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Translated by Simon Pleasance
from "La « danse africaine
contemporaine » : un paradoxe
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The use of categories regularly entails discussion and criticism, especially when it is matter of reaching an understanding about the criteria for their definition. They are at times regarded as too broad, at others too narrow, or both at once, depending on the context. However, we use them on a constant basis. They are at once problematic and inevitable, and all the more so because, if the categorization process is central in scientific arguments, some categories are used by social players themselves and have tangible effects on practices. It is henceforth a matter of being interested in their construction and their circulation between spaces and persons, with one key idea: there is no category *per se*; the category must be analyzed from a particular viewpoint, by asking the question : “What makes a category?” and putting the stress on its use.

We shall focus in particular on a widely used category, that of “contemporary African dance”. Since the 1990s, the dance works of sub-Saharan Africa have been described, in Europe especially, by this term which has given rise to a certain number of debates about the terminology used and what it encompasses. In order to put these discussions in perspective, we shall start by introducing their essential general points, by slipping the “contemporary African dance” category into a history and by considering the tensions it has stirred up and the issues it raises for artists. Then, in a second part, we shall look at the way dancers res-

pond to it, and how they interpret and handle this category, in Niger in particular, because the analysis can only be carried out in a specific context. To this end, I undertook various field surveys (2009, 2010, 2012), which have their place in an ongoing research programme. In 1994, I started by examining the dances of the *WoDaaBe* Peul people in Niger, in differing production contexts, ceremonial, staged, and for tourists, which confronted me, from the outset, with problems of categorical incompatibility, which is to say that the scientific categories did not tally with what was taking place in the field. Then in 2009, I became interested in the "contemporary African dance" category, not from an institutional angle, but by carrying out research among Nigerien dancers undergoing their training. Over and above choreographers and recognized institutions, these people helped me to work on the central role of transmission in the construction of this category. So I have followed their careers (courses, training, works...) and I have had regular interviews with them. This has prompted me to draw up an "ethnography of categorization" to use the words of Frank Alvarez-Pereyre (2008:2), raising more general theoretical and methodological issues. When categories form both a field challenge and a research tool, a reflexive work is inevitable for the researcher.

Categorical Comparison and Ideological Challenge: between "Traditional African Dance" and "Contemporary Art in the Making"

The first discussion broached by the category "Contemporary African Dance" has to do with the issue raised by the different terms which form it. In order to understand it, it is necessary to consider a category which has been previously developed, "African Dance", which acts as a filter for understanding the category of "Contemporary African Dance".

"African Dance": A Stereotypical Category

The "African Dance" category refers to a certain number of recurrent features used to define it. First and foremost, it describes dances of Sub-Saharan or Black Africa, as differentiated from the "Oriental dance" of the Maghreb and the Middle East. Different characteristics are associated with this territorial division: a musical context of percussion, movements of the pelvis, work with the sternum, and down to earth dance with a symbolic dimension, sacred and religious... The fact is that this description turns out to be old. Placed at the bottom of the evolutionary scale of dances by scientists at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the dances of Africa have been regarded as the most primitive.

For example, the German ethno-musicologist classified them as "convulsive" and "imitative", describing Bantu dances as follows:

"Like a steam engine, negroes puff, pant and moan... for hours on end, their posterior wiggles as if moved by springs on their bent legs. This prancing around and these bending movements are such African habits that one is tempted to describe the dance of the Bantu quite simply by the words "prancing dance". (Sachs, 1938:17).

Dancers subsequently perform "convulsive and violent quivers of the torso", "making frenzied erotic motions with their pelvis", "imitating extremely obscene gestures" (Sachs, 1938:17). This description borrows all the stereotypes associated with the choreographic primitiveness attributed to the dances of Africa, with its share of ideology. But at the same time it includes attributes whose appreciation would gradually change. In addition to the negrophilia of the Roaring Twenties, when black dances were "bewitchingly

