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## Come you Spirits, Unsex me Here: Contemporary Theatre and African Ceremonies as a Playground for Alternative Masculinities

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## **1. Abstract**

This thesis aims on one level to discuss masculinity intersecting with the way the male black body is presented on stage in recent theatre/dance performances and on another, it researches performance practices in West Africa for their portrayal of gender roles. Looking a number of recent productions on the topic in Holland, Belgium, France-Ivory Coast and Bénin, a panorama of masculinities is painted in the first chapters. Further chapters aim to compare this phenomenon with local performance practices in (mainly Francophone) West Africa within the framework of the very lively masked ceremonies and ritual manifestations, both religious as well as profane, that are still part and parcel of society in West Africa. Perhaps surprisingly, I set out to demonstrate that a more fluid perception of gender roles is to be detected in that society through these local performance practices, and that this might compare to the work of diasporic artists who explore masculinities in their contemporary productions, thus creating new, alternative types of masculinity.

The first half of the paper examines recent contemporary dance/theatre productions where Afro descendant and diasporic theatre artists have engaged with masculinity at the intersection with "race"<sup>1</sup>. Through interviews with the creators, a possible interface is created between European and West African performance practices concerning their views of masculinity.

Halfway through, a birds' eye view of recent developments in (mainly, but not exclusively diasporic) visual arts and design, where very similar tendencies in the portrayal of masculinity can be detected, is presented under the heading "Centrefold".

The second half focuses on performance practices in West Africa, including one example from the south-west; they seem to point to a concept of masculinity, different from what has been defined as hegemonic masculinity in Europe. Examples from this practice are discussed that point to a complementary concept of gender instead of a conflicting binary: instead of two oppositional irreconcilable and fixed poles directly identifiable through their sex, as the gender binary is conceptualised in the global north, in the global south we're dealing with a continuum where the male and the female are conceived in terms of roles and functions in society, where they're not oppositional but complementary.

The paper concludes that the theatre offers the perfect intercultural and transnational playground for these ambitions and points to further developments that have been set in motion in contemporary theatre practice. The black male body is reviewed as a site for alternative masculinities both in the context of societies that form part of the global majority as well as those belonging to the global north.

Thus, besides discussing the possibility of contributing philosophies that are related to local West African performance practices to contemporary dance/theatre, the article also intends to help filling a gap in research on masculinity and the performing arts in a marginalised region which is francophone West Africa. This will in the future lead to an ongoing research, where gender fluidity will be mapped as it is expressed through cross-dressing and gender identity switching in masked as well as trance ceremonies, celebrations, and liturgies in a wide range of local performance practices. Theoretically, I hope to uncover a non-colonial gender-fluid philosophy in that part of the continent, that has survived and has been imbricated with imported religious and ideological dimensions accompanying Arabic and European slave-trade and subsequent colonisation. Through this process, a sub-Saharan Africa has been created as a colonial construct that has stripped the local gender fluid approaches on the continent of its dynamic *accoutrements*, reducing it to the poverty of

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<sup>1</sup> throughout this article the word is used reluctantly as it does not refer to a reality but to a construct that has brought disastrous and disruptive worldwide results called racism, which still is a very manifest reality.

oppositional binary thinking and its ideology, but in spite of this ongoing process, pockets of the non-oppositional complementary approach have survived and are still functioning.

## **2. Introduction**

*Anthropological writing may be scientific, it is also inherently autobiographic.*

Johannes Fabian

### **2.0 Composing a polyphonic/polyrhythmic argument: switching between the global north and the global majority**

The topic of this thesis is the way masculinities are presented in very disparate performance practices. The question investigated can be summed up as: can West African so-called traditional performance practices present a playground for alternative masculinities comparable to recent Afro European contemporary dance performances?

Classification, taxonomy, categorisation: the global north obviously loves to sort things out. The well-made play might epitomise this as it reflects an extremely ordered view of the world where every element in the end finds (or is allotted) its proper fixed place. Theatre studies until the last quarter of the previous century were centred around hermeneutics and only since then a paradigm shift has taken place, where the performative is foregrounded as opposed to the logocentric approach. Postdramatic theatre (as this theatre has been baptised by Lehman in 1999) has favoured the non-logocentric aspects, creating spectacles where the main roles are reserved for images, sounds, music, immersive experiences and finally has explored (and continues to explore) a whole range of other-purpose spaces adapted to theatrical events. This development also has immense consequences for acting styles and audience involvement. Through the reappropriation of the theatrical, it can be argued that it has reconnected to its global origins: the ludic event as already depicted in ancient cave paintings throughout Africa and Europe.

Not only has this led to a new dramaturgy for the theatre of the global north, it also has taught theatre scholars to develop new standards in the way African theatrical events had been so far evaluated and this had led to a stream of publications about all kind of theatrical practices on the continent (especially the Anglophone part of it).

This thesis is an attempt to bring very different worlds together. As the thesis covers relatively new ground, connections will be proposed between the world of contemporary Afropean dance performance and West African dance and performance practices. The topic covers among others the field of anthropology, performance theory, ethnography, sociology, gender studies and visual arts, and it will be imperative to rely on a range of methods proper to this broad set of disciplines. Next to interviews and participatory observation, appropriate literature will be researched; performance analysis through dance scholarship shall be called upon, queer theory will be included in the approach of the topic.

The possible danger of a methodological hotchpotch will partly be avoided through a critical attitude and partly acknowledged as a consequence of the imbrication of cultures, characteristic of post-colony. Hence, a chapter at the heart of the thesis has been unavoidable on subjectivity: for this thesis I claim my gay gaze as the heuristic tool that serves to string together all the different themes into a coherent composition.

The foremost disciplines to call upon will be performance studies and anthropology. The birth of performance studies as a separate discipline has from the outset maintained a strong link to anthropology, Schechner and Turner's work being at the base of the new discipline. And besides anthropology and performance studies, so far references have already been made to the fields of sociology, gender studies, art criticism, queer theory,

showing that this research is by definition multi- as well as inter-disciplinary. In certain cases, literary fiction will be referred to and of course performance theory with references to Carlson, Fischer-Lichte, Schechner besides the work of dance scholars like Cools will be useful to the approach of the topic. References to visual art studies will be unavoidable, as masks (including costume and paraphernalia) have been evaluated from the point of view of visual arts as well as anthropological research; Fraser and Nooter Roberts among others have looked into the link between the visual aesthetics and the cosmological, philosophical and mythological values expressed through them; in fact, a visual essay will pose as a centrefold in this study.

