind of bus. A huge hall used by natives of Bamendankwe residing in Ndop for their weekly meetings had been set aside for the dance troupe. As soon as they alighted, they began to haul huge sacks to the hall. The sacks were so many that I began to wonder what could be in them. That was to remain a mystery until the next day.

I went to bed, but I could not sleep, waiting for the next day to come quickly. It did; and the earlier part of it was spent focusing on events directly related to agriculture.
My parents and uncle had given me some money which I changed into several coins to appear rich; and with a dress to match my new status, I sauntered onto the Agricultural Show ground.

It was jammed with people, many of whom had come with some precious items to be exhibited. Squeezing myself like a maggot through the human jumble, I finally got to a wide path that had been opened up in front of the stands. I picked my way on this path to avoid the squeeze, drifting with the human flow and feasting my eyes on all the marvels the diverse worlds of agriculture and culture had to offer.

Rambling in the hot tropical sun and eating all kinds of snacks and goodies soon took their toll. Since it was in the late afternoon that the folkdance competition would begin, I decided to rush back home for a quick nap. I was fast asleep when someone eagerly woke me up. It was my mother.

“What are you still doing here?” she asked in amusement. “Tamukung is already in the Agricultural Show ground and would soon begin dancing,” she announced.

Very frantically, I jumped out of bed and headed straight for the ground which was just a stone’s throw away. I arrived just when the musicians were busy setting their xylophones, a twenty-two-piece instrument of thick, hard, red, noisy tropical wooden bars played by four strapping villagers (Figures 5 & 6, Appendix A). It was to be accompanied by a drum conceived in genuine Tikar tradition, with a tall anthropological tale to recount. Standing at about 1.20 m above the ground, with a long rope for the player to strap round his waist to keep it in place while he pounded away (Figure 4), this one seemed very special. Tapering downward from the membrane to the midsection, it began to broaden at the base, giving it a kind of dumbbell shape. Every inch of the way,
on that hard mahogany wood out of which it was carved, it had different kinds of village motifs etched on the surface all round it: a king in ethnic garb sitting on his throne, a thatch house, a chameleon, a pair of gongs, and a woman pounding food in a mortar (Figure 3). These images summed up community life and captured the very essence of these cultural competitions.

I was still busy taking in the musicians and their instruments when my ears caught a rattling note. I looked up in the direction from where the sound had emanated. My word, what was I seeing! Half hidden by a segment of the grandstand where the dignitaries were sitting, on a path that had been cleared to let in the various dance groups, was what I had waited for so long to see. Almost blending in with the surrounding population, but still standing out well enough for a person to see was Tamukung.

Lined up in a single file according to their heights, they were about sixteen of them, all dressed up in some of the finest of very traditional dancing regalia. Brand new, the outfits the dancers had on were designed out of the alternating blue-white stripe Ndobo fabric (Figure 6), with the edges of the arms and bottom rimmed with cured goatskin. This being a ritual dance that had been transformed into a recreational one, they all had their faces covered and sported some of the most beautiful dancing head masks I have ever seen. They were gaudy Tikar masks, crafted by some of the best masters in the trade, with many of them encrusted with copper embellishments, beads, and cowries, the trademarks of the greatest of these artists. Their dancing whisks, of horsetails set on carved hardwood and sometimes ivory handles, were decorated with beads in the grand style of the Bansos, Bamilekes (Figure 12) and Bamouns (three major Tikar groups). As for the seeds used to make the rattles (Figure 11) strapped around their ankles, they were
something else. Fat and flat and woven into a thick cluster, their vibrations could scare
the devil out of hell during dancing. I was very impressed.

Shortly after I had breezed in, the voice of the announcer proudly rang out with
those magic words: “Tamukung of Bamendankwe!” I adjusted and held my breath. The
xylophones immediately struck up; and then the drum rolled in and rumbled in one of the
most beautiful melodies I had ever heard. It was thunderous and the ground was shaking.
With the *kam*, the lead dancer, leading the way in a prancing gait, and the other dancers
in tow, Tamukung strutted into the ground like Zulu warriors.

“Atungsiri built his house and spent the night outside…” the old lines of a popular
village lore to shame a chicken thief, which I would hear so often after, were hammered
out of the xylophones in the language of my forefathers. I could literally feel my head
swelling with pride that my own people could put it all together that beautifully. And as
the dancers strutted their stuff, the spectators voiced their approval in countless cheers.

In the cultural competition, Tamukung won first prize, a feat this dance would
repeat in numerous other occasions and competitions. After the event, bursting with
pride, I let it be known to anyone who cared to listen that Tamukung came from my
parents’ village, a place I had never actually known. By associating with the dance, this
gave me a sense of pride, of belonging and identity.

Years later, I was describing this event to Dr. Thomas Ngwa, a researcher from
my village living in Ottawa, and he told me about Njihgang, another dance started in
Bamendankwe by a group of disaffected youths as a way to raise money for their school
tuition; he informed me how the dance had not only prevented these youngsters from
dropping out of school but had taken the village by storm and rendered them extremely
popular. With my experience in Cameroon and the one in South Africa, where I lived for four years and where dance had played an important part in the anti-apartheid struggle, I was quick to make a connection between art and emancipation. So, traditional dance was the first thing that came quite naturally to my mind when I read about the alarmingly high school dropout/pushout rates prevalent among African-Canadians as well as some of the reasons given to explain this sorry state of affairs. This background knowledge of dance and the predicament of black students provided me with the initial momentum to embark on this study.

Enthusiastic as I was, the more I plumbed the depth of the challenges facing African (Canadians), the more it became obvious to me that these challenges were farreaching in scope; of even greater significance, they forced me to re-examine myself. Through such introspection and self-scrutiny, I began to question my own journey both in terms of education and experiences; after all, these aspects of my life were essential in formulating my initial assumptions. Who was I and did my life journey prepare me adequately to embark on such an investigation?

1.2 Context of the inquiry

1.2.1 Introduction

This is an Afrocentric cultural study of the historical production, representation and reception of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and the perception of its relevance to African (Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. Reviere (2001) has noted that “…truth in intellectual inquiry or the verification of claims…is as problematic for Afrocentric research as it is for all others” but insists that in
the Afrocentric research, “truth…has to be grounded in the experiences of the community” (p. 713).

What is the nature of these experiences as regards the black community in Regina? These experiences boil down mainly to the challenges faced by the community and they could be classified into two main groups: immediate and long-term. Immediate collective challenges comprise issues such as disunity, racism, and sexism. Chris Mativo (personal communication, July 2014), a Kenyan social worker who graduated from the University of Regina and currently works with the government of Saskatchewan, has outlined some long-term problems that Africans may encounter such as youth gangs, drugs, prostitution, cultural alienation, poor academic performance, etc. It should be noted that even though high dropout/push out rates continue to haunt black communities in many parts of Canada (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, Zine, 2003; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine 2007; Gordon & Zinga, 2012), the Regina Public Schools Continuous Improvement Plan for 2012-2013 did not list that as a problem currently affecting the black community. Similarly, the gang and drug crises wracking black youths in cities such as Toronto and Montreal or even nearby Winnipeg and Edmonton have not attained crisis proportion in Regina. However, they remain potential problems for which the black community of Regina must brace itself and make efforts to pre-empt.

Since, to a large extent, these challenges underpin this research, it is important to examine the extent to which they relate to the black community.
1.2.2 Some challenges of Regina black community

1.2.2.1 Disunity

Among the challenges that are real, the most prominent is disunity which allows for a dispersed approach to problems that require collective effort. Far from being a homogenous community, blacks in Regina, especially those from the continent of Africa, face a vast array of challenges, starting with the one of disunity. They come from different national and ethnic backgrounds, do not speak the same language or share a common religion. Within the community are doctors, engineers, students, refugees and adventurers. Such a diverse population is extremely difficult to bring together. While there have been tremendous efforts to create associations that attempt to unite Africans, they have often been organized along ethnic, regional or national fault lines. The greatest evidence is that most organizations in the City of Regina that carry the label “African” are either national, ethnic or even religious. Thus, there is a Ugandan Canadian Association of Saskatchewan (UCAS), Ghanaian Association of Regina, the Nigerian Association of Regina, etc. Even within certain nationalities, some groups are opposed to each other. Cameroonianians have been unable to come together as one in any effective organization because of divisions along ethnic and linguistic lines. The clan division that fanned the flames of the civil war in Somalia and led to the disintegration of that country still haunts the Somali community, not just in Regina but in North America as a whole. One would expect all Nigerians living in Regina to form one organization that takes care of the problems of every Nigerian. This is far from being the case. The Igbos, from the eastern part of Nigeria, have a separate organization: the Igbo Cultural Association of Regina.
Saskatchewan (ICAS). Not to be outdone, the Yoruba from Western Nigeria have their own association, the Yoruba Community Association, which, in Regina, runs a Yoruba language school. Northern Sudanese, for the most part Muslims, do not see eye-to-eye with the predominantly Southern Sudanese, who fought for years against them and not long ago established a separate nation of their own. For years, Somalia and Ethiopia fought each other over a dry and barren piece of land called Ogaden and memories of that conflict still breed bad blood among some citizens of the two countries (Tareka, 2000). Not very long ago, Eritrea wrested its independence from Ethiopia after a protracted and bloody conflict. The list is endless.

As a counterpoint, it must be revealed that with the Saskatchewan Caribbean Canadian Association (SCCA), an umbrella organization which unites people of Caribbean heritage and responds to their needs, members of this community have demonstrated greater maturity towards unity than Africans. Historically, they always have. Pan-Africanism (started by the Trinidad lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams), Garveyism (originated by Marcus Garvey from Jamaica) and negritude (initiated by Aime Cesaire from Martinique), all of which were initiatives that pulled blacks from various horizons together to speak as one in defence of their interests, were the handiwork of blacks from the Caribbean (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2009, pp. 88-89).

1.2.2.2 Racism

Racism is a reality in Canada (Alyward, 1999; C. E. James, 1996; Kallen, 2003; Shepard, 1997; Cappello, 2012) and nowhere is it better cultivated and promoted than in the school setting (Dei, 1996; Dei et al, 2003, 2007; Cappello, 2012; Ghosh & Abdi,
Over the centuries, a disfigured black identity was created (J. W. Johnson, 1969; Mbembe, 2013, pp. 23-64; Osofsky, 1963/1971; & Shepard, 1997) and disseminated mainly through education (Woodson, 1933/2006). It still exists in Regina and this has always been of concern to Africans living in the city. In the bylaws of the Ugandan Canadian Association of Saskatchewan, which appear on its website, the organization lists among its objectives a provision “to work towards the elimination of racism and all forms of discrimination within the Ugandan Canadian community and the community at large.” Even though race relations in Saskatchewan have shown some major improvement from the early days when African Americans first arrived in the province from Oklahoma, “the stereotypical connection between Africa and disease still features in the immigration experiences of Africans…” (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005).

According to “Better Life Index,” a study carried out by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), of 34 industrialized countries that had been selected Canada ranked third as one of the best countries in the world to live in. All the same, vestiges of racism and racial prejudice still linger and dim the country’s good record. McLaren (2003) refers to prejudice as “…the negative prejudgment of individuals and groups on the basis of unrecognized, unsound, and inadequate evidence,” and further adds that “because these negative attitudes occur so frequently, they take on a commonsense or ideological character that is often used to justify acts of discrimination” (p. 208).

Today, part of the discourse of racism in Canada is the failure to acknowledge its existence; but as Aylward (1999) argues “Canada and the United States have similar histories that gave rise to anti-Black racism and oppression, which have often been
reinforced and perpetuated by law” and that “the similarities between the two countries run deep and the concept of ‘race’ is a powerful force in both societies” (p. 14).

Montgomery (2008) further argues that “a dangerous complacency is…permitted with respect to racisms by perpetuating myths about the essential tolerance of Canada and the dearth of racisms within it” (p. 84). Nevertheless, while incidents such as the dispossession of black people of their land in Africville in Halifax in Nova Scotia in the sixties remain a blot on the escutcheon of modern Canada, the country has been spared the endless spate of violence aimed at black people in the United States. C. E. James (1996) points out that racism in Canada today is more about exclusion.

Canada is inhabited by people of different ethnicities, languages, religions, and races. Yet often, when we identify ‘who is Canadian’ or of ‘mainstream Canadians,’ we think mainly of the English, and to a lesser extent French people, despite the fact that aboriginal people populated this region long before the French and English arrived. (p. 12)

How do Africans in Regina avoid the dangerous undercurrents of racism and not only survive but thrive? The need for collective effort as a strong community is evident.

1.2.2.3 Cultural imperialism

African American historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1962/2000) has demonstrated how black people were stripped of their culture when they arrived in this continent as slaves. Over the centuries this created a serious void. In Saskatchewan, as elsewhere in Canada, education attempted to fill that void by subjecting blacks to cultural imperialism, the universalization of one group’s experience and culture and its establishment as the norm (McLaren, 2003, p.17). Woodson (1933/2006) has painted a picture of what happens when a group is educated away from its own cultural traditions: “The ‘educated
Negroes’ have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as their mixed school Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teutons and to despise the African” (p. 1). This is just one aspect of the fallout of black cultural alienation and destruction. Gutman (1976) has identified certain practices during slavery which impacted the black family negatively by arguing that it was by destroying the black family that white America broke the will of black people and that three centuries of injustice had caused deep-seated structural distortions in the life of African Americans. The disorganized family was at the root of a tangle of pathology (p. xvii).

A major concern for Africans who arrive in Regina involves how to navigate the cultural currents of their new society. How their children fare in school depends on the cultural values they acquire at home. Keeping family together, counting on the mutual support of members of their ethnic community, developing a sense of respect and hard work and raising children to take pride in their own history, folklores and traditions are all useful ingredients which form part of the cultural recipe that will ensure their own very survival and progress. Should they surrender to societal pressures and abandon all their African cultural values in order to fit in? Which approach should they adopt when dealing with matters relating to culture: confrontation or collaboration? Brown and Hannis (2012) describe confrontation as “based on opposition, incompatibility between groups.”

Of course, there are numerous areas where African culture stands to gain a lot from the West and even the East. Some of these areas had been part of colonial indoctrination and have often played a positive role in Africa’s advancement (Ayittez,
1998, 2005; Mandela, 1994). If the role of creating a community is to ensure that ordinary people and those who are marginalized and oppressed are provided with the knowledge and skills so that they can analyze critically their situation and actively respond (Freire, 1993), should such collaboration with the cultural values of other communities to attain this objective not be the way forward? This does not mean that the African community should succumb to “cultural destructiveness” which refers to “forced assimilation or subjugation, with rights and privileges extended to the dominant group or groups only” (Brown & Hannis, 2012). From a community development perspective, it is not whether or not the approaches, processes or practices of development are derived from the so-called West or from local traditional values and norms. The most important issue is whether activities are owned, supported and, as far as possible, controlled by the people whose everyday lives are affected (Kenny, Fanany & Rahayu, 2012, p. 293). It is only through cultural accommodation that the African community in Regina can mend some of the divisions that roil it from within and prevents it from reaching out in order to partner with other communities. Reaching out to embrace other communities does not only underline our humanity, it also bolsters the Canadian official policy of multiculturalism adopted since 1971 and through which diversity is managed in this country (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005, p. 38).

1.2.2.4 Gangs and drugs

To a large extent, the Regina African community has been spared the scourge of street gangs and drug trade and consumption wracking other cities in Canada. The proliferation of African youth gangs in recent times and their involvement in the drug
trade and consumption in some North American cities is increasingly becoming a cause for alarm among African communities. An article in the *Toronto Star* of Monday, March 22, 2010, titled “Somali-Canadians caught in Alberta’s deadly drug war” provides a hint of one of the greatest challenges that African communities all over Canada may yet have to face. “Since the summer of 2005, 29 Somali-Canadians ranging in age from 17 to 28 have been murdered in Alberta…,” the article states. Somali youth gangs have been reported in places as close to Regina as Saskatoon and Winnipeg. Integrating immigrants has been identified as one of the ways of fighting against youth gangs and crimes. Thus, a press release by the Government of Alberta on May 11, 2010, states that “New Edmonton anti-crime projects focus on immigrant integration, mentoring and Somali youth support.” In order to attain these objectives, the Safe Community Innovation Fund (SCIF) received $202,740 over three years to help “reduce and prevent crime in the Somali community through quality afterschool programming and academic support.”

While such fundings may be appreciated, in the long-run it is unity, decent education and the search for answers within their own culture and community that are vital when it comes to dealing with these critical issues. Even though Canada is an advanced society in which education is seen as key to the good life, Gordon & Zinga (2012) have noted that “academic disengagement is a considerable issue among black youths” (p. 2). James & Brathwaite (1996) have concurred, stating that research “showed that Black students were second to Aboriginals in being most highly represented in basic level programmes of study” (p. 16).
In the light of this distressful portrait, it is important to heed John R. Porter’s warnings which appear in the introduction to Perkins’ *Explosion of Chicago Black Street Gangs – 1900 to Present* (1990). In it, Porter states:

> Where there is little or no sense of community or family, where Black men fail to organize, Black boys will run and ruin our communities. When the black community will struggle and gain control over its economical, political, educational, familial and religious institutions – and its cultural, athletic and artistic talent – there will be no need for negative institutions. (p. 14)

In other words, it is the absence of positive organizations that forces some youths to join gangs. I, therefore, see the creation of an African traditional dance program as just the kind of positive substitute organization he is advocating.

There are other compelling reasons for the study. The black population in Regina continues to grow, making the need for such an investigation urgent; in addition, since the predicament of black students is not peculiar only to this group, it is hoped that other minority groups that are encountering similar challenges and are in search of a solution may draw inspiration from the findings of such a research undertaking. These are strong reasons. Still the question remains: has my education adequately prepared me for such an investigation?

### 1.3 My own background: education and experiences

#### 1.3.1 Introduction

Reviere (2001) has contended that “…all scholars have some stake or interest in the outcome of their work” and argues that “the inclusion of the personal is therefore necessary for Afrocentric research” (p. 714). M. K. Asante (1990a) agrees, noting that “the Afrocentric method insists that the researcher examines herself or himself in the
process of examining any subject” (p. 27). This speaks to reflexivity, to my own subjectivity which informed and shaped the assumptions and perspectives I had as I embarked on this research project. Who am I and am I who I think I am?

1.3.2 My own education and cultural alienation

When I was born, there were no nursery schools in my village, so my parents had to wait until I had attained the age of attending elementary school. The most popular school, N. A. School Ndop, was owned by the Native Authorities, a branch of the local government, and this is where my long journey into Western culture started. Up to this point, my education had been African and at that tender age was made up mainly of family and village lore and history recounted to me by my parents. As the son of a blacksmith, I should have also been initiated into learning how to play the xylophone and drum; but I showed little interest and my parents did not press the point, as long as I expressed enthusiasm for Western education.

Formal Western education came to Cameroon mainly through the Germans, the English and French. In spite of its numerous and undeniable benefits, it has become a sticky point for Africa. Luma (1983), a Cameroonian educator, notes that “the problems that Africa as a whole is facing continue to mount” and that “if Africa is to survive the onslaught of diverse and piercing problems facing her today, she must come to grips with the fact that education is a potent factor in finding solutions to them” (p. 1). More often than not, when examining the causes of these problems, analysts tend generally to overlook the role that education has played. The difference between a good and bad leader, an affluent and a starving nation, and a prosperous and underperforming economy
may depend to a large extent on education. Is the education of a nation designed to serve local or foreign interests? Is it based on the lived experiences of the people in the country in question? Does it take into account local epistemologies? Does it encourage or discourage critical thinking? And of course the old curriculum question: “What knowledge is of most worth” (Chambers, 1999, p. 1)? These are just some of the questions that very occasionally helped to shape my thinking later in life as I navigated the educational system, first in Cameroon and then in Canada. They also informed me as I embarked on this study.

I came into this world on the eve of Cameroon’s independence and reunification (of British and French Cameroons) and since it was a watershed moment which links the past to the present, I form a human bridge between two supposedly antithetical epochs (the colonial and postcolonial periods). I write from the vantage point of a person educated in both the English and French systems of education that the former colonial masters bequeathed onto my country. It is the combination of the forces of these two systems that continue to exert tremendous influence on me and shape my life and identity. The bilingual character of my identity is enshrined in the constitution of Cameroon.

Three aspects of the educative environment have been outlined: material such as books and buildings, language and the people in the environment, that is, the students and members of staff (Au, 2012). The language provision of the constitution shows that Cameroon still remains in the thrall of European cultural imperialism and hegemony. McLaren (2003) defines hegemony as “the maintenance of domination not by the sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and
social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family” (p. 202). If “curriculum development in the postmodern era deconstructs prejudice and hegemony” (Slattery 2013), Cameroon, which remains in a strict sense a neocolonial entity, is yet to genuinely initiate the postmodern era.

In the light of Cameroon’s predicament, it was therefore “normal” for me to undertake my journey into Western culture in both languages, starting with the English language. At all levels of the education process in my early school years, English was the language of instruction in the entire region. Pupils were thus required to refrain from speaking their African languages in order to master it well; and all the books used for the different lessons were in this language and focused mainly on European society. George Dei et al. (2007) argue that “society expects the school to legitimize certain hegemonic and ideological practices, while delegitimizing others” (p. 20). With English and European culture and values upheld to the detriment of those of Africa, this argument was particularly true of my early schools. Episkenew (2009) has identified similar trend in Canada by pointing out that Native children who attended day school were being assimilated into colonial society. Culture is a product of the history of a people which it in turn reflects and we were now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to us (Ngugi wa Thiongo, 1994). Catching Them Young, the title of Bob Dixon’s book on racism, class, sex, and politics, is how the Kenyan author styles the entire process of acculturation.

For Cameroon, as it is for most of black Africa, language remains a thorny curricular and educational issue crucial to development. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) has
stated that language is always more than a simple medium of communication and instruction. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is also indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next (p. 15). He argues that “the domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized” (p. 16). If language, as Ngugi suggests, is the “collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history,” Abdi (2012) has concluded that “de-‘linguicization’” of African countries led to “important components of the de-historicizing process…” (p.137). Diop has argued that one way of achieving African renaissance is by developing indigenous languages, insisting that no people have ever achieved a true renaissance using somebody’s else’s language (Diop, 1996 & M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 116). To counter claims by Eurocentric Africanists that African languages could not capture abstract notions in science and philosophy, Diop translated Einstein’s principle of relativity into Wolof, his mother tongue (Asante, 2007).

Cultural alienation through the imposition of foreign languages runs even deeper than what has been listed above. The task for the African writer is to write for the African audience and to create a strong sense of the possible among the general readership of Africans, Diop has argued in an essay: Toward the African Renaissance: Essay in Culture and Development. It is an argument that Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986; 1993) continues to harp upon and he now backs it by writing in his own African language, Gikuyu. The practice of writing in African languages is gaining popularity in some African countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and of course Ethiopia; but, Cameroonian
authors are yet to muster the courage to take up that challenge. Consequently, in Cameroonian schools most of the books still used for literature and even history are the works of French and English authors.

After high school, my journey into Western culture continued in the French language at the University of Yaounde. Like in the early years of my education, almost everything at this center of learning was modeled after that of the European. Very little I learned had any relevance to my own environment. “Curriculum is about learning, about how we see and understand the world” (Au, 2012, p. 16). The question then arises: whose world? George Dei et al. (2003, 2007) also notes that schools can be seen as a microcosm of society and the primary site of social reproduction. In the case of Cameroon, it is largely a microcosm not of our African society but that of the Europeans. What a betrayal, for in the nation’s own anthem a segment reads:

Foster, for mother Africa, a loyalty
That true shall remain to the last. (Shiri-Halle, Tacham, Fusi, & Tardzenyuy, 2013, pp. 14-15)

1.3.3 Experience as a classroom teacher

When I graduated from the Yaounde University, Cameroon was badly in need of teachers to fill positions in far-flung country schools. After an interview and a practical teaching demonstration before a panel of pedagogical advisers, I was deemed apt and recruited to teach at a secondary school in a remote village called Nyasoso. I became a history and French language teacher. Teaching history in Cameroon is like treading on a minefield. Those in power acquired it illegitimately and are determined to hold onto it by any means necessary, including through initiating a reign of terror. This practice operates in tandem with historical revisionism to “legitimize” their power usurpation as well as to
promote pastoral pedagogy, an aspect of pastoral power that was first illustrated by Michel Foucault and whose orientation in Canada organized the Canadian child’s relationship to formerly colonized people abroad thought to be savage and uncivilized (Cavanagh, 2001, p. 403). In the case of Cameroon, this form of pedagogy was intended to train students to become “exemplary partners of France.” As a result of this kind of pedagogy, those who actually died fighting for the “independence” (the process was derailed) of the country have always been cast in a negative light. Their names are absent in most history books and no statues have been erected in their honour. By contrast, entire avenues, schools, centers are still named after the colonizers. Besides, most of the history I taught to my students was pretty much that of Western Europe which tended to be silent on the issue of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and to paint a rosy picture of European colonial conquest. It was as though Cameroon had no history, no way of knowing. Okot p’Bitek (as cited in Abdi, 2012) talks of “de-philosophizing and in the process, de-epistemologizing Africa” (p. 134). It is the “void” that Hegel (1991), a pillar of Western scholarship, fills with statement of this nature: “Africa was in a state of barbarism and savagery which was preventing it from being an integral part of civilization.” His words have been repeated in a million different ways in the Western world!

Far from providing what curriculum theorist Wayne Au (2012) describes as “curricular standpoint,” that is counter hegemonic intervention, to this kind of discourse, history lessons in Cameroon merely subscribed to the views of the ruling elite. This is not at all surprising. It has been argued that the dominant trends in post-colonial African historiography, coming from both European and African historians, have served the
interests of the burgeoning ruling classes of the new African states (Gray, 1989, p. 65). Hence, anti and postcolonial Nigerian musician Fela Kuti embarks on deconstruction with songs such as Colonial Mentality (1977) and Teacher Don’t Teach Me No Nonsense (1976).

Without any knowledge of critical pedagogy, I spent most of my days as a teacher merely reproducing the biddings of the ruling class. The intervention of the political class in curricular matters, as in Cameroon, is tantamount to school deform – in which educators have no formal control over the curriculum (Woodson, 2006; M. K. Asante. 1993, pp. 85-96; Ng-A-Fook, 2010). This kind of scholarship has prevented Cameroonian from developing historical and social consciousness. Of “consciousness,” Au (2012) notes that it “requires active consideration of how one interacts with one’s social, cultural and material environment…” (p. 17). For Cameroonians, this environment is still dominated by Europe. Mine for the most part has been thus education in alienation.

1.3.4 My radicalization

My stint as a teacher came to an end when I succeeded in a special entrance organized by the Presidency of Cameroon in which I was granted scholarship to study translation at the Universite de Montreal. My exposure to the Canadian system of education and way of life made me question many things in my own Cameroonian society. Consequently, when I returned to Cameroon, I was determined to challenge them. In 1990, the one-party state apparatus which had ruled the country for thirty years was challenged when an opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), was launched. Six Cameroonians were killed following the event but the momentum for radical political change had been initiated. I joined in the fray as a prodemocracy and
human rights activist. I started writing for newspapers and magazines with a radical outlook: *Cameroon Post, Cameroon Life, Le Messager*, and *The Herald*. By 1996, I had had enough of the madness of Cameroon, to parody James Baldwin, and decided to move to South Africa. The country was just emerging from centuries of white domination and oppression with the collapse of apartheid. The trauma caused by the long struggle still lingered and this only helped to intensify my radical outlook.

1.3.5 *My experience with traditional dance*

Even with all the obvious flaws in the Cameroonian system of education, in some areas of local life, especially those which legitimized the authority of the neocolonial state, government authorities permitted benign aspects of the national culture to flourish. One of such areas was traditional dance (Ntaimah, 2012) which, as Shay (2002, 2006) points out, is used to assert national identities; and, given its very innocence often tempts tyrants to use and distort it for political purposes (p. 7). Thus growing up, I participated in traditional dances which were a fixture of most primary schools. At the time, my participation did not go beyond socializing with my friends and having fun together. Dance did take a whole new meaning to me when I first watched Tamukung.

In retrospect, I have good reasons to think Tamukung was the only thing African with which I associated myself closely that made me feel that way. The conversion to dance as a tool to combat tyranny came to me much later, when I was living in South Africa and read about the role dance had played in the liberation of the country from apartheid. This new cultural appraisal made me take a good look at this art form. This experience, and my own exposure to a context in which the most brutal form of Western
colonialism in Africa had been experimented (Mandela, 1994; Du Boulay, 1988), did a lot to shape the way I view art and human emancipation. I began to understand the reason why Western powers, wherever they exercised a colonial stranglehold, were keen on preventing the rise of native cultural art forms. Cruse (1984) has argued that a cultural renaissance which engenders barriers of any sort to the emergence of the creative artists is a contradiction in terms, an emasculated movement (p. 37).

1.4 My second coming to Canada

When I left South Africa, having caused the authorities more headaches than they could tolerate from any refugee, I was resettled in Canada in 2000 by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). I was sent to Prince Albert in Saskatchewan, a city with a large Indigenous population. Here, I struck up friendship with many Native people who recounted horrendous stories about their plight in this country; but even before they did so I could already detect similarities between their community and the one of black people in South Africa: poverty, alcoholism, illness, lag in education, etc. As our friendship progressed, I was eager to know more about them, especially in the light of the negative discourses which were being peddled over the media and on street corners, so I began checking out books on their history and culture from the local library; I also took an interest watching some of their activities on the television. This is how I deepened my understanding about the disproportionately high rates of incarceration and school dropout afflicting their community.

Drawing from their experience, I immediately made an analogy with the plight of black people in the United States and in Canada. During my sojourn in the United States,
where I spent some time with my friends and relatives in Maryland, what I had learned about African Americans in history books and from the media, confirmed what I was experiencing: high school dropout rates; many children in a single parent household (about 70%, CNN); high rates of incarceration, etc. According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE), college graduation stands at 42%, 20 points below the one for whites, which is 62%; and according to the *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, 1 in 3 black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. Similarly, while black people make up 13% of the population of the US, they constitute 40% of those who are imprisoned (K. Bell, 2016).

In Canada, blacks fared no better. In education, Hampton (2010) paints this disturbing picture:

As elsewhere in the country, many Black youth in Québec are not engaged in public schools, leaving them unable to make useful connections between the education they receive at school and their lived experiences – with the exception of the clear connection between the disenfranchisement and alienation they experience at school and that which they and their families experience in wider society. Even Black families who have been in Québec for multiple generations face an unemployment rate and a proportion of low-income households more than double those of the general population. Nearly half of Québec’s Black youth drop out of high school. A 2004 study demonstrated that a group of Black students in Québec who started high school between 1994 and 1996 had a 51.8 per cent graduation rate, compared to 69 per cent for the population as a whole. (p. 105)

The situation of disproportionately high school dropout rates is not peculiar to Québec; it is also experienced in other parts of Canada as well. Dei et al. (2007) have pointed out that “in the 1990s, North American society is facing the challenge of providing education for an increasingly diverse population” and that “the issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality present significant challenges and lessons for Euro-Canadian/American schools” (p.3). Consequently, “despite the efforts of the 1990s, at the
dawn of the twenty-first century, the situation for Black learners in Canada had not significantly improved” (Hampton, 2010, p.105). Focusing mainly on the Ontario Public School System, Dei et al. (2007) have conducted a study on the phenomenon of black students who constitute a disproportionate number of those who leave school prematurely.

I have staked this entire dissertation on African folkdance, to determine its relevance in helping deal with this dire situation in the black community. I am convinced that culture, or its lack thereof, has played a very important role in creating it. However, many people I talked to in the course of this investigation are quick to point out that if culture is as important as I claim in bringing about this state of affairs, how come Asian students, who navigate the same cultural currents as blacks and Native students in Canada and the United States, do well in school? This question is more mischievous than it appears. It is a racial indictment; and, in the worst of times, it often comes with a liberal dose of scientific half-truths and baseless allegations designed, in the main, to deflect accusations of white cultural hegemony and imperialism and to entrench the top-dog mentality. As a result, it requires a rebuttal sufficiently robust to put it to sleep. Strangely enough, in the question lies the answer.

Drawing on data from Statistics Canada 2002, a study jointly conducted by Teresa Abada, Feng Hou and Bali Ram in 2008 to determine differences in levels of academic achievements among the children of immigrants showed that the highest rates of university graduates between the ages of 24 and 34 born of immigrant parents were the Chinese with 69.5%, followed by the Indians with 65.2%. As outlined, this finding seems paradoxical as these two groups operate in a “foreign” cultural environment; but
follow the argument. In my search for an explanation to such discrepancy, I found out that the two groups which showed significant dropout rates and low academic performance, blacks and First Nations students, have had a cultural experience in North America different from that of the two Asian communities. Historically, native-born North American blacks and First Nations have operated in a virtual indigenous cultural vacuum dominated by two deleterious forces operating in tandem; to wit, the destruction of their cultural institutions and then their forcible assimilation into the dominant Eurocentric culture. Focusing on diaspora Africans (native-born North American blacks), Karade (1994) insists that they were “…stripped of their fundamental social structures and mores” (p. 5). This experience is different from that of the Chinese or Indians who have always retained their own culture in this continent even as they navigate the treacherous streams of cultural hegemony and exclusion. This argument takes on greater weight when a distinction is made between the school performance of African-born and diaspora black students. Those from Africa generally experience high graduation rates and perform well in school. With data from the United States Census Bureau, Wachira Kigotho (2015) has conducted a study titled *A profile of sub-Saharan African students in America*. His findings show that, compared with America’s overall foreign-born population, the foreign-born from Africa had higher levels of educational achievement between 2008-2012. Similarly, in *The Foreign-Born Population from Africa: 2008-2012*, a survey conducted jointly by Christine Gambino, Edward N. Trevelyan and John Thomas Fitzwater (2014) at the US Census Bureau, 41% of the African-born population had a bachelor degree compared with 28% of the overall foreign-born population in the US. According to another analysis of the Census Bureau by the Journal of Blacks in
Higher Education (JBHE), African immigrants to the United States were found more likely to be college educated than other immigrant groups. The journal continues by noting that 48.9% of all African immigrants hold a college diploma, a figure which is slightly higher than the percentage of Asian immigrants to the US, nearly double the rate of native-born white Americans and nearly four times the rate of native-born African Americans. In Canada, students of African immigrants came third, after the Chinese and Indians, with a university graduation rate of 55.9% (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008).

What these findings show is that there is a significant link between cultural preservation and high academic performance. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009) has argued that “…cultural subjugation is more dangerous (than political and economic), because it is more subtle and its effects longer lasting” and that it can lead to a pessimism that fails to see in a person’s history any positive lesson in dealing with the present (p. 109). The Chinese in North America have often attributed their academic excellence and economic success largely to Confucian ethics (N. Smith, 2015). So, coming back to the explanation of the discrepancy between African-born and native-born North American blacks, I should point out that a Yoruba student from Nigeria, for instance, apart from bringing his or her own ethical and cultural values enshrined in Book of Ifa (Karade, 1994, pp. 14-20; Soyinka, 2012, pp. 104-169), has never been methodically exposed to the blitz of Eurocentric indoctrination and brainwashing as well as anti-black hostility which over the centuries have dogged Africans and contributed significantly in eroding self-esteem and ethnic worth. The point of cultural complementarity is taken up by renowned Jewish historian Max Dimont (1962) who has noted that “Jewish renaissance” came about in a two-way flow dynamic in which the Biblical Jews maintained their Torah-based faith
while embracing Hellenic philosophical rationality they had previously rejected. In other words, the Jews did not discard Judaism; they only supplemented what they had with something they borrowed from the Greeks (pp. 192-200). North American blacks and First Nations people were forced to abandon what they were, leaving a cultural void which was gradually filled with an unending barrage of denigrating and demoralizing morass and negative discourses designed mainly to rob them of their own history and heritage as well as to entrench white colonial stranglehold and values. Anti-black and -Native attitude prevalent in most North American school environment today stems largely from long years of very hostile and corrosive colonial narratives which have often been directed against the two groups. Afrocentricity, in its various dimensions, provides a counter narrative to those discourses and reaffirms a genuine black personality.

1.4.1 Blacks in Saskatchewan

This research is based on the lived experience of the black community, not just in Saskatchewan but the rest of Canada. This aspect is very important since in Afrocentricity research outcome must be validated by the experiences of the community members (Reviere, 2001, p. 720).

According to Shepard (1997), “Black is one of the oldest colours in the Canadian mosaic…” (10). He maintains that the earliest blacks arrived in Saskatchewan around the late 1800s and they comprised, for the most part, former slaves fleeing the racial segregation and violence of Oklahoma in the United States. “After World War I the younger /black/ colonists would move …to larger nearby towns – Lloydminster, North Battleford, Saskatoon and eventually to Edmonton and Regina…” (Winks, 1997, p. 303).
Owing to a shift in Canadian immigration policy, Africans from the continent began to show a significant rise in their population in the whole of Canada between 1971 and 2001 (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005).

The early presence of blacks in Regina, especially at a time when racial intolerance ran deep, has helped in creating the black identity which is currently being largely associated with recent arrivals in the City of Regina from Africa. Shepard (1997) maintains that “the Americans, the British and Anglo-Canadians shared a great deal – language, a deep love of democracy, and a profound racist bias against dark-skinned peoples” (p. 67). In the past, therefore, there was an overt preference “to keep the …plain white” (p. 73) and this was the main reason why the bulk of refugees in this province came from Europe. Changes in immigration policies since 1967 has given rise to immigrants to Canada from non-preferred sources. Tettey & Puplampu (2005) point out that “one particular source or group of people who benefited from the changes in the immigration policy were Africans” and that “while 64,265 Africans immigrated to Canada during the whole of the 1980s, the number between 1991 and 1996 alone was 76,260, according to Statistics Canada in 1996. In 2001, the same source maintains that the number of African immigrants in Canada jumped to 282,600 (p. 26).

Over the years race relations in Canada have improved, but “the stereotypical connection between Africa and disease still features in the immigration experiences of Africans…” and “it is this stereotyping that eventually leads to racism” (p. 35). The 2006 Canada Census Report (as cited in Kumaran and Salt, 2010), however, states that the total number of blacks living in Regina was 2,170, that is about 1.1 per cent of the population. In a report prepared for the planning and development division of Regina, the Regina
City Priority Population Study, in its “Study #2,” which was done in 2011 and focused on Immigration, about 16 per cent of recent immigrants arriving in this city after 1990 hail from Africa. Statistics outlining the population figures for each African country in Regina are hard to come by. However, the figures of Africans who showed up at the Regina Open Door Society in 2012-2013 for referrals to access the city’s services provide a hint about those nations whose population in Regina is growing. The figures were as follows: Somalia, 41; Sudan, 31; Nigeria, 29; Eritrea, 24; Ethiopia, 18; Burundi, 12; Cameroon, 7; Congo Brazzaville, 7, etc. Statistics obtained from The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research (2010) clearly show that there has been a radical shift from the period before 1960, when there were only 30 Africans in the entire province.

Even though in the data Africa is usually presented as if it were a country, it is important to point out at this juncture that it is a continent made up many independent countries (55) and numerous different ethnic groups (Ki-Zerbo, 1978). Such divisions along national, ethnic and religious fault lines often provide an enormous challenge to unity and community building. Vissicaro (2009) notes that “the common thread among people who move from one place to another is the necessity to strategically interact as a means for adaptation and survival” (p. 49).

1.4.2 My personal experience with the African community in Regina

Having spent some years in Prince Albert and then Toronto, I finally moved to Regina where I have been since 2008. Before some Africans were resettled in Saskatchewan, I became acquainted with them when I worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Pretoria in South Africa. In Canada, I have worked (as a volunteer) with
the Prince Albert Multicultural Council as well as with the Regina Open Door Society (RODS). I have been part of the St Jean-Baptiste Roman Catholic Congregation in Regina and have participated in many African gatherings and functions where I discussed with many people from different countries. Additionally, I have been prepared to engage in such an undertaking based on a history of mine. I hold a degree in history and have written for numerous newspapers (*Cameroon Post; Catholic New Times, Toronto; Herald Tribune, Yaounde; L’Eau Vive*, the only French newspaper in Saskatchewan), magazines (*Cameroon Life; Servir*, Jesuit Refugee Service International Magazine, Rome) and newsletters (*Kwanza*, South African Jesuit Refugee Service newsletter; *Botshabelo*, the South African Lawyers for Human Rights Magazine) on different aspects of African life. Through my studies, engagements and interactions, I obtained plenty of firsthand knowledge as well as great insight into the African community in the City of Regina: its character, some of its problems and challenges.

From my knowledge and experiences, I established that the majority of Africans who live in Regina came to this country either as international students or refugees, as part of an immigration quota or through the Saskatchewan Nominee Program. Generally, most of those who applied and got to Regina through the Nominee program or who arrived in some other parts of Canada as immigrants before resettling in the city are well-educated or have a trade that could enable them to make a decent living. By contrast, those who came here as refugees, people resettled mainly as part of an international humanitarian effort, have a different profile. While some of them might have had the opportunity to attend school, a huge number were taken straight from refugee camps or resettled from some host countries and had never enjoyed the benefits of a decent
education. This speaks not only to racial, ethnic, national, religious and gender but class diversity as well.

These are complex problems which require the involvement of the entire community. An African proverb states that it takes an entire village to raise a child. By forming a strong community and reenacting the African I/We philosophy of Ubuntu, “an organic relationship between people such that when we see another we should recognize ourselves and God as in whose image all things are made” (Desmond Tutu as cited in Chilisa, 2012, p. 186), the African community could better tackle these problems. Some of the problems and needs are self-evident and have been classified by Brown and Hannis (2012) under basic needs and include food, shelter, employment, safety and sense of place. Both scholars have maintained that problems such as marginalization, oppression, exploitation, and powerlessness could stem from racism and are often latent. These and other problems such as gang violence, drugs and prostitution as well as cultural alienation tend to require group efforts for their resolution. The problems have been shown to greatly affect student performance in school and result in high dropout/push out rates. They also provide a good selling point for the use of African traditional dances for community mobilization and collective effort.

1.5 Arts, black struggles and emancipation

In the face of such enormous challenges, many may wonder how much an art such as dance can contribute in providing an answer. Such doubt, to say the least, flies in the face of the history of black people. According to Taylor (1995), the publicist and manager of Jamaican reggae star Bob Marley, “Bob had one burning desire: to lead a
revolutionary assault on the forces of Babylon by giving voice to the downtrodden and
the oppressed through his music” (p. 105). This statement is just one among many which
capture the link between emancipation and arts. Nothing speaks to emancipation better
than group solidarity and in this the contribution of arts is robust. Blair (1994) has stated
that

Art forms, as seen in Africa, arises from and re-enforce social values. Celebrations and rituals which make room for such expression are linked to
the perpetuation of group culture, which not only cements the group together
in an unseen bond of solidarity, but imbues its participants with a world view
which is particular to the group. (p. 13)

Arts and emancipation blend into a theme which resonates throughout black liberation
struggles. Long before Abraham Lincoln affixed his signature on the Emancipation
Proclamation in 1863, the spirit had been singing.

The spirit begins to sing and out of it comes the great freedom spirituals
whose force of beauty and imagery of hope and deliverance still make
freedom sing everywhere in the world. The spiritual is an aesthetic of
resistance, the most consistent and concentrated in the world. Out of that
tradition of African American and African Caribbean speech which produced
the spiritual, came the blues, jazz, and calypso as well as today’s reggae and
hip hop. (Ngugi, 2009, p.45)

It was not only the language (Patois, Creole, Ebonics) and songs of the slaves that
comprised avenues to freedom. Their lore, embedded in stories like Anansi The Cunning
Spider (Dorson, 1972, p. 408, Ngugi, 2009, pp. 44-45) and Uncle Remus Stories
(Johnson, 1969, pp. 260-261), different kinds of literature, from Beecher Stowe’s Uncle
Tom’s Cabin (1852) to Northup’s 12 Years a Slave (1853) and the Classic Slave
Narratives (Gates, Jr., 2002), and other forms of arts were pressed into service to keep
the struggle against slavery alive.
The 1920s, what renowned African American poet Langston Hughes describes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940/1986) as “the years of Manhattan’s black Renaissance” and a time “when the Negro was in vogue” (p. 223), saw an explosion of black artistic talents as African Americans gradually began moving away from minstrelsy of the 1890’s, which was “a caricature of Negro life” (J. W. Johnson, 1969, p. 93), to a display of the wide range of their talents as well as to portray their identity in a positive light. This period saw the rise of shows such as *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Running Wild* (1923), of performers such as Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Florence Mills, of musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Gladys Bentley, and Bessie Smith, of writers and poets such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Count Cullen, Ethel Waters, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Carl Van Vetchen, and Pan-African ideologues and advocates such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Dubois (Bennett, Jr., 2000; Hughes, 1940/1986, pp. 221-278, J. W. Johnson, 1969).

Away from America, in the rumbles and drumbeats of the struggles against European colonialism in Africa, arts became a formidable weapon in the arsenal of those fighting for freedom. In 1938, Jomo Kenyatta published *Facing Mount Kenya*, described by renowned Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in an introduction to the book as “instructive contributions to African ethnography by a scholar of pure African parentage” (p. xiii); and in the 1930’s, the magazine *Legitime Defense* launched Negritude in Paris as an anti-colonial movement which brought together some of the finest black minds such as Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Leon Damas. The publishing house *Presence Africaine* was established in 1947 by the Senegalese Alioune Diop and through this effort radical Pan-Africanist and anti-colonial thinkers such as
Aime Cesaire (*Discours sur le colonialism in 1955*) and Cheikh Anta Diop (*Nations negres et culture in 1955*) were published and gained prominence. Even in modern times, in the African postcolonial dispensation, often characterized by totalitarian regimes, widespread corruption and mismanagement, tribalism, ethno-fascism and genocide (Ayittez, 1998, 2005; Dallaire, 2003; Mongo Beti, 1972; Soyinka, 2012), arts have maintained that longstanding fighting reputation and still remain a formidable weapon in the arsenal of those seeking genuine freedom. Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela (South Africa), Fela Kuti, Sonny Okosun (Nigeria), and Lapiro de Mbanga (Cameroon) are among numerous prominent African musicians whose art openly challenged bad government and oppression. Among the writers could be listed the following: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ken Sarowiwa, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria); Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Kenya); Mongo Beti, Francis Nyamnjoh, William Ndi, Peter Vakunta, Bate Besong, Achille Mbembe (Cameroon); Ayi Kwei Armah and George Ayittez (Ghana); Ousman Sembene (Senegal); Eskia Mphalele, Nadine Gordimer, Peter Abrahams (South Africa); and finally among dances are the following: Les Ballets Africains (Guinea); Le Ballet National du Senegal (Senegal); Amandla Mayibuye (South Africa), etc.

1.6 African folkdance and black emancipation

It is thus clear in the preceding analysis that in various ways and at different periods in black history, arts have been used as a tool for liberation and have proved to be very effective. Hanna (1988) has pointed out that dance is potentially very potent (p. 13); and it is central in this inquiry. Kringelback & Skinner (2012) maintain that “dance does not simply ‘reflect’ what happens in society or serve a particular ‘function’ but that it is
often central to social life as music and other universal forms of expression” (p. 2); they also add that it “is not fixed outside the bodies of performers and is therefore malleable enough to be manipulated according to context, ideology, and purpose” (p. 14). As an Afrocentric project, this research is largely emancipatory in that dance is conceived as an art “...concerned with the liberation of oppressed people” (Mazama, 2003, p. 145) and as such should be seen to reject “inequality, the oppression of disenfranchised groups, the silencing of marginalized voices, and authoritarian social structures” (Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999, p. 105).

With regard to education, Hanna (1999) has pointed out that dance can facilitate learning of other academic disciplines and life skills and that not only can students learn the discipline of dance, but they can also learn about dance through dance; and that through dance education students can discover and address personal and public concerns about health, gender, ethnicity, self, and their national identity (p. 2).

My selection of an African folk dance from the numerous art forms is not fortuitous. Apart from the reasons advanced so far, my own background has a lot to do with the selection. I am the son of a blacksmith and was born and raised in a region where traditional dance is widespread and remains largely a people’s art par excellence; an art with wide range applications, which, true to its African character, encompasses other art forms such as music (Ajayi, 1998; Argenti, 2002, 2007; Bebey, 1975; Flaig, 2010; Ntaimah, 2012), sculpture (Argenti, 2002; R. F. Thompson, 1974), story-telling (Ebron, 2002), theater (Layiwola, 2003), aesthetics (K. W. Asante, 2000; R. F. Thompson, 1974) and spirituality (Gunn, Jr., 2006; Ajayi, 1998; R. F. Thompson, 1974). This versatility is expressed by Fodeba (1959) who, talking about Les Ballets Africains,
states: “To make Africa and all the variety known, we have chosen dance, not only as an excellent means of universal expression but also because, with us, it is connected with all the other arts” (p. 20).

Furthermore, “Dance in Africa is not a separate art, but a part of the whole complex of living” (K. W. Asante, 2004, p. 4). Fodeba (1959) refers to African dance as an emanation of the people; and Ajayi (1998), as a microcosm of culture. If, as Alan Merriam (1959) posits dance is culture and culture is dance and culture is defined in cultural studies in terms of “shared meanings or shared conceptual maps” (Hall, 2013, p. 4), then dance becomes a perfect tool for effectively creating and engaging entire communities (Fodeba, 1959), especially those in quest of solutions to their problems. As the example of a vaccine or an antitoxin clearly proves, the solution to a problem is not far from the problem itself. The implication of this reasoning is that the tools for the emancipation of black people are actually embedded within their own culture and institutions; hence, the necessity for them to return towards their own “center” (M. K. Asante, 1998; Diop, 1996).

It is somewhat ironic that dance as a route to black emancipation has not been amply explored by its being associated with education which, for centuries, has served as the main source of the production and propagation of Western cultural hegemony and oppression. During the eras of enslavement and of Western colonialism, African traditional dance was often discouraged in black communities, sometimes by the very leadership of these communities. Thus, in 1787 the Free African Society, the first African American organization in the United States, “opposed singing and dancing” in order to “improve the morals of its members” (Neufeldt & McGee, 1990, p. 11).
From Northup’s *12 Years a Slave* (1853), Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948) and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), through Hailey’s *Roots* (1976), Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) and *Kongi’s Harvest* (1967) and Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), to a very recent work such as Hills’ *The Books Of Negroes* (2007), to quote just a few of them, there is a profusion of writings through which black communities have been actively engaged in different ways (schools, movies, theaters, documentaries, TV mini-series, etc.). Could as much be said of African folkdances?

In terms of decolonization, literature is obviously a powerful tool to engage society and raise collective consciousness; but experience so far has shown that it tends to be largely Eurocentric (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1986, 1993), too elitist and limited to those who are literate and rich. Worse still, especially in Africa, books are scarce and often expensive and are written in foreign languages (English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic), a factor which only helps in exacerbating alienation and isolating the bulk of the local population since “every literary work necessarily belongs to the language in which it is written...” (Diop, 1996, p. 34). Fanon (1963) argues that “decolonization is the veritable creation of new men” (p. 35) and that in it “…there is the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation” (p. 37). Smith (1999) views decolonization as “…a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (p. 20). One level is to encourage the teaching and use of African languages in schools (Abdi, 2012, p. 137; Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1986, 1993; Diop, 1996). In the light of the importance of dance in black life (Ajayi, 1998; Fodeba, 1959; K. W. Asante, 1998, 2000), one of the objectives of this research is to determine how this art form could serve as an anticolonial tool. European missionaries, explorers, traders, and administrators
vilified African folkdance (Ajayi, 1998; K. W. Asante, 2000; Kealiinohomoku, 1970/2001; Vissicaro, 2004) precisely because it “facilitates all phenomena in African societies” and also because their impressions of this dance “were largely related to their own /imperialist/ ambitions” (K. W. Asante, 2000). Ajayi (1998) points this out when he states that “given the cultural importance of dance in many of these cultures (African), it was politically expedient for the colonizers to prevent their survival” (p. 4). In addition to these troubles, for a long time dance in anthropology was classified by evolutionists as occupying the lowest rung of human development ladder and thus reserved for “primitive” societies; and, until the rise of modern recording technologies, dance as a whole remained an ephemeral art (K. W. Asante, 2000; Kealiinohomoku, 1976; Ntaimah, 2012), that is, one which lasted as long as the duration of the performance. Against all these odds, even when dance was taught in schools, it was usually European dances such as ballet since it was “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values /which/ were taught in Southern black schools...” (hooks, 2003, p. 1). The result of this was that “Black parents didn’t want to send their daughters to... Negro Dance Group” for fear that they “would be taught ancestral African dancing” (Harnan, 1974, p. 51).

However, in spite of the drawbacks outlined, the effectiveness of dance as a means for community building and involvement has been demonstrated (A. Kipling. Brown, 2008, chapter 7; O. C. Banks, 2010; Vissicaro, 2004, 2009). As a counter-hegemonic art, folkdance conceals numerous other strengths. Since it unites different art forms, it is multi-layered and so is capable of attracting people with diverse interests, thus engaging a broad spectrum of the population. Sometimes, because of the alternating ambivalent attitude of fear and dismissal to which it is subjected, dance is naively
perceived as benign. The implication of such an attitude is that as a tool for resistance to cultural assimilation and indoctrination, dance may less likely stir the kind of controversies which have been shown to surround the creation of, say, an Afrocentric school (Ekwa-Ekoko, 2008; Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Sium, 2006). Notable African American choreographer/dancer Pearl Primus (1998) referred to dance as the soul of African people. There are important events in the tortuous history of black resistance to domination and tyranny which lend credence to this declaration. Bennett, Jr. (1962/2000) points out that it was during a voodoo dance ceremony that the successful slave revolt which culminated in Haiti’s independence in 1804 was plotted (p. 108). Amandla and Mayibuye (SAHO, 2015) served as road ambassadors to the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. And dances such as Les Ballets Africains and Ballet National du Senegal have contributed far more than the noises of African politicians and administrators in asserting and promoting the continent’s cultural identity and independence abroad. Initiation, dance and music, from their inception, formed three realities which blend together into one, which is life and its activities, in traditional black-African conception (Mveng, Njob, Samuel, 1969, p. 9). Little wonder then that in a colonial context “many dances were banned because of fear of indigenous rebellion, fear of the unknown which created problems in colonizing other cultures” (Davila, 2009, p. 63). Ajayi (1998) states that the destruction of these dances served as a cultural reinforcement of the military defeat and helped to facilitate the act of ruling over the subjugated people (p. 4).

Given this importance of dance, of all the art forms I have selected African folkdance for this research project. The main purpose of this research is to ascertain the
extent to which the preservation or promotion of cultural practices, such as Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, may be important in assisting marginalized youth to create a strong community in order to counter what Young (2001) calls “cultural imperialism” as well as other forms of oppression and injustice. Smith (1999) has noted that “imperialism frames the indigenous experience” (p. 19) and that “the struggle to assert and claim humanity has been a consistent thread of anti-colonial discourses on colonialism and oppression” (p. 26). An enduring legacy of slavery and Western colonialism has been the continuous distortion of African history and culture; this misrepresentation is constantly drummed up by white society to justify marginalization, injustice and various forms of oppression.

Might cultural continuity in the form of dance, as just one example, somehow help with ensuring greater engagement with schooling and curriculum among marginalized youth? Might it help in reducing drop out/push out rates?

1.7 A brief literary review of dance and emancipation

In this study, dance is an art concerned with representation, education and emancipation. Studies, which combine an in-depth analysis of dance, education and emancipation, especially in a black context, are hard to come by; and even when some of them do tackle aspects such gender (Markula, 2006, Desmond, 1999, 1999a), representation (Markula, 2006, 2011; Vissicaro, 2004; Kringelbach, Kringelback and Skinner, 2012; Argenti, 1998, 2006, 2007; Shay, 2002, 2006, Stoller, 1995; Hanna, 1988) or the promotion of inequality in arts (Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999), they merely examine them cursorily.
By sieving through existing documents, the main objective of this review is to determine which works have contributed in a significant way to the main tenets of this study and the extent to which they have done so. I found it difficult to establish headings under which to group or classify the various documents since each document I have consulted came to the table with something, so I made, more or less, a general review.

Dance has come a long way, from the time evolutionists depicted it as a primitive level of development and relegated it to the lowest rungs of human ladder to the current situation in which critical dance pedagogy is gradually becoming a fixture in some institutions of learning. In her study, Caldwell (2008) has exposed this situation in her analysis, noting that initially the insinuation was often that dance is not a serious or scientific subject due to its embodied nature and thus of lesser status. By contrast, Judith Hanna (1999) in her own research has attributed the neglect of dance in academic circles to factors such as prejudice and the absence of scientific evidence such as notation in early dance studies. In the works of Laban (1963), Kurath (1960, pp. 243-247), Hanstein & Fraleigh (1999, pp. 293-308) and Fraleigh (1987), some attempts have been made to close the gap on the issue of a scientific approach by exploring notation; however, it is in the contribution of Buckland (1999, pp.100-110) that there have been some efforts to adapt this notion to African-derived dances. African American dance scholar Green (2011) realized this absence and has written about this aspect in her article.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Vissicaro (2004) in her study has pointed out that “dance provides a lens for exploring the world, its people, and their cultures” (p. 3) and that it “creates a bridge for traversing cultural borders because fundamentally it involves the human body, something that all people have in common” (p. 5). In a single
breath her pronouncement speaks for emancipation through multicultural dance study, inclusion and anti-racist education as well as for peace. Similar culture-based and global approach to dance studies has been carried out by Shapiro (2008) whose work to this study is very relevant with regard to community formation through dance embodiment. “We are all one in music and dance,” the popular dictum ascribed to renowned Ghanaian master drummer Cornelius Kweku Gangyo, speaks volume on multicultural approach to dance.

Long before Vissicaro (2004) and Shapiro (2008) made inroads into dances studies with their phenomenal works on dance culture, some scholars had laid the foundation towards multicultural dance scholarship. Caldwell (2008) examines the contribution of Gertrude Kurath to dance and in her analysis, she has identified two periods in dance scholarship, pre- and post-1960. She explores the topic of dance in academia since the 1960s and 1970s and points out that it has emerged as a legitimate and significant field, especially in relation to anthropology, folklore and ethnomusicology (p. 23). She further notes that the post-1960 period is characterized mainly by the introduction of the anthropology of dance and the work of scholars such as Royce (1977), Hanna (1988, 1999), Kaepller (1978, 2000), Kealiinohomoku (1976, 2001). To that list I have to include other scholars, especially those whose works have been particularly relevant to my study such as Ajayi (1998), R. F. Thompson (1974), Koloss (2000), Argenti (2007), Vissicaro (2004, 2008), K. W. Asante (1998, 2000), and Shay (2002, 2006).

The pre-1960 period saw primarily the contributions of Gertrude Kurath (1960) and Franz Boas. In her study, Vissicaro (2004) has noted that perhaps Boas’ most
significant contribution is the recognition that every group of people has a cultural network or shared knowledge system, which provide social integration as well as a unique history with rules that govern how they operate; also adding that the concept of historical particularism and cultural relativism respectively set the stage for comparative human studies that emphasize the “native’s point of view” (p. 14). “Native’s point of view,” whose relevance to dance study Polish anthropologist Malinowski had already pointed out, marks Boas’ departure from a Eurocentric approach. The implication of his emancipatory scholarly stance as well as relevance to this study needs not be emphasized. Kaeppler (1991) has demonstrated that Boas had rejected the kulturkreis ideas of his native Germany and “focused on cultural variability, rejecting universal language of art and dance and laid a foundation for the possibility of examining dance and responses to it in terms of one’s own culture” (p. 14). Lewis (2001) takes Boas emancipatory journey a step further, noting that when he began his work in America, it was the era of Jim Crow laws, racial segregation and anti-black and anti-foreign agitation and that his actions on “racial difference,” in physical anthropology, had the intended effect of calling into question 60 or 70 years of “scientific” racial determinism, the intellectual rationalization for segregation (p. 454). Stocking, Jr. (1974) has explored the same subject and has pointed out that in 1906, at the invitation of DuBois, Boas delivered the commencement address at the all black Atlanta University and he spoke about the African background of African American.

Boas’ contributions did not only “liberate” dance study but helped to influence a whole generation of researchers. His intellectual offspring, Herskovits, went on to investigate the relationship between the music of African people and of American blacks.
Such a link clearly makes an Afrocentric statement which is important in this investigation in that “an analysis of African American culture that is not based on Afrocentric premises is bound to lead to incorrect conclusions” (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 11). Harnan (1974) points out in the biography of black dancer Katherine Durham that Herskovits, who was her mentor, taught her to be alert to details of voice tones, hands movements and many other points of observation (p. 58). Another Boasian offspring was Alan Merriam whom Kaeppler (1991) has stated was “imbued with the Boasian doctrine that dance and music must be considered in the contexts of the society of which they are parts” (p. 14). Merriam’s (1959) own research on characteristics of African music speaks to this quest for specificity. Boas’ appeal for the “native’s point of view” aligns with the Afrocentric approach which maintains that “current Eurocentric criteria for evaluating research in the social sciences are inadequate and inevitably deceptive” (Reviere, 2001, p. 710) because it harbours “the preponderant Eurocentric myths of universalism, objectivity” (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 10). Cultural particularism is important in any aspect of dance study which seeks education and human understanding and not domination.