savage" (Décoret-Ahiha, 2004), choreographers asserted their desire to have "African dance" recognized as a choreographic art. The books of Germaine Acogny (1980) and Alphonse Tiérou (1989, 2001) represented major milestones in this respect. Based on different sources, both authors undertook the task of defining "African dance", which was an essential stage of recognition and legitimization. However, defining an African typicalness in dance involves inevitable mechanisms of uniformization and standardization. Because "African dance" thus defined is a construct, and the use of the singular to describe it strengthens this perspective of representation.¹ "African dance", regarded in a unitary way, cannot exist. Just as it would be impossible to describe "Western dance", just by classical dance. As Funmi Dewole writes, "The expression African dance refers in reality to an all-encompassing concept which talks more about the relation between Africa and the rest of the world—and vice versa—than about life in Africa" (2003:299). In the diversity of African dances, certain features of one or two dances have been remembered, and promoted or belittled depending on the challenges of the moment.² And within this selection process, scientific disciplines have played a not inconsiderable part, sometimes in spite of themselves.

In our disciplinary distributions, the dances of Africa have been assigned to anthropology, which has had inevitable repercussions. While the tools of aesthetic analysis and dance history have been essentially applied to European dances and their north-American extensions, anthropology has determined the areas of knowledge developed about African dances. Traditions, symbols, and rites, all so many basic anthropological concepts, have become their archetypal references.³ These references have been taken up, generalized and integrated in order to define "African dance". The identity game has lent it a substantial value which can no longer be dispensed with, which calls to mind the history of ethnic identifications (Amselle, M'Bokolo, 1985).

Whence the idea of "African dance" as an "anthropologized category"⁴: anthropology has typified African dances in accordance with legitimate scientific notions which have acted as a basis for the groundbreaking features of "African dance". What is in no way involved is a criticism *per se* of anthropology which, like all sciences, thinks within a context; rather it is a matter of underscoring the place of this discipline in the description that has been made.

The fact is that, within the coding which "African dance" has been the object of, the summons to tradition is not the least dogmatic element. In societies where writing underpins the notion of model and identical reproduction, tradition has become static and unchanging, and its contrast with change has become structural (Lenclud, 1987). Since then, the dances of Africa, described as "traditional", have become fixed in our eyes, whereas they used to be placed in a continuum of transformations, and local conceptions were

¹ Some dances, like those of the *WoDaaBe* of Niger, do not include the features under consideration: no musical instruments, but songs performed by the dancers themselves; the dances do not encourage a relation to the ground, but an elevation, and aspire to physical beauty. (Lassibille, 2004).

² For example, Alphonse Tiérou defines "African dance" by the *dooplé*, a *wéon* term of Ivory Coast, meaning mortar and pestle, probably referring to a percussive beat bringing sound and movement together, and to the symbols of man and woman. This is a postural nucleus around which are organized the basic movements of the traditional dances of Africa, enabling dancers to be "masters in the art of making their shoulders, breasts and heads vibrate", "specialists in thrusting and swaying their hips, and in making pelvic movements... It is also the great secret behind the vigour of the feet and legs of male and female African dancers" (2001:64). Here we find the previous features treated in a totally positive way.

³ After the theories of evolution, ethnologists emphasized the rationality of African societies and the development of their dances, as well as their symbolic wealth. (Evans-Pritchard, 1928 ; Griaule, 1938 ; etc.).

⁴ Carrying on Anne Doquet's concept of "ethnologized society" with regard to the Dogon of Mali (1999:289).

very flexible.⁵ In an interplay of categorial contrasts, if "African dance" is traditional, it is therefore not contemporary. It has been excluded from this field, in the knowledge that contemporary dance is also an historical category, with its share of imagination, its processes of exclusion, and its hierarchic challenges. As an artistic category, "contemporary dance" calls for at times implicit criteria, such as the refusal of conventions, and personal creation. In the guise of a reference to time, a shift has been made towards an axiological accepted meaning of break or rupture (Bernard, 2004),⁶ which acts as a selection criterion.

"Contemporary African Dance": A Twofold "Fictional" Projection⁷

In addition to the issues raised by the use of each term, discussion also focuses on their combination. In fact, "contemporary African dance" has the distinctive feature of calling on several areas of references and finding itself gripped in a twofold "fictional" (*"fictionnaire"*) projection, "African dance" and "contemporary dance", which have been defined in a contradictory way depending on the history that we have seen: an "African dance" which is by definition "traditional" and repetitive, and a "contemporary dance" regarded as creative.

