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## Rhythms unite at African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival

Bridging cultural gaps and connecting people to their roots

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West African dance and drum sessions were the focus of the African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival. However, styles from Haiti, Cuba, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea and other countries were also featured in the class schedule.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)





The 12th annual African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival returned last weekend, with 20 workshops and classes aimed to educate the community about West African art and culture.

(Courtesy of Delou Africa)

Delou Africa, a nonprofit organization dedicated to African heritage and arts education, celebrated more than a decade of bridging cultural gaps this past weekend at its 12th annual African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival.

With 20 dance and drum workshops taught by world-renowned artists who hail from Haiti, Cuba, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea and other countries, the fully immersive experience took place over three days at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex. Members of the tight-knit West African arts diaspora from throughout the U.S. attended the event to connect and foster a greater sense of community.

“We've all had a rough year and a half,” said Folayan Griffiths, Delou Africa’s vice president. “We weren't able to have the festival last year due to the pandemic, so this year our theme is rejuvenation. It's more about celebrating the ability to get together, or even just being around to get together, and share in each other's energy.”



Artists and instructors from all over the world came to participate in the African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival and connect with other performers and attendees.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)

Members of the greater Miami community, who are less familiar with traditional African art and culture, were also welcome at the festival. A big part of Delou Africa's mission is education, in order to link all people of African ancestry to their roots.

"What we do is we try to bridge gaps," Griffith said. "So our focus is on African folklore dance, but we try to bridge the gap between the whole African diaspora."

Africans, Black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans share a genetic link and tie to Africa that unites them both historically and psychologically. However, members of the African diaspora remain separated by myths, misperceptions and negative stereotypes, despite their common ancestry.

“Growing up, we used to get made fun of for being African” by Black Americans, said Jennifer Emejulu, a 36-year-old physical therapist who was born and raised in the United States to Nigerian immigrant parents.

The Associated Press reported that when superhero blockbuster “Black Panther” was released in theaters in 2018, second-generation Africans and recent immigrants didn’t know how to feel about Black Americans’ responses.

“Now ... we’re in, we’re cool,” Emejulu continued, reflecting on past negative experiences of trying to fit in with Black Americans.



Delou Africa’s mission is to connect members of the African diaspora, who are often separated by language, cultural differences or stereotypes.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)

Many factors separate members of the African diaspora from each other. Language barriers and overall cultural differences are common examples. Colonialism and slavery also have made it extremely difficult for most African Americans to trace their ancestries back to Africa. Stereotypes have been absorbed by both groups, like those about poverty-stricken Africa or dangerous inner-city America, and there is a lack of knowledge about the harsh realities of slavery and colonialism, experts told The Associated Press.

“We meet and encounter each other through these lenses of mutual ignorance,” said Mwatabu Okantah, assistant professor at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. “It makes relating to each other difficult.”

That’s why education and celebrating diversity is so important to the members of Delou Africa.

A family-run organization started in 1987, the group’s original aim was performance art. Calling themselves Dance Africa Miami, the ensemble produced original artistic works of traditional West African dance and music routines. In 2010, Delou Africa was created to further the organization’s work through facilitating year-round programs and events to educate the community on African heritage.

“The festival is important to me because it brings people from all walks of life together to share and experience the beauty of African culture,” said Shelia Alexander, a drum instructor and performer with Delou Africa. “This is an opportunity to educate the community about our rich history and culture, which most of us did not learn in elementary or high school.”

Alexander joined the organization in 2000 as a Djun Djun player. A Djun Djun is a set of three drums that are played along with other percussion instruments to accompany traditional West African performances. She said that being a part of the organization has been “fulfilling” and has connected her to her roots.

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Festival attendees were required to wear masks and classes were socially distanced.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)

“Throughout the years, Delou has afforded me the opportunity to continue studying West African music, dance, culture and history through numerous classes and workshops,” said Alexander. “We are all giving back by sharing this culture and bringing artistic, educational programs to our school systems, corporations and the community at large.”

Scholars and prominent Black American figures, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm X, have long discussed the importance of connecting to their African heritage. Many others have come to agree, especially in recent years.

“We need to know that we don’t come from nothing,” Shara Taylor of Nashville, Tenn., told the AP. “We need to know that we came from somewhere, that we didn’t just spring from the ground in chains in the United States.”

Mark Carter, a Washington, D.C., native, dancer and first-time attendee of the festival, said being there helped him find similarities between African culture and Black American culture.



Attendees were able to participate in festivities both in person and online through Zoom.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)

“I think it was a great way to understand where some things come from,” he said. “I think we can look at hip-hop, and a lot of other different American dances and music, and be able to relate some of those things back to these more traditional dances and rhythms. I think the festival is a good thing to experience – even if you’re not a professional dancer – at least once. You’ll be able to make those correlations between the two different cultures.”

Ariane Bornes, a second-time attendee and dancer from New Orleans, said the festival is truly about more than just the arts.



“We do focus on West African dance here, but it's more than just a dance,” she said. “It's about the music, the language and the reason behind the dance. You get to learn about why and when they do the dance, so it's almost like a living history lesson as well.”



In addition to dance and drum workshops, the festival featured a global marketplace, allowing attendees to shop the wares of multicultural artisans.

(Selena Stanley for The Miami Times)

In addition to the workshops and classes, the festival featured yoga, a children's dance class and a global marketplace. Attendees were able to attend festivities both in person and online through Zoom.

The event was sponsored by the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Miami-Dade Mayor's Office and Board of County Commissioners, and the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, among others.

According to event organizers, the annual African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival will return next year to continue “supporting, inspiring, uplifting and educating” individuals about West African and Caribbean cultures.

A dark blue banner featuring the Cadillac logo on the left. In the center, a woman with braids is driving a car at night, with city lights visible through the windshield. The text "MAKE THE ROAD AHEAD" is positioned above "AUDACITY" in white, uppercase letters. On the right side, there is a white-bordered button with the text "LEARN MORE".

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