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Review

'Butt shakers' versus national ballet: dancing national identity during the one-party rule in Gabon (1968–1990)

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This paper sheds light on an unsung part of Gabonese history: the construction of national performance and 'spectacle' culture. It is based on long-term ethnographic and historical research on Gabonese music and dance groups and on an analysis of two music and dance genres created during the one-party rule. While the first one (cultural animation groups) has represented a national unity project and a masculine dominance of the state in a period of 'Renovation', the second (the National Ballet) has used local initiation rituals on stage as emblems of the Nation in a period of heritage-making and the construction of cultural policies. This paper shows how, in the case of Gabon, dance and music ensembles have not only been used by the single party to produce ordinary consent; they were also employed by popular classes to assert their agency, despite the domination of the single party. It highlights how the micropolitics and negotiations of some have shaped local 'traditions' to become part of a 'national culture' in public performances. This unknown history of two national dance and music genres ultimately adds innovative elements to the existing literature on culture, politics, gender, and initiation societies in Gabon.

Keywords: Gabon; dance; gender; traditions; nationalism

Cet article éclaire une partie méconnue de l'histoire gabonaise: celle de la construction de la représentation nationale et de la culture du « spectacle ». Il s'appuie sur des recherches ethnographiques et historiques à propos des musiques et danses gabonaises, et sur une analyse de deux genres créés à l'époque du parti unique. Tandis que le premier (les groupes d'animation culturelle) a incarné le projet d'unité nationale et de domination masculine de l'Etat dans une période de «Rénovation », le second (le Ballet National) a déplacé des rituels d'initiation locaux sur les scènes de spectacle, pour les ériger en emblèmes de la Nation, dans une période d'édification de l'idée de patrimoine et de politiques culturelles. Cet article montre comment, dans le cas du Gabon, les groupes de danse et de musique ont non seulement été utilisés par le parti unique pour produire de l'adhésion ordinaire; mais ils ont aussi été employés par les classes populaires pour faire valoir leur capacité d'agir, malgré la domination du parti unique. Il souligne comment les micropolitiques et les stratégies de certains individus ont contribué à façonner des «traditions » locales comme composantes de la « culture nationale » dans les représentations publiques. Au final, cette histoire méconnue de deux genres nationaux de danse et de musique ajoute des éléments innovants à la littérature existante sur la culture, la politique, le genre, et les sociétés d'initiation au Gabon.

Mots-clés: Gabon; danse; genre; traditions; nationalisme

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When I arrived in Gabon for the first time in October 2006, my initial encounter with the local dance scene took place in the courtyard of a high-school, in a central borough of Libreville. I had been put in contact with Peter Nkoghé, a choreographer who was part of the so-called 'afro-contemporary' dance scene that was emerging at this period, and I met him before the training of Adiaïsse, the 'tradi-contemporary' dance company of whom he was the artistic director and choreographer. After our discussion, I joined this dance company because they needed new dancers for their forthcoming performances. Three evenings a week, they taught the initiates their repertoire of choreographies: a series of ballets that represented a specific dance or ceremony of an ethnic group of Gabon.

The core members of the company Adiaïsse all came from the same roots as they had been trained within the National Ballet of Gabon, a state funded company created at the beginning of the 1980s. Adiaïsse had been established in the late 1980s by the choreographer of the national ballet, Geneviève Issembé, when the latter started to lose its state funding and to decline. Almost twenty years later, they continued to stage a mix of dance moves stemming from ceremonial and ritual contexts and to create a fusion of 'traditional' dance moves with contemporary techniques, transmitting these styles to the young generation of dancers who joined their company.[1]

Like their choreographer Peter Nkoghé, most of the company's dancers were travelling between different companies and dance genres: from 'tradi-contemporary', to 'contemporary', and 'hip-hop'. While participating in the rehearsals, performances, backstage discussions, and sometimes in passing in the ordinary lives of these dancers, I noticed for example that some of the women dancing in Adiaïsse and the National ballet were also members of other dance ensembles called *groupes d'animation culturelle* (cultural animation groups). Created during the one-party rule, these groups gathered mainly women, recruited on the basis of their ethnic or regional origin, who sang and performed different dances (local dances or urban popular genres such as *soukouss*) while praising the president and political leaders.

In fact, these two categories, the national ballet and the cultural animation groups, have been the major sites of dance performance and training for a whole generation of dancers in Gabon. They have been the main spaces to represent the nation through dance from the installation of Omar Bongo's regime in 1967 to the 1990s. Yet, they have had very different trajectories even if they are still alive[2], cultural animation groups have seen a progressive decline since the democratic transition in 1990. They were criticized by opposition parties for their representation of women as 'butt shakers' and their passive submissiveness to an autocratic state power. The national ballet is still touring international stages, and hires dancers from dance companies within Libreville. Therefore, in the present day, both categories represent a main part of the national history, heritage and culture.

Building on a broader literature describing the interlacing of culture and politics in postcolonial Africa (Apter 2005; Askew 2002; Castaldi 2006), this contribution proposes to shed light on an unsung part of Gabonese history: the construction of national performance and 'spectacle'[3] culture. This article is based on an analysis of two music and dance genres created during the one-party rule that has played a major role in creative scenes. A number of studies have demonstrated the relevance of studying dance and music practices in order to understand the process of nation-building 'from below' (Askew 2002; Neveu Kringelbach 2012) and the subtle appropriation of nation-state ideologies by popular social classes. In this paper, my argument is that, in the case of Gabon (as in other central African countries – see White 2008), dance and music ensembles have not only been used by the single party to produce ordinary consent, they were also employed by popular classes to assert their agency, despite the domination of the single party. Contrary to previous perspectives based mainly on institutions and on a uniform conception of the single party's modes of governance, my interest is to highlight how these performing

scenes have been shaped by the action of some travelling people who have negotiated between different influences and constraints, interlacing nation-state ideologies, global influences, and 'traditional' norms related to initiation rituals and local ceremonies that they have been inspired by. My aim is to highlight how the micropolitics and negotiations with different scales and constraints have shaped local 'traditions' to become part of a 'national culture' in public performances.