With regard to Gertrude Kurath (1960), even though most of the studies she undertook focused on North American Indians, she made enormous contributions to dance scholarship in general. She was editor of *Ethnomusiciology* for a period of 15 years and is considered a pioneer in dance ethnoology and coined the term “ethnochoreology” which corresponds to the term “ethnomusicology”. She also examined different approaches to dance studies and where contributions have come from; she points out that most researches have focused on European dances. She has also explored dance concepts such as ethnology, choreology, ethnochoreology. Vissicaro (2004) has noted that these
terms denote holistic, cross-cultural studies that contextually approach the topic of dance and music (p. 14). By studying the relationship between dance and music contextually, Kurath in some ways has contributed to our understanding of African dance, since music and dance often go together in Africa and both arts in the colonial era were often studied out of context, not only by missionaries and administrators but also by early anthropologists. Kurath (1960) makes dance ethnochoreology synonymous with dance ethnology which she defines as the scientific study of ethnic dances in all their cultural significance, religious function or symbolism, or social place. Kurath’s article, “Panorama of Dance Ethnology,” spans the pre- and post-1960 eras and explored dance ethnology, dance notation, music and dance analyses, technology and the training of dance ethnologists. Even though she made these enormous contributions, she has come under attack from Kaepler (1991) who in her article accused her of being too “Eurocentric” and “product-oriented”. She has argued that Kurath used European sources, many of which were tied to theoretical notions about evolutionary cultural stages (p. 12). She also maintained that she had very little influence on those of them who began their dance studies in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 13).

Another pioneer in dance ethnology, an intellectual descendant of Franz Boas, is Joan Kealiinohomoku whose definition of dance supports the cultural discourse in which “dance emerges as a result of shared meaning” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 16). Apart from this definition which views dance as culture, a view Kealiinohomoku shares with Nigerian dance scholar Ajayi (1998) as well as with Merriam (1959), she coined the term “dance event” which she expounded upon in her 1976 doctoral dissertation. This term is important in multicultural education in that “dance cultural knowledge is influenced by
the greater knowledge system that people strategically use to interact and negotiate meaning in various settings” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 137). It is a holistic approach which shares a lot in common with an Afrocentric notion of dance. Kealiinohomoku’s (1970/2001) anthropological study in which she portrays ballet as a form of ethnic dance is a strong statement against, if not a rejection of, hierarchy in dance classification and scholarship which creates the binary oppositional notion of “us” against “them”, with obvious power implications. Her comparative study, *Reflections and Perspectives on Two Anthropological Studies of Dance* (1976), is long on Afrocentricity when she points out commonalities between African and African American dances. She notes in the foreword of the study that “automatic behaviour occurs when a set of triggering stimuli is present” and that in the case of dance, the set of stimuli includes music and the music-making process, and several studies have shown that Africanisms are retained in the secular and sacred music of United States Negroes. M. K. Asante and K. W. Asante (1991) concur with such an assessment when they state that African dance is a complex art in an advanced form and its development encompasses numerous forms, including ballet, jazz, and modern dance; and that its influence is visible in the highly stylized dances of the Americas such as the samba, rumba, and capoeira (p. 71). By emphasizing such commonalities between the two dance traditions, the authors have responded to those who query about the relevance of an African folkdance to diaspora black people whose connection with Africa, they claim, had long disappeared. M. K. Asante (1998) argues that “separatist views carry the false assertion that Africans in the Americas are not Africans connected to their spatial origin” (p. 11). Kaeppler (1991) attributes her own influence to Boasian empirical traditions, intermixed with the importance of insiders’
views and ideas about competence and performance derived from concepts promulgated by Saussure and Chomsky (p. 15). Buckland’s (1999) work on how to conduct field research is particularly relevant in this work in that it continues to explore the theme of Kurath (Chapter 1) and dedicates another chapter (8) to the study of the Kokuma Dance Theatre in Britain. This segment explores the micro aspect of movement in dance, how Labanotation could be used to address the absence of a documented dance history which records the movement systems and reflect the experience of African people’s dance as practised in the West (p. 105).

Many scholars undertaking research in African dances have cited paucity of documentation (Ajayi 1998; Argenti, 2007; K. W. Asante, 2000; Koloss, 2000; Ntaimah, 2012). The reasons for this void are not hard to find. Most of Africa belongs to an oral tradition, where information is committed to memory (Ki-Zerbo, 1978, 1986), and as such most of the written documents relating to dance go back to the colonial era. K. W. Asante (2000) has pointed out in her study that a lot of the data collected during this period was done by missionaries, traders and colonial administrators and their investigations tended to reflect their own imperialist ambitions; and that, for Africans, “under colonialism the primary concern was preservation of the tradition rather than documentation” (p. 5). Furthermore, as Bah (1996) has shown in the case of Oku, even Africans who had acquired some education during this era subscribed to the disparaging manner in which Europeans colonizers depicted African dances and tended to distance themselves from them. Thus, Ajayi (1998) points out the irony in which African nationalists treated their own cultural heritage of dance in a prejudicial fashion relegating it to a quasi-informal national cultural policy (p. 5). Writers, scholars and researchers,
such as Fodeba (1959), R. F. Thompson (1974), Kealiinohomoku (1976), Ajayi (1998), Argenti (1998, 2006, 2007), Cohen (2012), Kringelback (2012), Green (2011), Layiwola (2003), and Ngum (1990), who have made some efforts to close this void have often concentrated on the West African region to the detriment of other parts of the continent. Apart from this trend, the bulk of their investigations have tended to be more of a general nature and there have been little attempts to analyze a single dance to determine its emancipatory worth and to apply such findings to a specific educational setting. All the same, as I have already demonstrated in the preceding literature review with some American and European dance anthropologists and ethnologists, a lot of these inquiries have studied some aspects of liberation or emancipation. A lot of the research has often shown the link between African dance and the quest for group or national identity and so provide fodder to explore dance as a tool to combat various forms of oppressions. For my analysis, I have selected Buum Oku Dance Yaounde in Cameroon and to use this dance as a frame of reference in exploring dance as a tool of emancipation in school setting in Regina in particular and in Canada in general.

It is important to point out that in more recent times the works of Hanna (1988, 1999), Vissicaro (2004, 2009) have laid the groundwork for an emancipatory approach to dance study. Vissicaro’s publication on dance culture across the world (2004) emphasizes the importance of local culture in dance interpretation and study, drawing thus from the works of Boas, Kurath, as well as Kealiinohomoku. In her article which studies dance and community (2009), she demonstrates how refugee communities in Arizona have used dance to create larger and more effective communities that could assist them in upholding their traditions as well as asserting their own identities. Covington-Ward (2013) explores
an identical theme with the Liberian community in the United States, stressing on its sense of community and identity, which is a mix of America and Africa. The context in which these two studies were carried out is analogous to the one of black students in Regina and is therefore very pertinent to my inquiry. In a similar vein, O. C. Banks (2010) has focused on the Dembe Project, a postcolonial dance study which involves the Soli African dance from Gambia, its use as a tool for decolonization, for resistance, multicultural dance education and for inclusion. Her findings are relevant in building a healthy community among students drawn from different cultural and racial background. Similar activity towards community building and inclusion through dance has been illustrated by Ann Kipling Brown (2008) in an analysis in which she works with school children towards building community through dance. Hanna (1988, 1999), through her studies, has explored how a school environment could be liberated using art, especially dance; and by having a better understanding of the role gender plays in art. The relevance of these studies to this dissertation is tremendous, especially with regard to African (-Canadian) students creating their own communities in order to promote their culture and identity.

Many African scholars, especially in the postcolonial dispensation, as well their counterparts in the diaspora have taken interest in the study of African dance; but their contributions have tended to focus mainly on general aspects such as types, characteristics and historical development of the dances. Ajayi’s (1998) main focus has been on Yoruba dances of Western Nigeria while K. W. Asante’s (2000) has been on the dances of Zimbabwe. Even though both authors do provide in-depth analysis of the historical evolution and social significance of the dances, not much attention is paid on
what the dances actually embody nor on the emancipatory role that they could play in education. However, their works are important in the sense that they are culture-based and show, albeit sometimes briefly, the struggles of these dances in a colonial and even postcolonial (as in the case of Ajayi) dispensation. Colonial discourses in which African dances were often analyzed out of context and portrayed as inferior highlight the creation of hierarchy and obvious power implications which ties in with discourse analysis of Foucault and representation of Hall (2013). In exploring this theme in their work, Fraleigh & Hanstein (1999, pp. 334-351) have focused more especially in the North American context. Talking about dance research, both authors agree that such differentiation and representation were also part of an imperial project in which European values came to be foisted on the colonized Others. By calling attention to this aspect of dance, they speak for an emancipatory approach.

The dances of Zimbabwe and Yoruba are not the only African dances which have been written about. Fodeba (1959), who came from a theatrical and choreographic background, was actually among the earliest Africans to write about African dances from an African perspective. In his article, he challenged Eurocentric interpretation and outlined the unique characteristics of African folkdances. Dance scholars such as Kringelbach (2012), Cohen (2012), Green (2011) among many others have drawn inspiration from his piece when studying African dance. Fodeba’s action in creating Les Ballets Africains is a progression from traditional to neotraditional dances (Green, 2011; Kringelbach, 2012; Ntaimah, 2012), in which traditional African dances are stripped of their mystic and are incorporated with modern elements in order to serve nationally and internationally as tool for ethnic and national cultural as well as identity promotion.
Kringelbach (2012) articles dwell at length on this subject, using the dances of Senegal. The study of dance as an embodied social art with ideological, political and other kinds of meaning has also been carried out lengthily by Desmond (1999, 1999a) and Shay (2002, 2006). In this research, the works of Desmond have contributed in exploring issues of gender and difference within dance and their implication in liberation. Shay’s analysis has been particularly useful in determining how a wide range of different ethnicities (2006) and nations (2002) have used their dances internationally to promote their identities, an aspect of embodiment tied to representation which I have examined.

“Dance… is a political as well as a social and aesthetic issue” Peter Brinson (1999, p. 55) points out.

With regard to Oku itself, the greatest contributions have come from the works of Argenti (1998, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2011) and Koloss (2000). While Koloss does a great job of providing in-depth information on Oku society, history and institutions, his analysis lack the depth of that of Argenti; and in addition, his work needs to be “decolonized” from derogatory terms such as “tribe,” meaning “ethnic group”. Argenti’s analysis on neotraditional dances, in the tradition of Air Youths, Subi and Buum Oku, provides us with great insight into the oppressions, not just of the past but today and not just in Oku but the entire Grassfield region, that spawned these dances. By drawing from history and the lived experiences of youths involved in these dances, he shows the role of dance as a form of resistance to the forces which continue to hold young men and women in thrall in this part of Cameroon. His firm grasp of Eblam Ebkuo, the Oku language, provides him with the ability to unlock meanings hidden in some terminologies and enables us to have a better understanding of the forces underlying and driving these
dances. In this, some of his works remain the most relevant in this study which deals with representation, oppression, resistance and liberation.

The dissertation of Ngum (1990) on Oku dances, overall, does a decent job of outlining their origins and roles but falls short of in-depth analysis of specific dances. She however helps us to put each dance in perspective, thus providing a good starting point for those eager to research Oku dances. The work is also remarkable in that it focuses on women’s dances as well as shows the role women play in Oku dances. This aspect I found particularly important in my study of dance and gender. In his work, Ntaimah (2012) covered a lot on Oku history, institutions and culture; but his focus on dances is surprisingly fleeting. This is a void that his unpublished work (2014) tries to fill.

1.8 Outline of this dissertation

This dissertation is divided into 8 uneven chapters. Chapter 1 begins with a story of my own cultural journey; how the cultural epiphany that I experienced as a child when I first saw the dance of my village began to alter the way I view the folkdances of my own people. The chapter also provides a setting, the black community in Regina; the various waves of arrivals and their countries of origin. This dissertation deals with dance as a tool for emancipation within the black community in Regina; as such I found it important to involve the story of my own education, which was largely Western and hardly ever seriously involved things African. From this overview, the rest of the introduction cursorily explores arts as a tool for black emancipation, from the period of enslavement, through Western colonialism in Africa, to the current postcolonial dispensation. An important segment of the chapter explains why of all the art forms, I
chose dance. It reviews the merits of other art forms such as literature, theatre, and music; and how they have all played very significant roles in black emancipation before dwelling on dance. It explores dance’s central role in African culture as a tool for community building, for more inclusive cultural participation and for education.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Afrocentric theory or Afrocentricity. This chapter traces the origin and evolution of the theory, the historical forces and intellectuals that have played an important role in this development, some variants of the term and context in which they have been applied. It also explores controversies surrounding the theory, from challenges advanced by intellectuals to discrepancies with other African-centered theories such as negritude. It also delves into the reasons why this particular theory is deemed most suitable for this research endeavour.

Chapter 3 deals with data collection and methods. It describes the research sites and the interviews which I conducted both in Regina and in Cameroon; it also provides a detail analysis of the video shoot that took place in Cameroon and outlines the difficulties of recruiting interview participants for audience reception and how the challenges were overcome; it also shows the challenges encountered while navigating ethical guidelines and how they were resolved within the framework outlined by the University of Regina and Afrocentricity.

Chapter 4 looks at the research design, focusing on the theoretical and conceptual framework. It breaks down and examines the three main features of the dissertation and explores the reasons for selecting the Afrocentric framework. It also examines cultural studies, the research methodology which has been used for this inquiry, the contributions of some key intellectuals in this field and why it has been chosen for this research. This
section also goes into my own story in the context of this work and some of the research challenges I encountered. Since this research focuses a lot on people, many of whom are ordinary villagers and students, and who are both in Canada and in Cameroon, it raises issues concerning ethics; so this segment of my analysis also examines ethical concerns. As an Afrocentric study, such ethical considerations takes into account indigenous methods of conducting research which tends to stress the collective as opposed to the individual.

Chapter 5 deals with the historical production of Buum Oku Dance. It starts by laying the groundwork of examining various aspects of Oku: its geography, history, its culture and institutions and its conception of dance itself. Oku conception of dance is part of an overall evolving African conception of dance which is central to an Afrocentric analysis. The outfits and instruments of the dance are very different, especially when we take into account a Western audience; and this calls for some elaborate description and explanation and so the chapter breaks down the various music and outfit components to enable readers to put things in context, so that they may derive fuller understanding and meaning of the dance. With the background information firmly established, it delves into the actual historical production of the dance, from its inception in the village of Mboh where it started, its composition in the early days and the main characters involved, as well as the challenges that they had to overcome. It unveils the rather conservative nature of Oku society, with institutions and stakeholders that had conflicting interests which only helped to bedevil efforts to start the dance; the changes which were made to the dance, first in Oku; and then as it moved out of the village to other parts of Cameroon and the world. It also analyzes the move to Yaounde, the early characters involved, their
contributions and the changes they made to fit into a new environment and the alternating cultural kaleidoscope. It ends up with current trends which make the dance to continue to be relevant.

Chapter 6 deals with the representation of a 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. It begins by engaging the reader with the video, exploring key aspects of it and situating the aspects in a social and historic context. Using the macro-micro dance analytical framework of American scholar Pegge Vissicaro, the chapter delves into representation. At the macro level, it explores the big picture of the video by looking at key journalistic questions of who, why, where, what and when. It tackles the micro aspects by examining the actual dancing, focusing on space and exploring movement, energy, and rhythm. It examines meanings that could be derived from the video and shows how this could relate to knowledge/power by drawing mainly on the works of Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault. The chapter also looks at performance and performativity of the dance and what the dance embodies, drawing heavily on the works of Nicolas Argenti, a British scholar on Oku, as well as on some international, African, Africanist and Cameroonian dance scholars to beef up key arguments. This segment seeks to answer questions such as what does the dance embody or symbolize, to whom and for what purpose?

Chapter 7 is an analysis of the interviews of six participants who watched the 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance. It breaks down the chapter into five important components and analyzes each of them. The components are community organization, cultural inclusion, group identity, gender issues, low self-esteem and dropout. Based on
the interviews the chapter examines the various components in the light of the whole dissertation.

Chapter 8 is an assessment of the dissertation, whether it meets the criteria of an Afrocentric cultural study. It also explores my own assumptions before going into the study and whether they conflict or align with my findings at each stage of the investigation. To what extent did my findings prove or refute my assumption that the dance could be used among African (Canadian) to build community and promote education?
CHAPTER 2: AFROCENTRICITY/AFROCENTRIC THEORY

2.1 Overview, definitions and perspectives

2.1.1 Overview

Afrocentricity was conceived in the early eighties, but the theory still remains elusive to many scholars. Since it is central to this study, I have decided to elaborate on the theory in this chapter. What is Afrocentricity? Does the term have the same meaning as Afrocentrism, Africentrism or Africentricity? Why is the term sometimes confused with Africanity? What are the historical and intellectual origins of the Afrocentric theory? Who are the key intellectuals behind the theory and what are their contributions? If the theory is African-centered, how different it is from the theory of negritude which came earlier in the thirties, makes a similar claim, and was initiated and championed by black intellectual giants such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas. What challenges does the Afrocentric theory face? How does the theory provide an appropriate framework for my research on African dance and education? These are some of the questions this chapter of my inquiry seeks to explore.

2.1.2 Definitions and perspectives

Afrocentricity is the term Molefi Asante coined (Cobb, Jr., 1999, p. 122) and he uses it to describe his theory. He framed the Afrocentric idea in his 1980 work Afrocentricity (Noll, 1999, p. 240; Chilisa, 2012, p. 184 & M. K. Asante, 1988, p. ix; Clark, 2013, p. 381). What then does the term mean? Ama Mazama (2003), a Sorbonne graduate and pillar in the Afrocentric movement, points out that the definitions of
Afrocentricity are multiple, most scholars giving their own working and free version of the original one elaborated by Molefi Asante, often choosing to emphasize specific aspects of the paradigm to respond to their own needs (p. 5). To M. K. Asante (1998), Afrocentricity means literally “placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior…” (p. 2). He then proceeds with an even broader explanation in an article published on the theory in education. He states that Afrocentricity provides

a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person… In education this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view… In Afrocentric educational setting, … teachers do not marginalize African American children by causing them to question their own self-worth because their people’s story is seldom told… It must be emphasized that Afrocentricity is not a Black version of Eurocentricity… Eurocentricity is based on White supremacist notions whose purposes are to protect White privilege and advantage in education, economics, politics, and so forth… In education, centricity refers to a perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives. Centricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture. The centrist paradigm is supported by research that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the center of the context of knowledge… (M. K. Asante, 1990b, pp. 171-172)

M. K. Asante (2007) also contends that “Afrocentricity is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and trans-generationally” and then he goes further to state that “this means that the quality of location is essential to any analysis that involves African culture and behavior whether literary or economic, whether political or cultural” (p. 2). Central to the concept of Afrocentricity is the notions of margin and center. “We
thus find ourselves relegated to the ‘periphery,’ the ‘margin’ of the European experience, spectators of a show that defines us from without” writes Mazama (2003, p. 50). To de-centre or dislocate the African in the United States, the notions of pluralism and multiculturalism have been peddled, mainly by Eurocentric scholars. M. K. Asante (1991) makes it clear that he is not opposed to multiculturalism, as long as it is “a non-hierarchical approach that respects and celebrates a variety of cultural perspectives on world phenomena” and, also as long as for Africans, the Afrocentric idea is the stepping stone from which the multicultural idea is launched (p. 172). Furthermore, he has argued that “it is unreasonable to expect African Americans to divest themselves of culture when such unilateral divestiture is neither required nor expected of other cultural groups” (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 13).

The notion of Afrocentricity as a paradigm was first espoused by Ama Mazama in her work *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (2003). Taking her cue from Kuhn, she states in her book that

as we seek to bring further clarification to what Afrocentricity entails from an academic standpoint, we should like to suggest, as a first step, that Afrocentricity, within the academic context, will best be understood as a paradigm. (p. 7)

Maulana Karenga, “the preeminent African American theorist and one of the towering figures in the science of social and cultural reconstruction of our era” (M. K. Asante, 2009, p.1) and founder of Kawaida, the theory which “emerged in the sixties in the United States…and played an important part in the cultural rebirth of the African American community of this period” (Mazama, 2005 p. 9), takes issues with the idea of Afrocentricity as a paradigm by viewing the theory as “essentially a quality of perspective…rooted in the cultural image and human interest of the African people”
Nevertheless, the idea of a paradigm dies hard, prompting Keto (1994) to write that “The African-centered perspective of history is closely associated with what we can call an Afrocentric paradigm” and that “a paradigm is a model or a pattern based on certain common assumptions” (p. 12). The “common assumptions” seem to be the thread that ties the different scholars together in Oyebade’s definition. To him, “The theoretical conceptualization of an African-centered approach is the handiwork of Afrocentric scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante, Tsheloane Keto, Mualana Karenga and a host of others…” (Oyebade, 1990, p. 233).

M. K. Asante (2008) has warned that he does not present “Afrocentricity as a corpus of idea, … as a closed systems of beliefs” because for him “It remains important that we hold back any reductive misunderstanding of the nature of human interaction and the creation of reality” (pp. 2-3). In a rebuttal to Walker’s (2001) claim that Afrocentricity is a record of the black past, M. K. Asante (2008) outlines the various contributions to the theory by noting that “There are those who claim that it is a quality of thought (Karenga), a paradigm (Mazama), a perspective (Asante), or a methatheory (Modupe)” (p.5), but certainly not a record of the black past.

While cultural unity is central to Afrocentric thinking (M. K. Asante, 1988; Dove, 2003), Afrocentricity stresses “not unity... but collective consciousness” (M. K. Asante, 1988, p. 24) as well as the importance of cultivating consciousness of victory, as opposed to dwelling in oppression (Mazama, 2003 p. 6; M. K. Asante, 2009). It also believes that the liberation of the mind of the African person must precede any other type of liberation (Hillard in M. K. Asante and Mazama, 2002). In order to attain these objectives, the
Afrocentric challenge has posed three critical ways which M. K. Asante (1991) has outlined.

(1) It questions the imposition of the white supremacist view as universal and/or classical
(2) It demonstrates the indefensibility of racist theories that assault multiculturalism and pluralism
(3) It projects a humanistic and pluralistic viewpoint by articulating Afrocentricity as valid, nonhegemonic perspective. (p. 173)

Where then does women’s struggle fit in the Afrocentric theoretical frame?

Women’s liberation and black struggle have fed off each other in America. Davis (1981) points out that the real story behind the birth of the organized women’s movement in the United States took place in London on the opening day of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention (p. 46). Similarly, in the foreword to Hudson-Weems’ *Africana Womanist Literary Theory* (2004), Delores Aldridge notes that Women’s Studies followed on the heels of the Black Studies movement and that the study of women was introduced as a means of providing their story and eradicating many of the myths and distortions surrounding the lives of women (p. xi). hooks (2003) concurs by noting that “in the wake of the success of militant black anti-racist work, feminist movement emerged” (p. 3).

This shared history of struggle between blacks and women has not provided women emancipation movements with a unanimously acceptable vision on how to conceptualize the objectives of their struggle. M. K. Asante (1993) has noted that “the convergence of issues of gender and race is uniquely confronted in the discussion of African-American males and females” (p. 7). Dove (2003), a leading Afrocentric female theorist, has pointed out that while her focus was on conceptualizing and defining racialization of the world through European domination/white supremacy, it was impossible to ignore the specificity of the oppression of African women living in male-centered western society.
(p. 165). To cite just one example, reaction to the plight of ‘The Hottentot Venus,’ Saartje Baartman (Hall, 2013, pp. 254-255), would certainly have been different if she were white. Dove draws on the work of Stone (When God Was a Woman) whose research is illuminated by the Cradle Theory of Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop (1990) which points out how women are devalued and debased by Western patriarchy. A common example is the biblical story of creation in which “Eve is responsible for the fall of humanity from the grace of God...” (Dove, 2003, p. 168). She further argues that “European patriarchy underlies western social inequalities that affect African women and men in equally perverse ways” (p. 166). The implication of Western patriarchy runs even deeper, leading to cracks that have dogged and spelt trouble for the feminist movement.

As more women begin to opportunistically lay claim to the feminism in the ’80s without undergoing the feminist consciousness raising that would have enabled them to divest of their sexism, the patriarchal assumption that the powerful should rule over the weak informed their relations to other women. As women, particularly previously disenfranchised privileged white women, began to acquire class power without divesting of their internalized sexism, divisions between women intensified. When women of color critique the racism within the society as a whole and called attention to the ways racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and their hearts. And that was true when it came to the issue of classism among women. (hooks, 2000, p.16)

Another sticky and centripetal point that has caused women of colour to shift their perspective away from mainstream feminist movement has been identified by Pamela Yaa Asantewaa Reeds who points out in the preface to Africana Womanist Literary Theory (2004) that “whereas the feminist tend to focus on gender empowerment to the exclusion of all else, the elevation of the Africana race and community is the center of consciousness for the Africana womanist” (p. xvii).
Africana womanism is the brainchild of Hudson-Weens and the idea emerged in mid-eighties when it was first described as “Black womanism.” It took shape in a 1992 First International Conference on Women of Africa and the African Diaspora held at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka and was publicly articulated in a 1998 publication. The concept emerged from the acknowledgement of a longstanding authentic agenda for that group of women of African descent who needed only to be properly named and officially defined according to their own unique historical and cultural matrix, one that would reflect the co-existence of men and women in a concerted struggle for the survival of their entire family/community (Hudson-Weens, 2004, p. 1).

In this conceptualization, Africana womanists are treading on a well trampled and familiar ground associated mainly with issues of slavery and colonization. Of anti-slavery activist and black leader Frederick Douglass, J. W. Johnson (1969) notes that “From the beginning he had been a force in the woman’s suffrage movement, realizing that it was a kindred cause to Negro freedom” (p. 55). Ain’t I a woman? address delivered by anti-slavery advocate Sojourner Truth at a 1851 women’s convention in Akron, Ohio (Davis, 1981, p. 62) remains pivotal in shaping the way black women approach issues of female liberation within the Afrocentric framework. Of Sojourner Truth, J. W. Johnson (1969) states that “she was a very fervent anti-slavery agitator, but her appeal was broader than the question of slavery; it embraced women’s rights. Sojourner Truth was a strong factor in the woman’s suffrage movement” (p. 31). Truth’s speech was an indictment not just against sexism of the men but of racism and class she experienced in the hands of white women as well. “The Tripartite plight of Black Women – Racism, Classism and Sexism,” Hudson- Weens (2004) refers to it. Davis (1981) has pointed out that Truth herself was
black, an ex-slave but she was no less a woman than any of her white sisters at the
convention (p. 64). It is, therefore, but fitting that in Africana womanist discussion,
allusion should be made to the efforts of Nigerian female activist Funmilayo Kuti whose
struggles went far beyond the liberation of women to embrace that of her people.

Frances Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas Ransome-Kuti (commonly known as
Funmilayo or by her nickname, “Beere”) was an internationally recognized
women’s right activist. A champion of female suffrage and the founder of the
Nigerian’s Women’s Union, she was an important player in the movement for
Nigerian independence and confidante of independent Ghana’s first president,
Kwame Nkrumah. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was also reportedly the first
Nigerian woman to drive an automobile. More significantly, she was the first
African woman to visit China, the USSR, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary,
Yugoslavia, and East Germany during the Cold War. (Veal, 2000, p. 24)

M. K. Asante (2007) maintains that Dove converges with insights that Mazama
makes in her own analysis of relationships, culture, and identity (p. 14). Hudson-Weens
“was the first woman to call for Africana Womanism” (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 14) in her
conceptualization instead of feminism which is so badly tainted in the African American
world with the idea that women are against men. She states:

While many academicians uncritically adopt feminism in its established
theoretical concepts based on the notion that gender is primary in women’s
struggle in the patriarchal system, most Africana women in general do not
identify with the concept in its entirety and thus cannot see themselves as
feminists. Granted, the prioritizing of female empowerment and gender issues
may be justified for those women who have not been plagued by
powerlessness based on ethnic differences; however, that is certainly not the
case for those who are Africana women. (Hudson-Weens, 2003, pp. 153-154)

Thus, Afrocentricity veers off mainstream feminism in its conceptualization of
women struggle for justice and equality.

Coming back to the definition and perspectives of Afrocentricity, more light is
shed by exploring how the term originated as well as the historical and social
circumstances that have caused it to blossom.
2.2 Afrocentricity, origin and intellectual contributions to the theory

In “The Danger of the Single Story,” a lecture delivered by renowned Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she recounts the beginning of the telling of the African stories in the West when she cites John Locke, a London merchant who travelled to Africa in 1561. In filling his log, the Londoner wrote this of Africans: “Beasts who have no houses, they are people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.” Adichie reads relationship based on power in this portrayal and defines power as “the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it a definite story.” This is a Foucauldian stance which exposes Eurocentric ideas of the Other (Said, 1979); and the stance has worked its way into the analysis of many Afrocentric scholars. Diopian (from Diop) historiography is based on the fact that no one can tell the African story better than the African people (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 100). In providing a justification for an African-centered perspective, Oyebade (1999) writes:

The need to create an African-centered perspective that takes Africa as a point of departure for African studies stems from the nature of the Eurocentric paradigm, which has been used in many previous African studies. In the history of intellectual thought, the Eurocentric paradigm has often assumed a hegemonic universal character, and European culture has placed itself at the center of the social structure, become the reference point, or the yard, by which every other culture is defined…The Afrocentric perspective seeks to liberate African studies from this Eurocentric monopoly and thus assert a valid worldview through which Africa can be studied objectively. (p. 234)

Eurocentrism, as typified in Locke’s description of Africans, is also at the heart of Reviere’s (2001) quest for an Afrocentric research methodology, for she points out that “…traditional Eurocentric criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity are inadequate and incorrect, especially for research involving human experiences” (p. 709). Since the Afrocentric idea centers African students inside history, culture, science, and so forth
rather than outside these subjects, it presents the most revolutionary idea to the ideology of white supremacy in education during the past decade (M. K. Asante, 1991, p.172).

Eurocentrism is a product of the Age of Enlightenment, a period which to Smith (1999) heralded the end of superstition, feudalism, the inauguration of progress, science and rational thought, the project of modernity science, free inquiry, and rational thinking. These developments led Europeans to view themselves as superior (Cannella and Viruru, 2004), a sense of superiority that caused them to conquer and occupy other lands and dominate and enslave their people. Young (2001) points out that at the beginning of the Great War imperialist powers controlled or occupied 90% of the world and that the occupation was violently imposed over a period of 500 years and has a history of slavery, unimaginable and unnamed deaths, oppression, and forced migration. In his classic work Orientalism (1979), Edward Said has demonstrated that colonialism was operated not only as a form of military rule but also as a discourse of domination. It could even be argued that Western colonial powers resorted to discourses of domination to justify military rule and their barbaric practices against native population. Dove (2003) points out that scientific racism was used to prove the cultural, genetic, psychological and mental inferiority of African people... At that time, it seemed politically expedient to support this idea in order to justify the subjection of African women, men, and children to analogous forms of barbarian treatment under the auspices of European domination. (p. 167)

Verwoerd’s apartheid project in South Africa, for instance, was preceded and undergirded by a potent and deadly religious cocktail from the Dutch Reformed Church as well as a barrage of political and racist discourses designed to prove black inferiority (Battle, 1997; Du Boulay, 1988, p. 43; Mandela, 1994). Similarly, the works of German
geneticist Eugen Fisher provided a justification and even boost to his country’s military in its South-West African (today Namibian) adventure that culminated in the genocide against the Hereros at the turn of the twentieth century.

Thus, with regard to the Orient, Said (1979) has noted that its colonial relationship with the occident was “one of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony…” (p. 8). Relationship based on domination and hegemony had numerous consequences for the colonized Other as Wane (2008) clearly indicates:

The encounter between the colonizer and colonized subjects disrupted ways of knowing, learning and teaching for most indigenous peoples in the world. It also resulted in loss of lands, the erosion of cultures and ideas, and most importantly, the colonization of minds. (p. 183)

Ngugi wa Thiongo (1993) takes the argument a step further when he notes that over the last four hundred years the developments in the West have not just been the result of internal social dynamics, but also their relationship with Africa, Asia and South America. Their external relationship with Africa, Asia and South America have not been those of equality but of dominance and domination at the economic, political and cultural levels (pp. 27-28).

Pratt (2004) has exposed how the West and its modernity project have come under the assault of anti-colonial and anti-imperial thinkers; and she advances four tropes as correctives or counternarratives to the story of diffusion (the idea that knowledge was a one way traffic from Europe to the Other): interruption, digestion, substitution, and reversal (p. 445). Cabral (1974), slain African nationalist from Guinea-Bissau, maintains that interruption entailed “the negation of the historical process of the dominated people, by means of violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the productive forces” (pp. 41-42). As an example, Nkrumah, former president of Ghana and
pan-African nationalist, has argued that African precolonial social structures and values to a large degree coincided with the prescriptions of modern socialism; thus Africa was on its path to socialism before it was interrupted by Western colonialism (Pratt, 2004, pp. 445-446). Anticolonialists used “digestion” to counter the view of European exceptionalism, arguing that Europe’s knowledges did not stem from inherent superiority but was acquired through the absorption of knowledges from elsewhere; and as proof, Goonalike, Sri Lankan historian of science, has argued that until 1500 the flow of scientific knowledge was from east to west (pp. 447-448). With substitution, anticolonialists maintain, local models were substituted and replaced with those of the Europeans; for example private property replaced common propriety. And through this, the Europeans destroyed competing systems, thus universalizing theirs (p. 452). Finally, they allude to “reversal” in which “European-derived institutions and principles often produced effects that, far from being universal, were the opposite of their effects in the metropole”. For example, anticolonialists cite the example of liberalism which, they argue, produced bondage, not freedom, when deployed abroad along imperial lines (p.454).

Such counter narratives only make real sense as decolonizing tool for transformation in education when they constitute part of the school curriculum. Thus, even when driven by the best intention, Carter Woodson (1933/2006) points out that some whites, among them liberals I must add, taught African Americans following “the traditional curricula of the times which did not take the negro into consideration except to condemn or pity him” (p. 17). This discourse of omission has been highlighted by Ngugi
wa Thiongo (1993, p. 43) and even Malcolm X in his autobiography (Malcolm X, 1966, p. 29).

It is mainly against the backdrop of Eurocentrism that Cheikh Anta Diop and his contributions in the formulation of the Afrocentric theory should be examined. M. K. Asante (2007) writes in Diop’s portrait that “his gift to other scholars was never to accept the inferiorizing of African people” (p. 22). In this stance, he distanced himself from the negritudists who raised “question of culture and personality in such a way as to suggest almost mystical qualities of human beings” (p. 20). Senghor (1988) has maintained that the essence of negritude is expressed in words, in poetry but also in thought and dance (p. 118). Moving away from this tendency toward abstraction, Diop focused instead his attention on “the concrete conditions of the African people …, conditions … created … by slavery, exploitation, and colonialism” (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 20). Keto (1994) expresses this gulf in perception between the two philosophical trends by referring to Diop as “African centered historian” and Senghor, the best known proponent of negritude in Africa, as “European centered poet” (p. 38).

In the introduction to The Cultural Unity of Black Africa (1990), African American scholar John Henry Clarke provides an interesting introduction of Diop.

The books of Dr. Diop upset white scholars the world over and started a rage against him that has not abated. He challenged their interpretation of African history and backed it with scholarship that they could not dismiss. Among African writers using the French language he started the Afrocentric approach to history. (p. ii)

So, who was Diop and how relevant was he in the creation of the Afrocentric theory. He was born in Diourbel, Senegal, of aristocratic Wolof heritage (M. K. Asante, 2007; Gray, 1989). As was the tradition with bright students in French colonies, after his
baccalaureate, he went to France for further studies in mathematics and physics. It was in Europe that his genuine intellectual epiphany started as his interest grew beyond mathematics and physics. Obenga referred to this period as a descent into history in search of truth and M. K. Asante (2007) as “the mission of overturning the cruel hoax played on the African people by the falsifiers of our history” (p. xi). Diop himself provides some account of how his conversion started:

I noticed that whenever a Black showed the slightest interest in things Egyptian, whites would actually begin to tremble. I was sitting in a hieroglyphics class in which there was one other student, a French woman, and when the professor instructed her to go up to the board and write a passage in hieroglyphics, she would erase it almost as fast as she wrote so that I wouldn’t copy what she had written. (Gray, 1989, p. 6)

In 1948, barely two years after his arrival in France, he published “Studies in Valaf Linguistics” in the monthly journal Presence Africaine. It was a hint of the new direction in which he would steer his intellectual life. This article was quickly followed by a second one that appeared in a special edition of Musee Vivant titled “When Can We Speak of an African Renaissance?” In the article, he advocates the use of African languages to write African literature because “every literary work necessarily belongs to the language in which it is written…” (Diop, 1996, p. 34). For a student from a French colony where the colonial doctrine of cultural assimilation held sway, this development was huge. By striking on the language issue, he opened up a cut that continues to fester to this day in postcolonial discourses. “In my view language was the most important vehicle through which /colonial/ power fascinated and held the soul prisoner” (p. 10), the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1994) states, adding that “it had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning” (p. 11). Canadian educator Abdi (2012) agrees and points out that the imposition of the colonial language led to “advanced
process of de-‘linguization’” of the colonized, a trend which formed an important component of the “dehistoricizing process” (p. 137).

Diop’s second article showed that his Afrocentric vision was becoming sharper in focus. Mazama places Diop in the context of the Hegelian notion that Africa was outside history because the African people did not have, according to Hegel, a historical consciousness (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 13). In 1954, the rejection of Diop’s doctoral thesis on the Egyptian Origin of African Civilization on the ground that it was too “polemical” only hardened his resolve, so he had a segment of the work published in 1955 as Nations Negres et Culture. Basing his analysis on physical anthropology, the works of early travellers and historians such as Diodorus of Sicily, Strabo, Aeschylus and Herodotus, who actually visited Egypt (Diop, 1974, pp. 1-9; 1996, p. 112), on osteological measurements, laboratory tests of the skins of mummies, and on cultural and linguistic similarities between black Africa and ancient Egypt, he lashed out at Western scholarship for rejecting his work because of Eurocentric racist assumptions. In 1967, he published Anteriorite des Civilisations Negres: Mythe ou Verite Historique. Both the 1955 and 1967 works have been translated into English under the title The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality (1974). Cheikh Anta Diop, in the main a historiographer, is “inarguably the most dominant Afrocentric historian of the past forty years” (M. K. Asante, 1993, p. 53). “Nations Negres et Culture,” Aime Cesaire (1972) declares, “is the most daring book yet written by a negro and one which will without question play an important part in the awakening of Africa!” (p. 35). According to James Spady in his afterword to Diop’s The Cultural Unity of Black Africa (1990), the book (Nations Negres et Culture) “…marked a turning point in African history written from an African
perspective” (p. 218). “An African perspective” is at the core of Afrocentricity. Of Diop, M. K. Asante (1990a) declared: “Diop’s conception of African centeredness remains fundamental to the Afrocentric revolution because it redirected philosophical and historical inquiry to the role and place of Africa prior to Arab and European colonialism” (p. 117).

When Diop returned to Senegal following the independence of that country in 1960, he “articulated a Pan-African, and what must be called, Afrocentric, socialist philosophy that ran counter to Senghor’s brand of French assimilationism” (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 15). As an African head of state in the sixties, and an intellectual at that, Senghor took an active part in the creation of the Organization for African Unity. However, in Diop’s view Senghor’s political actions as the head of an African state compromised his Pan-African ideals; in addition, his strand of negritude has been criticized mainly by Franz Fanon for being an ideological tool for imperialism (Gray, 1989, pp. 38-39). An even more damning view of Senghor came from Nelson Mandela (1994).

I had been told to be wary of Senghor, for there were reports that Senegalese soldiers were serving with the French in Algeria, and that President Senghor was a bit too taken with the customs and charms of the ancient regime… We summarized the situation in South Africa and made our request for military training and money. Senghor replied that his hands were tied… In the meantime, he wanted us to talk with the minister of justice, a Mr. Daboussier, about military training, and the president introduced me to a beautiful white French girl who, he explained, would interpret for me in my meeting with him. I said nothing but was disturbed. (p. 262)

Among the followers of Diop is the Congolese historian and linguist Theophile Obenga who, according to Gray (1989), was “profoundly influenced by the ideas of Leo Frobenius and Cheikh Anta Diop” and referred to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure
in his writings as “le maître” (p. 13). Of Obenga, M. K. Asante (1993) notes that he “is the leading continental scholar in the Diopian School...” (p. 55). Like Diop, “Obenga believes that if there is to be profound and effective continental unity, a truly African history coming from African historians must be written first” (Gray, 1989, p. 16). His *Pour Une Nouvelle Histoire* (1980) captures this thought. However, the main thrust of his Afrocentric work is in linguistics where he dismisses Greenberg’s Hamitic hypothesis of the ancient Egyptian language. He states that “the French talk of ‘Hamito-Semitic,’ the Americans of ‘Afro-Asiatic’ and the Russians ‘Afroasians’ to refer to the same scientific lie. They are driven by the same racist ideology” (Obenga, 2001, p. 17). Specifying the difference between his method in the scientific analysis of ancient Egyptian language and that of Greenberg, he points out: “Greenberg… classifies without reconstruction: this is typology which Greenberg himself admits. I classify after reconstructing; it is a historical and genetic classification” (my English translation, Ibid, pp. 18-19). Turning his attention to two French Africanists, notably Pr. Jean Suret-Canale and Pr. Raymond Mauny, he argued that the two scholars lacked depth in their critique of Cheikh Anta Diop.

Contrary to any basic notion in linguistics, and without showing exactly how, they claim that ‘all languages in the world’ enjoy close hereditary and genetic relationship among themselves. And for Mauny to ask a mischievous question like this one: “Might Sun Yat Sen, Ibsen, Eisenhower and Amundsen have been Serer?” (Obenga, 1980, p. 56)

Yet, even with this formidable groundwork laid by both Diop and Obenga, it has been noted that many of the principles that govern the development of the Afrocentric idea in education were first established by Carter G. Woodson in *The Miseducation of the Negro*, a book that was first published in 1933 (M. K. Asante, 1990a, pp. 161-163; Noll,
1999, p. 242). That Woodson’s book is essential in the formulation of the Afrocentric theory becomes evident right on the first page where he writes:

The ‘educated Negroes’ have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African. (p. 1)

How could it have been otherwise that blacks displayed such contempt for their own things? Great African American poet Langston Hughes (1940/1986) points out that when he entered Lincoln College, “…there was no course in Negro History being given, none in Negro Literature, and none in Negro Education…” (p. 309). The message of alienation remains so potent that many decades later, Nigerian Afrobeat musician Fela Kuti would emphasize the same theme in the song Buy Africa (1997). In M. K. Asante (1990b, 1993, & 2007, pp. 78-92, 2008) and Noll (1999), it has been indicated that the Afrocentric response to the phenomenon of dislocation was Carter Woodson’s alert recognition that there was something severely wrong with the education of the African Americans. M. K. Asante (1991) has noted that “Woodson’s alert recognition, more than 50 years ago, that something is severely wrong with the way African Americans are educated provides the principal impetus for the Afrocentric approach to American education” (p. 170).

Woodson, the founder of Black History Month, was not alone in the early contribution to the theory as Mazama (2003) has outlined.

Certainly, we find in previous scholars the assertion that the African experience is different from the European experience, and must be seen as such – from Blyden’s insistence on the infusion of the curriculum with information about African history and culture to Marcus Garvey’s emphasis on the necessity to look at the world through “our own spectacles”. Also Dubois’s call for a “Negro University” to interpret African and African American phenomena was along the same line. (pp. 9-10)
However, Mazama insists that “It is simply untrue that any thinker, prior to Molefi Asante, had elaborated and systematized an intellectual approach based on the centrality of the African experience, i.e, Afrocentricity” (Ibid, p.9).

M. K. Asante (2008) has traced the origin of the conceptualization of Afrocentricity in this account:

The convergence of two influences worked to produce the idea that the ‘black perspective’ needed a fuller and rounder theoretical construction. The first influence was the critical insight of the philosopher Harold Cruse who suggested that it was critical for the African community in the United States to articulate a political, social, cultural, and economic idea consistent with its own history… The second influence was that of Kwame Nkrumah who had argued in his book *Consciencism* (1964) that Africa itself had to come to terms with its own personality and create a scientific response to the national and international issues based on the interest of Africa. (p. 6)

Since the theory arose out of the Black Power Movement of the sixties, he is quick to mention that “the Kawaida Movement founded by Maulana Karenga had articulated a vision based on the twin idea of tradition and reason grounded in the African experience…” (Ibid, p. 6). Thus, Cobb, Jr. (1997) states that “among Afrocentricity’s countless forebears, it is most directly related to Karenga’s Kawaida theory” (p. 122).

However, arguing that Karenga’s Kawaida was not sufficiently robust to deal with the Pan African issues confronting the interactive networks of Africans, Clark (2013) makes this distinction between the ideas of Karenga and M. K. Asante:

For Maulana Karenga…’Afrocentricity is a methodology, orientation or a quality of thought and practice’…as distinct from … a full-blown theory or philosophy. Karenga’s Kawaida precedes the academic articulation of Afrocentricity, and his formulation, such as a ‘black frame of reference’ and ‘putting black things first,’ were primary sources for Asante’s… intitial statement on Afrocentricity. Karenga’s… intellectual and practical work is done within the framework of Kawaida. While many identify Afrocentricity exclusively with the works of Molefi Asante, I understand Kawaida as a school of thought within the broader framework of Afrocentric thought. The stress on recovering and reconstructing African culture, the emphasis on
reappropriating it and reaffirming it as a living tradition, is essential to understanding Afrocentricity as an emancipatory discourse. While Asante prioritizes language and consciousness as key categories in his Afrocentric approach, Karenga stresses political theory and ethical reflection in Kawaida. (pp. 381-382)

Mazama (2003) expands the list of influences by stating that “Asante identifies four major foundational blocks to Afrocentricity, namely Garvey’s philosophy, the Negritude movement, Kawaida and Diop’s historiography” (p. 10). To this list, she adds Fanon. Irrespective of the different influences that culminated in the theory, I agree with Noll (1999), especially as it involves education, that “Afrocentrists feel that the traditional emphasis on white European history and culture and the disregard of African history and culture alienate black schoolchildren, who are unable to feel an attachment to the content being offered” (p. 240).

2.3 Terminological challenges to Afrocentricity

One of the challenges Afrocentricity faces is variation in the term. From its inception in the early eighties to date, the term “Afrocentricity” has developed several variants in spelling. This raises a key question: do they all mean the same thing?

The most common of the spellings are “Afrocentrism,” “Africentricity,” and the less commonly used “Africentrism.” David Nicholson titled an article published in the Washington Post (September 23, 1990) “Afrocentrism and the Tribalization of America.” About the theory Edward Said, the author of Orientalism (1979), also uses the term in the phrase: “The fantastic explosion of specialized and separatist knowledge is partly to blame: Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, Occidentalism… deconstructionism, etc.” (Said, 1994, p. 320). The use of the term “Afrocentrism” is not limited to scholars opposed to
the theory (M. K. Asante, 2007). Ruth Reviere (2001), an Afrocentric scholar and advocate of M. K. Asante, talks of an article which “deals with the emergent philosophy of Afrocentrism” (p. 709) and notes that “the formal theory of Afrocentrism was postulated by Molefi Kete Asante…” (p. 711). Similarly, Cobb, Jr. (1999) writes that “Afrocentrism is an attempt to redefine ourselves as subjects rather than objects of history…” (p. 122). Later, in the same article, he states that “among Afrocentricity’s countless forbears, it is most directly related to Karenga’s Kawaida theory.” To him, “Afrocentricity” and “Afrocentrism” are clearly synonyms. Based on my own observation in the course of this investigation, the term “Africentricity” is used less frequently than “Afrocentrism.” Africentricity is the term widely used in Bernard’s and Brigham’s Theorizing Africentricity in Action (2012), a collection of articles written in Nova Scotia on “Africentric” leadership. It also features in “Africentricity and Career development of African Americans,” an article published by Harold E. Cheatham (1990) in Career Development Quarterly (Jun90, 38(4). In the article, Cheatham alternates between the application of the terms “Africentricity” and “Afrocentrism” in describing the same phenomenon. In The Journal of Negro Education, under a section labelled “Africentrist and Multicultural conflict or Consonance,” Howard Professor W. Curtis Banks titles his article “The Theoretical and Methodological Crisis of the Africentric Conception.” An article published in Toronto by Gordon & Zinga (2012) notes that “Black-focused or Africentric schooling has been proposed as one of the ways to address…disengagement and provide a more supportive environment for black youths who may lag behind their white peers for various systemic reasons” (p. 3).
These different terms appear to be synonyms and are apparently describing the same phenomenon. “Afrocentrism, Africentric, or African Centered are interchangeable terms representing the concept which categorizes a quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of African ancestry…” (Marks & Tonso, 2006). Nevertheless, Molefi Asante, the theory’s originator, insists on the application of the term “Afrocentricity” to describe his theory. To him,

the term Afrocentrism was first used by the opponents of Afrocentricity who in their zeal saw it as an obverse of Eurocentrism. The adjective “Afrocentric” in the academic literature always referred to Afrocentricity. However, the use of Afrocentrism reflected a negation of the idea of Afrocentricity as a positive and progressive paradigm. (2007a, p.17)


The use of the term “Africentricity” seems prevalent among African-Canadian authors, especially those from Nova Scotia, and this has led me to think that it is an attempt on their part to embed the theory with their own national identity by moving away from the very American “Afro” to the African Canadian “Afri” (like in Africville). Thus, Provoe (2010) states: “The Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC)…took a bold step when it opened its doors to a program giving African Nova Scotians a place to earn some of their high school diploma credits in an Africentric learning environment” (p. 343).
The term lends itself to confusion as a result of these different variants; but this is not the only problem that the concept faces. Another confusion arises from the use of the terms “Afrocentricity” and “Africanity,” causing M. K. Asante (1998) to make this declaration: “I feel compelled to resolve the confusion surrounding the terms Afrocentricity and Africanity” (p. 19). M. K. Asante (2007) states that Africanity is a term coined by Senghor to give substance to Aime Cesaire’s Negritude and African Personality (p. 12) and it “refers in its generality to all of the customs, traditions, and traits of people of Africa and the diaspora” (Asante, M. K., 1998, 2007). It would appear that “Africanity” is the ultimate objective of negritude, a philosophical trend which was partly championed by Senghor. “The apostles of negritude feel it necessary to affirm, glorify and exalt their own heritage until ‘Africanity’ has been achieved” (M. L. Butler, 1976, p. 346). M. K. Asante (1990a) has pointed out that African birth does not make one Afrocentric, for Afrocentricity is a matter of intellectual discipline and must be learned and practised (p. 117).

2.4 Some critiques and other challenges to Afrocentricity

With particular focus on the definition of Afrocentricity, Asante notes that “many definitions of African people and their ideas appear to be either outright distortions or deliberate negations” (p. 7). Such “distortions or deliberate negations” have given him the opportunity to shed more light on the definition of Afrocentricity and what the theory represents. Refuting claims by Michele Wallace, Arthur Schlesinger, Miriam Lichtheim, Cornel West, Diane Ravitch, bell hooks, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. that Afrocentric theories are about cultural separatism or racial separatism, M. K. Asante (1993) cites
“pre-Afrocentric” works by white authors such as Meville Herskovits, Basil Davidson, Robert Farris Thompson which “sought to see through the African eyes” and “enlarged our understanding” in other fields on Africans and African Americans (p. 4). The charge of black chauvinism is taken a step further when African American scholar Clarence Walker (2001) maintains that Afrocentricity is Eurocentrism in black face (p. 4). In his work *We Can’t Go Home Again* (2001), Walker states that “Afrocentrism is a mythology that is racist, reactionary, and essentially therapeutic” (p. 3). M. K. Asante counters with the argument that “Afrocentricity is not a Black version of Eurocentricity” (M. K. Asante, 1990, 1998) for the simple reason that “it is not Eurocentrism that gives rise to Afrocentric perspective but rather the idea of Africans speaking for themselves” (M. K. Asante, 1993, p. 62). Besides, he adds, Afrocentricity “is not an ethnocentric valorization to the degradation of other perspectives as Eurocentricity tends to be” (2007, p. 17). He bolsters his position by noting: “My intention is more comprehensive: I seek a critical method applicable to Africans, wherever they are, in much the same way that Western scholars have set the procedures for criticizing Western discourse” (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 187). In this, he shares a lot with Diop (1990). Mazama (2003) argues that the Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. It also means viewing the European voice as just one among many, and not necessarily the wisest one (p. 5). M. K. Asante (2007) also talks of what Ancient Egyptians called the “djed” or the Greeks “stasis,” both terms referring to “a strong place to stand” (p. 15). This “strong place to stand,” the African’s own centeredness, prevents Africans from being “… peripheral dwellers in somebody else’s unfolding historical panorama” (Keto, 1993, p. 12).
Another critique to Afrocentricity is that “growing out of a largely vitalistic ideological perspective of African America life, the Africanist theoretical school has advanced constructs that focus upon the unique characteristics of African peoples” (C. Banks, 1992). In other words, it is too centered. The critique of specificity is shared by Cornel West who declares that Molefi Asante believes that one has to be centered, rooted, but I believe that one must go with the flow, move and grove and be dynamic (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 13). In his response to Cornell West, M. K. Asante has stated that one “must be open to the possibilities of dynamism, moving and flowing, but you have to be moving from a base. Those who do not move from a base are just floating in the air” (Ibid).

Still West’s argument remains valid and traces of it could be found in “Black and Not-Black: Gilroy’s critique of racialised modernity” (McRobbie, 2005, pp. 39-66). In the article, Gilroy echoing Du Bois struggles with issue of his own identity, the “double-consciousness” (Du Bois, 1897, p. 194) of being inside and outside of European modernity. Gilroy is anti-essentialist and uses this argument against “the absolutism of putting people in one camp or the other” (p. 40). This is an argument that Afrocentric researcher should heed. The main thrust of his argument is that nationalism has only created exclusion and tremendous suffering for black people and that in responding to this situation black people run the risk of creating black nationalisms of their own. He, therefore, warns against what he terms “ethnic absolutism” (p. 45).

Similar warnings are echoed in the views of Hall (1996) who states:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which constitute the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a
set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantee in nature. (p. 254)

However, sounding a somewhat optimistic note, he states:

It seems to me that, in the various practices and discourses of black cultural production, we are beginning to see constructions…of a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new identities. (p. 259)

Some of the stiffest challenges to Afrocentricity have come from the greatest beneficiaries of Eurocentrism. Thus, Allan Bloom, self-designated American spokesperson for the West, and his intellectual followers have considered the appearance in the academic world of women, African American, gays, and native Americans, all of them speaking with genuine multiculturalism and new knowledge, as a barbaric threat to “Western Civilization” (Said, 1994, p. 320).

Non-Western epistemologies and perspectives have often met with outright hostility. Talks of “multiculturalism” have often concealed this reality. Renowned American historian Arthur Schlesinger states in his work The Disuniting of America: Reflection on a Multicultural Society (1991) that the Afrocentric theory is a cult of ethnicity, lashing out further that the militants of ethnicity now contend that a main objective of public education should be the protection, strengthening, celebration, and perpetuation of ethnic origins. Said (1994) describes it as “…a disrupting eruption of separatist and chauvinistic discourse…” (p. xx).

Another challenge has been European cultural assimilation, which for the “native populations …. turns out to be only a more or less violent attempt to deny the culture of the people in question” (Cabral, 1974, p. 40). Of assimilation, Diop (1996) notes

Of all the European powers which dominate Africa, France is one of the most colonialist – if not the most colonialist. The methods they use (assimilation
policy, etc.) are such that in spite of the most ferocious exploitation, no real aspiration to national independence has so far been seen in her Black African colonies (apart from territories under French mandate). French colonialism has even managed the exceptional feat of creating political consciousness among all age groups, the old, the middle aged, the young, in defence of the French Union. (p. 69)

Through the colonial policy of cultural assimilation, Western roots were sunk deep in numerous African countries. Attempts to shrug off Western cultural grip seem an exercise in futility since it was in Europe that the bulk of contemporary African leaders and cabinet ministers received their education (Kesteloot, 1991, p. 10). Ironic as it may seem, Young (2001) has stated that the postcolonial is a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty – but also the realities of nations and people emerging into a new imperialistic contest of economic and sometimes political domination (p. 57).

Assimilation, nevertheless, could and should be seen as a double-edge sword in that even though the policy was opposed to autonomy and failed to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous African culture (Crowder, 1967; Cabral, 1974), resistance to it paved the way for the emergence of negritude and later Afrocentricity. In an interview with renowned Haitian poet Rene Depestre, Aime Cesaire (1972), described as “the High Priest of Negritude,” explains that Negritude was really resistance to cultural assimilation (pp. 70-78). President Senghor of Senegal, a disciple of Cesaire, has stated that “…his return to his African past, his sudden resentment of his own Frenchness and his search for virtue in the African personality was the result of his realization that he assimilated, and was not being assimilated” (Crowder, 1967, p. 52). In the realm of literature, Batouala (1921), an early book by René Maran that went on to win the Prix Goncourt, did not deal with science or art but rather with colonial realities. “French public opinion could not
accept a Negro who dared to question European superiority or the right to colonize” (Kesteloot, 1991, p. 9).

Another challenge has come from the clash between some followers of Negritude and those of Afrocentricity. Senghor, in the preface of a special issue of *Ethiopiquest*, a cultural journal which he founded, referred to Diop as the great “theoretician of negritude” (Gray, 1989, p. 46). M. K. Asante (2008) clearly acknowledges the contribution of negritude when he states that “…Kawaida and negritude were influences on Afrocentricity” (p. 13). And yet, when Diop was alive, he never saw eye to eye with Senghor. As president of Senegal, Senghor had Diop imprisoned and prevented him from teaching at the university (Gray, 1989; M. K. Asante, 2007). Diop was not hostile to negritude and openly admired Aime Cesaire. After all, in many ways, negritude is African-centered, shares many of the same sources of inspiration for its creation as Afrocentricity; and, like Afrocentricity, has similar decolonizing aspirations. M. K. Asante (2007) shows Diop’s inroad into negritude and the difference of approach his approach to research.

It was left for Cheikh Anta Diop to infuse the idea of Africanity with a scientific and research orientation. As a trained scientist, as well as being a student of social sciences, Diop provided what the artists, writers, and poets could not provide for the Negritude Movement. (p. 12)

Diop stated that the cultural personality of a people coalesce into three interrelated factors, which are the psychic, the linguistic and the historical; and that while the negritudists emphasized the psychic, he chose to concentrate on the linguistic and historical because these two factors could be apprehended scientifically (Diop, 1974, p.xiii; Gray, 1989, p. 40). It must be noted that if Afrocentricity, at least as a theory, is a thing of the early eighties, negritude goes back to the thirties.
To W. L. Butler (1976), the term Negritude was relatively insignificant until the 1930s” when it “was coined by Aime Cesaire from Martinique and popularized by Senegalese-born Leopold Senghor” (p. 342). Senghor defined Negritude as “the cultural patrimony of, the values, and above all the spirit of Negro African civilization” (Kesteloot, 1974, p. 102). Senghor (1988), basing his analysis on the views of Robert Cornevin of Academie des Sciences d’Outre-mer, points out that

It was in Haiti that, as of 1915, Negritude movement started, by way of a conscious resistance to the military, political and cultural occupation of the United States of America which lasted for about twenty years. It is also not by accident that it was Baron Vastey (1735-1820), the bi-racial cousin of General Dumas, the father of Alexander Dumas, who was the first theoretician of Negritude. (My trans. pp. 137-138)

W. L. Butler (1976) states that

Negritude is usually divided into three periods: 1900-1932 (‘The Pre-Establishment Period’); 1932-1947 (‘Period of Recognition’); and 1947 to the present (‘Period of Independence’). This era marks the upsurge of black pride and black awareness. Many black writers of this period protested against European scholars who attempted to explain Africa in western terms. ‘La vielle negritude’ occurred during the time of the Harlem Renaissance and introduced such Black Americans as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Count Cullen and W.E.B. DuBois to the French public. ‘Pan-Africanism’, spearheaded by DuBois, and Marcus Garvey’s ‘Back to Africa’ Movement proclaimed the dignity of blackness... (p. 342)

Thus, Senghor (1988) points out when talking about negritude that

I would not be done if I failed to include the influence on us, black students in Paris, of the black American New Negro cultural movement or the Black Renaissance, whose founders were Alain Locke, but above all William Edward Burghard du Bois... Actually, it was he who is the historic founder of Negritude as his first important work testifies; it was written in 1903 and titled Souls of Black Folks, which I have translated as ‘Ames des peuples noirs’ (pp. 138-139)

Gray (1989) points out that “Negritude was met with hostility by most English-speaking African intellectuals, this discourse often associated with Soyinka’s famous comment
about ‘tigritude’” (p. 51). In “Cult of Negritude”, Esk’ia Mphahlele’s contribution to a
discussion that was published in Notes and Topics, the South African writer states that
“...negritude to us is just so much airy intellectual talk either in terms of artistic activity
or as a fighting faith” before concluding that “I take my negro-ness for granted” (pp. 51-
52). So even though negritude and Afrocentricity have a lot in common, infighting
among black intellectuals is a distraction to the focus of African emancipation.

