

technique

**Maguette
Camara**
HOW I
TEACH
WEST
AFRICAN

BY RACHEL CALDWELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE FROMAN

As Maguette 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 musician leaves off and the dancer begins. He's instructing an advanced-beginner-level West African class at The Ailey School in New York, and the intricate rhythms are proving challenging to the students—30 pre-professional men and women. As he claps, sings, scats, counts and beats out the rhythm with his drumsticks, it's clear that the two roles, musician and dancer, are inseparable to him. "Listen to me, and we'll always be on the beat," he says.

Camara is introducing the celebratory dance kuku, belonging to the people of the Beyla region of Guinea, and characterized by swift stomping, a buoyant torso 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 drums play an integral, communicative role in West African. "It is always a give and take between you and the drums," says Camara. In his class, there are four drums, providing both an underlying pulse

and counterpoint: the doundoun, kenkeni and the sangba, all played with sticks by one drummer; and the higher-pitched djembe, played with the hands by another drummer—often by Camara himself.

Camara demonstrates with a loose, relaxed quality in his limbs 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 one! And two!" Although West African is a dance style open to personal interpretation, Camara encourages his students to follow his lead and home in on the subtle specificity 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 rousing demonstration of another Guinean dance they've been working on, *liberté*—their heads thrown back in triumph and arms extended—it's clear that they feel that joy from head to toe. **DT**



Maguette Camara is a New York City-based West African teacher, musician and choreographer raised in Dakar, Senegal. Starting at age 8, he studied West African dance and drumming with local troupe Ballet Bougarabou Dance Company and became a full-fledged company member in 1986. As a professional dancer, he traveled internationally to perform at festivals and lead workshops. He relocated to the United States in 1993. His performance accolades include the Lincoln Center Out of Doors concert series, Guggenheim Museum, the Rolling Stones World Tour, Disney World and World Trade Center jazz festival. He has been teaching West African dance for more than 20 years and is on faculty at The Ailey School, The Ailey Extension, Barnard College and Djoniba Dance Centre at Peridance Capezio Center in New York City.

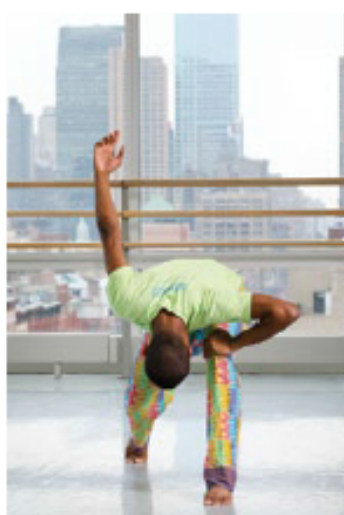
Kyle Martin, 19, is a first-year student in The Ailey School Certificate Program.

Camara (right) and Martin at The Ailey School

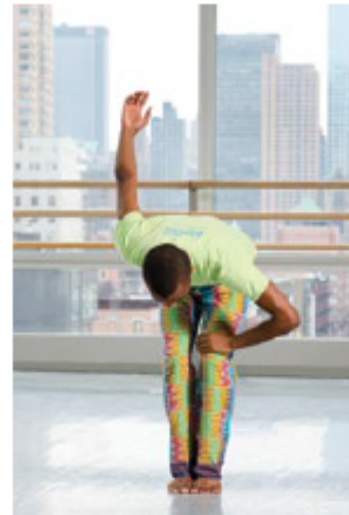
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Step-by-Step: Kuku combination