Based on long-term ethnographic and historical research on Gabonese music and dance groups, this paper will examine how each of these two genres have appeared at specific moments of the nation's history. While the first one (cultural animation groups) has represented a national unity project and a masculine dominance of the state in a period of 'Renovation', the second (the National Ballet) has used local initiation rituals on stage as emblems of the Nation in a period of heritage-making and the construction of cultural policies. The description of two different music and dance genres will allow me to highlight the existence of changes in the government's policies towards dance and culture, in its project for the modernization of 'traditions', and in the use of performing arts by the single party. This unknown history of two national dance and music genres will add innovative elements to the existing literature in culture, politics, gender, and initiation societies in Gabon.

Cultural animation groups: performing national unity and masculine state power

Origins and history

The emergence of cultural animation groups coincided with the installation in November 1967 of the second president of Gabon, Albert Bernard Bongo.[4] He revoked multipartyism and created the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) on 12 March 1968. With this instrument and with his concept of 'Renovation,' he asserted an ideology that broke profoundly with a previous era – one marked by ethnic and territorial divisions (Nicolas Métégué 2006) – in order to promote national unity. The development of the country depended at this time on the union of all 'tribes,' 'clans' and 'ethnic groups' through the central figure of the president and the state (Ndombet 2009; Nguéma Minko 2010; Mbah 2015). President Bongo insisted upon amplifying the strong feeling of national belonging that existed since the colonial period and the era in which Gabon was part of French Equatorial Africa (Pourtier 1989), and upon the cohesion of the country's values of peace and unity. In addition to repression techniques and the appropriation of economic resources, he maintained his hegemony by dominating the symbolic and religious sphere (Ngolet 2000), and with the help of several communication institutions, including media (radio, television, press) and music and dance. The latter became core ways to embody the power of the state.

Two kinds of music and dance groups were at the centre of state politics and urban popular life between 1967 and the 1980s. First, from the 1950s, the new citizens of Libreville – which was in the midst of a demographic explosion resulting from the rural exodus – embraced 'modern' instruments in brass-bands and orchestras. These orchestras went through great turmoil around the time of independence (between the end of 1950s and the 1960s) and they enlivened Libreville's nightlife with Afro-Caribbean, western or Congolese rumba rhythms. Nearly exclusively composed of men, these musical formations were requisitioned by national armed forces and turned into national military orchestras in 1971. Musicians who performed in informal musical groups were forced to join the ranks of the military orchestras, where they were obligated to uphold the political messages and play to the preferences of the chiefs from the law enforcement officials and the police.

The second type of group that had been at the foreground of the music scene since the creation of the single party in 1968, were cultural animation groups. In Gabon and in the Democratic

Republic of Congo (DRC), the notion of '*animation culturelle*' (also called '*animation politique et culturelle*' in the DRC) referred to a kind of 'state-sponsored singing and dancing that came to be synonymous with the image of the state and the system of the one-party rule' (White 2008, 73). The term *animation* was synonymous with the idea of enlivening (*ambiance*) official events and the public sphere. In Gabon, cultural animation groups were created as a ramification of UFPDG: an organ of the party, and the Union of Women of the PDG (UFPDG) which was a partisan organization created for the promotion of women and their autonomy and equal rights in the new modern society. These ensembles exclusively gathered women who danced and sang to praise the glory of the single party and the president. Cultural animation groups took charge of popular propaganda (Nzengue 1989).

Political animation by musical and dance groups has been common in many African countries, propagating the messages of the party in power. These cultural animation groups have been famous, for example, in Togo, under President Eyadema, where there were named 'groups of shock' (Toulabor 1986). In Malawi, the one-party period (from 1964 to 1993) was also synonymous with a creation of female musical groups (*mbumba* groups), linked to the Malawi Congress Party, that sang the praise of leadership and of the president, Kamuzu Banda (Lwanda 2008; Gilman 2001). Writing about the Congolese version of the genre (previously Republic of Zaïre), Kapalanga Gazungil Sang'Amin considers that 'animation is a resurgence of traditional artistic forms in a new form of representation' (Kapalanga Gazungil 1989, 118), because these spectacles honour the chief, just as in traditional cultures. Also writing about the DRC, Bob White draws connections between these groups, the construction of cultural authenticity under Mobutu's regime (White 2006) and the diffusion of a certain vision of 'culture' as a political tool in Congo. Bob White refutes the idea that this genre was a product of Mobutu's inspiration in Northern Korea and in China, and defends the point of view that they were probably also inspired by previous folkloric animations from the colonial era.

In Gabon, it is commonly supposed that Omar Bongo was inspired to create these propaganda spectacles by socialist regimes and by his travels in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mouele 2009). Therefore, the early creation of dance and music groups before independence and their participation in colonial animations (Bernault 1996) corroborates the idea that the latter were predecessors of the genre '*groupes d'animation culturelle*' during the colonial era.

Josephine Bongo, honorary president of UFPDG, wife of President Bongo and passionate music lover, created the first cultural animation group on 23 November 1968. This group was initially called Akébé II, in reference to the borough in Libreville where several members of the group lived. It was later renamed Kounabéli and then Mbil'asuku (words taken from languages in the Eastern province of the High Ogooué), to give it a more 'authentic' and traditional appeal. This group gathered mainly women from the eastern province of the High-Ogooué (the province of origin of the Bongo couple). Accompanied by their orchestra, the Superstars, and often by the first lady herself, their mission was to animate political events. As the first, most popular ensemble, and the closest to the party, Kounabéli remained a model of cultural animation during the genre's golden era, in the 1970s and 1980s. Following the model of Kounabéli, several other groups arose after 1968 to represent each province of the country, and then within each province, each department. In the 1970s and 1980s, the country counted thirteen cultural animation groups, such as Centre-ville, Nkol-Engong, Dimossi, Nyenzi, Missema and Mikouagna. Each of these could gather thousands of members.

