

DISABILITY. DANCE. ARTISTRY.

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Sidiki Conde Tokounou

Location: NYC, NY

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Sidiki Conde Tokounou
137 First Avenue Apt. 7
NYC, NY, 10003

Phone: 212 533 9764
E-mail: tokounou@mindspring.com
Website: sidikiconde.com



Photo by: deborah ross

Mission Statement

"I approach music with discipline to feel myself, to keep my mind calm, my heart clean, and my focus straight. With these principals in mind, I believe obstacles can be overcome, mountains climbed, discomfort endured. People see a 'handicap' when you lose your eyesight or legs, but true handicaps come only from the mind, the limits we place on ourselves. We can do anything, and our community is everywhere."

Program Statement

My birth roughly coincides with Guinea's independence from French colonization, and I came of age artistically in a country whose president, Sekou Toure, considered culture to be its greatest national resource. The national dance and music ensembles rehearsed in the presidential palace. During this time and at the behest of Toure, myself and other artists traveled to remote villages to learn the songs and dances of Guinea's 26 different ethnic groups in order to preserve and celebrate the rich cultural diversity of Guinea and unite the country. I became a master ethnographer in addition to a master artist.

My music derives from the traditional rhythms of Guinea. Harmony is created by a series of melodic rhythms that are played by each of the instruments (kora, balafon and traditional drums). In my process I sing each instrument's particular melody to my musicians. The chords are formed by the unique melding of the instruments when they are played together. In keeping with the West African griot traditions of my homeland the lyrics are my own compositions within which I chronicle my life's journey. In cultures where very few can read or write histories are passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. African traditional music is a living art form; it speaks of present conditions. Music is never a solitary action for me. Music has always been about bringing together people and creating communities.

I lost the use of my legs when I was fourteen. Being disabled was devastating because in Guinea people with disabilities are thought to bring shame and bad luck upon their family and village. To protect the larger group, disabled people are sent away from their homes, cut off from the ritual and daily lives of the community. My case was no different. After my paralysis, I was taken out of school and sent to live in my grandfather's village deep in the forest. After several years in the village, the time came for the coming-of-age ceremony when the young men dance the traditional steps into manhood.

I knew if I did not participate in this ceremony ~ if I did not dance ~ I would forever remain separate and cut off from my community. I reconstructed the traditional steps dancing on my hands instead of my feet. I found a way of moving that was true to the traditional rhythms and steps while also being true to the capacities of my body. I sang and danced at the coming-of-age ceremony and reconnected with my community and my culture. I continue dancing and singing to reaffirm that connection.

I have performed with West Africa's premier music and dance ensembles, including the prestigious Les Merveilles de Guinea, which I joined in 1987. Merveilles founder, Kemoko Sano, trained me in the traditional music and dance of the company's repertoire. I performed as a soloist in the troupe. Receiving the post of rehearsal master in 1988, I also composed and directed the company's musical arrangements.

My music brought me to America, where I continue to reach people with my message of hope and inclusion and brings happiness especially to those audiences who have felt separated from life by misfortune.

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