This puts choreographers and dancers in a paradoxical situation intrinsic to the categories themselves. They teeter between "African characteristics", whereby they are identified, and which have become identity-related, but which are deemed not contemporary enough; and they aspire to "criteria of contemporaneity" sometimes interpreted as a loss of authenticity and a form of post-colonial acculturation. To African essentialization is added "contemporary art in the making". The questions raised by the choreographer Seydou Boro perfectly illustrate this ambivalence: "Does contemporary dance have a meaning in Africa? Does it have a future on a continent for which dance still bears its sacred and functional connotations?" (1999).

Last of all, the issue of the order of words is raised, as is well emphasized by Annie Bourdié (2013:95): "Contemporary African dance puts the stress on an African choreographic identity which has become contemporary from an evolutionist angle, and "African contemporary dance" on a choreographic genre whose cultural reference needs to be specified. By adding "African", we ethnicize contemporary dance in accordance with a logic of cultural qualification which also suggests that "African dance" is not contemporary *per se*.

In the face of these arguments there are divergent stances between choreographers. Some lay claim to a continuity with "traditional dance", and regard it as an indispensable basis for the development of a contemporary African dance, such as Germaine Acogny, Koffi Koko, and Adedayo Muslim Liadi. Others use the tradition/contemporary contrast on the artistic level.⁸ Others still lay claim to a break with "tradition"

⁵ Among the *WoDaaBe*, "tradition" is defined by "what the *WoDaaBe* found when they woke up". We find a similar expression among the Dogon (Bouju, 1995)). Accordingly, a dance will not be regarded as "traditional" by the elders who have seen it appearing, and will become "traditional" for the young people who have "found" it. This conception very swiftly incorporates transformations (Lassibille, 2013).

⁶ For the question of the term "contemporary" in dance, see also Ginot (2003) and Pouillaude (2004).

⁷ This term is borrowed from Michel Bernard who, through the ephemeral and fragile character of our relation to dance, underscores the inventive work of the choreographic oeuvre carried out by the spectator, and the inevitably "fictional" (*fictionnaire*) relation that we have with it (2001:205).

⁸ See the piece "*Ja'Nee*" by Boyzie Cekwana in which he juxtaposes urban and traditional dances as well as references to digital technology to question the new South African society and its contradictions (2003).

and describe this latter in more critical terms (Faustin Linyekula, Augusto Cuvilas...). What is more, in relation to the expressions "contemporary African dance" and "African contemporary dance", regarded by some choreographers as an "artistic allegiance to the West" (Tiérou, 2001:50), new proposals have appeared: "creative African dance" (Tiérou, 2001:50), "creative dance" (Sanou, 2008), "Afro-contemporary"... However, each proposal has entailed discussions and none has really imposed itself. This makes it possible to consider the diversity of artists who do not belong to the same generations, who have different trainings and references, and have their place in different contexts. Because far from being restricted to a mould in which people must blend, the categories involve dynamics where the interpretative part is central for consideration, together with a contextual analysis which must absolutely be conducted.

Categorical Manipulation and "Cultural Poaching": Between Re-Interpretation and (De-)Categorization in Niger

It is henceforth a matter of knowing how dancers re-interpret and manipulate these categories in Niger, the situation being very different from one African country to another, even within the French-speaking area of West Africa. The National Ballet in Niger has not give rise to any establishment as institutionalized as they are in other countries, and has not left any equivalent trace among young people. Nor is there any training structure in contemporary dance, as there is in Burkina-Faso, Senegal and Mali, but, rather, sporadic courses with different teachers. No festivals have been organized for contemporary dance, but they have for hip-hop, and for traditional Nigerien music and dance. As a result, dancers pass through "mosaic-like training projects" between different dance genres, with several teachers; which explains the many different re-compositions and diverse re-interpretations, on a par with experiences undergone. This absence of structure also leaves a lot of room for the initiatives of dancers, small companies, and self-training programmes, which, to be sure, entails difficulties of development, but also a certain mobility among actors and dancers and a possibility of rapid changes. Lastly, hip-hop and urban dances have become very developed in Niger and form a central backdrop in the local interpretation of the category "contemporary dance", as we shall see.

