

“Contemporary dance on stage in Burkina Faso and Senegal – creating new publics”

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My paper starts from the observation, that since the turn of the century contemporary performance arts from various parts of Africa are gaining a renewed attention and recognition within the international art scene. However, from the point of view of local cultural activists and other actors involved in the performing arts scene in Africa (including many transnationally highly mobile performers and cultural entrepreneurs) the meaning of this trend is quite contested.

How to interpret the increasing recognition and appreciation of African contemporary performance arts by Western publics touches a delicate issue and raises controversial debates turning around the question why this trend does not correspond to a similar recognition by local publics. Many critical voices hold that contemporary dance in Africa is an “imported” artistic movement for which a local public does not yet “really exist” – this point of view leads some cultural actors to call for collective efforts in order to create a public by means of cultural management that aim at “educating” or “sensitizing” the population. While the performing artists involved resort to diverse strategies that reflect their understanding of their particular position in society, the creation of a local public remains a challenge.

What is at stake with ‘the question of the public’? On an individual level it is first and foremost a quest for recognition from the part of the artists, who need a public for an affirmation of their identity, social value and moral integrity as artists. If this public is located somewhere in an affluent Western country, this may provide access to financial resources and livelihood options that in turn can be converted into social prestige. Although Western publics tend to stereotypically affirm the Africanness of black performers, they cannot account for their belonging to local traditions and society in Africa.

The quest for belonging thus remains as a flipside of the desire to participate in international art circuits.

On a collective level, local publics have an even more existential role to play – especially where national governments have retrieved from investing in cultural politics. With the take-over of civil society as responsible for a sustainable ‘management of culture’, local publics are more and more needed in order to (re-)appropriate and re-territorialise Africa’s artistic traditions and potentials, thereby countering a tendency that is perceived as a ‘selling out’ of Africa’s last remaining vital resources, namely its performative culture and creativity.

In my paper I want to show that the way how local actors conceive of and try to find answers to the ‘question of the public’ is still largely determined by the rhetoric of national cultural politics. But what is at stake cannot be understood without reference to the dynamics of transnationalisation, migration and global transformations. Thus, the fear of local actors of being culturally dis-appropriated can be related to changes that have taken place on a global scale with respect to “what we understand by the notion of culture and what we do in its name” (Yúdice 2003: 10), namely the imposition of the idea that culture is a “resource” that has to be professionally managed and administered in order to ensure “sustainable development”.

After the introduction I give an outline of the environment of my field-research by introducing the most important institutions representing contemporary dance in Senegal and Burkina Faso. Then I analyze how performance artists from these two countries deal with the challenges arising with ‘the question of the public’. I do this by referring to examples of choreographers from Burkina Faso and from Senegal, who are considered as prominent representatives of ‘contemporary dance’ in their respective country of origin (although not all of them embrace this label). The analysis reveals that the examples differ in significant ways, but also show important commonalities.

Thereby I want to bring forward an approach that – rather than comparing (discrete) cases – highlights transnationality and translocality (Lachenmann 2008). I argue that in order to understand the social and political meaning of performative practice, it is necessary to account for the multilayered connectedness of places, actors and events, and the overlapping of spaces that characterize the uneven dynamics of globalisation. I think we should dismiss the restricted focus of conventional performance studies (mainly concentrating on the relation between actors and audiences during ‘playtime’), which has

contributed to the identification of the domain of culture as a kind of second order reality, and to its marginalization in academic research and debates. Focusing more on the social embeddedness and historical situatedness of performance, by contrast, we can conceptualize performances as practices and institutions that are intimately are interrelated with the domain of politics and economics. In short, I think that we should study and theorize performance as a part of society, and not just as a reflection of it.

