



LOVERS OF HOME

The Diouf Family

BY NKEIRUKA ORUCHE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANEESAH DRYVER | CREATIVE DIRECTOR: NKEIRUKA ORUCHE



Clockwise from top, L-R: Sakeenah McCullough Diouf, Demarcus; Madiou S. Diouf; Bottom L-R: Demarcus, Maya, Ibrahima O. Diouf, Naomi Gedo Johnson-Diouf, TAKH



It's 8:37 am on a Saturday in March, at the home of the Diouf family. Mama Naomi is up in her chambers, doing her best to stay out of the way as our shoot team has descended on her bedroom, with lights, plugs, clothes, makeup and bodies in every corner, trying to do everything. Many of the other rooms of the house are filled with people, of various ages, looking through piles of clothes, sipping from a disposable hot drink cup, rolling around under blankets, peeking into a bathroom mirror, or walking around with a cell phone lodged between their ear and shoulders.

'Everyone' is here. Mama Naomi Gedo Johnson-Diouf, her children, Esailama, Sakeenah, Madiou, Ibrahima, and Fatou Kine, and her grandchildren, Makai 16, TAKH 10, Maya 6, Kayden 4 and Demarcus 4. Papa Zakarya Diouf, who began his ancestorship journey on October 9, 2021, is also here, in spirit, in photos, and on a piece of mail with his name boldly written in all caps, that catches my eye. I imagine this is him reminding me that I need to style him too.

"Ahhhhhhh!" It's Ibrahima, responding to his older sister Esailama's pounce on him, that makes them topple onto their mother's bed. Esailama clutches on to him, and smothers him with hugs and kisses. When she's finally satisfied that she's imparted enough, for the moment, she releases him. I see my opening to ask for her to meet with me, so that we can make some decisions about her outfits for the shoot.

Our 6-person photoshoot team arrived before 7am today to kick things off, and although seemingly under control, it's not just a regular Saturday. It's arguably the busiest weekend in this family's schedule. Aside from the full family photoshoot, it's also the weekend of their dance company [Diamano Coura](#)'s annual *Collage des Cultures Africaines*, a multi-day conference of dance and drum workshops, performances, and activities with local and international guest artists alike.

Still, I don't think I've taken in the enormity of the situation, but it wasn't lost on me that this was exactly what I was curious to discover. To the rest of the Bay Area dance community, there was a conference happening, which meant attending classes and connecting with other African dance lovers. But here I was in their home, watching

Esailama ask her family for their coffee orders, letting her mother know that her preferred tea order was not available by delivery app, while also toggling between phone calls, troubleshooting lodging and accommodation mishaps associated with the conference.

While it seemed too busy for a photoshoot, it was also the opportunity to be able to have all the family back home in one place.

As I tinkered with furniture pieces and picture frames, selecting outfits, I can't help but wonder what it would be like with Papa Zak in person. I knew him as my instructor of West African Dances at Laney College, before I dropped out because 'life' got busy. In that time, I was struck by his precision in the craft, and commitment to education and higher learning.

I had to stop myself from spending time staring at photos all around the house. Because even if all I wanted to do was sit around and sip tea drinks, and ask more questions like if "Fatou Kine is the Kim K of the family then what is everybody else?"

"Nkei come and tie me Nigerian gele." Mama Naomi called from the room. It was action time.

[Dr. Zakarya Sao Diouf](#) and [Naomi Gedo Diouf](#) are culture bearers and artists from Senegal and Liberia, respectively, who have contributed to the practice and performance of West African dance, drum, and culture in African diasporic communities for more than four decades. Before immigrating to the U.S. in 1969, he led the Mali Dance Ensemble and served as artistic director of Les Ballet Africaines of Guinea and National Ballet of Senegal. In 1969, Zakarya joined the faculty of Southern Illinois University and was invited to dance with the dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham.

Naomi Gedo Diouf grew up in Liberia and danced at Kendeja Cultural Center of the Liberian National Troupe and with prominent dancers and musicians from other West African nations. She came to Los Angeles as a high school student as a member of the Youth for Understanding Exchange Program and later returned to the U.S. for university. In 1979, she met Zakarya who asked her to join his new dance company.