Whatever the critiques, shortcomings and challenges, Afrocentricity remains non-
hegemonic and non-prescriptive, an African-centered worldview, which establishes a
conceptual framework for how the world is seen and understood. It is culturally specific
and draws on African philosophical and theoretical assumptions and serves Africans, just
as classical Greek civilization serves as a reference point for Europe (Diop, 1990).

2.5 How relevant is the theory of Afrocentricity to my study?

John Locke’s description of the African, as exposed by Adichie in “The Danger of
the Single Story,” was just an opening salvo in a long list of discourses and representation
that would come to characterize Western scholarship and that would be used to justify
enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism and various forms of
oppressions and injustice against the Other, especially black people. Hall (2013) has
stated that “some commercial advertising images and magazine illustrations …use racial
stereotypes … dating from the period of slavery or from popular imperialism of the late
nineteenth century” (pp. 215-216). Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1993), Abdi (2012), Chilisa
Episkenew (2009), Fanon (1963) and many other intellectuals have shown in their
writings how from Hume and Hegel through Gustave Le Bon, Jules Romain and Jean-
Champollion Figeac to even the likes of Arthur Schlesinger, some of the pillars of
Western scholarship, have come to embody falsification and misrepresentation in their
analysis of the Other. M. K. Asante (1993) argues against the imposition of the
Eurocentric perspective on every subject and theme as if the Eurocentric position is the
only human and universal view and concludes by stating that such an attitude is the
fundamental basis of a racist response to history (p. 2).

In the case of Africa, apart from the major flaws of outright distortion or
falsification, “the Eurocentric approach often ignores … important interpretive key to the
African experience” (p. 3), a situation which has had dire consequences for the
continent’s development. Chilisa (2012) raises the issue of research and development
when she notes that in Africa, “scholars…argue that the dominant research paradigms
have marginalized African communities’ ways of knowing and have thus led to research-
driven development projects that are irrelevant to the needs of the people” (p. 35). Hence
the need for Afrocentricity or an African-centered perspective, “…a perspective which
allows Africans to be subjects of historical experience rather than objects on the fringes
of Europe” (p. 3). Afrocentricity contends that the main problem of African scholars is
precisely their usually unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective
and their conceptual framework (Mazama, 2003, p. 4).

I was born and raised in Africa and I have experienced firsthand colonialism and
its horrible aftermath; so, for the foregoing reasons, I am convinced that the way forward
is to stick with the Afrocentric perspective. However, in scholarship, to the extent that I
am African, using an African-centered perspective to study an African dance in a context
which involves an African people, this raises the question on research relationship, on insider/outside and “notions of objectivity and neutrality” (L. T. Smith, 1999, p. 137). I am certainly an insider but given my status and level of education, I may also be considered an outsider. L. T. Smith (1999) emphasizes that “insider research has to be ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research” (p. 139).

In Afrocentric research, Chilisa (2012) states that *Nommo* (the creation of knowledge as a vehicle for the improvement in human life and human relation - Reviere, 2001, p. 711) and *Ma’at* (the quest for justice, truth and harmony – Karenga, 2006) together with a conception of reality based on *Ubuntu* (I-We relationship – Desmond Tutu in Chilisa 2012, p. 186; Battle, 1997, p. 39; Du Boulay, 1988, pp. 114-115), should provide a code of conduct and a standard of aspiration for ethical and moral behavior (p. 186).

There are other reasons that made me use the Afrocentric conceptual framework for this research. The subject of the inquiry is African-based. An African-centered perspective is in harmony; I, therefore, consider it the most suitable since it takes Africa as a point of departure. By doing this, I am subscribing to the Diopian historiography which is based on the fact that “no one can tell the African story better than the African people” (M. K. Asante, 2007, p. 100). Oyebade (1990) provides additional reinforcement for this decision when he states that “The Afrocentric perspective seeks to liberate African studies from … Eurocentric monopoly and thus assert a valid worldview through which Africa can be studied objectively” (p. 234).

It should also be mentioned that the subject under investigation has numerous facets (education, dance, cultural studies, history, philosophy, etc.) which means that the
theory is adequately equipped to address all of them, for as Mazama (2003) has pointed out Afrcentricity is not a single theory but rather a multiplicity of Afrcentric theories applied to a wide range of topics. This flexibility ties in with my cultural studies methodology which to McRobbie (2006) is “not a tightly defined discipline but a shifting terrain, a site of dispute and contestation” (p. 2).

It is important to note that an Afrcentric research approach will push the inquiry into a higher realm where methodology and the process of knowledge construction cease to take precedence over the well-being of the people being researched (Reviere, 2001).

Other justifications for the use of the theory revolve around the nature of education in Western society. It is based almost entirely on Western epistemologies, which tend to privilege white racial dominance and cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is “the process of a dominant group’s norms and culture becoming defined as the norm” (Dubrosky & Young, p. 207). McLaren (2003) maintains that “victims of cultural imperialism live their oppression by viewing themselves from the perspective of the way others view them,” adding that this phenomenon is known as “double consciousness” (p. 37). The exclusion of black and Aboriginal perspectives in Canadian schools have been studied by scholars such as George Dei (1994, 2003, 2007, 2008), Yatta Kanu (2011), Peter McLaren (2003), Ali A. Abdi (2004, 2012) among many others. Through an Afrcentric perspective “…schools…can offer students the opportunity to participate in inclusive… learning environment” (Hampton, 2010, p. 103). Curriculum theorist Huebner has stated that part of the educative environment comprises physical materials such as books, language and symbols (Au, 2012) and since “school is to prepare that child to become part of a social group” (Noll, 1999, p. 242) such materials should...
also reflect a child’s background. It is the best way for students to develop what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2007 terms “critical consciousness” (p. 39).

Finally, my study strives to attain the Afrocentric objectives of cultural reclamation and the rise to consciousness through the African-centered grounding base; “to obtain a liberation which houses the psychic freedom to develop and the freedom from oppression concomitant with African cultural pursuit…” (Mazama, 2003).

2.6 Conclusion

In spite of all of the challenges and obstacles Afrocentricity faces, “the journey towards personal decolonizing and reclaiming continues and, in many ways mirrors the journey of the African continent in general…” (Wane, 2007, p. 185). Given the centrality of Afrocentricity in analyzing phenomena in African culture and history, its methods and methodology have played an important role in this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

Data collection for this dissertation has varied and has responded to the exigencies of the three facets of this investigation. The task of collection has not been without its thrills and challenges. While some primary sources (newspaper and magazine articles, artifacts, periodicals, photographs, etc) and secondary sources (books and theses) exist, African dance in general and Buum Oku Dance in particular still suffer from a severe lack of written documents (Bah, 1996; Ntaimah, 2012; Ngum, 1990). Given this circumstance, and faced with the task of reconstructing the history of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde as well as the representation and audience reception of the said dance, I had to supplement information acquired from written material with the one obtained from interviews that I conducted in Cameroon. A highlight of my fieldwork in Cameroon entailed shooting a video of Buum Oku Dance which was watched by student participants in the City of Regina and whom I later interviewed in order to generate data for audience reception of the dance.

3.2 Interviews

3.2.1 Rationale

Even when written materials do exist on African dances, most of them go back to the colonial period and tend to be Eurocentric in character. Most of the colonialists who conducted the research were often driven in their endeavours by Western imperialist agenda which was often to assert white superiority. More often than not, they excluded African points of view (Ajayi, 1998; K. W. Asante, 2000; Ngugi, 1993). These two
tendencies go against the grain of the Afrocentric research method which must “work to legitimize the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data...” (Reviere, 2001, p. 712).

It must be noted however that, in comparison to other Cameroonian folkdances, a lot has been written on Oku folkdances. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1993), Chilisa (2012) and Mutua & Swadener (2004) have pointed out that some post-colonial African scholars, through some of their research practices, continue to promote the legacies of colonialism. Consequently, even when some of the works on Oku come from Oku and other Cameroonian scholars, they had been conducted mainly following a Eurocentric scholarly tradition; hence, a common use of terms such as “tribe” (Bah, 1996; Ntaimah, 2012) to denote “ethnic group” and “pagan” to describe African religious practices, etc. Furthermore, most of the works published on Oku have not made their way into Canadian libraries and other institutions of research and learning. I was caught up in this rather difficult situation and, with the need to validate African viewpoints in my research findings, I had to supplement existing written literature with material obtained by interviewing Oku natives who created, own and are operating Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. This phase of the interview involved “oral history interview”, one which “relies on what has been remembered and can be collected by human beings” (Stokes, 2013, p. 99).

Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) talk of “purposeful sampling” when looking for interview participants, noting that “the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 104). Berg (2001) adds that “this category of
sampling is sometimes called *judgmental sampling*” and that “when developing a purposeful sample, researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent the population” and who are “… certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes…” (p. 32). With purposeful sampling in mind, I decided to travel, either to Cameroon where the dance is based and where I could interview past and present members of the troupe; or to the United States where an Oku dance in the tradition of Subi and Buum Oku exists and is managed by Oku natives. Even though members of the dance group in the US might not have possessed the kind of intimate knowledge that could only be provided by insiders of Buum Oku both in Yaounde and Oku, overall, they have a good knowledge of the dance since they are from Oku; and, besides, I considered them closer to me geographically, which meant that travelling fare would have cost me less. In the end, the unwillingness of Oku natives operating the dance in the US to collaborate with me caused me to make the important decision to travel to Cameroon. There, apart from having the opportunity to consult archives, I would interview a wide range of people: scholars, dance owners, and Oku villagers, etc.

### 3.2.2 Oral history interview

3.2.2.1 Participants and challenges: USA

Even before I started this research, the very first person who came to my mind was Dr. Tatah Mentan, a native of Oku and scholar who lectures at St John’s University, Minneapolis. I knew him in Cameroon where for years he served as a journalist and then lecturer at the University of Yaounde as well as the Higher School of Mass
Communications in Yaounde. He is well versed in Oku history and traditions, having served as Oku language and cultural broadcaster at Radio Buea in the South West Region. In addition, he is close to the traditional administration that runs Oku. I called him in early December 2014 and he gave me a list of names of other Oku indigenes whom he felt I should contact. He recommended six persons, three in the US and the remaining three in Cameroon. Those in the US included Dr. Yaah Beatrice Wamey in Washington, D. C., Nchiyndah Mah and Romanus Dorr in Virginia.

Of the three names, I knew of Beatrice Wamey, the spouse of renowned Cameroonian journalist, Julius Wamey. I knew that she has a doctorate in education, so I was eager to get her perspectives on the dance, especially on gender issues. I called her on December 6, 2014, and she said that since the dance I had selected for my project was a male dance in which women did not participate, she had nothing to say. She, however, provided me with the phone numbers of the remaining two candidates, advising me to start with Romanus Dorr, the *bam eykum* or “father of the dance.” I called him and left a message with my name and number. I tried the number of Nchiyndah Mah and did the same. When Nchiyndah received my message, he got back to me the same day and stated that he was actually called James Wanyu. I outlined my research proposal and promised to email it to him and informed him that I would very much like to interview him and other members of the dance troupe. He accepted on condition that I respect hierarchy by first obtaining permission from Romanus Dorr, the *bam eykum*. I called Romanus three times, leaving my contacts and a message on each instance; but he did not return any of my calls. Sensing the reluctance, I decided to travel to Cameroon.
My interaction with Dr. Tatah Mentan was mainly by phone and emails and he provided me with details on the Oku administration, the early history of Subi and on key figures such as John Ndinaah and Nkemba John Babey, who happened to be people he knew personally.

3.2.2.2 Participants and challenges: Cameroon

Conditions for the interviews in Cameroon were more propitious. I had a friend in Dr. Peter Ntaihm, a native of Oku, a lecturer of anthropology at the University of Yaounde, a researcher and a xylophone player and former president of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. In terms of research partnership, he proved to be the gold standard. We had been discussing folkdances long before I enrolled at the university to do a PhD. I forwarded him the thesis proposal, the ethics approval certificate and other relevant documents to share their contents with members of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde.

Meanwhile, I started making arrangements to obtain a travel visa to Cameroon. Cameroon does not recognize dual citizenship, so since I am Canadian, I needed to obtain a visa from Cameroon High Commission in Ottawa to enter the country in which I was born and raised. Letters from Dr. Ken Montgomery, my thesis supervisor, and Peter Ntaihm in Yaounde, accelerated the visa process. Once I had obtained my visa, I began hectic arrangements to meet interview participants in Cameroon. Apart from the persons Peter Ntaihm had recommended, I had the list from Dr. Tatah Mentan which included the following: Fai Ndishangong, a former high school teacher, an Oku historian and a lineage head; Dr. Martha Ngum, an Oku native and anthropology lecturer at the
University of Buea in Cameroon; Bah, a budding Oku historian who had worked with Nicolai Argenti, doing research on Oku.

Peter Ntaimah recommended the following persons: Gladious Keja, a dancer, a cultural icon, the current bam eykum or president of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and a policeman; Dr. Dinsi Stanley, a University lecturer of law and political science and the current lead dancer and choreographer; Peter Ntaimah himself; Nsakse John, a university graduate with LLB in law and a classroom teacher; Francis Jick, a former soldier who had served as the first treasurer of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde for thirty-two years; John Tatah Gamse, a former soldier, the first bam eykum and a dancer and xylophone player of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, and currently a cultural adviser to Mawe, an Oku dance outfit in the port city of Douala; and Yang Cletus Ntam, the late Fai Baimenda, head of the lineage which owns the original Subi in Mboh.

These participants lived in four different regions (provinces) of the country: North West, South West, Littoral and Centre. Travelling by public transport from one region to another on terrible roads and inclement weather conditions as well as calling participants to book appointments often proved very challenging.

3.2.2.3 Interviews

I arrived at Yaounde Nsimalen Airport on March 14, 2015 and was met by Christopher Selambi, my brother-in-law and cameraman for the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), and by Major Emmanuel Jing, my cousin and a soldier in the Cameroonian military and the person with whom I spent the first three days. The next morning, I called and informed Peter Ntaimah that I was already in Yaounde and
suggested that we have our first meeting that very day. He agreed to meet me at 2:00 p.m. at First Bar in Ngoakelle district with a delegation made up of some important representatives of Buum Oku Dance. The delegation showed up in time and comprised Peter Ntaimah, Keja Gladious, Dinsi Stanley, Keming David, Nsakse John Kelese, Keja Samuel, a supply clerk with the US Embassy in Yaounde, and Keja Terence, a security guard.

Christopher Selambi, who was to be part of the shooting team, as well as Major Emmanuel Jing, a man with sound knowledge of folkdances, comprised part of my delegation to the deliberation. Buum Oku delegation wanted me to spell out in my own words the purpose of their invitation. I told them about the research project, which they already knew about since Peter had kept them constantly updated on any new development. It turned out that all those members Peter had recommended for me to interview were present during the meeting, so I used the opportunity to collect their phone numbers in order to discuss with them later when and where I could meet each of them at their own convenience.

I had conducted research on the background of all the participants and knew their various areas of expertise. I was also well informed on Oku traditions on how to conduct research within the community as this would help me to respect the research ethical guidelines as recommended by the University of Regina as well as by Afrocentricity. Following Oku traditions, I bought drinks and kolanuts which I shared with each of the participants to be interviewed; this is the Oku equivalent of “consent.” I also provided participants with minimal remuneration as a token for their contributions. This amounted to about $12.
The interview was the standardized interview, “…with formally structured schedule of interview questions” in which “the interviewers are required to ask subjects to respond to each question” (Berg, 2001, p. 69). Very long interviews tend to discourage people from participating, so I kept the length reasonable. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes and I concentrated most of my questions on areas where there were fewer documents. A lot has been written on Oku history, culture and society. Even though there were general questions common to all participants on issues such Oku culture, dance representation and gender, I structured my questions in such a way that each participant had the opportunity to focus on matters involving his or her area of expertise in Buum Oku Dance. For instance, those who played musical instruments were allowed to elaborate on this section; and the same applied to those dealing with the administration, etc.

Those interviewed in Yaounde included Peter Ntaimah, Nsakse John Kelese, Gladious Keja, and Dinsi Stanley. The first three candidates were interviewed in a quiet room at the residence of Christopher Selambi and the last participant, Stanley Dinsi, at his office at Carrefour Obili. In Douala, I interviewed John Tatas Gamse; and in Buea, Dr. Martha Ngum. Arrangements to meet and interview both Bah and Fai Ndishangong fell through; and the same was true for an attempt to interview Cameroon Minister of Culture, Ama Tutu Muna, as well as the Fon (king) of Oku. Time was not on my side.

In Yaounde, the first person to be interviewed was Peter Ntaimah and the event occurred on March 17, 2015. The bulk of the questions he was asked focused on the administration since he is a former president; on history of the dance since he is an anthropologist and Oku historian; and on music and dance since he plays the xylophone
and is a choreographer. His interview lasted 35 minutes. The second person to be interviewed was Nsakse John whose interview lasted 31 minutes and started around 3:45 p.m. It took place on March 19, 2015, and focused on music since he is a lead xylophone player; and on dance and education since he is a classroom teacher. The third participant was Gladious Keja, the current president of the group and a dancer. The interview occurred on March 19, 2015, and the bulk of his questions were based on the administration, dance and choreography. He had been active in Oku cultural circuit since his high school days in Nso where he had participated as a dancer in the local chapter of Subi. The last person to be interviewed in Yaounde was Stanley Dinsi, whose interview was done on March 20, 2015, and lasted about 45 minutes. As lead dancer and choreographer, many of his questions were based on these areas of his expertise.

In Douala, John Tatah Gamse offered to come to me for his interview since he knew the city better. He was the first president of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, and he was interviewed on April 5, 2015, at the quiet residence of Pa Ngufor Jing in Bonaberi, a location which was a stone’s throw away from where Gamse lives. A large number of his questions were on the early history of the dance, mostly on who did what, when and where. As for Dr. Ngum, she answered many questions on issues relating to gender and representation in Oku dances. Her PhD dissertation (1990) at the Victoria University of Manchester focused on Oku dances. Her work on ecological anthropology of Oku (2010) is insightful. She was interviewed on April 6, 2015, and it started around 5:00 p.m. in her residence in Munyar, Buea, in the South West Region. In Oku, on March 24, 2015, around midday, I interviewed Francis Jick, a native of Mboh and relative of Ndinaah, the originator of modern Subi dance (kekum mekale). Jick had also served as treasurer of
Buum Oku Dance for 32 years, from the time of its inception to his retirement from the military. The bulk of his questions revolved around the early history of the dance, the financial structure of the organization, Ndinaah, the Baimenda lineage. The last person to be interviewed in Oku was the late Fai Baimenda, whom I met at the Market Square, where the interview was conducted on March 24, 2015, in the afternoon in a quiet room at his cousin’s business location in Elak. Many of his questions focused on the Baimenda lineage, the creation of the original Subi and important moments between Ndinaah and his family in the making of modern Subi.

3.2.2.4 During and after interviews

All the interviews were conducted in English, so there was no need for translation or interpretation. The information was recorded with a small, ultra-sound-sensitive USB rechargeable Sony IC Recorder ICD-UX543. Each interview was replayed to participants after completion. After I had conducted all the interviews, my nephew Ndifor Selambi, a student of finance at the Catholic University in Buea, who was on holidays and had nothing to do, opted to help me with the transcription but I offered to pay him a token amount which came up to around $60 or 30,000 CFA. After recording the interviews, they were played back to participants for them to confirm what they said; and I forwarded the typed transcripts to them through Peter Ntaimah, Buum Oku’s contact with me.
3.3 Video shoot of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde

3.3.1 Reason for the shoot

As part of my study, I had to shoot a video of Buum Oku Dance in Cameroon. The video was to be used to analyze dance representation as well as audience reception. It was viewed by six students living in Regina to whom I asked a series of questions relating to the dance.

3.3.2 Prelude to the video shoot

The initial idea was to shoot the dance video in its natural setting, during the monthly Oku meeting in Yaounde. However, even though the shoot of the dance video took place in Yaounde, it did not occur where the Oku Community normally holds its monthly meeting during which the dance is sometimes performed. Part of the reason for my trip to Cameroon was to be present during the video shoot. Before I set out, I had been in constant touch with Peter Ntaimah who held some meetings with representatives from the dance troupe and the Oku community to determine the amount of money that I had to pay for the video production and other related costs. My research approach, which is based on the I/We Ubuntu philosophy that sees knowledge production as collaborative (Chilisa, 2012), respects specificity of place in accordance with the requirements of Afrocentric research methods (Reviere, 2001; M. K. Asante, 1990).

The Oku community in Yaounde perceived my research project as collaborative and mutually beneficial since it is in consonance with key provisions of its constitution. The preamble of the 2002 constitution states: “Proud of their cultural heritage, desirous to
sell the image of Oku and Cameroon at home and abroad through the display of their cultural wealth…, all sons (sic) of Oku in Yaounde… have resolved to form the Oku Dance in Yaounde…” . Markula and Pikko (2011) make allusion to a “communitarian model” of research ethic “that stresses the benefit of the group instead of an individual” (p. 15). In the end, the amount I was charged in my dealings with the dance group was moderate; and this was so because both parties involved stood to benefit from the research project. I was asked to pay the sum of 100,000 frs CFA (about $250) for participating in the production of the dance video itself; and an additional 50,000frs CFA (about $125) to buy food and drinks for the community to ensure that all its members were speaking with one voice on this matter.

During my stay in Yaounde, my cousins, Judith Selambi (and her husband Christopher Selambi) and Major Emmanuel Jing, provided me with food and accommodation, and let me use their cars. When I did my final calculation by the time my one-month trip was over, the total amount I had spent came to over $7000.

Some challenges emerged during the meeting with regard to the video shoot. Since my stay in Cameroon was very brief, I wanted it shot right away before any unforeseeable incident came up that could disrupt the exercise. However, owing to discrepancies in individual timetables for members of the troupe, that option did not seem feasible. It was finally agreed that the entire dance troupe could only meet for the shoot the following weekend, on Sunday, March 22, 2015. The dance delegation stated that it would have to first come together at 10:00 a.m. at First Bar for a rehearsal on Saturday March 21, 2015. Since that would give me a rough idea on what the shoot would look like, I jumped at the offer. Ideally, the actual dance video should have been shot during
the monthly meeting of the Oku community in Yaounde when most Oku natives are in attendance. Such an approach ties in with an Afrocentric conception of dance as part of a whole. Pearl Primus (1998) pointed out that dance in Africa celebrates the everyday events and occurrences in the lives of its people (pp. 3-11). Kaeppler (1978) concurs, noting that “…dance cannot be separated from the stuff of social events and action; instead it is one of the ‘movement dimensions’” (p. 47). Apart from showing that African dance is an emanation of the people (Fodeba, 1959), such an approach to the shoot puts emphasis on a sense of community as well as the notion of common identity.

Nevertheless, my arrival was ill-timed and did not coincide with the date of the community meeting. In addition, the community was in a kind of transition as it was struggling to complete the construction of its own hall. The hall where their monthly meetings were normally held, the one at First Bar, was deemed unsuitable if all the dancers, shooting crew and public were to become involved. We agreed to find a decent location in the course of the week, and to communicate this information during Saturday’s rehearsal.

Saturday arrived. The rehearsal went without a hitch and a location had been found. It was Etok Koss, a little resort in a neighbourhood called Simbock in Yaounde. Major Emmanuel Jing had already made arrangements with the owner of the resort, who happened to be a captain in the military. Before leaving the rehearsal location, we agreed that since the weather had proved to be rainy during the past days of the week, especially in the late afternoons, we should assemble early at “Les Balafons”, an outdoor bar of the resort with a roof and overlooking a pond. This is the spot we had decided that the shoot would take place and where everyone had to meet at 2:00 p.m. Since the rains normally
began to fall around 4:00 p.m., we should be done by that time. We had agreed that in its performance, the dance troupe would explore as much of its musical and choreographic repertoire as possible. After the rehearsal, Major Jing bought some drinks and snacks for everyone to cool down as we looked forward to the shoot the next day.

### 3.3.3 The shoot and some challenges

#### 3.3.3.1 Overview

I had agreed with Christopher Selambi that he would organize the Buum Oku Dance video shoot team. He was a professional cameraman with more than thirty years of experience working with state-owned Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV). He knows the dance, having shot it on several occasions during state functions; and, most importantly, he understands the culture of Oku people since he hails from the same Bamenda Grassfield region as the troupe. The quest for this level of experience and expertise was to ensure that the video was of the best quality. Past experience, especially in a traditional village setting, had shown that the presence of a camera may sometimes negatively affect dance performance and video production. However, I did not feel Buum Oku Dance was likely to experience this situation, being one of Cameroon’s most traveller and exposed folkdance groups and being used to performing under pressure and the presence of a camera.

#### 3.3.3.2 Mode of shooting

“Situations and events, actions and issues may be represented in a variety of ways…Modes of representation are basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain
recurrent features or conventions” notes Bill Nichols about shooting documentary films. He identifies four modes around which texts are structured: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive (Nichols, 1991, p. 32). Drawing from this knowledge, which shares a lot with shooting videos, I settled for the observational mode which “…allowed the filmmaker to record unobtrusively what people did when they were not explicitly addressing the camera” and which “limited the filmmaker to the present moment and required a disciplined detachment from the events themselves” (p. 33). The chapter which focuses on the historical production of the dance has helped to contextualize the dance. I had intended that there would be no cutting or editing, so that the fixity of the camera “suggests a commitment or engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal that is comparable to what an actual observer/participant might experience. The sounds and images used are recorded at the moment of observational filming, in contrast to the voice-over and images of illustration in the expository mode…” (p. 44). The intent was to “bring back alive on /video/ the dancing…” and “to let the audience be exposed to an event as a sound-image construct, not pictures with explanatory words relentlessly superimposed” (Buckland, 1999, pp. 114-118). In the light of the problems that I encountered, we had to resort to some adjustments and editing in the end.

3.3.3.3 Shooting and recording the video

There are other forms of recording technology which exist but I decided to use video technology because I deemed it the most suitable for this dance endeavour in that it is easy and less expensive to shoot and could be viewed and reviewed many times and
then copied and distributed to viewers for them to take time and study the dance carefully before reacting to its content.

The week preceding the shoot, Christopher Selambi and I had gone to CRTV station many times in search of his boss, Daniel Ekukwele (who happened to be my high school mate), to seek his permission to use the CRTV equipment for the shoot. Having learned he was out of the country, Major Jing proposed that we could hire Focus Company in Essos in Yaounde which had done the shooting of his wedding ceremony. After Christopher and I viewed the wedding video, we were convinced that the company had the proper level of expertise and professionalism to do the job. When I met the manager, Chauwa Andre, he insisted that his own cameraman would do the shooting. I had no problem with that, as long as he worked in collaboration with Christopher Selambi. He asked me to pay the sum of 50,000 frs (about $125).

The cameraman dispatched to work with Christopher was Gilles Kenmogne Sado. Gilles had an impressive resume; at least by the standard of Yaounde if not Cameroon. He was trained by another shooting studio, AV Maydia, from 2008-2011. Following the training, he had worked and accumulated experience and expertise in the following locations: Focus Image for a year; Vision 4 for 6 months; SPPA for 8 months; Studio Karel for 9 months; and at CEFMIA for 7 months.

Christopher Selambi, Major Jing and I arrived at Etok Koss at 12:00 noon. By 1:15 p.m., the entire Buum Oku Dance troupe, with the exception of the lead dancer, was present. By the time he got to the location, it was close to 3:00 p.m. and shortly after the dance video shoot started in earnest.
The technical team had agreed with the troupe that there would be a shoot of the ensemble two times; alternating between wide-angle and zoom in order to capture not only the overall scenery but the movements, intricacies in colours, patterns, people’s emotions as well. The first shoot was to focus on the dancers; and the second, on the musicians. I lacked money with which to hire many cameras to shoot from different angles, different points of view. Gilles had come with a Canon GL2 NTSC (DV) Camera. During dancing, while Gilles was busy filming the dancers, Christopher Selambi, with the aid of a small, ultrasensitive USB rechargeable Sony IC Recorder ICD-UX543, recorded the sound. In the production phase, these various components would be put together. The dance comprised three sets, each of which had five to six songs. We had completed the first two sets and were into the third set around 3:30 p.m. when it began to rain. Fortunately, with the roof overhead, we managed and completed the third set; but the second shoot that would have focused solely on the musicians was completely shelved because of the terribly inclement weather conditions. The final video product did not, therefore, feature the orchestra very prominently as I had intended.

3.3.3.4 Editing the video

The video was edited at Focus Company Studio and initial trial showed that it had some problems. I had tried it on Major Jing’s large screen TV set to determine whether it had been properly done. It did not show, for Gilles had it formatted to fit the dimension of an hp laptop computer screen. I contacted him and he made the necessary adjustments for it to work on screens of any dimension. On second trial, it worked. The information was stored on a DVD, a 90-minute Panasonic tape, a Lexar flash drive and my laptop
computer. The main reason to vary the methods of storing the information was security (theft, misplacement, etc.); however, I also wanted to ensure that should one form be damaged or develop a problem, the other form would be used. In accordance with the regulation of Buum Oku Dance, I left the troupe with a copy of the DVD for their archives and for transmission to the King of Oku, should the need arise.

3.4 Audience reception: interviews of 6 students in Regina and challenges

3.4.1 Purpose for the interview

The second series of interviews I conducted was in Regina. I had completed the first two phases of my dissertation, the historical production as well as the representation of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. I needed to carry out the interviews to determine audience reception to the dance. This would complete the cultural circuit: production, representation and audience reception. To this end, I had to interview six students after they had viewed the dance video.

3.4.2 Participants

My original context was to interview 6 African (-Canadian) students attending high school in Regina, 3 males and 3 females. They would view the video collectively in a room at the University of Regina after having been briefed on the social and historical background of the dance as well as the areas of interest to the study. Then they would be interviewed individually to get the opinion of each person. I had planned to recruit the students through various African community organizations operating in Regina. However, even though there are many African students in the city, finding those who
wanted to view the dance video and undergo the interviews proved far more daunting than I had ever imagined.

3.4.3 Challenges

3.4.3.1 Criteria for selecting interview participants

The first challenge was to determine the criteria for selecting the students. Would it be random? Would the students be drawn from the best and brightest and how do I determine best and brightest? Would it be based on age, level of education? Even though the urge would be to select gifted students with a better understanding of the world in which they attend school and the issues at stake, so that they could answer questions in an incisive manner, this would not be a true reflection of the black community. Everyone has an opinion on something, so I decided to make a random selection from those who displayed an interest; recruiting from different nationalities if possible to obtain a wide range of views.

3.4.3.2 Recruiting participants and challenges

Having decided to interview 6 African (-Canadian) high school students, I then went to work. First, I went to the Open Door Society (RODS) in Regina on 11th Avenue where I was given a list of African and West Indian community organizations, with their phone numbers and email addresses. It turned out that RODS had to update its list, for most of the letters and emails I forwarded to the addresses came back to me; and the phone numbers listed had been discarded. I did, however, obtain an email from Christine Lwanga who heads the Ugandan Canadian Association in Saskatchewan (UCAS). She
sent me an email to inform me that she had forwarded my ethic approval certificate and letters of application (to students and parents) requesting to use eligible students in their community to their parents. I never ever heard from any of the parents. I called UCAS office, left numerous messages but nobody got back to me. This same scenario was repeated when I contacted Igbo Association of Eastern Nigeria in Regina. Working through Yoruba (from western Nigeria) friends, I tried to contact the head of the organization, the Yoruba Association of Regina. Most Yorubas I talked to informed me that the organization exists but they had never participated in any of its activities. Many Kenyans said the same of their own organization. Clement Burikukiye, a Burundian friend of mine in Saskatoon, gave me the name of a gentleman from Rwanda, Nepo, who lives in Regina. He told me that he would help since he heads the French-speaking community in the city and loves activities which promote African culture and solidarity. I contacted him but my efforts yielded no fruit either.

At the University of Regina, I met a young Ghanaian. He gave me the contacts of Father Okai who doubles as the priest of Saint Jean-Baptiste Parish and leader of the Ghanaian community in Regina. I reached him and he invited me to his office at O’Neil High School on Argyle Street where he helped me to make copies of the relevant research documents: letters to parents and students and research ethics approval certificate. He promised to let me use the church hall, which had modern facilities, to project the dance video once I had succeeded in finding the students. He then forwarded a message, including the relevant documents, to Ghanaian parents in Regina, requesting those with children who are eligible for my research to contact me. None of them ever did.
As I struggled to find participants, I ran into Acuil Akol, an eminent member of Regina Southern Sudanese community, at the Cornwall Mall on October 2, 2015. While we were having lunch together, we exchanged phone numbers. On October 04, I called him and I talked to him about my PhD project and asked him if he could help me find eligible students within his community. He told me he had a son in Grade 12 and would discuss the matter with him. He invited me to his residence on October 5; and I met his son Akol and gave him document containing a brief background information of the dance which he read; and then we viewed the dance video together. He was very enthusiastic and recorded the video on his computer to watch it many times before the interview. He also promised to help me burn some copies of the video to hand to other students I plan to interview. Nothing came of this meeting when I called Acuil many times, left messages and got no reply.

Some parents I talked to justified the refusal of their children to participate on grounds of Christianity or Islam. It became clear to me that even when the children were interested, their opinion was often not sought. To me this was a vindication of this study because all the resistance and indifference only proved how Africans are alienated from their own culture, hence the need for an Afrocentric approach. Brown and Hannis (2012) list “fragmentation” among the “factors that weaken communities” (pp. 10-11).

3.4.4 Change of recruiting strategy

After numerous failed attempts to recruit students, I decided to sound the opinion of some important members of the black community in Regina. My first port of call was Dr. Barbara McNeil, an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education in the University
of Regina, with whom I discussed my frustrations. Before she joined the university staff, she had lived long in the city where she once served as a high school teacher and understood students and members of the black community well. Based on her experience, she had advised me on how to frame some of my interview questions. She told me to adopt a more inclusive approach by casting my net wider than high school so that I could recruit from adults, if parents proved uncooperative. Recruiting students was hard enough not to talk of getting them to view the dance video collectively, so I decided to work with any number of student(s) I found as long as every participant was asked the exact same questions. After consulting Dr. Ken Montgomery, I abandoned my original plan of recruiting and interviewing participants collectively. According to Dr. McNeil, concentrating only on high school students was too limiting in terms of even finding participants; and besides, such an approach did not quite reflect the diverse nature of black community. For a research project in which community organization was a key component, this would be lacking. Nimone, a Caribbean dance instructor, later echoed similar concerns. In the light of this new finding, I decided to use the 18 to 25 years age group and not to confine my selection to high school students. After all, students at the university and trade schools had once been in primary and secondary schools and understood the challenges of these environments for African-Canadians.

Armed with this information, I contacted a friend, Celena Kalusky, on October 6. She knew many people in Regina and introduced me to a childhood friend who had two daughters with a Nigerian. What was more, the two girls were practising dance at a dance school of the Saskatchewan Caribbean Canadian Association (SCCA) on Broad Street. The lady gave me the phone number of the instructor of the academy; it was Nimone
Campbell, a Canadian of Jamaican extraction. I phoned her on October 7, 2015, and she proved to be friendly and helpful and gave me her email, home address and phone number and asked me to forward her documents relating to the project to send to parents who had children at her dance school. She also invited me to come to the dance academy on Saturday October 17, 2015, and project the dance video to the students. Jason D’Souza, Donna Chouinard and Kaity Rossmo, my work colleagues, gave me a ride to the location. At the academy at 2:30 p.m., I watched the dance with the students and I left copies of DVDs, background information on the dance, letters of consent and REB approval certificates with Nimone to hand to students eager to participate in the project. Kweira, Sierra and Jennifer signed up to participate when I showed up at the school on Saturday November 7, 2015. Melodie, who is also an instructor at the dance academy, gave me the names and phone numbers of her two sons, Isaiah and Jackson. On November 08, I called Isaiah, 18 and the older of the two sons. We discussed the project and he expressed interest. His mother had given him all the details and materials. However, he still gave me his email address and I forwarded him a video link of the dance so that he could watch with his brother. Meanwhile, David Deng, a Sudanese friend, had talked to Mabior Alier, a compatriot of his. He gave me his phone number on November 8 and I called him and he told me to sign him up and gave me his email address to forward him a link of the dance to view as well as other material relevant to the dance to go through. He faced a problem attempting to open the link and ended up watching a DVD. After Kweira’s interview, she told her brother, Kabari, who also called me to express his interest to participate.
3.4.5 Participants and interviews

3.4.5.1 Overview

I had the six participants, all of whom have attended secondary-high schools in Regina and are acquainted with the kinds of problems minority students face. With the exception of Mabior Alier, the other five participants are actively involved in dance at the dance academy of the Caribbean Association. Since all the participants complained that they were too busy to sit down for some token compensation by way of sharing donuts for their participation, I gave four of them $10 to treat themselves when they have the time. Kweira and her brother Kabari rejected the offer, stating that they really felt honoured to have been invited to participate in the project. All the participants stated that I should use their real names when I informed them that in Afrocentric research ethics, knowledge production was viewed as a collective endeavour and a source of personal and group pride. Some even viewed the use of their real names as a wise career move in that they could quote their participation in their resumes when looking for a job. They all felt proud that through their participation they were in some ways giving back to the black community. It was a standardized interview and all the participants answered the same questions.

3.4.5.2 Participants

3.4.5.2.1 Kweira Quaye

She graduated from Thom Collegiate in Regina North and is a first year student at the University of Regina where she reads science. She is 21 years old and is an African-
Canadian of Jamaican and Ghanaian heritage. She has been dancing with the SCCA
dance school in Regina since she was 5. Apart from Caribbean dances, she has also been
involved in numerous dance forms, including ballet and jazz. Her interview was
conducted on November 9, 2015, around 4:00 p.m. in Room 235 of the Education
Building at the University. Her interview lasted 30 minutes.

3.4.5.2.2 Mabior Alier

He is an African Canadian of Southern Sudanese extraction. He is 23 years old
and studies electrical engineering at the University of Regina. He has never attended
dance school before. His interview began at 10:20 a.m. in Room 235 in the Education
Building at the University of Regina and was conducted on November 13, 2015. His
interview lasted 28 minutes.

3.4.5.2.3 Isaiah Bennett

He is 19 years old, an African Canadian of Jamaican and Berlitz origin. He
describes his identity as largely “Central and South American.” He writes his own music
and has been involved in art since he was young. He has been a dancer with the SCCA
dance school since he was a child. He felt most comfortable granting his interview at his
home where he also has his music studio. His interview took place on November 10 at his
home on Rochdale and it was the longest interview of all the participants. It lasted 40
minutes.
3.4.5.2.4 Sierra

She is 18 years old, an African Canadian of Irish-French and Jamaican background. She just graduated from high school, loves dance in which she has been involved with the SCCA dance school for close to 16 years. Melodie, her mother, is a dance instructor at the academy. Her interview took place on November 14, 2015, around 11:30 a.m. at the Caribbean dance school located at the Regina Multicultural Council on Broad Street and lasted 25 minutes.

3.4.5.2.5 Kabari Quaye

He is 23 years old and attended Thom Collegiate; he graduated in 2014 from the University of Regina with a degree in science; and he currently works at the Workers Compensation Board as an actuarial analyst. He states that he is interested in African and Caribbean cultures and has been involved with dance at the SCCA dance school. He offered to be interviewed at my apartment on 2620 – 12th Avenue since it was close to his gym and his interview took place on November 16, 2015, and lasted 32 minutes. I offered to provide him with a token compensation by taking him to a donut shop and he rejected the offer, stating that he was enthusiastic about the project and even thanked me for letting him to participate.

3.4.5.2.6 Jennifer Kuger

She is an African Canadian of Haitian descent who has just had a baby. She is 21 years old and works. She graduated from high school in Regina and loves dancing. She states that she is passionate about dancing because it helps her to calm down and be a
better person and remain focused. She was interviewed at the dance school where she is a student and her interview took place on November 21, 2015, at around 2:30 p.m. The interview lasted 20 minutes and Haitian Creole being her first language, she took time to process her response to each question in English.

3.4.6 Audience reception interviews

3.4.6.1 Preparations

3.4.6.1.1 Social and historical context of dance

Since Buum Oku Dance is little known in this part of the world, I prepared a brief document which outlined the social and historical context of the dance. Aware of the fact that many people are turned off when documents are too long to read, I reduced the document to one-third of a page. I made copies of the document which I handed to all the participants to read before watching the video. The document read:

Africa is made up of 55 independent countries and each of these countries has its own forms of dances. Too often than not, the dances vary from one ethnic group to the other, or may be gender based, and depending on how they were originated, tend to serve different functions. Some are purely for entertainment, others are religious and yet others for community building. The dance you are about to watch is Buum Oku Dance Yaoundé in Cameroon. Even though it helps people from the Oku ethnic group based in Yaoundé to come together, organize and share many elements of their culture (dance, music, art, storytelling, etc.), its uses extend far beyond. Besides community building, the promotion of group identity, it is a tool for social and economic inclusion and empowerment and even for political mobilization.

3.4.6.1.2 Video

Chris Taylor, who works at the university Education Computer Centre, as well as Felicity Vindevoghel, the daughter of my work colleague, Alwyn Martins, assisted me in the reproduction of copies of the dance videos which I handed to all the participants to
view as many times as possible before the interview. For her efforts, Felicity was given a
token of $25 for her assistance.

3.4.6.1.3 Interview questions

I prepared a list of interview questions that I asked to all participants. Participants
did most of the talking. Occasional follow-up questions, usually to clarify a point,
depended on what participants said. The questions revolved around the research questions
and focused mainly on key emancipatory issues, especially within a school setting. After
each interview, I played back the recording to the participant; I did the transcription and
typing and had them emailed to each of them for confirmation.

The interview questions were as follows:

- **Looking at the dance, what aspects of it strike you the most and why? How
can they be made useful in the African Regina community?**
- **Here in Regina, other communities such as the Ukrainians, the First Nations
and Metis have been known to build community around dance. In what ways
do you think Africans in the city can build community around such a dance?**
- **Identify community, family and spiritual values being upheld through the
dance and show how that is important for any group of people?**
- **How different from (or similar to) is such a dance with respect to, say hip hop,
or other dance forms that you are familiar with? How important are those
differences in identifying elements important to community development,
spiritual uplifting?**
- **This dance was originally conceived as a male-dance, so what role do you
think females can play in it? Where does the notion of male or female dance
come from? What does such a way of differentiating dances tell you about the
society the dances come from?**
• In what ways do you think the dance could be used to engage promote with schooling, especially in aspects like cultural inclusion in the curriculum?

• Identify some elements of lack of esteem among Regina African youths. In what ways do you think such a dance could be used to build self-esteem among Regina African youths?

• Research shows that dropout rates among African Canadian youths are very high, so do you think this dance could be used to address this problem in any way?

• What else have you identified in the dance that we have not touched upon and how do think it is important?

3.5 Conclusion

As outlined above, collecting data while respecting Afrocentric and Indigenous as well as the University of Regina research ethical guidelines presented enormous challenges; but in the end things worked out for the best. Stumbling on students who were dancers was a godsend, for the situation fitted properly with the research, providing as it did solid empirical evidence to my findings.
CHAPTER 4: THEORITICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION AND METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

4.1 Purpose, aim and significance of the study

This is an Afrocentric cultural study which seeks to understand: (a) the historical production of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde; (b) the representation and embodiment of performance/performativity of the said dance; and (c) audience reception of the dance and perception of its relevance to African (-Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. The conceptualization of this investigation has not been without challenges, the most important of which is to maintain the crucial balance between Afrocentricity and cultural studies. While “centricity” is central in this juggling act, it should not come across as “essentialist.” I situate this study in a context in which the drop-out/push-out rates of African-Canadian youth are disproportionately high, and they continue to face significant problems associated with racism, colonialism, and other forms of social oppression, including but not limited to SES and gender. The aim of the research is to ascertain the extent to which the preservation and promotion of cultural practices, such as the Buum Oku Dance, may be important in assisting marginalized youth to counter what Young (2001) calls “cultural imperialism.” L. T. Smith (1999) has noted that “imperialism frames the indigenous experience” (p. 19) and that “the struggle to assert and claim humanity has been a consistent thread of anti-colonial discourses on colonialism and oppression” (p. 26). An enduring legacy of slavery and Western colonialism has been the continuous distortion of African history and culture; this situation serves as a smokescreen used by white society to camouflage marginalization,
injustice and various forms of oppression. An Afrocentric approach to this study seeks in part to counter colonial and oppressive discourses, thus serving as a tool for the emancipation of Africans.

To this end, the study traces the historical origins and evolution of the dance; it explores the macro-micro aspects of its representation as well as the embodiment of its performance; and using, in the main, Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall, it investigates meaning, knowledge and power. Finally, for audience reception, the research analyzes the interviews of 6 African (-Canadian) students, 3 males and 3 females between the ages of 18 and 25 who have watched a 15-minute video of the dance. Before embarking on my research design, it is important to examine cultural studies.

4.2 Cultural Studies

Desmond (2000) has noted that cultural studies refers to a body of work and a community of scholars who draw on post-structural approaches to investigate representational practices in literary texts, films, fashion, advertisements, music, theatrical events, etc. (p. 43). Hall (2013) argues that “meaning and representation seem to belong irrevocably to the interpretive side of the human and cultural sciences…” (p. 27). Seen from this angle, a cultural studies approach to this study requires that I keep the dialogue about culture open and alive, in a way that provides “…thought and possibilities that are open to critique, that would generate new ideas and previously unthought-of possibilities, and that will most likely be different for each reader” (Canella & Viruru, 2004). The cultural studies approach quite naturally should begin by seeking to answer the following questions: What is cultural studies? How and where did it originate? Who
are the key figures? What are the key movements and texts? How does my beliefs and values impact an Afrocentric cultural study of Buum Oku Dance?

4.2.1 Definition

Barker (2003) has pointed out that “cultural studies would not warrant its name without a focus on culture” (p. 7). Nevertheless, the starting point in the field of Cultural Studies is a very broad and all-inclusive notion of culture that is used to describe and study a whole range of practices (Sardar & Loon, 2007, p. 6). McRobbie (2006) notes that cultural studies is “not a tightly defined discipline but a shifting terrain, a site of dispute and contestation” (p.2). This may be what prompted Barker (2003) to argue that “cultural studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice, and I do not have one voice with which to represent it” (p. 4).

The contestation begins with the very definition of “culture.” It has been defined as one of the four or five concepts in modern social knowledge and the term was originally associated with the idea of tending or cultivation from which one of the central meanings of culture as the process of human development is obtained (Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H. & Negus, K. 2003, p. 11). While many other different definitions of culture do exist (e.g., anthropologists tend to refer to culture as the way of life of a people, community, nation or a social group), the field of cultural studies defines culture as a process, a set of practices concerned primarily with the production and exchange of meanings – the giving and taking of meaning – between the members of a society or group (Hall, 1997). In place of focusing on canonical works of art, governmental leadership, or quantitative social data, cultural studies devotes time to
subcultures, popular media, music, clothing, and sport. It sees people not simply as consumers, but as potential producers of new social values and cultural languages. It is a tendency across disciplines, rather than discipline itself (Miller, 2001).

Social practices, not nature, genius, or individuality, make a way of life and change it over time. This insight directs us away from any view of historical and contemporary culture that privileges aesthetic civilization, the experience of rulers, or the impact of religion delivered from on-high (Williams, 1983; Miller, 2001). Instead, the field of cultural studies advocates engaging culture by reading its products and considering their circumstances of creation and circulation.

Williams’ view of culture insists on the importance of community life, the conflict in any cultural formation, the social nature of culture, and the cultural nature of society (Miller, 2001 p. 6). For Hall (2013), culture is about ‘shared meanings.’ This is done through language. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced (Ibid, 2013).

### 4.2.2 Origin, key figures and movements

Cultural studies has appeared, largely after the Second World War, in a variety of places, arising from a variety of disciplines and intellectual project (Grossberg, 2010). R. Johnson (1986/87) states that “in the history of cultural studies, the earliest encounters were with literary criticism” (p. 38). As for media, culture and communication studies, Stokes (2013) maintains that they are relatively recent additions to the rostra of academic subjects taught within the formal education system.
Concerning its origin, four founding parents of British cultural studies are often cited: Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams (Miller, 2001; Barker, 2003). Richard Hoggart’s focus was to use literary study to uplift the British working class and he published *The Uses of Literacy* in the 1950s. Just as Raymond William and Richard Hoggart in different ways developed the Leavisite stress on literary-social evaluation before turning their assessment from literature to everyday life, similar appropriations have been made in history, drawing on the post-war traditions of social history with their focus on popular culture, or the culture of “the people” especially in its political forms (R. Johnson, 1986/87, p. 38).

By the 1960s, Richard Hoggart founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Thompson’s 1963 main contribution was *The Making of the English Working Class* (Barker, 2003). He preferred the accounts of ordinary people to theory, especially structuralist Marxism introduced in British studies in the 1970s by Louis Althusser. As for Hall, he worked as Hoggart’s assistant at the CCCS before taking over the running of the centre in 1968. He engaged Gramscian scholarship and steered his career at the Open University towards Foucault and Said. He sought a means of analyzing signs, representations, and ideology (Miller, 2001) and is one of the most influential scholars in addressing issues of identity and race in the media (Stokes, 2013). He is considered “the most canonized of the founding fathers” (Sardar & Loon, 1997, p. 35).

Williams was a lecturer in adult education (Stokes, 2013; Sardar and Loon, 1997) and “he has provided the largest body of theory for ongoing cultural studies work,” work that “models a hybrid between critical political economy and cultural studies” (Miller,
2001). He is critical of idealist conception of culture and proposes that “we concentrate on the ways of life and values of particular communities at particular times…” His method is cultural materialism which aligns with Karl Marx’s thought that “people manufacture their own condition of existence, but often without a conscious or enabling agency.” To him, “social practices, not nature, genius, or individuality, make a way of life and change it over time” (Ibid, 2001, p. 5). Williams breaks down culture into “dominant” versus “residual” and “emergent” forms. He has come under attack from Gilroy (2006) who reminds us of the racialising currents in the works of some of his greatest influences, notably Ruskin, Burke and Carlyle (McRobbie, 2006). To Arnold (as cited in Stokes, 2013), Hoggart, Thompson and Williams “helped bring ‘culture’ down from the elevated heights of ‘the best that he has been thought and said’ to something we could study – culture as a ‘way of life’” (p. 41). The revolutionary struggles of the 1960s and the rise of the feminist movements and issues of gay rights provided new momentum to cultural studies. In the 1960s “the focus of interest in ‘mass culture’ was shifting towards an understanding of working-class culture as worthy of serious study” (Stokes, 2013, p. 43)

Apart from these four cardinal men, there are many other sources of cultural studies. Ray Browne established the first degree in popular culture anywhere in the world (at Bowling Green State University) and was the founder of two important journals, the Journal of American Culture and the Journal of Popular Culture (Ibid, 2013). Gilroy’s (2006) contribution to cultural studies is particularly pertinent to this study since he is an anti-essentialist and warns blacks against “ethnic absolutism” which could cause them to end up occupying a position of right-wing racists. (pp. 40-42). Gilroy’s (1993) analysis
draws on Dubois’ (1897) “double consciousness” (p. 194) which stems from being simultaneously inside and outside European modernity.

Feminist theorists have made huge contributions to cultural studies as well. Barker (2003) argues nevertheless that “…while feminist thinking permeates cultural studies, not all forms of feminism are to be thought of as cultural studies” (p. 279). However, the scholar notes that “cultural studies and feminism have shared a substantive interest in issue of power, representation, popular culture, subjectivity, identities and consumption” (p. 280). A counter proposal in the history of feminist media studies is considered by Angela McRobbie (Stokes, 2013). McRobbie’s intervention represented a major development in cultural studies and it arose from a critique of Paul Willis’ *Learn to Labour* (1977) in which the author explored the question of “how working class kids get working class jobs and why they let themselves” (Willis as cited in Barker, 2003). The work only concentrated on white and male in its discussion. McRobbie and Garber (Ibid, 2003) argued that very little seems to be written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings. They are absent from the classic subculture ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal accounts and the journalistic surveys of the field. When girls do appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women or they are fleeting and marginally presented. Barker (2003) points out that in McRobbie’s account of the working class girl, she explores the way in which the culture of femininity is used by girls to create their own space while at the same time securing them for boyfriends, marriage and the family and children (p. 385).

Another female contribution to cultural study has come from Judith Butler (1990) and her theory of performativity (pp. 134-141). Her main influence was derived from
Derrida and J. L. Austin who in “performative utterances” introduced “speech act,” the idea that “to say something is to do something” (Martinich, 2008, p. 127). To Butler (1990),

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body gestures, movements, styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. p. 140

Thus, Miller (2007) defines performativity as “… the assumption that human beings have no innate selfhood or subjectivity but become what they are through more or less forced repetition of a certain role” (p. 225). According to McRobbie (2006), Butler uses performativity as

…a repetitive, processual, happening activity which brings into being that which it seems merely to describe. Thus far from sex being a state of nature, an anatomical reality onto which gender is drafted (which was for long time how feminist scholars influenced by de Beauvoir understood the taking up of masculine and feminine positions) sex is discursive, it too is cultural, it is brought into being by the convergence of any number of officiating discourses which pronounce on the birth of a child, as Butler reminds us. (p. 85)

Butler (1990) challenges Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one through gender construction. “Is gender as variable and volitional as Beauvoir’s account seems to suggest” and “Can ‘construction’ in such a case be reduced to a form of choice?” she questions. And then argues that

If ‘the body is a situation,’ as she (*Beauvoir*) claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along. (p. 8)

At the heart of this discussion are the questions of identity, male-female binary and hierarchy. These questions involve power issues which run deep in Oku dances as Ngum
Ngum (personal communication, April 6, 2014) bemoaned the fact that “you have women who have even ventured into the areas that were reserved for men in performance but they have failed;” and cites the example of Bati masquerade started by women which was banned because “…women should not venture into the area of masquerades.”

Given the importance of sex, gender, identity and power in this study, the relevance of Butler (1990) arguments need not be overemphasized. She states that it would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. (p. 16)

Thus, she aligns her thought with Foucault, noting that “the notion that there might be a ‘truth’ of sex is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” (p. 17).

Barker (2003) argues that differences do exists between white and black feminist theorists, with black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (in McCann & Kim, 2003, pp. 318-352), Angela Davis (1981) and bell hooks (2000; in McCann & Kim, 2003, pp. 50-57) arguing that colonialism and racism have structured power relationship between black and white women (p. 282).

Cultural studies has drawn some fire mainly from scholars such as Bourdieu who, in recent years, has been hostile to it, going as far as describing it as a “mongrel domain born in England in the 1970s” and which does not exist in French universities (McRobbie, 2006, p. 122).
Nevertheless, irrespective of the sources of influence and the perspectives of cultural studies, its main project remains what McCabe calls: “An emancipatory social project” (Stokes, 2013).

4.2.3 Dance and cultural studies

Desmond (2000) has stated that “during the last decade or so, many scholars in dance studies have produced exciting new work by bringing to bear on their research those questions and methodologies that are loosely part of “cultural studies’” (p. 43). Nevertheless, it has been noted that “dance and cultural studies developed along different paths; consequently, interdisciplinarity within dance studies is not always conceptualized in the way it is in cultural studies” (Morris, 2009). To make matters more complicated, cultural studies is involved in numerous disciplines. Initially conceived as a form of political and social intervention, cultural studies had no theory of its own whereas dance research was part of history and anthropology and used theories related to these fields.

Nevertheless, Jane Desmond (1999, 2000; in Morris, 2009) has appealed for cultural studies to include dance in its agenda and argues that dance research could further the understanding of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement. Conversely, dance could profit from cultural studies by exploiting many of the tools developed in literary, film and feminist theory as well as Marxist analysis (p. 83). However, Morris (2003) notes that “dance, although not altogether like cultural studies in that it does not adopt methods and theories from other sources – it has its own. To this degree, dance studies resembles humanities disciplines
that have incorporated aspects of cultural studies rather than cultural studies itself” (p. 93).

Irrespective of where the two fields converge or diverge, I am looking at dance through an Afrocentric cultural study lens, with a focus which privileges an “emancipatory” approach. In doing so, I am drawing upon a post-modern approach which “…recognizes the limit of knowledge, recognizes it as a discursive construct, and accepts and acknowledges that we always work within the constraints of the discursive limitations” (Stokes, 2013, p. 21).

4.2.4 African conception and classification of dance

Vissicaro (2004) states that dance provides “a lens for exploring the world, its people, and their cultures and it is one way that individuals interact with the environment and each other” (p. 3). The “straight forward, unproblematic relation between dance and culture” was established in the 1920s and 1930s by the American Culture and Personality School and the German kulturkreis ideology (Kringelback & Skinner, 2012, p. 9). Since culturally people differ and do not come from the same environment, these differences are also reflected in their dances. This makes the term “dance” a very broad category. So too is “African dance,” which encompasses different types, genres, and styles (K. W. Asante, 1994, 2000; Warren, 1972) and which needs to be narrowed down to enable us “…to define the subject matter of our inquiry in order to say anything significant about it or in order to be able to draw comparison” (Royce, 1977, p. 7). Of the “object of analysis,” Stokes (2013) recommends that “you narrow down your focus to a single
aspect of the subject, or to one key character theme or feature” (p. 64). What then does “dance” mean as it pertains to Africa (for Oku, see chapter 5) In this research, the term “African dance” refers to any dance that is contextually African and rhythmically African in that the dance almost always meets a prescribed set of characteristics, some of which are polycentrism, angularity, asymmetry, soft knee, ancestorism, ephebism, and isolations (K. W. Asante, 2000, p. 11). Ebron (2002), however, has challenged the notion that “collectivizes Africa” and “fixes the continent as a homogenous object” (p.1), thus aligning her idea with that of K. W. Asante (2004), who points out that “Africa is a continent with 54 (sic) countries and thousands of cultures and languages” (p. 14). For a couple of reasons, the issue of diversity needs to be stressed, not just in the African context but in the Cameroonian as well. Mveng et al (1969) have argued that “…in Cameroon, it is all of Africa that dances” (p. 5). The first reason draws on the view of Chabal and Daloz (1999) that we should not “think of Africans in term of a ‘universal’ notion of citizenship” (p. 49), especially when it comes to dance, because, as Green (1998) argues, in Africa “…there are as many styles of dancing as there are different ethnic groups and languages.” Dance scholar Joann Kealiinohomoku (1970/2001) is right on the point when she notes that “it is a gross error to think of groups of people or their dances as being monolithic wholes. ‘The African dance’ never existed; there are, however, Dahomean (sic) dances, Hausa dances, Masai dances, and so forth” (p. 34). Thus, the term “African peoples’ dance” was employed by dancer and choreographer Peter Badajo to reflect the complex diversity of dance and movement practices of both the African continent and African diasporic cultures in Britain. “The term avoids the monolithicism of ‘African dance’ … and has common
usage among people fighting for greater appreciation and promotion of African-derived dance, particularly as a theatre-dance artform” (Buckland, 1999, p. 100). The great Guinean choreographer Keita Fodeba (1959) stresses this notion of ethnic and regional peculiarities in African dance when he pointed out that unlike other forms of dance, African dance is not detached from the lives of the people, but is a spontaneous emanation of the people (p. 20). The question then arises: which people?

Fraliegh and Hanstein (1999) provide a second reason for the pertinence of stressing diversity by arguing that “…art and culture can serve as an arena where power struggles over group recognition, representation, and identity take place” (pp. 335-336). Dance educator Nancy Smith Fichter (1992) lends a voice to the second reason when she argues that attempts at homogenization can destroy the sense of identity being striven for by the very groups, in this case African countries and ethnicities, which are seeking recognition. Thus, Hamidou Bangoura (2013), artistic director of Les Ballets Africains, points out in an interview posted on the website of the dance troupe that in relation to Guinea-Conakry “…the country … comprises four natural regions corresponding to four different dance and musical identities.”

A major streak in postcolonial African identity politics has been to seek recognition nationally and internationally through music and dance performances. These identities are not static but keep changing, for as Kringelbach (2012) has noted “When performance is made to embody national or regional identities, this is particularly salient because it is flexible enough to accommodate changes in those identities” (p. 144).

