

Calendar

Let Drums Dance You

West African Dance Workshop

She saw the ad for his workshop on an index-card-sized slip of paper tacked to the wall of an African boutique. This was in Stockholm over ten years ago. Nikola Clay admits that Sweden is an unlikely place to have found her West African dance mentor.

Clay, who lives in Leucadia with her family, has studied many other forms of dance, beginning when she was a child in the early 1960s. "I started dancing as soon as I heard music. I had it in me."

She has been "through the gamut — ballet, jazz, modern, belly dancing, folk and ethnic dances" — as both teacher and performer. But she didn't wholly commit to a particular form of dance until 1988, four years before meeting her

mentor in Stockholm, when a San Diego friend took her to a

West African dance class here.

That was her first experience dancing with live drumming; it convinced her she had found her form. "The drums called my name and said, 'Here it is.'" She began to take classes wherever she could find the best teachers. Her search took her to L.A., San Francisco, New York, and finally Europe. There, in 1992, after seeing the ad in the boutique, she met Abdoulaye Camara, a native of Guinea. Camara's home for the past several years has been near the Arctic Circle, but he teaches West African dance around the world. Since meeting Clay, he has conducted classes in San Diego.

How does Clay describe the technique that she now teaches and performs? "It's been called 'earth-based' as opposed to ballet style, which is up on your toes." It's bare-footed; flat-footed, for the most part, but not always.

"Earth-based" also means that many movements have similarities to daily activities," says Clay, who traveled to Guinea for study 18 months ago. "The trip gave her a better sense of some movements' sources. For example, an arm movement resembles the act of bringing up water from a well by pulling a rope. "It's not exactly mimed," says Clay, "it's more like the movement was extracted from life." In a forthcoming dance video, Clay includes footage of Guineans doing

daily chores.

The pace of West African dance varies widely. "For the *yankadi*, which is a dance of flirtation and seduction, it's slow and flowing. But for the dance that traditionally follows that one, the *makru*, it's fast and fiery, since it's about what happens after the seduction — the celebration of the connection with the partner."

Drummers use several different sizes and shapes of drums, including ones called the *dun dun* and the *djembe*. This weekend at Clay's workshop, the

drumming will be performed by L.A.-based Jason Hann.

When Clay met Camara, she found his teaching style refreshing. She also appreciated the lack of racial tension in his classes, she says. "Abdoulaye doesn't put up with it. Here [in the United States] there was always some tension when the whites took classes," says Clay, whose ethnic background is German, Romanian, and English.

Were proprietary feelings the problem? "Yeah. This is the only thing

we can really say is ours. Please don't take it away from us.' It's gotten better, but there are still places where it's very — I guess you could call it 'competitive.'"

What does Clay tell people who expect her to be African-American? "If somebody calls to ask about my classes, I may tell them that I'm not, just in case they don't want to study with somebody who isn't. Sometimes they ask me questions that lead to that information in a roundabout way."

As a performer in a West African dance troupe, Clay has also faced the issue of audience expectations. "We have had trouble in the past, especially if it's a performance geared to African history or Martin Luther King Day. Our group tries to keep it 50-50 between African-Americans and whites. But if the African-Americans aren't available, some people in the audience have been anywhere from disappointed to almost violently opposed to whites performing."