When calling upon gender studies, the focus will deliberately be on European and African studies rather than on US research. The reason for focusing rather on European/African research into masculinity, especially at the intersection with "race", is because of the discursive hegemony which characterises this topic in Academia: the big majority of research on this matter is from the US and cannot (or only partly) be transposed to situations outside the US. Parallels, similarities, discrepancies, between both sides of the Atlantic as well as the influence of feminist conceptions of gender (and "race"): these elements have to be taken into account in order to cover the topic in its complexity. Charl Landvreugd stresses this fact in his paper elaborating on the issue with a focus to the visual art and the position of Afro-Dutch artists; in a way this paper seeks to support that stance with a view to the performing arts.<sup>2</sup>

Local performance practices have been foremost a research area of anthropology and sociology, although the number of performance studies on these practices is rapidly increasing (the ongoing publication of the *African Theatre* and *Performative Interactions in African Theatre* series are examples of the growing interest in the topic). Performance studies as a discipline has from the start with the pioneering Richard Schechner in 1980 always entertained a close link with ethnography and throughout these chapters there will be regular references to concepts and theoretical aspects on the intersection ethnography/performance practices. This study wants to take on board what has been suggested by leading scholars (the last one being Lamp in Bouttiaux that the kinesthetics of the mask "(...)is as important as formal analysis or iconology" and the study of African masks should be reframed as theatre or performance studies instead of art history.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of this thesis, performance practices in West-Africa are resolutely considered as performance art. This has not been done before as the study of masked performances only recently has entered into the arena of performance studies, and so far, these practices have not been under consideration as performance art. For the sake of argument, it might be interesting to compare Abramovic's famous performance *Lips of Thomas*, which is the starting point of Fischer-Lichte's study on performance art, with the *vodun* practice of the *koku* rite, where the participating adepts cut their bodies with sharp knives. Abramovic's performance, which took place in 1975 in a gallery in Innsbruck, consisted (among other actions of self-torture) of the artist cutting her own abdomen with a razor blade, while the audience looked on for half an hour before interrupting the performance.<sup>4</sup> The immediate differences between Abramovic's and the *koku* rite's performance that come to the mind are:

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<sup>2</sup> Landvreugd, "Notes on imagining Afropea." *Open Arts Journal* 5 no.1 (2016): 12. "(...) the salient theoretical frameworks and art histories that have characterised such counter-modernity during the past century need to be brought under further scrutiny to ensure that the local gets the chance to develop on its own terms".

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *La Dynamique des Masques en Afrique Occidentale/Dynamics of Masks in West Africa* (Tervuren, RMCA, 2013), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 11-13.

- In performance art, it is the initiative of an individual artist that leads to the performance. In ritual practice like *vodun koku* it is an initiative shared by a community.
- The access to the performance is public-on-condition in the first case and only for the initiated in the second one, although one could discuss the flexibility of this rule.
- In any case the economics of the performance are totally different.
- A further distinction: the audience becomes participant in the first case without they're being informed of the process on forehand, they have to choose and adapt their stance individually during the performance, while in the second case the participants are on forehand well aware of the process, they have in fact chosen to undergo its power. If a member of Abramovic's audience decided to come back for a second time, this would affect this argument at its core.

Thus, the transformative power of performance is definitely working for the participants in both cases, but I'm sure performance studies would hesitate to categorise *vodun koku* practices with performance art. One might easily agree on the performative aspect, but the doubts would be about the artistic intentions. The very different contexts are probably the cause of this distinction, but on the other hand: the postdramatic turn in theatre<sup>5</sup> might also be considered a return to theatre as it was before drama became the central constituent of the theatre paradigm in the Global North: Lehmann has introduced the term in 1999 to signal an important shift in theatrical practices that has been going on since the last quarter of the previous century. This shift foregrounds the non-textual theatrical elements at the expense of the verbal element, which is confined to the theatre form that can be defined as drama, thus opening the way to a new relationship with the audience. Postdramatic theatre stresses the event itself, bringing together performers and audiences under specific conditions, where drama creates the illusion of reality, and thus invites the famous phenomenon called the suspension of disbelief. Postdramatic theatre does not represent reality, it creates reality and thus reconnects it with its non-dramatic origin. It may not come as a surprise that early attempts at postdramatic theatre were connected to the idea of ritual and ceremony: Schechner and Turner are the obvious names to refer to in this case.<sup>6</sup> Postdramatic theatre practices in the global north and African ceremonies and rituals share basic foundations.

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, transl. Karen-Jüers-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ, 1987); Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985).



(anonymous photo, Cotonou 2008 )

The author together with Koku adept; the scars of the Koku sessions are very visible on the adept's chest.

When discussing alternative masculinities, it will be necessary to refer to queer theory and queer performance practices; a parallel development in design, fashion, photography, and performance art, partly created by the African diaspora and partly on the continent itself has been instrumental in creating images of alternative masculinities and contentious presentations of the male black body. Aesthetic manifestations of queer activity seem much more visible for the anglophone countries as compared to the francophone: all the contributions to the *Queer Africa* collection of stories published in 2018 are exclusively from anglophone countries on the continent. A comparable anthology from the francophone area has to my knowledge not seen the light (yet).

To my regret, I did not find many examples of academic research into concepts of masculinity in West African francophone societies. In an article in 2002 Lahoucine Ouzagane could still maintain that "(...) the scholarship on gender in Africa continues to operate as though gender applied only to women, as though African men had no gender."<sup>7</sup> Even as late as 2016, Schulz and Janson maintain that "(...)scholarship on gender in Africa is still marked by the tendency to describe men as an unmarked, universal category" and this seems to be especially the case for the francophone part.<sup>8</sup> To illustrate this, a few representative examples: Uchendu's bilingual work on Masculinities/Masculinités published in 2008 contains fourteen chapters, of which just only one is dedicated to a region in francophone West Africa: southern Togo; it contains four further articles discussing other French speaking regions on the continent as widely separated from each other as possible: Congo Brazzaville and the Mahgreb. Another example: the *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* issued a comprehensive volume fifty-three (eighteen articles) on masculinities covering the whole of the continent, *Masculin Pluriel* in 2013; Mali gets adequate attention with four articles and there is one single article on Niger.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Introduction to special issue "African Masculinities," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 10 no.3 (2002): 243.

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to special issue "Religion and Masculinities in Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 46 no.2-3 (2016): 121-3.

<sup>9</sup> "Pourquoi n'y retrouve-t-on pas par exemple, aux côtés des incontournables études féministes (Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Paola Tabet), une référence à un article aussi essentiel que « Guerre des sexes à Abidjan : masculin, féminin, CFA » (Vidal 1977b) ? De même certains volumes collectifs sur les masculinités



Part six of the comprehensive reader *African Sexualities*, which is dedicated to sex and masculinities contains eight chapters (including a blog and two poems), none of which addresses a Francophone region (actually the entire reader is heavily toppling over to the Anglophone countries).

In the passing, Viveros Vigoya reaches the same conclusion concerning the lack of research into the Francophone areas in her exemplary documented study on Latin American intersectional masculinities.<sup>10</sup> In her study I found the most pertinent observations and analyses on the intersection of masculinity and "race" in a postcolonial and diasporic context. The black male body in a majoritarian white environment will inevitably develop the double consciousness already articulated by W.E.B. Dubois at the beginning of the twentieth century and Viveros Vigoya lists the strategies adopted under these circumstances. In the chapters on the contemporary theatre performances in this essay, her observations will provide a suitable framework.

The process through which dancers have to go in order to become incarnations of the mask has not been researched from the point of view of gender studies. Some rudimentary notions are discussed,<sup>11</sup> like the use of drugs ("medicine") in preparation for the performance, or the preparatory training in the exclusive domain of male initiation. Schechner has written about transformations in a wide range of ritual contexts in general terms ("all transformations are incomplete"), Turner has elaborated the central element of liminality, but this has not taken into account the ontology of the gender as a separate topic. Bouttiaux in her article on Guro mask practices<sup>12</sup> does mention the kinetic talent necessary to become a (female) mask wearer, but does not elaborate on the topic and instead, stresses the dangers involved for the wearer and his family from possible spiritual opposition: mask dancing can be a risky undertaking.

A number of local performance practices in West Africa have been thoroughly researched by leading scholars. Practices from Bénin/Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Togo, Niger, Burkina Faso of which detailed studies based on solid fieldwork have been published; they have been scrutinised for this thesis on the gender-crossing aspect and a (non-exhaustive) list of comparable practices elsewhere on the continent is included as an illustration of the extent to which the phenomenon is spread. But none of the studied researches addresses separately the topic of the transformation of the male performer into a female (id)entity. The (sub)question I would like to address then is: how, through what means does the dancer arrive at the appropriation of a female identity, and what does that mean for the performer.