The examples I am referring to go back to explorative fieldresearch in Burkina Faso and Senegal (mainly during the festival “Dialogues de Corps” 2010 in Ouagadougou, the “Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres” FESMAN III 2010, and during the World Social Forum 2011 in Dakar). The research was carried out in the context of a project on the significance and meaning of contemporary dance for processes of social transformation in West Africa. Methodologically, the project focuses on the encounters and institutionalized ‘interfaces’ (Long 2001) between arts, cultural politics and the ‘development world’, where actors in asymmetrical power relations are negotiating the meaning of the link between ‘culture and development’. This allows me to study the entangledness of artistic initiatives in Africa with the current trend of globalized political discourses (as promoted by UNESCO, the World Bank, the EU, or other supranational organizations, as well as by national governments, NGOs and local development agencies) to conceive of culture as a ‘resource for development’.

Empirically, my project focuses on Burkina Faso and Senegal because over the last decade, in and between these two countries major ‘hubs’ and dense networks of artistic exchange, choreographic production and professional training in the (francophone) West African region have emerged, particularly in the domain of contemporary dance. The nodes of these networks can be located within institutions at particular sites. The most important and influential in terms of representing and promoting contemporary dance in Western Africa are the Centre de Développement Choréographique – la Termitière (CDC) in Ouagadougou, and the École des Sables in Toubab Diallaw. The two centers often collaborate, creating new connections, increasing funding options and enlarging spaces for professional artistic practice.

The dance school École des Sables is run by one of the most prominent pioneers of contemporary dance in Africa, who is also a representative of the professional urban elite

among the first generation of post colonial artists: Germaine Acogny. She was the director of MUDRA Afrique, a dance academy in Dakar that came into existence in 1977 through the initiative of Senghor. MUDRA Afrique was founded by the renowned French choreographer Maurice Béjart, who had already set up a UNESCO funded international dance academy called MUDRA in Brussels. MUDRA Afrique, co-financed by UNESCO and the private charitable Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, was conceived as a “pan-African school for the art of stage”. Its aim was to develop a new kind of African dance (different from the folkloristic model of national African Ballets) as “a prospective image of a continent full of future” (Béjart, in Acogny 1980: 10) and “as a living ferment of modern civilization” (Acogny 1980: 25). From Senghor’s point of view, the potential for a “New Black African Ballet” was to be formed at MUDRA “according to the Senegalese method of borrowing from Europe, not [...] inspiration, but rather Europe’s ballet techniques” (Senghor, in Acogny 1980: 7). Classical ballet, as a “system of exercises that makes the dancer master of his whole body” (Acogny 1980: 86), was seen as an essential element and necessary basis for professional training. Although Acogny conceived of herself, by origin, “deeply rooted in popular traditions”, she ascribed her work to an artistic movement that was “not at all a return to the roots”, but rather “a way that is altogether different and resolutely urban, reflecting the modern context within which so many of us, Africans of our time, must live and move and have our being. The Africa of sky-scrappers, the Africa of international alliances.” (Acogny 1980: 25).

MUDRA thus stood in sharp (although complementary) contrast to the National Ballet. The latter was created immediately after independence in order to function as an ambassador of Senegalese culture, putting on stage in front of audiences all around the world the wealth of its diverse musical and dance traditions framed by idyllic scenes of rural life. The professional formation at MUDRA, by contrast, did not aim at showcasing traditional culture but rather at learning, acquiring knowledge and techniques for the formation of a modern, pan-African self, being able to express itself in a universally meaningful artistic language. Its agenda included the idea of international understanding, but to my knowledge, it has never been explained or legitimized with respect to any particular public.

After Senghor had given over in 1980 to his predecessor Abdou Diouf, who strictly followed the precepts of the IMF instead of the visions of Pan-Africanism and Négritude, MUDRA Afrique was closed in 1982, due to lack of funding. Germaine Acogny spent the

years to follow mainly teaching African dance in France and Germany. She eventually managed to re-establish herself in Senegal on the basis of private entrepreneurship, starting by founding the association Jant-Bi, before she was able in 2004 to set up École des Sables. In the meanwhile this dance school is supported by an impressive number of international partners and has lately figured prominently in the rubric of “Success Stories” in a report on a colloquium organized by the EU in April 2009 in Brussels on “Culture and Creativity, vectors of development” (http://www.culture-dev.eu/www/accueil/Culture-Dev_BROCHURE_OK_7_7.pdf; accessed 24.05.2011).