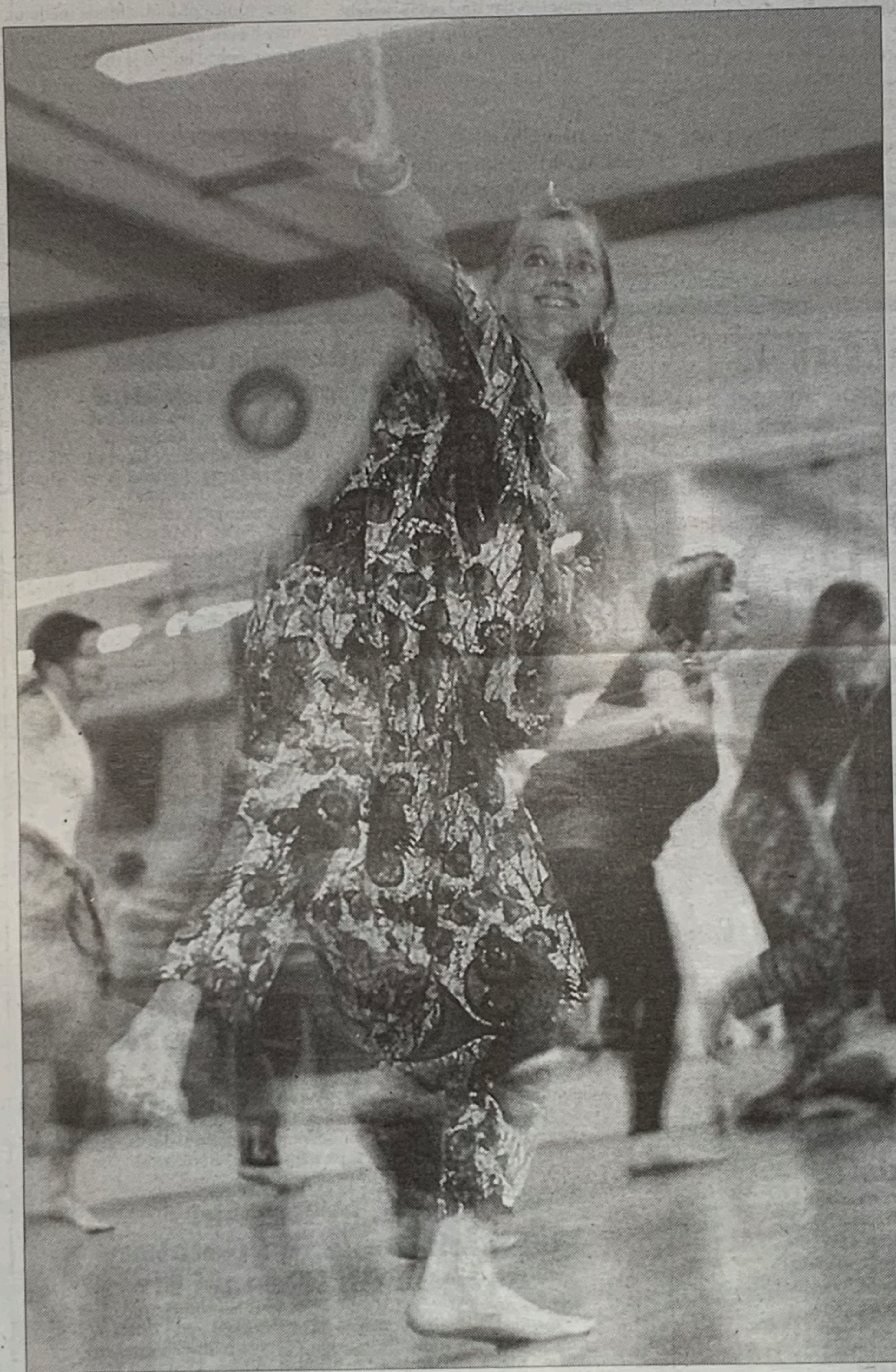
When Camara was in San Diego, he and Clay visited schools. "We did a workshop at my daughter's high school, San Dieguito Academy. At that level, they went wild, because they recognized it as the roots of hip-hop."

Do the techniques favor any particular body shape? Or any particular personality type? "As far as body type, anything goes, from petite to round and heavy." The latter, says Clay, "have more to shake, and that can be an asset. One of my teachers was close to six feet tall and probably 200 pounds. She could jump in the air and hit the ground soundlessly. She's a good example of the upper range. Personality types? Many times introverts find this is a way to free themselves. The drums bring them out. Often I'll say in class, 'Let the drums dance you.'"

Who doesn't do well at this kind of dancing? "Former ballet students," says Clay. "They have the hardest time forgetting their old-school rules."

— Jeanne Schinto

West African Dance Workshop
conducted by Nikola Clay
Saturday, November 23,
11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
Coast Athletics
613 Westlake Dr., Encinitas
Cost: \$15
Info: 760-942-9927



Nikola Clay

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