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Technique

Magueette Camara

How I Teach West African

By Rachel Caldwell

Photography by Kyle Froman

As Magueette Camara seamlessly shifts between the front of the studio and to play drums that are clustered on the side, it’s hard to tell where the music leaves off and the dancer begins. He’s instructing an advanced-beginner level West African class at The Alpert at The Alcott School in New York, and the intricate rhythms are proving challenging to the students—50 pre-professional men and women. As he claps, slaps, steps, counts and beats out the rhythms with his drumsticks, it’s clear that the two roles, musician and dancer, are inseparable to him. “This is me, and we’ll always be on the beat,” he says.

Camara is introducing the celebratory dance-drama kuku, belonging to the people of the Bariga region of Nigeria, and characterized by swift stamping, a buoyant stance and expansive, reaching arms. He teaches this from the ground up, beginning with the pattern of the feet, clarifying the angles of the torso and eventually adding on the arm and head movements. But he always brings everything back to the rhythm.

The drum is an integral, communicative role in West African. “It is always a give and take between us and the drums,” says Camara. In his class, there are four drums, providing both an underlying pulse and counterpoint the drumming, kekendo and the anga, all played with sticks by one drummer, and the higher-pitched dundun, played with the hands by another drummer—a chore—office by Camara himself. Camara demonstrates with a loose, relaxed quality in his stride and a bounce in his legs and torso, making the kuku look effortless. “Look at my arms,” he says as he circles both arms up and around two times. “And our Adding two” Although West African is a danse style open to personal interpretation, Camara encourages his students to follow his lead and home in on the specific step he infuses each movement with. “Your body has to get used to it, get into the habit of it, and then you can add your own feeling into whatever you do,” he says.

Though rhythm is the primary focus, Camara reinforces the joyful, celebratory nature of West African with his positive energy and words of encouragement. As his students end class with a moving demonstration of another Gambian dance they’ve been working on, libere—their backs thrown back in triumph and arms extended—it’s clear that they feel that joy from head to toe. ETP
**Step-by-Step: Kuku combination**

Kuku is a communal, recreational dance for people of all ages. Originating in the Bayla region of West Africa, it was danced to acknowledge community members’ accomplishments, like making the catch of the day. Maguette Camara encourages his West African students to be grounded and relaxed while also staying in time with the beat of the doundoun (bass drum). —RC

**TIP:** Relax the joints of your wrists and elbows. Make sure your fingertips point behind you.

**COUNT 1:** Step your right foot back into a wide lunge, letting your torso fold forward with your head dropped, right arm swinging back and left hand pressed into your knee.

**COUNT 2:** Step together with your right foot.

**COUNT 3:** Jump straight up into the air, lifting your left knee and throwing your arms up over your head, fingertips shooting back behind you.

**COUNT 4:** Land softly with feet together, both hands on your knees, elbows bent and head and torso hanging over your legs. **COUNTS 5–8:** Repeat counts 1–4.

**COUNT 1:** Step out to the right with bent legs, leaning to the right. Arms should be open wide, and you should be looking out past your left hand.

**COUNT 2:** Step together, bringing your left foot to your right. Lean forward and clap your hands together. **COUNTS 3–4:** Repeat counts 1–2. **COUNTS 5–8:** Repeat counts 1–4 on the left side.

**COUNT 9:** Step to the right and clap, leaning right.

**COUNT 10:** Roll your head down and to the left as you step and clap on the left side. **COUNTS 11–12:** Repeat counts 9–10.

To see Camara and Martin in action, go to dance-teacher.com.