In Gabon, groups of animation were thus constituted on the basis of common provincial or ethnic origins, and mostly led by important women from the country, such as wives of state ministers or rich political personalities. Many also depended on the main political figures of their provinces. Described as 'sponsors,' they provided general funds for the group, costumes, the small amount of material remuneration that the members received for their travels, drinks, and food and

sometimes meagre financial support. They also intervened to provide jobs for some members and partisans of the PDG (Mouele 2009, 61). In this way, musical organizations connected the capital with the hinterland, and with the rural migrants who arrived in Libreville under the control of political institutions and figures. They also reproduced structures, systems and ideologies of the single party in their own organization, including the division of the country in provinces, ethnic groups and spatial communities, exactly in the same way as in Ministries and administrations.

Indeed, a local 'geopolitic' system was progressively installed in Gabon after independence. This system consisted in distributing posts and income between the different spatial and cultural communities in the country, and aimed to balance political governance between different ethnic groups (Obiang 2007, 137–138). This principle has reinforced the 'materialisation of ethnicity in everyday urban life through an ethnicization of public administration and government' (Nguéma Minko 2010, 14, my translation). Following the same principle of harmonious ethnic balance, all official events and ceremonies had to invite cultural animation groups and artists who represented the nine provinces of the country, or at least the most important communities in terms of political power and demography. In that sense, cultural animation groups were claiming their work was an 'authenticity' project that reified ethnic traditions to bring them to life on stage and to merge them with modern western sounds and the 'Renovation' message of the single party.

As a consequence, during the 1970s, both orchestras and groups of cultural animation were partly stuck in the same paradoxical relationship towards 'tradition' as the state. At the same time, they were claiming their work was an 'authenticity' project that reified ethnic traditions to make them live on stage, but were also considering it as potential threat to national unity, and as something to merge with 'modern' western sounds.

Social contexts and musical contents

While some studies address the existence of cultural animation groups (Matsahanga 2002; Rossatanga-Rignault et al. 2005; Tonda 2009; Nguéma Minko 2010), only a few are devoted specifically to this genre, and only in the form of M.A. theses (Nzengue 1989; Mouele 2009). These works have analysed cultural animation groups with regards to their political meanings and functions rather than their musical and dance dimensions, and they have reproduced a theoretical division between politics and culture in their analysis. Nevertheless, these musical formations have created a proper aesthetic, endowed with musical and choreographic characteristics that remain an emblem of this era in Gabonese history, and that was intertwined with the governance and power organization of that time. The study of their artistic creations reveals original aspects of the single party's governance and ideological foundations.

Cultural animation groups can generally be described as 'a particular kind of spectacle that allied the sensibility of folklore with popular music, but that sang at the same time the praises of the single party and its chief' (White 2006). Even if the attempts to create fusions of modern Western instruments with traditional songs and instruments were numerous in this period, the performances of cultural animation groups came from a special dialogue with the politics and ideologies of each nation-state, highlighting musical styles, political impacts and gender norms in very localized ways. They aimed to represent the local features of an 'authentic' African culture, called for by several nation-state ideologies after independence. As a consequence, ethnicity and provincial singularities were strongly highlighted in musical and textual contents. In Gabon, the common linguistic belonging that linked members of each group was predominantly found in their songs, and Gabonese languages were mixed with French, which remains the national language. For example, the group Dimossi produced texts in *ipunu* and in French, while Kounabeli used the *bateke* and *obamba* languages in its songs.

Lyrics were mainly dedicated to the description of Bongo's successes, presented as 'Camarade Bongo Ondimba,' 'Papa Omar,' 'Yaya Bongo,' 'father of the nation,' 'strong man of the country' or 'great guide.' Some lyrics praised other ministers, deputies, senators, or the first lady herself. In these praise songs, themes of peace, development, national wealth, national unity and solidarity were also very present, and they progressively included other social issues, such as the prevention of AIDS. These songs were used to spread the idea of the nation, political values and social norms towards popular classes. Through singing, the repetition of political slogans enabled the incorporation of the single party's messages towards large audiences, and the recruitment of new militants.

From the end of the 1960s to the mid-1980s, cultural animation groups mainly performed live, as they were solicited to perform during official events.[5] Their performances always followed the same pattern: dozens, sometimes thousands of women, from teenagers to old women, occupied the background of the stage, placed in lines, led by one or several solo singers, while dancers occupied the foreground of the stage. Women wore African cloth ('*pagne*'), either with wrap-around skirts or dressed in modern outfits, for example with a t-shirt carrying the emblem of the party and the picture of the President or the name of the group. A few were dressed in traditional costumes and raffias, straws that are used in the traditional ceremonies of many ethnic groups in Gabon.

They were accompanied by an orchestra consisting of modern and traditional musicians (mainly men), playing guitar, drums, bass or brass instruments, and also very often traditional percussions, such as *nkul* or *ngom* for northern cultural animation groups (Nkol Engong), *mosomba* drums or *obaka* (a rack made of hardwood and hit with two sticks) for southern groups. Musical instrumentation was inspired by African rumba sounds, but these groups also included the traditional rhythms and 'folklores' of each province, such as *ikoku* rhythm for the group Dimossi – mostly composed of Punu – or the *elombo*[6] ritual music for groups of the province of Estuary and Maritime Ogooué. Songs often contained a special part called 'chauffé,' with an acceleration of the rhythm usually in the middle of the song and a solo performance of the guitarist, as in rumba music (White 2002), which was appropriate for the solo improvizations of the best dancers.

While specific singing or musical features characterized the cultural animation groups, dance represented a core aspect of their performance. Choreographies were a mix of *ndombolo* or other popular urban moves from Congo, and traditional dances, coming from ritual ceremonies or festivities. But they performed in a line, with no movement in space as in traditional performances. Beyond their different origins, most of these dances emphasized swaying hips and the eroticism of waist movements, a feature present both in popular dances and in traditional moves such as *ikoku*, a symbolic celebration of fertility (Plancke 2010).