## **2.1 Masculinities and the stage**

*I don't have much with me. In my ears I always wear my yin yang-earrings. Everyone has two sides, you just have to find them.*

Martin Kes, 35 years old homeless man  
in an interview for De Straatkrant.

If the European theatre of the nobility in 18th century put life on stage as it should be, if the bourgeois theatre of the 19th demanded an escape from life and the theatre of the democratic

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récemment publiés en français ont choisi d'écarter toute contribution sur l'Afrique." Christophe Broqua et Anne Doquet, "Penser les masculinités en Afrique et au delà." *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 53 no. 209-210 (2013): 4.

<sup>10</sup> Mara Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs de la masculinité*. (Paris: La Découverte, 2018), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990); Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* Bloomington: IUP, 1992; Benedict Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama and Entertainment in the Gelede of the Ketu-Yoruba subgroup in West Africa* (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo UP, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Bouttiaux, *La Dynamique*, 125.

20th century aspired to interpret the realities of life, contemporary theatre is perhaps looking for a way to transform life. The stage has inevitably been a platform for the display of human behaviour and always follows (and often precedes) major changes in behaviour that reflect changes in society. The contemporary stage has shown recent examples where the gender binary is effaced. Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarsten has created a number of performances (*Red Pieces*) where it is impossible to discern gender in the dancers that perform. In *Schönheitsabend*, and other spectacles, Austrian/Dutch performers Holzinger and Riebeek perform gender functions freely distributed regardless of the "appropriate" sex. Even if the radicality of these performances can be considered a very recent phenomenon, gender fluidity has been a theme presented on stage as well as in the visual arts of the past century. Duchamp's alter ego Rose Selavy comes to mind, like Sarah Bernard performing as Hamlet or Féral Benga performing as Josephine Baker. But it's only from the last quarter of the previous century that the attention given to this topic has developed into the proportions it has taken nowadays, especially in dance/movement/mime/performance art environment.

In West-Africa this gender fluidity is a standard element in masked and trance ceremonies throughout the region and far beyond, but this has not been signalled nor researched as thoroughly as could be expected, taking into consideration the attention the topic is receiving by performing artists in the global north. This research wants to address this lack of attention by comparing both performance practices from the point of view of the portrayal of masculinity. Of course, if we focus on the black body, there is a vital difference that has to be taken into account concerning the black male body on stage: in the global north, it is in a minority position while in West Africa it is the opposite, which entails very different contexts and consequently a different set of values; the fact that this research is undertaken by an old white gay male will be foregrounded whenever appropriate, as the gay gaze figuring at the centre of this text has been active in the observation and appreciation of the performances discussed. This research is being undertaken at a time when a substantial paradigm shift is finally (hopefully) taking place: the world-wide protests against racism that are still going on after the violent death of George Floyd are expected to lead to important changes in societies in the Global North. By comparing the two performance practices for this research, I hope to contribute to the un-othering of the sub-Saharan part of the African continent, in agreement with Chabal that the international (not limited to European) view of the continent as an exceptional "case" should be reviewed thoroughly.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.2 Masculinity studies and the black body**

In the global north, matters related to masculinity have shown a wealth of new approaches to the oppositional gender binary, especially at the intersection of masculinity and "race". Intercultural theatre (or whatever terminology one wishes to handle) has rapidly developed into an entity of its own in the (dance)theatre landscape in Europe. The African diaspora has produced a growing number of leading choreographers, theatre personalities, authors, thus offering new visions of masculinity through the presentation of the male black body. In this paper, I will approach half a dozen of these productions from Holland, Belgium, Bénin,<sup>14</sup> Sénégal and France/Côte d'Ivoire focusing on the masculinities they portray or propose. Since its definition by Connell<sup>15</sup> hegemonic masculinity has been nuanced and criticized and reframed<sup>16</sup> but it remains a very practical term.

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Chabal, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* (London: Zed Books, 2009), 18-22.

<sup>14</sup> For this thesis the French spelling of names will generally be applied.

<sup>15</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*. Second Edition. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 77.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 58.

In general, hegemonic masculinity is recurrently defined in the literature by the following cluster of characteristics, with either a positive or a negative connotation: "strength, control, power," "bravery, leadership, endurance," "sexual force, bravura."<sup>17</sup> Violence as an alarming constitutive element is probably its most researched separate topic.<sup>18</sup> Viveros Vigoya, next to giving an overview of studies related to this topic, also points to another important decisive element, which needs special attention because of the ravages the neo-liberal revolution has brought about on the continent in this respect: his ability to be a "pourvoyeur de ressources et chef de famille"<sup>19</sup> to which we need to add the display of "contrôle émotionnel et la rivalité avec les autres hommes (...)." <sup>20</sup> She cites Editberto Barreto of the Colombian Macho Movement who maintains that a man can be rightly called masculine if he shows the following behaviour: "actes agressifs contre sa beau-mère, faire objet des plaintes pour harcèlement sexuel ou refuser d'assumer les obligations liées à l'entretien des enfants en cas de séparation, frapper les femmes quand elles n'obéissent pas."<sup>21</sup> Competitiveness has to be added as perhaps one of the most typical attributes of masculinity, inscribed on the male psyche from the earliest moments, even when the body is still not shaped as genuinely masculine (i.e. able to reproduce).<sup>22</sup>

Focusing on black masculinity specifically: this is a topic that has been researched especially in the context of the situation in the US, to such an extent that it is a take that is becoming hegemonical by itself in literature. Robert Staples in the eighties of last century, David Marriott at the turn of the century, feminist researchers white as well as of colour: Edwards (2006) critically reviews the corpus of works on the topic. The most often recurring black male stereotypes are "hypersexual and aggressive" (Enguix), "selon les stéréotypes typiques: êtres dionysiaques centrés sur le plaisir obtenu par la consommation d'alcool, la danse et la sexualité."<sup>23</sup> The problem with these researches is that they have all been undertaken in environments where the black male body is minoritarian and they often chart and discuss the white gaze on the male body, but for the article at hand this literature will only make sense further on, when the contemporary theatre scene in Europe will be discussed and the white gaze on the black male body has to be taken into account. A useful instrument will be St. Aubin, who has traced back the steps through which the male black body has been articulated and constructed from the eighteenth to especially the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> He presents what he calls a "grammar" that has called into existence a presumed type of black masculinity that still prevails in many contexts, the most dramatic being how it is still determining the way the police forces in the United States regard and treat the black male body.

Since Connell, hybrid masculinity has been defined and inclusive masculinity has been proposed as a possible model of non-toxic masculinity.<sup>25</sup> A very interesting proposition is made by Løvgren when she opts for a set of categories which she defines as Anxious

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<sup>17</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 46, 67-71ff; Kassim Koné. "When Male Becomes Female and Female Becomes Male in Mande." *Mande Studies* 4 (2002): 21-29; Sandra Bornand, "Le joueur de tambour d'aisselle est-il un homme ? ", *Cahiers d'études africaines* 209-210 (2013): 6-10.

<sup>18</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, Chapter 2 contains an annotated overview of studies on the subject.

<sup>19</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, 168.

<sup>22</sup> Donaldson, "What is hegemonic masculinity", *Theory and Society*, Vol.22, No.5 (1993):11.

<sup>23</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, 107-135 on the image of black males in South America.

<sup>24</sup> St. Aubin, "A Grammar of Black Masculinity." *Journal of Men's Studies* 10 no. 3 (Spring 2002): 247-270.

<sup>25</sup> Bridges and Pascoe, "Hybrid Masculinities." *Sociology Compass* 8 no.3 (2014): 246-258; E. Anderson and M. McCormack, 'Inclusive masculinity theory: overview, reflection and refinement.', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 no. 5 (2018): 547-561.

