Exploring the Cultural Tradition of Performance Art
Ten Weeks of Study in Ghana, West Africa

This summer I spent ten weeks in Accra, Ghana developing a deeper understanding of the links between artistic tradition such as drumming and dance and West African culture. My home-stay experience living with a Ghanaian family helped me become more fully immersed in the culture. Although the house lacked running water and modern conveniences such as a shower or kitchen, I benefited from the personal relationship I shared with the family. They were always thrilled to teach me Twi and answer my many questions about Ghana.
Working with Professor [name not provided] (director of the Noyam African Dance Institute) allowed me to observe how traditional art forms such as African dance are now being reinvented in a modern context. I spent three mornings each week observing the dancers incorporate ancient dance movements into modern routines. After their rehearsals, I met one-on-one with a senior dance student who taught me basic bell patterns, drum accompaniments, and dance theory. In addition, he shared his own personal experience as a young Ghanaian man hoping to master the traditional art of dance in order to keep it alive for future generations.

As well as being immersed in dance, I studied African drumming two days a week with Tackie Abia, director and founder of Adesa Taloi, a drum and dance ensemble in Accra. Through Mr. Abia, I gained hands on experience with West African rhythms and had the opportunity to explore the symbiosis of African drumming and dance. As part of this learning process, I developed my own written method for recording traditional drum patterns that I hope to share with other students. I attended several cultural events including a concert in Makola Market (Central Accra), a dance performance in Tema, and a drum and dance concert celebrating the release of Mr. Abia’s first album. Furthermore, I witnessed the construction of traditional Ghanaian instruments such as the kpanlogo drum and other percussion instruments like the shekele (a gourd covered in a woven netting of beads).

When not taking classes, I was learning to cook local Ghanaian dishes and recording the recipes in a small cookbook. I was taught by a Ghanaian friend at the University of Ghana (Legon), and together we went to the market and learned about local spices and ingredients as well as tools used for food preparation. I learned how to prepare fufu, red-red, light soup, fried plantains, ground nut soup with rice balls and pallava sauce to name just a few. My cookbook also includes digital pictures of the cooking process as well as the finished dishes.

I felt it was very important to become acquainted with Twi, the local Akan dialect spoken in Accra. I learned how to say basic phrases that enabled me to interact in the marketplace as well as find my way through the city on the local transportation system. Having a basic understanding of the language was also helpful during my travels outside
of the capitol city. Traveling was an important part of my experience because it gave me that chance to temper my rather urban outlook with a rural perspective.

Even though I have left Ghana, I am lucky to have the opportunity to continue my study of African performance art here at Swarthmore since Professor [Name] is a visiting scholar in the Music and Dance department. I am excited to incorporate my experience in Africa into my academic studies here at Swarthmore because I feel I have a deeper understanding having been immersed in the culture and lifestyle of Ghana and its amazing people.