Like École des Sables in Senegal, the above mentioned CDC in Burkina Faso was also established as a permanent structure in 2004. In contrast to the former, the CDC does not have the status of a private enterprise – it was officially recognized in 2005 as an associative structure (association sans but lucrative) by the Burkinabe state (http://www.cdc-latermitiere.org/centre_presentation.php; accessed 24.05.2011), who has since then been officially supporting the center on the basis of funding provided by the French embassy. Although the government of Burkina Faso has cooperated in its establishment, the structure rather ‘belongs’ (in economic as well as in organizational structure and management terms) to France. The CDC la Termitière has been set up according to a French model, the national network of choreographic centers (CCN: Centres Chorégraphiques Nationaux), supported by the French Ministry of culture in order to connect and thereby enhance the performance of various CDCs established in different towns in France.

The CDC – la Termitière in Burkina Faso was initiated in 2000 by the then already internationally renowned dance company Salia ni Seydou. The company is directed by two dancers original from Burkina Faso, Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro, who had met each other in the framework of a piece created in 1992 (“Pour Antigone”) by the French contemporary dance choreographer Mathilde Monnier. After having worked together in France at the prestigious Centre chorégraphique national de Montpellier, they founded in 1994 their own company in Burkina Faso. Since then the company has received several awards for their choreographies. Besides their artistic creations they have put a lot of effort in promoting professional dance training in Burkina Faso, although they spend most of their time outside the country. Starting with workshops and sporadic international encounters that offered training opportunities for young local artists, they gradually built up their capacities and (since 2001) managed to organize a regular festival in Ouagadougou

that combines an international choreographic encounter with intensive professional training workshops. Since 2004 this festival takes place as a biennale entitled “Dialogues de Corps”. Moreover, the CDC caters for the whole African sub-region, offering possibilities for continued training, workshops, artistic residencies, co-productions and professional networking.

In 2008 Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro have been nominated “Officiers des Arts et des Lettres” by the French Ministry of Culture, who thereby recognized the quality of their artistic work as well as the value of their promotion of professional dance training in Africa. This, however, does not prevent them from being repeatedly questioned with respect to the value and significance of their work from a Burkinabe point of view – as for instance during a press conference that took place during ‘Dialogues de Corps’ in December 2010, where Salia Sanou vehemently denounced the lack of financial support by the government, indicating a lack of recognition of their work as not only artistic development, but “développement tout court”. The journalists, on their part, had been questioning the lack of any references to the national celebration of the 50th anniversary of Burkinabe independence during ‘Dialogues de Corps’, although the two events were taking place almost simultaneously. The tensions between the festival organizers and the journalists at this occasion can be related to the general criticism articulated by a range of actors in Burkina Faso concerning the elitist character of contemporary dance and the limitations of its possible range of influence and effective reach. Many cultural actors complain that the “scriptures” of contemporary dance performances are difficult to read and understand.

This widely shared skeptical point of view has to be understood against the background of Burkinabe cultural politics and the way how the “artistic revolution” under Thomas Sankara (1983-87) lives on in local practices, institutions and discourses. Sankara conceived of culture as “key element of the social transformation” (Andrieu 2010: 191), to be achieved by a “democratic and popular revolution”. His vision was based on the idea of a “new culture”, that would promote national unity and sustain the process of creating a “new society” (ibid.: 190) in which power would be restored to the popular masses. Accordingly, cultural performances, music and dance in particular, could and should serve as a means to educate and “conscientize” the population in order to mobilize the rural masses and delegitimize the elites in power, including the urban bourgeoisie.