Clockwise from bottom, L- R:
Esailama Diouf-Henry; Sakeenah
McCullough Diouf; Fatou Kine M.
Diouf and Kayden; Kine, Sakeenah,
and Esailama; Naomi Gedo
Johnson-Diouf

Introduce your family to us.

MAMA NAOMI: Naomi Gedo Johnson-Diouf and Zakarya Sao Diouf (Ancestor). Children, Ousmane Diouf (Senegal), Adjie Diouf (Senegal), Esailama G. Diouf-Henry, Sakeenah McCullough Diouf, Madiou S. Diouf (Son #1 in the US), Ibrahima O. Diouf (Youngest son in US), and Fatou Kine M. Diouf (daughter in Atlanta).

The Grandchildren, Makai 16, TAKH 10, Maya 6, Kayden 4, and Demarcus 4.

Go back, where did it all start?

ESAILAMA: Papa Zak & Mama Naomi met on the dance floor...

Okay, before that, who are your people?

Where are you from?

IBRAHIMA: My people are Senegalese, but me and my siblings came up with the name Senegaberian. We put it in that direction mainly because, your father first and then your mom. My dad's from Senegal. My mom's from Liberia. Our people come from Medina. My dad is Serrer,

from Kaolack, where he was born and then he traveled over to his family in Medina.

ESAILAMA: On the Liberian side, we come from Lafayette Couya Johnson and Naomi Goede Johnson. Mama Naomi is named after her mother and both of those people were born in Cape Palmas, Liberia. That is where both father and mother of Mama Naomi come from. L Couya was an orphan raised by his uncle in Monrovia, the nation's capital, where Mama Naomi was born. There are about 18 documented ethnic groups in Liberia. Ours is Grebo. They were known to be warriors who held heavy resistance in times of enslavement.

What was home like for you growing up?

MAMA NAOMI: My dance started in the home arena, in my father's house, (although) in my immediate family who dances on this performance level. My father had this grand celebration that the president of Liberia (at the time) attended. And normally in our tradition when you have these, there is traditional dance. For Grebo people,

for the men it's the Doglor and for women it's the Boyeh. When you're honoring a big person, you have to do these dances. That was my history. My first love with traditional dance. That was the marker.

SAKEENAH: For San Diego life, our day to day was typical. Kids went to school in the morning. We had dance class one night a week like on Wednesday nights or Thursday nights. That night was usually an eat-out night. We had our responsibilities, we had chores. Our parents were very particular on our homework. No matter what they had going on, they took time out to make sure that our homework was done, and we were on top of our things. Mommy really trained us up, on domestication. We knew how to do laundry, sort clothes, and cut chicken.

ESAILAMA: What she forgot to say is that, we were living with the majority of the Liberian National Culture Troupe. There were about 15 people in a 2-bedroom apartment in La Jolla (San Diego). My mom was finishing her bachelor's in computer science engineering.

During that time, a lot of music and dance took place in the house. There's a history of West African dance in the United States. A lot of the people who have companies now were one large company performing in the San Diego Zoo or EPCOT Center and living together in one house talking about sewing, talking about music, about dance. A lot of the stuff that my mom learned came from those environments. All they did all the time was talk about drumming and dance. Dancing in the living room, drumming in the living room, rehearsing in the living room. Singing and dancing all day, arguing, fussing, doing all that comes with a whole bunch of people in a two-bedroom house.

SAKEENAH: And then the family transitioned and moved to the Bay Area.

ESAILAMA: Only thing that changed from San Diego to the Bay Area was that the house got bigger. You still had a lot of people. There's three waves of households. From the 1980s, up to the 2000s, the household has been a



Pictured: Opposite Page: Fatou Kine Diouf; Top Right: Madiou Diouf and Makai; Bottom Right: Maya, Madiou and Makai; Bottom Left: Ibrahima Diouf

community house, where you have dancers, musicians, costume makers, and singers.

MADIOU: Once we got up to the Bay Area, it got a little bit more youthful. We had a lot of young drummers too. By the time Ibrahima was born, Esailama and Sakeenah were in college, some cousins joined in with us and we were all living together, growing up together. We just always shared our parents with everybody for our whole life.