Taking their cue from Fodeba’s Les Ballets Africains of Guinea-Conakry, Africa has seen numerous different national and ethnic dance ensembles (Bakalama and Senegal
National Ballet in Senegal; Buum Oku Dance in Cameroon; Jerusalema and Muchongoya in Zimbabwe; Amamere in South Africa, etc.) These dances are built on differing worldviews and capture different social realities. Maurice Sonar Senghor stated in relation to African dance in 1973 that before a dance can be created, an event or happening must occur (K.W. Asante, 1998). Sometimes, the dances may last only as long as the events that led to their creation. For instance, Mayibuye and Amandla, two dance outfits which served as ANC anti-apartheid road ambassadors, have long since lost their momentum in post-apartheid South Africa.

What is true of Africa in terms of diversity is also true of Cameroon. Often described in both popular and scholarly literature as “Africa in miniature” (Debel, 1977), Cameroon is “a veritable cocktail of ethnic groups” (Ki-Zerbo, 1978, p. 291), with approximately 250 of such groups (Mokake, 2012). With an ethnic fractionalization score of 0.89, it is much more ethnically diverse than the sub-Saharan average of 0.64 (Fearon & Laitin, 2005). Since all African dances, and by deduction Cameroonian dances, are not the same, K. W. Asante (2000) points out that classifications are the tools dance historians use to arrive at scholarly and interpretive conclusions. This classification, she suggests, could be based “on specific functions and histories” (p. 7). However, Warren (1972) counters this argument by noting that “It is unrealistic to attempt to make neat groupings of the different kinds of dance…” and identifies two basic types: “recreational” and “ritual dances” (p. 6).
4.3 Notes on language and geography

Dei & Kempf (2013) have stated that “while language is a building material, it is also a building, constructed with particular uses and function in mind” (p.22). Hanna (1988) argues that dance is potent because it is language like and that in both its verbal and nonverbal forms it has a vocabulary (steps and gestures), a grammar (rules for putting the vocabulary together) and a semantic (meaning). Buum Oku Dance is an African neo-traditional dance, replete with its own vocabulary, grammar and semantic which sometimes need to be clarified for readers, especially those outside the Cameroonian cultural context, to understand. In some of the literature used in this study, other terms such as Oku Juju, Bum Oku Dance, Subi Oku Dance, Subi Dance, and Oku Dance have been used to designate “Buum Oku Dance.” Subi dance in Mboh-Oku is the original dance which spawned Ndinaah’s modern Subi dance (sometimes referred to as *kekum mekale* or Oku modern ballet) in Mboh. It was Ndinaah’s innovation which gave rise to Jaji’s Subi dance in Old Town Bamenda, Fai Mbuw’s Nkeng in Jikijem-Oku, Mawe dance in the port city of Douala and Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. This explains why many observers are confused and sometimes refer to Buum Oku Dance Yaounde as Subi dance. Detailed analysis of this information is outlined in chapter 5 which deals with the historical production of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde.

Tettey and Puplampu (2005) have noted that “the term *African-Canadian* is often used in everyday parlance as an uncontested signifier of identity capturing all peoples of African origin in Canada” (p. 6). In the context of not just Regina but Saskatchewan as a whole, the terms “African” and “African Canadian” shall sometimes be used
interchangeably in this study and shall refer to people from the continent of Africa or any of their descendants who self identify. I also use the term blacks in this study and Africans interchangeably and this refers to all black people of African descent, both in the continent of Africa and the African diaspora, and their world views in my notion of their Africanity or Africanness because “they share a common experience, struggle, and origin” (Dei, 1994, p. 4).

Throughout this inquiry, words, no matter how derogatory or offensive, will be quoted as they appear in the original texts.

Certain words in English do not quite capture some phenomena in Eblam Ebkuo, the language spoken by the people of Oku. For example, the Eblam Ebkuo term kenfan to describe a “trumpet” could be misleading in that the “trumpet” in question, even though it is a wind instrument, it has little to do in appearance with the instrument played by Louis Armstrong, Wynton Marsalis or Hugh Masekela. To forestall this kind of confusion, a glossary of terms, with some descriptions, has been established on Appendix G, at the end of this dissertation.

Even though words do provide some clarifications, readers are still likely to grope in the dark in quest of a mental picture. In response to the ancient dictum that a picture is worth more than a thousand words, I considered it essential in the study to affix an album of pictures depicting some important phenomena. This, I am convinced, should provide readers with a visual representation of the phenomenon being described.

The term “drum” with regard to Africa instantly brings to the minds of most Western observers the djembe, an instrument which was popularized by Les Ballets Africains, the dance troupe from Guinea-Conakry (Flaig, 2010). There are wide varieties
of drums scattered across the continent of Africa (Bebey, 1975; Ngum, 1990), so it is important to specify the type of drum using pictures. The same is true of xylophones, since in most Western minds, a xylophone is often associated with a “marimba.” In the case of Buum Oku Dance, it is log xylophones being alluded to. To clear up these kinds of confusion, I have deemed it necessary to include some pictures on Appendix A of the dissertation.

Over the years, successive Cameroonian administrations have changed the names of some towns and districts. Some towns which were prominent in the colonial era have been eclipsed in this regard by new administrative units. More often than not, it is the newer units which often appear in maps and administrative documents and this often lends itself to some confusion. Thus on most maps, Bui has replaced Nso whose administrative capital still remains Kumbo; Boyo has taken the place of Kom; and Noni, D jot tin; while Ngo-ketunkja Division is now the name given to what was known as Nd op, which has now been reduced to the divisional administrative capital.

4.4 Conceptual context and theoretical orientation

Using an Afrocentric theoretical orientation and conceptual framework, my research inquiry is a cultural study of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and the perceptions of its relevance to African (-Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. According to Oyebade (1990), “The theoretical conceptualization of an African-centered approach is the handiwork of Afrocentric scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante, Tsheloane Keto, Mualana Karenga and a host of others…” (p. 233). This conceptualization “requires of us (Africans) an exact analysis of our present conditions
throughout the world” since “we seek not an accommodation with defeatism or with second-class racial status but the reaffirmation of our place among peoples of the world” (M. K. Asante, 1993, pp. 45-46). Clark (2013) states further that “Asante’s Afrocentric project understands itself as a conceptual and practical advance in the journey of liberation. It fosters the development of a liberated consciousness in the work of social change” (p. 381). Seen from this emancipatory perspective, an Afrocentric conceptualization fits squarely into this study since it “is concerned with the African people being subjects of historical and social experiences rather than objects in the margins of European experiences” (M. K. Asante, 1998, p. 99). Besides, I consider it the most appropriate theory to use in conducting research on an African folkdance which has the potential of serving as a tool for the emancipation of African (-Canadian) students in the throes of colonial domination and oppression.

As an emancipatory project, this study is heavily influenced by history and the lived experience of black people. Throughout history black people have had to resist the oppressive conditions in which they live and nothing speaks more to that tradition of activism and militancy than the foundation on which Afrocentricity is built.

Indeed, the contemporary discussion and practice of Afrocentricity stands on the shoulders of those who have come before. African-centered education builds on the work and struggles of the radicals, the activists, the poets, the scholars, and the regular people in Africa and the diaspora who have fought in their own ways against oppression. These figures include Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Amilcar Cabral, Rosa Parks, Viola Desmond, Martin Luther King Junior, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela and countless others. (Dei & Kempf, 2013, p. 26)

The application of an Afrocentric theory is, therefore, no more than a sequel to that longstanding tradition.
There are many more reasons which explain why I have chosen to use this conceptual framework for my study. The very first builds on the very foundation of Afrocentricity as propounded by Oyebade (1990).

The need to create an African-centered perspective that takes Africa as a point of departure for African studies stems from the nature of the Eurocentric paradigm, which has been used in many previous African studies. In the history of intellectual thought, the Eurocentric paradigm has often assumed a hegemonic universal character, and European culture has placed itself at the center of the social structure, become the reference point, or the yard, by which every other culture is defined…The Afrocentric perspective seeks to liberate African studies from this Eurocentric monopoly and thus assert a valid worldview through which Africa can be studied objectively. (p. 234)

Mazama (2003) provides additional reason for this selection when she states that Afrocentricity is not a single theory but rather “…a multiplicity of Afrocentric theories applied to a wide range of topics”. Stokes (2013) has cautioned that “…we need to find a theoretical paradigm which will be useful and help us to investigate our chosen object of analysis”; that is, the subject which is being investigated (p. 64). My object of analysis spans across numerous fields of studies: history, education, dance, philosophy, cultural studies, etc. This diversity provides a common and compatible ground for both my Afrocentric theoretical framework and my cultural studies methodology which, to McRobbie (2006), is “not a tightly defined discipline but a shifting terrain, a site of dispute and contestation” (p.2). This is not the only aspect which my theory and methodology share in common; they both espouse an emancipatory vision. Desmond (2000) has noted that scholars involved in cultural studies strive to reveal the complicity of certain representational systems with continuing systems of social oppression (p. 43).
Most importantly, an Afrocentric research approach “…will push the inquiry into a higher realm where methodology and the process of knowledge construction cease to take precedence over the well-being of the people being researched” (Reviere, 2001).

Finally, my study strives to attain the Afrocentric objectives of cultural reclamation and the rise to consciousness through the African-centered grounding base; “to obtain a liberation which houses the psychic freedom to develop and the freedom from oppression concomitant with African cultural pursuit…” (Mazama, 2003). Further reasons for using this conceptualization have been elaborated in chapter two of this research focusing entirely on the Afrocentric theory.

4.5 My Beliefs and Values

Stokes (2013) has noted that “you can also prove that you are a credible speaker by discussing your personal experience.” This is what M. K. Asante (1990a) implies when he notes that an Afrocentric inquiry must be executed from a clearly defined place, which to Reviere (2001) is in essence “…an argument…for the inclusion of what can amount to an autobiographical approach…” (p. 712).

My personal experience informs this research greatly even though I find such reflexivity conflicting in some ways with the subject under investigation. In the light of my own education, which is mainly Western, it questions my Africanity and, therefore, my assumptions as one who could speak for an African people. Even though I was born and raised in Cameroon where I was exposed to many folkdances, and actually participated in some of them during the early years of my schooling, the bulk of my education, from primary (patterned after the British system) through secondary schools
(Sacred Heart College, Mankon, the very epitome of Roman Catholic education in Cameroon) to universities (University of Yaounde & Universite de Montreal, both of which are French-speaking), where I graduated with degrees in history and translation respectively, has been Western. Carter Woodson (1933/2006) and later Harold Cruse (1984) have demonstrated the dangers in a system of education which alienates black people from their own culture as it is clearly reflected in the kind of education I obtained. However, without necessarily abandoning my own cultural roots, have I succumbed to what Dubois (1897) and Gilroy (1993) have described as “double consciousness,” of being simultaneously inside and outside European modernity? To the extent that I am African, using an African folkdance as potential tool for the emancipation of an African community, I am at once a subject and an object of this investigation. An Afrocentric theoretical framework stands me, therefore, in good stead; however, given my dual nature, I have to constantly go back to question my perspectives and assumptions on issues. Am I moving towards my own centre or heading towards the margin (M. K. Asante, 1998; Mazama, 2003)? Sometimes, in the zealousness to stay centered, I could become too centered to fall within the pall of essentialism, which Gilroy (1993; in McRobbie, 1995) has decried and which could largely challenge the validity of my findings. Canada is a multicultural society (Dei et al. 1994, 2003, 2007; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Tettey & Puplampu, 2005; Ryan, 2010) and the quest for inclusivity should remain a constant drive if I intend these research findings to be text in context. In this respect, cultural studies methodology provides checks and balances since it is a shifting terrain and a flexible framework that responds to the question: How do we live together and acknowledge differences (McRobbie, 2005)?
The subject of my dissertation relates to Buum Oku Dance and its relevance to community building and scholarship. I believe that in education lies the solution to many of the problems that beset African-Canadian youths; and in such an education, dance should play a central role in youth cultural awakening. Ajayi (1998) talks of dance as a microcosm of the culture. I share this view and contend that this is particularly true for Africa. Having worked closely with Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, I have come to appreciate this art form as a means of empowering ordinary folks. When I arrived in Canada and began to acquaint myself with some of the country’s realities. I noticed that the drop/push out, as well as the incarceration, rates were extremely high among certain minoritized populations. I wondered whether in the quest for social justice, cultural continuity could prove helpful. I imagined that dance, at least as I understood it, could become a wonderful tool for mobilizing people around issues of social justice; issues such as genuine cultural inclusion, gender equality and quality education for all. In South Africa, where I lived for four years, I acquainted myself with the dominant role music and dance had played in the struggle against apartheid. Doing some advocacy and translation work for the Jesuit Refugee Services and the South African Lawyers for Human Rights as well as writing for newsletters, newspaper and magazines in South Africa and Cameroon had certainly deepened my understanding of oppression. It might have initially been for these reasons that I was attracted to dance and to cultural studies, a methodology which exposes hidden forms of domination and oppression.

I lay no claim to any neutrality with regard to the subject under study since, to a large extent, my interests blend in with those of the researched. This, I believe, only creates I/We harmony (Ubuntu) which goes a long way in minimizing the
researcher/participants dichotomy. It is an approach which is espoused both by Afrocentric and cultural studies. Hopefully, such a stance finds truth and justice as espoused by Ma’at (Karenga, 2006; Asante, 2008). As it requires more than mere passion to be able to embark effectively on dance as tool for empowerment in Canada, I enrolled in a doctorate program in order to learn how best to understand the context in which I reside, for this has an important role to play in meeting the needs of the those African (-Canadian) youths who feel disempowered. In alignment with the aim of Afrocentric and cultural studies, I, therefore, perceive my venture as “emancipatory.” Mazama (2003) states that Afrocentric objectives strive “to obtain a liberation which houses the psychic freedom to develop and the freedom from oppression concomitant with African cultural pursuit…”

4.6 Research methodology

4.6.1 Research overview and statement

This is an Afrocentric cultural study which investigates: (a) the historical production of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde; (b) the representation of the said dance and the embodiment of its performance/performativity; and (c) an audience reception of the dance. By examining these 3 dimensions of the dance, the purpose of the study is to establish its potential relevance to African (-Canadians) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina who are dealing with various social and school challenges (e.g., racism, disproportionately high rates of drop-out/push-out, etc.).
4.6.2 Research questions

- How did the dance originate and how has it evolved over time?
- How is the dance represented and what does it embody?
- As an emancipatory project, what meanings are derived through representation of the dance and how do they relate to knowledge and power?
- How did an audience respond to a video recording of the dance and what emancipatory relevance has this in education?
- What were my assumptions before going into the study and what have I learned

4.6.3 Analytical dimensions

I have drawn from the interdisciplinary field of Cultural Studies and, in particular, have adapted R. Johnson’s “circuit of cultural production” (1986/87, pp. 46-47) to organize my study into dimensions of historical production, representation, and audience reception of the cultural product which is a video of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde.

4.6.3.1 Historical production

4.6.3.1.1 Methodological approach to historical production of Buum Oku Dance

Stokes (2013) has noted with regard to researching culture industries that “the choice of which method to adopt rather depends on the research question” (p.113) which in this case deals with the “historical production of Buum Oku Dance.” Reconstructing and making sense of the dance calls for standard historical research (Saukko, 2003, p. 193). Crowley (1988) notes that historians in Canada was once only preoccupied with the political and constitutional matters regarding national development but that in the past two decades, that is the seventies and eighties, they have broadened their horizons to
include areas which were once considered out of bounds such as women, labour, ethnic
groups, native peoples, education, religion and many others. Consequently, the scholar
continues, “new topics require new historical sources and the methods by which to
extract their meaning” (p. 1). Diop (1978) has noted that “only a real knowledge of the
past can keep in one’s consciousness the feeling of historical continuity…” (p. 9). The
notion of “historical continuity” is relevant in this inquiry because far from being a
phenomenon of only the “past,” as the definition of history tends to suggest, Buum Oku
Dance is also that of the “present.” The past and present aspects have implications for the
methods and methodologies used to reconstruct the historical production of the dance.

Storey and Jones (2008) have stated that to write history, historians use their
sources to “make inferences about the events of the past, then they develop their
inferences into sustained arguments and narratives” (p. 2). With reference to “sources,”
Buckland (2006) argues that “for the dance historian, the familiar realm is the archive,
where extant sources,… have been created by people other than the researcher, who now
employs their surviving artifacts as testimony to the dancing of the past” (p. 3). This
argument is shared by Stokes (2013) for whom this source of documentation (archives) is
“the most commonly used method in any kind of project” and “involves published and
unpublished sources collected in archives, libraries or databases” (p. 82). The emphasis
on “archive,” which, according to Ki-Zerbo (1986), includes private documents (letters,
commercial correspondence); official documents (administrative correspondence,
legislative and fiscal texts); and legal and religious documents (p. 68), points to written
sources. This raises a challenging question: how do we study the history of a dance in a
society such as Oku where writing did not exist? An Afrocentric approach requires that
not only traditional Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity in the inquiry process be challenged but also that the voices of the African people, in this case the people of Oku who created and own the dance, be heard (Chilisa, 2012; Diop, 1955; M. K. Asante, 1993; Mazama, 2003; Reviere, 2001). Ngugi wa Thiongo (1994) is right on the mark when he points out that colonialism, especially through written material, was involved in the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature (p. 16). This explained why colonial “…reports were often distorted with ethnocentric prejudices” (Ajayi, 1998, p. 5). One of such prejudices with regard to African history based on oral traditions was “to refer to these sources as mere speculation” (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 3). In fact, British historian A. J. P. Taylor dismisses oral history as old men drooling about their youth and concludes that it is not history at all (Crowley, 1988, p. 42). Buckland (1999) notes that “oral cultures were believed to possess no history since there were no literary records to study their pasts” (p. 5). In the case of Africa, such arguments are often heavily tinged with the Hegelian notion that the continent is outside history because its people lacked historical consciousness (Hegel, 1991). Such historical analysis has an ideological bearing, for it “serves a given cause within the framework of …ethnic hegemonies” (Akwa, 1982, p. 69). No wonder, therefore, that “African dances…have been subjected to gross misinterpretation and misrepresentation, particularly in the Western world” (Ajayi, 1998, p. 3). The need for objectivity and the validation of African viewpoints as well as the exploration of the “present” of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde compels me to rely on oral traditions as a source of information for historical reconstruction. This seems all the more logical since most of the people...
managing the dance are still alive and their version of this history is the most credible since they are living it. After all, Crowley (1988) identifies two sources of information “to establish what happened: the facts” and they are “what people say, and what people have written” (p. 12).

Stokes (2013) maintains that “oral history involves interviewing people about their past experiences and memories” and “it was developed as a research method by historians to study social history” (p. 98). Kariamu Welsh Asante and Molefi Kete Asante (1990) are of the view that “Part of the responsibility for the lack of documentation and notation is the dominance of the oral tradition, which is an art in and of itself and a form of documentation.” Vansina (1961) defines oral traditions as “…‘unwritten’ sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings” (p.1). The same author adds that:

In those parts of the world inhabited by peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past, and even among peoples who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones are based on oral traditions. (p. 1)

Ki-Zerbo (1986) concludes by stating that “oral tradition is the only road that really leads to the soul and history of the African people” (p. 99). Even though oral sources have sometimes been discredited for being unreliable in historical reconstruction, “it is not always the work of praise singers and is …often sung and played rather than said” (Tardits, 1980, p. 78) and, therefore, are pertinent in this segment of my inquiry. With regard to African dances, K. W. Asante (2000) has argued that “… dance had always been a part of the oral…traditions and inherent in those traditions were the oral and kinetic modes of preservation and transmission” (p. 5).
Shifts in methods and methodologies in a bid to reconstruct Buum Oku Dance align with contemporary history research approaches. Storey and Jones (2008) elaborate:

When historians write, they incorporate methods and insight from the works of other historians as well as scholarship in the humanities, the natural science, and the social sciences...geography, literature, anthropology...economics... (p. 2)

With regard to my use of multiple approaches in analyzing the historical production of Buum Oku Dance, I find Buckland’s (2006) view particularly illuminating when the author maintains that “…ethnography is a methodology that deals with the present…,” and that in the twenty-first century, a neat division between this methodology and history methodology into mutually exclusive territories were never wholly operative in dance research (p. 4). Consequently, “…dance historians have found that the freedom to traverse disciplines has fostered the development of rich and varied historical perspectives” (Fraleigh and Hanstein, 1999, p. 228). As Crowley (1988) points out “history has proven the most ecumenical of subjects in borrowing ideas and methods from its sister disciplines” (p. 5). Having explored the issue of methods and methodologies, I now proceed to aspects which have been examined in order to analyze the historical production of Buum Oku Dance.

4.6.3.1.2 Analytical features of production

In the historical production of the dance, I have analyzed the following aspects: (a) Oku institutions and how they relate to dance creation as well as the composition of the dance; (b) how and where the dance originated, the high and low moments of its creation and who played what roles; (c) how the dance has spread, from its birthplace of
Mboh in Oku to other parts of the country, especially in Yaounde; (d) how it has evolved over time and who made what contributions, where and with what motivations.

4.6.3.2 Representation and its key components and definitions

4.6.3.2.1 General introduction

The representational dimension of this study calls for an analysis of key relevant concepts, such as representation, signification, discourse analysis, and text. The actual analysis of representation has focused on a 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance shot in situ in Yaounde; the analysis has broken down representation into two main aspects: (a) the macro-micro features for organizing dance analysis proposed by American dance scholar Pegge Vissicaro (2004, pp. 137-145); and (b) the representation of performance/performativity: meanings and embodiment.

4.6.3.2.2 Definition and theories of representation

Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people. Language in this sense transcends the spoken and written words; sounds, words, musical notes, gestures, expressions, dances constitute different forms of language, for their importance to language is not what they are but what they do, their function. Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, ‘a language’.

Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture; but also across cultures (Hall, 2013).
Young (2001) has noted that the study of representation is as much interested in what is not said as in what is said (p. 391). Ngugi wa Thiongo (1993) shares Young’s view of deliberate omission, or what Soyinka (2012) calls “revision by omission,” when he makes the argument that “…colonialism recognized as truly African only art and artistic activities which were completely emptied of all meaningful content” and concludes that by doing so “…colonialism was not entirely averse to associating itself to reactionary backward elements in peoples’ culture which is more often than not fossilized in museums or paraded as irrelevant, static traditionalism labeled as the authentic remnants and manifestation of true African culture” (p. 43). Malcolm X (1966) takes up the argument of omission by basing his analysis on his own personal experience at school as a black pupil.

I remember we came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one page long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. (p. 29)

From his anecdote, black history in America, a field which spans four continents and had lasted for more than three centuries, a history replete with monumental historical figures, such as Harriet Tubman, Matthew Henson, Robert Rillieux, Jan E. Matzeliger, Elijah McCoy, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, C. J. Walker, Du Bois and many others, and which comprises huge contributions in arts, music, sports, science, inventions and in every American struggle (Bennett, Jr., 2000, pp. 721-758; Hughes, 1986, pp. 221-272; J. W. Johnson, 1969; Cruse, 1984; & Osofsky, 1971), is summed up in a single page by Eurocentric “educators.”

Seen from the light of what to include or exclude, representation, as Shay (2006) argues, is a form of power. The scholar sees representation as a form of power which
involves political, social, and economic factors. He maintains that how a community is to be represented, particularly in its appearance to the outside world, depends largely on who has the power. Consequently, the various modes of representation that characterize performances of folk dance reflect larger social changes occurring in both specific ethnic communities and in mainstream society (p. 22). In *Orientalism* (1994), Said argues that

> The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. (p. 272)

To him, methodologically, representations should be viewed as inhabiting a common field of play defined for them, not by some inherent common subject matter alone, but by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse (pp. 272-273).

Hall (2013) identifies three theories of representation: reflective, intentional or mimetic and constructionist. In the reflective, meaning is believed to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world; but as Hall (2013) argues, “Things ‘in themselves’ rarely, if ever, have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning” (p. xix). Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) has argued against such an “essentialist” notion, insisting that language does not reflect a preexistent and external reality of independent objects. Instead, he maintains, a sign system like language constructs meaning from within itself through a series of conceptual and phonic differences (Barker, 2003, p. 89; Saussure, 1966). Hall (2013) makes a similar argument by noting that “meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call ‘languages.’ Meaning is produced by the practice, the ‘work,’ of representation.” (p. 14). “Signs” are composed of “signifier” and “signified,” with the former taken to be “the form or medium of signs, for example, a sound, an image, the
marks that form a word on the page;” and the latter, the signified, should “...be understood in terms of concepts and meanings” (Barker, 2003, p. 89). Visual signs, for instance, a dance, are called iconic signs because they bear, in their form, a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer (Hall, 2013, p. 7). However, “visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted” (p. 5).

The second approach, the intentional or mimetic approach, maintains that it is the author, the speaker, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. In other words, words mean what the authors intend them to mean. The major flaw in this approach, Saussure (1966) argues, is that while the author decides what he or she intends to say, he or she does not decide whether or not to use the rules of language, if he or she wants to be understood, for people are born into a language, its codes and meanings and this makes it a social phenomenon. Similarly, Hall (2013) maintains that a person cannot be the sole or unique source of meaning in language, since that would mean that individuals can express themselves in entirely private languages. The intentional approach is antithetical to the reflective approach. So, meaning is not in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word (p.7).

The third theory of representation, the constructionist approach, has had the most significant impact on cultural studies and comprises two variants: the semiotic (the study of signs) approach, influenced by Saussure (1966); and the discursive, by French philosopher, Michel Foucault (Hall, 1997). “Foucault himself identified as a historian of thought and often his own his own texts highlight how a particular discourse, or a way of
knowing, evolved over time” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 128). Barker (2003) agrees with
the argument, noting that Foucault “…is determinedly historical in his insistence that
language develops and generates meaning under specific material and historical
conditions” (p. 101). This makes his method useful to dance analysis since it helps in
determining how a dance, such as Buum Oku, has come to be known over time. The
constructionist approach does not deny the existence of the material world; rather it
argues that things do not construct their own meanings. It recognizes the public and
social character of language and acknowledges that “…neither things in themselves nor
the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” (Hall, 2013, p. 11) and
proposes a complex and mediated relationship between things in the world, our concept
in thought and language. Saussure (1966) has argued that even when the relationship
between “signifier” and “signified” are fixed by cultural codes, this is not permanent;
thus, words shift their meanings as the mental concepts (signifieds) revolves with
historical and social trends and evolutions. For example, the term ‘wicked,” in its current
usage, especially in North America, sometimes has a positive ring to it. M. K. Asante
(1998) demonstrates shifts in meaning by drawing on black history. “Words do change
and have different appeals at different times. For example, ‘Negro,’ ‘Black,’ ‘African
American,’ and ‘African’ have had their impact at various times” (p. 44).

These shifts of concepts open “representation to constant ‘play’ or slippage of
meaning, to the constant production of new meanings, new interpretations” (Hall, 2013,
p. 17). Thus, “in representation, constructionists argue, we use signs, organized into
languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others” (p. 14). Foucault
did not analyze particular texts and representations, as the semioticians did; but rather, he
was more inclined to analyze the whole discursive formation to which a text or practice
belongs. Expanding on the semiotic ideas of Saussure, Foucault saw the production of
“knowledge” (rather than just meaning) through what he called “discourse” (rather than
just language). Hall (2013) states that “Saussure’s focus on language may have been too
exclusive,” and that “the attention to its formal aspects did divert attention away from the
more interactive and dialogic features of language…, questions of power in language
between speakers of different status and positions…” (p. 19).

4.6.3.2.3 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, especially Foucauldian, is central in this study. Barker (2003)
argues that “discourse constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an
intelligible way while excluding other forms of reasoning as unintelligible” (p. 101).
What then is discourse analysis? Howarth et al. (2000) state that discourse analysis
refers to the practice of analyzing empirical raw materials and information as
discursive forms. This means that discourse analysts treat a wide range of
linguistic and non-linguistic data – speeches,…historical events, interviews,
policies, ideas… - as ‘texts’ or ‘writings’… (p. 4)

As tool for analysis, discourse has been extended to the colonial field, the “colonial
discourse analysis… that examines the ways in which a special kind of discourse was
developed in order to describe and administer the colonial arena” (Young, 2001, p. 392).
Young argues that colonial discourse analysis “derived from Foucault via Said is not
concerned with language as such, but rather with a discursive regime of knowledge” (p.
385). According to this “discursive regime of knowledge,” Europeans positioned
themselves as “superior,” a feeling that led them to create a kind of “binary opposition”
with the rest of the world which they considered as the “Other” (Said, 1994) and as
“inferior.” Africa, thus, came to be described as “Dark” and “backward” and its people, as “savages” without history or any civilization worthy of the name (Crowder, 1967, p. 2). This form of discourse analysis seems particularly pertinent in investigating the ways in which Western colonizers represented African dances (Ajayi, 1998; K. W. Asante, 2000; Ngugi wa Thiongo, 1993). Vissicaro (2004) talks of how “media representation of dance encourage ethnocentric attitudes, which produce generalizations and stereotypes” (p. 86).

Stokes (2013) has pointed out that discourse analysis is a method which requires you to take close analysis of texts, visual and verbal; and she also adds that it “integrates several methods including textual analysis, interviews, fieldwork and historical and archive research” (p. 89). In discourse analysis researchers analyze the structures of discourse and Yang (2000) identifies two kinds of structures, namely, *surface structures* and *underlying structures*. Of surface structures, he states that they “refer to the forms of language that can be seen or heard, such as sounds, intonations, gestures…” whereas “underlying structures refer to discursive meaning and action or interaction” (p. 33). Hall (2013) has argued that when Foucault talked of discourse he meant a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic or a particular historical moment. These statements, Foucault believed, were building blocks of discourses (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 28). In *The Archeology of Knowledge* (2010), Foucault attempted to clarify his concept of discourse. According to him, “we shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation…” (p. 117); and he used the term “discourse” in three prime ways: “Treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as
an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that account for a certain number of statements” (p. 80).

Markula & Pringle (2010) have elaborated on these three prime ways Foucault used discourse:

The first meaning suggests that discourse, as a reference to the general domain of statements, is concerned with statements that coalesce within specific social contexts and have some particular meaning or effect. The effect refers to a momentary production of a phenomenon, such as the production of objects, subjects or conceptual understandings. The discursive effect could produce, for example, a soccer ball, a soccer player, a passion for soccer… This does not mean, however, that an object such as a soccer ball is enunciated, but that one would simply not recognize the spherical object as a soccer ball.

The second usage of the term discourse referred to an individualisable group of statements or to statements that refer to the same phenomenon, such as discourses of rugby union or discourses of health. Although some discourses appear to refer to the same phenomenon, these discourses should not be viewed as necessarily unified or consistent.

This leads to the third usage of the term discourse, as a ‘regulated practice that account for a certain number of statements’. By this usage he is referring to the unwritten rules that guide social practices and help to produce and regulate the production of statements that, correspondingly, control what can be understood and perceived but at the same time, act to be obscure. (pp. 30-31)

Discourses are about the production of knowledge through language. They are made up of discursive practices which Foucault (2010) describe as a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function. (p.117)

Seen through the lens of Foucault, discourses are ways of knowing and everyone using language is involved in the circulation and creation of these knowledges (Foucault, 1990). Markula & Silk (2011) maintain that “Foucauldian discourse analysis aims to detect what knowledges dominate particular fields, where they come from and how they
have become dominant” (p. 130). Discourse governs the way a topic can meaningfully be talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas can be put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2013, p. 29). For Foucault, “discourse is very much entwined with power and with ideological hegemony” (Stokes, 2013, p. 143). Hall (2013) notes that Foucault’s discursive approach to representation revolved around three main ideas: the concept of the discourse, the issue of power and knowledge, and the question of the subject (p. 28).

4.6.3.2.4 *Buum Oku Dance video as text*

Shay (2006) has pointed out that “dance, because of its embodied character, is an ideal vehicle for cultural representation” and that “traditional dance constituted an ideal vehicle of representation” since they are a rich repository of song, dance, and folktales (p. 19).

Following the field of cultural studies, Buum Oku Dance video is the text. As Barker (2003) points out

the concept of text suggests not simply the written word, though this is one of its senses, but all practices which signify. This includes the generation of meaning through images, sounds, objects… and activities (like dance and sport). Since images, sounds, objects and practices which signify with the same mechanism as language, we may refer to them as cultural texts. (p. 10)

Buum Oku Dance Yaounde is an offshoot of modern Subi in Mboh in Oku. The dance shares a common ancestry with other Cameroonian troupes such as Jaji’s Subi dance in Old Town Bamenda, Fai Mbuw’s Nkeng of Jikijem in Oku, and Mawe of the port city of Doula. For a number of reasons, I decided to select this dance outfit for this study.
Firstly, it is one of the most documented, widely travelled and dynamic of Cameroonian folkdances. It is the handiwork of cultural icons such as John Kegham Ndinaah, Nkemba John Babey, Mkong Francis Ndom and Yang John Nshiom and as such, it blends the best of modern Cameroonian, nay African, folkdance traditions: music, dance, storytelling, and artistic creation.

Secondly, over the years I have developed an interest in this dance and have been working in very close collaboration with Peter Ntaimah who once served as the group’s president and is currently playing the xylophone for the troupe. Like John Kemgham Ndinaah and Nkemba John Babey, Peter Ntaimah hails from Mboh, the original birthplace of the dance; and, apart from being an amazing and generous individual, he is a descendant of the second Baikong (Chief) of Mboh and has written extensively about his village and the dance. Given his intellectual depth and interest in the history and culture of his people, he has provided me with in-depth and reliable analysis of the dance, and of Oku and Tikar culture.

Thirdly, Mveng et al. (1969) have argued that “those (Africans) obsessed with modernization are very quick to copy the West, displaying no desire whatsoever to bring to light their own ancestral heritage which should be revived and infused with new blood,” (p. 9). Buum Oku Dance provides a remarkable counterpoint to such spirit of alienation. One of its greatest selling points (Du Gay et al. 2003) remains the intellectual profile of many of its members who, in spite of or even because of their levels of education, are still drawn to their Cameroonian and African heritage. Peter Ntaimah has a PhD in anthropology; Gladious Keja, the current president and a dancer of the group, holds a B.Sc. in biochemistry and joined the police force in 2002 where he studied
geographic information systems, cartography, remote sensory and territorial management. In his high school days, he had danced with Nkomate, another offspring of Subi based in Nso, before joining Buum Oku Dance in Yaounde. Tata Mentan, a graduate from a technical college in Kumbo, was the leader of a traditional music orchestra in his institution where he played the drum and xylophones. Nsakse John Kelese, who is currently a classroom teacher, holds an LLB in Law from the University of Yaounde and was the traditional music director of Government High School in Kumbo. He joined Buum Oku Dance Yaounde group in 1985; and he currently doubles as Secretary General and a xylophonist. One of his many tasks in the group is to train youths on how to play the xylophones. Nkwambi Kennedy Keneh has an M. A. in Geography and has been a dancer with the group since the age of 12. He is an expert xylophone player and excels in a wide range of Oku dances. Keming David Nchinda is currently enrolled in a doctorate program at the History Department of the University of Yaounde. He was born and raised in Oku and is a distinguished dancer, musician and soccer player. Bafon Nchinda Felix Yancho has worked as an enumerator with Bird Life International at the Kilum/Ijim Mountain Project in Oku. He is considered a musical virtuoso extraordinaire, even in a strictly traditional setting which abounds in such talents; he also doubles in the group as an oral historian who recounts the history of Oku through songs. He plays all the sections of the xylophone and, apart from dancing Buum Oku, he has also demonstrated quick feet with mbaya, njang and ndong. Since it is hoped that this research may eventually assist in community building as well as the promotion of scholarship and culture, no other folkdance in Cameroon speaks more eloquently on these counts than Buum Oku Dance.
Fourthly, given the levels of education of members of the group, I was convinced that they stand a good chance of making a sound assessment of their performances at home and abroad and are more likely to respond intelligently and incisively to interview questions. The fact that they all speak English also helps as I imagined that there would be no need for translation or accusation of information distortion.

Finally, the group has a constitution that clearly spells out its activities and the rules and regulations governing them as well as its objectives. The constitution provided me with a point from which to start; it also helped me to clear up some ethical issues.

4.6.3.2.5 Macro-micro perspective of representation

Vissicaro (2004) has studied dance culture across the world and maintains that the macro-micro approach incorporates methods for gathering and organizing data that consider the dancer’s emic views (intrinsic) and etic perspectives of the dance scholarly community (extrinsic). The approach also organizes information by examining (a) the macro features of the dance event; and (b) the micro features of dance. The macro features explores participants and location of the dance and respond to the basic journalistic questions of what, where, when, why, how, and who. In order to obtain detailed information to these aspects of my analysis, I have included cultural insiders’ observation in addition to mine (Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 139-140; Golshani, Park & Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 98-100). As for the micro features, they deal with the actual dancing and other aspects (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 137) and focus on the smallest components of dance; in particular, the movement (Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 139-144) which I analyzed using an Afrocentric lens.
As an Afrocentric project, the concept of “dance event” is relevant to the macro micro aspects of the investigation. “Dance event” was first suggested by American anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku; and the concept was later elaborated in her doctoral thesis *Theory and Method for an Anthropological Study of Dance* in 1976 (Davida, 2001). Vissicaro (2004) expatiates on the concept by noting that “in order to understand the dance itself, one must examine ‘the relevant personnel,’ their behavior, the entire *mise-en-scene* of the dance event, and knowledge of the large cultural universe and population” (p. 137). Such an approach ties in with the Afrocentric conception of dance as an emanation of the people (Fodeba, 1959). Ajayi (1998) points out in connection with Yoruba dances of western Nigeria that “… dance was not segregated from other aspects of life, rather, it was closely interwoven with significant aspects of the culture, informing, enriching, and perpetuating it” (p. 2). As such, dance “… is dependent upon its relationship to the community of people in which it occurs and cannot be meaningfully studied as an isolated phenomenon” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 137).

As part of this aspect of the analysis, it is necessary to specify the type of “dance event,” whether it is “contained” or “extended”. Of “contained”, Vissicaro (Ibid) notes that it is framed by an identifiable beginning and conclusion. Almost any type of concert in which an audience is expected to appreciate a dance performance without an in-depth background is a contained event. Consequently, competitive dance performances also qualify as contained events. This makes Buum Oku Dance on the video a contained event. By contrast, “extended events” are tied entirely to their cultural context. These are not portable. Without much experience with the cultural knowledge system, an outsider will have a limited understanding of an extended dance event and in fact, may
misunderstand it completely (pp. 137-138). Most of the *Kwifon* dances in Oku are extended events.

4.6.3.2.6 Performance/performativity: Definition

According to McKinlay (2010), “performance suggests an actor who consciously follows – or refuses to follow – a script”, pointing out that this notion contrasts with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity in which “the individual is not condemned to simply act out a structurally determined identity” (234). Covington-Ward (2013) argues that performance is essentially a contested concept which has been used in the humanities and social sciences to describe and analyze a wide variety of human activity. For Barker (2003), as a cultural metaphor, performance engages with the following: the verbal and the visual; word and bodies; stasis and movement; objects and space; scripts and improvisations; intention and compulsion. However, he argues that “we must get away from the idea that a performance is necessarily a consequence of intention” and that “our stories are performative in that they enact and constitute that which they purport to describe” (p. 118). Ngum (1990) has noted that “to understand performances, one needs to understand something about the culture and society in which they are performed and how they tie in with local geography” (p. 1). This understanding of performances extends to their hidden meanings, to their underlying discourses. However, the essential question as to whether we (human subjects) essentially play an active or passive role in our acts, or simultaneously both, *is* a question which seems to underlie all discussions of performance and performativity (Siray, 2007, pp. 11-12).
Martinich (2008) states that in “performative utterances”, Austin introduced the idea that to say something is to do something; and that Austin’s idea is important because people often think that there is an important distinction between talking and doing. Austin was originally motivated to explore the nature of performative utterances as part of a project to refute the theory of meaning championed by the logical positivists, primarily during the 1920s and 1930s (p. 127). Miller (2007) defines performativity as “…the assumption that human beings have no innate selfhood or subjectivity but become what they are through more or less forced repetition of a certain role” (p. 225). She maintains that the theory of performativity suggests a later hybrid combining speech act theory, Foucault, and performance studies. On this basis, Butler invented a new and immensely influential theory called performativity, that is, the notion that gender is not inherent but is engendered by disciplinary pressures that coerce us into performing, that is, behaving, in a way society assumes is appropriate for a certain gender (pp. 222-224). Desmond (1999) has pointed out that performativity is a new welcoming arena for entry into the debates about dance, and an opportunity for the specificity of dance research and the tools already developed within dance scholarship to contribute to these debates in cultural studies (p. 4). So what meanings are embedded in the performance of Buum Oku Dance? Are these performances relevant to ethnic, national, gender and other identity construction? Is the dance performance a metaphor for community, resistance, and the nation?
4.6.3.2.7 Signification, Foucault and Buum Oku Dance

In performance/performativity signs are said to be polysemic, that is, they have many possible meanings; thus, texts could be interpreted in a number of different ways. Barthes talks of two systems of signification: “denotation,” involving the descriptive and literal level of meaning shared by almost all members of a culture; and “connotation,” meaning arising from the association of signs with other cultural codes of meanings” (Barker, 2003, p. 92; Sontag, 1996). For example, an African mask displayed as a museum piece carries a different significance when the same mask is employed during an African dance performance. Thus speaks an African mask on display at a museum: “Since I have been enclosed within the walls of this room, my eyes have become dimmed; my proud smile of yesteryear has disappeared and my features have been disfigured by shame” (Fodeba, 1960).

Using for the most part the analysis of Stuart Hall (representation) and Michel Foucault (discourse analysis), I intend to show how meanings are constituted in the video performance of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde and how they relate to knowledge and power. Ajayi (1998) has pointed out that

“...the dance space is insignificant until movement gives it meaning, the presence of the body in motion not only changes the perception of the space, but actually alters the form, giving it additional strength in depth, direction, and balance. (p. 20)

Different interpretations and meanings have been attributed to the performance of Buum Oku Dance. For example, it has been seen as a metaphor for the slave trade and forced labour which once wracked the Bamenda Grassfield (Argenti, 1998, 2006) or as an assertion of ethnic and national identities (Gamse, 1986; Ngum, 1990, 2010; Ntainmah, 2012, 2014; G. Keja, personal communication, March 19, 2015). These various meanings
arise because the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” tends to be arbitrarily fixed (Hall, 2013; Saussure, 1966) and therefore is not permanent; thus, interpretations and meanings associated with the dance continue to vary, for meaning has the potential to proliferate to eternity. To understand how in Foucauldian discourse, meanings translate into knowledge/power, it is important to understand his conception of knowledge and power. Foucault was concerned with how knowledge was produced and put to work through discursive practices in specific institutional settings, such as schools, prisons, the military, etc., to regulate the conduct of others. He focused on the relationship between knowledge and power and how power operated within what he called institutional *apparatus* and its technologies (Hall, 2013, p. 32). He was concerned that many social problems arose from the imposition of particular way of knowing the self and others. For example, the “knowledge” that whites are superior to other races helped to produce the problem of racism. Similarly, the “knowledge” of men as leaders and women as subservient, helped to produce the problem of sexism. Foucault argued that what we think we “know” in a particular period, say, gays, has a bearing on the discrimination and homophobia to which they are subjected. Similarly, to study the high rates of incarceration of blacks and natives, you must study how the combination of discourse and power, that is, power/knowledge, has produced a certain conception of both groups as “criminals.” There is nothing as knowledge for knowledge sake or knowledge operating in a void. “This led Foucault to speak, not of the ‘truth’ of knowledge in an absolute sense – a truth which remained so, whatever the period, setting, context – but of discursive formation sustaining a regime of truth” (p. 34). He rejected the positivism belief that knowledge could be constructed objectively and argued that
knowledge was always subject to certain epistemic conditions and truth, accordingly, was 
always a partial, localized version of reality (Markula & Pringle, 2006, pp. 25-27). Hall 
(2013) adds that “meaning and representation seem to belong to the interpretive side of 
the human and cultural sciences, whose subject matter – society, culture, the human 
subject – defies a positivistic approach…” (p. 27). Foucault was much more historically 
specific, seeing forms of power/knowledge as rooted in particular contexts and histories. 
For Foucault, the production of knowledge is always crossed with questions of power and 
the body; and this greatly expands the scope of what is involved in representation (Hall, 
2013, p. 36). He argued that within different epistemes, different sets of understanding or 
discursive conditions shape what can be known but simultaneously obscure other forms 
of knowledge (Foucault, 2010, p. 191; Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 27). Foucault (2000), 
thus, defined knowledge of humans as a form of power that categorizes the individual, 
marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of 
truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.

4.6.3.2.6 Embodiment in performance/performativity

Another dimension of the analysis of the video pays particular attention to the 
way the dance enacts, performs, embodies such aspects of life such as identity, resistance, 
gender, community and family by using mainly the works of British Oku scholar, Nicolas 

As an Afrocentric study, “theory and practice should be informed by the actual 
and aspired interests of the community” (Reviere, 2001, p. 719); and “the African
experience must determine all inquiry” (Mazama, 2003, p. 26). To the people of Oku in Cameroon what then does the dance embody? Here, the views of African scholars, especially in a postcolonial dispensation, as well as those of the people of Oku, are important.

Even though Argenti is British, there is no contradiction drawing on his works for the analysis of this aspect of the study. M. K. Asante (1990a) has argued that “…African birth does not make one Afrocentric” and that “Afrocentricity is a matter of intellectual discipline and must be learned and practiced” (p. 115). Argenti is no armchair intellectual, having lived in Oku where he learned the language and customs before embarking on his research. Throughout his inquiry he worked with Bah, a native of Oku and a historian, who mediated his research; and the “emancipatory” aspects of his research are not in question.

M. K. Asante (2008) has pointed out that “…any textual analysis must involve the concrete realities of the lived experiences, thus making historical experiences a key element in analytical Afrocentricity.”

4.6.3.3 Audience reception

4.6.3.3.1 Definition of audience

Stokes (2013) has stated that “in media and cultural studies, the term ‘audience’ is used in the everyday sense to refer to people who attend a particular performance or view a film… In its broadest sense, the term … is almost interchangeable with society” (pp. 170-171); and she further adds that “Audience research also allows us to examine… what people like (and don’t like) and why” (p. 174). R. Johnson (1986/87) has pointed out that
“…all cultural products are ‘read’ by persons other than professional analysts…” and that to understand specific conditions of consumption or reading we have to explore asymmetries of resources and power, material and cultural, which also include “the existing ensembles of cultural elements already active within particular social milieux…and the social relations on which these combinations depend” (pp. 46-47).

4.6.3.3.2 Audience composition

The audience in this study is made up of students who watched the dance video and were interviewed; it comprised 3 men and 3 women, all of whom have attended secondary schools in Regina. Out of the 6, only John Mabior, of Southern Sudanese origin, comes directly from the continent of Africa and is not a dancer even though he professes that “he has always been interested in music” (2015). The remaining 5 are of African Caribbean origin and have been in dance school for most of their lives. The fact that they are dancers-students is important because they constitute “active audience,” that is, participants “with cultural competence to decode programmes in their own specific ways” (Barker, pp. 329-330); and also because they bring an “emic” perspective to this segment of the dissertation. Coined by linguist Kenneth Pike in 1954, the term *emic* is “the view of someone inside a cultural system” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 24).

The dance school they attend is part of The Saskatchewan Caribbean Canadian Association (SCCA) which is described in the organization’s flyer (SCCA, 2016) as being “an integral part of the Saskatchewan mosaic for over 35 years” and “has over 200 members counting spouses/partners and children separately.” The document outlines the objective of the organization as being “dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Caribbean heritage and culture within the multicultural context of Saskatchewan and
Canada”, noting that one way it does so is through “the promotion of Caribbean dance through one of the Association’s subgroup: The Caribe Folk Arts Dance Troupe”. The subgroup dance troupe is made up of junior, intermediary and senior group of dancers who “attend weekly dance practices and perform at various cultural events in Saskatchewan” such as Mosaic, Motif, Folkfest, Estevan’s Cultural Collage, Spring Free from Racism, Carisask, Labour Day Events, Independence Day event of various islands and countries, RCMP Diversity Day, Black History Month events, Regina’s Dragon Boat Festival. It was from one of the dance academies which is being operated by SCCA and is located at the basement of the headquarters of Regina Multicultural Council on Broad Street that the 5 interview participants are drawn.

4.6.3.3.3 Nature and challenges to audience interviews

The interviews went from 20 to 45 minutes and all the participants were asked the same questions. As for their ages, it ranged from 18 to 23 years. The participants were drawn from university, high school and the workforce and come from different countries, giving the interviews a broad spectrum of views. It must be pointed out that some participants have the same last name, so to avoid any confusion and to stay consistent, I have chosen in my analysis to use the first names of all participants.

4.6.3.3.4 Analyzing audience reception

I took up audience reception dimension by analyzing the interviews of 6 African (-Canadian) students (3 males and 3 females) after they had viewed the dance video. The 6 students live in Regina where they are attending or have attended secondary-high
school and university. 5 of the students are currently training in dance with the Caribe Folk Arts Dance troupe at the Multicultural Centre on Broad Street in Regina and have been involved in a wide range of cultural activities such as Mosaic, Black History Month, RCMP Diversity Day, Canada Day Performance and Spring Free From Racism and they come from the Caribbean.

In their interviews they insisted on the relevance of dance to key issues such as family/community, cultural inclusion and group identity, issues of gender, low self-esteem and school dropout. I have analyzed these dimensions, exploring the relevance of Buum Oku Dance as a tool for resistance to forms of oppression.

4.7 Ethical considerations

This research centers on people, so it becomes what Stokes (2013) calls “human subjects research” (p. 175). Research that uses people need rules and guidelines to deal with them, so this raises ethical questions. Desmond (2000) exposes the need for ethical guidelines by pointing out that prior to the 1970s, fieldwork usually “involved an ‘outsider’ (most often of European or Euro-American descent) entering a community of which he or she was not a part, and then producing a description of the ‘peoples’ she studied” (p. 45). This attitude towards research has come under tremendous fire from anti- and post-colonial scholars and has prompted Chilisa (2012) to declare:

Colonialism – in the form of the universal application of Western-based research methodologies and techniques of gathering data across cultures – and the subjectivity of researchers are among the factors that have created a body of literature that disseminates theories and knowledge unfavourable to the colonized Other. This body of literature threatens to perpetuate research that constructs the researched colonized Other as the problem. The challenge for researchers is how to manage the literature that informs our research studies,
where the literature that is available on the colonized other is predominantly oral. (p. 59)

This study posed a series of ethical questions, notably at three main levels: at the level of the production of the dance video when I went to Yaounde in Cameroon where it was shot; at the level of interviews I conducted with Cameroonians in Buea, Yaounde, Douala and Oku in order to reconstruct the oral history as well as other aspects of the dance; and at the level of the City of Regina where I interviewed 6 student audience participants after they had watched a video of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde.

There were some key questions I had to bear in mind as I proceeded with fieldwork. What does Buum Oku Dance Yaounde obtain in return for its participation in the production of the video; or for allowing its members to do interviews? Is the action of the group in violation of national or ethnic laws? Do members expose themselves to any harm or impropriety? Does a Westerner flying into an African village, armed with all kinds of modern information collecting gadgets, designed to appropriate the work of its people not smack of the exploitation of the natives? Are Oku villagers mere objects of the research; or they are copartners in knowledge construction? Another concern revolved around the status of some Oku villagers to be interviewed on the dance. Fai Baimenda, the head of the lineage which owns Subi dance, is the equivalent of a “senator” in Oku and has numerous responsibilities to carry out both in his compound and palace and other parts of the village as well. Does sitting down with him for an interview not distract from these responsibilities. Jick, a soldier on retirement and a farmer, had been the treasurer of Buum Oku Dance for 32 years and was a close relative of John Ndinaah, the originator of modern Subi, whom he knew very well. Abandoning his farm work and other important engagements to grant interview means a loss of income for the time spent. How would
these important personalities be remunerated in a manner that befits their village ranks for abandoning their activities and means of livelihood to spend time responding to questions? What are the implications for their participation in the research? Are they privy to village secrets and traditions that put them at risk for their participation in the research? Could they be ostracized for their contribution? I had to figure out the appropriate response to all these queries. Throughout the research proceedings in Cameroon, I worked in close collaboration with Peter Ntaimah who mediated my activities to ensure that I did not act in violation of national or ethnic laws.

Back in Canada, there was the question of student audience participants whom I interviewed after the video projection. As part of the quest for ethical approval, I prepared consent forms for participants, which they signed to show that they were not coerced in any way to take part in the project; that they had the freedom to leave whenever they wanted; and that they could not be sued for their participation or persecuted in any form in their communities or countries of origin for their contributions. What forms of compensation do they get?

Suffice it to state that these issues have all been addressed in accordance with the requirements of the ethical board of the University of Regina, REB. For instance, I encountered some problems with parents who displayed little or no enthusiasm to participate, even when their children openly expressed the desire to be part of the research. I then decided to select only students between the ages of 18 and 25 who did not require parental consent for the interviews.

I also had to respect the Afrocentric research ethical requirements which insist on a number of other factors. Research must align with the principles of Nommo and Ma’at.
Ma’at is “the moral ideal of ancient Egypt” (Karenga, 2006) that represents “the quest for justice, truth and harmony” (M. K. Asante, 1998). In the context of research, it “refers to the research exercise itself, in harmony with the researcher, being used as a tool in the pursuit of truth and justice.” Its ultimate goal is to help in creating a more fair and just society (Reviere, 2001, p. 711). Nommo means “the productive word…and also the place where facts are disseminated…” (M. K. Asante, 1998, 2003) and here “it describes the creation of knowledge as a vehicle for improvement in human relations” (Reviere, 2001). These guidelines fit with the emancipatory objective of my research.

“Ma’at and Nommo together with the conception of reality based on Ubuntu should provide a code of conduct and a standard of aspiration for ethical and moral behavior” (Chilisa, 2012). Inspired by the principles of Ma’at and Nommo, Reviere (2001) has outlined five canons that “…are important and traditional in African cultures and necessary for the proper and more complete construction and interpretation of knowledge - …ukweli, uhaki, kujitoa, ujamaa and utulivu.” To her, it is against these criteria that “…research should be judged for the accuracy of the representativeness of the lived experiences of…Black people” (p. 711). M. K. Asante (1988, 1998, 2008) provides basic beliefs that anyone doing Afrocentric research must subscribe to, for they make up the fundamental characteristics that define the Afrocentric researcher as well as distinguish the Afrocentric from the Eurocentric methodology. They have thus been summed up by Reviere (2001):

…researcher must (a) hold themselves responsible for uncovering hidden, subtle, racist theories that may be embedded in current methodologies; (b) work to legitimize the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data; and (c) maintain inquiry rooted in a strict interpretation of place. (p. 712)
Ukweli refers to the groundedness of research in the experiences of the community being researched, for based on their lived experiences the community members are the ultimate authority in determining what is true. Kujitoa is more concerned with how knowledge is structured and used over the need for objectivity and dispassion. Ujamaa and uhaki call for the need to recognize and maintain community and the rejection by the researcher of the researcher/participant dichotomy deemed so detrimental to African cultural environment of communalism. Utulivu means justice. The concept of justice is required for legitimate research and justness is measured in terms of fairness of research procedure and the openness of research application (Reviere, 2001).

Given Africa’s diversity, Afrocentric research respects the specificities of the location under investigation. This means that the research on Buum Oku Dance will be undertaken after fulfilling certain requirements of the Oku community in Yaounde.

The methodological approach I have used for this research initiative has come with its fair share of challenges, each of which has been resolved following the ethical guidelines propounded by the University of Regina as well as Afrocentric methods which govern qualitative research.
CHAPTER 5: HISTORICAL PRODUCTION OF BUUM OKU DANCE
YAOUNDE

5.1 General Overview

Du Gay et al. (2003) have stated that

…the production of a cultural artefact in the present day involves not only understanding how that object is produced technically, but how that object is produced culturally; how it is made meaningful – what we term ‘encoded’ with particular meanings – during the production process. In thinking about the production of culture, then, we are also simultaneously thinking about the culture of production – the way in which the practice of production are inscribed with particular cultural meanings. (p. 4)

How does the above declaration translate into the production of Buum Oku Dance?

Buum Oku Dance Yaounde is a nationally acclaimed folkdance in Cameroon which has represented this nation in different parts of the world. Its history has been reconstructed largely through interviews conducted mainly among Oku indigenes in Cameroon and North America; and it began in Mboh in Oku in the Bamenda Grassfield where it still bears the original name, Subi.

Subi dance is the property of the Ntul Baimenda lineage in Mboh and still retains all its traditional features. However, in order to meet the highly competitive standards of folkdance practice in Cameroon, the dance had to undergo remarkable transformation to become “neo-traditional” (Kringelback, 2012; Green, 2011). This phase, which Ntaimah (2012, 2014) describes as “modern ballet or kekum mekale,” was set in motion in the sixties by two brothers who belonged to the Bah lineage. The first, John Kegham Ndinaah, was a visionary with an innate sense of greatness and a stubborn determination to see his dreams come to fruition; and the second, Nkemba John Babey, a rare genius whose mastery of and insight into folk dances and music provided him with the right
tools for such a venture. Working in tandem, they let their imaginations run wild, infusing the dance with their own artistic creation by drawing on other local folkdances as well as on developments occurring in other parts of the world. These changes moved the dance from its humble and conservative setting and catapulted it to national and international spotlight.

In Yaounde, where a medley of Oku traditional musical and dance talents had congregated, the dance took another turn, becoming a major laboratory for even greater artistic experimentation. This new venture was labelled “Buum Oku Dance.” In keeping with Oku tradition, what was original was maintained; but, through constant additions, tinkering and modifications, the dance continued its inexorable transformative march to keep pace with modernity and to fit into the new and exacting environment. With an ever expanding music and choreographic repertoire, monotony was broken and the dance made more exciting and a hub for youth activities. In a nation where a spirit of cultural alienation still runs rampant, causing many people to identify with things foreign, enkindling the interest of the younger generation in their own cultural heritage and identity was no small achievement. Even today, as the quest for genuine nationhood continues to flounder in ethnic bickering over power, the dance has provided Cameroonian with something around which to construct unity and mobilize community efforts for nation building.

What is the Oku conception of dance and what kind of dance is Buum Oku Dance Yaounde? What were the underlying motivations for its creation and innovation? The dance has been described variously as “juju dance,” a “masquerade,” and a “masked dance” which uses xylophones and drums as its main instruments (Ntai...
Jing & Ntaimah, 2009). What do these descriptions represent in African/Oku dances? Who originated the Oku Subi Dance? Who innovated it and for what purpose? Which challenges did the innovator(s) face? What are the dance’s key components? What materials were used for its creation? Who tuned the xylophones, carved the masks and drums? Who composed the music and came up with the choreography? Who made the outfits? These are some of the questions chapter five of my inquiry seeks to answer.

5.2 Components of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde

In order to fully understand Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, it is necessary to first of all break down and explore some of the dance’s key constituent elements such as Oku and Dance as well as outfit and music accessories. Vissicaro (2004) maintains that “dance provides a lens for exploring the world, its people, and their culture…” (p. 3). In the quest for “text in context” (Yang, 2000, p. 34), the study of any aspect of Buum Oku Dance, should be pitched against a backdrop of a historical and socio-cultural knowledge of the village of Oku. Koloss (2000) has noted that “In order to understand the function of the masks (Buum Oku Dance is a mask dance) in the life of their bearers, one must learn about the King and Kwifon, indeed about Oku itself” (p. 17).

5.2.1 Oku

5.2.1.1 Geography

Perched high up at an altitude of about 1800m is Oku, a Grassfield fondom (kingdom) located 290 kilometers northwest of Yaounde. The ethnic group lies between longitudes 10°25’19” and 10°35’42” east of the Greenwich meridian and latitudes
6°05’41.28” and 6°17’34.08” north of the equator and is squeezed between Boyo Division to the west, Ngoketungia Division to the south, and Noni Sub-Division to the north in the North West Province (Nkwambi, 1996). Among Oku’s important landmarks are the following: Mt Oku, which has a height of 3011m and is the second highest mountain in West Africa (after Mt Cameroon); Lake Oku, a fresh water lake and “the largest body of water found at that altitude in Cameroon” (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 16); and the Kilum forest, “a well-preserved primary montane forest” (Argenti, 2007).

According to Cameroonian National Institute of Cartography, Oku is made up of 34 villages and 2 adorates (cattle-Fulani or Mbororo villages) and covers an area of 372.5 sq. km. The villages are as follows: Ndum, Ngashie, Ngemseba 1, Ngemseba 2, Ngham, Ngwenki 1, Ngwenki 2, Mbok-Nghos, Mbok-Kevu, Mbok-Jikijem, Mbok-Embeng, Mboh, Mbacham, Mbam Ba’ateh, Manchok, Lum, Lui, Lang, Keyon, Ketongwang, Kesoten, Jiyane, jikijem, Ichim, Ibal, Fekeng, Elak, Chak, Bo’ow, Ntowe, Nkvei, Simon-Ko’oh, Tangkei; and the adorates, Itoh and Shinga’a.