Young, Navigating, Patriarchic and Vulnerable Masculinities.<sup>26</sup> These categories are used explicitly to evaluate existing literature on masculinities related to mass violence on the continent, but I find these distinctions very useful in the context of West African society (though I agree with her that "there is nothing specifically African about them"). The author takes a critical look at the way African masculinity is presented in research and often detects imperial and racist undercurrents in the academic viewpoints on the ways the link between masculinity and mass violence are theorised. Her categories resonate with me as immediately recognisable: especially when taken together as a complex, they offer a portrait of the way challenges are dealt with that (young) men on the continent have to face on a daily basis: any specific problem will be addressed taking the most adequate masculine stance that the problem asks for. And Ratele adds the complicating but highly important socio-psychological factor that masculinity in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be judged without taking into account the intersection of gender and poverty/unemployment and the role played by age in the shaping of masculinities.<sup>27</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis but the fact that the young male of colour who is spending his life under precarious circumstances, has turned into perhaps the most marginalised and neglected member of the population, both on the sub-Saharan part of the continent as well as in the diaspora.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps this complex might be illustrative for the postcolonial state of affairs: elsewhere I have emphasized the fact that hybrid does not suffice to characterise West African society<sup>29</sup> and cited Okeke-Agulu about artists' agency as a "compound consciousness that constantly reconstituted itself by selective incorporation of diverse, oppositional or complimentary elements"<sup>30</sup> as the best way to describe the workings of West African society as such.<sup>31</sup> This compound beyond hybridity might be the most distinctive feature of the sub-Saharan part of the continent and I would welcome an analysis showing that it is in fact the most creative force operating not only in the lives of artists, like Okeke-Agulu argues, but in the lives of the *petit peuple* as a whole. Imbrication seems the best word to describe the essential characteristics of post-colonial West African culture. It is precisely in the act of imbrication without causing conflict where agency operates. The elements that constitute an imbricated construction will inevitably be very different within each local context, up to the point of making it almost impossible to make comparisons and venture into generalisations.<sup>32</sup> An amusing and very telling example of this came up when I attended a traditional Moba dance in pastoral northern Togo. The dancers were all middle-aged men with spears, as the dance depicted hunting sequences; at the end of the dance, the men turned to the audience, unexpectedly addressing the spectators collectively chanting "byebye." I felt quite sure this word was not part of the regular Moba vocabulary and I checked with my Moba friend and

<sup>26</sup> Rose Løvgren, *Masculinity and Mass Violence: Ongoing Debates, Concepts and Trends*. DIIS Working Paper 08 (2015): 6-20.

<sup>27</sup> Koprano Ratele, "Analysing Males in Africa: Certain Useful Elements in Considering Ruling Masculinities", *African and Asian Studies* 7 no. 4 (2008): 515-536.

<sup>28</sup> "We worden gezien als roofdieren, hosselaars en mooiboys die overal kinderen maken". Don Moussa Pandzou in an interview by Marijke de Vries in *Trouw*, 7 april 2021, 6-7. <https://www.trouw.nl/verdieping/don-moussa-pandzou-in-brussel-wemelt-het-van-de-expats-maar-mij-benaderen-ze-altijd-als-nieuwkomer~b58424f7/>

<sup>29</sup> My MA thesis: *Borrowers and Lenders: Exploring Contemporary Intercultural Theatre in Francophone West-Africa*. (Utrecht University, 2017).

[https://www.academia.edu/34358846/Borrowers\\_and\\_Lenders\\_Javier\\_López\\_Piñón\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/34358846/Borrowers_and_Lenders_Javier_López_Piñón_pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke's UP, 2015), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Svetlana Robailo Koudolo (in Egodu Uchendu, *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa/ la masculinité en Afrique contemporaine* (Dakar: Codesria, 2008): 88-109, investigating the acquisition of a standard masculine identity in South Togo, tracks down the hybrid influences and forces that shape the process in this field.

<sup>32</sup> Similar observations have been made by Chabal, *Politics of Suffering*, 42 in the field of political theory.

colleague Marlène Douty, who had arranged the performance; he (Marlène is a traditional Moba given name for a boy) confirmed that the group had inserted this anglicism to appeal to the younger generations in their communities. This type of imbrication can be observed on a daily basis in whatever community in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>33</sup>

The lens through which I will look at recent performances that have explored alternative masculinities might be somewhat unexpected: the local performance traditions in (mainly Francophone) West Africa. The whole region is an extremely rich source for masked ceremonies, trance rituals, in fact all sorts of theatrical displays of religious as well as profane nature.<sup>34</sup> Especially the masked performances show a wide array of types of masks: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, mixtures of the two as well as completely abstract ones. Now the anthropomorphic masks very often perform paired in male and female types, but the dancers are all (with a few very rare but well-documented and researched exceptions) exclusively male.<sup>35</sup>

Research has shown that masks do not serve only to disguise the dancer when he is representing another being: the masks in fact do not represent at all, they present. The dancer is not to be considered disguised as a female spirit, the mask is the actual spirit incarnated, or rather: the mask inhibits the dancer. Now this poses an interesting ontological question. If the male dancer turns into a female spirit what kind of repercussion does this have on (his) masculinity? A good example of this conundrum can be found in annexe II, an eyewitness account of a ceremony in Sénégal among the Bedik people. When the specialist of the ceremony was asked what the gender was of the male wearing the mask/costume embodying a female spirit, after some confused reflexion, he replied that its gender was - the mask.

Discussing alternative masculinities means that we should also research the shape alternative masculinities can or could take. Heterosexual relationships have a built-in asymmetry that sets them apart from homosexual relationships, for which the roles can change and for which a-symmetries can be a choice made temporarily. Both the discussed performances in Europe as well as the masked or trance performances in West Africa will provide examples of "soft" or "vulnerable" masculinities and show a range of actions and shifting identities. The masked performances often show a paradox that is interesting to look into: fluid gender performance mostly functions to consolidate existing hierarchies between the sexes, but this practice can undeniably also generate alternatives to the strict hierarchical gender binary.

### **2.3 Hegemonic masculinity and homosexuality**

The discourse on gender fluidity and alternative masculinities touches intimately on the issue of sexuality and again it needs to be concluded, with Epprecht that we're dealing with "the anglophone scholarship significantly dominating the francophone in quantity and in the quality of its theorization of sexuality,"<sup>36</sup> complicating the research at hand. Before looking

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<sup>33</sup> Frederick Lamp, *See the Music Hear the Dance* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 98 on Dan masquerades: "[T]hrough the incorporation of popular music into what they call a "traditional" performance form, performers express identities simultaneously rooted in Dan tradition and cosmopolitan surroundings."

<sup>34</sup> Bouttiaux, *La Dynamique des Masques*, 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> Bouttiaux, *La Dynamique*, 17, analyses why women are most of the time excluded from the masked dance practices.

<sup>36</sup> Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 19.

into the topic properly, I would like to explore the related issue of men having sex with other men as a minefield to cross within the topic of hegemonic and alternative masculinities.

On stage, perhaps the epitome of hegemonic masculinity is the appearance in the nineteenth century of the Heldenenor. In the preceding era when the *opera seria* reigned supreme, ruling monarchs, army generals, revolutionaries, in fact all powerful men (provided they were of noble birth) were equipped with a (mezzo)soprano voice that could tackle the most vertiginous coloraturas.<sup>37</sup> These iconic examples of masculinity were represented on stage by the *musico*, the neutral word commonly used for the castrato singer. This was one of the elements that illustrate gender fluidity in eighteenth century opera,<sup>38</sup> although one might confidently argue that gender fluidity already is a prominent feature in Shakespeare's work and perhaps the phenomenon can even be viewed as constitutive of certain theatre practices that are documented worldwide.

