Introduction

'Dance in Africa and beyond: creativity and Identity in a globalised world'

Carine Plancke & Hélène Neveu Kringelbach

More than any other region, Sub-Saharan Africa is portrayed as a disaster area enduring famine, disease, conflict and poverty (Kiarie wa Njogu 2009). Images of epidemic outbreaks, terrorist attacks and political violence due to undemocratic elections or ongoing rebel wars and divisionist political strife dominate the screen. This portrayal of Africa as a region of trouble and suffering extends to the African diaspora, even when young people of African descent have become citizens of European countries. The media treatment of Islamic fundamentalism and illegal immigration often involves youngsters of African descent being portrayed in a negative light. The notion of "Afropessimism" has been employed to refer to this overwhelmingly negative coverage as it suggests that Africa has little or no prospect of positive development and is a failed continent in need of outside intervention (de B'Béri & Louw 2011).

In recent years however, the international media has started to tell positive stories about sub-Saharan Africa (Nothias 2014; Bunce 2017). The 2011 cover of The Economist entitled "Africa Rising" (*The Economist*, 3 December 2011) is a sign of this change. The cover depicts a black child running in the savannah and pulling a rainbow-coloured kite in the shape of Africa, which rises high in a clear blue sky. The message of hope it conveys contrasts sharply with the gloomy picture of the 2000 issue "The hopeless continent" (*The Economist*, 15 May 2000), wherein a young black man carries a shoulder-fired missile embedded in the shape of the African continent on a plain black background. Besides a new international willingness to promote a positive message of Africa's economic development and technological innovation, Africa-grown information flows have multiplied, which have opened up new visions of the continent (Bunce, Franks & Paterson 2017). The amount of content produced in Africa, for example by youths and religious groups using local media, has led to

the emergence of a diversity of voices and of new ways to communicate, producing new worlds of experience and imagination (Njogu and Middleton 2009).

Performance is at the heart of inventiveness, renewal and cultural creativity as they emerge locally. For many in Africa, music and dance are crucial means of dealing with problematic situations, and are often central in fashioning a cultural identity that is self-enhancing. This issue explores this creativeness as it relates to a variety of political, religious and cultural topics. The aim is to present African dance expressions in their plurality, showing how they creatively shape social realities within and beyond Africa.

In the editorial of a special issue of *Africa Today*, Daniel Reed (2001) notes how African cultural expressions, notably in the domain of music and dance, have proven both resilient and open to creative adaptation and innovation. The essays in the Reed volume explore the way people take local performances and modify them to meet new social and expressive needs. They show how, faced with sometimes tremendous social changes, actors employ performative strategies in order to comprehend, modify and capture the effects of those changes on their lives.

This issue situates itself in continuity with the focus on African agency developed in the Reed special issue, but it also expands beyond. Among other themes, our issue investigates the role of dance in shaping new identities, the space it provides for African diasporas to gain visibility in societies in which they are often denied equal citizenship, and the contested moral discourses in which dance is embedded, and which it reconfigures. Furthermore, it takes a specific look at flows of choreographic genres, both North-South and South-South, as a crucial means to shape local, national or even pan-African identities, highlighting herein the growing role of digital media. As such, globalisation is a recurring topic in this volume. In line with Appadurai's (1996) seminal work and following a growing interest in global-local interactions (Kearney 1995, Hannerz 1996, Eller 2016), rather than stressing the unilateral impact of western influences, dances are approached as local expressions that creatively respond to and emerge from complex and manifold inter- and transcultural exchanges. Embedded in new digital-scapes of encounter and hybridization between

artistic genres and sociocultural environments, performances are constantly recreated with new rhythms, new moves and new media. Lastly, the issue also seeks to better understand creativity as such, and asks how it is conceptualized and realized in a diversity of choreographic contexts.

The study of dance in Africa

With the exception of a few early contributions (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1928), the anthropological study of dance did not begin in earnest until the 1960s (e.g. Kurath 1960; Kaeppler 1978; Spencer 1985a). Despite a considerable growth of interest in the anthropology of the body in the 1990s, the study of moving bodies remained on the periphery (Farnell 1999), and the need for serious scholarship on the subject was still called for in the early 2000s (Williams 2004). Dance is a significant component of social life in Africa (and elsewhere), yet until fairly recently the study of dance on the continent was equally neglected.