In 2009, I met Hamma, a Nigerien dancer coming from hip-hop, while he was taking a contemporary dance course in Bamako.⁹ After observing the course and talking with Hamma, he granted me a first interview which we conducted in a café. First and foremost, he explained his career to me: he had been recruited by a rap group to film a clip, and he joined the *Wass Wong* group on several albums. He took several contemporary dance courses (Salia Sanou, Kettly Noël) and trained in traditional dance during the Jeux de la Francophonie (2005). In 2006 he created the *Wongari* dance group, "the warriors" in Djerma, which gave rise to several works (*Moun Isso* meaning "we've arrived" (2006), "En attendant la pluie/Waiting for the Rain" (2007)...).¹⁰ We then talked about what he liked about the course which he was taking and his way of defining "contemporary dance".

⁹ I was finishing off my Nigerien field projects by attending this course organized by Kettly Noël in her school Donko Séko, because this choreographer has taught at particular times at the Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien Jean Rouch in Niamey.

¹⁰ I have updated these data with the interviews subsequently conducted with Hamma in 2010 in Bamako and in 2012 in Niamey.

Traditional Dance and Contemporary Dance as a Binary Construct

"What is contemporary dance for you?"

-[Hamma]: Contemporary dance is a state of mind which is stronger than the body. You have to control everything.

-And isn't that the same in traditional dance?

-In traditional dance, you have to be on the beat. In contemporary dance, there's no need for this. In tradition, there's rhythm. You are obliged every time that you are tapping the ground. In traditional dance, African dance, you are tapping the ground. In contemporary dance, you breathe, you are always breathing. When you breathe, you always want something. You see, life doesn't stop all of a sudden. It may just mean you're in it. With tradition its "douw doumdouw". With contemporary dance, you express what you are... It expresses emotions, ideas, and feelings."

This extract gives us a glimpse of how this dancer conceives traditional dance, associated with "African dance" and contemporary dance. They are the object of an imagination constructed in opposition: rhythm and expression, the top and the bottom coloured by the use of breathing. We may note that if his vision of traditional dance may be stereotyped, that of contemporary dance is just as much. Hamma adds: "Contemporary dance is European, Western, at the outset". Two levels of opposition are thus intertwined: traditional dance and contemporary dance, Africa and the West.¹¹ We find the previous binary structure with features which, being stereotyped in their opposition, form a re-interpretation developed from the local context. This dichotomy nevertheless becomes less complex during the interview:

"[Hamma]: If the person onlooking, the spectator, has a notion of [contemporary]dance, he may be in it. But if he has no notion, he cannot understand. What does he do?... You can imagine, but it's necessary to work... some people find this odd. But for me, I said to myself that people are not stupid. I said to myself, I must understand, I must fight...The audience for contemporary dance does not just say: "Those are beautiful dancers". They say: "Those are good dancers and I felt that". There's a story behind this. It doesn't matter if it's abstract or subjective, people can see another side of what the artist has presented. Yes, that's it, it's abstract. We have a ritual dance in our country with trances. This may be contemporary if the audience says as much, and has understood. For traditional dance, people say: "That's pretty", but there's nothing behind it. This is what is typical of contemporary dance. It doesn't matter if it's beautiful or not, it's what the audience has received."

Here we have the basic dichotomy, expressed in the form of abstraction/ aesthetics. Contemporary is associated with a practice that we do not necessarily understand at first glance, and which becomes a kind of cultural challenge which requires keys for its understanding. This dancer raises not only the question of self-representation in relation to the other ("people are not stupid") but also the issue of the reception by the audience. In the end, the contemporary is not seen as a category in itself, but as an interactive parameter, a relational element, a way of interacting. The category becomes a method of interactive and relative evaluation. So a traditional dance may be regarded as "contemporary" by the spectator.

¹¹ Contemporary dance is often regarded as being of western origin in West Africa (Bourdié, 2013), which represents a factor underlying the discussions we have seen about allegiance to the West.

But in order to better analyze what "contemporary dance" represents for this dancer, we must look at the other categories that he uses.¹²

Traditional Dance, Modern Dance, Hip-Hop, Contemporary Dance: A Multi-composition

Hamma explains it thus: "Traditional dance comes through the bush", which represents the viewpoint of an urban person and a hip-hopper, for whom ballet is no reference.¹³

"And modern dance?"