The disappearance from the operatic stages of the castrato singer at the beginning of the nineteenth century marks a change in definition of masculinities that in my opinion (and I follow Foucault in many respects) is linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie to the ranks of power, leading to the hegemony of a specific view of masculinity that has reigned supreme well into the next century, and is concentrated in the character of the Heldenenor in nineteenth century opera.<sup>39</sup> Towards the end of the twentieth century, the neo-liberal turn the world has taken, has been accompanied by a profound shift in power relations that in turn has started to affect that specific view of masculinity. The times present, i.e. the first decades of the 21st century have produced a wealth of literature on the topic of masculinity (works by Connell, Edwards, Viveros Vigoya have already been cited) and the debate is continuing at its most interesting at the intersection with "race," sexuality and class (although it is regrettable to observe that this last element within this context seems to become less and less popular in academic discourse).

Hegemonic masculinity like it has developed in twentieth century Europe might look very different in historical perspective. Taking the attitude towards same sex relationships as an example, homophobia might well turn out to be a modern(ist) phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> Recently, visiting an exposition in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum on Roman Baroque art, I was struck by the almost ostentatious display of homo-eroticism, and I'm convinced it wasn't just my own gay gaze that got into interpretative overdrive.

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<sup>37</sup> Marianne Tråven, "Voicing the Third Gender: the Castrato Voice and the Stigma of Emasculation in Eighteenth-century Society," *Études Épistémè* 29 (2016): 17-18. <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.1220>

<sup>38</sup> Heather Hadlock, "Opera and Gender Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 264-267.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Bordo, *The Male Body* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 202.

<sup>40</sup> within the discussion on homosexuality as an imported phenomenon in African culture, Eprecht and others maintain that homophobia (especially its legal status) is the imported element, not homosexuality, that can be traced from the arrival of the Europeans.



Francesco Righetti/Dionysus and Amelios 1782



(photos JLP 2020. Garden of Haarlem Provinciehuis, The Netherlands)

I often have speculated about how homosexuality has been regarded before it developed into an identity during the twentieth century. The scarce existing historical sources show that the ruling nobility could find solutions: the ample correspondence of his wife, Liselotte von der Pfalz to her family in Heidelberg gives an interesting (albeit by definition very prejudiced) intimate look into how her husband Monsieur, the brother of Louis XIV himself, arranged his very homosexual practices into a kind of life at court, surrounded by a host of mignons. It did not prevent him to father a son with his German wife (and she is very graphic in her description on how he succeeded to perform in this respect), it was this very nephew who became regent after the Sun King died. But the way things went in less loftier circles: we can only get an unreliable glimpse through the lawsuits that have survived in specific periods.<sup>41</sup> After Foucault's ground-breaking work, historical attitudes have been studied sufficiently through what has now developed into gender studies (amongst many others: Saslow, De Ruig, van der Meer).<sup>42</sup> Studies on attitudes towards homosexuality in cultures outside the hegemonic West however are (except for South Africa) scarce (but we do have Watanabe, Epprecht, Murray and Roscoe, Parkinson).<sup>43</sup>

The research undertaken so far lead me to the concept that before homosexuality had turned into an identity, same-sex practices used to be regarded as an option. In the classical world, Greek/Roman mythology gives the right kind of examples of this attitude, great womanizers like Zeus himself, activating his therianthropic faculty, had at least one same sex

<sup>41</sup> Theo van der Meer, *Sodom's Zaad in Nederland: Het ontstaan van homoseksualiteit in de vroegmoderne tijd*. (Nijmegen: SUN, 1995), 59-65.

<sup>42</sup> James Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (Newhaven: Yale UP, 1986); R. de Ruig, *In de schaduw van de grand seigneur* (Utrecht: Humbergen, 1984) ; Theo van der Meer, *De wesentliche sonde van sodomie en andere vuyligheeden: Sodomietenvervolgingen in Amsterdam 1730-1811* Amsterdam: Tabula, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Tsuneo Watanabe and Jub'ichi Iwata, *The Love of the Samurai: a thousand years of Japanese homosexuality* (London: GMP, 1989); Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*; Sephen Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature* (New York: NUY Press, 1997); Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe, *Boy-wives and female husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (New York, St. Martin's, 1998); Richard Parkinson, *Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity across the World*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2013).

affair with Ganymedes, Dionysos with Ampelos, Apollo with Hyacinthus, the superman Hercules with Hylas. An extreme example of gender transformation is when, in order to seduce the nymph Calisto who is a member of Diana's following, Jupiter takes on the shape of Apollo's sister<sup>44</sup> as Calisto only accepts female suitors. Whether same sex relationships were acceptable or not is a disputed question in Egyptology but there is action to that effect to be found in Egyptian mythology. Pantheons elsewhere, like in Haïtian vodou have their own deities or spirits which include ambiguous or fluid sexuality (some manifestations of Baron Samedi, Guede Nibo), the African *vodun* and Akan pantheon, Dogon as well as Shona cosmology, all show examples of this too.<sup>45</sup> In Murray and Roscoe the ethnonyms are listed of the peoples where documented same-sex patterns exist.<sup>46</sup> Six of the fifty odd peoples on the list are inhabitants of contemporary Francophone West-Africa. Not all of them are as convincingly documented as the Azande, where Evans-Pritchard in the nineteen thirties could interview witnesses to a well-established tradition of same sex institutionalised marriages. In rituals and ceremonies, the deities do not distinguish gender if they want to manifest themselves: a female deity or spirit can just as well possess a male or a female mortal.

Observing attitudes towards the phenomenon in contemporary West Africa, I can see confirmation of this idea of homosexuality as an option. Homosexuality as an identity is almost impossible to realise in society and only attainable for the well to do, comparable with how Louis XIV's brother arranged his life at Versailles. Rebucini has researched this aspect for contemporary Moroccan society and his findings confirm this.<sup>47</sup> He too signals a marked difference between the classes in this respect. From my own experience, growing up in the fifties of last century in my working-class environment, I remember that homosexuality was regularly linked to class. A telling example is the often repeated saying I heard in Dutch: "hoe groter geest, hoe groter beest", which can be translated as "the better the brain, the dirtier the stain." The general belief being that MSM was all right for the well-educated but had no place in working class circles.

Niang, in a revealing article, analyses the complexities of homosexual behaviour in Sénégal, and his conclusions that "Traditional Islamic beliefs as well as beliefs relevant to traditional African religions developed forms of acceptance of the goor-jigeeen (Wolof word for men-women -JLP) alongside formal doctrinal condemnation of homosexuality,"<sup>48</sup> might be an indication of the results of further researches on this topic on a wider geographical scale,<sup>49</sup> especially taking good notice of Niang's critical attitude towards implicit biases of dominant linguistic and discursive categories.

The final common denominator in this matter is that men who sleep with other men will plan to get married eventually, because the first and foremost duty of a male in this region is to produce offspring, and it doesn't matter how the box is ticked. The prelude to Chike Frankie Edozien's collection of tales *Lives of Great Men* (2017) is the eloquent

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<sup>44</sup> Thus providing the material for one of the most delightful operas of the 17th century: Cavalli's *La Calisto*.

<sup>45</sup> Alain-Michel Boyer, *Les Arts d'Afrique*, (Paris: Hazan, 2006), 198, offers a list of androgynous or even downright hermaphroditic deities that can be found with peoples scattered across the continent: Dogon, Urhobo, Teke, Tchokwe, Songye, Baulé, Bongo.