The core pedagogical principles of these revolutionary ideas concerning the role of performing arts in the transformation of society are widely shared in social and political liberation movements all around the world. They form part of the various traditions of community theatre, theatre for development or “théâtre utile”, and are thereby well established in Burkina Faso. As a kind of taken for granted background they can be discerned in the proposal of an academic research project on “Contemporary Dance in Burkina Faso and the Question of the Public” (Projet de recherche DEA, mémoire: “La Danse Contemporaine au Burkina Faso et la Question du Public”), that was meant to be realised 2009/2010 at the faculty of literature at the university of Ouagadougou. Its author, a trained social scientist and “cultural journalist” had already accomplished a research in 2007 on the “Problems of contemporary dance in Burkina Faso” focusing on the case of ‘Dialogues de Corps’. In the outline of the project on the “Question of the Public” the choice of the subject is justified with the following statement, based on his previous study:

“[A]u Burkina Faso, le public de la danse contemporaine est essentiellement composé de l’élite intellectuelle, des expatriés occidentaux et très rarement des artistes qui viennent soutenir leurs amis danseurs. *La danse contemporaine ne disposerait donc pas réellement d’un public.* Aux représentations ne se rendent seulement qu’un tout petit noyau dur d’habitues et quelques spectateurs occasionnels.” (Djibril Zana Kiemtore, 2009/2010: 1; my emphasis)¹

According to the author, the spectators of contemporary dance performances (“a little, hard core of regular(s) and some occasional spectators”) are either foreigners or part of an intellectual elite and therefore do not “really” count as a public. The majority of the population, by contrast, does not understand and consequently does not appreciate contemporary dance. He therefore proposes to set up a whole programme in order to create a knowledgeable public by up to date means of social engineering and cultural management (including seminars, participatory research, sensitizing and awareness raising campaigns).

The rationality of this research proposal can be understood when taking into account that contemporary dance, along with the plastic arts, is “one of the artistic movements least understood in Burkina Faso but most exported towards the exterior” (Sawadogo 2004:

¹ In Burkina Faso, the public of contemporary dance is essentially composed by the intellectual elite, Western expatriates and very rarely by artists who come in order to support their fellow dancers. Contemporary dance thus does not seem to really dispose of a public. The performances are attended only by a very small hard core of regulars, and some occasional spectators.

134). This background is certainly not unknown by the organisers of the festival Dialogues de Corps. Still, they have their own visions of how to contribute to the formation of a new society, and their concept of the public of the festival is focusing rather on professionalisation than on popularity.

This became evident when I was talking with Seydou Boro some days before the opening of 'Dialogues de Corps' in December 2010 about how the preparations were advancing. At that time an amazing range of cultural activities were taking place in Burkina Faso almost simultaneously but at different sites (the 50th Anniversary of Independence Celebrations in Bobo Dioulasso, the music festival Nuit Atypiques in Koudougou, a Salon de la Musique Africaine at the CCF Ouagadougou, a theatre festival ...). When I asked if this would not compromise the success of the festival with respect to the expected public Seydou Boro answered: „We don't worry! Not everybody will go to Bobo. We have our public here – you will see! There will be the young artists whom we have trained ...“ (Boro, 8.12.2010).

In fact, as a survey of parts of the public during the festival clearly indicated, most of them (ca. 63%) were actually artists, many of them already working at a professional level, mainly in the domain of dance, theatre or music, or about to be trained as professionals. This observation confirms the trend already stated by Moussa Sawadogo in his master thesis (accomplished in 2003/2004 at the department of archeology and art history) on the topic of "Contemporary Dance in Burkina Faso". Although he still considers the genre of contemporary dance as an "elitist art" because its choreographies are difficult to decipher (Sawadogo 2004: 112), he also takes note of a growing popularity since the 1990s, namely among artists (ibid.: 65).

Probably the most decisive aspect of this growing popularity is the international success of the company Salia ni Seydou, which has become "a model" for a whole generation of young artists in search for an "affirmation of the the new style of Burkinabe choreographic creation" (ibid.: 103). The prestige that goes along with the public recognition but even more with the economic achievements of the company contributes to enhancing the social status of dancing – an activity that is perceived by the majority of the population as a a passtime activity for those who have failed in school, but not as a serious profession. By contrast, the visibility of the social and economic success of Salia ni Seydou brings forward the perception of dance as a possible income generating activity and adds up to the growing awareness of the 'exportability' of contemporary dance.