Some of you have started your own families and households. Is it like how you grew up? How is it the same or different from how you grew up?

SAKEENAH: I am married. And, to have a million people in the house. There was a party at my house. Right? So I think there's nine people in the house right now. Now who lives here? There's four of us. But this morning, there's nine. And I don't think anything of it. It's just natural. I'm accustomed to that now. My husband comes from a small nuclear family, where it was always just him, his siblings and parents. I won't say he's getting used to it, but he just sees it. This is just who I am. This is just how we are.

IBRAHIMA: I don't have any kids. I have my goddaughter and nieces and nephews, but it's me by myself. I'm dedicated to my work at this time.

ESAILAMA: Yes. There's a lot of people who come in and out of my house and my back house is a rotating house for people to live in.

MADIOU: Kinda is like that a lil' bit not to that extreme... but in its own way.

ESAILAMA: I think there is a little bit of a difference. I have people who come in and out of my house. People stay here. My back house is rotating. But there's a

little bit of a shift in the sense for my parents, there was rehearsals, classes, all that stuff going on all the time. And if we wanted to be together, we'd be in a rehearsal or a class or in a show. Looking at my relationship with my son, Sakeenah with hers, and Madiou with his, our children, this generation, they're doing their own thing very early on. We're very careful and mindful of allowing them that space. If they don't want to dance, they don't have to dance. They don't have to drum. We encourage

them and hope this can be a foundation because we love it and do it. We do take them to shows and rehearsals and classes, but we make space for them to explore and be whomever they are outside of that.

How does your family background and parents as dancers influence you now?

KINE: I would say we were kind of all born into it. It was our extracurricular activity that became our passion as we got older. For me, it was a wonderful thing to be born into. Being able to first be an apprentice under my own mother. Then study under my brother. That's how we bond. Besides dance, nursing was my calling. I could still have my nursing career and have my dancing career. I explored many different things. I did step, hip hop. I'm currently in a dance organization, House Arrest Two Championship Dance Team Inc., out of Chicago, Illinois which I joined in college at Clark Atlanta University.

IBRAHIMA: I was definitely born into the dance. The rhythm was in my body. I would not say I took dance seriously [until] about the age of 10 or 12. I danced with Diamano Coura West African Dance Company. I went to Berkeley High [where] my mom taught. That's where my dance choreography journey started at Berkeley High because of the African-American studies department. My friends thought I would be this famous choreographer but it took a right turn doing drawing and design, my first passion. I still keep West African dance. I have danced with choreographer Fatima doing contemporary styles, still based around African dance. I went to school for fashion design and I have my own clothing line, [Rebels of the Soil](#), challenging the eye of classification for men and women. Fashion and dance go hand in hand, because I first started learning how to sew garments and do things from watching my mother, her good friend uncle Nimely, and their friend who has transitioned, Papa Ibrahima Camara. I always tie my designs back to what I was born into.

SAKEENAH: I was first introduced to dance at around eight. It's in the home. It's what we do. I won't say that I have two left feet. I probably could have danced a little bit if I really kept up with it. I think I can claim one performance. I went off to college and then came back and we were doing big shows at the Calvin Simmons Theater and selling seats and I just jumped right in and took the hat of Ticketmaster for performances. When my dad was teaching the women's group [I took] classes with him. But I didn't perform. I'm in the audience, clapping my hands, and moving my body a little bit, but I'm not getting out there on the dance floor.

MADIOU: I came into the picture when things were getting going in San Diego. My dad was dancing, but he was more so drumming. I went in the direction of the drumming. He kind of put that in front of me more. I wanted to dance at one point, so I dipped in it a little bit. I know how to dance because I've been around it, but I grew up more so drumming. At one point I focused more on sports, but I never stopped drumming. As I grew up, I've always been able to keep music and percussion. I went to college for audio engineering, so I can be an engineer and still create beats and record people and bring my own flavor that I've learned from growing up in the arts with my parents all these years.