By some estimates, Oku has “a population of 60,000 people, spread over a mountainous landscape” (Argenti, 2002, p. 499). However, according to Koloss (2000), an eminent authority on Oku, in 1996 the figure was set at 75,000 people (p. 17). As a village located in the North West Region, Oku is part of a very high density region. According to Cameroon Government sources (2010), North-West Province’s population density of 99.12 people per square kilometer is higher than the national average of 22.6. The pressure on land is one of the causes of rural exodus, mainly of young people moving to larger cities of the country. This migration has important implications for the study of Buum Oku Dance.
5.2.1.2 Brief history of Oku

A drawback in researching the history of Oku is paucity of written documents, especially those written by indigenes of Oku and other Cameroonians (Koloss, 2000 & Ntaijah, 2012). Oral traditions thus play an important role in reconstructing the history of Oku. Like numerous fondoms (kingdoms) in the Bamenda Grassfield, Oku oral traditions lay claim to a Tikar origin, “from the Upper Mbam River region and its tributaries in East Cameroon,” which some describe as “Tikari” and others as “Ndobo,” and yet others as “Kimi or Rifum, now associated with the modern Tikar kingdom of Bankim…” (Kaberry, 1962, pp. 282-283; Forde and Kaberry, 1967, pp. 126-128). The Tikars arrived in successive migration waves (Ki-Zerbo, 1986; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982; Ntaijah, 2012; Tardits, 1980) and Oku people had formed part of one of such waves. Some scholars such as Kaberry (1962) and Price (1979) have nevertheless challenged the idea of Tikar origin, mainly on linguistic, ethnic or truly historical evidence. Fowler and Zeitlyn (1996) agree by noting that:

…many Grassfields dynasties claim Tikar descent, yet neither the languages spoken nor the cultural traditions of the groups concerned bear much relationship to the language and culture of the Tikar who presently occupy the Tikar Plain. (p. 6)

However, in spite of such counterclaims Forde and Kaberry (1967) state that:

The ruler of Kimi still maintains ritual links with Bamum, Bandam, Ditam, Ntem, and Ngu and has recently revived those with Nso, Kom, Bafut, Nkwen (Bafreng), and a number of chiefdoms in the Ndop Plain, such as Bamunktä, Bamessi, and Nsei... (p. 124)

Further proof of the link between these groups was displayed following the death of the Bamoun queen-mother. “Following the death in 1913 of the noted Bamum queen-mother,
Njapdungke, emissaries were sent from Rifum carrying fire and smeared with white clay of mourning” (Fowler & Zeitlyn, 1996, p. 13).

In addition, the “Tikar” element of history is so deeply rooted in the oral traditions of numerous Bamenda Grassfield kingdoms where “We are told virtually identical stories of small princely emigrant groups which claimed to have brought with them ‘the thing of Rifum’…” (Gufler and Bah, 2006, p. 56).

Ntaimah (2012) has expressed kinship relation between Oku and the neighbouring ethnic group of Nso during one of these migration waves when he states:

…Oku and Nso were one group during that migration wave; but it is difficult to tell with exactitude the names the people were bearing during their movement out of the Tikar region. It is clear that the names (Oku, Nso) only came up later... Some say that they constituted a unique family and shared many things wherever they moved to during this period… After shuttling from spot to spot, this…movement led them to what was seemingly their permanent settlement at Kokefem (in Oku) or Kovifem (in Nso). (pp. 3-4)

According to Ndishangong (1984), it was at Kovifem that Yeafon, one of Fon Nso’s wives, gave birth to Tatah who would become one of three children (Tatah, Nso, and Yeaneh) and the founder of present day Oku. Owing to succession quarrels, the author argues, Tatah felt cheated as first son when he did not become king after the death of their father, Nso. The throne having passed into the hands of his younger brother Nso (son) who was a musician, he decided to leave, taking along with him his supporters. In their movement, it was in Mbokenghas that Tatah and his Mbele followers (who today constitute the royal clan in Oku) started the process of self-identification (Ntaimah, 2012). When the Mbele clan arrived at the current site of Oku, it was occupied by the Ntul in whose midst they blended. Even though Tatah and his followers were mere refugees, owing to his leadership abilities he was enthroned as Fon (King) Nyanya, the
first king of all of Oku, upon the death of Baba Ebfon, the leader of the Ntul. Later these groups were joined by other clans, notably the Mbulum and Ebjung (Koloss, 2000, p. 31). At this historical juncture, the name Ebkuo, which was later corrupted by the Germans to “Oku,” did not exist.

It is believed that the name Ebkuo is a Ntul version of Vikulaf or Viku, a label said to have been coined by Nso people and which stands for “those who have scrubbed away mud from the walls of the house” (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 9). The story goes that Oku people had participated in the construction of a house at the Nso palace and was expecting to be entertained, as tradition required, but instead were insulted and they instantly proceeded to scrub mud off the walls, hence Vikulaf or Viku. Another version situates the incident in Oku where the Ntul were those invited to help construct Tatah’s house and were insulted and decided to scrub mud off the walls of the house - Ebkuo. While F. Baimenda (personal communication, March 24, 2015) situated the incident in Oku, he noted that those invited and felt insulted were the Nso and he summed up the discussion by saying that “Oku is like a nickname for ‘bad behaviour.’”

The Golden Age of Oku is generally associated with the reign of Mkong Moteh, considered to be a great mystic (Ntaimah, 2012) and the most important king who is worshipped in Oku (Argenti, 2007; Bah, 1996; & Koloss, 2000). Bah (1996) notes that “during his rule, he performed a number of miracles, notably the drying up of streams in the Nso Fondom” (p. 13). By the time the Germans burst onto the scene of Oku in 1905, Mkong Ndako was fon and he openly received German explorer Captain Glauning (Ntaimah, 2012; Koloss, 2000). A high point in German colonial administration was that this administration drew up lucrative contracts with local kings through which young
people were forcibly removed from many parts of the Bamenda Grassfield, including Oku, to labour in newly established German plantations along the coastal region (Argenti, 2007, 2011; Chilver & Roschenthaler, 2001, p. 9; Rudin, 2013, p. 310; Fowler & Zeitlyn, 1996). Argenti (1998, 2006, 2007) has pointed out that, like the slave trade that came before and ravaged this region of Africa, there is a connection between these tragic events and masquerades in Oku and other parts of the Bamenda Grassfield.

Mkong Ndako died around 1909 and was succeeded by King Ngek Yulam (1909-1940) who was in power during the British administration. Under this new colonial administration, Oku became part of what Vubo (2012) describes as:

…the southern fragment of one of the territories of the former German colony of Kamerun, which had been administered after the outcome of the First World in association with the British colony of Nigeria under the name of Southern Cameroons, /and which/ opted to join the newly independent French speaking Republic of Cameroon in a plebiscite organized by the United Nations Organization on the 11th of February… (p. vii)

As part of the British colonial possession of Nigeria, Oku, like the rest of Southern Cameroons, was administered from Lagos, which is located in Yorubaland. Che (2013) explains: “The British established the system of Indirect Rule in Southern Cameroons in 1922 in which they ruled the territory through local chiefs but with a Governor-General resident in Lagos, Nigeria” (p. 19). This region of Nigeria, that is, Yorubaland, was and is still rich in masquerades as Veal (2000) remarks: “There were masquerades such as the Egungun and Gelede ceremonies, found throughout Yorubaland” (p. 28). Such cultural wealth might have played some role in the innovation of the Oku Subi, the antecedent of Buum Oku Dance.

Today, Oku forms part of English-speaking Cameroon, a hotbed of nationalism opposed to the predominantly French-Cameroonian controlled central administration in
Yaounde. Achankeng (2014) provides a reason for this nationalist upsurge when he notes that “… the de-colonization of ex-British Cameroons was affected with little or no regard for the interests of the territory and its people” (p. vi). In a context of ferment and challenge to nationhood, dance cannot claim neutrality. As Veal (2000) has made it clear, “…creative artists … also play a very important role in the symbolic process of cultural revitalization, often with substantial government support” (p. 46). Using Cohen’s notion of “cultural performance,” Kringelback (2012) takes the argument a step further by arguing that “…the artistic and the political could not be separated from each other” (p. 144) and that “It is no coincidence that dance and musical performance are so often mobilized to help shape local, ethnic and national identities” (p. 157). Thus, of the modern Oku Subi Dance, Ntaimah (2012) states that “it has become one of the identifying traits of the Oku people in all the towns of Cameroon where Oku people are found” (p. 44).

5.2.1.3 Oku institutions

Oku comprises three main clans: the royal clan, Mbele; and two other clans, namely Ebjung and Mbulum (Koloss, 2000, p. 17; Bah, 2004, p. 447; Ntaimah, 2012, p. 48). Its most important institutions are: the Fon or king, or Ebfon as he is known in Oku; the Kwifon, the Oku version of Ngumba in Babungo and Bamunka and Ngwerong in Nso; and Ngele, an Oku adaptation of “Ngiri” in Nso where this institution originated.
5.2.1.3.1 Fon and Kwifon

The village has a highly centralized administration. At the top of the administrative hierarchy is the Fon or king, the head of the executive who is “…variously referred to as ngenyam, fekake, njongse, nyal… frightful animal, a tree with thorns, buffalo respectively” (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 18). High-sounding though these descriptions may be, they do not make the Fon “omnipotent, as was customarily thought of in Europe,” for he rules with the aid of the Kwifon, “a lineage-based palace regulatory society” (Argenti, 2002, p. 499) whose “…most important members represent about sixty heads of extended families” (Koloss, 2000, p. 17). As an indication that kwifon can overrule the fon’s decision, Fon Nggang “was … assassinated by kwifon because he attended an open market” (Bah, 1996, p. 13). Similarly, in a phone conversation on June 5, 2015, Tatah Mentan also cited the example of Fon Yancho who was eliminated by kwifon for the fatal spearing of a man. Kwifon is open to the male gender only and was initially reserved for nonroyal members before it was expanded to incorporate members of the extended royal family (Bah, 2004, p. 440). It is constituted by the king, the heads of families, normal members or nchisendase with full membership, and ghonde nchisendase, young nchindase or ‘small ndisendase,’ who are not full members (Koloss, 2000, p. 112). The two, that is the Ebfon and Kwifon, form a unit, “functioning on the basis of trust and cooperation rather than control and opposition” and, among other functions, are “responsible for conducting ceremonies for the forefathers of the whole tribe” (Ibid, p. 17).

Bah (2004) has outlined some other functions of the king or Ebfon thus: His most important job is receiving visitors…and settl/ing/ dispute of his subjects… He executes in a really significant way the function of the judicial
body... The king is the chief ritualist,... at the centre of all traditional rituals /and/ prepares food and drinks which is offered to the gods. (p. 443)

Among the functions of the king, Ntaimah (2012) adds that he “…is the head of the traditional religion” (p. 68).

5.2.1.3.2 Ngele

A third important institution in Oku is the Ngele, a corruption of Ngiri, the term used by neighbouring Nso where it originated. Gufler and Bah (2006) have pointed out that only one secret society existed in the Oku Palace, to wit, the Kwifon; and that since princes in most if not all of the eastern Grassfield chiefdoms were debarred from entering Ngwerong or Kwifon and Nngumba, as it is known in other ethnic groups (Forde & Kaberry, 1967, p. 127), the regulatory society recruited from commoner lineages which existed in virtually all the palaces, the princes had their own secret society called Ngiri (p. 55).

The ebfon, kwifon and ngele have deep implications for masquerades in Oku as Argenti (1998) argues: “Palace masquerades can be sub-divided into the three groups…: those of the regulatory society of commoners (kwifon), those of the king (ebfon) and the royal (ngele) society…” (p. 757). With regard to the creation of modern Subi dance, Ntaimah (2014) has pointed out how the implications became evident: “the atmosphere that preceded the emergence of the Oku masquerade ballet was tense due to some unfortunate events that hardened the Fon and Kwifon’s position on innovation” (p. 1). Fraliegh and Hanstein (1999) have argued that “in writing a narrative of events,... the historian may, on a broad scale, clarify concepts and establish contextual connections that
reveal new areas for further investigations…” (p. 226). Having explored Oku, I now focus on dance and its classification, especially as it relates to Oku.

5.3 Oku conception of dance

This study focuses on an Oku dance; and to this end, it is important to determine how the people of Oku conceive and classify their dances. As regards this question, Vissicaro’s (2004) thoughts seem particularly relevant since she argues that “All people are ethnocentric because they possess a value system that is specific to their world view and cultural knowledge” (p. 86). So, “along with the view that every culture was unique in some respect went the related belief that each culture should be valued for itself” (Royce, 1977, p. 23).

Argenti (1998) has stated that the masquerades of Oku can be divided into two basic types: those of the palace and those of the lineages dispersed amongst the thirty-two (sic) villages of the kingdom. Village lineage masquerades are based in the compounds of extended families; compounds from which young men have gone out to form sub-compounds. As for those of the palace, he notes that they fall under three categories, those of the king, the kwifon and ngele (p. 757).

Following this classification, the modern Oku Subi dance is a lineage masquerade, a dance “…founded not by a compound head but rather by one of the compound’s head sons who has been living outside the kingdom for an extended period, as civil servant, professional, traditional doctor or wage labourer” (p. 760). John Kegham Ndinaah, the innovator of the dance, came from the Bah lineage in Mboh (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 28; 2014), one of the villages that make up Oku, and had lived in the coastal
region where he was a native doctor and plantation worker (F. Baimenda & F. Jick, personal communication, March 24, 2015).

Further classification based on characteristics and description shows that the dance is a “mask/masked dance,” a “juju dance,” a “masquerade” (Argenti, 1998, 2006, 2007; Koloss, 2000; Ntaimah, 2012, 2014; and Jing & Ntaimah, 2009). Ntaimah (2012) breaks down the dance further by noting that “juju dancing in Oku is divided into two main broad categories: the traditional ballet and the modern ballet” (p. 43). He describes “modern ballet” as *kekum mekale* (literally white man’s dance), “an innovation that originated in Mboh Oku in the 1960s” (p. 44). It is this description he applies to Buum Oku Dance Yaounde. Citing an identical phenomenon in Senegal, Kringelbach (2012) talks of “neo-traditional” dances which are “divorced from the … religious ritual that undergirded pre-colonial society” (p. 143) and are established by “associations of migrants” (p. 144).

Stokes (2013) provides another method of classification by arguing that one best-recognized means by which…culture is classified is by genre (p. 149). Is the Oku Subi Dance traditional, ethnic or national? La Meri (as cited in K. W. Asante, 2000) states that ethnic dance “designates all those indigenous dance arts that have grown from popular or typical dance expression of a particular race” (p. 11). The term “race,” seen from a broader perspective, includes ethnic group and so Subi qualifies as an “ethnic dance” from Oku. And it is a “traditional dance” which has been stripped from its traditional mystical and religious trappings and popularized as neo-traditional or *kekum mekale* (Ntaimah, 2012; Mentan, personal communication, 2014). K. W. Asante (2000) states that traditional refers to any social institution that is passed on generationally and is
recognized by most members of the community as being of, for, and by that community (p. 14). Nevertheless, she contends that “… traditional dance once put on stage goes through a metamorphosis that removes the dances from the “traditional” category (p. 24). Perhaps, this brings us back to the idea of “neo-traditional.” Buum Oku Dance Yaounde is removed from its traditional setting and has appeared on stage many times.

It is important at this juncture to determine whether the terms “masquerade,” “juju dance” and “mask/masked dance” all refer to the same phenomenon. These terms have been used interchangeably to denote the Oku word *kekum*, which according to Argenti (1998) does not only include “…dancers in wooden masks but also dancers with their faces hidden behind a mesh cloth and wearing feather head dresses (*kekum evel*) or mesh face covering and no head-dress (*kekum ngang*).” He continues by pointing out that in Oku, “the literal meaning of the term *kekum* has nothing to do with the masking, in fact, but denotes mythical forest creatures” (p. 755). Koloss (2000) has argued that the term *juju* “…is … used to designate an individual mask” as well as “… a whole complex of medicine.” And “since medicine and its owner (*the mask*) are indivisible, the word juju projects upon the whole society itself” (the mask society). Hence to make a ‘juju’ basically means to carry out an act of magic (p. 97). He traces the root of the term “juju” to the French word “joujou,” which means “a play thing.” While this argument may apply to some parts of Africa, I take issue with it in the case of Cameroon and Nigeria. The term “juju” in Cameroon is widely applied in what used to be the former British Cameroons. I would, therefore, associate its origin with part of English-speaking Cameroonian cultural baggage dating back to those colonial days when it was ruled by Britain as part of Nigeria. Stapleton and May (1989) maintain that “the name juju itself
didn’t emerge until the late 1930s, when British colonials, looking for a word to label Yoruba music, adapted the term from the generic description of the tribe’s (sic) religion” and that “…the word could be a corruption of ‘jo jo,’ Yoruba for dance” (p. 78). This argument is bolstered by Veal (2000) who states “Juju, fuji, and apala music are all deeply rooted in both traditional rural culture and the modern urban Yoruba elite…” (in Western Nigeria) and “…the development of modern juju has been largely dominated by Chief Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Ade” (p. 14). Stapleton and May (1989) add that before the colonial era, a music/dance like juju was played at shrines to the Yoruba gods Ogun and Oshun (p. 78), prompting King Sunny Ade to declare in an interview granted to Black Music magazine in 1983 that “juju music is traditional Yoruba music” (King Sunny Ade as cited in Stapleton and May, 1989, p. 83). The settings of the Yoruba shrines are reminiscent of houses of medicine, which forms an integral part of mask and other secret societies in Oku (Koloss, 2000, pp. 97-103). So, juju dance, mask/masked dance and masquerade all refer to the Oku term kekum.

5.4 Music and outfit accessories of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde

K. W. Asante (1998) has noted that “one cannot really speak of dance in Africa without saying at least a few words about costumes and music” (p. 8). The accessories of Buum Oku Dance could be categorized under two broad headings: musical and outfit. On the dance video, musical accessories include those elements that go into producing the music and have been named as follows: xylophones, drum, 3 pairs of metal gongs, and a wooden flute (Gamse, 1986; Ngum, 2010; & Ntaimah, 2012). Even though the rattles contribute to the music (Gamse, 1986; Mveng et al., 1969; Ngum, 1990, 2010; Ntaimah,
2012), I have listed them under outfit. As for the outfit accessories, it comprises the
dancing whisk, the rattles, the head mask, and the robes

5.4.1 Outfit

5.4.1.1 Head mask (figure 14)

Warren (1972) has stated that masks are usually made of wood and are large,
beautiful and brightly coloured and that they are important symbols in traditional dances
in many African ethnic groups (p. 33). Blair (1994) provides an even more elaborate
description of the mask.

The mask is part of a complex, part of a costume which is woven into the
dance and music and ritual. It is also part of a mindset.
Though carved with great devotion some masks are never seen by any human
being. In certain rituals masks are covered by other pieces of costume. Among
some tribes (sic) certain masks are worn on top of the dancers’ head. These
masks face the sky as they are not meant for human gaze. The masquerade in
such rituals is directed to the spirits not to the human beings participating in
the rituals.

Some masks are meant to be the materialization of spirits which live in the
bush and which reveal themselves to individuals because they wish to take
part in the life of human beings. It is through such masks that the spirits of
ancestors may give judgments on acts of omissions or commission done by
members of the community. Punishments or rewards pronounced by them are
held to be sacrosanct.
There are also masks of frolic. There are fault-finding masks that play very
roughly. They whip bystanders who they themselves trick into misbehaving,
like laughing at a mask which represents a deformity. (17)

In the Cameroonian Grassfields masks are quite naturalistic, corresponding to the
shapes and sizes the carver is aware of, or which he has perceived (Ngum, 1990, p. 166).
Monti (1969) argues that the African understanding of the “mask” goes beyond the
Western notion of the term, which is “the carved, modelled or wooden object…worn on
the face or the head” (For further analysis, see chapter on representation). The mask we
are referring to in this segment of the analysis, the one sported by Buum Oku Dance Yaounde on the video, is the wooden headdress which constitutes one of the dance’s important paraphernalia. They are made out of soft and light weight woods as the local type of umbrella trees and depict such animals as elephants, buffalo, the leopard, the monitor lizard as well as man (Mveng et al., 1969, p. 42; Ngum, 1990, p. 175). Ngum (1210) states that “Masks carry their status symbols in carved animals of lion and leopards for power and fierceness and the elephant for greatness…” (p. 274).

5.4.1.2 Dancing whisks (figure 12)

With reference to Oku dances in general, Ngum (1990) makes the argument that “…whisks are commonplace… and are used by both genders” and “they are produced from wood, sheep fur, cow tails, horses’ tails, clothe, beads, fibre, wool and twine” (p.137). Whisks are extensions of hand movements and are usually made of horsetail (Warren, 1972, p. 27; Gamse, 1986). The Buum Oku Dance uses horsetail whisks but the kam carries a spear instead (Ntaimah, 2014, p. 7).

5.4.1.3 Gowns

K. W. Asante (1998) equates gowns with “costumes” and states that they “…vary from the most elaborate and exotic to the smooth bare body,” with some of them covering “every inch of the dancer” (p. 8). With regard to the Bamenda Grassfield, Mveng et al. (1969) identifies two types, the feathered and unfeathered. The ones worn by Subi and its spin-offs such as Buum Oku Yaounde, Subi Bamenda or Mawe Douala are unfeathered. The white and blue striped gown, known in Eblam Ebkuo as kelanlang, has been
identified as one of the unfeathered dresses used by some dances in Oku. Subi has been described by Ngum (2010) as a dance of the diaspora that is “now represented in other towns” (p. 276), and so dress codes do not often adhere strictly to what is practised in Oku. The dress code of Buum Oku is addressed in chapter six.

5.4.1.4 Rattles (figure 11)

To make a distinction from “calabash rattles” *(barke)* or from bamboo rattles *(seesang)*, Ngum (1990) refers to them as “foot rattles” *(imbarke)* (p. 126); while to Warren (1972) they are “buzzers,” designed “…for the dancers to increase the interest of their simple stamping movement” (p. 27). Recounting the experience of Cameroon, Mveng et al. (1969) has pointed out that rattles “…were and are still made from the fruit of certain huge forest climbers. The dried fruit (kidney in shape) with the seeds removed are strung on to raphia fibre or other tough ropes…and/ are worn round hadded (sic) ankles” (p. 45). Ngum (1990) identifies two major kinds of foot rattles in Oku, the first of which is used by masquerades and treated with medicines and can be touched only by the initiated men and are kept with the masks; and the second, the seed rattle used by women and which are not associated with any magico-religious practices (pp. 126-127). Ntaimah (2012) makes the argument for Buum and many other Oku dances that rattles “are used to announce movement on stage” and “…are also used by the dancers as part of music” (p. 45). Ngum (2010) considers rattles a musical instrument by noting that “the rattle is another vast area in musical instruments in Oku” (p. 334). Ntaimah (personal communication, March, 23, 2015) pointed out that the size of the rattles strapped around
both ankles are often determined by the age groups of the dancers, with bigger ones reserved for grownups and smaller ones for children.

5.4.2 Music

5.4.2.1 Xylophones (figures 5, 6, 7)

Nketia (1979) classifies xylophones under “idiophones,” which may be broadly defined as “any instrument upon which a sound may be produced without the addition of a stretched membrane or a vibrating string or reed” (p. 69). To Mveng et al. (1969), xylophones are wooden pieces, about 17 of them, and “each is about 2ft to 3½ ft long by six inches wide” (p. 42). Nketia (1979) identifies three main types of xylophones and notes that the number of keys of this instrument varies from one dance to the other, from one region of Africa to another (pp. 81-84). For instance, Christopher Ntembi (personal communication, March 26, 2015), a Bamendankwe court retainer, states that Tamukung, the palace masquerade, uses 22 keys. The people of Oku refer to xylophones as njang (Gamse, 1986, Ngum, 1990, 2010 & Ntaimah, 2012). Bebey (1975) has noted that “the xylophone may be resonated or unresonated, but invariably has wooden keys that are struck with mallets…” and identifies “log-xylophones,” comprising 15 wooden keys laid on two banana trunks and are usually played by two or three musicians (p. 84). Log xylophones are also referred to as “leg xylophones” (Nketia, 1979, p. 83). Even though Bebey argues that log-xylophones are common in the south-west of Cameroon, they are in the north-west as well, especially in the Bamenda Grassfield region (Mveng et al., 1969; Ngum, 1990, 2010; & Ntaimah, 2012, 2014). Ngum (1990) identifies two varieties in Oku, each of which reflects its social group: the ordinary or popular njang; and njang
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*mbeh* used by members of the royal family Finji (p. 99). According to Ngum (1990) and Ntaimah (2010), log-xylophones are the principal instruments of Subi and Buum Oku Dance Yaounde; and Ntaimah maintains that “a complete Oku set is made up of thirteen (13) different musical notes” (p. 45). Ntaimah further notes that “Generally, all the classical musical parts are represented i.e. first (lead), second (background), third (solo) and the fourth part (bass)” (Ibid). Ngum (2010) identifies *ebjung* (p. 271) as the tree commonly used to produce xylophones while Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) talks instead of *efvian*.

5.4.2.2 Drums (figures 3 & 4)

Nketia (1979) has noted that “in many African societies, the emphasis on percussive instruments finds its highest expression in the use of membranophones (drums with parchment heads)” (p. 85). Blair (1994) concurs, noting that so important is rhythm to dance that drum itself has become hallowed and that “…dance has become inseparable from the drum; and the Swahili word ‘Ngoma’ makes no distinction between the two” and that “certain drums are believed to have spiritual potency in them” (p. 17).

In *Eblam Ebkuo*, drum with a parchment head is called *nchum or nchom* (and in Mankon *ngom*) and constitutes one of the main instruments of Buum Oku Dance (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 45; Gamse, 1986). Bebey (1975) points out that “these instruments are considered throughout the world to be the most representative African instrument; and for many non-Africans, they are the only ones” (p. 92). According to Ngum (1990), “drums are the most diverse set of instruments with varying lengths and sizes producing various sounds at different occasions and by different groups” (p. 106). Drums are of numerous
varieties (slit-drum, xylophone-drum, talking drum, djembe, hour-glass drum, bata drum, friction drum, water drum, etc.); however, the one that applies to Oku Subi dance and Buum Oku Dance Yaounde is the tall standing drum for which Ngum (2010) provides this description:

A hollow log forms the basis of the drum body, or the resonator, the top is covered with an animal skin preferably antelope. For the kinning and tensioning, they use wooden nails, fibre rope, and wooden wedges, and strings. The skin is soaked in water before it is stretched over the drum. After drying, the skin is now properly tensioned for playing. (p. 332)

Mveng et al. (1969) talks of “a long wooden drum…with a leather surface at the bigger end /and/ measures about 3½ ft to 4 ft long” (p. 42). Various motives are often etched on the side of the drum prompting Ngum (2010) to add that “some drums are carved with decorations of all sorts of animals and birds found in the locality” (p. 332).

5.4.2.3 A pair of metal gongs or bells (figure 9)

Termed ngem in Eblam Ebkuo, Bebey (1975) refers to them as “double metal bell” (p. 110), a pair of hollow metal blocks struck with bamboo pith. In Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, it is the main instrument that provides entry music for the dancers. Ngum (1990) traces the origin and evolution of this instrument by stating that “gongs were first made of locally smelted iron ore and were heavy” but “modern gongs are made from imported iron ore which is lighter and more expensive” (p. 130). She adds that “the double iron gong is not a coincidental instrument to the Oku people, being that they have been great iron smiths from time immemorial” (Ibid). While analyzing the origins of instruments used in Bamoun music on the video ‘The Classical Music of Cameroon’s
Bamoun Kingdom’, Prince Fuaupen Yaya (2015) stated that “the double metal bell is Bamoun.”

5.4.2.4 Trumpet (figure 10)

In Eblam Ebkuo, this is known as *kenfang* (Ntaimah, 2012) or *ndong* (Ngum, 1990), depending on what object from which it is made. Mveng et al (1969) notes that the instrument is “made out of a long internode of the Indian bamboo/and/…is open at both ends” (p. 42). Bebey (1975) points out that in different parts of Africa, “trumpets, horns, or even elephant tusks are also used to provide musical sounds” and adds that “most wind instruments have a limited register, restricted to one or two notes” (p. 68). In the case of Oku Subi Dance or Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, the tubes of reeds or Indian bamboo from which the trumpet is made already have vents into which to blow in air and are cut to about 12cm in length (Ngum, 1990, p. 104). Ngum (1210) sometimes refers to the same instruments as “flutes” (p. 335).

5.5 Early days of Subi Dance

Buum Oku Dance, an offshoot of the modern Subi dance in Oku, started in the twilight years of the seventies and the early eighties in Yaounde; but its actual origin goes back to Mboh, one of the villages that make up the Oku ethnic group in the Bamenda Grassfield. Mboh, the third largest village in Oku in terms of population (F. Baimenda, March 24, 2015), looms large in the Oku cultural landscape, being home to the Baimenda Ntul lineage which owns the original Subi dance and whose head must oversee any important traditional sacrifices or rituals conducted by the palace and *kwifon* in Oku
(Baimenda, personal communication, March 24, 2015; Ngum, 2010, p. 203). In an antithetical stance that belies these conservative and deeply rooted traditional roles, the inhabitants of Mboh have been in the vanguard of numerous modern trends that came to Oku. Bah (1996) has noted that by the time of the death of Oku evangelist Moses Nkeng in 1946, “many prayer groups like Jikijem, Ichim, Mboh, Elak and Baten had been elevated to full churches” (p. 6). Aside missionary activity, it was one of the sons of Mboh, John Kegham Ndinaah, who organized the first Miss Oku pageant; and having travelled to nearby Djottin where he was mesmerized by the display of a merengue orchestra, he immediately introduced the Afro-Dominican dance in Oku upon his return (Ntaimah, 2014, Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015). The dance was popular; but it did not go down well in every quarter. Ndinaah’s unorthodox xylophone combination, his playing of multiple drums in a style reminiscent of Cuba’s Mongo Santamaria, and his torrid nightly gigs (Ntaimah, 2014), coupled with the pulsating rhythm and pelvic-grinding movements, were an instant sensation among enthralled and long socially inhibited adolescents. With words going round very fast, in record numbers young men and women came flocking to the Cooperative Hall at Elak, the royal capital, often sneaking out without parental consent to participate in these nocturnal jams. As this venture gained momentum, putting to the test age-old traditional Oku and Christian injunction of “no sex before marriage,” the lurking dangers of premarital pregnancies as well as idleness and lassitude induced by late night carousal and frolics caused the palace and kwifon to take a long, dim view of its activities.

The ranks of kwifon and other organizations which serve in Oku as custodians of native customs and traditions have always been made up mainly of elderly grey-headed
wise men whose call on social and political matters, especially one with such gravity, was often overriding, if not final. To them merengue undoubtedly spelt social disorder and moral decadence and, therefore, had to be stopped. “Merengue was performed at night and the outcry was that it was favouring deviance in society,” and “it was a fertile ground for sexual misconduct” (Ntai
mah, 2014, p. 1). Strange claims from men Reverend Bah once described as given to “earthly pleasures” and “married to more than one woman...” (Bah, 1996, p. 5). Nevertheless, by voicing their opposition to the encroaching dancing trend, the wise men joined chorus with distraught mothers and fathers. For the women, ever since the AfroLatino “madness” burst onto the shores of Oku, with its attendant open display of romantic acts such as kissing, their blood pressures had not ceased being cranked up; first, by worries of the eventuality of having their reputation blotted with the taboo of harbouring an unmarried and pregnant daughter; and then by lack of sleep attributed to endless nocturnal vigils to ensure that their daughters stay in their beds. The concern of the men was different and closely allied to the highly patriarchal nature of Oku society and to personal gains; it was a well-known fact not just in this village but the entire Bamenda Grassfield that no daughter with a child outside wedlock could bring honour to a family or fetch a hefty bride price. In this reasoning, driven primarily by self-interest, the fathers shared something in common with the village wise men whose actions and opposition to the dance were not motivated entirely by concerns for the welfare of Oku society.

Back then, as it still is today, many of them were married or betrothed to beautiful young women; and given the age differences, and declining physical conditions experienced by most of the men, they felt a sense of insecurity which sometimes took the
form of overt display of nervousness in the presence of young eligible bachelors. To make matters worse, many of these young women ended up marrying into polygamous families whose crowded atmosphere, jealousies and backstabbing, and rigorously observed sexual pecking order gave rise to loneliness and various forms of deprivations and eventually to rebellion. It was but normal that tantalizing images, real or imaginary, of adolescent brides running off to snuggle in moonlit nights underneath coffee bushes with some local ruffian should dance before the eyes of these wisemen. It was not surprising then that “…kwifon threw an injunction in Bah’s compound in Mboh to dissuade Ndinaah from his activities” since “Ndinaah comes from the Bah lineage.” To give teeth to this action, “kwifon vowed never to allow this dance to function within the Oku territory” and “several punitive expeditions were made…to discipline Ndinaah and his followers” but “the more these punitive expeditions were made, the harder or unyielding he became” (Ntaimah, 2014).

In the end, having been pushed to the wall, Ndinaah had no other recourse than to seek the backing of the national administration by challenging Oku traditional authorities in the law courts. He won and returned to Oku, triumphantly brandishing a permit - which many contemporaries believed was actually forged - from the district officer in Nso to proceed unperturbed with his merengue activities. “For the first time in the history of modern Oku society, an individual had successfully circumvented the powers of the Fon and kwifon” (Ibid). His action won a lot of applause from the gallery and instantly turned him into some kind of a folk hero. He would soon learn it was a Pyrrhic victory. Bloodied and still reeling from the impact of this round of the encounter, the majority of
members of the Oku traditional administration quite naturally did not take too kindly to this wise-guy attitude.

It was in this rather very tempestuous and controversial maelstrom, one brimming with suspicion, tension, fear and outright defiance, that John Kegham Ndinaah, “the man who popularized the Oku Subi dance” (T. Mentan, personal communication, December 2014), made his grand entry into the Oku cultural scene. Mboh people often claim to be “eye-openers of Oku people” (F. Jick, personal communication, March 24, 2015); and this feeling has even made them bestow upon themselves the lofty appellation of “Mboh-London.” On the basis of historical evidence, this is a claim that is not entirely without merit, for it has been amply given substance by one man in particular, John Kegham Ndinaah. In cultural production, Paul du Gay et al. (2003) talk of “heroic individuals,” inspired individuals who almost single-handedly built a company (pp. 44-45). This fits the description of John Kegham Ndinaah who created the modern Subi dance or kekum mekale in Oku (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 44). Of him Baimenda stated in a 2014 interview with Ntaimah that “He was a well organized person ready to show light to his people.”

He was born into the Bah family of Mboh, a lineage that is yet to secure its independence from the ruling Mbele clan (Ntaimah, 2014). Throughout his life, he seemed driven by a messianic sense of mission and destined for greatness. He has been variously described as “a traveller, a stubborn and determined person, a reliable man-of-the-people” (F. Baimenda, personal communication, March 24, 2015), “an eloquent jack-of-all-trade and a formidable organizer” (T. Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015), “an articulate and precocious person” (F. Jick, personal communication, March 24, 2015), a creative and steadfast innovator and a very crafty and astute person
(Ntaimah, 2012, 2014). “In 1960, there were no four persons like Ndinaah in Oku, he did everything and was everywhere” reminisced Fai Baimenda. He attended Jikijem and Elak Baptist schools where these abilities started to really blossom even before he completed his primary school education. F. Jick (personal communication, March 24, 2015) confirmed his precocious tendency when he stated that “when he was still in standard three and four, he could already do great things.” Some of the “great things” were experimenting with a traditional dance called Kwa and serving as herbalist. F. Baimenda (personal communication, March 24, 2015) and T. Mentan (personal communication, 2014) have pointed out that Ndinaah’s father was one of the most powerful Oku herbalists and at the time there were not many of them with such a hefty reputation in all of Oku; and when a person was seriously sick, the fon would send the person to go and consult with him. “My grandfather who was chief of Mboh and died around 2006 was one of the powerful medicine people and Ndinaah and I worked with him,” recalled F. Baimenda (personal communication, March 24, 2015). His stint with traditional medicine continued with a certain native doctor called Babey Nontock (P. Ntaimah, personal communication, May, 2015) where he was taught how to treat some allergies and to manage the register and keep books, a training that would stand him in good stead in Nkongsamba where he doubled as herbalist and a plantation worker. Native medicine was not the only thing he dabbled into at that tender age since “he was running a gramophone, organizing dance during Christmas” (F. Baimenda, personal communication, March 24, 2015). By the time he left primary school, his penchant for travelling was already bursting to the fore. F. Jick (personal communication, 2015), a relative and neighbour, stated that he left primary school and travelled down south, going
back and forth and doing everything until the time when he started Subi dance. He travelled to the coastal regions where “he worked first at PAMOL (palm oil plantation) and then at some plantations in Nkongsamba and Melong” (F. Baimenda, personal communication, March 24, 2015).

Large-scale banana, palm oil and rubber plantations, which were started by the Germans and later expanded by the British, have always been a fixture of the Cameroonian coastal region since colonial times and have served as a magnet to young men in the Bamenda Grassfield. What began as “forced labour” during the German colonial administration, with many young men being forcibly removed from their villages and marched to the coast to work in the plantations (Argenti, 1998, 2007; Rudin, 2013; Fowler & Zeitlyn, 1996, pp. 92-94), had become voluntary during the British colonial era. By 1955, “the three Bamenda Plateau Divisions (Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe) supplied 32.8 per cent of all workers, approximately the same as the proportion supplied by Nigeria” (Ardener & Warmington, 1960, p. 27). By leaving Oku and heading to the coast in search of work, Ndinaah was part of an ongoing regional migratory trend. His stay in different parts of the country exposed him to new ideas as was reflected in his sartorial outlook (see figure 2, picture gallery on annex) and even the manner in which he approached things when he returned to Oku.

In African artistic production, Kringelbach (2012) talks of “neo-traditional” ballet and of what is known locally in Senegal as “ballets traditionnels.” Neo-traditional, he states, “is essentially a modern phenomenon” and in these ballets, “dance, music and theatre are mixed in flamboyant recreations of local cultures” (p. 143). In the creation of neo-traditional ballet or kekum mekale, as Ntai (2012) puts it, the authors tend to
have one thing in common: they have travelled outside their own communities or countries and have been exposed to and inspired by new ideas. Mallobo Moise, who later on became Jimmy Raphael and started *Ballets Bantous* in Douala and Yaounde in 1950, was born in the village of Bilongue Logtelep in Ndogmakumak in Bassaland in Cameroon’s Littoral Region in 1918 but had spent many years in Spain and France where he practised dance and theatre (Mveng et al., 1969, p. 55). Similarly, the Guinean poet Keita Fodeba who went on to start *Les Ballets Africains* in 1952 was a former theatre student of Ecole Normale William Ponty in Goree in Senegal before heading to Paris “where he became part of the flamboyant cohort of Francophone students around Leopold Sedar Senghor, Alioune Diop and the emerging negritude movement” (Kringelbach, 2012, p. 146). For good measure, Maurice Sonar Senghor, a nephew of the late Senegalese president, who started the Senegalese National Ballet, also drew from his dance and theatrical experience in Paris. All these Africans who sojourned in France before starting dance troupes have a distinctly Parisian flavour in their performances.

As for John Kegham Ndinaah, astute, alert and open-minded as he has been described, his sojourn in Nkongsamba in French-speaking Cameroon could not have left him indifferent. “He was fond of borrowing new ideas from other communities and integrating them into the Oku society,” (Ntaimah, 2014) and “before Subi was modernized, Ndinaah and some people were moving out of the community and seeing how things were organized...” (F. Jick, personal communication, 2014).

Nkongsamba lies at the foot of the Kupe Manegouba Mountains (7,861ft/2,396 m) and it is the most important city in the Mungo region. It emerged from the country’s independence with a malodorous reputation, for it was the hotbed of political dissension,
widely believed to be championed by a controversial Roman Catholic Archbishop, Monsignor Ndogmo (Chia, 2010; Terretta, 2014). Having selected this upcountry region that was slightly farther inland and a bit removed from the heavy guns of the French Legion in the coastal areas as the place in which to make their last stand, rebels loyal to the opposition UPC (Union des Populations du Cameroun), under the command of one of their historic leaders, Ernest Ouandie, embarked in a bloody fratricidal war against the increasingly autocratic and brutal regime of French-imposed stooge, Ahmadou Ahidjo (Chia, 2010; Deltombe et al., 2011; Terretta, 2014). Nevertheless, this terrible and repugnant aspect of the region often concealed a positive and very attractive flipside. For a long time, Mungo’s sweeping fertile plains of rich volcanic soil was home to vast coffee, cocoa, banana and pineapple plantations which had transformed the region into a crossroads of differing human types as well as a major commercial and agro-industrial hub. Terretta (2014) confirms this by noting that “at the end of the trusteeship period, the Mungo region was a diverse…melting pot…” (p. 64).

Here, long before Cameroon could break free from the shackles of colonialism, cultural cross-fertilization had been an experiment in gestation. A major benefit from this pursuit was that the whole region had blossomed into a kind of melting pot in which people of diverse ethnicities could live and work together in harmony. In this expression of interethnic friendship and cooperation, the region was a step ahead of politicians and administrators who were merely paying lip service to the concept of national integration. Of Nkongsamba, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online provides this account:

The French agricultural policy of intensive exploitation contributed to the town’s growth in the 20th century. It is the terminus of railway from Douala and has road connections to Bamenda…, Bafoussam… and Buea. Large oil palm, banana and coffee plantations in the area make Nkongsamba a
commercial centre. The town has a sawmill, a food-processing plant, and a teacher training school. Originally inhabited by the Mbo ethnic group, Nkongsamba’s population is primarily composed of migrants... (2014)

With Douala, the country’s main port of entry and economic capital just a stone’s throw away, the City of Nkongsamba easily kept pace with the latest musical and fashion trends taking place in other parts of the world. This relationship between the two cities is chanted by renowned Cameroonian musician Prince Eyango in his zouk ballade Bantene Mi (1987). “A Nkongsamba, j’ai pris le train pour Douala; c’est la vraie vie que je cherchais (In Nkongsamba, I took the train to Douala; I was in search of real life),” he sings. On Nkongsamba’s streets, girls dressed in mini-skirts and sporting heels to match spouted French, kissed men publicly, and re-enacted scenes in Paris with uncanny authenticity. Bars and nightclubs boomed with the latest hits from Talla Andre-Marie, Manu Dibango, Fela Kuti and a wide range of Afro-Latino musicians, drawing a motley and vast array of customers, ranging from plantation workers through soldiers to prostitutes and ordinary people.

This social and political upheaval was a far cry from the quiet bucolic life Ndinaah had left behind in Oku. Raised on fufu corn and spinach, a food that exemplified the very essence of simplicity and good health, he found himself tossed in a new world where he was entranced not only by the phantasmagoria of strange spectacles parading before his eyes but also by the unending auricular torments of sounds playing at top volume. For the simple country lad that he was, this was just overwhelming; but from this fount of influence, he drank very deeply. He certainly was not the same person who left Oku when he returned there. While his French swagger and suits drew a lot of admiration and applause from local bumpkins who had never stepped outside their villages, the
elderly, ever circumspect of anything new, were not so impressed. They believed that his fanciful appearance and affected mannerisms concealed another reality.

“Nkon!” (short and title of endearment for Nkongsamba) they snickered. Dreadful and long yarns had often been spun by travellers and in radio broadcasts about the city as the den for the notorious *maquisards* (term connoting “terrorists” in Cameroon that is often used by the state to demonize militants of any opposition outfit) who stalked and killed people in their farms and even homes; a land where constant clashes between government troops and rebels had left many dead and its soil running with human blood. With their minds thus suffused with such skewed versions of the city, often promoted by the administration to rally citizens to its standards in its struggle against the rebels, members of *kwifon* quite naturally viewed Ndinaah and everything that he proposed with a lot of suspicion and distrust. The terrible odour of merengue still lingered when his Subi dance project came up for adjudication before *kwifon*. The negative ruling was predictable. In this rejection decision, there was even more damning evidence which rendered Ndinaah’s bad-boy image fouler than it appeared lurking in the background. His lineage, Bah, was still part of the Mbele ruling clan, which meant that Ndinaah was in essence a prince. For years, ever since the traditional institution of *ngele* was introduced in Oku from neighbouring Nso in 1948, this palace masquerade for Oku princes and princesses had been at daggers drawn with the regulatory society of *kwifon*. Fon Ngum Yuteh (1940-1956) of Oku had long been honoured in the Nso palace with this institution but he had refrained from bringing it to Oku since numerous princes had become a stumbling block to his administration (Ndishangong, 1984; Ntaimah, 2014). Ntaimah (2014) lays out the *ngele-kwifon* controversy:
Finally, this institution was forcefully introduced in 1948 against the opinion of the Fon. Its introduction was greeted by the princes and princesses with a lot of interest and euphoria. To them this was the highest honour they have ever had. This is remarkably true since princes are forbidden from the legislative and judiciary body, the kwifon. The introduction happened at a time when Fon Ngum Yuteh was initiating a strategy to modernise ngele to avoid a clash or opposition from kwifon. The princes took the ngele issue as an opportunity to challenge him and went forward to fully implement it... This brought trouble that was unresolved for a long time. (p. 1)

During the faceoff between the two traditional institutions, Ndinaah, as should be expected, had sided with the princes and had sometimes gone public with his denunciations, a gesture that won cheers from an adoring public but did not endear him to members of kwifon. And yet, his reputation notwithstanding, no undertaking by him could have been nobler and more patriotic than the dance!

When Cameroon became independent in 1960, caught up as it were in the crossfire of its own nationalism, the fledgling and hastily cobbled administration saw an urgent need to assert the country’s independence, even if only to help entrench its own power.

Immediately after independence, the former president of the Republic of Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo, introduced what was commonly known as ‘agric shows.’ During these shows, not only were agricultural produce exhibited, but many other domains of the nation’s life. One of such activities was the performance of traditional dances. (Ntaimah, 2012, p. 44)

Oku is a land of numerous dances (Argenti, 2007; Koloss, 2000; Ngum, 1990, 2010; & Ntaimah, 2012). G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015) estimates that “there are more than one hundred”. For a long time, ironically, the traditional authorities in Oku had been a bit reluctant to experiment with various dances in order to come up with the proper performance that could win any of the coveted prizes being awarded during such national events. Outsiders pressing for a dance in Oku simply
wanted dance entertainment but the Oku authorities wanted it to remain a thing of the palace (F. Jick, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Mveng et al (1969) provide an explanation for this irony when they state that “...the eternal dance of Africa ... is not entertainment but cosmic celebration” (p. 5). Francis Jick, in an interview conducted by Peter Ntaimah in Kenseng in 2014, gives a detailed description of what followed after the traditional authorities eventually relented:

The Oku authorities first introduced Fenji with a thrilling music but visitors wanted wooden masks. The Fon brought in Nsum which was also a palace masquerade. Young men started practising Nsum and later realised that the style were too sluggish. (December 20, 2014)

Realizing that it would require a blend of cultural and dance savvy to pull off the task, the fon finally pressed Nkemba John Babey into service. Poly-instrumentalist and dancer of the first order, he had an impressive cultural resume and had long been serving in an unofficial capacity as cultural adviser to the fon. He was persistent, humble and liked; and so his selection was widely applauded. With tremendous alacrity, he embarked on his task of organizing and supervising the masquerade that would be participating in the Agric Shows of the early sixties. After taking stock of the palace masquerades, he began experimenting with two of them, starting with fenji whose abilities were to be tested in an initial competition organized at the Divisional Headquarters in Kumbo, the capital of Nso. Ntaimah (2014a) has outlined the results of Nkemba Babey’s efforts.

His (Babey) choice of Fenji as a masquerade was influenced by the following facts: 1) the music is one of the most thrilling, 2) the material is lighter and easy to convey to distant places, 3) Fenji was the only masquerade that had the best outfit in terms of decoration, 4) it carries no special magico-religious paraphernalia. Fenji was time again substituted with Beng, which uses heavy, carved wooden masks. Beng was admired for its masks and nothing else and consequently did not perform better than Fenji. It should be mentioned that this wonderful endeavour by Nkemba John Babey only laid the foundation for
the modern ballet in Oku and did not at this stage bring any trophy to the land due to the cultural handicaps we have just mentioned. (p. 1)

F. Jick (personal communication, December 20, 2014) has pointed out that due to these lapses, Ndinaah became the man of the moment and literally hijacked the momentum from the palace and took it to Mboh. “This was when fast guys like Ndinaah benefited from the confusion and took it to Mboh and once in the village, they went to Fai Baimenda,” he stated.

The following conditions made the choice of Baimenda’s dance favourable: the Subi masquerade had virtually no mystical material attached to it, so all the boys were free to participate in it. Secondly, the dancing ground at Fai Baimenda’s compound is level, which permits open practice sessions without the fear of accidents. Thirdly, the original Subi music is very thrilling and equally permits the introduction of other musical compositions. This is why it started in Baimenda’s compound. So when they came, Baimenda accepted the idea and the chief of Mboh also gave his endorsement (F. Jick, personal communication, December 20, 2014; Ntaimah, 2012, 2014).

However, having fallen foul with members of kwifon, Ndinaah sensed that his efforts would be futile, even if he had to run back to the government administrator in Nso for another permit that would compel the traditional authorities to yield to his demand to embark on his dance project. He knew his strength and quickly came to the conclusion that the traditional authorities had far more lethal weapons in their arsenal this time than they did during the clash over merengue. Traditionally in Oku, before any dance is endorsed as the property of an individual or a family, it has to be presented before a cultural committee whose members are drawn predominantly from the omnipresent kwifon. The purpose of this exercise is to prevent someone from infringing on the
property rights of any other dance group by copying its music, outfit, motto, or
choreography without the group’s permission. If Ndinaah needed a dance for his project,
which he urgently did, he had to create one from scratch which was no easy task, even for
a multi-talented genius like himself. Dances come from deep inspiration and take years to
develop, often requiring input from family members, friends and even visitors. To use
another family’s dance for the innovation experiment, he would have to go through
kwifon that by tradition literally held the copyrights to all dances in Oku since every
dance in the land belong to the palace. The outcome of the situation looked very bleak
and most people would have given up at this stage, but not the diehard and very shrewd
Ndinaah who had a pleasant surprise for members of kwifon. He knew that deep down the
fon was supportive of the idea of a successful dance that would bring trophies, money
and pride to Oku. Putting to work his diplomatic skills, he began by holding out an olive
branch to members of kwifon. In a gesture that smacked of face saving, he embarked on
this exercise in a roundabout way. He worked his way into the fortress of this formidable
and ubiquitous institution through his half-brother, Nkemba John Babey.

Ntaimah (2014a) paints a picture of this admirable figure:

As a young man, brought up within the rural milieu, he developed interest in
playing all sorts of traditional instruments. His abilities were special as he
excelled both in playing instruments and dancing. Nkemba John Babey had an
amazing character. He would hardly get angry even in apprehensive
situations. He would neither irritate anyone nor easily get irritated. These
qualities attracted the admiration of traditional stakeholders. (p. 1)

A shrewder and more formidable lobbyist could not have been selected. First, Babey
lobbied hard on behalf of his rambunctious half-brother by chanting the merits of any
successful dance, irrespective of the person who started it, as well as by cautiously selling
a new and benign image of him. Then digging deeper into his diplomatic kit, he reached
for even deadlier tools. Tatah Mentan, a figure close to power in Oku and an intimate friend of Nkemba, in an email dated June 05, 2015, provides an analysis of Nkemba’s behind-the-scenes dealings during this period of the Ndinaah-Kwifon standoff:

In his diplomatic foray Nkemba John Babey used back channel efforts to win the support of His Royal Majesty Sintieh I. Nkemba used the influential position of the Head of Kwifon Society (Babey ne Kwifon) Pa Lemba who doubled as Head of Kwifon and Chief Security Officer (Nchiyntock) of the Fon. It is noteworthy that in Oku Kingdom the holder of this coveted position has the final word in Kwifon’s decision as well as uses his parcels of power of proximity to the Fon (since he is the only one who cooks food eaten by the Fon) to influence and soften the mind of the Fon against ngele or Subi viewed both by the Kwifon and Fon as an affront to their control of total power in the kingdom. Nkemba also used the influential role of a long-serving Nchiyntock Pa Wambang from Mboh itself to influence the softening against the Subi-Ngele exploits. (June 5, 2015)

Now, equipped with heavy diplomatic artillery that was busy pounding away, Ndanaah went to work. This time, he displayed instincts for the jugular in his next move. Ntaimah (2014) provides a description of this new offensive:

As an intelligent and cunning person, he decided to employ diplomacy as the only means to achieve his aims. He gathered some Mboh youths and employed them as a labour party to fetch firewood for the Fon. During the firewood reception at the palace, he openly “denounced” merengue and pleaded to come up with something new for the community. (p. 2)

Babey was present during this event, and so were some members of kwifon. In the face of this gesture, it was now the Fon who took Ndinaah’s case to kwifon and pleaded with its members to concentrate more on the rewards that the efforts would bring to the community rather than the youthful shenanigans of the man. Kwifon finally relented and “John Kegham Ndinaah, with permission from the Fon of Oku His Royal Sintieh I, 1956-1992, (see figure 1, Appendix A), decided to innovate the Subi Juju Dance of Mboh Oku” (Ntaimah, 2012, p 44).
Ndinaah did not celebrate this phase of his victory for too long, for he knew that he had his work cut out for him. First, for his project he needed to select a suitable dance from a whole multitude that existed in Oku; and then, he had to convince the family which owned the dance to allow him to use it. For this, his initial instinct was to turn to his native Mboh which had displayed an unwavering support for him during the dark days of his struggles with members of kwifon. There were numerous dances from which to choose: ngang, ntongtu, mejia, etc. However, he found the type of dance he was looking for in Subi. There could not have been a better choice, for apart from his being closer in every sense to Subi than any other masquerade, Ndinaah’s relationship with the Baimenda lineage was very cordial (F. Baimenda, personal communication, December 20, 2014). In another diplomatic manoeuvre, “he gathered gifts and presented them to Fai Baimenda in public” and then appealed to him to exploit his closeness to the palace and kwifon to present a formal request to be granted “…permission to use other existing songs or music…for the Subi dance /project/” (Ntaimah, 2014, pp. 2-3). Seeing the enormous prestige that Ndinaah’s project would bring to the name of his family, Fai Baimenda gave full backing to the endeavour.

The history of Subi is closely tied to that of the Baimenda (title of the lineage head) lineage, for it was a Fai (lineage head) from this family who created the dance. According to the 5th Fai Baimenda, Ntam Cletus Yang, in an interview he delivered, this is how the history of the lineage goes:

Baimenda’s compound or lineage originated from Jiyane. The founding father of this lineage was Bainmbo who came from Emfa’a’s compound. He was one of the children from this compound. He left and moved to Jikijem where he settled at Mboh-Jikijem at a place known as Kvemse. This spot is where you find the remnants (kefum) of their ancient settlement. Even there you can also find another ancient remnant belonging to Bainkong’s lineage. While still at
Kvemse, Bainkong (title of Chief of Mboh) met Baimenda there. They lived there for long and at a certain moment there was some kind of problem. They discovered that the land was not suitable for habitation and made the decision to leave. Baikong left first and moved to Mboh. The Baikong I am referring to here is the village chief, that is, Chief Baikong of Mboh-Oku. Baimenda left later and joined him in Mboh. Before departing from Jikijem, each of them had left one of their male children on the spot. Baimenda (Bainmbo) left his son Baba Te’eh, while Baikong left behind his son known as Bah Ndem at a spot called Eysakong. The two lineages were moving as relatives. Baimenda and Baikong were living together as one family and were referred to as Kekol or rather they preferred this name as their joint lineage identity. They were being referred to as Kekol Baimenda/Keko Bainkong. Baimenda is of Ntul and the Ntul is not a family but an entire community or nation, the true owners of Oku. Oku, or Ntul as it was once referred to, is made up of three clans: Ebdzeng, Mbulum and Mbe’ele. The Baimenda lineage is under the Mbe’ele ruling clan. (Personal communication, December 20, 2014)

Fai Baimenda (Ibid) maintains that Subi was created by Ngong, the first Fai (this is a title that originated from Nso) Baimenda of the lineage (Ngong, Chii, Manjang, Buji and Yang), whose father was Bainmbo and who was enstooled by the Fon of Oku. Very little else is provided by Oku historian or by members of the lineage concerning the dance at this early stage. Maurice Sonar Senghor has stated that before a dance can be created, an event or happening must occur. Menang, a court dance in Nkar-Nso, came about when a certain man, who ended up giving his name to the dance, had the brilliant idea of using xylophone music and rattles to drive away marauding monkeys from his crops. The music and dance he created were so beautiful that the ruling family of Shu Fai Rombi of Nkar adopted the dance as a dance of his court (Mveng et al., 1969). The current Fai Baimenda or any member of his family provides no detail to corroborate the meaning of the word “Subi” or the circumstances which caused his forebear to start the dance. However, a booklet dedicated to Jaji’s Subi dance in Old Town Bamenda states that
To dance Subi means, rewriting the ancient and contemporary story of the Oku people. It is partaking in the celebration of the history of their migration, their failures and successes. It is at the same time praising the ancestors for providing them with a settlement at the hill of Killum, the leaders, food and children. The dance equally praises the heroes and heroines of this people. In other words dancing Subi is ‘dancing a people’s coming together’. This explains why Subi has been literally translated as ‘Man of the People’ (Jaji, Tufon & Gham, 2007, p. 16)

The music of Subi provides certain information in this regard to an extent. Sometimes, in the absence of written or oral sources, the music of a dance could provide credible historical information on the dance. “Bamoun history is preserved in music” notes Prince Fuaupen Yaya in The Classical Music of Cameroon’s Bamoun Kingdom before adding that “I change nothing in the music.” This method of preserving history could also be observed in the Bamendankwe Tamukung’s exit song lyrics which states: “Tamukung, the Elephant, is coming out of the compound of Fundoh Muma!” It is from this information that we know the dance was started by Fundoh Muma. With regard to Subi, some information is encoded in the lyrics of the xylophones. P. Ntaimah (personal communication, March 16, 2015) decoded the information:

Baimenda was someone with many wives but unfortunately all his children were dying very young and then there was a saying that Baimenda delivers and there is no child to send to fetch firewood or water. If you have any seeds better fry them and eat, for what is the point planting, he was asked? The second part of the music tells us that then came a new woman whose children are not dying and this brings us to the issue of polygamy. When we teach African family system and recommend polygamy, it is not because the men are greedy and only want sex. It is because of the high mortality rate and for some people, it is to ensure that their family line is maintained. In the case of Baimenda, it is the second wife that maintains the lineage and if he had remained only with Kimai, there might have been no Subi today.
5.6 Buum Oku Dance Yaounde

In the neo-traditional dance tradition, artists draw upon the past of their communities in their innovative ventures (Kringelbach, 2012). For Jimmy Raphael, the dance of Ballets Bantous entailed transposing traditional Bassa dances, such as sekele, bolobo, wom, mbaye, and mfou, using modern choreography (Mveng et al., 1969, p. 55). Similarly, before setting up Les Ballets Africains, Keita Fodeba toured the whole of Guinea-Conakry to recruit the best dancers and drummers. French theatre critic Jean Silvant noted in Aube africaine et autres poèmes africains (1994), a collection of poems written by Fodeba, that “Keita Fodeba was a creator with innate gifts, an exceptional organizer who knew how to use Les Ballets Africains to bring together the best artists, singers and dancers of Mandingo origin and from elsewhere” (Fodeba, 1994). In Wynton Marsalis Tribute to Armstrong, Ed Bradley states that in his jazz innovation venture Louis Armstrong went from ensemble to solo; Ndinaah did just the opposite. The original Subi dance came with just one xylophone soundtrack, which had to be expanded to meet the standards of a high-level competition in which folkdances often presented a vast repertoire of music and dancing styles. Ntaimah, in a discussion we had in our van on our way to Oku on March 24, 2015, stated that “Ndinaah’s strength came from his ability to draw from other dance traditions in Oku to supplement the singular soundtrack that was characteristic of traditional Subi dance.” The creation of the masquerade thus aligns with Argenti’s (1998) argument that it was “…in response to the need to elaborate ever more complex dance styles for national competitions organized by the local government” (p. 763).
What Ndinaah did may now appear simple; but to come up with the right blend of music and dancing styles, he had to make a very careful selection from a vast pool of varied and complex dances and music in Oku. Flanked by Nkemba John Babey, his half-brother whose expertise in folk music and dance had already been amply tested, he went to work. He had a clear vision of what he wanted. In response to the taste in vogue in traditional dance competitions and national events, he sought to create a decent xylophone-based dance troupe with properly carved wooden masks and a vast collection of thrilling music and dancing styles. So, at a mere glance he could easily tell that a dance such as *muguo* would not make it to his intended cocktail, since it used two long wooden drums, one tam-tam and a bamboo trumpet for its music and feathered head dresses (Mveng et al, 1969). In some cases, he borrowed just a musical instrument and in others, just the music; and in yet others, the choreography. While a pair of metal gongs is a common musical instrument in many Bamenda Grassfield dances, it is usually played along with other instruments such as xylophones, drums and slit-drum. Tatah Mentan, in a phone conversation on June 07, 2015, maintains that in many Oku dances this instrument, all on its own or in conjunction with a drum and the trumpet, does provide entry music. The difference often comes from the number of gongs employed. Fenji uses four of them; while Subi uses two to three, a trumpet and a drum. Buum Oku Dance Yaounde uses three gongs, a drum and a trumpet.