Exemplified by Evans-Pritchard's (1928) discussion of the Azande funeral beer dance, early discussions of dance in Africa followed a functionalist approach (e.g. Leynaud 1953). Much later, Mitchell's (1956) study of the Kalela, a competitive marching dance performed weekly by miners in the towns of the Zambian Copperbelt, illustrated transformations of ethnicity in contexts of rural-urban migration. But for Mitchell and other anthropologists at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, the focus was on social transformations in late colonial, urban Africa, and Mitchell did not linger on choreographic description. Nevertheless, the study provided inspiration for later studies, and Ranger's (1975) historical work on the *beni ngoma*, for example, showed how, in colonial East Africa, dance associations helped to maintain a sense of continuity with older Swahili hierarchies while also acting as an ironic commentary on colonial society. Further South, Blacking (1967) drew on his fieldwork with the Venda of Southern Africa to suggest that music and dance were central aspects in the socialization of children, and that they expressed the group's creative potential.

An important and often overlooked milestone in the study of dance on the continent was art historian Thompson's (1974) *African Art in Motion*. Unusually for its time, the book featured a

wealth of photographs and still shots from video recordings. Thompson's concern was with the aesthetics of dance, particularly the shared aesthetic and ontological principles underlying both dance and art works, rather than with dance as a sociological phenomenon. But Thompson's reflections on aesthetics and art criticism in West and Central Africa remain highly innovative.

With the rise of structuralist and symbolic approaches in anthropology, the ways in which dance upholds or challenges social structure became a core interest in the 1980s, with studies mainly focused on 'traditional' dances in rural settings (e.g. Hanna 1979; Blacking 1985; Spencer 1985b). Drewal and Drewal's (1983) important work on the Yoruba Gẹlẹdẹ genre demonstrated how, in West African societies with specialized groups of performers, dance often interacts with drumming, oral poetry, dress and the use of space to create very real forms of power – in this case female power.

From the 1990s onwards, the impact of poststructuralism as well as a growing interest in the embodied nature of social life fostered studies that showed how dance in Africa was often implicated in gender and power dynamics, and had a political dimension (Blakely 1993; Heath 1994; James 2000; Nannyongo-Tamusuza 2005; Castaldi 2006; Argenti 2007; Edmonson 2007; Andrieu 2008; White 2008; Gilman 2009; Djebbari 2011; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Covington-Ward 2016; Plancke 2017). Anthropologists working in hunter-gatherer societies have shown the crucial role played by music and dance in the maintenance of distinct identities and of an egalitarian ethos (Kisliuk 1998, Lewis 2013). A recent and exciting strand of scholarship is looking at the multiple ways in which the circulation of dance styles in migration contexts foster new identities and new forms of sociality while simultaneously, at times, strengthening older ones (Bizas 2014, Reed 2016).

Some of these studies are marked by the increasingly reflexive positionality of the dance scholar, and by a deliberate inclusion of the researcher-performer in the writing (e.g. Kisliuk 1998). Phenomenological approaches have also developed, highlighting the lived experience of dance, both in Africa and in diasporic contexts (e.g. Friedson 1996; Daniel 2005; Plancke 2014). In addition, challenging the continuing construction of the 'other' in scholarly literature as well as in

representations of Africa more generally, has meant questioning the very notion of 'African dance'. For Gore (2001), the fact that many West African languages do not have a specific word for dance underlines the Eurocentric character of the category 'dance'. Lassibille (2004) found that the WoDaaBe of Niger used three different terms to speak of dance: *fijjo* (play), *gamol* (dance) and *bamol* (dance or braid). These interventions have been crucial in highlighting the need to redefine our object of study in every context and to begin with local epistemologies.

In a different vein, the booming interest in global-local connectedness since the early 1990s has led to the study of globalised dance genres and their appropriation in African contexts, but also to the study of how African artists have contributed to the renewal of genres such as contemporary dance (Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 2014; Bourdié 2013; Despres 2016).

A specific strand of studies, carried out mainly by anthropologists and art historians, and largely indebted to the early work of Tonkin (1979), Drewal and Drewal (1983), and Picton (1990), has focused on the resilience of masquerade practices in Western and Central Africa (Gore 2007, 2008). Although not always framed as studies of 'dance', they often highlight the choreographic dimension of masquerade. These studies linked dancing masks to many aspects of social life, from the memory of past violence as it relates to contemporary intergenerational politics (Argenti 2006, 2007) to the politics of secrecy (De Jong 2007, McGovern 2013) and youth claims to new forms of power (Pratten 2008). We believe that research on performance in Africa would benefit from a conversation between the two strands.