<sup>46</sup> Murry and Roscoe, *Boy Wives*, 279-282.

<sup>47</sup> Gianfranco Rebucini, "Masculinités hégémoniques et "sexualités" entre hommes au Maroc." *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, 209-210 (2013): 30-31. " Si les hommes des classes aisées, qui sont plus en contact avec la culture européenne, assument plus ou moins complètement la vision identitaire et binaire occidentale, les individus des classes défavorisées semblent majoritairement la modérer à la faveur d'une dichotomie hiérarchique instable, analogique, homme/non-homme, ou moins-homme: l'opposition *rajul/zamel*."

<sup>48</sup> Cheick Niang, "Understanding sex between men in Senegal: beyond current linguistic and discursive categories," in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality, Health and Rights* ed. by Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010): 116-124.

<sup>49</sup> For examples from the Islamic east coast: Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*, 225.



personal illustration of this mechanism, and the collection contributes to support the idea of same sex relationships as an option, although the homophobic environment often present on the continent does not permit to regard this as a positive alternative. On almost every page of this work, halfway between fiction and journalism, Edozien provides numerous examples of the strategies followed to reconcile personal desire with societal constraint. Epprecht echoes Murray and Roscoe when he maintains that "(...) the men and women who had same-sex sexual relations most often also continued to marry, have children, and to engage in heterosexual relationships as well."<sup>50</sup> He continues to quote (critically) from very early European sources about cross-dress practices witnessed in Kongo and Angola and offers an inventory of reported comparable activities in twentieth century ethnographic literature. From personal experience I distinctly remember the first years I worked in Bénin, when at every occasion the inevitable question arose about my status. Evasively, I explained that I had a partner and 6 new children every year as this was the amount of new students we could take into the Master course of which I was head of drama studies. This never went down well, but it helped to stop questions.

Rachel Spronk, among others, has pointed to the non-applicability of the global north's categories in the definition of sexual identity<sup>51</sup> and examples in West Africa (and South) abound, in literature as well as in academic writing of how MSM often refuse to be categorised as part of the LGBT+ community.<sup>52</sup> The 1998 documentary *Woubi Chéri* about gay subculture in Abidjan even introduces a special word, "yossi" for MSM that beside their MSM behaviour have settled to a heterosexual family life with wife and children, a situation in itself not seen as problematic: once the behaviour is labelled as homosexual, the problem arises. The South-African feature film *The Wound* (2018) is very clear in this respect, when the process of labelling leads to tragic events.

It might be argued that beyond identity discourses, developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century are leading for the millennial generations to a return to the basic view of homosexuality-as-a-option.<sup>53</sup> The ostentatious display of gay culture during the Amsterdam canal parade every summer has perhaps led to a reduced visibility of gay men in everyday life. Despite my gay gaze, it has become virtually impossible to develop a properly working gaydar as gay young men on the whole do not manifest themselves as gay in outward appearance or behaviour anymore. Such ostentation no longer makes sense, and if I would do my final exam for secondary school this year, I would no longer feel the need to wear the black lace shirt and paint my index fingernail black like I did in 1969, when I was eighteen years old.

So perhaps it is not surprising that Heldenentors are notoriously difficult to find nowadays and that the range of the male voice during the last decades has extended upwards, producing countertenors and sopranists, like in the old days of the *musico*, but luckily without the need to resort to non-reversible operations.

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<sup>50</sup> Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Spronk, "Invisible Desires in Ghana and Kenya: Same-Sex Erotic Experiences in Cross-Sex Oriented Lives" *Sexualities* 21 no. 5-6 (2018): 886.

<sup>52</sup> Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (Lagos: Black Sands, 2005), Laurent Bocahut and Philip Brooks, *Woubi Chéri* (1998, FR/CI DVD ), *The Wound* directed by John Trengove (2018, SA, Artifilm DVD) all provide examples of this non-categorisation.

<sup>53</sup> Mark McCormack, "Intersection of Youth Masculinities, Decreasing Homophobia and Class: an Ethnography" *The British Journal of sociology* 65 no. 1 (March 2014): 130-149.

## 2.4 Observations on gender fluidity in West Africa

My many theatre projects in the region have recurrently confronted me with questions concerning hegemonic masculinity in the context of decoloniality, tradition as well as "tradition," sexuality (in most of the countries I have worked, homosexuality is still a criminal offense), "race" and class (or perhaps inequalities is a better word). But where anglophone Africa can boast an up to date and comprehensive library on these questions,<sup>54</sup> francophone West Africa stays marginalised in academic literature. And masked ceremonies being the province of anthropology (and only still too rarely of performance studies), not much study has been published in this context about the way masculinity is interpreted, displayed, transformed, veiled etc. (with the obvious exception of Thompson Drewal who already devotes a chapter on Gender Play in her 1992 study on Yoruba ritual). From my own experience as a stage-director I remember vividly a project in Togo where one of the actors, Salomon Sanna, had to appear as a female spirit at a certain point in the play. I was happily surprised to observe how comfortably the actor arranged to borrow on the spot make-up products from his female colleagues and seriously started to apply to himself the make-up needed to convince. This is just one of the examples to show that hegemonic masculinity in West Africa might not wear the same face as it does in Europe or the US.



(photo JLP 2007. Lomé, Centre Fil Bleu)

Salomon Sanna in *Machabées*

Luckily, gender fluidity in the region has been researched in a number of cases: Koné for the Bamana,<sup>55</sup> Geoffrion for a number of Ghanaian students,<sup>56</sup> Bornand for the Zarma in Niger<sup>57</sup> have all analysed gender fluidity as a specific element in performance practices and even beyond. Geoffrion, in spite of the limited number of students she questioned for her article, describes cross-dressing happening on a much bigger scale, and mentions celebratory parties that allow for unproblematic cross-dressing. She explicitly concludes that through talking to her students "I have discovered that their gender identities can hardly be seen as

<sup>54</sup> a.o. Drewal and Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); Thompson, *Yoruba Ritual*; Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1996); Tamale, Sylvia. *African Sexualities: A Reader*. (Cape Town: Pambazuka, 2011); Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa*, Mark Epprecht, and S.N. Nyeck eds. "Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory, Citizenship" *Sexualities* 18 no. 1-2 (2015); Zethu Matabeni ed. *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*.(Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2014).

<sup>55</sup> Kassim Koné, "When male becomes female", *Mande Studies* 4 (2002): 21-29.

<sup>56</sup> Karine Geoffrion, "'I Wish our Gender Could be Dual': Male Femininities in Ghanaian University Students." *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 53 no. 209-210 (2013): 417- 443; "Ghanaian Youth and Festive Transvestism". *Culture, Health, Sexuality* 15 no. 1(2013): 48-61.

<sup>57</sup> Bornand, "Le jouer de tambour".

dual; they are one even if as they are fluid, shifting and constantly re-configured".<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Ratele quotes researchers that have observed in southern Ghana the phenomenon of "ritual men" as an identity for post-menopausal women and those who occupied chiefly offices.<sup>59</sup> Koné unravels a complex set of societal rules pertaining to hierarchy where gender cannot be reduced to the male-female binary and its usual asymmetric power balance, and Bornand provides us with an emic insightful report of gender as a function in Zarma society that can be performed unconnected to one's actual sex, thus reaching a similar conclusion for the Zarma in Niger, concluding that a specific drummer can be the patriarchal head of the family at home, but turn into an ungendered individual when exercising his ritual function as percussionist. He can thus transcend gender limitations and side with the women. William Banks concludes in line with the previous researches that "(...)both men and women can be possessed by spirits of the 'opposite' gender, and this allows them to adopt the dress and mannerisms of that gender without social disapproval."<sup>60</sup> The ritual context in most of these cases provides the appropriate context, as we will notice for masked ceremonies as well.