In the absence of a musical and dance genius such as Nkemba, whose knowledge was required to determine what should be kept or discarded, the exercise of cutting and pasting such large amount of choreographic and musical material to an already existing dance could have easily resulted in an unwieldy monstrosity. And even when the proper
combination of these sounds and dance styles were found, the various parts still had to be well coordinated in such a way that there is a smooth transition from one sound to another, from one dance style to the next. Such a feat is usually attained through constant tinkering and relentless and rigorous practice. With this idea in mind, Ndinaah and Nkemba recruited strong, dedicated and disciplined young men with a sense of purpose; men who could “stomp the ground hard,” as Oku people describe good dancers. When all the pieces had been assembled, training began in earnest. It was long and hard; and when the troupe felt confident that it was ready to go public, it offered to make its first appearance before the people of Oku. The performance was a smashing success; and from “bad boy” Ndinaah, almost overnight, became “the father of innovation” and “an innovating prince” (Ntaimah, 2014)

Ntaimah (2012) has drawn some interesting comparisons between the traditional and modern Subi ballet, *kekum mekale*. In the traditional ballet presentation, there are these outstanding features: the front captain *Kam*, the rear captain, *Kam ebam*. The head of the captain *Kam*, is always a male figurine in wooden masquerade; while the *Kam ebam*, in a wooden masquerade, uses most of the time the following masks: buffalo head, elephant head. The role of the *Kam* is to introduce and change dance styles, decide the duration of the styles and the dance as a whole and is assisted by the rear captain. The traditional ballet follows a monotone and the styles are done in a line or circle. As tradition requires, all the native features are represented in this modern ballet dance or *kekum mekale*. The only difference here is that the role of the *Kam* dominates. He introduces the styles and is the pace setter at the same time. Since choreography is intricately related, all the jujus have to pick up any style at once. The dancing styles are
done in the following forms: line, circle, triangle, and rectangle. What is peculiar with the Oku dance as a whole is that the dancers follow the music and respond by producing their own music with the feet. The modern ballet follows more than thirty different songs that are changed almost automatically during the course of the dance. The music is quite original as well as the musical instruments (p. 44). Some of the songs that Ndinaah added to his repertoire included the following: *Biy Nam (Subi Modern); Nchiamfa; Ndangndang; Subi Traditional; Felengang modern.*

Having proved its mettle in Oku, Ndinaah’s dance had to compete with other dances in the country as well as seek to grab a place on the world stage. Performances outside Oku set the stage for the beginning of what Ngum (2010) has declared about the dance: “Subi is a dance in the diaspora and it has represented the people of Oku for a long time and even abroad, to America and the national capital for various competition and won prizes” (p. 276).

Even while the development of modern Subi was taking place in Oku, as far back as 1958 long after he had retired from the British army and settled in his compound in Old Town Bamenda, a certain gentleman who went by the name of Jaji had acquired plenty of dance paraphernalia and had begun espousing the vision of an Oku Renaissance through folkdance. His compound became a rallying point of folks from his native Oku living in Bamenda (T. Mentan, personal communication, November 30, 2014). At this stage, the ex-soldier seemed not to have had a clear format which he wanted his dance vision to take. However, with Ndinaah’s troupe flitting in and out Bamenda for various competitions, Jaji appeared to have drawn inspiration from the new terpsichorean marvel and had started a “Subi” dance group of his own.
After Old Town Bamenda, it was the turn of the people of Jikijem to borrow a page from Mboh and they went on to start their own group called Nkeng. Among the renowned dancers of Nkeng in Jikijem were Mkong Francis Ndom and Yang John Nshiom. Nkeng became so influential that “it was the first dance after Subi Baimenda Mboh-Oku to represent Oku externally … and during this time Subi Bamenda was still handled as Jaji’s property and only saw the limelight internationally after the decline of Nkeng Jikijem Oku,” Peter Ntaimah wrote in an email dated April 27, 2015. As for the role Ndinaah’s outfit has played in influencing the new dances that were emerging, especially those started outside Oku, T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) has noted that “if you go to Oku you will be told of Subi in Mboh…./for/ they started the modern way of dancing.”

As Subi and its various spin-offs were evolving, so too did the politics of Cameroon. According to Achankeng (2014):

> The dates February 11 and October 1 are important in the history of Cameroon because the first marks the day Southern Cameroonians voted to gain ‘independence by joining’ a neighboring country and the second marks the actual joining with the former French/Cameroon Republic to inaugurate the Federal Republic of Cameroon. (p. 91)

By May 20, 1972, following a new constitution in Cameroon the Federal Republic had been transformed into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon (Ki-Zerbo, 1978, p. 522). This development caused the parliament of the two federated states, which was hitherto in Buea and Yaounde, to be centralized in Yaounde. Many of the civil servants and politicians of the English-speaking Cameroon were transferred to the national capital, Yaounde.
Among those who moved to Yaounde were Nkemga John Babey who, in the early
seventies, had replaced Tatah Mentan in Buea Radio Station as an Oku national language
broadcaster before becoming, first, an identification officer; and then later, a policeman
(J. Nsakse, personal communication, March 19, 2015; T. Mentan, personal
communication, June 5, 2015). John Tatah Gamse, who had joined the military in 1970,
also moved to Yaounde. He came from a juju tradition and was also poly-instrumentalist
and a dancer. “I attended the Baptist school in Oku, the one near the market, and my
father’s juju was called Felu and in 1964 I had danced with Jaji’s Subi group in
Bamenda” (T. Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015). In Yaounde, the two men
met and joined forces with Mkong Francis Ndom who later burst onto the national scene
as a musician, going on to play his hit song *Fai Mbu* (1982) with Cameroon’s National
Orchestra, (Guiffio, 2015). “He was a musician, the best from the North West Province,”
T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) said of Ndom. Francis Ndom worked
with the Ministry of Information and Culture since musicians were considered part of that
ministry. In Oku he hailed from Jikijem and had danced with Fai Mbuw’s Nkeng troupe
(T. Mentan, personal communication, June 5, 2015). He too was poly-instrumentalist and
a great dancer. Yang John Nshiom was another prominent dancer and musician from
Nkeng who also moved to Yaounde. Bebey (1975) has expressed the negative influence
that city life exerts on many Africans. “It must be remembered that urban life, which
exposes Africans to European music, and the ever-growing exodus from villages to
towns, have created a new breed of African – one who tends to resolutely turn his back
on the traditional past” (p. 140). T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015)
declared that it was this sense of alienation which aroused in him the desire to start an Oku folk dance in Yaounde:

You know tradition is something being passed from generation to generation, so when I went to Yaoundé, I discovered that Oku people there had no sense of tradition; and if we didn’t create one for our children and even ourselves, our tradition will be lost. That is how I started. I gathered some people and we started Buum. Buum is a juju right back at home in Oku. We just created a new one and instead of naming it after my father’s juju, I decided to name it Buum because of its popularity.

In an unpublished article Gamse wrote as far back as 1986, he confirmed the preceding line of thought when he stated: “We have created this dance in Yaounde to prevent the disappearance of the rich and colourful tradition bequeathed to us by our ancestors.” However, Gamse’s version of the story seems to contradict that of F.Jick (personal communication, December 20, 2014) who served as treasurer of the group for 32 years:

What prompted us to create a juju dance was the need for animation in town during official occasions and ceremonies. It started with the reception of the President of the National Assembly. That is when we started the group. It was very few people in Yaounde at that time, it started growing until it became what it is today.

T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) has argued that Jick was living in Bertua, a town in the Eastern Region of Cameroon, when the group was founded and only arrived in Yaounde three years later. Of the dance, he stated that it was started at his house in Oledzoa in Yaounde; and that it actually became fully operational only in 1986 when they had obtained all the equipment. “There were so many of us but most of them are now deceased,” he recalled of those who met to form the group. Ntaimah, who is a younger person with better recollections and who had served as president of the troupe from 2004-2014, while agreeing with the location where the dance was started, argued that by 1984 the group was already fully operational; and by 1986 was firmly
established enough to lift numerous folk dance trophies in Yaounde. Both reasons for the creation of the dance are not contradictory but complementary and are even undergirded by a stronger reason. The mere fact that all of the men who became founding fathers were talented dancers and musicians and were from Oku is worth noting. K. W. Asante (2004) has pointed out that “National and ethnic dances are designated as those that show allegiance to one’s national and ethnic background performed to songs that speak to national strength and loyalty” (p. 61).

Buum Oku Dance Yaounde has sometimes been misnamed “Subi,” the mother dance from which it sprang. The name lends itself to confusion and triggers an identity crisis since there is already a profusion of dance groups in Oku and the diaspora with the name Subi: Baimenda’s and Ndinaah’s in Mboh, and Jaji’s in Old Town Bamenda. T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) stated that he proposed the name “Buum” for the Yaounde dance troupe at its inception but since the name already belonged to a group existing in Oku, he had to travel to the Oku palace to have it confirmed. In an unpublished article, he provided this meaning for the name he had selected (1986).

Buum in the Oku language simply means ‘abundance.’ In the real sense of the word, Buum is a type of tree commonly found in the forest. This tree blossoms into flowers after seventeen years. During this period the flowers attract numerous bees and bee hives become filled with honey. This period is one during which there are hunting expeditions and many animals and birds are killed. (p. 1)

This definition is identical in every respect to the one given by F. Jick (personal communication, March 24, 2015).

With regard to the origin of Buum dance in Lui Oku, it was provided to me by Ntaimah following a discussion I had with him in Yaounde in early April 2015. His
version confirmed information in the interview I had with T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) as well as in the article Gamse (1986) had written.

Buum is a dance from Lui village which uses Medjiah (a dance troupe) music from Ichim Oku. The story goes that Gwuaneh was an Ichim man who spent most of his time in Lui. He was blind and childless and consoled himself singing and playing. He was a musical genius of rare caliber. When Fai Wantong of Lui created his dance called Buum, Gwuaneh, then living in Lui at the time, slightly modified Medjiah music and obtained a patent from the palace and used it as the basis for the new dance; that is, Buum. The real difference between Buum and Medjiah is not the sounds from the xylophones but rather the lyrics of the songs. (*Almost like “Al Weird” Yankovic’s Eat It! (1984) may sound like Michael Jackson’s Beat It! (1982); but the two songs do not have the same lyrics*) (Gamse, 1986; P. Ntaimah, personal communication, March 24, 2015).

Just as the reason that led to the creation of the dance troupe has become a source of some controversies, there is no unanimity among existing founding members on how the first musical instruments were acquired. T. Gamse (personal communication, April 5, 2015) maintains that he went to the forest and made the first xylophones himself and that the first drum was obtained from Oku. This version conflicts with that of Jick (personal communication, March 24, 2015). “The very first xylophone set, the one made in Yaounde, came from a man named Mbale who at the time was a prison warder in the south. That is the person who gave us the first xylophone,” he maintained. Jick’s version is confirmed by Ntaimah in a June 10, 2015, email. However, Ntaimah was quick to add that even though the prison guard provided the xylophones, he acted following directives from Gamse who was president and an elderly member of the troupe at the time. As for
the drum, F. Jick (personal communication, March 24, 2015) declared that “the first drum we had was offered by Mr. Ndishangong, the former Mayor of Oku, when he was at the Ecole Normale Superieure” in Yaounde. However, by his own admission, Jick stated that he came back from Bertua in 1985 when the dance was already operational. It is likely that he may be talking about a different set of xylophones and drum. As for the first set of xylophones that actually came from Oku, Ntaimah, who was already in Yaounde by the time it was obtained, insists that the troupe dispatched Nkemba who brought it in August 1984.

In email messages of December 3 & 4, 2014, Ntaimah stated that the Buum Oku Dance Yaounde is a new creation which only surfaced after the 1972 plebiscite and began to take root in the twilight years of the seventies when Jaji’s troupe in Old Town Bamenda had already started losing its luster as a result of infighting. By all indications, Gamse proposed the name; but the template of the modern Subi from Mboh could only have been effectively introduced by Nkemba John Babey who was not just a close half-brother of Ndinaah but had actually teamed up with him to popularize the dance. It was, however, under the presidency of Gamse John Tatah, who became the first Bam Eykum (literally “father of the dance”) or bamkum (Argenti, 1998, p. 766), that the dance started to undergo gradual transformation (Jick, personal communication, December 20, 2014; Ntaimah, 2014).

In the transformation, it was normal that the Yaounde founding founders (which included three former presidents; namely, John Tatah Gamse, Mkong Francis Ndom, and Nkemba John Babey) should draw from Buum in Oku, whose name they had already chosen for their group, to supplement existing songs. “What was actually drawn from
Buum were its name and its lone soundtrack,” Ntaimah noted in an email dated June 10, 2015. Apart from Buum, they also used the music of Nsum, the palace masquerade whose styles had been described as “too sluggish” Jick (personal communication, December 20, 2014). In an email message of June 01, 2015, Ntaimah argued that to further expand their dance and music material, the originators of Buum Yaounde also tapped into the works of a renegade lineage that had moved out of Oku to Kom. The lineage, Ebfim, moved to a location called Mbessanaku, which is simply referred to today as Mbessa. The group has dropped the “Oku” suffix as a way of asserting its independence and it is currently part of Belo Sub-Division in Kom (Boyo). Remnant of the lineage still lives in Oku, in the village of Jiyane. The first Mbessa fon was a direct cousin to Ngek Zeulam, the 11th Tikar Fon of Oku. From this group, Buum Oku dance in Yaounde obtained songs such as Ndangndang and Nghonyi.

Over the years, as the older generation gives way to the younger, Buum Oku Dance Yaounde has continued to expand its musical and choreographical portfolios. “We started from what already existed at Mboh and gradually added new styles,” (F. Jick, personal communication, December 20, 2014). In this musical and chorographical transformation, the troupe has also been influenced by the television and other dances. This is not a new trend as Shay (2006) points out:

Participation in international folk dance festivals, with the competitive spirit they often generated, exposed members of dance groups to spectacularized and theatricalized elements that they saw in the performance of other groups and they adapted to their own performances. (p. 16)

S. Dinsi (personal communication, March 20, 2015), who doubles as choreographer and lead dancer or kam, has pointed this out. “When I came the dance had two dance sets and I brought in the third one,” he declared before adding that “I learn and
take from different groups, bringing what I watch them do when dancing.” From the traditional “line and circle” dance formation, new routines have been included and they follow geometric and letter-of-the-alphabet patterns: “triangle, rectangle, letters V and H shapes” (Ntaimah, 2014, p. 8). In the video, Buum Oku Dance Yaounde dance routines comprise three sets, each of which is powered by five to six songs. In the first set, the songs played are: Metal Gongs (3 of them), *Chiamfa, Modern Subi, Ndangndang, Ndongtu, Nsum*; in the second set, the songs are: *Nkeng Modern, Nghonyi, Buum, Subi Mekale*, and *Wemumsi Chie Ghe*; and in the third set, the songs are: *Rocky Dance, Chiamfa, Biy Nan, Baimenda, Ghe Ibal, Kumki Mekale* (J. Nsakse, personal communication, March 19, 2015).

Having a good local traditional dance was one thing; but having the dance embraced by other ethnic groups in a multiethnic national setting was quite another. In French Cameroon, where Yaounde is located, the departing colonial masters had perpetuated a policy of cultural assimilation. Assimilation was opposed to autonomy and failed to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous African culture (Crowder, 1967). Through such a policy, a breed of cultural travesties more Western than African was created. Cabral (1973) pointed this out when he stated that the experience of colonial domination shows that, in the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the colonizer not only creates to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population, either by so-called assimilation of indigenous elites and the popular masses (p. 45). It was to these “indigenous elites” that the French handed over power on the eve of independence; and as an expression of their loyalty to the departing colonizers, they were often hostile to things African or non-
French. In postcolonial Cameroon, this hostility often took the form of anti-English-speaking sentiments (Jing, 2002). However, with the regime being closely identified with foreign interests and challenged through internal dissension, in a bid to shrug off such a label and come across as patriotic, the need to pay what actually amounted to lip service to local cultural promotion became evident; and though it served little purpose, it at least provided an avenue that local folkdances could exploit for their own assertion.

It was at this juncture of the troupe’s own history that the attitude of Nkemba John Babey became an asset. Ntaimah (2014) elaborates:

While in the police force, he used his exceptional character in boosting the relation of the Yaounde troupe with prominent personalities in the Ministry of Culture. His humility was a positive point for the troupe. By this time, the troupe was just getting reintegrated into the mainstream Francophone culture in Cameroon where our differences were most of the time negatively exploited to our disadvantage. Even in the face of such discrimination, Nkemba would hardly get angry. He gradually became an admirable figure by all at the Ministry of Culture.

In this promotional activity, it should be pointed out that as a musician of national renown Mkong Francis Ndom served as a point guard. Through his musical talents, he had risen to fame and was held in high esteem at the Ministry of Culture where he worked as an artist. He exploited this advantage to navigate the various channels in this ministerial department that dealt with the promotion of folkdances, noted T. Mentan (personal communications, December 20, 2015). In this effort, it must be added that, Yang Philemon, a native of Oku and currently the country’s Prime Minister, was then Minister of Mines and Energy and this, in some ways, helped to raise the profile of the dance.

By the time Nkemba John Babey handed over the presidency of the troupe to Peter Tatah Ntaimah in 2004, Buum Oku Dance Yaounde had long ceased to be only an
ethnic or a national phenomenon. It had gone international and this was captured in a report written by Eugene Keja in *Cameroon Tribune* (the state-owned national daily) of 17-18, 2000.

The Yaounde Oku Juju dance which has gained international renown through its participation at both national and international cultural events… has travelled to France several times and performed in the French cities of Toulouse, Montpellier, Nantes…. It has also won many national prizes. It was selected by the Ministry of Culture as one of the dances to represent Cameroon at the September 1999 Extraordinary OAU Summit in Libya, the second best Cameroonian traditional dance for the Commonwealth Music Day Celebration and the best traditional dance during the CEMAC Forum in Yaounde from November 23 to 28 last year (p. 5).

Increasingly, the group has attracted intellectuals and such a profile has steered it clear of the type of internal conflicts that has roiled and ruined other groups such as Subi in Old Town Bamenda. In addition, Buum Oku Dance Yaounde continues to receive the backing of both traditional and national authorities because of its involvement in community development projects and the promotion of Cameroon’s Culture. In *Cameroon Tribune* of Wednesday 10-11 of January 2001, Eugene Keja noted:

> The group has also been asked not to relent in its effort to sell Cameroon’s culture abroad and to fight for national unity. Francis Yengo, Technical Adviser No 1 at MINAT (*Ministry of Territorial Administration*) made the call on 1 January at his residence where he invited the group to perform. (p. 5)

Finally, the group has a rich and illustrious history as is reflected in the caliber of the men who have been *bam eykum*:

From the group’s inception to 1989, it was Tatah John Gamse

From 1989 to 1995, it was Nkong Francis Ndom

From 1995 to 2004, it was Nkemba John Babey

From 2004 to 2014, it was Peter Tatah Ntaimah

From 2014 to date, it is Gladious Keja.
In the historical production of Buum Oku Dance, modernity clashed with tradition and the struggle resulted in a new art form which has profound implications for dance representation in numerous respects.
CHAPTER 6: REPRESENTATION IN A 15-MINUTE VIDEO OF BUUM OKU DANCE

6.1 Engaging with a 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance

Buum Oku Dance is an ethnic community-based ensemble in Yaounde which was started in the early eighties by some natives of Oku; and which was largely inspired by the modern Subi dance in Mboh in Oku. This 15-minute video of the dance opens with the gradual unfolding of the lush equatorial setting of Etok Koss resort in Simbock in Yaounde where it has been shot. The camera focuses on “Balafon,” an outdoor bar overlooking a pond at the facility where the actual dancing took place. Apart from the actual dancers, other aspects of the ensemble include an orchestra, an audience and the praise singer. The orchestra is made up of twenty-four pieces of log xylophone, a standing drum, three double-bells or metal gongs and a bamboo trumpet; and it is played by nine musicians. Members of the audience, predominantly from Oku and the Bamenda Grassfield and almost entirely male, are for the most part either dressed in the alternating white and black ndobo gowns or the traditional multi-coloured Cameroonian attire; these two outfits constitute the sartorial identity of the Western Grassfield of Cameroon. In keeping with Grassfield tradition, the audience forms a circle, leaving an open space inside for the dancers. In addition to his peculiar role, the praise singer also identifies himself from the majority of the audience with the colour of the hat he is wearing. In an email of August 12, 2016, Ntaimah states that the cap shows he is a member of the Nfu and kwifon. The members of these two institutions are initiated and wear a cap that is made using black and white thread running round parallel to each other. Nfu, he
maintains, “is a military fraternity that meets weekly for sharing of wine, deliberation on community development events, planning of community defence strategies.”

As in most Oku masquerades, three double bells, a standing drum and bamboo trumpet provide entry music for the first set which lasts for five minutes. The dancers, six in number, that is not including the kam, as the lead dancer is termed in Eblam Ebkuo, strut into the circle from behind the musicians. The kam is already in the circle by the time they get there. With the exception of the kam, all the dancers are dressed in identical black gowns, with motifs of double bells, chameleons and other symbols sewn into them using white thread. The dancers have rattles strapped around their ankles and wield horsetail dancing whisks. They all have their faces covered and sport wooden dancing head masks. The outfit of the kam is a sky blue gown embellished with cowry shells both at the rims and on the fabric itself where they form rectangular and other geometric patterns. The alternation of white cowry shells and blue fabric mimics the blue and white ndobo raiment worn by Oku and other Grassfield royals and notables. The kam wears a human mask decorated with cowry shells and wields a spear instead of a whisk. The presence of cowry shells on the mask of the kam is a symbol of royalty in the entire Western Grassfield region of Cameroon; and the combination of spear and cowry shells points to leadership and power.

The dancers enter the circle in a straight line formation, swinging their whisks in broad circular strokes and dancing from side to side. The straight-line formation gradually becomes a circle as they dance round in swinging movement; then the circle straightens into a line as the side-to-side swinging dance motion continues for a while and then transforms into a series of on-the-spot locomotor motion of trots. The line breaks
into two and the dancers dance back and forth and sometimes with their backs turned to
the audience. Then they blend into a single line and break up and form two lines, with
three of the dancers breaking rank to form another line in front.

The masks the dancers are wearing assume both human and animal forms which
capture the complementarity between humans and animals in Oku; and in this first of a
three set series, one which dance owners call the animation set, it is a dancer bearing a
buffalo-head mask who leads the troupe into the dancing space while one with an
elephant mask brings up the rear. As the dancers enter, they are goaded by the praise
singer who struts up and down, swinging his whisk and recounting the history of the
dance and Oku and mouthing praises on the greatness of both. After dancing for a while
in the circle, the music stops suddenly as the dancers drop in a collapse crouching
posture. Driven by the taunts of the rattles of the kam, and the occasional sound of the
drum, the praise singer continues to deliver his message which culminates in “yebuug!”,
Eblam Ebkwo for “Hit it!” The xylophones roll in and dancing is on.

With the exclusion of the double-bell entry music, the first set is made up of five
pieces which, like in the other series, describes both the dance and the music: salutation
tune nchiamfa; biy nam; ndangndang; ndongtu; and nsum. Just before the close of the
first set, the dancers merge into a single file formation and stomp backwards.

Amid singing and dancing of some members of the audience, the second set opens
with the drum rumbling and xylophones wailing. It is fast pace and the energy intense,
with circular whisks motions. The set begins with the dancers already in the circle and the
initial ring they form gradually becomes a single file formation; and their backward-
forward and sliding movements hint at swing movements. It is during this set that the
lady who owns the facility, accompanied by her son, makes a cameo appearance. As an audience or in acknowledgement of the performance of the dance at her facility or even dancing by the side, such a female presence is welcomed. The movements in this set blend stationary and locomotor in which the latter are dominant. Occasional collapse movements are evident. There are numerous formations as lines break into some letters of the alphabet and geometric patterns. The energy level is intense for most of the series and could be categorized mainly into swinging, collapse and percussive. There is also an intense percussive ripple through the body – polyrhythmic or multirhythmic.

The pieces involved in this series are rocky dance, salutation tune nchaimfa, biy nan, traditional subi, ghe fo oti, and then the exit song.

In the third set, the kam coaxes the dancers into the circle with insistent notes of his rattles. They resort to a series of leaping dance steps to the tune of xylophones before crouching in parallel straight-line formation; and following an insistent musical note from the orchestra, the dancers rise and face each other and execute a variety of dance movements and formations: crouching, spinning, bouncing. This series also blends locomotor and stationary movements. As the xylophone tune changes, the dancers crouch. They only rise when they are coaxed into doing so by an accompaniment of xylophones and drums interspersed with the hollering of the praise singer. They trot, swing around while executing strokes with their whisks as the set closes. These are all elements of locomotor movements.

The third set comprises njang ngeng, salutation tune, nghonyi, bum dance, felegang modern, kam weh momseh, chie ghe.
It must be pointed out that the salutation piece runs throughout the three sets, all of which last fifteen minutes. While the dancer bringing up the rear consistently wears an elephant mask, this same trend is not true of the dancer leading the troupe into the circle. The significance of this gesture is not lost in terms of man-animal relationship in sharing a common environment. In terms of environmental cleanliness, Oku leads the rest of Cameroon. The various tunes and dancing styles, through their names, reveal Oku traditional dances which inspired them. The dancers and musicians are a blend of students, civil servants and workers, all of whom are drawn from the Oku ethnic group.

6.2 Pegge Vissicaro’s macro-micro representation of the dance video

6.2.1 Macro representation

To Vissicaro (2004), the macro features of a dance include “participants and location” (p. 137) and respond to the basic journalistic questions of what, where, when, why, how, and who. Within this broad frame, key dance questions could be asked: what kind of situation is happening (rehearsal, ceremony, performance, rite of passage, other type of celebration/ceremony, or spontaneous activity); when and where does the dance event take place (physical location, time of the year, month, and or day, as well as the overall duration of the entire event or each component); what is its purpose; what is its accompaniment (is it a live or recorded musical accompaniment and what are the instruments?); what is the movement content; how do the dancers prepare; and who are the dancers (their sex, age, whether they are amateur or professionals, apprentices, amateurs and if they are from the same family, church, school, village, tribe, community, country, or combination of these)? To seek detailed answers to these questions, it is
recommended to include cultural insiders in addition to researcher’s observations (Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 139-140; Golshani, Park & Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 98-100).

Talking about African dances, Buckland (1999) notes that “removal from their former contexts alters their meanings; but the movements of the staged dances maintain a cultural validity which can act as a window through which more understanding can be gained of the people who perform them” (p. 100). This remark is pertinent to our macro understanding of the Buum Oku Dance video. To the extent that it was moved from its original location in Oku in the Bamenda Grassfield to Yaounde in French-speaking Cameroon, such a change of environment has influenced and altered its performance and this affects the way it is viewed and understood.

K. W. Asante (2004) talks of neo-traditional dances as “…those dances that are created in the spirit or likeness of traditional dances but … are not bound to all the aesthetics and cultural rules of that society” (p. 19); and Green (2011) as “…dances that make use of elements of traditional dances, but not necessarily in the same context as they are found in the traditional culture” (p. 24). “Neo-traditional” or “kekum mekale,” to use the Oku term usually employed by Ntaimah (2012, 2014), is a description that best fits Buum Oku Dance performance in the video.

As a dance form though, Buum Oku, even as it appears on video, encompasses numerous categories, for it could also be described as an ethnic dance. However, even though the dance is firmly rooted in the customs and values of Oku and the Bamenda Grassfield, it could be considered “national”. Shay (2002) has pointed out that the terms “ethnicity” and “nationalism” are intertwined in the popular mind; and that the nationalists frequently forge their patriotic positions and claims by the use of elements of
ethnicity such as traditional music and dance as representing the common origins of the majority population on the stage of national discourse (p. 5). Thus the dance ensemble has been representing Cameroon internationally (E. Keja, 2000, 2001). Gorer (1962) has noted that “African dancers can be roughly divided into two groups: professional and amateur dancers” (p. 215). In contemporary Africa, many dances of the neo-traditional category, such as *Les Ballets Africains* and *Ballet National du Senegal*, have gone on to become professional ensembles, often sponsored by the state. This has not been the case with Buum Oku Dance whose members, for the most part, hold other jobs and view their roles in the troupe as part of an effort to promote ethnic and national identity and culture (Constitution, 2002).

I arrived in Yaounde on March 15, 2015, after making arrangements with some representatives of Buum Oku Dance community, to interview some members of their troupe as well as shoot a video of a dance performance, which I intended to use for my doctoral dissertation. My initial plan was to have the dance shot in the location where it normally performs when members of the Oku community in Yaounde gather for their monthly meeting. The video project was designed to capture a “contained dance event” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 137), in conformity with the conception of American dance scholar Joann Kealiinohomoku. Such a conception is holistic and lends itself to an Afrocentric perspective in which “dance is intermeshed in every aspect of day-to-day traditional African life” (Warren, 1972, p. 2). M. K. Asante (1990) makes a case for an African-centered approach when he notes that

Whether one talks of reality in the African American church or in African dance one sees that separation of subject/object, speaker/audience, dancer/spectators or investigator/subject is artificial. The social context of
African people encourages a collective as opposed to an individual separation. (p. 27)

However, in the light of outlined difficulties, we were compelled to move the dance performance and video recording to Etok Koss.

The performance for the dance shoot took place on Sunday March 22, 2015, and did not involve the entire Oku community in Yaounde. By 12:00 noon, I was already at Etok Koss, a small tourist resort in Simbock (neighbourhood) in Yaounde. This is the venue where I had agreed with Buum Oku Dance representatives that the dance performance and video shoot would take place. The cameraman, Gilles Kenmogne Sado of Focus Image in Essos, the video studio that had been selected for the shoot, showed up shortly after. At 1:15 p.m. the musicians and dancers arrived and the dancers instantly retired with their equipment to a room at the back of Balafon to change into their dance outfits. Having changed into their pair of shorts and their T-shirts, and with all of them sitting in a row on a long bench, the dancers began their preparations, first by strapping on their pair of rattles, each around an ankle. This dance is performed barefoot, so they had taken off their shoes. After their rattles had been strapped on, they put on their dancing gowns and then sweater nettings over their heads to conceal their faces. This was followed by the head masks.

In Oku, some dancers smear their bodies with medicine; but in Yaounde the context is different and they did not; at least not during the shoot. With the exception of the kam who held a spear instead, all the dancers clutched horsetail whisks in their right hand. The dance floor at Balafon is circular and not large, in comparison to other locations where the dance has performed publicly. At 3:00 p.m., the dancers entered the
dance floor to the beat of a drum, a bamboo trumpet, and three double bells. The shoot had started in earnest.

K. W. Asante (2004) has noted that some African “dances are almost always gender-specific, with boys dancing with boys and girls dancing with girls” (p. 19). Buum Oku Dance is an all-male dance (T. Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015), even though the community organization within which it operates is open to members of both genders (G. Keja, personal communication, March 19, 2015).

The dance is a xylophone-based masquerade; and according to J. Nsakse (personal communication, March 19, 2015), even though some of those trained to dance may be below 18, as one of the aims of the dance organization is to promote and transmit Oku culture and tradition (T. Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015; Constitution, 2002), the youngest member among those currently involved in dancing is 18 and the oldest member of the troupe, a musician, is in his sixties. Those selected to dance in competitions and special occasions, as it was the case during the dance shoot, must be mature enough to listen to music and relate it to dance since there are numerous dancing styles (J. Nsakse, personal communication, March 19, 2015).

The kind of xylophone used is the log-xylophone. J. Nsakse (personal communication, March 19, 2015) has stated that the current set of xylophones used in the video is made of camwood and comprises twenty main pieces; and then four additional pieces that are occasionally pressed into service depending on the type of music to be played. In Oku, these additional pieces are referred to as nchok. However, the twenty main pieces remain constant and are divided into four sections, each of which is made up of five xylophones. The four sections are tunjang (head of the xylophones); then the
tuning xylophone section, played by the person who introduces and dictates the pace of each song. This section is called *eling njang ki chu une*. This section is followed by the one played by the person who swings into action after the introducer and which is referred to as *eling njang ki fine*. The final section is the *shala njang*, usually located at the extreme right. The person playing the drum stands close to the head xylophones at the extreme left. The purpose for this disposition is that since the person on the head xylophone sets the pace, the drummer needs to be next to him to pick up the introduction of any new note. And next to the drummer is the person playing the trumpet because the drum and the trumpet go together.

The set of xylophones played on the video was tuned and put into service by Kibuh Emmanuel Balak, a retired soldier of the Cameroonian military. However, the set has been modified from time to time by Ngum Ngwan and Tafon Felix.

The Musicians are:

1- Nsakse John
2- Teih Jerome – lead
3- Ngwang Samuel
4- Ching Zacheria – bass
5- Peter Ntaimah
6- Nchinda – drum

Dancers on stage are:

1- Dinsi Stanley, the lead dancer or *kam*
2- Keja Gladius
3- Keming Emile
4- Ngolan
5- Keming David
6- Mankoh Dieudonne
7- Teih Jerome
8- Yumgong Jong
Ntaimah (2014) has pointed out that the hierarchy of the dancers which exists in the traditional setting is disrupted in the video of Buum Oku Dance or the *kekum mekale*.

In the traditional presentation, there are these outstanding features: the front captain *kam*, the rear captain *kam eybam*, pace setter *kenfiyebin*, front virgin *ngon embiy*, middle virgin *ngon feteten*, rear virgin *ngon eybam*, the running *juju* or police *nkie*. There are other figurines like the noble *fo’oche*, and many others representing animals in the wild and spirits. The other masquerades that command some respect within the traditional ballet lose this prestigious position in a modern ballet. The *fo’oche*, *mekong*, *ngon*, become ordinary masquerades. There is no *kam eybam* as two captains cannot effectively function here.

At 3:30 p.m. rain started to fall and by 4:00 p.m. the dance shoot was concluded. After, the dance and video shoot, all participants who had contributed in the making of the video were treated to roasted meat and drinks at the resort before members of the crowd broke up around 5:00 p.m. to head to their various destinations. In all the event took around 3 ½ hours.

According to G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015), in a bid to modernize, membership of the dance group is open “to every son and daughter of Oku and to every lover of Oku tradition” and he identifies two kinds of membership: active, around 45 out of a total of roughly 60 to 65 members, who are registered and involved in the daily activities of the organization; and the passive members, who are scattered all over the world and do make contributions to the organization for its upkeep and for development projects. The dance organization is run by an executive community which he breaks down as follow:

For the executive, we have the president and vice president. The president is the overseer of the organization, he is the one that makes certain decision when necessary and he runs the day-to-day activities of the union. Then close to the president is the secretary, the secretariat where we have the secretary general and his assistant who are in charge of correspondence of the organization, taking minutes during practice sessions and during our meetings.
Then we have the financial secretary who takes care of the finances; he records any financial transaction of the union… He is also a signatory to the organization’s account besides the president and also the treasurer who keeps the funds. Then you have the organization’s secretary who is in charge of organizing activities that the group is involved in; for example, if we have to participate in a seminar somewhere, he will be the one to spearhead the organization. Then we have the public relations officer. There are two of them and they are in charge of publicizing the group, making the group known to the public and trying to arrange dances for the group. Then we have the two coaches of dancing; and two for equipment, to look after the equipment of the troupe and ensure it is properly and safely stored; and then we have the discipline master and his assistant to reinforce discipline; then, there are advisers who we call upon when there is the need for certain things; and finally we have auditors who audit the accounts of the organization. (G. Keja, personal communication, March 19, 2015)

### 6.2.2 Micro Representation

Goshani, Park & Vissicaro (2004) have pointed out that “at the micro level of analysis, dance researchers can now study the structure of human expressive movement recorded in a tangible recorded form that heretofore was only an ephemeral movement” (pp. 99-100). The micro features focus on the smallest components of dance; in particular, the movement (Vissicaro, 2004, pp. 139-144). Buckland (1999) argues that “whether the focus is on overall cultural context, gender issues, ritual, or some other topic, the movement involved should, at an appropriate juncture, enter the discussion…” (p. 85). This is an Afrocentric cultural study, so for the micro features of the dance, those that focus on “the study of the actual dancing and related aspects” (Vissicaro, p. 137) and that involve a description of the movement (Golshani, Park & Vissicaro, 2004, p. 100), I will base my analysis of the video on the perspectives of dance scholars in general, especially those from Africa and Cameroon. Kealiinohomoku (2001a) argues that contemporary study of dance and human movement now encompass a broadening range
of theories and methods (p. 90). In addition, Dils & Albright (2001) maintain that “movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge” and that “one has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning” (p. 31).

Labanotation has the capacity, when used by trained movement analyst, to depict precisely the direction, duration and intensity of human motion through three dimensions of space (Buckland, 1999, pp. 102-103). Nevertheless, “Laban Movement Analysis systems, which include Labanotation or Kinetography Laban, and Laban Movement Analysis” (Fraleigh, 1999, p. 285) were conceived to analyze European dances. To Laban (1963), “movement is the essence of life, and that all expression, whether it be speaking, writing…dancing, uses movement as a vehicle…” (p. 101). Fundamental to dance movements are “energy” (or force), “space,” and “rhythm.” Energy controls the dynamic quality of movement and its subsequent meaning; space is the receptacle of the different product of energy; and through rhythm, the other elements of dance are bound in a harmonious structure (Ajayi, 1998, pp. 18-20). The Laban system of movement as a tool for analyzing African and Carribean-derived dance forms has been questioned because it is more commonly associated with Western dance forms (Buckland, 1999). Nigerian dance and theatre scholar Layiwola (2003) states that

…the visual content of African dance performance extends beyond the third dimension. Nketia refers to this aspect of dancing as ‘polyrhythmic’ while Robert Farris Thompson (1974) refers to the same phenomenon as ‘multimetric’. This infers that linear forms of notation as in Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh are not sufficiently representative. Because of concerns with linear, geometric forms, ballet dancers seek to contend with the law of gravity and create the impression of extraordinary lightness… But the African dance steps depend on rhythmic patterns and puts premium on weight transfer and counterbalancing. Much like Indian dances, therefore, skills consist in extraordinary manipulation of definite muscles of the physiognomy, shoulder blades, the solar plexus, the torso and the tarsal and metatarsals. (pp. 2-3)
According to him, “the fourth and fifth dimensions of African dance” include “non-material phenomena, empathy and storyline” which, he argues, “are inaccessible to western documenters” (Layiwola as cited in Buckland, 1999, p. 104). Layiwola (2003) advocates “a concept of analysis and notation which takes into consideration ritual and religious issues which go beyond the fourth and fifth dimensions of space and matter,” for it is only in this regard, he maintains, that “a holistic experience can be derived from African dance experience” (p. 3). However, while drawing on an African conception, I have no intention to stray too far from the framework provided by Vissicaro (2004).

Buum Oku Dance Yaounde, based on its current conception on the video, is not a ritual or religious dance and could be captured in a holistic way through “dance event.” Moreover, “space, time, and force/energy are the primary categories listed on assessment rubrics used to measure dance skills taught in public school curricula” (p. 140). Russell (1958) follows up with a corroborating argument when she notes that “in dance education we give experience in three principal fields: those of effort, of space and of group relationships” (p. 19). For a research project which has school in focus, I consider my approach sensible.

To Vissicaro (p. 140), there are many ways to describe dance events in terms of space; but with the video, I hope to explore movement type, formation, patterns, personal space (based on silhougraphs), spatial relationship (or proxemics), shape of the movement, body extensions (sword, switches, sticks, masks…and all other items that influence the dancers’ performance, appearance, and the timing of movement, as well as energy quality), body designs, and direction faced by dancers or in which they move (L.O.D. or Line of Direction) (Ajayi, 1998; Vissicaro, 2004).
6.2.2.1 Space

According to Ajayi (1998),

Space is the receptacle of the different products of energy. Body patterns and movements are produced within this rather amorphous structure, giving it a new significance that enables spectators to relate effectively to it, ascribing meanings and looking for hidden messages. Initially operating within the spatial structure, movements create meanings through aerial or floor patterns, qualifying the perception of the space in the process and ultimately affecting the production of meaning. (p.19)

Since Buum Oku Dance is often invited to perform on different types of occasions, such as state functions, death celebrations, receptions, birthday parties, etc., the need to fully and meaningfully exploit any existing space is very important. The dance space on the video is circumscribed by the metal railing and is not large. With the audience forming another circle within, the space is made even smaller. According to G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015), the size of the dancing space determines the number of dancers to be deployed. “We can dance 5, we can dance 9 or 10; it all depends on the size of the stage,” he stated. On the video, the number of dancers on the floor is seven, six dancers and one lead dancer. Like in a very traditional setting, the dance space has been created by the spectators. They reinforce the dancers by shouting, singing, joining in on the choruses, and vocalizing responses (K. W. Asante, 1998, p. 44). Proxemics, which determines the spatial distance between dancers and spectators, is determined in traditional Subi by the nkie, which “polices the crowd and all the jujus in line” (Ntaimah, 2012, 2014). In Mbaya groups, this role is performed by the keshiengene which “…dances alongside the line…, keeping the audience at bay and aggressively correcting dancers who fall out of step” (Argenti, 1998, p. 766). It must be noted that depending on the occasion, the space could be “sociopetal,” where the public is brought together and
interaction encouraged (Ajayi, 1998, p. 17). This is the case with the performance on the video.

A major determinant in spatial occupation is dance outfits. The outfits of the Buum Oku dancers, from heavy masks through ample gowns to rattles and horsetail whisks, are ponderous and affect movements and spatial configurations. “In many dances, the movements are determined by the costumes,” concurs Warren (1972) who cites the example of how “The whirling turns of the Taki dance make wide billowing shapes of the dancers full-flowing smocks” (p. 27). Within dance space, therefore, items on dancers, seen either separately or collectively, create an appearance that is important in the way different meanings are generated and interpreted. Thus, Argenti (2007) has associated the dancing with actual swords and cutlasses by some members of Fulengan, an old palace masquerade in Oku, as a metaphor for protection since cutlasses and knives are often used in medicine in Oku where they are considered essential means of warding off evil spirits. At an even deeper connotative level, they reify memories of slave raids by external forces and heroic fights against them (p. 126-127).

Through the swords and cutlasses the importance of body extensions in dance is established; and the role of dance as a means of preserving history in Africa demonstrated. In the video, body extensions for the dancers are represented by the horsetail whisks; and for the kam, by the spear. Ntaimah (2014) points out that “frequent swinging of cow or horsetail is … a sign or symbol of happiness” (p. 3). This gesture exemplifies “use of body” which “examines what parts of the body are featured” (Goshani, Park & Vissicaro, 2004, p. 100). The horsetail whisks are also important in establishing distance between dancers, as each dancer must take into account a distance
that provides for very broad swings. In this aspect, the use of silhougraphs, a creation of Kealiinohomoku based on the idea that dancers create shapes with their bodies, costumes, and paraphernalia (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 141), comes into play.

Another key component of the dancers’ outfits is rattles, used by dancers to announce movements on the dancing stage and to communicate with musicians as well as with one another (Ntaimah, 2014). They are also used by the kam to call for the initiation of a different dance style or a continuation of the same style. Communications with rattles prevent masquerades from breaking the code of silence, by uttering verbal pronouncements during performance.

Equally important in the way dance communicates meaning through space are the spatial dimensions covered in a movement and the dance path or directions followed by the performer – i.e., whether forward, backwards, or sideways (Ajayi, 1998, p. 19). The video performance is replete with “forward, backwards and sideways” movements. In Oku dances, this is part of neo-traditional trend as Argenti (1998) points out:

> While traditional masquerades dance only four types of step in a counter-clockwise circle around a xylophone, the new ‘styles’ masquerades have added an array of more complex and rapidly changing steps which they effectuate to the frequently switching rhythms of the xylophone and drum ensemble, and do not move in a circle but dance in place in a line periodically dividing into couple or trios and then lining up again in front of the leading masquerade (kam) which directs the dancing and the music by way of hand signal and other cues… (763)

Russell (1958) maintains that “in considering the basic principles underlying all movement, knowledge of the structure and function of the body is necessary” and she follows up this argument by stating that “in this connection it can be observed that the body has three possibilities of bending, stretching and twisting, various joints being able to perform one or more of these functions” (p. 22). Green (2011) has stated that the dance
genre known as Ballet has codification and names for each of its movements, positions for the feet, as well as carriage for the arms; and that this kind of codification is present in African dance as well, but it is dictated by the music, which governs the dance (p. 21).

Vissicaro (2004) identifies two basic types of movement, stationary and locomotor. Stationary, she maintains, are those that do not travel through space, such as bending, twisting or axial and stretching; while locomotor movements travel through space and include walk, run, hop, skip, jump, leap, slide, crawl, roll and gallop. All other movements are combination of these basic types (p. 140). Both locomotor and stationary movements are identified throughout the video.

Warren (1972) makes the argument that “differences in basic movement reflect the particular cultures that spawn the dances” (p. 26). Hence, Ntaimah (2014) states that in traditional Oku dances “gestures of happiness are demonstrated by widening the arms and feet” and that “these types of gestures are swift and occur repeatedly” (p. 3). Most of the movements on the video are locomotor. A very good example is the entry dance movement when the dancers swing from side to side to the beat of metal gongs and drum, performing a wide circular sweep with their whisks as they do so.

Irrespective of whether a movement is stationary or locomotor, it fits within a dance pattern or formation. “Formation considers how the movement ‘looks’ in terms of the overall design” (Goshani, Park & Vissicaro, 2004, p. 100). In the traditional Subi ballet, Ntaimah (2014) and Argenti (1998) identifies two formations, a circle and one straight line; while in the modern ballet or kekum mekale, such as Buum Oku Dance, new patterns such as triangle, letters V and H were developed by Ndinaah and included in dancing formations. In the video geometric formations such as a circle and straight lines
are common as well as a letter of the alphabet such as the letter H. Russell (1958) talks of “air pattern” which “may take the form of a straight line or the shape may be angular or curved or twisted” (p. 33). The whisks create different air patterns which are very distinctive. Sometimes, a formation is disrupted and reconfigured to fit within a given space. As also noticed in the video, single line formation may be disrupted to create another line or a new and tighter pattern or formation, as Argenti (1998) has shown (p. 763).

Spins, turns, backward and forward movements, as in Buum Oku Dance, involve the total body. For example, towards the end of the second set, the dancers split into a two-line formation and then dance outward in opposite circular directions to meet at the initial point of departure.

Gorer (1962) argues that “for the negro the dancing has always held first place; the music, such as it is, and the decorative arts have all been evolved to supplement the dance; and except for sculpture in certain cases they are still subsidiary” (p. 214). The association between African sculpture and dance has been explored by R. F. Thompson (1974) and this is important in analyzing posture, “the total physical body carriage of a person and the specific way and shape a person arranges the various physical parts of the body” (Ajayi, 1998, p. 16). R. F. Thompson makes the important observation that…

Tradition selects those bodily positions which come to define lordliness and command in human interaction: standing, sitting, riding on a horse. Tradition also emphasizes postures set at symbolically descended levels of submission and respect. These are: kneeling, supporting, and balancing objects upon the head. (p. 47)

So while horizontal positions correlate with darkness and death, standing embodies light and life; it is the stance of day and the time of morality. Among the Manding people,
standing as an act, foretold the very rise of the medieval Mali Empire, for its founder, Sundiata, could not stand or walk when he was a child (p. 49). With balancing, he also notes that to move in perfect confidence with an object balanced on the head is one of the accomplishments of traditional life in Africa. Consequently, Akan priests dance with a shrine, a vessel filled with magic substance and water, posed on their heads. Similarly, Oyo Yoruba thundegod (Shango) devotee must dance upon initiation with a living flame balanced in a vessel on their heads (p. 96). It is an abomination for any Oku masquerade to drop his mask during dance performance.

6.2.2.2 Energy

For energy, it implies action, power, or type of force and could be explored in terms of type, amount and dynamics. It is grouped into five basic categories: sustained, percussive, swing, collapse, and vibratory (Vissicaro, 2004; Ajayi, 1998). I plan to explore those movements I have identified in Buum Oku Dance video, such as “percussive” (movement with obvious starts and stops), “swinging” (going back and forth), and “vibratory”. Russell (1958) points out that “every movement has an effort quality” (p. 19).

While collapse movement, sudden falling movement that happens when support is removed (Vissicaro, 2004), may be common with an Oku acrobatic dance outfit such as Air Youth of Ichim (a mbaya dance), it is very rare with masquerades. The reasons are fairly obvious, since in mbaya performance dancers tend to dress lightly like athletes, putting on blue jumpsuits and wearing red berets (Argenti, 1998, p. 764). This is obviously a far cry from the ample and heavy jute accoutrements and wooden masks of
masquerades, not to talk of other paraphernalia, which make leaps and somersaults not conducive. A few do exist however in the video; like in the first and second sets when the dancers drop in a crouching stance.

“Percussive is a quality that applies to movement with obvious starts and stops; usually these are sharp and very quick” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 144). Even though this form of energy has been associated with sword and stick dances, where these instruments strike against one another, one common example which occurs in the video is when the praise singer and kam come face to face and clash their palms towards the end of the second set. Another example of percussive is the continuous step patterns that are sharp and sudden connecting with rhythmic structure of the music.

Swinging and vibratory movements are by far the most common in the video. Dancing backward and forward or from side to side, with body parts swinging, especially the arms from the ball and socket joints at the shoulder, producing swing energy quality. All these elements are pretty much in evidence throughout the video. At times, the dancers mark time while swinging their dance whisks.

R. F. Thompson (1974) points out the link between African art and dance by showing how energy is depicted in sculptures. He argues that an object shines within its force and without vital aliveness we are no longer talking about African art. This point, he maintains, applies to the dance.

People in Africa, regardless of their actual age, return to strong, youthful patterning whenever they move within the streams of energy which flow from drums or other sources of percussion. They obey the implications of vitality within the music and its speed and drive… The power of youth is suggested by other traits of African art and drive… Most dancers in Africa (elderly kings are sometimes an exception) step inside rhythms which are young and strong, and to this extent their bodies are generalized by vital rhythmic impulse. This necessitates phrasing every note
and step with consummate vitality. This is a uniquely African quality, dubbed ‘swing’ by jazzmen in the United States. (p. 7)

Vibratory movements occur when dancers jiggle their leg muscles in an attempt to move the rattles that collide against one another and produce the whoosh sound.

6.2.2.3 Rhythm

L. N. Thompson (1933) has described rhythm as “ordered movement which runs through all beauty” (p. 3) and identifies auditory and visual rhythms. Of the former, she states that they are the most common form in which the rhythm expressed or perceived is sound; for example, the heartbeat. As for the latter, she declares that they are those we see, for example, the movements of the arm of an orchestra leader (pp. 5-6). On the dance video, elements of auditory rhythms emanate from the xylophones, the drums, the trumpet, the double bells, the rattles, and from voices of the audience and praise singer; while visual rhythms could be associated with the swing of the dancing whisks and movements of hand and feet.

Ajayi (1998) has stated that the compositional quality of rhythm is instrumental to the total perception of dance as a continuous smooth form that Laban calls “the flow of movement” (p. 20). While Ajayi (1998) studies rhythm separately, Vissicaro (2004) tackles it under the element of time: some descriptors pertaining to time are rhythm, tempo, duration, pulse, and accent. She adds that “In West Africa, the double bell sets the rhythm, provides the tempo, and serves as a common reference point for other drummers, as well as the dancers” (p.143). On the video, Vissicaro’s observation may only apply to the entry dance. For Buum Oku, like numerous other Grassfield dances, the xylophones set the rhythm to which the dancers must coordinate their movements. Bebey (1975)
declared that a feature “that is common to all type of music in black Africa is rhythm” (p. 128). Merriam (1959) has pointed out that much of western writing on rhythm in African music has tended to emphasize drum and drumming to the exclusion of other musical instruments and ideas (p. 15). As clearly demonstrated on the video, Buum Oku Dance has a complex rhythm since there are numerous “centers of rhythms” (four different xylophone players, a drum, a trumpet and the double bells as well as seven dancers, with their rattles) which must be coordinated into one harmonious whole. To this end, the disposition of the various sections of the orchestra is important (J. Nsakse, personal communication, March 19, 2015). Fodeba (1959) has noted that “African dance indeed, far from being the autonomous art that it is in Europe, is primarily a union of rhythm and movement” (p. 20). Then he continues:

Neither would it be possible to understand the essential part played by dance in the life of the African peoples if one did not bear in mind their conditions of life. When a body has the lightness and the flexibility of a ‘liana’, who could prevent it from dancing? When the economic stage is essentially agricultural, involving few needs and material worries why not move like a bird or snake, open like a flower and so be in communion with Nature and the mysterious powers which people it and animate it? If one remembers these circumstances it is easy to see why the Africans are, so to speak, the real men of dance. For the very rhythm of their existence is already an invitation to dance – a simple rhythm in common time, which can be translated into the following needs:
- to work for the community
- to enjoy the fruit of common labour
- to honour the gods who protect man during his life and safeguard him after death
- to exteriorize the cause and effect of these activities by song and dance. (p. 21)

Here, clearly is outlined the importance of rhythm in African dance, for not one dance is performed without a reason. Dance is a school of life (Mveng et al., 1969). It dictates the rhythm of life itself, for “the subject matter of dance is all inclusive of every activity
between birth and death” (K. W. Asante, 1998, p. 6). Thus, community is created out of the rhythm produced by the musicians and dancers as the video clearly portrays.

6.3 Meaning, knowledge and power on the video performance

Hall (2013) has noted that Foucault argued “…that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not” and that “the question of the application and effectiveness of power/knowledge was more important… than the question of its ‘truth’” (p. 33). Such an argument seems particularly relevant in colonial discourses in which, through hegemonic practices, the “truths” of the colonizers became dominant.

Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. It is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment (p. 29). To Markula & Silk (2011), Foucauldian discourse analysis aims to detect what knowledges dominate a particular field, where they come from and how they have become dominant within ongoing power relations (p. 130). What are the ways of knowing about Buum Oku Dance and why do we consider these ways of knowing as important? How are dances in the tradition of Buum talked about or represented in Oku? How are these ways contested and how does the struggle between different sets of meanings reflect the play of power and resistance to power in Oku society?

Dances such as the one on the video have been variously referred to as “juju,” “masquerade,” “mask dance” (Argenti, 1998, 2006, 2007; Koloss, 2000; Ngum, 1999, 2010; Ntaimah, 2012, 2014), and “modern ballet” (Ntaimah, 2012, 2014). These various
terms are foreign to Oku and represent attempts at capturing one *Ebkuo* word: *kekum*. To the extent that Buum Oku Dance on the video is a mask dance, in that the dancers put on actual wooden masks, locals use the term “mask dance” interchangeably with *juju* and *masquerade*. To Monti (1969), the understanding “considers a mask to be the whole outfit…the cloth costume which covers the dancer as well as the accessories which he holds in his hands or with which he adorns his body” (p. 17). When the person adorns that mask, he is transformed into the spirit or being he is representing (K. W. Asante, 1994, 1998, p. 21), participating in the many-sided life in the universe, creating new realities beyond the merely human ones (Monti, 1969). It is this transformative dimension, in which the performer’s identity is temporarily lost, that Argenti (2006) associates with Oku mask dances. “Emphasis is not laid upon masks as objects in the Grassfields as it is in the West…but rather upon the power of metamorphosis and proximity to the other world achieved by the masquerade and its performance” (Argenti, 1998, p. 754). Hence, certain performers, *kekum*, do not necessarily need to wear headdresses to be considered masquerade (p. 52).

Foucault (2010) was much more historically specific, seeing forms of power/knowledge as rooted in particular contexts and histories. This seems particularly true of *kekum* which is originally associated with “mythical forest creatures” (Argenti, 1998, p. 755). Fardon (as cited in Argenti, 1998) states that “The /Chamba/ mask has the sense of man-made anomaly that enters the village from the bush and combines the features of the dead and the wild… The mask is the exemplary crosser of boundaries” (p.755). Argenti then concludes that

What relates the disparate types of *kekum* is not that they are all what would be categorized in the West as masquerades, but that they all negotiate
passages from the everyday world to the other world of the forest, the ancestors and the deities of Oku…
The members of masquerade society ironically employ fundamentally the same methods as those used by witches, those gifted with the power to detect witches… and by the king, all three of whom are reputed to be gifted with the power of bi-location and metamorphosis. That is to say that, in their rites (including rites of initiation) secret society members and their masquerades produce and reproduce themes of access to the other world in the forest, and further afield, also claimed by the king and by witches. Although these powers are ideally put into different uses by these different groups and although the king ideally has the greatest control over these powers, they are essentially the same powers. (Ibid)

Even with this apparent power parity between members of masquerades and the king, it must be noted, however, that “the masquerade of Oku can be divided into two basic types: those of the palace and those of the lineages…” and that “village masquerade dancing is known as bine, whereas palace masquerades are known as shienge, a term suggesting a display of might rather than a dance” (p. 754). Thus, a hierarchy is clearly established in which masquerades of the palace occupy an upper echelon. Foucault (2000) talks of modes of objectification, the second of which he termed “dividing practices.” Markula and Pringle (2006) point out that these practices are “… more broadly speaking, the socially constructed division between the abnormal and normal. The knowledge that helps create the divisions simultaneously justifies the confinement, isolation and control of certain groups of people” (p. 26). Here, we are confronted with an aspect of Foucault’s conception of power. To him, power is not monopolized by one center; it does not radiate from top to bottom, from the ruling class to the masses. Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore found to be operating in every site of social life (Hall, 2013, pp. 34-35). “Foucault’s view of power is relational and is, therefore, exercised to create certain practices” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 132). Argenti (1998) makes this clear when he states that
Half-way between the compound and the bush, covered in creepers and hidden from view by a dense thicket of greenery, secret society houses exist in the liminal space between both worlds. This ambivalent location signals the political potential of lineage masquerades, in the factional everyday world of opposing interest and struggles for influence, lineage masquerades sometimes act to support the palace in the village, but at other times, like Trojan horses, they contest the authority of the palace, even as they go there to perform. (p. 755)

Foucault talks of power being “productive,” of engendering the forces that challenge it and it is clear in the preceding citation that this is in evidence (Barker, 2003). So even though Buum Oku Dance performance on the video could be interpreted as representing youth resistance to the palace, which, throughout history, has connived with external forces to undermine its interests (Argenti, 1998, 2007), the troupe is still subject to the authority of Oku palace. The palace exercises in this case hegemony, “… a form of power based on leadership by a group in many field of activities at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable” (Hall, 2013, p. 248). Ntaimah (2014) makes it absolutely clear that “Ndinaah’s innovation (and its derivatives, including Buum Oku Dance) was still tied to the Oku cultural space” and that “the kam takes a central position while the rest of the masquerades are in the same hierarchical position” and “this depicts the absolute position and power the leader takes in this type of society” and “the kam depicts the Fon whose position and authority are unquestionable in the Oku cultural space” (p. 7). When the name “Buum” was selected for the dance troupe, the group needed the approval of the palace for it to be adopted (T. Gamse, personal communication, April 5, 2015). The gown of the kam, blue with cowry stripes, is identical to kelanlang, the blue-white striped outfit reserved for Oku royals; and cowries, which is an item associated with the palace not just in Oku but the entire Grassfields, are used to decorate the robes of the dancers. From these actions, for which
permission had to be sought from the palace, the troupe acknowledges the supremacy of the Oku palace and king in all the activities of the dance group. After all the kam, judging from his dress code, is clearly a symbol of the palace authority; he sports a human mask and leads, while the other dancers, who must receive orders from him, wear for the most part animal masks. There is hierarchy and where it exists, it has power implications.

Power negotiation within Buum Oku Dance space could be seen to go beyond the palace. Shay (2006) has pointed out that “in many communities, tensions often exist between the different choreographers and community dance companies, who are often rivals for pride of place in their respective communities as well as competing for public funding and performance opportunities” (p. 21). In the rivalry which pits folkdances against one another in Cameroon, through the choice of its name, the masquerade could be interpreted as expressing some kind of supremacy over other dances. “Buum” is an Eblam Ebkuo term that designates a tree in the forest which, unlike other trees, blossoms into flowers that attracts a very large number of bees. When it is in full bloom, honey production is at its peak; and during the same period, hunters return home with bountiful kill (T. Gamse, 1986, personal communication, April 5, 2015; F. Jick, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Buum, therefore, symbolizes plenty, abundance. So, likening dances to trees in the forest, this dance sets itself apart, for even though it is a tree, it is a different and special kind of tree, a very productive tree. Discourses do not reflect “reality” or innocently designate object (Hall, 2013). In representation, sometimes meanings depend on the differences between opposites: palace masquerades versus lineage masquerades; bine versus shienge; buum tree versus the other trees; human mask versus animal masks, etc. Thus, ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu pointed this out.
when he stated that “as soon as the world regards something as beautiful, ugliness simultaneously becomes apparent” and that “difficult and easy define each other” (Hua-Ching, 1989, p. 2). Derrida (as cited in Hall, 2013) argues that there is always a relation of power between the poles of binary opposition. This argument has been clearly demonstrated by Said (1979) in *Orientalism*; and by Hall (2013) in the concept of ‘intertextuality,’ where an image depends for its meaning on being ‘read’ in relation to a number of other similar images (pp. 222-223).