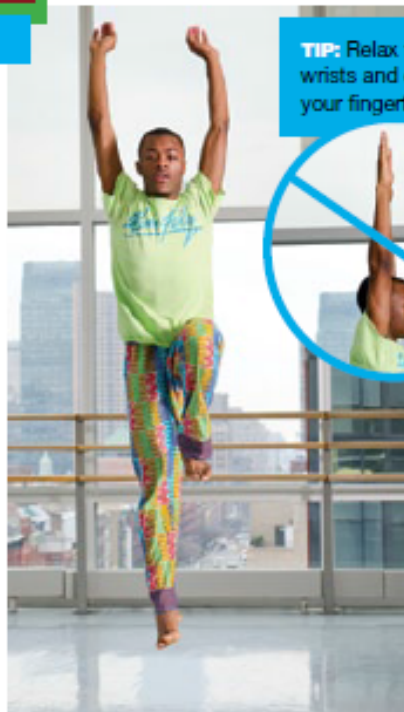
Kuku is a communal, recreational dance for people of all ages. Originating in the Beyla region of West Africa, it was danced to acknowledge community members' accomplishments, like making the catch of the day. **Maguette Camara** encourages his West African students to be grounded and relaxed while also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



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.



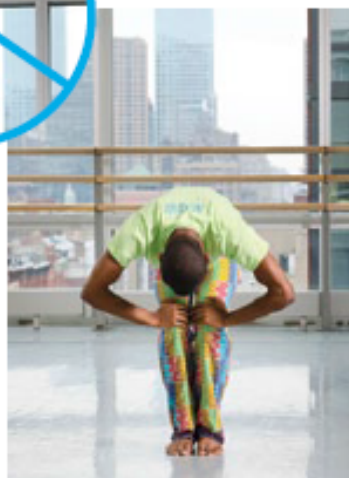
COUNT 2: Step together with your right foot.



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

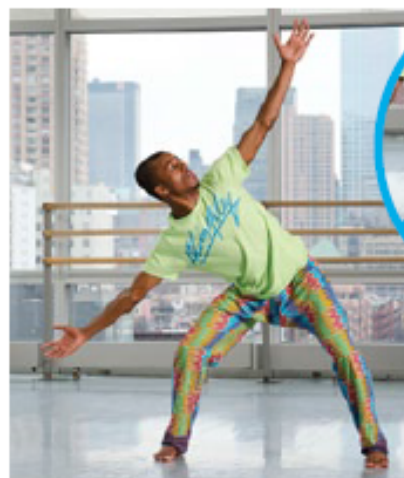


COUNT 3: Jump straight up into the air, lifting your left knee and throwing your arms up over your head, fingertips shooting back behind you.



COUNT 4: Land softly with feet together, both hands on your knees, elbows bent and head and torso hanging over your legs.

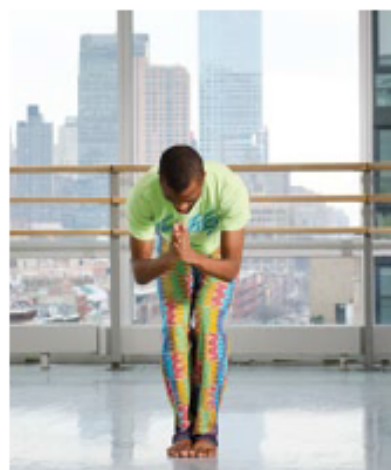
COUNTS 5–8: Repeat counts 1–4.



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.



TIP: Make sure both knees are bent and your weight is evenly distributed.



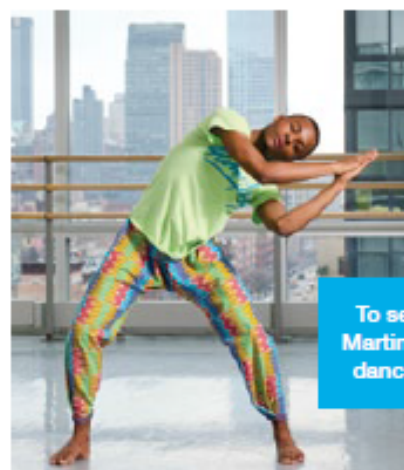
COUNT 2: Step together, bringing your left foot to your right. Lean forward and clap your hands together.

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.