In sum, the performances of cultural animation groups were drawing from diverse local ceremonies and rituals that they mixed with other African and global influences seen as 'modern'. It was adapted to the political agenda of Omar Bongo. Consequently, this new 'national' genre has shaped some traditional features to make it correspond to the underlying ideologies and social structures of the Single Party. The penetration of cultural performances by political agendas and ideologies appears particularly clearly in the domain of gender, which reveals how performing music and dance groups were both a medium to impose political domination and a way for popular classes to develop their agency.

Power issues: masculine domination or women's agency

Whereas cultural animation groups in Congo and Togo gathered both male and female genders (with a majority of women), membership in these groups was exclusively reserved for women in Gabon, and they represented a strong sense of gender identity. Under the single-party

government, a gendered division structured the emerging musical scene. While the category of musician was designated principally for men, women were to embody power through dance. The abstract dimension of state power and its masculine character in Africa (Mbembe 2001) were represented in women's singing and dancing for leadership. Some scholars have for that reason considered the cultural animation groups as a staging of the female body as a sexual object to be consumed by high government officials (Kapalanga Gazungil 1989; Tonda 2009), as well as representing the political hegemony of the PDG and Omar Bongo (Mouele 2009). Managed and funded in big part by political leaders, cultural animation groups reinforced indeed the dependency of artists on politics, and the subordination of women participants.

At the same time, it may be argued that these groups allowed their members to develop their agency in a society defined by the control of the nation-state, and to reconstitute social links in a context of urbanization and transformation of solidarity relations. During the mid-1980s, when Gabon entered an economic crisis and strong inequalities divided urban society, performing power and beauty gave women the opportunity to escape precarious life situations. For some poor women who could not be hired in the public sector or in private companies since they lacked diplomas and contacts to family patronage, these groups provided a way to meet important political personalities who helped them to find a job, or with whom they had intimate relationships in exchange for material support. In a few cases, these led to official relationships. Above all, group life was a space for these women to have fun with other women while learning to dance.

White (2006) argues that the representation of the cultural animation group's artists in Congo as alienated and passive individuals does not do justice to the subtle forms of criticism they expressed behind the scenes, or to the interdependence that has progressively been established between these groups and the single party. In Gabon also, if, on the one hand, the single party imposed the frame for musical creation and the life of the musicians, on the other, its authority also became dependent on these 'organs of communication', whose presence was an unavoidable condition for holding political and official ceremonies. The sociologist Joseph Tonda confirms this in a paper which deals with Omar Bongo's domination techniques:

> Through seduction and fascination that they exerted on the audience, and even more on the TV viewers, these women's bodies dancing and singing the merits of the President in a perfect political liturgy have strongly contributed to installing the hegemony of the Gabonese Democratic Party in the political field. (Tonda 2009, 135; my translation).

Actually, this idea about interdependence between cultural animation groups and the political system of the PDG was related to the broader gender system and conception of men's and women's roles in the Gabonese society. In interviews, members of cultural animations groups explained that these musical formations were important for the President because women were 'by nature' more faithful and honest with their household and husband, in contrast to men who were more strategic. In Gabon, it is relatively admitted and accepted that men have polygamous relationships, and to have a large number of sexual partners is often perceived as a proof of the virility which is imposed by local models of masculinity (Esseng Aba'a and Tonda 2016). Cultural animation groups would be the mirror of this normative principle in the field of politics and the presence of a large number of women dancing for the President would be proof of his power. Through their songs and performances, dancers of cultural animation groups were representing the genuine and pure devotion from women towards their master, namely the President.

This strong correlation between politics, gender norms and dance performance in cultural animations groups was obviously present in discussions about sexuality that I observed in the cultural animation groups' rehearsals. During rehearsals and performances, references to sexuality were omnipresent, for example through jokes and humour, or through comparisons between

the dancer's performance and her sexual competences. Young women were invited by their peers and superiors to sway and turn hips 'as they would do in bed', and when they were providing a strong performance, older dancers made jokes while supposing that she was probably giving a lot of pleasure to her partners during sexual relationships. This association between the role of women in the household, sexuality and dances also appears in the lyrics of some songs; such as the song 'La botte' [7] published in 2007, which recounts implicitly the transmission of sexual skills and knowledge between different generations of women.

As so, in these dance and music performances, women were presenting a deeply eroticised and sexualized representation of female's bodies that was both a development of diverse ethnic traditional dance performances insisting on hips and pelvis moves and a reaction to the constraints and ideologies of the single party. In this way, they were embodying on stage the submission of women to men (and to men in power). At the same time, this representation was used as a way for women to assert a certain power through the use of their body and sexual performances. As in other contexts, sexuality is conceived as a way to exert an influence on men's decisions and actions, and asserting a sexual power is thus for these women a way to assert power or agency.

Contrary to this genre, which blended with state politics and its ambiguous relationship with 'tradition' and gendered representations of power, another trend in the music and dance scene appeared in the 1980s. As a result of new cultural policies, the national ballet and 'tradi-contemporary' dance groups appeared and rose during this period, drawing on connections with foreign music and dance genres, and on other conceptions of how to perform both national and local identities through dance.

The National ballet: moving initiation rituals and codes on stage

During the 1980s, other musical and choreographic projects appeared in Gabon, related to the development of new institutions in support of culture and with a new project about 'preservation' of tradition.[8] In 1980, as a reaction to the shortcomings observed in the first decades after independence, the Gabonese state started a ten-year programme of cultural development (Engandja-Ngoulou 2012). It was aimed at reinforcing regulatory measures, creating cultural industries, and strengthening artistic domains. This programme led in 1982 to the creation of the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Popular Education, of the National Agency for Promotion or Arts and Culture (ANPAC), and of the International Centre of Bantu Civilizations (CICIBA). President Bongo asserted more strongly from that date his support to artistic creation that drew on 'tradition', materializing more tangibly an idea that he had already expressed previously: 'my support is given to all the people who pay attention to preserve the Gabonese originality and personality'.[9]

The ten-year programme failed very quickly, undermined by drastic budget cuts as a consequence of the economic crisis of the mid-1980s. However, this turnaround of cultural policies inspired a new impetus in the artistic scene, to turn more clearly towards traditional cultures, music and dance and put them on stage. This was different from the previous period where this staging of national culture was mainly based on rumba and African popular rhythms, and to a lesser extent on local elements of culture. Correlated with the progressive opening of new international markets for African dances, this attempt led to the creation of a whole new scene of 'tradi-contemporary' dance that intended to mix local traditions with contemporary dance techniques.