Similar arguments on differences are reminiscent of the colonial era when European colonialists and missionaries who came to Africa in the nineteenth century depicted African dances as “exotic”, “primitive” and “wild,” with little aesthetic value (K. W. Asante, 2000; Gorer, 1962). Apart from upholding such disparaging discourses about these dances, they described them as “imitative fornication” (Ajayi, 1998) and tried to suppress them “in an effort to curb pagan immorality” (Warren, 1972, p. 23). To Kealiinohomoku (2001), this is… a trait to divide the world into “we” and “they” (p. 41).

Fraleigh & Hanstein (1999) have emphasized the real purpose of this binary opposition.

> Setting the boundaries of genres, establishing artistic standards, and building hierarchical classifications and canons are not processes that are as pristinely objective as the cultural arbiters of high art would have one believe. At their most subjective, these processes can be little more than the labeling of art with appellation such as ‘beautiful,’ ‘significant,’ ‘universal,’ or ‘refined.’ Much of the powerful influence of elevated forms of art can be attributed to the fact that a specific – and powerful - group of people has agreed upon and perpetuated the idea that select forms of art deserve a position of prominence. (p. 340)

Both authors further argue that creating such oppositions in art forms constitute part of the less salutary aspects of the cultural/economic/political history that inspired, financed, and in other ways enabled the development of European imperial art (p. 341).
Vissicaro (2004) has argued that such “ethnocentric practices advance ideological assumptions that legitimize certain ways of thinking and acting” (p. 85) and so it comes as no surprise that “some individuals believe that ballet is superior to dances of indigenous people...because the former requires rigorous training and development of technique” (p. 86). These are Eurocentric constructs that Western media have done a lot to promote. This is cultural imperialism, which is described as “the process of a dominant group’s norms and culture becoming defined as the norm” (Dubrosky & Young, 2013, p. 207). Kealiinohomoku (1970/2001) has demonstrated that ballet is a form of ethnic dance (pp. 33-43); while Fodeba (1959) has argued that African dance could be considered a ballet.

If ballet is ‘a form of artistic and cultural expression developed by man in his endless quest for new means of expression, in his yearning to create forms which are ceaselessly renewed according to his genius and abilities’, African dance as a means of expression and of exteriorization can be identified with ballet”. (p. 20)

Said (1979) captures the ultimate purpose of discourses of difference between the West and “others” when he describes the relationship between the Occident and Orient as one of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (p. 8). It, therefore, comes as no surprise that “in missionary circles /African religions/have been condemned as superstitious, satanic, devilish and hellish” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 13). In Oku, the manner in which African dances was portrayed caused conflicts within native people, many of whom were Christians and attempted to distance themselves from what they were made to perceive as “heathen” practices. For instance, “in 1920, Moses Nkeng, who was to guard his father’s juju at Jiyane, ran away... He only returned to Oku in 1939, already a Christian/ and a pastor” (Bah, 1996, p. 1).
Mazama (2002) has argued that Christianity must be understood to be part of the white supremacy project and points out the paradox of this religion causing more misery and suffering than any other religion (p. 223). Listen to Paul Kruger, the President of the South African Republic, when he addressed his Volkraad (People’s Council) in August 1897 – “Our constitution wants no equality and equality is also against the Bible, because social classes were also applied by God” (Eze, 2011, p. 11); and to Nelson Mandela (1994): “The policy was supported by the Dutch Reformed Church, which furnished apartheid with its religious underpinnings by suggesting that Afrikaners were God’s chosen people and that blacks were a subservient species” (p. 97). Malcolm X (1964) sums it up thus: “First always ‘religiously,’ he (the white man) branded ‘heathen’ and ‘pagan’ labels upon ancient non-white cultures and civilization” (p. 178).

6.4 Embodiment on Buum Oku Dance video

The Canadian oxford Dictionary (1998) describes “embody”, the verbal form from which “embodiment” is derived as

1 give a concrete or discernible form to (an idea, concept, etc.), 2 (of things or person) be an expression of (an idea etc.). 3 express tangibly (courage embodied in her heroic actions). 4 form into a body. 5 include, comprise. 6 provide (a spirit) with bodily form. (p. 456)

These various definitions capture the essence of the term. Fraleigh (2000) has stated that the notion of embodiment is a fully and totally human notion; and that “being embodied implies being embedded as well – embedded in a society, a culture, a language”. She further argues that “to be human entails existing in a world of symbolization and meaning that is essentially tied to the material, the physical, the kinetic, the spatial, the temporal” and that “dance captures all of these ideas” (p. 8). Desmond argues that
By looking at dance we can see enacted in a broad scale, and in a codified fashion, socially constituted and historically specific attitudes toward the body in general, toward specific social group’s usage of the body in particular, and about the relationships among variously marked bodies, as well as the social attitudes toward the use of space and time. (p. 32)

What then does the dance on the video embody?

In some aspects of his research, Nicolai Argenti has demonstrated how hierarchy is used to emphasize difference between palatine elites and youths of Oku; and how, from the slave era to postcolonial Cameroon, this situation has led to the exploitation, marginalization and oppression of the latter. He illustrates how the performance of masked dances in Oku among youths has come to embody a form of resistance within this history. This phenomenon is not new in Africa, for the French colonial authorities saw in the Hauka spirit possession movement in Niger “no more than a theatrical stage of political resistance” (Stoller, 1995, pp. 119-120). Argenti’s (2007) analysis is grounded particularly in the lived historical and social experience of Oku. He states:

Indeed, apart from a few exceptions, Africa’s new youth were systematically divested of the right to accede to eldership as reinvented by the state and the state can thus be seen to have reproduced rather than replaced local gerontocracies. Like the colonial order, the postcolonial state has participated in a dialectical relationship with local elites, each systematically providing legitimacy for the other, and one of the outcomes of the partnership has been the emergence of youth as a salient category. (pp. 9-10)

Argenti’s perspective embraces an emancipatory objective of Buum Oku Dance as well as an Afrocentric approach that “must be concerned with the liberation of oppressed people” (Mazama, 2003, p. 145). He argues that “in the elaboration of discourses of power, the palatine elite of the Grassfields had more than myths in their armoury” (2007, p. 57). In analyzing the embodiment of the performance of Oku mask dances, he expands the semantic field by drawing on discourses stemming from the term kekum. The term
*kekum* in Oku, as in most of the Bamenda Grassfield, is polysemic and covers a much wider range of referents and category than the Western categories of masks; but it “primarily refers to any person thought to possess the power of metamorphosis and to undergo transformations” (Argenti, 2006, p. 52). So, the dancing paraphernalia are seen as a means of achieving this end. At an even deeper connotative level, there is another meaning to the term. Central to the term *kekum* is the root *kum*, for in *Eblam Ebkuo*, it means “to lock,” “to touch,” “to be adjacent to or next to in a queue or line.” *Kenkum* is a lock of any type and *eykum* is a padlock and *kenkumten* refers to a follower, as in a line. *Kum*, the root common in all the terms and referring to the notion of “locking” or “standing in a line and of being interlinked”, are all “actions reminiscent of the way slaves and later, forced labourers were taken from the Grassfield, bound to each other, in a single-file and marched down to the coast by guards” (Ibid). So, the etymology of masking in Oku, accordingly, seems to make reference to the slave trade of the past. 

Argenti (2006) points this out when he states that “the term *kekum* has nothing to do with masking, in fact, but denotes mythical forest creatures” (p. 758), with the ability to spirit something away. Gamse (1986) agrees with this definition when he states that “Juju is considered traditionally as a mysterious, extraordinary, and even supernatural, creature” (p. 2).

Resistance to the palace, which tends to present itself as the voice of the central government at the local level and, therefore, reenacting a long tradition of youth subservience and exploitation, may be said to be embodied in the performance of youth masquerades such as Buum Oku Dance in the video. These masked performances “were once deployed to address the unspeakable violence of the slave trade as it unfolded”,

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conditions that “are still relevant today because the power relations first conceived by the transatlantic slave trade still obtain in the present” (Argenti, 2007, p. 4). So, even as the dance is innovated, “innovation does not represent a radical departure from the past, but rather the continuity of an essentially local response to an ever-widening field of information…” (Argenti, 1998, p. 767).

During performance in the video, the dancers are led on stage in the opening set by a masquerade wearing a buffalo head mask while the dancer who brings up the rear sports an elephant head mask. The kam carries a spear and is clearly in command even though he operates mainly from the flank of the other dancers. Argenti (2006) argues that this configuration embodies a slave or colonial caravans. “Like the masks of the Grassfields, the German colonial caravans and the slave caravans before them all had drivers …. who made liberal use of the whips to drive the porters on” (p. 62). The term “captain,” used to describe the kam, hints at “policing figures” who in slave caravans often bore a weapon and who, in the configuration of the dancers in the video, is symbolized by the lead dancer bearing a spear. With the kam commanding from the flank, with two powerful figures both at the head (buffalo) and tail (elephant) of the file of dancers, the “lock” is clicked shut. The whisks of the dancer, of horsetail, for horses are foreign to Oku, shows the complicity of outside forces. “Objects of foreign provenance were…inextricably tied up with histories of war and conquest” (Argenti, 1998, p. 767). The cowry shells on the mask and ndobo-like robe (kelanlang) of the kam may both be signs that hint at the involvement of the palace in all these nefarious activities to which Oku youths have been and are still being subjected. The mask could connote the loss of the identity of the slave (Argenti, 2006).
At a broader level of embodiment, the dance has come to be seen as a metaphor of ethnicity, of the Bamenda Grassfield region, of the state, even the nation, prompting G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015) to declare that “the dance represent Oku to me”. Thus, Desmond (1999) argues that dance “movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities” (p. 31). In postcolonial African identity politics, folkdances have come to embody the quest for national cultural affirmation and recognition as well as political inclusion. Kringelback & Skinner (2012) have noted that studies of dance and politics have multiplied since the early 1990s and they explore the ways in which dance practices can be co-opted to promote or contest political agendas (p. 14). Reed (1998) agrees, stating that “dance is a powerful tool in shaping nationalist ideology and in the creation of national subjects, often more so than political rhetoric or intellectual debates” (p. 511). It is, therefore, not surprising that “Les Ballets Africains de la Republique de Guinee… became the representation of Guinea nationalism to the rest of the world” (Flaig, 2010, p. 6).

This trend is not at all surprising given that most African countries are still grappling with the problem of national cohesion. Towards the end of 1884 the big powers of Europe met in Berlin in order to divide the African continent into recognizable pieces (Sesay, 1986, p. 34) and it was out of this partition that the states of modern Africa were created by simply lumping together disparate and sometimes antagonistic groups into an ethnic mosaic. After the Berlin Conference, Cameroon became a colony of Germany (Ebune, 1992, p. 23), a rule that lasted until the 1913 Anglo-French partition in which the possession became a mandated territory of the League of Nations (1922-1945) and then later United Nations Trust Territory (Achankeng, 2014, p. vii). When Western rule came
to an end following decolonization, former colonies in Africa sought to establish a new cultural identity. This seemed particularly true in former Portuguese and French African colonies, such as Cameroon, where the policy of assimilation had failed even to acknowledge the presence of indigenous African culture (Crowder, 1967). Cabral (1973) maintains that assimilation was more or less a violent attempt to deny native people their culture (p. 40). Cesaire (1972) has painted a picture of the relation that existed between the colonizers and colonized. “No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a class room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production (p. 21)”

Thus imperialist domination, by denying the historical development of the dominated people, necessarily also denied their cultural development (Cabral, 1973, pp. 42-43). With independence, African countries had a lot of political and cultural catching up to do. As late as October 1975, UNESCO, meeting in Accra in Ghana for an African intergovernmental conference, stated that “the major cultural problem which Africa faces is the one of its cultural identity,” for “to affirm the cultural identity of a people is to give meaning to their lives and to lay a foundation to their political independence” (Presence Africaine, 1976, p. 9). In Cameroon, by 1961 the Federal Linguistic and Cultural Centre had been created by UNESCO (Seignobos, 2011) and it was later merged with the Service of Cultural Development whose mission was “to give new life and impetus to an authentic Cameroonian culture” (Mveng et al. 1969, p. 9). One way in which local culture came to be restored and promoted was through folkdances. Ntaimah (2012) states that

Immediately after independence, the former president of the Republic, Amadou Ahidjo, introduced what was commonly known as ‘agricultural
shows’. During these shows, not only were agricultural produce exhibited, but many other domains of national life. One of such activities was the performance of traditional dances. (p. 44)

The choice of dance for this crucial role is not surprising. Fodeba (1959) points out that “…with all its moral and social context, dance has been the link which enabled African societies to maintain their cohesiveness” (p. 23). In their quest to establish an “authentic” national culture, some emerging African countries thus set the pace by drawing on the folklores, histories, songs, poems and dances of existing national ethnic groups in order to form dance companies. This trend was described as “neo-traditional” (Kringelbach, 2012; Green, 2011) and the most flagrant examples were Les Ballets Africains de la Guinee, Ghana Dance Ensemble and National Dance Company of Senegal. Fodeba (1959) argues that “the essence of authenticity in folklore is not to lose the original character through external influences” (p. 22). Shay (2002) has argued that describing particular forms of dance as “folk dance” carries certain historical and political connotation (p. 2) and that nationalists frequently forge their patriotic and sometimes chauvinistic positions and claims by the use of elements of ethnicity such as language, traditional music and dance as representing the common origins of the majority population on the stage of nationalist discourse (p. 5). This argument is bolstered by Veal (2000) who noted that “…creative artists … also play a very important role in the symbolic process of cultural revitalization, often with substantial government support” (p. 46). Using Cohen’s notion of “cultural performance,” Kringelback (2012) also argues that “…the artistic and the political could not be separated from each other” (p. 144) and that “It is no coincidence that dance and musical performance are so often mobilized to help shape local, ethnic and national identities” (p. 157). Desmond (1999) has identified
similar trends in Haiti where she argues that “the ‘folkloricization’ of national identity through performance is, of course, by no means unique to Haiti but has played a part in twentieth-century nationalisms more generally” (p. 346). So, even though Buum Oku Dance as portrayed in the video is ethnic in character, its momentum has been hijacked by the State of Cameroon to give cultural and even political relevance to a neocolonial polity still largely dominated by the French. Today, the folkdance has been representing Cameroon in different events across the world.

As clearly outlined, the representation of the 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance performance goes far beyond what hits the eye. In an attempt to preserve ethnic and national identities, it unlocks dark secrets of the past, with diverse and serious power implications.
CHAPTER 7: ANALYSIS OF DATA ON AUDIENCE RECEPTION

7.1 General introduction

The third phase of circuit of cultural production (Du Gay et al. 2003, p. 3; R. Johnson, 1986/87, pp. 45-47) is audience reception. Hanna (1988) has stated that “dance is replete with meaning for audience to discover or create” (p. 15) and that “in order to see and savor all that is present in a performance, the viewer must look for the choreographer’s meanings, respond to the dancers’ interpretations and bring his or her own personal experience to bear upon what happens on stage” (p. 16). In this segment of this research, I have analyzed the responses of 6 students, 3 men and 3 women. After watching the 15-minute video of Buum Oku Dance, I sat down with each of them for a private interview based mainly on the dance.

7.2 Some observations on the interviews of the six participants

During the interviews with these participants, there were some recurring discourses. Discourses are about the production of knowledge through language. Stokes (2013) argues that one element that is important in discourse analysis is the identification of the mode of address: the position from which the discourse is being made and the assumed identity of the person or persons (p. 145). This aspect has been amply examined in chapter four which covers the methodology for this research.

Five main themes resonated in the interviews. They are not neatly delineated, so I have created categories under which to group them for easier analysis and have attempted to arrange them in the order of importance to participants. The themes are as follows: (a)
family/community; (b) cultural inclusion; (c) group identity; (d) gender issues; and (e) self-esteem/dropout.

I find it necessary to make the general observation that during the interview when participants talked about the family and community, it was as if the two notions were one and same thing. “Personally I am in dance and it feels like my family and if we work together, get along and accept each other, then it brings us together” stated Sierra. Another participant, Kabari, noted “In terms of family, I would say that it is the togetherness factor… The drummers, the audience, the dancers all coming together to promote a culture; in this case family should be seen in a broader sense in that it transcends blood relationship”. For Isaiah, “We bring the dance to our community, express it in our households, within our families, families broadly speaking, including those close friends… and coworkers we take as family, people with whom we attend Sunday services, schools, people we see every day when we are at work”. Kweira maintains that “in the dance group that I am now in, it feels like a dance family…, so I feel that bringing people together for dance, for music, you got to know those people, you got to be a community together.”

Based on the analysis, each of these themes raised by participants do contribute in its own way to the emancipatory objective of this investigation.

7.3 Analysis of the data of six participants

7.3.1 Family/Community

G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015) noted in Yaounde in relation to Buum Oku Dance that “the dance represents Oku to me.” This declaration is clearly an
association of dance with community, an aspect which reverberates throughout the various interviews I conducted in Regina. Drawing from his own experience as a Sudanese, Mabior noted in his interview that

This dance and other dances that I have seen tend to be collective dances. So when everybody has a part to play, the level of participation is raised; physical presence is important for each individual to play his role and this makes you a part of the community and through such collective action, community is uplifted; your participation is important to that particular community, to that particular dance.

I find his intervention very relevant to this research in that it portrays dance as a likely instrument which could easily be used to bond Africans in Regina to their community. Even though Brown and Hannis (2012) have pointed out that “people are often more willing to be collaborative when they are confronting a common issue,” this has not really proved to be the case with Africans in Regina since they have failed to come together as a strong community to face up to “common issues” such as racism, sexism, cultural exclusion, etc. Mabior identifies in the dance video a way forward for Africans.

Dance is a tool for unity and when people come together, it is easier to build a community. When there is a dance, it will attract people, some of them will participate in the actual dancing; others will watch and learn a lot from it and it can act as a place where people assemble and this gives them the opportunity to discuss important matters and work out issues that keep the community together. (Ibid)

He does not isolate dance from the various activities which it encompasses; rather the activities form part of it and serve as a magnet to draw together people with diverse interests; and in doing so, this leads to the creation of community. His views of dance as a collective endeavour echo my own experience with this art form in Cameroon and other parts of Africa which I visited. The collective nature of dance in Africa is clearly
highlighted by these questions from a Swazi: “Dance when I am alone in my hut? Am I a wizard?” (as cited in Warren, 1972). For any diverse community, such as the one of Africans in Regina, where debilitating centrifugal national, ethnic, class and even religious undercurrents continue to tug at the base, a dance such as Buum Oku holds out tremendous potentials for unity and community. Some participants emphasized how its wide range of applications and artistic portfolios is likely to draw and accommodate people from diverse backgrounds and age groups. “This new style, the beat, very rhythmically kind of dance; the way that they were dressed, with masks and everything; I feel that that would be attractive to a young audience but also to an elderly audience” notes Kweira who also adds that “it does not matter from what community you come in Africa, it could be Ghanaian, it could be Nigerian, it could be Kenyan…, it does not matter which group you are from, anyone can come together and participate in the dance…”. For Jennifer, “the dance could be used to build community by representing the culture to people in folklore and Mosaic.”

Seen from the angle in which the dance could involve a broad spectrum of personalities and activities, it is but fitting that some participants believe its application in a school setting could be the answer to a wide range of issues. For instance, take the case of exclusion, or the inability to focus. On exclusion, Kweira has stated that “other children may not tell you that you are different but in a way based on the vibe that you get, you feel that you are not always included in the group.” In response to issues of exclusion and lack of concentration, Sierra makes an interesting analogy by showing how the dance can make a student adjust better in a difficult school environment.

I see dance as a context in which you can draw from other persons to be able to cope with education in school. Dancing is intense, with numerous routines,
and to keep those routines in your head and reproduce them calls for focus, an aspect that could be transferred to school life… In dance you can do something and you do it freely and not be worried about what other people would say or think about you…, you can be creative, move a certain way in order to achieve something… (Sierra)

Jennifer shares some of Sierra’s ideas and even views the dance as a means of encouraging students to go to school. “I think that dance can help students in school to focus. A lot of children do not want to go to school, so if there is a reason, or something to draw them to school, then they will go to school” (Jennifer).

It is important to note that Sierra’s approach to community building defies sameness and advocates the search for an individual path within a group.

Being in dance, I think there is a lot of similarities and stuff; but it taught me to accept what my role in life was and that I am a unique person and I can do unique things and I learn to embrace what I do have rather than pining for things I do not have… As long as you interpret your feelings your own way, it is alright because it is unique and it is creative. I think it should be acceptable, for you do not need to be like the person besides you. (Sierra)

In this approach, she espouses the African philosophy of Ubuntu in which people define their own individuality on how they relate to other members of their group. Eze (2011) points out that Ubuntu does not need to generate an oppressive structure, where the individual loses his or her autonomy in an attempt to maintain a relationship with the ‘other,’ but rather a critical reading of conditions of relationship to others might suggest that a person’s humanity flourishes through a process of relation and distance, of uniqueness and difference (p. 12). If we acknowledge bullying or racism as picking on other students or pupils because they are different, then Sierra’s perspective on dance in creating community in a school environment becomes a very useful tool in education.
Sierra shares a lot in common with Mabior and even takes the discussion a step further which, I must add, shows her deep understanding of dance and community organization.

Community, I think it is just working together; and in dance everyone would have a specific role to play; and organization too is important for community building in that you need a structure; also, to be able to work together to create something that is unique and creative. Coming to the dance itself, a lot of the movement being in sync with the music and the timing of things; also the costumes, including the masks, everything has to be coordinated in such a way that things are uniform as the dancers move around. It takes a lot of organization and working together to create that feeling of being together, of being a community. (Sierra)

She raises an important point in that while she sees dance mainly as a tool for community building through socialization, she also identifies it as a “structure” on which a community could be constructed, with dancers providing support to one another. “Having somebody to support you and to be besides you working with you, I think it is easier for things to turn out the way you want it to and you do not have to drop out of school or give up and that is important.” Thus, through mutual support group solidarity and competitiveness are enhanced and community reinforced.

Community building by associating the dance with a common cultural identity and sense of history also came up during the interviews. “I think it will be helpful to bring people together and show them the cultural aspects…, to show the world that here we have something and it goes back centuries… and that would be helpful to have a core community…” stated Kabari. Sierra noted that “the fact that I identify with a specific dance makes me want to be part of it and that brings people together.” The views of both Kabari and Sierra move them towards their own cultural “centre” (M. K. Asante, 1998) and as such align their thoughts with Afrocentricity and the original objective of the
creation of the dance on the video. Gamse (1986), the first president of Buum Oku Dance, declared that “we created this dance in Yaounde to prevent the very rich and colourful tradition handed down to us by our ancestors from disappearing” (p. 2). By laying emphasis on their cultural identity, they hint at Canada’s diverse and multicultural character. Isaiah’s view drives right into the heart of the matter when he points out that “…with Canada being a very Caucasian, white dominant country, you are not going to find people, especially in Regina, who can relate to you culturally, and so you have to buckle down and say to yourself, I want to know about my culture” and that “I dance because my culture brought it to me and I want to show people that I know my culture, I know what I am talking about, I know the stories” (Isaiah).

The stress on the return to their own culture does give the debate an Afrocentric flavour; but even more importantly, it centres it on the concrete reality of the African community in the City of Regina which is culturally dislocated. The community is thus provided with the opportunity to explore and exhaust its own cultural options, a phase which must be negotiated before reaching out to other communities. This is no easy challenge. Returning to “our own culture” debunks the notion of a quick fix and calls instead for an even deeper reflection on the application of dance in a multi-ethnic and cultural setting since Africans in Regina do not form a homogenous entity. Titon (1996) argues that “ethnicity comes into play only in the presence of people from a different group” (p. 72). Negotiating religious, ethnic and national differences in an attempt to implement a dance such as Buum Oku requires a lot of savvy, of give-and-take and other experiments in order to build a solid and truly reflective “rainbow” community. Difficult as the task may appear, Vissicaro (2009) shows a way forward by noting that a
community could be united by sharing dance which facilitates the resurgence of the thread of tradition in the lives of members (p. 56). Thus, Sierra’s view of the dance as a “structure” becomes very relevant in that there is margin for expansion and alterations by drawing on the multiplicity of cultures bearing the label “African” and “Canadian” and building around the common “thread of tradition.” It is a more inclusive approach to community building, with the added advantage that it waters down any accusation of essentialism.

By insisting that Africans should count on their own cultural resources, Isaiah and Kabari are also calling on the community to break with the syndrome of letting themselves defined by other cultures. “I think that it could definitely contribute in a way that people see the costume, people see the culture, people see the dance and overall excitement of it…” (Kabari). In addition, the views of the two participants draw on the African concept of *Ujamaa*. The term was coined by former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere and in Swahili it literally means “familyhood.” It advocates first and foremost that for African development, Africans have to depend on themselves and their own resources (Karenga, 1998, p. 57).

The notion of self-reliance echoes throughout the works of community development experts. For example, Freire (1993), whose own writings on the matter was greatly inspired by the challenging national circumstances of his native Brazil, has stated that the role of community development processes and practices is to ensure that ordinary people and those who are marginalized and oppressed are provided with the knowledge and skills so that they can analyze critically their situation and actively respond. The idea of self-reliance is at the core of the concept of Afrocentricity. M. K. Asante (1998) argues
that “if we have lost anything, it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our own platforms” and “this means that we cannot truly be ourselves… since we exist in a borrowed space” (p. 8).

Kabari maintains that “… it (the dance) will be helpful to bring people together and show them the cultural aspects. I know that the First Nations people do their pow wow dance and they have like their drums…” (Kabari). His voice is not one in the wilderness, for his idea is already being experimented by the African diaspora community in the United States where Sudanese refugees in Arizona, whose predicament is in many ways analogous to that of the African community in Regina, have used dance to come together, to be a place of refuge “…in which communal values take precedence over individual needs” (Vissicaro, 2009, p. 56).

Even though the need to remain “centred” is important, it comes with numerous challenges, especially in a context where there are dominant cultures. “You know people see something new and they are scared because they want to stay in their comfort zone” points out Isaiah in his interview. Shay (2006) argues that “because the core of ethnic identity is not readily available in overtly written texts, dance companies become useful vehicles for the expression of ethnicity and nationalism through the symbolic substitution of movement” (p. 6). Dance then becomes a cultural identity whose knowledge is shared by a people and is used by them to define themselves in relation to others (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 73). This was clearly the case with Subi when it started out in its native Mboh. Ngum (1990) and Jaji et al. (2007) have noted that Jaji’s Subi dance in Old Town Bamenda became a rallying point of Oku indigenes living in the city of Bamenda.
Creating community through the assertion of ethnic identity by using dance is, in a way, a resistance to the imposition of the dominant culture(s), a task that is very challenging. Kweira points this out in her interview when she notes that

I remember in school learning dances, Aboriginal dances because it is very important since we are in Canada, and then Ukrainian dances; but what about African and Caribbean dances because I feel that if you have to teach dances, it should be everyone’s, not just certain groups.

Woodard’s (2002) claim that “difference is underpinned by exclusion” (p. 9) therefore becomes pertinent in this regard. It is an argument bolstered by Kallen (2003) who maintains that the obstacles of primary integration into mainstream tend to be self-imposed by minority ethnic communities whose closure devices lack both the power and the scope to impact upon societal-wide opportunities (p. 147). Tettey & Puplampu (2005) have also argued that emphasis on ethnicity could be seen as “a tendency to revert to tribalism and groupthink” (p. 28). Shay (2006) points out that in the reification of culture and ethnicity, ethnicity is constructed as typically, or even only, an attribute of the Other (p. 3).

Even though returning to our own cultural base through dance may have the negative fallouts as has been outlined, most participants view it as an important path forward for the African community in Regina. Tettey & Puplampu (2005) argue that “ethnicity forms the basis for social struggle among groups” and in modern societies, either intentionally or unintentionally, it “looms large in the dynamics of group solidarity and processes…” (p. 28). Kweira states that

It feels good when everyone in the room looks like me and it has boosted my self-esteem and when I go to those other ballet and jazz classes, I feel like there is a group of girls I dance with and they are like me. At least there I can identify.
The second reason stems from the very nature of dance and Eurocentrism in North American society. Desmond (1999) points out that in the US, the dominant structuring trope of racialized difference remains white/nonwhite and that within this horizon, black/white and Latin/white dyads of difference reinforce essentialized notions of cultural production (p. 37). Furthermore, “to doubly insure the hegemony of European American art, an additional strategy of cultural arbiters has been to weld racial dichotomies and aesthetic dichotomies…, with all of their implied meanings of inferiority and superiority, into one seamless concept” (Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999, p. 342). This has been a strategy embedded in the school system in which for “…over the past 100 years, many texts have focused largely on the study of dance from a European perspective” and that “these texts were legitimizied by the dominant or hegemonic ideology through continued adoption in university courses” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 85). All of these reasons underline the question Kweira asked: “what about the African and Carribean dances?”

In the face of these realities, Africans have to come up with strategies to counter such hegemonic tendencies and narratives. Divisions within the black community in Regina have almost caused it to retreat into what Freire (1993) terms “a culture of silence.” Thus Kweira advocates that

In the curriculum of elementary school, middle school or even high school, it will be important to include music and dance and it does not have to center around African, Ukranian or Aboriginal culture; it should be we do a segment of each and then move to the next, just so that you include everyone and not just focus on a specific ethnicity.

Kweira’s appeal is a call for action, for by failing to do so, the community succumbs to what Brown and Hannis (2012) refer to as “cultural incapacity” which includes racism, maintenance of stereotype and discrimination, and hiring practices that are unfair.
Eurocentric hegemonic interpretation of dance needs to be challenged since it classifies dance into “high” and “low” art. According to the same interpretation, “some dance is not acceptable because of its innovative departure from mainstream aesthetics; or, as in the case of African American dance, it is not acceptable because of entrenched racial biases that affect the way in which it is perceived.” In this interpretation, “much of the elevated forms of art can be attributed to the fact that a specific – and a powerful – group of people has agreed upon and perpetuated the idea that select forms of art deserve position of prominence” (Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999, p. 340).

In my opinion, confronting hegemonic narratives and practices remains a tall order. All the same, the assertion of ethnic particularity of dance and the numerous challenges that come with it in a multi-cultural context do not prevent this art form from becoming “a bridge for traversing cultural borders” (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 5) in order to form even larger communities. Kweira in her interview thus views dance as both a means of creating communities as well as reaching out to other communities. From the diverse musical instruments being used through the actual dancing to audience participation, she identifies the different aspects in the video that could help bring people together. By alluding to these various facets, she sees the dance as something that could become transcendental, one whereby irrespective of nationality, race or gender people can participate in one way or the other.

I noted in the video that there were many people who were involved in watching the dance and also participating in the dance; it does not matter from what ethnic community you come from in Africa; it could be Ghanaian, it could be Nigerian, it could be Kenyan. (Kweira)

She also raises a point that is very significant in terms of the inclusive and transcendental nature of the dance. “The idea that you cannot actually see the person also brings people
together; it does not matter which group you are from, anyone can come together and participate in the dance,” she argues. Central in her argument is the idea that identity, be it ethnic, racial, cultural or gender, is constructed. People reject or accommodate the differences they have been educated to see.

The quest to reach out and involve members of other communities was an overarching element in the interviews of the majority of participants. For Isaiah, the outlook of the dance could be the aspect that elicits interest in other communities. “I think that it could definitely contribute in a way that people see the costume, people see the culture, people see the dance and the overall excitement of it and I think that will ignite someone’s interest.” Mabior views the spectacle and participatory aspects as the rallying point, the point of attraction that draws people from other communities.

When there is a dance, it will attract people; some of the people will participate in the actual dancing, others will watch and learn a lot from it; and it can act as a place where people assemble and this gives them the opportunity to discuss important matters and work out issues that keep the community together. (Mabior)

Jennifer has identified the different events which take place in the City of Regina as an outlet to present the dance and reach out to other communities: “The dance could be used to build community by representing the culture to people in folklore and Mosaic; some people may love it and want to learn it” (Jennifer).

Her observation is very relevant in the context of Regina where events such as Mosaic and the Folkfestival have been instituted to help bridge cultural gaps by bringing people together to share elements of their culture. As Africans in the city strive to create a larger and viable community to meet the challenges they face, they have to partner with other communities and draw inspiration from their own traditions and experiences. This
approach is not only beneficial but is also in line with the Canadian policy of inclusion through multiculturalism. As long as these activities do not become an outlet for the dominant white culture to display essentialized notions of the Other, thereby helping to promote the very stereotypes that have often been used to justify exclusion, they are commendable. Sierra’s proposition refocuses our attention to where the discussion started, our own “centre.” She constructs the process of cultural expansion and community building following a concentric format that starts within the community before extending to other communities.

I think that it is important, first know who and what you are in life, and then going to those who are similar, reaching out to families and then to the communities; and then to continue to build out…and continue to bring in other communities (Sierra).

In the light of black history and experience, Sierra’s approach blends in with the perspectives of past and present Afrocentric scholars. Woodson (1933/2006) insisted that education in America for black people must first address their historical experience, both in America and Africa. Thus, Mazama (2001) insists that “Our liberation and Afrocentricity contends and rests upon our ability to systematically displace European ways of thinking, being, feeling and consciously replace them with ways germane to our own African cultural experience” (p. 388).

“You can’t run away from yourself!” chants Jamaican reggae star Bob Marley. This core message in Rasta liberation theology is an exhortation for black people not to reject their own culture. While the singer’s appeal is important, it will be counterproductive to community formation if it only provides the basis for the kind of “cultural absolutism” that could culminate in black extremism and exclusion. The purpose of creating a more inclusive and stronger community is to avoid being marginalized. So
striking the delicate balance between self and others is important. Not least because the line between self and others is sometimes blurrier in a context in which even within the community a person has multiple identities such as one born into a bi-racial or multi-ethnic household. This point looms in Kabari’s interview. “My father is Ghanaian and my mother is Jamaican. I am really interested in African and Caribbean culture and in learning about the similarities and differences and the history as well.” Sierra expresses the notion even clearer when she states that “…there are so many cultures and people are confused about where they need to be…”

Within dance the line between self and others could be virtually erased. Block & kissell (2001) have argued that “while embodiment is in one sense a refutation of the Cartesian mind/body polarity, it is more than that. We are not merely embodied as individuals. Our culture, our language and our art tell us that our way of being-in-the-world means being with others.” And consequently “…dance captures an essential element of embodiment that profoundly involves community” (p. 8). Fodeba (1959) agrees, adding that “…a simple rhythm in common time, which can be translated into the following needs: to work for the community; to enjoy the fruit of common labour” (p. 21). This has prompted Liane Loots, artistic director of Flatfoot Dance Company in South Africa to state that “…the more personal you get, the more universal you get” (Shapiro, 2008, p. 428). This is Ubuntu.

In the contemporary world where culture seems to be constantly in a flux, cultural particularity as expressed in ethnic dance often operates on quick sand. When different cultures come together, there is a lot of give and take which often give rise to something
new. Isaiah expresses this idea in a conversation he had with his friend Brian from Malawi.

It (*the conversation*) thought me about my African background, my roots because we got together and we actually had the chance to tell him about the islands, my cultural background. It was not like we were colliding two cultures together but rather we were joining two cultures that was once in Africa and then travelled up to the islands. And so it is like he is connecting me with the first part of the bridge and I am connecting him with the second part of the bridge. (Isaiah)

In the same vein, when Subi dance started out, it was as an Oku enterprise limited to members of that ethnicity and the North West Region of Cameroon. Other ethnic groups such as Chomba and Bamendankwe soon came on board, copying the dance and reinterpreting it their own way, thus making it their dance. As Oku indigenes travelled to other parts of the world, the dance was among the items they trundled in their cultural portfolio. For Buum Oku Dance to serve as a tool for building and consolidating African community in Regina, it must be malleable and open to reinterpretation. It should serve the various African, and even other Canadian, communities as a means of telling their respective stories. By thus accommodating more people and expanding its repertoire, it stands a better chance to succeed in its educational and collective objectives.

Based on the analysis of the interviews of participants, I have identified different ways in which dance could be used to create community and some of the obstacles and challenges involved in the process. For example, participants talked of dance as a “structure” around which to build community; a source of a common identity; and art form with multiple portfolios and activities to accommodate diverse groups, an art form which provides for multiple identities, a tool for reaching out to other communities, etc. Among the challenges they identified are resistance from the dominant culture, the
danger of lapsing into essentialism, individual versus group identity, etc. The obstacles notwithstanding, participants viewed the dance as the way forward.

7.3.2 Cultural inclusion

The next theme which featured prominently in the interview of participants was “cultural inclusion.” The official state policy of multiculturalism positions Canada as a mosaic of diverse cultures (Caida & Allard, 2005, p. 302; Berry, 2013) and it is this reality that gives relevance to the discussion on inclusion. In addition, Barker’s (2003) argument that “the concept of culture is by definition central to cultural studies” (p. 57) also makes the issue important to this analysis since cultural studies constitutes a central component of this investigation.

During his interview, Isaiah took issue with cultural inclusion as it is practised in Canada. “We have to be our self, represent who we are to make a nation of cultures. Jamaican model is one out of many, that is, unity in diversity; in other words, out of many cultures there is one culture in Jamaica.” He argues in favour of different cultures coming together and blending to eventually become one within the nation of Canada and sees that as a global trend. “A lot of the world is into what is going on and cultures seem to blend so people talk less about their specific ethnic culture but rather focus on national culture” (Isaiah). In a way, his stance on cultural inclusion shares a lot in common with the anti-essentialism of Gilroy (1993) who likens it to Ralph Ellison’s description of a true jazz which is

an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment…springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents a definition of his identity; as
individual, as member of a collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition (p. 79)

Isaiah’s intervention is significant in that it seems an indictment of the notion of “cultural inclusion” in Canada where it is more words than actions. In 1988 the Multicultural Act became a policy of the government of Canada and one of its objectives was to “recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage” (cited in Kallen, 2003). Apart from Isaiah, Kweira also questions Canadian multiculturalism based on her own experience with dance in school where she realized that African and Caribbean dances were not included in the curriculum. Scholars (Day, 2000; Haque, 2012) have continued to raise questions on the issue of multiculturalism in Canada, the gulf which exists between rhetoric and practice. Dei et al.’s (2003) approach to inclusivity adopts diversity as a critical perspective in which inclusion has a transformative agenda in that it focuses on the asymmetrical power relations between and among cultural groups within Canada and seeks a redistribution of power to ensure fair representation (pp. 14-15). Some scholars have argued that multiculturalism without a political transformative agenda can just be another form of accommodation to the larger social order (McLaren, 2003; Rhoads & Valdez, 1996); hence Isaiah’s and Kweira’s concerns.

The ultimate objective of this investigation is emancipatory, so exploring power asymmetry within the Canadian multicultural context is very important. Under the slave or colonial regime black culture was often misrepresented or completely omitted. As Hall (2013) has clearly demonstrated, it is a portrayal which continues to this day. By insisting
that all the cultures which make up the Canadian Mosaic should be represented, Isaiah shares in that liberatory mission.

After all, the idea of building a social melting pot which once encouraged assimilation of minorities into the dominant group had failed, mainly because it turned out to be a powerful tool of control. Moreover, cultural difference and notions of the “Other” in many areas fueled tension, and created social boundaries that tended to isolate individuals and groups. Multiculturalism, though in recent times increasing under fire from scholars such as Richard Day (2000) and Eve Haque (2012), was introduced then as a counter proposal to this concept in that it embraced diversity and brought issues of ethnic and cultural identity to the forefront (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 4; 2009, p. 52). The issue of the importance of ethnic identity loomed large in the interviews of the participants as we shall see in the coming segment of the analysis on “group identity.” Sierra talks of racial exclusion and Kweira and Isaiah of cultural exclusion.

Kringelback & Skinner (2012) view culture as a creative process of integration as much as differentiation in which the boundaries between the two cannot be clear-cut (p. 2). Breaking out of the original dualistic Eurocentric mold is at the core of most of the challenges cultural inclusion faces in Canada today. It is even shocking to note that in the original equation of “inclusion” indigenous culture, which Europeans encountered when they arrived in this country, was not even a variable. So, right from the start, the elephant of multiculturalism was set on clay feet. Kabari thus calls for an openness which runs contrary to the original spirit of Canadian multiculturalism. He touches on several key issues when he states:

I think it is important that people should look at what others are doing, not be stuck in the same old routines, bubbles…. It is nice especially in Canada
where we are supposed to be a multicultural, immigrant society; and this background should be reflected in school; and I think that would help, at a younger age especially, kids coming up to see what different cultures do because they do not see it on the TV. That would be important; it could be built into the curriculum for sure. (Kabari)

Kabari’s view on inclusion is a call on Canada not to turn its back on its own policy of diversity and multiculturalism. He even points out that advantages could be derived through cultural openness and participation. By making this a selling point, Kabari thus exposes Canada’s hypocrisy in the implementation of its multicultural policy. Rumbles of this critique have echoed in other communities. For instance, Caterina Pizanias (1996) noted that “any critical reading of the discourse on multiculturalism in Canada…will reveal that all efforts at inclusion have been guided by a wish to preserve the ideological status quo of Anglo superiority” (p. 36). Tettey & Puplampu (2005) agree with this assessment by declaring that even though one major tenet of multiculturalism in Canada is to promote the equality of all cultures, the reality is that certain cultures are accorded pride of place in Canadian society, while the values and practices of other cultures, which are not concordant with those of the dominant groups, are rejected or denigrated as backward and likely to contaminate the civilized ethos of the dominant culture (p. 39).

Given the antithetical situation between rhetoric and practice, Kabari sees dance as one way through which true multiculturalism could be implemented in schools. “It would be nice to see some dance class in school where you can study some African dances, to make pupils have a more worldly view. Teach them some dances from Africa, from Asia, First Nations... This is more inclusive to people” (Kabari). Isaiah softens the ground further for inclusion by pointing out that current global trend is to break barriers, to draw from other cultures. “When you are in art and you want to present yourself, then
go ahead and present yourself; don’t say I am from Canada or I am from PA in
Saskatchewan or from Toronto… Really represent who you are…, where you got the
inspiration and what you dance.” In this he shares a common call with Kabari for cultural
openness and inclusion.

Intra-group inclusion also came up in the interviews in relation to genders, an
aspect which has been analyzed under “Gender.” However, useful a tool as dance could
become to reach out to other communities and share culture, Shay (2006) has utilized
folk dances to debunk the myth of cultural inclusion by exposing an element of Anglo
hypocrisy to the idea of multiculturalism:

The concept and the prominent civic presence of international folk dance
festivals, then, constitute the ideal nexus of the representative needs of liberal
Anglos to demonstrate inclusiveness and celebrate multiculturalism and
tolerance, and simultaneously by mainstream society… This liberal concept of
inclusion, so long as western Europe and ‘American’ heritage remain
enshrined in a central position in our libraries, educational systems, political
establishments, and the multicultural civic activities, such as international folk
dance festivals, remains as popular today as it was a century ago. (p. 32)

In addition to inclusion through cultural openness, Sierra takes the debate on dance one
step further than Isaiah and Kabari. It is not just the advantages derived from inclusion
which this art form affords, as Kabari argued, or the fact that it is a matter of national
policy, which Isaiah discussed, but also an issue of identity.

The dance can draw together different people to enable them to work as a
team, thus helping to enhance a sense of inclusion. How this relates to life
nowadays is that there are so many cultures and people are confused about
where they need to be, what their role to play is… (Sierra)

At the end of it all, Sierra sees a larger picture, one of national unity: “no matter what,
who you are, your gender, your race, your creed or anything, you could work together
and make something beautiful… with everybody working together, instead of people just
working individually or in their own small community.” Some of Kabari’s and Sierra’s views on inclusion align with the third objective of the federal government’s policy statement on multiculturalism: “to promote creative intercultural exchange among groups in order to foster national unity” (Kallen, 2003, p. 156).

While on the video Sierra identifies the goal of inclusion, of coming together, as the creation of something “beautiful,” Isaiah believes educating the public is essential in making inclusion happen.

The video certainly goes deeper than anything I may say, anything I may know because there are missing links in my own culture that I am still looking for. With the dancing, with the music, with the poems and with the writings, I think all that arts can come together; instead of saying that I do this for the fame, I do this for the money, I do this for the popularity... I just want people to see what is going on; people to see who I am and where I come from. (Isaiah)

By linking inclusion, education and culture, Isaiah brings to the fore an old thorny debate on multiculturalism in his interview. Rhoads & Valdez (1996) have confirmed this by stating that “Multiculturalism is a central topic in today’s debate about educational policy” (p. 8). Even Britain is not spared the scourge as Brinson (1991) points out. “The inadequacy of cultural education in the British educational process may be a significant reason for the racism, violence and intolerance which beset British society” (pp. 69-70).

Isaiah’s contribution by establishing this important link between culture and education takes us right into the heart of the video of Buum Oku Dance as a potential tool for community organization and education promotion among Africans and other communities in Regina. Dei et al. (2007) have stated that “School can be seen... as a microcosm of society and the primary site of social reproduction,” a site for the creation of “…the ideological conditions necessary to replicate the extant social-class and power
relations which maintain social order” (p. 20). It is the reason why certain dances are excluded from the curriculum as Kweira points out; why certain skin colour and hair texture are not seen as “real,” a point Sierra highlights by drawing on her own experience in school. For education to play the role of effective cultural transmission and inclusion, M. K. Asante (1993) has insisted that “in a multicultural society there must be a multicultural curriculum, a multicultural approach to institution-building and so forth” (p. 89). Isaiah’s appeal to take a leaf from Jamaica seems particularly relevant here. “Jamaican model is one out of many, that is unity in diversity; in other worlds, out of many cultures there is one culture in Jamaica.” Such an approach buys into the idea that education should address the needs of a multicultural society by dealing with social inequalities and inequities, and linking power and empowerment with race, gender, and class…for social change (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, pp.38-39).

Rhoads & Valdez (2004) have maintained that “mainstream multiculturalism” has failed to transform monocultural institution into multicultural communities and so they advocate instead “critical multiculturalism, which combines the conditions of cultural diversity with the emancipatory vision of a critical educational practice…” (p. 9). By dealing with issues such as race, gender, difference in their interviews on inclusion, the six participants agree to a large extent with the two scholars. While advocating the use of dance as a way forward in creating a more inclusive society, some of them view some hegemonic practices as a concern. Isaiah’s call for the Jamaican model echoes in the views of M. K. Asante (1993) who challenges hegemonic and Eurocentric approach by declaring that “it is the conviction that we will defend the rights of all cultural expressions, not just Greco-Roman-Hebraic-Germanic-Viking culture” (88).
As a battle ground for cultural inclusion, schools could be a double-edge sword. Montgomery (2013) has noted that even though schools are sites where “…structural domination is reproduced through the teaching of difficult knowledge,” he also argues that they “are both, even simultaneously, sites of domination and liberation” (p. 2). Montgomery’s argument taps into Foucault for whom power is not simply repressive but is productive in that it creates the forces that can destroy it (Barker, 2003, p. 103). Kweira and Kabari stated that a dance such as Buum Oku should be introduce to provide a counter narrative in a school environment where only European dances are taught and promoted.

Kweira provides a counter argument to scholars opposed to inclusion by viewing difference as disuniting when she sees the dance as a centripetal force. She recounted how she watched the video with her brother and he was intrigued. “He was intrigued by this new style, the beat, the very rhythmical type of dance; the way they were dressed, with masks and everything.” She then concludes that “just having that would be attractive to a young…and elderly audience” and “…will even pull a community together; so why don’t we just try that as a group of people.”

At the core of the interviews of all the participants, was the call for greater cultural inclusion both at the levels of schools and society. While all the participants believed in reaching out to other communities in order to broaden cultural appeal, they also realized, from their own experiences, that it was not an easy task. Barriers erected through non-inclusive curriculum and other hegemonic practices, through racial difference and prejudice, take time to dismantle. Howevery, they all agreed that an art form such as Buum Oku Dance showed great potentials for doing that.
7.3.3 Group identity

Covington-Ward (2013) has pointed out that “the most useful theory to emerge from migration literature in regard to the grand march is that of ethnic group identity formation…” (p. 33) and Ghosh & Abdi (2004) have argued that “for visible minorities, the apparent distinction of colour and/or culture produce a sense of discomfort and forces them to define themselves, to say who they are and what constitutes their identity” (p. 70). With all the participants being “visible minorities” and part of a “migration” trend, it is not surprising that issue of group identity featured prominently in the interviews.

On the question of the dance and identity, Jennifer stated:
I would like to point out that there are many dances in the world and every dance has a culture behind it. And the culture shows how the people worship or practice their religion. It helps one to embrace his or her culture, for there are many different ways of seeing things. A dance comes with specific spiritual values which are part of a culture. (Jennifer)

Jennifer’s view on the dance comes across as emancipatory in that dance is associated with the cultural system from which it emanates. It is a departure from earlier Eurocentric interpretation of dance in which dances of the Other, especially those which did not conform to Western standards, were often described as “wild,” “primitive,” “lewd,” “profane…” (Ajayi, 1998; K. W. Asante, 1998, 2000). As a consequence of such a portrayal, Bah (1996) has demonstrated how Oku indigenes who had come under the spell of Christianity turned their back on their own dances, even going as far as describing them as heathen practices. By insisting that ‘there are many dances in the world’, each of which “has a culture behind it”, Jennifer agrees with Shay (2002) that ethnic identity is reproduced through folkdance (p. 6) as well as with Covington-Ward (2013) that “…cultural forms play a large role in shaping ethnic identity” (p. 33).
Jennifer’s perception of dance is in accordance with that of dance anthropologists such as Kurath (1960), Royce (1977), Hanna (1988, 1999), Kaeppler (1978, 2000), Kealiinohomoku (1976, 2001), etc. The works of these scholars have made tremendous contribution in liberating dance by introducing multicultural dance studies which adhere to the Bosian doctrine that dance and music must be considered in the contexts of the society of which they are part.

Jennifer’s view on identity formation through dance has been elaborated upon by Vissicaro (2004) who identifies two types of identities: an individual identity which she likens to a fingerprint; and a collective identity, which is formed when people have certain types of similarities and come together. She associates collective identity with culture, “in which a set of people shares knowledge and acts upon how they make sense of the information” (p. 73).

The issue of identity and dance is raised by Sierra in her own interview. I think being part of a group does involve a lot of a common identity; sometimes people really do not know what their identity is, so it is having such a support group or doing something that a person is interested in. I find that cool. So the fact that I identify with a specific dance makes me to want to be part of it. (Sierra)

Her thoughts are in consonance with Jennifer’s concerning the idea of being part of a group in which members share something in common. In Jennifer’s case, the “something” is “culture”, while in Sierra’s it is “identity.” Central to Jennifer’s declaration is the acknowledgement of difference; and how meaning and identity are produced through dance. “There are many different ways of seeing things,” she declares. Barker (2003) argues that texts, in this case the dance on the video, as forms of representation, are polysemic. How a text is seen and interpreted depends on subjectivity and some other factors; so, in any culture there is a great diversity of meanings on any
topic and it is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events (Hall, 2013, p. xix). Thus, Jennifer points out that the dance “helps one to embrace his or her culture, for there are many ways of seeing things.” This point she raises is very important, especially in a context where the notion of race has been injected into the conversation of meaning, prompting Cappello (2012) to declare that “race remains a salient feature effecting and producing social realities…” (p. 6). This was certainly true of the attitude of the white population of Saskatchewan when blacks began to settle in the province, as Shepard (1997) shows.

There was a deep colour prejudice in British society even before the ancestors of Americans and Anglo-Canadians left for the New World. Black had become an overwhelming negative symbol with profound sexual and religious connotations. Black was a badge of inferiority to the British and their colonial descendants, and became a mark of slavery. (pp. 1-2)

Tettey & Puplampu (2005) argue that “in Canada and in other multi-ethnic societies, the question of identity relates to how several ascribed and socially determined factors interact to define people’s sense of self and their treatment, or place, in the larger society” (p. 28). This argument seems to lurk at the back of the mind of Mabior when he states that aspects of the dance are relevant in that “…they help people to see African culture, to appreciate the culture and when they do, they will realize that Africans are people with culture, with their own heritage, a heritage from which other communities can learn something.” Since in Eurocentric discourses and constructs Africans are represented as a people without culture, which explains why African culture never makes it on the television or in school books, it is easy for many Canadians to conclude that Africans do not have a culture. Said (1997) and Smith (1999) have pointed out that colonial representation is about distorting the image of the Other. Drawing on Foucault, Tavares
(1996) has illustrated a way in which identity is constructed through negative representation. “Foucault’s genealogical inquiries help undo the naturalness of historical phenomena and push us to consider how linguistic practices are impositions that make a reality possible” (p. 192). Consequently, by employing denigrating discourses and techniques such as “black rapist beast”, “black as hell”, “black peril”, “negro problem”..., white Canadians changed the way in which the conduct of black people should be conceptualized and managed. Thus, it is not surprising for Isaiah to state that “…you are not going to find people especially in Regina who can relate to you culturally, so you have to buckle down and say to yourself, I want to know more about my culture.”

Nevertheless, since, as Hanna (1988) argues, “identity evolves through realizing others’ perception of the self as well as by contrasting and comparing others with oneself in real or make-believe life” (p. 8), asserting their identity through dance and reaching out and educating other communities during events such as Mosaic and Folkfestival were themes that came up constantly in the interviews of the participants. As a tool for emancipation, Fraleigh & Hanstein (1999) argue that “…art and culture can serve as an arena where power struggles over group recognition, representation and identity take place” (pp. 335-336). In the quest for a new identity, “individuals within ethnic groups, and the various ethnic groups as collectives, keenly desired and constructed choreographic means of representation that would show their respective communities in a positive light to the outside world (Shay, 2006, p. 20)” and that “dance and its accompanying costumes and music can be said to operate as an almost instant symbol of identity in many ethnic and immigrant communities” (p. 46). For example, a group of African refugees now living in Arizona acknowledges that the transmission of dance
became for them a stabilizing agent constituting and reinforcing a sense of identity in the IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) and refugee camps (Vissicaro, 2009, pp. 55-56).

If negative representation ends up in marginalization and exclusion, asserting ethnic peculiarity through dance as a redemptive measure is not without problems of its own. Thus, Jennifer’s call on people to embrace their own culture may come across as being essentialist, especially given that cultures in the modern era are constantly borrowing from one another and evolving, as Gilroy (1993; McRobbie, 2006, pp. 40-65) and Desmond (1999) argue. Sierra hints at Gilroy’s anti-essentialist position when she states that “sometimes people really do not know what their identity is…” It is a view that Hall & Du Gay (1996) embrace by arguing that “…identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (pp. 3-4). While adopting the same anti-essentialist stance, Isaiah looks at the issue differently: “A lot of the world is into what is going on and cultures seem to blend so people talk less about their specific ethnic culture but rather focus on national culture”.

The point of anti-essentialism has been raised by Desmond (1999) who maintains that “concepts of hybridity or syncretism more adequately describe the complex interaction among ideology, cultural form, and power differentials that are manifest in such transfers” (p. 35).

Kabari, who was born in Canada and has lived in this country his entire life, makes an anti-essentialist argument too on the issue of identity by focusing the lens on himself: “My father is Ghanaian and my mother is Jamaican. I am really interested in African and Caribbean culture and in learning about the similarities and differences and
the history as well.” Not stated but implied in Kabari’s statement is the question: *who am I?* If we conceive identity as borrowing from others and being borrowed from by others and ever changing and taking new forms, nothing speaks more to such dialectical character than Isaiah’s interaction with his friend from Malawi:

I got the chance to tell him about the islands, my cultural background. It was not like we were colliding two cultures together but rather we were joining two cultures that was once in Africa and then travelled up to the islands. And so it is like he is connecting me with the first part of the bridge and I am connecting him with the second part of the bridge. (Isaiah)

Kabari also notes in relation to the dance that “I love the dance as it was kind of outside and open…; it was really appropriate for the dancers since some of them were taking on the identity of animals, so they were outside in the proper environment for it.”

The issue of the projection of an identity other than the one of human in the dance video is also taken up in the interview by Kweira who raises the issue of disguise as well.

I definitely have not seen dancers with masks, people dancing whose faces I do not see. I tend to see dancers whose facial expressions I observe; but I feel that the masks tell a story. The main man in the middle kind of leading the group and the others, some with animal masks, following kind of telling the story. I would say that they were following him. It was interesting to note that you cannot see their faces. The facial masks, some in the likeness of animals, preventing one from seeing the faces of the dancers was kind of interesting to me.

The fact that the identities of animals are represented in the dance leads us to think that the people of Oku place themselves on or close to the same plane with the environment in which they live. In this sense, Buum Oku Dance becomes a tool for the liberation of nature from the ravages of human activities. Any wonder then that Oku is one of the cleanest villages in Cameroon in terms of the respect for the environment! The mask of the dancers also raises an important question in identity formation and emancipation. One way to look at it is that disguise erases or conceals the identity of the dancer. Monti
(1969) has noted in connection with Africans and mask dance that “in his mask he can be a spirit-man, an animal-man or a divinity-man. It represents for him a real possibility of experiencing another sort of existence, a possibility admitted and recognized by everyone: no one doubts the transfiguring power of the mask” (p. 15). I extend Monti’s argument by stating that the dancer can become a woman, a member of any race, a transgender, a lesbian or gay. Depending on how the dance is used, in the hands of Africans in Regina, it could become a tool to combat racism, gender inequality, homophobia, etc. since nobody knows who is dancing. After all, what people see as female, male, white, black, pretty, ugly, etc. are all constructs into which they have been manipulated through regulatory and normalization acts. I find in that performativity in identity construction. By the mere act of donning the mask, the person automatically loses his own identity and is transformed into the spirit of the being he represents. The activity in this case does not even need to be “repetitive” and “processual” (McRobbie, 2006, p. 85).

Throughout the interviews, participants examined the question of identity from diverse angles. It is not surprising that identity looms large in their discussion of the video. The caricatures which pass for black identities have been carefully crafted in different eras of history by hegemonic Eurocentric powers using negative representations and continue to be sustained in the media and schools systems through various forms of discourses. Karenga (1998) argues that “the first act of a free people is to shape its world in its own image and interest. And it is a statement about their conception of self and their commitment to self-determination” (p. 5).
7.3.4 Gender

Barker (2003) has argued that it is impossible to conceive cultural studies without discussing issues of sex and gender and feminist theories (p. 279), so “in the past three decades, the pioneering works of feminist scholars, both in traditional disciplines and in women’s studies, has made us increasingly aware of the centrality of gender in social life” (Kimmel, 2008, p. xii). The “centrality of gender” came up during the interviews.

A key point which resonated in most of the interviews is assigning different roles within dance based on gender. On this count, Sierra stated:

I think that in dancing there are lots of different roles and in my dance we have girls and boys and sometimes we have to move differently. Sometimes we do the same kinds of movements but the boys do it a bit differently; thinking about it, I believe that as long as there is certain meaning behind it that relates to men or women, I think that there is a different role for us to play in society and in the world, I think that it is alright for men to have their own dance and women to have theirs… With dance you come to identify with something and if men identify with certain aspects of uniqueness or what they do they deserve to have a dance for themselves if they want to; I think that women can do the same or both men and women can mix together but I do not think that you should feel a kind of way just because I am a woman and can dance and relate to what the men are doing. (Sierra)

Isaiah follows the same line of argument.