Dance and multiple identities

This special issue explores historical continuities and new choreographic genres, paying special attention to local agency and the creativity of dancers. In studying the military drum performance *beni ngoma*, Terence Ranger (1975) has convincingly argued that the colonial experience was uneven and complex, and did not simply deprive Africans from any agency to creatively deal with and accommodate novelty and change, even under conditions of oppression. In a similar way, in this

special issue Cécile Bushidi's article on the spread of close partner dancing among Luo and Kikuyu youth in interwar Kenya shows how dance helped to forge multiple identities in a colonial context of heavy control and radical social change. She extends this argument beyond the urban areas explored in previous work (Mitchell 1956; Ranger 1975) to the rural hinterlands and to rural-urban migrant youth. There are resonances here with the more recent work of Sarró (2009), who showed how, in the Baga-speaking rural areas of the Upper Guinea Coast in the 1950s, elders attempted (unsuccessfully) to resist the emergence of couple dances which they thought represented a challenge to their authority by young Baga men and women.

Drawing on rich archival material and interviews, Bushidi shows how the European presence in rural Kenya expanded the nature of sociocultural interactions and spurred African creativity. Whilst imitating European settler dance in the close embrace between male and female partners, the new dance genres also drew on an older local repertoire. In Bushidi's view, the new dances helped to foster cosmopolitan identities in rural Kenya, and shaped new communities of self-imagination as they enabled dancers to acquire distinct visibility by wearing ostentatious fashion while performing both couple and ceremonial dances. The dances also allowed for new forms of negotiation with the colonial authorities. Youths not only developed practices of seduction and consumption that created spaces of autonomy from traditional structures, but they also resisted attempts at regulation of what the colonial regime framed as 'leisure activities'. Dancing in 1930s' rural Kenya became a daily practice that extended far beyond the confines of the weekend, the colonial framework for 'leisure'.

In postcolonial Africa, the negotiability of subject positions and the constant revision of multiple identities have become central ways of navigating shifting power dynamics (Mbembe 1992, Werbner & Ranger 1996; Simone 1998). In her article on dance groups in Gabon, Alice Atérianus-Owanga argues that dance was a means for different groups of actors, notably cultural animation groups and the national ballet, to negotiate their own version of a national identity during the one-party rule. Rather than a unilateral imposition of the single party's ideologies, dance was a tool of agency, enabling performers to challenge conventional perceptions of dance and to insert themselves into

local power hierarchies. To be sure, the cultural animation groups reinforced the dependency of female dancers on their male political patrons, but these groups also expanded the women's opportunities for professional promotion, and allowed them to meet influential male partners. At the same time, political patronage did not prevent the women from expressing subtle forms of criticism. With regard to the national ballet, Atérianus-Owanga highlights the impact of individual initiatives in shaping a genre of multi-ethnic dance that integrated local dances and contemporary choreographic techniques. She describes how the status of 'initiate' was used strategically to deal with a range of prohibitions in the staging of ritual.

Atérianus-Owanga's study reveals the dialectic of flow and closure that is characteristic of our increasingly globalised world (Meyer and Geschiere 2003). Whilst the performances of the national ballet entailed creative mixing and the breaking down of boundaries between the 'traditional' and the 'modern', there were also efforts to fix older identities, to make them more bounded than they had been in the past. Furthermore, the insertion of local practices into transnational scenes did not necessarily erase local codes, but sometimes invigorated them. When programming dances that included masked performances, director Geneviève Isembe met with strong resistance from initiated men, who reaffirmed their control over 'proper' notions of tradition.

Contemporary dance and decoloniality

Further illumination of the complexity of local-global interactions is found in Amy Swanson's article, which examines the development of the Acogny Dance Technique, a pan-African dance style which developed in reaction to Western domination in professional dance. The article reveals the persistence of views of cultural distinctiveness which inhibit decolonizing efforts at transcending essentialist notions of Africanness. It was in order to combat racist ideas of African dance as innate and simplistic that Acogny created a codified technique that integrated Western classical and contemporary dance forms alongside 'traditional' African dances. Despite its mixed roots, it is now taught as a *pan-African* form transcending local variabilities. Yet, as Swanson argues, the decolonial

potential of this initiative is currently curtailed as non-African participants at the school manifest a distinct desire for reaffirming colonially rooted ideas about a 'traditional', exotic African distinctiveness located outside of the contemporary world. In their effort to retain this 'market' of participants, trainers comply with these desires, albeit with some ambivalence. Nevertheless, Swanson points out the opportunity the school offers to African dancers to access affordable professional training on the continent. Furthermore, the value placed on their African identities in this context is a crucial asset for the dancers, and leads to further local reappropriations.