In the 1980s, the National Ballet represented the core institution in this 'tradi-contemporary' genre. In comparison with several West African countries, the creation of a National Ballet was delayed by twenty years in Gabon as a result of the minor importance assigned to the arts. Following the participation in international cultural events such as FESTAC 1977 or the UNESCO

conference in Mexico in 1982, it was finally created in 1980 by the Minister of culture, François Owono Nguéma, with the mission to stage and represent different Gabonese traditions through one dance group. The aim of this new state company was also to compete with other African national ballets that became famous after independence in world music markets, such as the 'ballets Africains de Keita Fodeba' for Guinea (Cohen 2012), or the National Ballet of Mali (Djebbari 2013).

The creation of the 'tradi-contemporary' scene happened also thanks to the roles played by a few artists who travelled abroad, specially one individual who played a major part for the National Ballet and the new visions of encounters between 'tradition' and 'modernity' that this dance group promoted: Geneviève Issembé. Born in a family of diplomats of the Myene ethnic group, Geneviève Issembé grew up in France, where her mother was the general consul of Gabon. After two years studying international relations at university, she registered at the Schola Cantorum of Paris, where she learned theatre and performing arts. When she went back to Gabon in 1980, she was invited by the Minister of Culture to run the National Ballet, an entity that existed in theory, but which had never really been established. Geneviève Issembé accepted the proposition, but since she was not an expert in the domain of dance, she followed first a choreographic training at a school that had just been created on the African continent: Mudra Afrique.

Mudra Afrique was created in Dakar in 1977, at the instigation of the President Leopold Sédar Senghor, with the idea of including dance into his project of modernizing traditions (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Bourdié 2015). This dance centre was at this period directed by the Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny, with the collaboration of Maurice Béjart, and with the support of UNESCO. Geneviève Issembé spent three years in this school, which was the core place for contemporary creation, where grew her project to mix western techniques of ballet and contemporary dance with a valorisation of African traditions. This project was at this time clearly infused by Senghor's visions of negritude, which was spread in Mudra Afrique:

> Leopold Sedar Senghor has entrusted Germaine Acogny to realise two missions: to do the inventory of the rich heritage in terms of dances, and based on this, 'to invent a negro-African dance'. […] Senghor considered French language and academic dance as modern tools of communication and expression. He aspired to a grammaticization of negro dances through the imposition of rules which could be reproduced and spread in a universal way. The whole creation of Mudra Afrique was drawing on these principles, that led by the way Germaine Acogny to invent an 'African dance' technic that was able to answer to these aims. (Bourdié 2015, my translation)

Inspired by the Mudra Afrique ideology, Geneviève Issembé came back to Gabon in 1983 and took charge of the National Ballet. Immediately, the project of staging and performing local traditions through the lens of modern dance techniques met the Gabonese project of mixing different ethnic groups in a national ensemble. Issembé started by hiring dancers coming from different provinces of Gabon who were living in Libreville, and teaching them contemporary choreographic techniques, while at the same time pushing them to learn local dances. Most of them had started dancing in small 'folkloric' dance groups (small amateur companies existing since the colonial era), or in hip-hop groups, which were very popular in Libreville's high-schools and night-clubs in the 1980s. She taught them classical ballet training, and helped to select dance moves and steps stemming from celebrations or ritual contexts in the dancers' regions of origin. The moves were merged into contemporary choreographies, and were codified for the stage. One ballet was created for each traditional genre: for example, one piece was created around *bwiti* ritual dances, with steps stemming from the different sequences. It was performed by men using wooden stools since this rite of passage is originally reserved to men. Another ballet based on the *nyembè* initiation dance involved women dancing with white, black and red loincloths, and executing quick skipping steps while rolling the hips. Another choreography

was performed on two lines dividing men and women who provoked each other in turn, with a dance, *ikoku*, mimicking the sexual act. With this repertoire, the company started to tour nationally and internationally, representing Gabon at international events.

Between 1983 and 1986, Geneviève Issembé ran this professional company funded by the Ministry of Culture. But the transformation of tradition for the stage was soon questioned by the Ministry of Culture itself, which had developed a fixed, purist concept of identity. Geneviève Issembè explained the pressure she received from state representatives in these terms:

> The Minister of Culture told me: 'National Ballet means that we have to gather the whole nation in this body. So if we gather the whole nation, we have to find dances of each ethnic group in Gabon, at least the four main trends of this group.' He came during rehearsals to observe what we were doing and he gave me his opinion. He said: 'But there are steps which are not at all Gabonese'. I said: 'Yes, but if the aim was to just take the village and to bring it to the stage, we might as well not go on stage and stay in the village.' [10]

Contrary to folkloric dance companies which had existed since the colonial period, the project of National Ballet as conceived by Geneviève Issembé did not only consist in transposing traditional dance moves into modern contexts, but also in adapting these steps to contemporary choreographic codes, in terms of displacements, positions in space and moves, and mixing these with contemporary dance steps to access new global markets. These 'tradi-contemporary' attempts did not fit with the traditionalist commands of the Ministry of culture, and Issembé was pushed to only 'stage traditional dances'. However, changes occurred in the Ministry of Culture which allowed her to get out of this institutional confinement.

