

Out of Africa

Amadou Thiam brings chance to learn culture and workout with tribal dance workshop at Student Rec Center

BY STEPHEN WELLS
The Battalion

utter bug, two step, lambada, tango and the waltz have made their mark on the American dance floor.

Tomorrow, from 3 to 4:30 p.m., Amadou Thiam will bring his West African dance and drum workshop to the Student Recreation Center, teaching students the significance of his art while they sweat to the beat of an African drum.

Amadou Thiam is a dancer, originally from Senegal in West Africa.

He toured the United States with the Second National Ballet of Senegal, and has performed and taught traditional West African dance for more than 10 years.

After his tour with the Second National Ballet of Senegal, Thiam formed the Lam Toro traditional West African dance and drum company in Sacramento, Calif., which has performed throughout Northern California.

Between practices with Lam Toro, Thiam taught dancing and drumming classes at the Sierra 2 Community Center in Sacramento.

Thiam later moved to Texas to stay close to his fiancée and has continued his teaching, traveling the country to do workshops. He stays so busy that the workshop at Texas A&M took almost a year to put together.

"I wanted to be near my fiancée," Thiam said. "So I'm trying to continue my teaching in Texas. She came to medical school here and we decided we couldn't do a long-distance relationship. I've still



been working a lot, sometimes more than one workshop a week. One year ago they tried to bring me here but I was too busy and my schedule would not allow it. This year it worked so that I could come."

Students can expect to learn a variety of dance styles at the workshop.

"I'm teaching West African rhythm and dancing from Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Gambia," Thiam said. "They will all be traditional dances. Usually they are used for celebrations like weddings. All the dancing I

will practice on the drums and on the different dance steps as individuals. Finally, we will combine it all and do everything together."

Dr. Kathy Dettwyler, an associate professor of anthropology, said people dance for many reasons. "There's all different kinds of reasons why people will dance," Dettwyler said. "They dance at religious ceremonies and weddings, just like we do. They dance at child naming ceremonies and at the beginning of the harvest season. They do dance for fun, but it's not like you will see at the Tap, where men and women dance together for companionship or to start dating."

Dettwyler said the traditional West African dance is a group activity. "African dance is not like dancing here, where you usually dance with a partner," Dettwyler said. "There are usually a lot of people standing in a circle, and a few drummers beating out a rhythm. Every now and then, somebody will go to the middle and strut their stuff."

The class is not limited to those who want to learn to dance.

An integral part of traditional dancing is the drumming accompanying it.

"All drummers are welcome to come," Thiam said. "If I've got some drummers to come to my workshop then it will be easy to teach them the part they need to know. That way, I can concentrate on teaching the

others who I want to do."

Drumming and dancing share an intimate relationship in West Africa. "There is usually more than one drummer present," Dettwyler said. "The rhythms they use are very complex, with each drummer performing a completely different part. It's very catchy and you can dance to it. The individual parts fit together into a whole, and the pattern for each drummer can be complicated, but it sounds wonderful."

Traditional African dance is not as distant as the name "traditional" implies. Several of the most popular club dances today have their roots in African dance.

"There are all kinds of movements, such as flapping arms to represent wings and making eating motions," Dettwyler said. "There is one dance females do to attract males. She will bend forward at the waist with her hands on her knees and twitch her bottom around."

Students who are planning on attending the workshop should come prepared to dance. "I think it will be a fairly participatory event," Dettwyler said. "My husband was thinking about taking our seven-year-old to the course and he was told if they were shy it might not be a great idea. If you go you will be dancing in front of others and with others."

Students should not expect the average fitness workshop. West African traditional dancing is as much about the culture as it is the dancing itself.

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GRAPHIC BY JP BEATO/THE BATTALION



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