-[Hamma]: Modern dance is the coup  d cal . It's American music. It's the rest of the world that is there."

Whereas in France this term means "the new dance" emerging in the early 20th century in Europe and the United States (Mary Wigman, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham...), this dancer is referring to dances from other places.¹⁴ Whence my question:

-"And hip-hop?"

-[Hamma]: "American hip-hop is part of it, not Nigerien hip-hop. It's hip-hop, hip-hop made in Niger."

-Is it break dancing?"

-It's not break dancing. For us it's hip-hop but with our own tradition...It's not because you rap that it's no longer your culture. Your culture is there. You are rich."

Nigerien hip-hop is a matter of identity for a dancer coming from that movement and from now on it is a category in itself, becoming "hip-hop". It is such a category all the more so because Niger is not as well known as other African countries for their national dance companies, and in contemporary dance.

"[Hamma]: You know, Nigerien culture is not recognized. Especially not on a worldwide level. People don't know about us. We have instruments which people aren't acquainted with. It's important to know about the culture."

Dancers duly refer to hip-hop, for which they find that Nigeriens have special qualities. The introduction of this category makes it possible to get away from previous binary systems, starting with the contrast between West and Africa: the identity challenge is also at work between African countries. Hamma's testimony also helps to deconstruct the binary character between traditional dance and contemporary dance. Hip-hop, claimed to have been nurtured on Nigerien culture, does not contrast the present-day with the

¹² I myself was able to introduce a dichotomy into the above-mentioned interview by my questions: "What is contemporary dance for you ?", and then "And there is nothing of that in traditional dance ?". In order to avoid this methodological bias, in this same interview I took each category, one after the other, without sequencing the categories "traditional dance" and "contemporary dance", which in effect altered the viewpoint.

¹³ Ballet may be defined as traditional in some countries like Mali. On the ballet companies of West Africa, see in particular Castaldi (2006) for Senegal, Andrieu (2009) for Burkina Faso, and Djebbari (2013) for Mali.

¹⁴ Defined in France as "exotic dances" or, more recently, as "world dances", which African dance is part of. Whence the significance of the viewpoint in the definition and use of categories.

traditional. Whence the expression "tradi-hip-hop" used by dancers. For example, groups use traditional songs but they rap the words, which has allowed them to be more accepted in Nigerien society, according to Hamma:

"Before, parents used to say that we were delinquents. They thought we were crazy, and saw us as hoodlums... But it wasn't about that. They got the point..."

Hip-hop became the "tradition" of the dancers. This finally made it possible to break with the distinction between performance and social dancing, the better to imagine their interactions. So what are known as "urban dances" are frequently used in contemporary dance works, especially in Africa.

"And contemporary dance?"

-[Hamma]: Contemporary dance is European, Western at the outset. But in fact we can take things a bit further, we can mix it with hip-hop, and traditional dance. Contemporary dance is the same in Africa. It is not different. It's the state of mind that changes."

He adds:

"You can juggle with the dances you want to. You can mix all the dance genres, in order to create. Anyone can choose a dance style and mix dance styles. Anyone can mix the traditional with hip-hop, and salsa, too."

Hamma in no way lays claim to the terms "contemporary African dance" and "African contemporary dance", preferring the term "contemporary dance". The fact is that, in his argument, contemporary dance becomes a category which is used to de-categorize local categories:

"When I've seen contemporary dance, I've found that it was like a door which could open up plenty of things, which can connect dance in your own country with dance from elsewhere, a cross-fertilization which can go everywhere."

Hip-hop, modern, traditional, and contemporary are all part of a process of multi-composition.

I also had an interview with another Nigerien dancer and choreographer, Ousmane, whom I approached during the "Choreographic Encounters of Africa and the Indian Ocean" in Bamako, in 2010, where he was presenting a solo work.¹⁵ He explains in his turn:

"[Ousmane]: For contemporary dance you can use any kind of base, traditional, classical, hip-hop... You can re-create and make use of your classical technique. It's contemporary because it's not only classical technique. It's the same for hip-hop. You arrive with the Smurf techniques, to express something. If someone is doing contemporary dance, he has already moved a little bit away from his African world, there are so many mixes..."