Indeed, after three years, the National Ballet was affected by the economic crisis that hit the country, and the Ministry decided to stop hiring dancers. Attached to the dancers that she hired and trained, Geneviève Issembé decided to continue her work with this team, away from the control of the Ministry. Thanks to the support of private companies, she created the company Adiaïsse. With the demise of National Ballet, Adiaïsse became the main company representing the country in international events or national ceremonies.

While cultural animation groups were related to gender representations and power relationships, leading sometimes to strong criticism, the performances of the National Ballet also related to other local organizations and power issues, notably in the field of religion and initiation societies.

From the temple to the scene

In her attempt to create a Gabonese 'tradi-contemporary' dance style, Geneviève Issembé drew on local dance repertoires, particularly ritual and initiation dances such as *ndjobi* (male initiation society of the High-Ogooué), *bwiti* (the most important initiation and therapeutic rite, widespread in the western part of the country) or *ndjembè* (a female rite of passage[11]). These initiation societies, which exist with variations in the different ethnic groups of Gabon, are often based on the consumption of a local hallucinogen to create visions or to experience spirit possession. They are all ruled by a strong hierarchical order and by prohibitions regarding the revelation of initiation secrets.

To understand the process of staging these local cultures, it is important to remember that from the 1970s to the 1990s, *bwiti* and other initiation societies have been progressively transformed, moving from the status of condemned practices to local heritage. This process has taken place through the influence of cultural institutions and agents, such as ethnologists, initiation ritual leaders, and academics (Mary 2005; Bonhomme 2007; Chabloz 2014), but also through the work of musicians and dancers who put those practices on stage and brought them into the

world markets of music and dance (Aterianus-Owanga, 2017a, 2017b). Nevertheless, even before the ministry of culture started to show interest in the preservation of these rituals, musicians like Pierre-Claver Akendengué had been precursors in the attempt to use traditional instruments, melodies and chorus in his songs, bringing these practices into world musical scenes (ibid.).

Dance groups like the National Ballet later played an important role in the heritage-making process. They were the first to reproduce the sounds and melodies of secret rituals as well as dance moves, dress and objects on stage. The importance of ritual societies appears on several levels, first and foremost in the personal trajectories of the dancers themselves. As a teenager, Issembè herself was initiated into *ndjembè*, a female initiation ritual shared among diverse Gabonese ethnic groups, later becoming an initiation leader for women (*ngwévilo*). She realized her initiation to *bwiti*[12] allowed her to know the symbolic dimension and prohibitions that are related to dance steps and objects in these rites. This fed her commitment to a return to 'tradition': she considered that personal and collective progress could not happen without a consciousness of ancestors, and that the solution to identity troubles could be found in initiation. In several rituals, including *bwiti*, the initiation experience is based on a spiritual trip to encounter one's ancestors, thanks to the use of a local hallucinogen plant named *iboga*. Geneviève Issembe explained how she used initiation to stabilize the youths in her company:

> As I said to them all the time: to know where we are going, we have to know where we come from. So if you totally open yourself up like that, it is not good. You have to know who were your ancestors, where you come from. Because it's nice to know American dances, to know dances from France and elsewhere, but you don't even know your own dances anymore. […] And I took them to be initiated. They were terribly disturbed, so I had to find something to stabilize them, and I took them to O.'s house, my cousin, telling him to supervise these young people. That's how he took them under his wing, and now they have become, themselves, initiation leaders.

Except for a few dancers who were already linked to secret societies, most were initiated by Geneviève Issembé or by her relatives. The idea was to teach them from the inside the practice of these dances. After that, several dancers created their own companies, and in turn initiated new recruits.

From the 1980s onwards, the National Ballet, Adiaïsse and the groups that have grown in this trail have staged a pluri-ethnic nation through body performances and dance moves drawn from initiation rituals. Like Adiaïsse, several companies were created during the 1990s and continued this attempt, dancing for concerts with 'tradi-modern' singers[13], for official animations or for video-clips, where they wore initiates' dress, displayed sacred instruments or masquerades, and recited ritual formulas or songs. But this displacement of ritual, sacred and secret elements onto urban and international stages did not happen without conflicts that reveal how dance and other performing arts contribute to broader cultural changes. These tensions are very visible around the reception of a video-clip released in 1990, and presented by many as the first to have broken the initiation taboo and displayed secret items.

Staging initiation societies: secret and scandals

In 1990, the famous Gabonese singer Vyckos Ekondo[14] published a title named 'Bovenga Ngoyo', which means literally (in his *mitsogo* language) 'the struggle for life', and which addressed the issue of profanation of initiation secrets. He solicited the famous director and producer Andre Ottong to direct the music video, and for the choreography, he called on a new company that gathered dancers from the National Ballet and Adiaïsse. Most of them were initiated and had been trained by Geneviève Issembé.

The video caused a scandal in the world of initiation rituals and dances; on the one hand, it was described by several initiation leaders as a profanation of ritual secrets, and on the other hand,

it was perceived as a violation of codes that determine the use of initiation tools and items. Dancers had created a choreography based on *bwiti* and *ndjembè* initiation dances, and had used masks and outfits usually reserved to high-levelled initiates. Although aware of the prohibitions, they received virulent criticisms and threats from their elders in initiation societies, which are organized along the lines of age-sets. One of the dancers of the group, who had not yet been initiated then, remembers the following:

> 'There were maledictions, saying supposedly that we had broken taboos. But when I look at the video-clip today, I laugh, because we had not broken any taboo. Only initiated persons knew what we had done, but for us, I mean the ones who were not initiated, we didn't know at all. […]. But as the clip defined broadly the origins of certain things, we had to go back to the village, and to pay 100.000 Francs CFA [150 euros], to lift a certain number of prohibitions and maledictions, because some of us were starting to be victims of the consequences, especially the ones who were initiated. Because we have a custom here, mainly in the South of Gabon: when you are initiated, there is a kind of pact, where one tells you that you don't have the right to reveal a certain number of things without being cursed. And if initiated people hear that you have revealed things, they don't even quote your name, they just say 'all those who have participated in that thing, boum!' […] And people started to get sick, Vyckos himself was about to die[15]'.