In a similar vein, Andrieu and Sieveking show in their article that the development of professional spaces and options for dance in Burkina Faso offers access to the locally valued identity of professional dancers, even though it is modelled on the norms and standards of the international contemporary dance scene. Participation in workshops acquaint dancers with choreographic experiments and improvisations that entail a trend towards artistic individualization, which has become the new proof of professionalism on global art markets. But access to transnational networks also allows dancers to forge their own local contemporary dance style, and to move away from stereotypes of 'African folklore'. This operates a shift from an ethnic identity into a valued professional identity. The strong emphasis on the need to transmit these new dance practices and the urge to acquire state recognition also reveals, in Andrieu's and Sieveking's view, the dancers' desire to open up professional possibilities that do not necessarily entail emigration.

Dance, new media, morality and diaspora

One of the most exciting developments in African musical scenes in the past couple of decades has been the popularization of music videos. Music is now consumed to a large extent through videos on TV, computer screens, and on mobile phones. This is largely a youth phenomenon, but older generations consume images of music and dance on screen, too, and these often generate intense debates about the appropriateness of particular dance styles. Increasingly, it is when dance is brought to the screen that the reputations of women dancers, in particular, are truly at stake.

In her article in this issue, Elina Djebbari draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Mali and Benin to investigate the making of contemporary music videos and their influence on social dance practices. The creation of new dance routines and their diffusion through new media and screens in dance venues has had a distinct influence on social dance forms. Specifically, the article examines the interactions between dancing bodies, music videos and pre-recorded dance routines in Cotonou and Bamako, respectively. As such, the article confronts dichotomies of representation/embodiment, global/local and screen/live, and analyses the role of intermediality and remediation in social dance practices in Africa today.

Lesley Braun takes a rather different historical view on how dance in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been controlled by different actors, from missionaries to postcolonial political leaders. In particular, women's dances have been portrayed as morally ambiguous, especially on stage. Braun argues that a woman's social position is negotiated through her public performances, and as such dancing women all too easily invite criticism. Discourses on the morality of dance performances build on multiple historical layers, each adding new anxieties on the place of women in public spaces, which have shaped contemporary attitudes towards dance. Specifically, the article considers how new dance forms emerged in the historical context of colonial Léopoldville, and how this shaped the social position of postcolonial Zairian, then Congolese women who danced for the nation, as well as those of concert dancers, professional women dancers who perform with popular music bands.

The moral ambiguities associated with young women dancing are not restricted to the continent, and also appear in relation to dances performed in African diasporic contexts. In her article, Laura Steil analyses the "politics of appropriateness" to which young French Black women are subjected in public spaces. To characterize their performance of urban popular dances, these female dancers have used the term *boucan*, meaning 'loud noise'. The term captures forms of bodily expression associated with ingenuity, boldness and flamboyance. The article investigates how this visual *boucan* is supplemented by real sonic noise, which renders young French Black women from the *banlieues*

both visible and audible and affirms their presence in urban spaces. Focusing on a moral panic around Black female "gangs" arising at the end of the 2000s, the paper poses the question of how these women make their presences felt, occupy space and claim a social place for themselves that is different from both the trope of the (loud) "angry black woman" and that of the (silent) "traditional" woman. Central to this discussion is the notion of *boucan*, loud noise that is also manifested visually, which Steil links with dominated and racialized groups too often viewed in terms of danger, and with the associated in/visibility of blackness in France.

Conclusion

Overall, this special issue seeks to expand and update notions of African agency within creative domains. This issue specifically investigates the role of dance in shaping new, and sometimes multiple identities, as well as some of the moral discourses associated with these, both on the continent and in African diasporic contexts. The dynamics emerging from the seven articles in this special issue show that dance in Africa and beyond has long undergone constant renewal, benefitting from local-global influences as well as more localized dynamics of innovation. Overall, these articles provide new clues to how creativity itself may emerge in the encounter between individual creativity, collective identities, moral discourses and power dynamics.

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