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# Maxwell Kofi Donkor & Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble

BY POLLY ADEMA

**Master drummer** and Asante Prince Maxwell Kofi Donkor spent much of his childhood in the Ghanaian villages of Otumi and Besoro-Kumawu, learning Asante (or Ashanti) drumming from his grandfather. As a young man, he was chosen to carry on the ancestral drumming tradition, a commitment he has pursued with a passion throughout his life. Kofi cultivated his drumming while also studying Ghanaian culture, sculpture, and industry at university. His life's work blends beautifully his musical and intellectual talents with his love and respect for the arts, tradition, and people of all cultures.

Since arriving in the United States in 1992, Kofi has been active with several drum circles. In 1997, he and other drummers formed Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble. The ensemble is comprised of drum and dance artists from the tri-state area. Every rhythm Sankofa plays evokes lively village experiences. Village life also informs Sankofa's dynamic modes of play and performance: "I use the village as the model for our philosophy, to bring everyone in," Kofi explains. When performing and leading demonstrations, he encourages audience participation and involves audience members in singing, dancing, and playing instruments.

Asante rhythmic textures speak of the multifaceted character of West African culture. Sankofa's 2010 CD *Drums* exemplifies this multidimensionality. Each piece communicates a dynamic interweaving of rhythm and music, tradition and culture, local and global, individual and community. Recently Kofi shared some insights in the making of this CD, providing a behind-



the-scenes look into the group's artistic process. His thoughtful responses follow each question.

***How do you and the group decide what to include on a CD, and in particular the Drums CD?***

We all made the decisions as to what rhythms to include on the *Drums* CD, even the order of rhythms and songs. We wanted to capture the village story the group has been studying for years from me and Yacine [Yacine Wade, a Wolof princess and co-leader of the ensemble].

Most of our music is based on authentic rhythms from West Africa, mostly Ghana and Senegal. We allow contributions from each willing member and review them before we get to the studio. Some of the rhythms, especially "Somba," evolved in the studio. We adopt the same philosophy [of honoring tradition and embracing interpretation] in our performances.

***How is the decision made about which instruments and whether or not there is***

***call and response in each piece? Are these factors prescribed by the song/tradition of the song? Is there room for "artistic license," leaving you free to interpret as you see fit, or is it completely open to negotiation among members of the group?***

It is a collective decision. I, with the help of a few of the drummers/dancers, made the decisions about the drums and instrument used for the call and response on each piece. These factors are prescribed by the songs and the traditions and by the ceremonies surrounding the songs. There is definitely lots of room for interpretation on some of the rhythms, like

"Fanga," "Ega," and "Bak2Roots." Other rhythms, in particular, "Kpalogo," "Ogidigidi," "Damba," and "Sogbadza," were left the way they are ethnically and traditionally.

***What are you working on now and what's next for Sankofa?***

We are now exploring the original tribal rhythms from West Africa beyond what I know, and how they have evolved in the Caribbean Islands and South and North America in general. The next CD is based on this research, which will involve some travels to West Africa and South America.

*Sankofa African Drum and Dance Ensemble's DRUMS CD is available from the Gallery of New York Artists at the New York Folklore Society or online at <[www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html#sankofa](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html#sankofa)>.* ▼

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