To end the curse against the artists involved, initiated participants in the music video went back to the village where they had been initiated. They paid a 'fine' of 100.000 Francs CFA to the authorities of their initiation society, and to *mwiri*, which is the initiation society in charge of the respect of order and secret and whom Julien Bonhomme (2006, 1938–1953) describes as a kind of 'magic police of secret'.

According to the explanations I have collected, initiated people, and some dancers or musicians condemned the fact that this video displayed symbols and formulas that are subjected to the rule of secrecy. The objects that caused the most anger were masquerades, which, in many ethnic groups, are reserved for special occasions, and which can only be used by men. In contrast, in the music video, women have contact with masquerades. Viewers also condemned the fact that the music video aimed to represent the origins of the world, which is one of the deepest levels of knowledge transmitted through initiation. In my interviews, some people were also contesting the authorship of Vyckos Ekondo on the songs and dance moves taken from a traditional repertoire, of which he is neither the author nor the composer, as written in his albums, but only the singer. In other words, they denounced the appropriation and merchandizing of collective cultural repertoires, particularly those with ritual agency.

As Evariste Nziengui explained in the abstract above, the music video itself, however, was not divulging any initiation secret: in fact, the secret focuses on the deep symbolic *meanings* of colours, proverbs, and moves involved, and not on the colours, proverbs, and moves *themselves*, which are only signs. The display of these signs happens during nights of ritual, in open spaces anyone can access. In other words, the idea of violation existed only in the minds of the initiates, and profanes could not be taught initiation knowledge and secrets through the music video.

For this reason, we can consider that the affair created around this music video (the threats of curse and the fine that they had to pay to initiation authorities) represented a way for initiated persons to reassert their authority over these practices and to extend it to the stage. Following this episode, most of the company dancers who were not initiated went through initiation. For some of them, it led to the creation of performances inspired more deeply by the personal experience of initiation, and not only by images observed during ceremonies.

Before this famous affair, other situations had proven the existence of local initiation codes in the world of performance. Geneviève Issembé recounts that in 1988, she had faced the same condemnation of her work by traditional authorities and by the traditional Myènè chiefdom, because

she had displayed sacred masquerades during a performance in Europe. The ballet in question had aimed to gather the masquerades of Gabon's different ethnic groups. The performance involved a Punu mask on stilts, from the South of Gabon, a Fang mask called *okukwé*, and another Fang mask with four sides, named *ngontan*.[16] It was programmed at the French *Maison des cultures du monde* as part of a broader exhibition about masquerades[17], before touring Europe. Issembé was asked by the curators of the exhibition to include an *okukwé* mask, which is one of the most famous images of Gabonese masquerade dance, and which exists in several ethnic groups, but is known as a *myènè* mask.[18]

Since the practice of the masquerade dance in many Gabonese ethnic groups is related to special rules and restricted to men only, Geneviève Issembe used strategies to avoid transgressing prohibitions. She solicited the dancers of her company who were initiated and had the right to use these masks. Geneviève Issembè wanted to include an *okukwé* mask from her own *myene* ethnic group, but to avoid the strong prohibition regarding this mask in her tradition, she chose to display a fang *okukwé* mask, which is not so taboo. Despite these precautions, she was incriminated by the traditional *myènè* chiefdom, which argued that as a woman, she could not use these objects. Ultimately, she was threatened with sanctions if she persisted in using the masquerades for performance purposes.

Beyond the reprimand, this example proves that even when these local practices enter into the global arena, they remain subjected to local codes. Indeed, the performance itself and the relationship with the audience happened in this show with a partial reproduction of the modalities of presentation of masquerades in the traditional contexts. These masquerade dances are usually performed by men who are hidden, and they aim to maintain the secret of initiation rituals towards the non-initiated – especially women. The issue is to give a material shape to mystery and the invisible that masks are supposed to evoke. Geneviève Issembè recounted the tour in Germany, and how the atmosphere of the secret was recreated:

> What was strange is that our guide in Germany asked: 'Who is doing the masked thing?' I answered: 'It's spirits, I can't tell you who it is'. She said 'But you can't tell me that you believe these stories.' I said: 'Go ask the men', and they told her 'It's a spirit'.

> She said that she would recognize which one of the guys was doing the masquerade, as she already knew them all. The day after the show, she told me: 'it's strange, because all the men were on stage, I counted, and I know them all. I know the number of boys that I have, because I manage you'. And I answered: 'I told you that it was a spirit![19]'

This anecdote highlights that a non-initiated audience is necessary for the existence of the secret. Indeed, the secret has to be partly exhibited to keep existing, even if it can never be totally revealed (Zempléni 1976; Bonhomme 2006). In *bwiti* as in other male initiation, the secret work as a marker of the frontier between initiated persons on the one side, and women or profane persons on the other side. Ultimately, the secret only exists through the relationship with this audience of profane people, towards whom initiated persons have to maintain a border. Julien Bonhomme describes in these words the role of mask and the relational dimension of secret: '[mask] shows and hides at the same time. Initiation secret is thus less an issue of content than an issue of relation: it exists only through the asymmetric interactions which connect and divide initiated and non-initiated people' (Bonhomme 2006, 1940, my translation).

The type of interaction described previously, between an incredulous Western audience and a Gabonese dance company which reproduces the symbolic dimensions of performance, reveals that even when ritual objects are displaced onto foreign scenes, people create continuity with the codes of initiation. These codes rely mainly on the upholding of secrets and on the division between a public of profanes and a stage of initiate persons, a configuration that is typical of

masquerades. Here the displacement of ritual and sacred religious objects does not lead to a total disappearance of symbolic meanings and mystery, but rather to a form of recreation of sacred objects and secrets outside of its usual spheres.