I do not think it excludes anybody. Like I said, I have been dancing for years and I do what is called a variety of girl moves. They wouldn’t actually call it a girl move, but it is a girl-basic move, usually done by girls; but being male dominant is really cool. For my dance, it is female dominant, and it becomes male dominant when it is solo and there are little parts where I do it differently from the girls... So seeing the dance being male dominant is pretty cool to me, because art is art, it has no gender, no colour. I think it can include everyone… I definitely think that females can be included into the dance; I do not think that you have to change the meaning behind the dance, change the background, the costume. Maybe the moves could be advanced to become kind of more feminine, but you do not have to change the background or the story of the dance. I definitely believe that every gender has its own way to express art. When it comes to painting, you can tell by the way they paint according to the gender; it seems like females have very descriptive, elaborate, pinpoint way of doing it than males do. That is the way I view it.
When it comes to writing music, guys have that kind of more aggressive, more of a showoff confident attitude; as for girls, they are more sweet, soft, not raw and hardcore, as people would say. Boys are a crazy, wild and so when it comes to dance, when I was doing hip hop guys used to fancy all these crazy moves, the best wildest moves that you could ever desire, ever figure out and we try to master them and go beyond that and make more elaborate and advanced those moves than the people who invented those moves. And so it definitely comes around to art has no colour, no gender. It comes down to yourself, how you can change it, either to be more masculine or more feminine. In African and Caribbean dance, it seems like boys and girls come as one and there are dances in Caribbean, back in the islands where women would do a dance more than guys would or vice versa; or both of them would come together and dance equally. It seems like that is also true of African dances as well and so I do not think it discriminates, it discriminates anyone purposely; I think it just does it for the fact that there are stories that women tell and there are stories that men tell and there are stories that both genders do together. I think that when the story cannot be told with words, with the voice, then that is when it is told with dance where the male steps up, where the female steps up and that is where it comes to female and male dominant dancing. (Isaiah)

Sierra and Isaiah talk of different roles for males and females in a dance and Isaiah even notes that “moves could be advanced to become kind of more feminine.” This thinking fits in with the definition of gender which refers to the meaning assigned to men and women based on their presumed biological sex and what men and women are supposed to do in the world. For instance, men wear pants and are considered more aggressive than women (Kimmel, 2008, p. 413). The idea of separate roles for women and men in dance is not new. Kringelbach (2007) points this out, stating that in Wolof-speaking Senegal “Popular events such as sabar dances…provide a unique space in which respectable women may enact a wide range of emotions than in everyday life. Men, by contrast, risk being classified as homosexual, mad people, or lower-status praise-singers…if they allow themselves as expressively as some women do” (p. 1). Similarly, Kurath (1960) had focused on male-female roles and had noted that “social dances pair the sexes; most ritual dances segregate them…” (p. 237). Nevertheless, the question that
comes up then is on what criteria is role distribution within the same dance based and what are the implications for meaning interpretation and power distribution? Drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity, Miller (2007) argues that “…gender is not inherent but is engendered by disciplinary pressures that coerce us into performing, that is, behaving, in a way society assumes is appropriate for a certain gender” (p. 224). Could this be the case with “feminine moves?” as Isaiah espouses. He goes further to throw more light on this subject by declaring that

when it comes to writing music, guys have that kind of more aggressive, more of a showoff confident attitude; as for girls, they are more sweet, soft, not raw and hardcore, as people would say. Boys are crazy, wild and so when it comes to dance, when I was doing hip hop guys used to fancy all these crazy moves. (Isaiah)

Kringelback & Skinner (2012) have demonstrated how tango has been used in various constructions of masculinity in Argentina (p. 15). Thus, Ngum (2015) has a point when she makes the argument that while Oku women have come up with a wide range of beautiful dances, which they perform on national occasions and special festivals, they are largely excluded from owning masked dances. In Oku, only males are allowed to be initiated into masked dances which come with tremendous medicine, secrets and power (Argenti, 2007; Koloss, 2000; Ntaimah, personal communication, March 17, 2015). G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015) confirms this, noting that “when it comes to juju society, women are not allowed.” Such attribution of role based on gender creates power imbalance. Ngum (1990) has argued that “these dances all owe allegiance to kwifon, Fon and other royalties…” (p. 324) and that during performance kwifon “…provides authority or power for men and boys to the exclusion of even those aged women who are supposed to be wiser through experience” (p. 40). The exclusion of
women “…goes hand-in-hand with an extraordinary degree of economic control exercised by the secret male political associations linked to the palaces of Grassfields chiefs” (Warnier in Fowler & Zeitlyn, 1996, p. 5). Hall (2013) has stated that the body, female and male in this case, is produced within discourse; and discourses do not reflect “reality” or innocently designate object. The construct has power implication, prompting Markula & Pringle (2006) to lend a voice to Foucault by rejecting the positivist belief that knowledge could be constructed objectively (p. 27).

In Oku hierarchy of dances, masked dances, from which women are excluded, occupy a higher echelon and as such are often invited to participate in funerals and other important ceremonies where they are given huge sums of money as well as goods which members share among themselves. Ngum (personal communication, April 6, 2015) thus states that “…dance…serves political purposes, they serve economic purposes, they serve social purposes; they are also didactic, they are religious”.

Even with this power imbalance, most participants did not think having a separate dance for men discriminates against women. “I do not think it (the dance) discriminates…purposefully; I think it just does it for the fact that there are stories that women tell and there are stories that men tell and there are stories that both genders do together” (Isaiah). Sierra holds a view not different from Isaiah’s. “I think that…with dance you come to identify with something and if men identify with certain aspects of uniqueness or what they do they deserve to have a dance for themselves if they want to; I think that women can do the same…” (Sierra). Often overlooked in these views is the hierarchy that comes with the classification of “man” and “woman” and the implication for power and control. Kimmel (2008) points out that scholars have increasingly asserted
the need to understand gender as a system of social relations, one in which gender is defined by socially constructed relationships between women and men, among women, among men in social groups. Gender should be viewed as fluid, a category whose meaning emerges in specific social contexts as it is created and recreated through human actions (p. 81).

In line with male-female power asymmetry based on dance, G. Keja (personal communication, March 19, 2015) has outlined how money derived from juju dance is distributed among members of Buum Oku Dance: “When we perform, 30% of our income during each outing goes in our coffers, 70% is used for transportation, other expenditures and motivation of the dancers”. It should be pointed out that since women do not participate in the dance on the video, they can only benefit indirectly from the money that goes into the coffers of the association. A clear pattern emerges from this analysis in which too much power is concentrated in the hands of men that they use for their own uplift, often to the detriment of women.

Kweira advocates breaking down barriers in order to throw the dance on the video open to anyone who wants to participate; however, she associates the absence of female participation more with cultural peculiarity and difference. “I understand that in history or in other cultures, there are different dances which are for males and others for females but I feel that those barriers can always be crossed and females and males can do both types of dances if their hearts really desires them.” Like Isaiah and Sierra, she seems more concerned with the story being told and which gender does plays the role. In addition, apart from attributing the absence of women in dance to cultural peculiarity, she
does not think that the gender of the persons telling the story on the video really matters, especially as the identities of the dancers are concealed.

I would not want to be restricted … Because you cannot see their faces that part of it means that it doesn’t matter who is doing the dance, it is the story that it is telling. I feel that a female could easily tell that story or if it were a dance for females, males could also bring something to the dance as well. (Kweira)

Her association of dance and cultural peculiarity draws on the concept of “dance culture” (Kealiinohomoku, 2001a; Vissicaro, 2004) and does raise a key question on how other cultures approach issues of gender. It has been pointed out that ”a central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definition(s) that could serve as point of unification” (McCann & Kim, 2003, p. 50). In the case of a universal approach, who determines the approach; and on what criteria is such an approach based? What is the subject position or standpoint of those who determine the approach? Butler (1990) has focused on the problem by pointing out that

The contemporary feminist debates over essentialism raise the question of the universality of female identity and masculinist oppression in other ways. Universalist claims are based on a common or shared epistemological standpoint, understood as the articulated consciousness or shared structures of oppression or in the ostensibly transcultural structures of femininity, maternity, sexuality… This globalizing gesture has spawned a number of criticisms from women who claim that the category ‘women’ is normative and exclusionary and is invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact. (p. 14)

Even though she injects cultural peculiarity into the conversation, Kweira somehow wrestles with the issues of gender within dance. “I just feel that it is very common from culture to culture, even from continent to continent, to have that ideology that men only do this while women do that” she declares, adding that “I would just say
that we’ve come a long way and we have evolved to a point where it is important to break those barriers, gender stereotypes.” The question of cultural and racial peculiarities has come to play an important role in gender and feminist conversations. Desmond (1999a) has argued that gender systems are always political in the most fundamental sense of articulating a division of power. They operate in complex and often contradictory ways and intersect with other categories of social differentiation such as race, class, ethnicity, age, national origin, and so on (pp. 309-310). It is along this line that black feminists and Africana womanists have launched their crusades. Thus, Hudson-Weems (2004), an Africana womanist theorist, states: “Arguably feminism, and by extension Black feminism, carries its own baggage that does not work within a Black historical and cultural context” (p. xx).

Mabior seems to share some of Kweira’s views. While acknowledging that such a dance could be open to members of both genders, he uses the example of Sudan to make a case for gender-based dances depending on the practical purpose of the dance. “Imagine, for example, a woman being present during a male circumcision ceremony or men dancing when a woman is being initiated into womanhood!” he queried before arguing that “In such a situation, the separation into genders makes sense to me. The separation is dictated by the nature of the event taking place.” Pearl Primus (1998) declares that “There are…dances which are the exclusive property of certain occupations. There are dances which accompany story telling…” (p. 6). Mabior, however, identifies areas in the video where gender restriction is not necessary and explores gender roles in dance in his native Sudan.

Females can also sing the songs that the men were singing, play the instruments that the men were playing; they can dance and beat the drums,
almost everything that was being done in the dance could be done by women. In Sudan we have male dances, female dances and dances involving both genders. Male dances are usually during initiation but for females there are dances to celebrate the attainment of womanhood. In such dances, the various genders have their own styles of singing, dances and the storylines are different for both.

Concerning the video, Kabari stated:

I could not tell whether they were all males; I thought they were some females in there. I do not see why it should just be a male dance because they are losing their identity. I can see any group, any gender, taking part in this dance; that would be beneficial, that way they can do different identities or whatever. I think that you can include a whole village in the whole dance since it takes on multiple identities, people, animal, birds and spirits… (Kabari)

I find Kabari’s observation eye-opening, even groundbreaking, in that it views this dance as a tool par excellence to combat sexism since by putting on their masks, the dancers lose their identities. Oku conception of the “mask,” that is *kekum*, goes beyond the headpiece or cover, for performers do not need to wear headdresses to be considered masquerade since it is the transformative dimension that really matters (Argenti, 2006). This transformative ability in which there is temporary loss of identity means anyone can play any role. The dance in this sense becomes a perfect tool for inclusiveness and community building. K. W. Asante (1998) has pointed out that “The identity of the mask wearer is not revealed according to secrecy of tradition” (p. 21). Kabari’s view lends credence to the fact that gender is a social construct and has nothing to do with biology.

Much of what people know about gender comes through regulatory practices and normalization. The African conception of dance as an emanation of the people (Fodeba, 1959) and as a source of education from birth to death (K. W. Asante, 1998) makes it an ideal instrument to combat gender inequalities since in Africa it takes a whole village to raise a child. Imagine a village without women!
The attitude of participants with regard to gender during the interview was for the most part ambivalent. While most of them believed that having separate roles within dance for women or gender-based dance depended on the culture and the story behind each performance, they felt that it was not necessary to segregate the sexes.

7.3.5 Self-esteem/school dropout

Since education is central to dance in this study, a major concern that came up during the interviews focused on school dropout/push out. It is interesting to note how many participants associated school dropout with “low self-esteem.” The best examples came from Sierra and Kweira as the analysis below show.

As a result of the link between these two aspects, I have decided to analyze the both of them together. James Dobson (1974), an American professor of pediatrics and psychology, terms low self-esteem “the epidemic of inferiority” (p. 9) and associates it in the North American society with two critically important factors: beauty and intelligence.

I have emphasized the critical importance of two factors, beauty and intelligence, in shaping self-esteem and confidence. For men, physical attractiveness gradually submerges as a value during late adolescence and early childhood, yielding first place to intelligence. For women, however, beauty retains its number-one position throughout life, even into middle age and beyond.” (p. 43)

“Beauty” and “intelligence” resonate in different ways in some of the interviews.

Drawing on her own experience at school, Sierra shares the views of Dobson (1974) who associates self-esteem with beauty or what is perceived as beauty in the North American society.

I think that living in Canada when I was younger there weren’t as many people from different racial background in the school; most of the children were white and European and so I felt very insecure with my hair or even the
colour of my skin, why my skin was so dark. So those two things kind of limited me with regard to feeling comfortable with myself and very often my mom will set my hair in different ways too and I will hate to go to school and be laughed at by girls who had beautiful long hair and light skin. (Sierra)

Kweira expresses similar concerns on racial difference even though she does not couch them in a language as glaring as Sierra’s. “I will say that for me growing up in the Western society, going to school you do not see a lot of people like you. I would say that I was usually one of the four black kids in the school or something like that.”

I would like to point out that the two participants are reacting in part to the way “black” has been constructed by Western society. “For centuries, western societies have associated the word BLACK with everything that is dark, evil, forbidding, devilish, dangerous and sinful” (Hall, 2013, p. 17). The negative representation of blackness is a theme which comes up time and again in the experience of many black people in Western society. For example, in his autobiography, Malcolm X points out that in white society the “…’negro’ was taught of his native Africa that it was peopled by heathen, black savages, swinging like monkeys from trees” and that “…black was a curse” (p. 164).

Nelson E. Copeland, Jr. (1995), founder of the Christian Education Coalition for African American Leadership in Philadelphia, has insisted that “coming to terms with one’s ethnic beauty is important and unavoidable” (p. 9).

For a long time, school remained just one of the main sites where blackness was negatively constructed. Images, representing “beauty,” which grace the cover of magazines or which appear on TV sets or feature in the movies, still have nothing to do with black. In the case of a female, based on almost everyday experience, what counts as “beauty” in the media is usually a tall, slim blonde woman with blue eyes and other typical Caucasian features. It, therefore, does not help in preventing high dropout rates
among minority students when in “multiracial and pluralist” Canada, schools are designed to reproduce whiteness (Capello, 2012) as well as “legitimize certain hegemonic and ideological practices, while deligitimizing others” (Dei et al., 2007, p. 20).

Kabari associates self-esteem with culture.

Esteem wise they could take some pride because this is a very unique dance. Like I said I have never seen anything quite unique like that and seeing this from the angle of your culture, I believe that there is something with a long history that I belong to. I think people can take a lot of pride in that, especially from the African and Caribbean community, the way I felt. (Kabari)

His views align with those of Copeland, Jr. (1995) who argues that “A positive self-image (self-esteem) cannot survive without culture;” that “culture is a part of who and what we are;” and that “in the city, minority youth are often discouraged from learning about their history” (p. 9). The process of steering a group away from its history has been referred to as “de-historicizing” (Abdi, 2012). Copeland, Jr. (1995) argues that “the ethnic culture to which a youth belongs establishes the image that…he or she must have pride in and rally around” (p. 9). He equates lack of self-esteem to “personal inferiority,” (p. 84) which he associates with the notion of “plantation ghost,” a term coined and used by clinical psychologist Na’im Akber to describe “people so dehumanized and psychologically torn from belief in their own mental abilities that they become brainwashed into thinking they are still a slave, when actually they are free”. As a result, “these individuals roam through life seeking the mentally safe bondage of the plantation, where someone else thinks for you and tells you when to come and when to go” (p. 85).

Like Kabari, Mabior associates self-esteem with culture and believes that dance could help in boosting it.

They (dances) help … people to see African culture, to appreciate the culture and when they do, they will recognize that Africans are people with culture,
with their own heritage; a heritage from which other communities can learn something. That will help them appreciate what Africa is all about and that will certainly help in removing the stereotypes people have of the continent, its culture and people. (Mabior)

For its Afrocentric and emancipatory worth, I share the belief by Mabior and Kabari that the promotion of folkdances among African youth could help in creating a positive self-image. The assault on African history and culture has been a constant in western scholarship, which was what prompted Diop to embark on his intellectual journey. Aime Cesaire (1972) has described his work Nations negres et culture (1955) as “…one which will without question play an important part in the awakening of Africa” (p. 35).

Meanwhile, Clark (2013) has argued that “the stress on recovering and reconstructing African culture, the emphasis on reappropriating it and reaffirming it as a living tradition, is essential to understanding Afrocentricity as an emancipatory discourse” (p. 381).

Call for the promotion of dance as a tool for emancipation has also come from Sierra who expressed how she was reluctant to go to school because of how she felt about herself, that she was not as beautiful as the white pupils. She points out in her redemption testimony that even in the midst of her trials and tribulations, one of the reasons why she did not drop out of school was because of dance.

It (dance) taught me to accept what my role in life was; and that I am a unique person and I can do unique things; and I learned to embrace what I do have rather than pining for things I do not have. So that involves a lot with talents. Some people might not move the same way but you can work it out in your own way and be creative in your own way rather worrying about what other people feel about what you are doing. As long as you can interpret your feelings your own way, it is alright because it is unique and it is creative. I think it should be acceptable, for you do not need to be like the same person besides you. (Sierra)

Sierra has taken a leaf from Block and Kissell (2001) who argue that dance “provides a sense of community and support to those whose status in the society often causes them to
have low self-esteem and to suffer from emotional and psychological disturbance” (p. 12). By digging deeper into dance to find answer to her estrangement, Sierra upholds the African philosophy of *Nija* which “makes us conscious of our purpose in the light of our historical and cultural identity” (Karenga, 1998, p. 59) and which prevents us from “viewing our culture not with shame but with dignity” (Copeland, Jr., 1995, p. 15). She even likens dance to real life situation and shows how it could become a source of tremendous inspiration to overcome the challenges in a school environment.

In dancing it is important that you might not get a step or understand something right away but if you focus and study and work harder, then you will see the outcome that comes with it. With dance you start with a song and you start with movements and you are not sure but once you learn and get comfortable with it, you are able to make it into something you know will succeed in the end and I think that is important. In school, we often learn something, do not understand it and then just give up but with dance it forces you to kind of get out of your comfort zone; but still learn and interpret new things in order to make it work. Having somebody to support you and to be besides you working with you, I think it is easier for things to turn out the way you want it to and you do not have to drop out of school or give up and that is important. I see dance as a context in which you can draw from other person’s to be able to cope with education in school. Dancing is intense, with numerous routines, and to keep those routines in your head and reproduce them calls for focus, an aspect that could be transferred to school life. In dance you can do something and you do it freely and not worried about what other people would say or think about you but in school, things are often unpredictable. You put in tremendous efforts and you are not certain you will get the rewards in the end. With dance, you try hard you are still able to create something and succeed; but that is not necessarily true of school. This makes school a bit scary; but in dance, you could be creative, move a certain way in order to achieve something. This is very important because if you are scared to be creative and not the same way as somebody else, I think that lowers your ability to do anything you would like to do; but with dance you can express yourself any way you would love to. (Sierra)

Kweira takes Sierra’s position on physical appearance and exclusion a step further by linking dropout to the curriculum.

In the curriculum itself, I remember in school learning dances, Aboriginal dances because it is very important since we live in Canada, and then
Ukrainian or Filipino dances. But what about African and Caribbean dances! I feel that if you have to teach dances, it should include everyone, not just certain groups. So I feel like in the curriculum of elementary school, middle school or even high school, it will be important to include music and dance and it does not have to center around African, Ukrainian or Aboriginal culture; it should be we do a segment of each and then move to the next, just so you include everyone and not just focus on a specific ethnicity. (Kweira)

She makes a strong point about inclusion, both in physical and curricular terms; and how exclusion does affect the positive self image of a pupil or student and eventually cause him or her to drop out of school. “When you are always taught about someone who does not look like you, or even if the teachers treat you slightly different from other children in the classroom, that takes away the interest for you to want to come back to school” (Kweira). Kweira’s argument of not relating to the school environment echoes the views of renowned educator Au (2012) who calls for a “dialectical consciousness, which fundamentally frames out how we are simultaneously with and within the world” (p.16).

For the student the world is the school and Au (2012) identifies three aspects of the educative environment: physical material which includes books, media, furniture, equipment and even the architectural structure of the building; language and symbols used for discourse among students and teachers within that environment which are dictated by the environment through the adoption of textbooks and the quality of teachers recruited to teach. The final aspect is the behaviour of the people of the environment, which represent the students, the teachers and other personnel (p. 35). Kweira raises concerns about all three aspects and this speaks volumes about multicultural education in Canada. Ghosh & Abdi (2004) have argued that “the success of multicultural education programs will depend upon their ability to create unity within diversity…” (p. 73) and that “schools play a significant role in maintaining – whether directly or indirectly, by
omission or commission – the racism, sexism, and classism schemes that are prevalent in society” (p. 68).

Kweira points out that “even during ballet or jazz classes, I was usually the only black girl in the class, always wanting to feel a part of the group but not really feeling a part of the group because my skin was a different colour than everyone else’s” and then concludes that “I feel like that part that we have to face when we live in this society lowers our self-esteem, how we feel about ourselves...”. She views community involvement through dance as the way forward.

I feel that this project that you are doing and trying to influence community and culture and using dance to bring people together will boost the esteem of so many youths; …dance has done that for me, for being in the Caribbean dance, I go to practice and I do not have to feel like I am the odd one out. It feels good when everyone in the room looks like me and it has boosted my self-esteem and when I go to those other ballet and jazz classes, I feel like there is a group of girls I dance with and they are like me. At least there I can identify. If you feel that your education is not valued as much as any other person in the room, and I experienced that, when teachers thought I wasn’t as smart as, say, another child because I was black. I feel that when you undergo that sort of tension or you are exposed to that kind of treatment, your motivation to go to school is lessened. I feel that if you were to incorporate learning about dance in a classroom and it was done from a black or African perspective, then the student will feel inclined to come back. Certain things that I have learned here at the university about my own culture, I did not learn at home and that motivated me to come because I felt like wow, I love learning. I love coming back to the university and learning stuff about my culture as well, not just anyone else’s in the room. I feel like incorporating dance like incorporating African dance, music, culture and storytelling, anything African; in fact storytelling is a big part of African culture, so why not incorporate that into our history and literature classes at school? I am convinced that if that is incorporated, then the student would want to come back, to stay in school, which is very important. (Kweira)

Mabior agrees with Kweira that the dance of every community in school should be included in the curriculum. “I believe that the dance of every community should be included in the curriculum so that people learn it and practice it. It could go on to provide
a career for some members of the community interested in dancing...” (Mabior). He sees it as a career opportunity, a tool to raise self-esteem when it is presented for others to appreciate and also as a way of encouraging hard work among students. The aspect of dance career opportunity is a very strong incentive to make people preserve and promote a culture. Many folkdances in the western grassfield of Cameroon had long been abandoned until a disastrous economic situation, with high unemployment rates, proved that they could be revived, prepped up and turned into a viable source of income. For a culture to survive, it should not be articulated in abstract terms but be presented in such a way that people see the concrete benefits.

Mabior approaches lack of self-esteem from the angle of people shying away from their culture for fear of the negative reactions or embarrassment it could create. “Some people often feel that if they present their African dances people may think that they are backward and uncivilized. They do not want to associate themselves with those things...,” he argues but maintains that it could be a source of pride. “The dance when appreciated by those doing it and those watching make the community from which it comes to take pride in what they are doing.” He sees dance as a tool for teaching “hardwork” and argues that the positive messages encoded in the music could be uplifting and so prevent students from dropping out of school.

When a person participates in a folkdance embedded with messages of struggles of others, their ultimate triumph, they draw inspiration. When hard work is promoted within a community through dance, dropping out of school is the last thing on the minds of those who plan to do so. (Mabior)

The positive messages promoted through dance provide a counterpoint to the negative ideas instilled in the minds of black urban youths. “Urban youth are constantly being told they cannot make it in this society,” states Copeland, Jr. (1995, p. 12) who
insists that “the strong cultural self confronts this situation by requiring that the books they read and the history they are told connote ethnic worth instead of inferiority” (p. 11).

Jennifer shares Sierra’s view of dance as a tool to help students to focus in school, thus providing the motivation to stay there. She is also in sync with Kabari when she ties self-esteem and dropout prevention to culture. “They (students) can do that by accepting their culture, by noting that this is where I come from and I must put in some time and exploit the opportunity... In this dance help them to focus, to take advantage of the school in order to make something of their lives” (Jennifer).

While advocating that the dance of every community should be taught in school, Kabari believes that community should be involved by initiating children to their dance while they are still young, so that by the time they reach high school they already have a sense of appreciation and pride of their own culture. In this, he adheres to the Afrocentric philosophy of Nija.

Esteem will come by bringing the community together and showing that here is part of your history; you are somebody, you have a strong background and do not be afraid to show that or think that you always be consuming what is produced by other communities. And do not look to the media for answers, especially western media which tends to project only what is negative and conceal or distort what is positive. This dance provides a strong foundation for youth especially. (Kabari)

Even more significant in Kabari’s insistence that children should be initiated at a tender age is the fact that black culture must become part of the daily activities of that community. Mveng et al. (1969) have stated that dance is a school of life. It thus becomes a means through which the values of a community are imparted into its members. Such an early education provides children with the tools to resist the negative manner in which they are constantly being portrayed. “Knowledge of one’s cultural heritage is a must, as
one must use intelligence to weather the winds of racial hatred and ignorance” (Copeland, Jr., 1995, p. 15).

Kabari associates dropout to lack of inclusion and is convinced that dances could play a role in alleviating the situation.

Here in Regina I think that it is more a lack of inclusion factor and dances should be steered in that direction to help kids enjoy and stay in school. Dark skin people do not feel included and this will help to show African and dark skin people that this is part of your heritage, an embodiment of a larger picture of where you came from and where your parents came from and so on and so forth. (Kabari)

Isaiah also shares the view that self-esteem could be built by not only appreciating one’s own culture but getting to share it with others through public performances such as Mosaic. In this respect, he recounts his own experience and decries the tendency of young people who pay too much attention to gewgaws and bric-a-bracs (blings). “The youth need to go back to culture, to their roots, their background. And they will discover it is not important to be fighting over money, cars, girls, and reputation” (Isaiah).

In conclusion, I must state that at the core of all the interviews with regard to low self-esteem and school dropout/push-out lies the issue of school environment and epistemology. How inclusive is the school environment? What counts as knowledge and who determines what counts as knowledge? Even though Canada is a multiracial and pluralist society, participants pointed out flaws in the educational system such non-inclusive curriculum and hostile school environment which impacted negatively on the self-esteem on minority students and cause some of them to drop out of school. Participants saw dance as one way to deal with these problems, thus helping students to build better self-esteem and focus more on their education.
CHAPTER 8: MY ASSUMPTIONS, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, whose main objective is emancipatory, I have used an Afrocentric lens to conduct a cultural study of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde in order to establish perception of relevance of the dance to African (-Canadian) students between the ages of 18 and 25 in the City of Regina. To this end, I have explored the historical production of the dance; and, based on a 15-minute video of the dance which was shot in situ in Cameroon, I have analyzed representation as well as audience reception. Having reached the end of the investigation, the question remains whether it conforms to the research practices and criteria outlined by Afrocentric and cultural studies approaches. What new findings did I make during the various phases of the investigation and how has this affected my initial assumptions? To what extent does the investigation prove or refute the assumption that the dance is relevant to the African (-Canadian) community in Regina? In other words, has the dance stood up to the test of its emancipatory objective?

As already outlined, there were initial moments which stoked the fire of my “emancipatory” interests when I arrived in Canada, especially when I began to become increasingly aware of certain social problems in my new environment. It was, however, in Regina in 2008 that certain observations and assumptions which had long been in gestation in my mind started to really take shape. I soon discovered when I arrived in the city that the African community was not living up to its true cultural potentials. Africans come from an ancient continent that is replete with folkdances, music and tales and has a rich and diverse historical, artistic and sartorial tradition. Yet, in spite of this cultural wealth, their showing on the artistic landscape of the city was virtually non-existent. I learned about this lapse firsthand when a friend was looking for a djembe player to stage
a performance during her wedding. I scoured not only Regina but Saskatoon and other neighbouring cities, hoping to find one only to discover that nobody in the entire community was involved in this highly lucrative activity. Though I was seriously shaken, this incident turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg. Even with a growing population, Africans had no shops or restaurants to cater specifically to their needs; no centres where they or their children could congregate to share moments and experiences. There were organizations created by the various African national communities, some of which flaunted big dreams of Pan-African solidarity on their websites but which, as I later found out by discussing with some of their nationals, could not even attract members of their own community, let alone address their needs. In addition, perhaps with the exception of the Yoruba of western Nigeria that managed a language school, none of them had a robust cultural program that could engage youth in activities such as African theatre, dance, music, literature or storytelling. It seemed that in the face of Western cultural domination they had literally retreated into what Paolo Freire (1993) calls “culture of silence” (p. 14). Such a situation smacked of disorganization and alienation, factors which have often proved to be a good recipe for economic and social decadence.

Diaspora for Africans has never meant the death of its culture and traditions. Rather, it has always provided an opportunity for revitalization and renewal by drawing on surrounding cultures to inject both aspects with a new life. Even during slavery, with its bleak history in which everything seemed lost, African religions, with their liturgies, music and dances, were infused with elements of Christianity and handed down in the form of practices such as Santeria in Puerto Rico, Shango in Trinidad, Voodun in Haiti, Lucumi in Cuba and Candomble in Brazil. Karade (1994) states that “in general, the
African soul was not extinguished, but simply transfigured to meet the Euro-social pressures under New World bondage.” (p.5). This transfiguration has been amply demonstrated by Robert Harris Thompson (1984), an eminent authority on African religions. Of voodun (voodoo), an African religion “…which was first elaborated in Haiti…in the western hemisphere,” he notes that it is “a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey (sic), Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism” (p. 163). Nigerian playwright and Nobel Prize laureate in literature (1986), Wole Soyinka, during a trip to Bahia in Brazil, visited a Candomble shrine and also had this to say about diaspora’s spiritual connection with Africa in this scene he witnessed.

Clusters of phrases in the liturgy were familiar, despite some changes here and there in articulation and tonality, and of course there were elisions that had taken place over time. Even so, much of the Yoruba in the worship was still recognizable. Despite time and distance, the lyrics of the chants were especially faithful to the original. (Soyinka, 2006, p. 200)

In more recent times, it was out of the French theatrical and dance tradition that Keita Fodeba found some of the inspirations he used to launch the great dance troupe which would become Les Ballets Africains; the same is true of Maurice Sonar Senghor and his Ballet National du Senegal. Nevertheless, for Africans, irrespective of where they found themselves, their circumstances, and for what purpose these artistic endeavours were carried out, forming a large and strong community has always been a prerequisite to make such great strides. It is not surprising then that Fodeba while in Paris “…became a part of the flamboyant cohort of Francophone students around Leopold Sedar senghor, Alioune Diop and the emerging negritude movement” (Kringelbach, 2012, p. 146).

Similarly, as outlined in the historical production of Buum Oku Dance, it was the “exile”
of Yaounde which ignited an interest among Oku indigenes in the capital city to assemble and launch their dance troupe in order to foster a sense of belonging and preserve their identity and heritage.

It was the immediate observation of this absence of a sense of community among Africans in Regina and the glaring lapses such a void comprised which fired my imagination and led to some of my immediate assumptions as I made plans to carry out a doctorate investigation on the situation. Berg (2001) has argued that “…the selection of a research topic typically derives from some researcher-oriented position” and that the “…topic selection occurs because of some inner humanistic drive toward some social problem or because one has personal experiences or…deep familiarity with the subject area” (p. 140). As I saw it, the absence of a solid, viable community was all the more ironic in that Africans in the city were faced with pressing social and economic needs which called for the creation of such an organization. With the rising tide of the city’s black population, there was the need for jobs, a dynamic cultural environment to involve and orient the youth, speed up inclusion and other facets of community organization. The creation of such a community was not an exaggerated ambition since a good segment of Africans in the city comprised the middle class (doctors, engineers, teachers, university lecturers, nurses, etc.), with enough intellectual firepower to help such a venture come to fruition.

The more I pondered over the situation and talked to people, it became easy for me to identify the main culprit underpinning the irony. Schisms along various lines within the community had become the main stumbling block to the creation of one large organization. Community is a powerful thing and, historically, has been at the core of
black survival. For Africans to stage a united front against the challenges which they confront both internally and externally and which continue to fetter their progress and development, they must first set their own house in order by rising above individual interest. They must abandon old quarrels and other crippling social baggage they arrived with in this country and come together as one in a bigger and stronger community. With every small ethnic, religious, linguistic or racial clique tucked away in its own small world and attempting to do its own small thing, Africans stood little chance of rising to the strength of their true potentials. This tendency towards atomization has only widened the gap between groups and prevented them from coming together and building strong institutions without which it becomes virtually impossible to mobilize substantial human and material resources for important undertakings as well as create strategic alliances with other groups in order to face up to the challenges of their new society.

Even worse, external and internal challenges often have the potentials of feeding off each other and festering into a huge sore which could dog and cripple a weak community as they have done in other large North American cities. For instance, the racism of society could lay the foundation for low self-esteem and withdrawal that may force students to resort to drugs and alcohol addiction, drop out of school and join street gangs or become prostitutes. A study conducted by Manju Varma-Joshi, Cynthia J. Baker and Connie Tanaka (2004) in New Brunswick has identified three responses enacted by minority pupils who are subjected to racism in school: splintered universe, spiraling resistance, and disengagement. This overall gloomy picture provides the backdrop against which this investigation is pitched. Laclau (2007) argues that there is no emancipation
without oppression, and there is no oppression without the presence of something which is impeded in its free development forces.

In the long history of black resistance to various challenges, forming a strong community had always been a prerequisite. Whether it was during the era of enslavement with its countless bloody uprisings, the struggles against the brutal years of Western colonial conquests and rule, or even dealing with contemporary issues such as anti-black racism and police violence, high school dropout rates, street gangs and drug and alcohol addiction, there have always been some strong movement, some organization or standards around which blacks have rallied. Imagine just for a moment Martin Luther King, Jr. fighting segregation without the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); or Nelson Mandela taking on apartheid without the ANC!

Based on my own African upbringing and experiences with folkdances, advocacy and education, I went into this study with the overall assumption that this form of art holds tremendous potential as a tool for mobilizing people and building larger and stronger community in order to combat various forms of oppression such as racism, gender inequality, cultural exclusion, and even poverty. By facing up to these challenges, the art form also becomes a means of boosting self-esteem among black students, thus helping them to do well in their studies as well as reduce the incident of high school dropout rates. It was, therefore, the quest for a way to deal with real and potential social and economic problems of the black community in the city, and even other parts of Canada, which prompted me to enrol at the University of Regina to do a PhD. Right from the start, I clearly envisioned the aim of the study as emancipatory. Among research aims, Chilisa (2012) has identified the “liberatory and transformative intent” which is
“...to produce knowledge that has a liberatory and transformative intention” (p. 51). The objective of the liberatory approach is emancipation which to Fraleigh and Hanstein (1999) “...brings a critical perspective to the research, including issues such as race, gender, or class.” Both scholars further state that for the emancipatory researcher, “the investigation is part of a social advocacy project” in which “there is an attempt to change participants and society” (p. 104).

In an attempt to apprehend the subject as I envisioned it, I found Afrocentricity to provide the most suitable theoretical framework. As an Afrocentric project (whose ultimate objective is emancipation), my investigation breaks with Eurocentric tradition of research by being “centered” on the needs of the community which it is investigating; it is also based on African philosophical assumptions and worldviews and adopts African-centered research methods and guidelines. W. C. Banks (1992) has argued that the major avenue of attack upon Western thought has been from outside the Eurocentric system of ideology, from the standpoint of the prerogatives of a particular community to reject as socially, politically, and therefore epistemologically irrelevant a system of ideology, theory, and method that fails to advance that community’s interest (p. 263).

Having thus clearly identified a theoretical frame, I had to determine how a cultural studies methodology fits into the picture of the dissertation. W. C. Banks (Ibid) argues that within a complex environment of multiple communities in which each simultaneously strives to function efficiently to serve its own interests and to acknowledge and defer to the interests of each other, the most successful methodology is that which set forth the most stringent rules for challenge and refutation as well as the most liberal in accessibility. In the quest for the proper methodology, part of the answer
came to me when in my interaction with some members of the Regina black community during a fact-finding exercise somebody asked me how relevant the dance could become to diaspora Africans (native-born North American blacks) who left the continent about five hundred years ago and have long since lost touch with it. Let me start by first stating that dance is a cultural phenomenon and “…culture is by definition central to cultural studies” (Barker, 2003, p. 57). McRobbie (2006) argues that cultural studies is “a site of dispute and contestation” (p. 2), an arena where within a culture meanings are produced and exchanged; so, given this contentious nature, in any culture there is always a great diversity of meanings about any topic and more than one way of interpreting or representing it (Hall, 2013, p. xix). Dance in this study provides the text and, therefore, is subject to reinterpretation, especially in a new environment where it is injected with fresh ideas and burst of energy. As already outlined (see chapter 5), it was out of this tradition that African neoclassical or neo-traditional dance forms such as Les Ballets Africains emerged. One way then is to view the dance as a tortilla shell open to different environmental stuffing; for as Barker further notes cultural studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice (p. 4). This versatility opens the investigation to other approaches since cultural studies is “not a tightly defined discipline but a shifting terrain…” (McRobbie, 2006, p. 2). Another response to the suitability of the methodology comes from its investigation of meanings concealed in various forms of representation. In a dissertation whose aim is emancipation, such an approach helps unlock the meanings hidden in racist and sexist social constructs and oppressive discourses.
For an investigation to be considered Afrocentric Reviere (2001) has advanced five canons based on Molefi Asante’s Afrocentric principles of Ma’at and Nommo; and they are *ukweli*, *utulivu*, *uhaki*, and *ujamaa* (see chapter 4). The ultimate goal of Ma’at is to create a more fair and just society; and for Nommo, is the production of knowledge as a vehicle for improvement of human relations (M. K. Asante, 1990). This investigation, with its emancipatory objectives in sight, aligns with the two principles. It has demonstrated how the use of various forms of representation and discourses perpetuate perceptions which foster sexism, classism and racism and how these oppressive tendencies could be challenged. The dance is not presented only as a tool for challenging but also for reaching out to other communities in order to strengthen human bonds and bring about peace and harmony. Thus, most of the participants in the interview stressed the need to use the dance not only for cultural assertion, group identification and community mobilization but also for engaging other communities in order to be more inclusive and share different perspectives and experiences in forums such as Mosaic, Folkfestival and Black History Month.

The need for community validation of knowledge production and the description of place, which in essence is an argument against the need for objectivity and for the inclusion of what can amount to an autobiographical approach and the rejection of the subject-object dichotomy, have been listed as forming important aspects of Afrocentric investigation. W. C. Banks (1992) has pointed out that insofar as reality is the collective experience of African peoples, the ultimate description will never spring from the mind of any intelligent scientist; rather, it will spring from the collective wisdom and sensitivities of the community whose interests may be served by the collective
intelligence of all its members (p. 270). Throughout the investigation I have attempted to position my collaborators as partners in the collective production of knowledge and have injected my own story, constantly interrogating myself and positions since I am a subject and an object of the research. Berg (2001) points out that “…research is seldom, if ever, really value neutral” and argues that “…all humans residing in and among social groups are the products of those social groups” and that “this means that various values, moral attitudes, and beliefs orient people in a particular manner” (p. 140). The mere idea that I was educated in a Eurocentric tradition puts a damper on my claim to Africanity and even my own African centeredness. So while struggling at each stage to remain “centered,” the spectre of “cultural absolutism” has continued to lurk in the background and has served as speedbumps. In this regard, the role of cultural studies could not have been timelier, providing checks and balances to guard against essentialist positions while at the same time complementing Afrocentricity in its emancipatory forays. Thus, this investigation, as it pursued its ultimate liberatory goal, has operated within the limits set by Afrocentric and cultural studies.

Before embarking on the research, based on the role dance has played historically in preserving African culture and mobilizing people not just to resist various forms of oppression but also to carry out important development projects (see chapter 1), I had expected most African-born members of the city’s black community to enthusiastically embrace the idea. I was in for a rude shock. Let me start by pointing out that the reaction of the black community as a whole was a mixed one, with diaspora Africans, mainly of Canadian and Caribbean extraction, displaying greater enthusiasm for the project than those born in Africa or of African parents. My assumption that African-born blacks
would show greater interest was based mainly on the idea that diaspora Africans had been
estranged from the continent’s culture for a very long time and so they might have
developed over that lengthy duration a feeling of cultural alienation. The reverse having
turned out to be true, I began to interrogate my initial assumption. Maybe the adverse
reaction of African-born blacks was because they took their “negro-ness for granted,” to
cite popular South African writer Es’kia Mphahlele. My assumption that they would be
more engaging might have proved to be a historical oversight after all; however, nothing
prepared me for the reason some of them gave me for their reluctance to be involved.
Two parents, one Christian and the other Muslim, who declined my request to have their
children participate in the research, attributed their decision to religion. Nothing is a more
telling indictment of a spirit of cultural alienation and hence a clarion call for
“emancipation” than the association of their decisions with two foreign religions which
“…had been guilty not merely of physical atrocities on African soil, including
enslavement of the indigenes, but a systematic assault on African spirituality in their
contest for religious hegemony” (Soyinka, 2012, p. xi).

On deeper reflection, the attitude of diaspora parents and students should not have
come as a surprise; at least on the basis of historical evidence. Having been forcibly
uprooted from Africa and forced into bondage where they were stripped of most of their
culture and dignity and exposed to the most brutal forms of physical and psychological
trauma, many diaspora blacks have always expressed a deep emotional attachment to
Africa. “Tell me how you do Africa; You sent me away with an empty heart!” are the
nostalgic and heartrending lyrics of Caribbean musician Eddy Grant in his calypso song
Hello Africa! (1977). This yearning also found expression in the creation of telltale
movements such as “Pan-Africanism,” “Negritude,” “Rastafarianism,” and more recently “Afrocentricity,” all of which are the handiwork of American and Caribbean blacks. The same spirit is embodied in the writings of scholars such as Franz Fanon, Maya Angelou, Aime Cesaire, Walter Rodney, Alex Hailey, Molefi Kete Asante, Maulana Karenga, Ama Mazama, George James, John Henry Clarke, Lawrence Hill, etc. Thus, Ngugi wa Thiongo (2009) states:

…lo and behold, the Africa that slaves and their descendants were supposed to forget became the founding image of new visionary narratives. The image of Africa is there in every line of their poetry and prose. What is Africa to me? asked the poet Countee Cullen in his poem ‘Heritage,’ and it is a question that many writers – from Phyllis Wheatley and Alice Walker to Toni Morrison and Kamau Brathwaite – have had to ask for themselves. (p. 45)

The yearning has also found expression in the activism of individuals such as Du Bois, Edward Blyden, Sylvester Williams, Malcolm X, Martin Delaney, George Padmore, Marcus Garvey, Stevie Wonder, Rev. Leon Sullivan…; in musicians such as Bob Marley, Burning Spear, Mongo Santamaria, Eddy Grant, etc.

Another finding during the investigation that conflicted with my initial assumption was the issue of high school dropout rates. The rates in other major North American cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, New Orleans where they are high had led me to assume that Africans in the City of Regina were experiencing the same problem. The Regina Public Schools Continuous Improvement Plans for 2012-2013 however, did not list high school dropout among blacks as a problem; nor did it state among its list of problems that this group faces significant academic challenges.

However, as the black population of the city continues to rise, if pre-emptive measures are not taken by creating structures to engage black youths and steer their energies towards education and other positive endeavours, they may go the way many black
students in other urban centres across North America have gone. Black communities in most American urban centers, be it in Chicago Southside or South Central Los Angeles, did not start off with street gangs and high school dropout rates. Eugene Perkins (1990) has attributed the rise of street gangs and their attendant problems among Chicago black communities to black men who fail to organize and gain control of their communities. In this sense, this investigation proves to be relevant to the Regina black community.

At each stage of this investigation, I made discoveries which challenged or confirmed the worth of the dance as an emancipatory tool. At the production stage, it was clear that the dance was ethnic based. However, this rather parochial foundation kept broadening as the dance changed environment and new elements drawn from surrounding cultures were introduced into it. This means that the dance should be seen more as clay to be molded the way people want in order to suit their own objectives. Given this malleability, it cannot represent the same thing for all people each time it is represented. Even more impressive at the stage of representation, is how power is negotiated within dance space. The youth of Oku use the dance to challenge traditional and national authorities on the marginalization and exploitation to which they have been subjected; but the dance owes its very promotion to the very same traditional and national authorities. Both authorities may not appreciate the challenge but they need the dance to give the ethnic group as well as the nation cultural recognition internationally. In this, both the dance and authorities agree with Foucault in his conception that power is more a relationship that is disputed and negotiated rather than something which flows from top to bottom.
At the level of audience reception of the investigation, I have already outlined the attitude of diaspora and African-born blacks. Another aspect of audience reception which also took me by surprise came from the interviews of my female participants. I had expected them to express disappointment that I had selected a male dance instead of one that was gender neutral. All the same, rather than attribute the gesture to sexism, all three of them associated the selection mainly with the fact that gender-based dances comprised an aspect of cultural peculiarity in many parts of the world. They even made it known to me that the same dance could be adopted by women and used to tell their own stories by dancing it differently. They thus viewed the dance more as a “structure,” to quote Sierra, open to expansion and reinterpretation. In this, they enriched my perspective on the dance and overall investigation.

To conclude, what I learned from the different stages of the research convinced me and the participants I interviewed that Buum Oku Dance held out great potentials to serve as tool for community building, cultural revival and promotion; it also shows great potentials as a tool that could be used to challenge the various discourses and practices which lay the foundation for low self-esteem and poor academic performance among African (-Canadians) students. Its wide artistic and cultural portfolios as well as functions make it possible to engage members of the community at multiple levels and from diverse backgrounds. Even more compelling as a tool for building community and promoting scholarship are experiments which are currently being conducted in parts of Canada and the US. In Regina, at Robert Usher Collegiate, hip hop music and dance are being used to reach out and engage students. Similar experiments with hip hop are being conducted in Nunavut by Dr. Charity Marsh of the University of Regina. Outside Canada,
in the United States, through the Dembe dance project, the same exercise has been carried out with some success in Arizona among students of different cultural and racial backgrounds using the Soli African dance from Gambia. With regard to the project, O. C. Banks (2010), its director, states that “the mission …is to create space for youth to experience community solidarity, positive self-esteem, and cultural diversity” (p. 18). With regard to these types of projects, Vissicaro (2009) has argued that though each student brings a completely unique background and perspective to the setting, they collectively share space; through community, therefore, self and group construct (p. 56).

These experiments and the assets of Buum Oku position the dance as not only a good tool for greater inclusive community organization but also for cultural preservation and promotion. As a forum where youth activities can be initiated and promoted and positive values taught to black students from birth, youth grow up becoming grounded in their own realities and serving as role models and teachers within the community. These are all factors which constitute the foundation of a good student. Of course, it is within the realm of fairy tale to think that such a program may come without its fair share of challenges as it became clear with the attitude of some parents during the search for interview participants. Embracing the idea does not need to be unanimous but like any other endeavour, starting small and building out is not unusual.

My recommendation is that such a dance endeavour should serve mainly as an afterschool project. In this respect, it plays the role analogous to a Japanese karate dojo or a Jewish yeshiva, both of which are institutions where the culture of a people is preserved, taught and promoted.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Photo illustrations

Figure 1 – Fon (King) Sintieh I, courtesy Peter Ntaimah

Figure 2 – John Ndinaah, courtesy Peter Ntaimah
Figure 3 – Drum, Courtesy Buum Oku Dance

Figure 4 – Buum Oku Dance Drummer, courtesy Peter Ntaimah
Figure 5 – Log Xylophones, courtesy of Buum Oku Dance

Figure 6 – Log Xylophones, courtesy Mbgalum

Figure 7 – Buum Oku Dance Orchestra, courtesy Buum Oku Dance

Figure 8 – Buum Oku Dancers, courtesy Peter Ntaimah
Figure 9 – Metal Gongs (bells), courtesy Buum Oku Dance

Figure 10 – Trumpet, courtesy Buum Oku Dance
Figure 11 – Foot Rattles, courtesy Christopher Taylor

Figure 12 – Whisks, courtesy Njoya and Sirri
Figure 13 – Buum Oku Dance Orchestra, courtesy Buum Oku Dance

Figure 14 – Head Mask of Buum Oku Kam, courtesy Buum Oku Dance
APPENDIX B: Letter to participants’ Parents/Guardians

October 08, 2014,

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I, hereby, invite your son or daughter to participate in a research project titled “An Afrocentric Cultural Study of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and Perception of its Relevance to African (-Canadian) High School Students in the City of Regina.” I am African and a student at the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Regina and this project will be used as part of the research portion for my dissertation to be submitted to the University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD in Education.

In the project, your son or daughter will be required to view a 10-minute video of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and respond to some interview questions relating to the dance. The Oku Subi Dance is a mask folkdance which uses mainly xylophones and drums as its musical instrument and it is from Cameroon. The focus of my dissertation is to determine how relevant this dance can be in building community and preserving and promoting African culture, thus helping to enhance education among young Africans in the City of Regina. The voice of young Africans then becomes very important in this project as it directly targets them. This is why your son or daughter’s participation is very important.

If you agree to your son or daughter’s participation, he or she will be required to:

a) View the video as a member of a group comprising other African high school students in Regina. The viewing will take place in a room at the University of Regina. Before leaving, your son or daughter and other participants will each be given a video to watch at home.

b) Then, on a one-on-one basis, I will interview each of them and questions will revolve around important issues such as community, cultural preservation and promotion, gender, family, identity, performance in school, etc.

The University of Regina Ethics Board and Regina Public School Division have approved this research project. In no way does this project expose your son or daughter to any form of harm, either physical, emotional or legal. Their contributions will be kept anonymous and confidential. However, in keeping with African-centered research method, which perceives the creation of knowledge as collective and therefore a source of pride to all participants, your son or daughter may want his/her real name used. If such is the case, I will honour that wish. If at any stage of the project any of the students selected for the project feel like withdrawing, they are not compelled to stay.

If you agree to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to your school principal as soon as possible. I greatly appreciate your consideration of my invitation. If you have any question or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at (306) 352-3062 or thmsjing@yahoo.com or my supervisor, Dr. Ken Montgomery at (306) 585-5031 or ken.montgomery@uregina.ca

Sincerely,
Thomas Jing, PhD candidate.
APPENDIX C: Letter of invitation to participants

October 08, 2014,

Dear Student:
I, hereby, invite you to participate in a research project titled “An Afrocentric Cultural Study of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and Perception of its Relevance to African (-Canadian) High School Students in the City of Regina.” I am African and a student at the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Regina and this project will be used as part of the research portion for my dissertation to be submitted to the University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD in Education.

In the project, you will be required to view a 10-minute video of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and respond to some interview questions relating to the dance. The Oku Subi Dance is a mask folkdance which uses mainly xylophones and drums as its musical instrument and it is from Cameroon. The focus of my dissertation is to determine how relevant this dance can be in building community and promoting culture and thus helping in enhancing education among young Africans in the City of Regina. The voice of young Africans then becomes very important in this project as it directly targets them. This is why your participation is very important.

If you agree to participate, you will be required to:
- a) You will view the video as a member of a group comprising other African high school students in Regina. The viewing will take place in a room at the University of Regina. Before leaving, you and other participants will each be given a video to watch at home.
- b) Then, on a one-on-one basis, I will interview each of you and questions will revolve around important issues such as community, cultural preservation and promotion, gender, family, identity, performance in school, etc.

The University of Regina Ethics Board and Regina Public School Division have approved this research project. In no way does this project expose you to any form of harm, either physical, emotional or legal. Your contributions will be kept anonymous and confidential. However, in keeping with African–centered research method, which perceives the creation of knowledge as collective and therefore a source of pride to all participants, you may want your real name used. If such is the case, I will honour your wish. You are not compelled in any way to participate and if at any stage of the project you do not feel like continuing, you are always free to withdraw.

If you agree to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to your school principal as soon as possible. I greatly appreciate your consideration of my invitation. If you have any question or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at (306) 352-3062 or thmsjing@yahoo.com or my supervisor, Dr. Ken Montgomery at (306) 585-5031 or ken.montgomery@uregina.ca

Sincerely,
Thomas Jing, PhD candidate.
APPENDIX D: Research Consent From

An Afrocentric Cultural Study of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and Perceptions of its Relevance to African (-Canadian) High School Students in the City of Regina

Research Consent Form

I, ____________________________________________ (print name of parent/legal guardian or independent student), hereby consent for ____________________________________________ (print name of student) to participate in “An Afrocentric cultural study of the Oku Subi Dance in Yaounde and perceptions of its relevance to African (-Canadian) high school students in the City of Regina” research being undertaken by Thomas Jing at the University of Regina.

By signing this consent form, I agree that ____________________________ (name of student) may participate in the research activities involved in this project. I understand that this research project is an African-centered study on the Oku Subi folkdance from Cameroon and its relevance to community-building and education among African students in Regina.

I understand that the research activities include:

a) Viewing a video of the Oku Subi Dance with some other African-Canadian high school students in Regina; and that the viewing will take place in a room at the University of Regina. And that before leaving the room where the viewing takes place, your son/daughter and other participants will each be given a video to watch again at home.

b) A one-on-one interview of not more than 1 hour with the researcher (Mr. Jing) based on the dance they have viewed. And that the response to the interview questions will serve only research purposes and will not be made public in any way. The interview will be audio-recorded using a dry-cell battery recorder and once the information has been transcribed, it will be deleted from the machine.

I understand that:

- My son/daughter’s participation is voluntary and he/she may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. If my son/daughter wishes to withdraw from the study, he/she (or I, on his/her behalf) needs to only contact Thomas Jing, the researcher, or Dr. Ken Montgomery, the supervisor of the research.
- My son’s/daughter’s refusal to participate will lead to no consequences whatsoever.
- Data gathered in this study may be published in scholarly journals, professional journals and academic books and may be presented at both scholarly and professional conferences. However, unless my son/daughter, in keeping with African-centered research method so desires, his/her identity will be kept confidential as all data will be identified by a number or pseudonym only and signed consent forms will be stored separately from the collected data.
- My son/daughter will not be identifiable in any document resulting from this research. Numbers or pseudonyms will be used to identify all research participants.
• I will receive a copy of this signed consent form for my records
• This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina and the Regina Board of Education. If your son/daughter or you have any questions or concerns about their rights treatment, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or email: research.ethics@uregina.ca

I also understand that the result of this research will be used only in presentation and written articles for educators.

____________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of parent/guardian             Signature of student
____________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature of student if 18 years and above Date

If you have any question or concerns, please contact Thomas Jing at (306) 352-3062 or by email at jing200t@uregina.ca or Dr. Ken Montgomery at (306) 585-5031 or ken.montgomery@uregina.ca
APPENDIX E: Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

University of Regina

Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Thomas Jing

DEPARTMENT
Education

REBM# 2014-192

SUPERVISOR
Dr. Ken Montgomery – Education

FUNDER(S)
Unfunded

TITLE
An Afrocentric Cultural Study of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and Perception of its Relevance to African (Canadian) High School Students in Regina

APPROVAL OF
Application for Behavioural Ethics Review
Sample Interview Questions
Letter to Parents or Guardians
Letter to Students
Consent Form

APPROVED ON
December 2, 2014

RENEWAL DATE
December 2, 2015

Full Board Meeting □
Delegated Review □

CERTIFICATION
The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion.
Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.uregina.ca/research/REB/main.shtml

Dr. Larena Hoeber, Chair
University of Regina
Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:
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University of Regina
Research and Innovation Centre 109
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4775 Fax: (306) 585-4893 research.ethics@uregina.ca
APPENDIX F: Research Ethics Board Certificate of Renewal Approval

University of Regina

Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Renewal Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Thomas Jing

SUPERVISOR
Dr. Ken Montgomery-Education

DEPARTMENT
Education

REB# 2014-192

TITLE
An Afrocentric, Cultural Study of the Oku Subi Dance Yaounde and Perception of its Relevance to African (Canadian) High School Students in Regina

ORIGINAL DATE of APPROVAL
December 2, 2014

NEW EXPIRY DATE WITH THIS RENEWAL
December 2, 2016

TODAY’S DATE
November 30, 2015

Full Board Meeting ☐
Delegated Review ☒

RENEWAL CERTIFICATION
The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has renewed the above-named research project for an additional 12 months beginning December 2, 2015.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board for consideration in advance of implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions:
http://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/forms1/ethics-forms.html

Ara Steininger
Research Ethics Board

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APPENDIX G: Glossary of some important Eblam Ebkuo (Oku) terms

**Bam eykum**: This term literally translates into the English equivalent of “father of the dance” and it refers to the person who is the president or manager of a dance group in Oku. Traditionally, in many Bamenda Grassfield dance troupe, he is the person who carries the medicines and other mystical paraphernalia of the group as well as the one who oversees the smooth administration of the group.

**Bamkum**: depending on how the term has been pronounced, this is just another way of saying bam eykum

**Barke**: This word refers to calabash rattles. In Brazil it is commonly known as *maracas*, a term which has been adopted in the Western world. Among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria, it is called *shekere*. Some historical evidence point to Nigeria as the origin of this musical instrument in Cameroon. According to Prince Fauapen Yaya (2015), the Bamoun got the instrument from the Nso. It is probable that the Nso got it from the Yorubas when British Cameroons was ruled as part of Nigeria.

**Buum**: Before this name was adopted by the Oku dance group in Yaounde, it actually belonged to another troupe in the village of Lui in Oku. The term derives from a tree common in the Killum forest of Oku; and according to Gamse (1986), the word means “abundance”. When buum trees blossom, bees visit them in very large numbers and this accounts for an abundant collection of honey. It is also when these trees are in bloom that, there are numerous animals in the forest and hunters often return with plenty of kill.

**Ebfon**: This term is used to describe the king in Oku. It is the Eblam Ebkuo version of the term *Fon*, which is the title widely used in the entire Bamenda Grassfield to address the king.

**Ebjung**: According to Ngum (1990), this is the tree commonly used in Oku to make xylophones. It is also one of the three clans that make up Oku. The other two are the Mbele or the royal clan and the Mbulum.

**Eblam Ebkuo**: This is the language of Oku people.

**Efvian**: According to Gamse (2015), this is the wood commonly used to make xylophones in Oku.

**Fon**: In the entire Bamenda Grassfield, this term refers to the King.

**Ghonde nchisendase**: Nchisendase are palace retainers in Oku. Ghonde nchisendase are young palace retainers, rookies.

**Imbarke**: These are foot rattles (Figure, 11), the ones used by Buum Oku Dance. They are made from the seeds of some tropical climber plants (Ntamah, 2012; Mveng et al., 1969; Ngum, 1990). Ngum identifies two kinds, those that have been treated with medicines and are kept together with the masks; and those that have not been treated with medicines.

**Kam**: This is the lead dancer or the captain.

**Kam ebam**: This is the rear captain, the second captain who brings up the rear in traditional Bamenda Grassfield masquerade. In the neo-traditional dance, his role is insignificant.

**Kekum**: This *Eblam Ebkuo* term refers to mask dances, to masquerades, to juju dance. It also refers to the spirit in the wild, the power of metamorphosis and proximity to the other world achieved by masquerade and its performances (Argenti, 1998). Seen in this light, certain performers or kekum do not necessarily need to wear headdresses to be considered masquerade or kekum.

**Kekum evel**: These are dancers with wooden masks but also those with their faces hidden behind a mesh cloth and wearing feather head dresses (Argenti, 1998)
Kekum ngang: These are dancers wearing mesh face covering and no head dress (Argenti, 1998).

Kekum mekale: This is the word used by Oku people to describe the modern form of dance into which traditional dances have been converted. It literally means “white man’s dance” because it has lost its mystical power and has been incorporated with elements of modern dance and choreography. It is the term widely used by Ntaimah (2012, 2014). Kringelbach (2012) and Green (2011) talk of neo-traditional.

Kelanlang: The white and blue striped dress (Figure 6) that is a mark of royalty in the entire Western Grassfield of Cameroon.

Kwifon: It is a lineage-based palace regulatory society (Argenti, 2002) whose members are drawn from sixty heads of extended family (Koloss, 2000). Not every ethnic group in the Bamenda Grassfield uses this term to describe this institution.

Nchisendase: Commonly known as nchinda throughout the Bamenda Grassfield, the term refers to palace retainers in Oku.

Nchom: This word describes the drum, specifically the one with a leather membrane (Figures 3 & 4). The word is sometimes pronounced Nchum. In Mankon, the word used to describe a drum is ngum (Mveng et al, 1969), which brings it closer to the Swahili term ngoma. (Nketia, 1979).

Ngele: This word is a corruption of the Nso term Ngiri and it refers to a secret society to which Oku princes belong. It was borrowed from Nso and quickly adopted by princes since they were barred from becoming members of Kwifon.

Ngem: This term refers to what is widely known in the Bamenda Grassfield as “metal gongs” (Figure 9) but which has been described by Bebey (1975) and Nketia (1979) as double bell.

Ngiri: The term is the word used by the Nso to describe Ngele; it was from Nso that the institution was borrowed (Ntaimah, 2012).

Ngwerong: This is the name given to the institution of Kwifon in Nso, one of Oku’s next door neighbours.

Njang: This term refers to log or leg xylophones (Figures 5, 6 & 7), the main instrument of Buum Oku Dance

Njang mbeh: Ngum (1990) identifies two kinds of xylophones in Oku and njang mbeh refers to those xylophones used by members of the royal family in Finji dance.

Nngumba: This is the term used in Babungo, one of Oku’s neighbours to describe the institution of Kwifon.

Seesang: This term refers to bamboo rattles (Ngum, 1990).
APPENDIX H: Accessing the 15-minute dance video of Buum Oku Dance Yaounde:

Kindly check this link https://youtu.be/A2jMt6s_vlc
Or
Search using the title “Buum Oku Dance Yaounde” on youtube