Following Sawadogo the 'question of the public' thus leads to the paradoxical evolution of

an artistic movement that has been rather recently “imported from the West” (ibid.: 135) and, although still lacking understanding in Burkina Faso, has now become a major export item to the West. Sawadogo indicates that the tempo of this paradoxical development is extremely fast. This helps to understand the logic of the above mentioned research proposal on the “Question of the Public”. Given the mistrust of the population with respect to the state’s capacity to effectively manage and protect the national heritage, only a knowledgeable and advertised public can guarantee for a control of the rapid extraction of the internationally highly valued cultural resource constituted by the local contemporary dance scene.

The situation of contemporary dance in Senegal is different. Here the perception prevails that the national heritage left by Senghor’s prestigious cultural politics and Senegal’s avant-garde position in the domain of arts has actually contributed to such an idleness and stagnation in the following periods, that Senegal is now “behind” many of its neighbouring African countries. This applies particularly to the domain of dance, conceived of and cherished by Senghor as the “primadonna” of the arts in Africa. The pessimistic view expressed by many Senegalese intellectuals in the aftermath of FESMAN III in December 2010 reflects a deep disappointment and disillusion concerning the presidency of Wade and his obvious instrumentalisation of cultural symbolism. However, the focus on national politics tends to ignore the dynamism of private entrepreneurship in the realm of the arts and the fact, that a new generation of artists and cultural activists have taken over in the meantime.

Although Germaine Acogny is still recognised and revered in Senegal as “la Grande Dame de la Danse Africaine”, founding figure of contemporary African dance and unquestionable authority, a second generation of contemporary dancers has emerged in the meanwhile. This generation of artists is co-temporary with Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro, although in Senegal no one can claim a comparable prominent position within the international dance scene, nor a similarly dominant influence within the national artistic landscape. The latter is much more diversified than in Burkina Faso, namely in the domain of dance. However, Senegal also has its biannual international dance festival, Kaay Fecc, with a programme that combines performances by international dance companies with intensive training sessions for local artists.

One of the founders and co-director of the festival (that is already celebrating its 10th

anniversary in 2011) is Jean Tamba. Tamba is also the co-founder of a dance company named “La 5ième dimension” – referring to the five continents representing the world (according to the olympic symbols). The name of the company, set up in 1995 with the aim to create a “free space” to experiment with new styles (Neveu-Kringelbach 2005: 217) clearly indicates a claim for active participation in a global cultural sphere. Tamba, however, vehemently rejects the label ‘contemporary’ dance as “something imported” and imposed: “It’s like democracy in Africa: it’s imported! It doesn’t work!”. He strongly criticises and opposes French cultural politics, because he conceives of the dense network of institutions, festivals and competitions promoting African performance arts solely as a means to follow French interest by controlling the domain of staged performance in the francophone region.

“La danse contemporaine, ca nous ne ressemble pas, c’est pas nous! La danse contemporaine est venue des États Unis. Mais ici on n’a pas la même conception de danse. Si on n’a pas de grandes companies de danse contemporaine c’est un problème de conception, ce n’est pas seulement une question de moyens, mais aussi de conception. Il faut que ca sorte d’un besoin, ca ne peut pas se faire comme ca, créer une compagnie juste pour aller aux rencontres choréographiques. Les rencontres sont quelque chose d’imposé par la France!” (Tamba, 14.2.2011)²

Tamba also criticises the establishment of a CDC in Burkina Faso as a mere subsidiary of a French institution, unable to exist without their support. He claims that the CDC in Ouagadougou was not born out of genuine local needs, but rather out of French national interests: “Le CDC au Burkina n’est pas né d’un besoin de là bas, il est le 9ième centre de développement choréographique soutenu par la France – les 8 autres se trouvent en France. Les projets de Mathilde Monnier sont des projets de la France!” (Tamba, 14.2.2011).³

In contrast to the way the company Salia ni Seydou has made it, Tamba is proud to affirm that he has been working since almost twenty years without any subsidiaries. Moreover, he underlines that he has not left the country in order to work in Europe, like most of his

² Contemporary dance in Senegal does not resemble, it’s not us! Contemporary dance has come from the US. But here we don’t have the same concept of dance. If we don’t have big companies it’s a problem of conception, it’s not only a matter of means, but also of conception. It has to come out from a need, you cannot just create a company like that, only to go to the choreographic encounters [organised by Culturesfrance]. The encounters are something imposed by France!