Another example from my own experience: visiting the *vodun* stall at Ouidah market in 1999, I found a whole series of small carved wooden figurines that eventually will be manipulated and "charged" by the *bokonon* (the ritual specialist). I wanted to pick two female and two male figures, but the latter were much rarer to find, at which the market woman who sold the figurines explained to me that it didn't matter, men had breasts as well so I could use one of the female ones without any problem. I still have them in my collection:



(photo JLP)

Vodun figurines in author's collection

Looking into the professional stage for entertainment purposes: in its heyday in the seventies of last century, popular theatre, a genre now almost extinct, produced Concert Parties, especially in Ghana and Togo. These were wonderful dramaturgical constructions of music theatre and initially all roles, including that of the attractive young woman, were performed by men.

Of course, cross-dressing in the theatre is a standard item in comedy, and if we extend our contemporary period way back to cover bygone ages and include world-wide cultures, we encounter besides Shakespeare on our journey, cross-dress practices in Kabuki, Chinese Opera, Kathakali, Zidixi, Baile das Bonecas, Mama Negra, and numerous other practices as liturgically prescribed or profane theatrical entertainment where actors play female roles in a non-comic context. Another example from personal experience: when working in the Limpopo area (South-Africa) on a theatre project related to the HIV consciousness raising,

<sup>58</sup> Geoffrion, "I wish our gender could be dual", 439.

<sup>59</sup> Ratele, "Analysing Males", 524.

<sup>60</sup> William Banks, "Queering Ghana: Sexuality, Community, And The Struggle For Cultural Belonging In An African Nation" (Dissertation Wayne State University, 2013), 89.

we met with a group of elderly Venda women who had decided purely on their own initiative to form a theatre group to act out male behaviour in order to convince the men in their community to change their ways. In a stunning piece of intense performing these amateurs, dressed in male dungarees, could portray the drunken violence they were the victims of as no proper male would ever have been able to do.

The recent exposition *It's a Genderful World* at the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum provided a world-wide overview of gender fluidity that has been researched and to the above list it's possible to add the Muxe phenomenon in Mexico, the Hijra in India, the Lengger dancers in Indonesia. Besides, we should not forget that the many versions of the "quem quaeritis"-trope that was staged in liturgical context in medieval Europe, often start with the first recorded stage directions in early modern times, indicating that three brothers do put on a long garment and pretend to walk slowly while carrying candles, like they are looking for something, thus impersonating the three Marys on their way to the grave of Christ.<sup>61</sup> Cross-dressing then was already a feature at the liturgical cradle of European drama and this travesty was certainly not aiming at comic relief. West African masked dance practices show a wealth of cross-dress practices and in the second part of this thesis I will discuss some of these.

### **3. Three theatre seasons 2018-2020: Masculinity intersecting with "race"**

In his essay *Sortir de la Grande Nuit* from 2010, as already in an article from 2004 in the *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Mbembe points out the changes and transformations that the shifting position of the male in post-colonial Africa have operated.<sup>62</sup> The female empowerment process, the advancing digitalisation, the damages caused by rampant merciless hysterical capitalism, this all affects the status, position and function of the male and destabilises relations on sexual, marital, economic levels.<sup>63</sup> The process is ongoing and Durban based company Eager Artist as early as 2009 devised a play written by its director Jerrey Poee, *It's a man's world*, reflecting on the changing positions and vulnerability of men in South-African (Zulu)society.

Of course, Africa is not the only continent where the role of men has been destabilised through the onset of globalised neo-liberalism, especially at the intersection with class, and these changes are monitored by journalists, academics as well as artists. In the next chapter, recent theatre practices in Europe will be investigated focusing on the way the male black body is presented and the related topic of masculinity is outlined.

There is an essential difference when comparing the presentation of the black (male) body in an African (majoritarian) as compared to a European (minoritarian) performance context; in the latter case, the double consciousness already articulated by W.E.B. Dubois more than a century ago will doubtlessly play a role, ranging from it being the subject of the performance itself on the one hand to deliberately reaching beyond it on the other. The performances discussed hereafter, tend to belong to the second type: due to the rather recent process (as compared to the UK for instance) of integration of non-white artists on the Dutch and Belgian stages and screens, the double consciousness will operate on several levels. Belgium based Sierra Leone born choreographer Harold George remarked in an interview that he "became black only after he had arrived in Europe." The ambiguous, even contradictory way empire created images of the black body, in postcolonial times has led to

<sup>61</sup> Jos Smits van Waesberghe, *Muziek en Drama* (Amsterdam: Bigot, 1954), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Essai sur le politique en tant que forme de la dépense." *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 44 no.173-174 (2004): 151-192.

<sup>63</sup> Maria Correia and Ian Bannon, *The Other Half of Gender: Men's Issues in Development*, (World Bank Publications, 2006), xxiv and Chapter 10.

its prominence on the contemporary stages of the global north, in the wake of the ongoing discussions on systemic racism, the BLM movement, the Black Pete controversy in The Netherlands and the general shift towards a serious examination of the shared past of slavery and colonialism.

In this thesis the black body on stage/display is studied as a site where alternative masculinities are explored. The stage, either as a well-defined heterotopic space that can be manipulated to serve artistic goals or a public location not specifically intended for theatrical events, is qualified as a "playground". This term, mostly associated with child's play, underpins the ludic aspect of the events presented in this study, whether it's on a black box stage in a modern European capital or on a crossroads in a West African suburb.

In the past a theatrical season in Holland used to start in September and last until June, but since festivals have become the main body of work for performing artists, the theatrical season isn't clearly defined any more: companies and productions abound the whole year round and the summer period has turned into a busy one, filled with festivals in every part of the tiny country. There as well, the issue of masculinity has come into focus on stage. For the last three years a number of spectacles have seen the light, especially in dance theatre, where artist from marginalised regions (post-colony) have staged their views on the topic of masculinity and related themes. Not only Holland has witnessed this growing interest at the intersection of gender and "race", as similar developments can be detected elsewhere (Belgium, France, Scandinavia) and I would like to focus on how masculinity is presented in a number of these cases.

Of course, when discussing gender and the stage in general, feminism has exerted a huge influence and (academic) literature on this topic abounds, next to a wealth of theatre projects, choreographies, plays, operas that have been and still are continuously being produced. The intersection with "race" has also given birth to performances and plays, from individual autobiographical statements up till black feminist interpretations of classical repertoire and this is ongoing, but I will limit myself to performances devised and performed (mainly) by men of colour.

Intercultural theatre has finally come into its own and has become part of the theatre landscape in Europe. So far, the topic of masculinities has not been researched in relation to the intercultural theatre practice in this context. The US on the other hand can boast an exhaustive number of researches on the intersection "race" and masculinity and the performing arts<sup>64</sup> but I maintain that the situation in Europe is only partly comparable and issues and perspectives might be more different than generally acknowledged. In her recent study of masculinities, Viveros Vigoya is very much aware of the similarities as well as differences when comparing this intersection in South America with the Northern part.<sup>65</sup> The creation of the image of the black body into an exotic and primitive creature as developed in Europe is traced, next to the historical conditions that have emphasized the kinetic and musical expressions as proper to the enslaved black body on the other side of the Atlantic. She illustrates her discourse by taking two examples from the performing arts field and analyses how these theatre groups succeed in turning the black male body from a reified object into a subject with his own agency.<sup>66</sup> The same process can be observed in the dance theatre creations by the diasporic artists treated on these pages.