MAKAI: I'm not that interested in dance, but I like watching the shows and being around it because it's pretty cool to me. It brings people together. I think I got [music] from my father because he drums and he's a music producer. I know a lot of rhythms.

KINE: My perspective of my parents, keeping it going to bring both their cultures to the states so people experience it. They've taught about four generations, from babies to adults, and it brought the culture and kept the culture going. And those people sometimes branch off and go to do their own thing and it becomes their passion.

ESAILAMA: My mom always talks [about her and her] brother Lafayette Johnson Jr. relationship with Cuban, salsa, merengue, and cha cha cha dancing. At that time in their youth there was all this cross-cultural inspiration between Liberia, Senegal, Brazil, and Cuba. Festac, the 1977 festival. Those cultural exchanges and how Latin dance influenced a lot of West African cultures.

How does dancing connect you to your cultural roots & identity?

KINE: [When asked] if I identify myself as an American or an African, I always identify myself as African. Not just because my parents are from Africa, but when I go to Senegal (I haven't been to Liberia yet), I feel like I'm home.

ESAILAMA: I remember as a child, when my grandfather L.Kwia Johnson passed away, I was standing next to my grandmother, and I was scared but it was the most fascinating thing you could have seen. Something you will never see on a performance stage. But it took place right there in the yard of our house in Fiamah, Liberia. These people came down from the countryside. They did the Doglor to commemorate this big person in that way. We saw the same thing in Senegal when (my father) Papa Zak passed away. He was celebrated in such a moving way in Medina (Senegal), where he was raised. One final sendoff, orators [singers], the dance was there through the music and song.





When y'all are not dancing. What are y'all doing?

KINE: We go out. When we're all in the Bay Area, we do brunch at home on Sundays and cook together. Watch our different shows together, and come up with new dance ideas or come up with new drum breaks. Go on trips, take the kids places. Bond together. Since, some of us are not with the rest, try to find that time. We talk on the phone every day. We have a sibling group chat. We are very family-oriented, so we're going to find ways.

What does home mean to you?

ESAILAMA: There's a man named Baba Bill Summers, who was a very good friend of Papa's. He said to me that the world is your house and these places that you are from are the many rooms in your house. So as we think about our house, and our house being the world, and our rooms being Senegal, Liberia, California, Atlanta, Cuba, wherever it is that we have planted seeds, those are the rooms in our house. When I think about home, I think about that. I think about my home being expansive and me having multiple rooms in that house that are various parts of the world.

IBRAHIMA: Love that! Love that explanation. I'm with you 100%.

SAKEENAH: I was just about to say what you just said.

KINE: Mmmmm I agree.

You can't take Esailama's answer.

SAKEENAH: I can't take her answer, but it's funny because we call the house that our mother dwells at as 'The House.' Our parents' house. "I'm at 'the' house" not "I'm at my house." That's the phrase for home. I won't call it the foundation because of course we've lived in different places, but, this was the last home that, you know, that our parents shared. 20 years. I don't want to be cliché. Home is where the heart is. Home is where the love is. There are many aspects of what is home and what feels like home. And it's multiple physical spaces. We all have our individual spaces and places. The space where I come in and out, it's home for me. It's home for my son.

NKEIRUKA ORUCHE is a cultural organizer, multimedia creative of Igbo descent, who specializes in Afro-Urban culture and its intersections with social issues. She is a co-founder of BoomShake, a social justice and music education organization, and founder and executive artistic director of Afro Urban Society, an incubator and presenter of Pan Afro-Urban arts, culture, and social discourse. In 2022, she created and directed 'Mixtape of the Dead & Gone #1' – Ahamefula', a shit-just-got-real dance-theater piece about life, death, and what the fuck comes next.

She is a 2022 Dance/USA Artist Fellow, a Kikwetu Honors Awardee, a 2018 NYFA Immigrant Artist Fellow, YBCA 100 Honoree, and recipient of awards from Creative Work Fund, MAP Fund, New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, Kenneth Rainin Foundation, California Arts Council, among others.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ALYSSA CORTEZ
LOGO: JOSEPH RACCA
DESIGN: DON AGUILLO

WWW.PARANGAL.ORG