³ The CDC in Burkina is not born out of a local need, it is the 9th center for choreographic development

peers who got the chance to do so. What is more, on tour abroad with his company he has always made sure to come back with all the artists – something that is rather unusual in the Senegalese performing arts world. Tamba strongly condemns the many young companies mounted just to present a spectacle that could run in the competition of one of the prestigious “Rencontres choréographiques” organised by Culturesfrance, and then dissolve as quickly as they appeared.

For Tamba, the real breeding-ground for the development of genuinely new forms of dance in Africa is the artists own consciousness.⁴ Insisting on the importance of self-reflection and the need to have a concept of one’s own art, he urges the artist to reflect, think about his position and his role in society.⁵ In order to develop his art, Tamba insists the the artist has to be clear about his location, both physically and socially, and to be honest about his intentions: Is the creation of a dance company only a means to get money in order to leave and get more money abroad, or is it about staying and developing ones own country?⁶ Without answering these questions the artist cannot know where he is going and what is his place in society and therefore he will not be able to engage with the basic question that is, in Tamba’s eyes, essential for the identity of an artist: What is the meaning of art in society?

Tamba’s point of view is largely shared by his fellow Senegalese artist, the actor and playwright Macoudou Mbengue, who thinks that the West has imposed contemporary dance in Africa in order to put local artistic traditions down:

“En ce qui concerne le rapport avec le public, moi en tant que comédien je dis ce que j’ai à dire. Nous ici en Afrique ‘on est très expressif’, il n’y a pas de difficulté pour le public de comprendre. Mais avec la danse contemporaine c’est différent – quand je regarde la danse conemporaine je ne ressens rien! Ca ne me parle pas! Je dis souvent que si l’Occident a inventé la danse contemporaine c’est pour nous stagner. Maintenant tous les danseurs doivent faire de la danse contemporaine pour être financé par Culturesfrance.” (Mbengue, 14.2.2011)⁷

supported by France. The others are in France. The project by Mathilde Monnier are French projects.

⁴ “C’est une question de conception, de conscience”

⁵ “Il faut faire cette reflexion: Quelle est ma position? Quel est mon rôle dans la société?”

⁶ “Est-ce qu’il s’agit de gagner de l’argent et d’avoir les possibilités de partir ou est-ce qu’il s’agit de rester là et de faire quelque chose ici et développer le propre pays? Il s’agit de savoir ou aller. Quelle est notre place? Quelle est la signification de l’art dans la société?”

⁷ Concerning my connection with the public, me, as an actor, I say what I have to say. We here in Africa are very expressive, there is no difficulty for the public to understand. But with contemporary dance it’s

Mbengue shares the point of view of many cultural activists and pedagogues, who adhere to the idea that a new society can only be created by ‘educating the masses’ – performance arts being a means for it. However, in contrast to more ideological concepts of the role of culture and performance mentioned above, he states in a rather pragmatic way the necessity for any professional performer, to be able live from his or her art. Therefore, publics need to be educated:

“En ce qui concerne le public: on doit le former. Il y a une différence entre le théâtre professionnel et le théâtre amateur. Moi, j'en ai fait un métier. J'ai appris un art - si je ne vends pas mon art je ne mange pas! Ce que je fais les gens des quartiers profonds ne le comprennent pas. Il faut les éduquer.” (Mbengue, 14.2.2011)⁸

Considering the fact that all these different artists confirm that they are – in one way or another – making efforts to create their own, local public, it becomes clear that this effort is vital, if not existential. On the one hand, practicing art has to assure a livelihood: “If I don’t sell my art I don’t eat”. On the other, it is the only means to defend a relative autonomy and to affirm a certain cultural integrity.