Dancers, choreographers, and teachers all interpret and reconstruct the categories that they come across. What is involved for them is taking up a position in relation to characteristics such as they define them, which is to say, such as they have perceived and interpreted them. The categories are in no way fixed and monolithic. They are put back together by artists in a process of (de-) construction, (de-)categorization,

¹⁵ Hailing from Zinder, he explains that he started dancing "in the street" in a friendly setting, becoming initiated in different dance styles (hip-hop, n'dombolo...). Spending time at the Centre Culturel Français in Zinder, he took part in contemporary dance training programmes and participated in several festivals to present his works. In 2010 he set up an association trying to work with Nigerien dancers, while he carries on his creative work, which he describes as "tradi-contemporary".

and re-categorization, based on the context and the configurations in which the people involved find themselves. As a "discussion category", contemporary dance enables them to play on its ambiguities. But it is more precisely a re-interpretation that is at stake. Everyone also categorizes based on the idea that they make for themselves of the category for the other. For example, what "contemporary dance" would be for the white people with whom it is associated from the outset, and all the more so in an interview context with a European. Categories thus open up endless areas of interaction, re-interpretation, and re-reading, with their comparisons, paradoxes, and combinations.

We can make a connection with Michel de Certeau's theory of cultural poaching. In relation to "proprieters", who impose meaning on cultural assets, users undertake acts of resistance and reshape their daily lives through the mesh of the imposed network: in this "subtle art of tenants" (1990:L), "Users 'cobble together', with and within the predominant cultural economy, the countless and infinitesimal changes of its law into that of their own interests and their own rules: (de Certeau, 1990: XXXIX). Likewise, African dancers are not passive consumers. They create their own interpretations of the categories which are circulating, on the basis of their uses, juggling between - *"l'écart et l'entre"*-(Jullien, 2012).

Conclusion: Categorial Games, Artistic Challenges, and Scientific Precautions

Categorization phenomena prompt us to think about criteria of definition, effects of inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy and discrimination, promotion and devaluation, as well as the uses, and the social, cultural, ideological, artistic, and economic challenges... In this sense, categories have a powerful political scope. This entails analyzing relations of power and counter-power with their share of violence. At the same time, under this structural effect, there is a real dynamic: not only do categories depend on viewpoints, and their "contexts of use" (de Certeau, 1990:55), but they are also being endlessly transformed. Contrasting with the image of rigidity which follows them, categories are moveable, composite, and relative. What is categorial for one is not for the other, nor in any constant way. This, however, is the very mark of a categorization.

Because dance categories play a central part in creation: for example, "traditional African dance" is necessary if "contemporary dance" is to exist. They are also a vital reference if "mixtures" are to be operative. The boundaries in dance turn out to provide structure for the artistic approach by introducing areas of differentiation and thus of circulation, but also of opposition and rupture. Dance categories are transformed into artistic tools through adhesion, composition, and disjunction. Categories and their stereotypes are part and parcel of present-day practices, and represent a "driving force", extending the thinking of Tzvetan Todorov (1980:8).¹⁶

Lastly, on the methodological level, the researcher must engage a reflexive analysis as soon as mechanisms of categorization pass through his knowledge and operate in his acts of denomination. Categories include an ideological load which imbues our research. The anthropologist's responsibility is all the greater because there is a feedback from the scientific category which may be the object of a re-appropriation in the field. This leads to considering the chains of transmission between the researcher and the people

¹⁶ Likewise, Amselle shows how African artists thwart the stereotypes developed in their regard, and writes: "African art thus appears as a strategic place, a conceptual node making it possible to grasp the area of interlocution -including misunderstandings-between the West and Africa" (Amselle, 2005 : 10).

involved, from which emerge unexpected connivances, new oppositions, and interwoven interplays of referencing. "Contemporary African dance" is thus the product of an ongoing and paradoxical construct, in which different ways of looking at things and different systems of logic are associated. Once science is a social agent, the researcher's activity is organized with regard to the dancers' movements, and it is this articulation which gives it all its impact.

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