

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCE AFRO HOUSE



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If you go to a big kizomba party or festival, at some point in the night there is sure to be an Afro House animation. The DJ changes the music to something upbeat and pulsating with energy. People line up facing the DJ booth or stage, then follow the moves of a leading artist. After a while another confident dancer may stride up to take over for a while or a different teacher may be pushed to the center. People copy the moves until they are too tired or sweaty or the DJ relents and brings it back to a semba or kizomba song.

Some people can't wait for that point in the party. They find it revitalizes them. Other people roll their eyes, go check their phones, and maybe even call it a night if the set

goes on longer than a few songs. I used to be one of them – but somehow in the past couple years I’ve become super excited about taking any African solo dance on offer at festivals.

I would attribute some of that shift to an amazing hour dancing Kuduro and Afro House behind an ever-smiling and tireless Paulo

Cruz(<https://www.facebook.com/PauloCruzLanna/>), at the Hamburg Kizomba Gala(<http://www.kizombagala.com/>), in

2014. It was also partially because I was writing more about the nature of kizomba and its history, and I was interested in exploring the roots more. Maria Hover, organizer of the Ginga

Festival(<https://www.facebook.com/gingafestivalhamburg/>), said it well: “Afro House and Kuduro show the influence from tribal dances from before. They help us connect better with the authentic movement. Afro House taught me how to move better in authentic kizomba.”



With Paulo Cruz after Kuduro at Ginga '17

Introduction to African Dance

For most people in the kizomba scene, the Afro House set is how they first encountered any kind of solo African movement. For me it was Kuduro line-ups at big salsa parties. From Casablanca to Lyon to New York, the only time I saw Kuduro from 2010 to 2011 was as part of an animation or choreographed dance, usually performed to a Caribbean or Brazilian dance tune like Don Omar’s infamous “Danza Kuduro”(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wj4ukZFNEgs).” I assumed it was a recent Latin craze.

My first real encounter with Afro House was when my kizomba partner in 2012, Nelson Campos, insisted that we add some to our kizomba/semba show. I was very resistant to the idea. “Aren’t we supposed to be showcasing the dances we teach? I don’t know how to dance Afro House!”

Not only that, I was terrible at it. In spite of all the rehearsals we did, by the final performance I still looked like a jazz dancer.

And it wasn’t because I hadn’t taken any classes. I did go to Afro House and Kuduro classes at festivals, but their purpose also seemed to be animation. The classes were a game of “Do what I do – if you can keep up!” and trying to memorize the

choreography du jour. I spent so much time trying to remember the basic blocking and order of the moves I never got any better at the actual movement.

Fortunately, things seem to be changing. Increasingly festivals are offering not just a single Afro House or Kuduro class, but a range of classes that include other African dance styles. The quality of instruction has improved to include assessment of and adjustment to students' needs. Most importantly, more and more people are beginning to recognize the dynamic freedom of these various dances. Like me, they're coming to class wanting to learn more than they can from line-ups at parties.

An Incomplete Alphabet

In a single weekend this month at Hamburg's [Ginga Festival](https://www.facebook.com/gingafestivalhamburg) (<https://www.facebook.com/gingafestivalhamburg>), I got to do workshops in six solo African dances. Here they are in alphabetical order, to avoid any question of hierarchy: Afro House (mixed origins), Afrobeats (Nigeria), Azonto (Ghana), Coupé Décalé (Côte d'Ivoire), Kuduro (Angola), and Ndombolo (Congo). While there are certainly many others out there, I'd say these six are pretty representative of the offerings I've seen across festivals in the last two years.

When it comes to the kizomba scene, the most commonly taught solo dances are Kuduro and Afro House. Kuduro has been party music for decades in Angola. The dance is a bridge between traditional tribal dances and modern African movement. Kuduro translates into English as "hard ass," and the energetic leaps, squats, kicks, and various isolations that characterize Kuduro absolutely deliver on that name.

Afro House comes from the intersection of South African music and house. The dance is popular across several African countries and therefore varies wildly. I've even heard people say that they dance "Angolan Afro House" or "Afro House from Congo." In most festival workshops, there's no real explanation of what defines Afro House, and our objective as attendees is simply to fit the mold presented to us. Personally I have seen elements of many other dances in Afro House. I'm not knowledgeable enough to be confident naming names, but have a look at this excellent video. What do you recognize? Have you tried any of these styles?

Teaching Methods

A big shift I've noticed over the last few years is the way in which classes are run. Far more than a taster or additional animation, there is real pedagogy going on. I don't mean to say that this was never happening before, but not to the extent we enjoy currently.

Picture this: a group of kids of mixed ages, playing Afro House from a phone. The younger ones copy the older kids, trying to figure out how to take on their confident flow. The most innovative explode in a flurry, showing off for the ones they want to find them attractive or cool. There is cutting, mocking, cheering, and ever more exploration of moving their bodies to this music.

Some teachers stick to the visual/kinesthetic learning emphasis of most movement cultures(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/>), in which students are expected to learn by watching and copying the movement. However, the teachers step back at some point to evaluate their students' progress. They keep an eye out for which points are causing trouble. They slow down and offer additional repetition for these points. It's no longer all about getting through a crazy choreography built to impress – there is a real intent to help students progress. Last month I spoke on this topic to Maymouna after an awesome workshop. She shared her perspective: “Quand tu es prof, tu dois prendre le temps, même si tu dois répéter 15 mille fois, de sorte que quand ils sortent ils ont appris quelque-chose. Je suis contre le rapide apprentissage et faire le star.”