It is in this vein that, in spite of their differences with respect to their self-identification as artists, Jean Tamba as well as Seydou Boro emphasise that they have been able to create their own local public. And it is significant that they characterise this public differently from the descriptions given by Kiemtore. In the case of ‘La 5ième Dimension’, Tamba claims to have attracted an altogether “mixed public” from popular urban neighbourhoods (quartiers). In the case of the public of Dialogues de Corps, Seydou Boro self-consciously indicates that the majority are young performers and peer artists. This public may include some representatives of the ‘hardcore’ fraction of the Burkinabe intellectual elite, but the much larger group of artists has a very mixed social and cultural background. Moreover, some spectacles of the last edition of Dialogues de Corps adopted the strategy already developed on a quite large scale during the precedent theatre festival “Récréâtrales” in

different – when I see contemporary dance I don’t feel anything! It doesn’t speak to me! I often say that the West has invented contemporary dance in order to stagnate us. Now all the dancers have to do contemporary dance in order to be financed by Culturesfrance.

⁸ Concerning the public, we have to form it. There is a difference between the professional theatre and amateur theatre. Me, I have made it a profession. I have learned an art – if I don’t sell my art I don’t eat! What I do the people in the profound areas [popular quarters] don’t understand. We have to educate them.

November 2010, where parts of the programme took place in the public and semi-public spaces of the streets and compounds of a popular quarter in Ouagadougou. This trend of opening the scenes towards the streets is currently gaining momentum in the Burkinabe performing arts scene.

The strong efforts from the part of the performing artists, choreographers and other cultural actors, such as Kiemtore, to create a public for contemporary dance can be interpreted as an attempt to appropriate and localise an “imported” globalised art form. These attempts are very different from the way post-colonial national governments were appropriating local as well as foreign art forms in order to build up, unite and modernize their young independent nations. The rather hierarchical and authoritative style of knowledge transmission at MUDRA, where new African dance techniques (in spite of having “borrowed” their ingredients from different sources) were conceived in a strictly unifying way and meticulously codified, has given way to much more open ways of teaching and exchanging – ways that neatly correspond to the now dominant neo-liberal ideas of ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘cultural freedom’. The current – and in the eyes of many European critics for the first time ‘really contemporary’ kind of contemporary African performances – are much more diverse. Moreover, they increasingly display a new element: social criticism (Neveu-Kringelbach 2005: 243).

By way of conclusion I want to underline that my reflexions on the ‘question of the public’ are not meant to give an answer, but rather to point to the relevance of the further reaching questions and challenges into which this rather rhetorical formulation (why does contemporary dance reach only an ‘elite’ and does not have a ‘real’ public?) can be translated. Furthermore I want to argue that in particular the newly appearing element of social critique and more or less open political dissent, that is currently expressed in many contemporary dance performances, should lead us to question the meaning of its presumed “elitist” character. The rather taken for granted meaning of the notion of elite as it is used by Burkinabe intellectuals themselves does not reflect on the question: Who is this elite today and in how far does contemporary dance speak to them? In how far can contemporary performance artists assume the role of critical civil society, as promoted by alternative development theories, or are they rather to be seen as examples for cultural dependency (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 66)? And what can be the meaning of arts in society, when it is organised on the basis of private entrepreneurship?

Asked about his view on the current challenges and opportunities for the development of contemporary dance in Africa, Seydou Boro answered impatiently: “To begin with, it has to exist!” (“D’abord, il faut qu’elle existe!”) According to him, affirming the existence of contemporary dance in Africa entails a lot of work, which should concentrate on the establishment of institutions for professional training. He conceives of proper training as the breeding-ground for contemporary dance in Africa (“Il faut former, il faut la pépinière”). One of the biggest challenges to this effort are the centrifugal forces of cultural export.

In spite of the shortcomings of a romanticising “horticultural anthropology” that privileges the local as the site where culture develops, “organically, from below and within, by way of ‘roots’” (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 68) I think that it is important to remind that the extraction and ‘selling out’ of cultural resources in Africa is not just about fancy export articles – it is about the transformation of collective dreams and individual lives ... In times of neo-liberal development politics, when the legitimation for cultural politics as well as the recognition and support for the arts is not supposed to come anymore from the state, but from ‘the people’, the question therefore becomes pressing: Who are these people? Who is the public?

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