A broad literature deals with *bwiti* and initiation rituals in Gabon, analysing its symbols, healing process, or systemic organization, and focusing often on religious institutions, temples and initiators recognized as 'authentic'. Nevertheless, few have attempted to understand the broader cultural sphere that appropriates and communicates with these religious associations, that includes political dance, masked ceremonies done for entertainment and tourism, videos featuring 'traditional' dance and dresses, or – more recently – rappers and hip-hop dancers staging initiation music and symbols. However, as described in this paper, different sorts of interactions and interpenetrations exist between official religious spheres and cultural spheres, leading to mutual influences and transformations.

As the example of the National Ballet and tradi-contemporary dance scene proves, initiation rituals have shaped the dance world in Gabon. Dance companies have not only staged 'traditions' and local ritual ceremonies to transform them into modern spectacles; they have also been deeply influenced and structured by the symbolic and social rules of these initiation societies. The tradi-contemporary Gabonese dance world highlights the strong mutual influences between local cultural systems and dance performance: dance is not here a simple transfer of local practices to the stage. The staging also leads to real transformations in individual trajectories, in local social systems and in representations of culture. The National Ballet has contributed to the transformation of initiation societies into national heritage, and to the opening of these secret societies to world scenes.

Conclusion

Groups of cultural animation and 'tradi-contemporary dance' groups have been at the core of music and dance performances in Gabon during and since the decades of the single party. The first one, groups of cultural animation, was mainly inspired by communist regimes' representations, and ruled by the single party, with the mission to symbolize a state power considered as essentially masculine. In fact, cultural animation groups were essentially a tool of communication used locally to prove the grandeur of Omar Bongo and to comfort the dissent of the crowd, through mass performance. In a period of the ideology of 'Renovation', it mixed local traditional dance and music with 'modern' influences in order to spread the ideologies of the single party and to stage the masculine power of the state. At that time, 'traditions' were conceived as both 'authentic' and threatening to the project of renovation and modernization.

Contrary to this genre anchored in 'popular' culture and in urban dances mixed with traditional steps, the National Ballet has always constituted a more elitist tool of representation of the nation towards international dance markets, either inside the country during important events inviting officials, or outside the country. Influenced by a global change of cultural policies and by a shift in local cultural institutions, this model was built following a fusion between 'tradition' and 'modernity', between African 'traditions' and Western techniques of performance. It led to an 'artification' (Heinich and Shapiro 2008) of ritual and religious symbols to displace them in the scene, but also to a form of reproduction of initiation rules in the local dance world.

This paper has described how, beyond these distinctions, related to different historical moments of Gabonese history and different connections with global features, the cultural animation groups and the National Ballet were both based on local ceremonies, rituals and dance moves to create a national entertainment industry. The examination of these two dance genres allows a wider understanding of the connections that have tied the state and the ordinary citizens in post-colonial urban Gabon. It reveals the micropolitics and relations of power that were built in the

dance scene. It proves how individuals who performed these dances played strategically between different conceptions of 'culture', 'tradition' and 'locality' in their practices, creating flexible performances to negotiate with power institutions, whether state institutions of the single party or religious institutions of initiation.

Notes

1. The National Ballet still exists, but by 2006 it was unable to pay the dancers' salaries and was no longer a permanent company, as it had been in the 1980s. Two dance companies were created by former National Ballet dancers, Adaïsse and Nzi Nimbu, and they took charge of dance performances at national events.
2. Groups of cultural animation are still active. In a recent fieldwork undertaken in Libreville in February 2016, I attended the rehearsal of several dozens of women, aged from 13 to 65 years old, who prepared a performance for the anniversary of the party PDG.
3. I use the word spectacle to describe a type of exhibition arranged for visual shows. Like Andrew Apter, I am interested in how the construction of spectacle contributes to the construction of national culture itself (Apter 2005). For information about the aesthetics of spectacle and production of value in Gabon, see Bernault 2015.
4. As vice-president, he accessed power automatically after the death of the first President Leon Mba. He changed his name in 1973 to become Omar Bongo, and then Omar Bongo Ondimba.
5. Some, however, have also recorded discs since 1985, in France and in the first local studios created during the 1980s, thanks to the support of their benefactor.
6. Elombo is a mixed-gendered initiation society based on possession which may have been created during the 1930s by the Nkomi ethnic group (which belongs to the Myènè ensemble).
7. See the song « La botte », published in 2007 by the group Omengo. On line https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hf-CueGQJnI (consulted 8 septembre 2017).
8. The following pages are partly reproducing the analysis presented in another paper (Aterianus-Owanga 2017a).
9. My translation of Omar Bongo quoted by Owono-Nguéma (1974, 5).
10. Interview with Geneviève Issembé, Libreville, February 2015.
11. Also called *nyembè*, this women's rite of passage apparently comes from the myènè ethnic group, but it is practiced by a large part of communities of the South-West. About *ndjembè* and *bwiti* in myene ethnic group, see Gaulme 1979.
12. Even if *bwiti* is a masculine rite of passage, women can also be initiated, but they have a special position and status in the ritual.
13. This 'tradi-modern' etiquette is applied to a variety of musical genres, on the African continent and abroad. It often describes musical genres that mix instruments, melodies and rhythms coming from rural ceremonial or ritual contexts with western instruments and arrangements (See also White 2012).
14. Vyckos Ekondo is a famous Gabonese singer known in the 'tradi-modern' musical domain. First known as a TV animator and singer of soul music, he created in the 1980s a dance and music company named Tandima, which aims at representing all Gabonese traditions, and which tours all over the world. About his trajectory and his role in heritage building in Gabon, see Aterianus-Owanga 2017a.
15. Personal interview with Evariste Nziengui, Libreville, February 2015.
16. According to Louis Perrois, *ngontan* is a 'helm mask with four sides or more', that has been created more recently than other masks such as ngil. *Ngontan* is used in the search for witches (Perrois 1968-1969, 885).
17. 'Mask of the five worlds', Maison des Cultures du Monde (Paris), 1988.
18. According to Louis Perrois, the *okukwé* mask personifies spirits of the dead who come to visit the living, and who resolve village problems (Perrois 1968-1969, 82).
19. Interview with Geneviève Issembé, Libreville, February 2015.

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