“When you are a teacher, you have to take the time – even if it means repeating 15 thousand times – so that the students walk away having learned something. I am against rapid learning and acting like a star.”



Alain Nca taught Afrobeats, Azonto, Coupé Décalé, and Ndombolo at Ginga '17

Other teachers adapt their classes to include verbal explanations, helping auditory learners and students who did not grow up dancing and learning by copying their elders. They start with an explanation of what defines the music of this dance and what characterizes its movement. When they assess what is blocking students' mastery, they offer word pictures that can help the students connect to the movement: “It's like you are reaching up to a very high shelf” or “Imagine you are about to fall, you changed directions so fast.”

Perhaps the change is because the African dance teachers connected with the kizomba scene have gained so much experience. Many started out being pressured

into the role of instructor and figured out teaching technique through trial and error. It might also be thanks to students' increased interest in these dances or raised expectations from organizers for what attendees should gain from such classes.

Next steps

Picture this: a crowded club in Luanda. There's a hot new Kuduro track ringing out. People are dancing in little clusters of friends. One person may go for the spotlight for a bit, getting intense with their creativity for a minute while the others keep the pulse and cheer them on. They play off each other, taking inspiration from one person's movement and transforming it in one way or another to put together their next move. The energy flows among them in a complicated, vibrant exchange.

For me, this image is far more appealing than the top-down approach of an artist leading dozens of people in a game of "Do What I Do" for an hour. Line-ups are fun and are a great way to welcome in newbies or re-energize those flagging at a late-night dance or inspire an interest in these dances – but I think it's a mistake to let them define African solo movement for us at kizomba festivals. Line-ups shouldn't be the beginning and end of our solo dancing.

In many ways I think the workshops at festivals still fuel this mentality. While instruction has become more responsive, African solo dance classes are still always built around learning a choreography to a particular song. We should do these moves in this order, changing according to the direction of the teacher leading in front. "Many do it because it's easier to manage a class when you're on choreography," Maria Hover explained. I understand that. It's easier to measure the success of your class if your rubric is based on performing the choreography.

Beyond my personal struggle with learning choreography in class, I feel a strong desire to see the kizomba scene foster creativity when it comes to solo African dance. I come from a swing and blues dancing background, and in both styles we learn various solo moves with the intent of being able to put them together differently every dance. We learn about what in the music might inspire us to do this hip-focused move or that rhythmic variation with our feet, this smooth arm styling or that staccato isolation. We consider transitions between moves and how to create endless variations.

I think that more people will be excited about dancing Afro House late into a kizomba party if they are empowered to dance for themselves. I'd also bet that would bring more people out to these classes, providing motivation for learning to do solo movement well. I would also hope it would get the guys more excited. I don't have statistics to back it up, but my experience in the last four years has been that

girls are consistently a large majority in solo African workshops, and also outnumber men in lineups. In spite of the fact that men are more often to be found leading from the front of the party.

Line-ups are fun, but I believe that if we are truly going to embrace these dances as a community, we need to have classes aimed at helping us learn to move creatively and appropriately to the various African music genres – the way people do in the dance clubs of Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Congo, and Angola.



(P)

Petchu taught us about Angolan tribal dances

I wanted to write a lot more on this topic but I realized that my article was already really long! So, to learn more about these African dance styles, check out the links below:

Afro House

[A Brief Lesson in Afro](#)



Special thanks to Olawale Osamade for the photo featured at the top.

[House](http://www.houseologylabel.com/a-brief-lesson-in-afrohouse-houseologyblogseries/)(<http://www.houseologylabel.com/a-brief-lesson-in-afrohouse-houseologyblogseries/>).

Afrobeats

[From Afrobeat to](#)

[Afrobeats](https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/aug/08/gateways-tony-allen-and-nigeria-from-afrobeat-to-afrobeats)(<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/aug/08/gateways-tony-allen-and-nigeria-from-afrobeat-to-afrobeats>).

Azonto

[Azonto in Afropedea](http://www.afropedea.org/azonto)(<http://www.afropedea.org/azonto>).

[5 Amazing Things You Didn't Know About](#)

[Azonto](https://wildfiremag.wordpress.com/2013/03/12/5-amazing-things-you-didnt-know-about-)(<https://wildfiremag.wordpress.com/2013/03/12/5-amazing-things-you-didnt-know-about->

[azonto/](#)

Coupé Décalé

[Coupé Décalé in Afropedea](http://www.afropedea.org/coupe-decale)(<http://www.afropedea.org/coupe-decale>)

Kuduro

[Kuduro: The Dance that Keeps Angola](#)

[Going](http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2012/12/26/167628341/kuduro-the-dance-that-keeps-angola-going)(<http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2012/12/26/167628341/kuduro-the-dance-that-keeps-angola-going>)

[Life, Music, Dance: Kuduro](http://africaredux.com/culture-entertainment/life-music-dance-kuduro/)(<http://africaredux.com/culture-entertainment/life-music-dance-kuduro/>).

Ndombolo

[Learn to Dance Ndombolo](https://www.allthingsankara.com/2017/01/dance-learn-dance-ndombolo-ceecee-coco-aurelie-congolese-makolongulu-dance-tutorial.html)(<https://www.allthingsankara.com/2017/01/dance-learn-dance-ndombolo-ceecee-coco-aurelie-congolese-makolongulu-dance-tutorial.html>)