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<sup>64</sup> Eury German, "Body as Spectacle: The Queer Black Male Body in American Modern and Contemporary Dance." PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs de la masculinité*, 112-125.

<sup>66</sup> Viveros Vigoya, *Les couleurs*, 131. "Dans leurs performances musicales, la peau, le signifiant le plus matériel de la négrité, a été remplacé par la chair qui expérimente et provoque les sensations." (quotation taken from Stephens, 2014).

During the 2018-2020 seasons there were many instances of masculinity and the black male body in the performing arts. Although not all of them did address the topic as such, many of them certainly contained conscious elements of it. The following list of titles is not exhaustive and is presented as illustrations of the manyfold expressions going on around the theme of masculinity and the black body.

A beautiful example from the 2018-19 season is the choreographic version of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* by Ryan Djojokarso. The performance is for three dancers only, two male, one female. The role of Giovanni in this danced version is allotted to a black dancer, adding a rich layer of complex meaning to the situation and actually accentuating the novel's urgency even after more than half century. Personally, I don't think Baldwin would have objected, even if he himself had deliberately decided to not write about an interracial relationship, as one would have expected at the time from an African American author. This choice functions effectively as an update, colouring the central conflict in Baldwin's touching novel.



(photo Rob Hogeslag)

#### **Giovanni's Room**

A second example: Shailesh Bahoran with the performance of a highly stylised solo *Heritage*. His transformation of hiphop grammar into an individual and personal style works very well. There are notions of Indian dance (I wondered at the time if they would be considered Indian if they had been danced by a white dancer) but the whole spectacle functions as a kind of cosmic meditation on the young man and the world surrounding him. It was aptly combined with another of his choreographies, *Redo* created for and danced by Radouane Aït Chill, which felt like a reflection on behalf of the dancer with a handicap who transgresses his handicap to enter the realm of aesthetics, thus providing another example of non-normative representation and inviting reflexions whether Bahoran identified his own well-proportioned physical persona as handicapped because of its otherness.

An example that I would like to include even if it's not in the field of theatre, is a short poetic documentary *Patroon* by director Mario Gonsalves, produced in 2020. With a loving eye, the director engages with a group of young males in an underprivileged neighbourhood somewhat comparable to a Parisian *banlieue*, portraying their worries, their macho behaviour, their dreams, their aspirations. Although masculinity is not the topic it sets out to address, I can't help observing how strict the rules of hegemonic masculinity, even translated to a marginalised community need to be followed. The young men amongst themselves display tenderness in the hegemonic masculine way in which it is allowed to show (more on this subject in the next chapter). The director actually furnishes the element of outspoken, "soft" tenderness: his gaze onto this community is filled with empathy and poetry which he conveys in a convincing montage of their dialogues, speeches, statements, poems.

Yet another good example to add to these: *Een leven lang sex* (2020). Exceptionally, this time we're dealing with female creators Sanne Shuhmacher (text) and Wieke ten Cate (stage direction). They have interviewed a number of men on their sexual personae, their experiences with and viewpoints on the matter, and have created out of this material, together with the three actors a piece around men and their relation to sex. The resulting performance turned out a very feminine view of masculinity, and I mean view, not critique or interpretation, perhaps I should call it a female gaze on masculinity: it only perfunctory touches on the topic and besides a display of a whole range of masculinities or masculinity-related actions feels like a kind of good-hearted way to express a certain solidarity with the other sex. Even though "race" does not play a part in this all-white performance, I like to include it here to support the observation on the wide range of performances addressing masculinities.

The Holland Festival 2020 had programmed a new work by Ivorian choreographer Nadia Beugré entitled *L'Homme Rare* which would have treated the gender question concentrating on the male dancing body. It would have been interesting to watch another female gaze on the topic, especially as she explored why movements/gestures seem to fall within gendered categories and she choreographed a diverse group of male dancers trained in different styles. But for the time being all performances have been cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

For contrast I would like to add an example from a more commercial environment: The Ruggeds, a hiphop group from the south of Holland. In the wake of the artistic developments in concert dance touched upon in this chapter, where dance styles that originated in street dance, hip hop and related environments were transformed into artistically ambitious products for the more elitist market of avant-garde festival and dance centres (in Holland the already mentioned Korzo Theatre, next to the Spring Dance and Julidans festivals are its most important exponents), it can be observed that those street-related styles also sought to extend beyond the limited circles where they were practiced in order to find a more commercial context. It is beyond the scope of this thesis but it would be interesting to trace this development in order to research whether the commercial exploitation has been the initiative from within the circles of the youthful practitioners themselves, or rather the initiative of theatre programmers with a keen eye to popular entertainment. The contemporary dance scene in The Netherlands probably is a gold mine for research on the intersection of "race" and class, in my opinion a seriously under researched field. At times the thesis will refer to the class aspect as it will inevitably play a significant role in the positioning, habitus and self-awareness of the artists involved.<sup>67</sup>

The Ruggeds can be considered one of the groups that successfully made the transition from the street to the stage; they performed a choreography which they gave the title *Between us*. This performance is somewhat like a demonstration of hegemonic masculinity: eight young men occupy a type of reduced house with a bedsit, a loft, a living-room, a utility room and an outside space. Dancing away their rivalries, demonstrating their power, they use their bodies as objects as well as subjects. They help each other to be able to perform complicated moves and on the other side they have to outdo each other in virtuosity, the association with a battle is never far away. The actions are probably based on feelings of tenderness, even love between them in this small universe from which the women are excluded. And this mutual love they share is the source of the energy that propels them into

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<sup>67</sup> Dancer Remy Tilburg in an interview in *Trouw*, 26 November 2010: "Before I joined Don't Hit Mama (contemporary dance company-JLP), I used to dance in the street. The idea to go and watch dance in a theatre never even crossed my mind. <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/hiphoppen-bij-het-ballet~bdadc6aa/>

demonstrations of prowess in front of an audience. Yes, it is very coquettish, there is no trace at all of any alternative masculinity and hiphop seems to have been turned into a commodity.



(Photo Little Shao)

**The Ruggeds**

Comparison with Kader Attou's *Allegria* (2017) shows interesting similarities in presenting masculinity: in both instances the dramaturgical structure of the (hiphop) battle leaves its footprint. Attou's choreography-cum-mime covers a good range of young male (street as well as group) behaviour ranging between good-natured and competitive, where solidarity and friendship are the closest they come to displaying tenderness.

This parade of spectacles playing with the presentation of masculinities, is to underpin how prominent the theme of masculinity has become for these last theatrical seasons and also provides the context for a closer scrutiny of a number of spectacles that will follow in the next chapter.

### **3.1 A choice of five spectacles**

The following set of five performances explicitly address masculinity and incorporate the male black body. They can be considered representative of the different ways performing artists approach the topic. The performances chosen fall mainly within the category dance/movement, text being only (a small) part of the performance and not the principal tool that communicates with the spectators. For each performance, interviews have taken place with one of its co-creators. As most of this has been done in pre-covid times, the interviews were taken in person. In the annexe one can find the questions that were asked.

It is to be expected that when dealing with devised theatre spectacles, a phenomenological approach to the topic will be crucial. Both the director/choreographer as well as the actor/dancer will take their personal experiences as their starting point and through analysis, comparison, questioning, transform these experiences into the shape that will communicate with and affect the audience. As we're dealing with the field of dance, in the process the logocentric approach will be avoided as much as possible, and the emphasis will be on the physical: "The skin is faster than the word."<sup>68</sup> The (black) male body as an experienced reality is at the centre of all these spectacles.

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<sup>68</sup> Brian Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect", *Cultural Critique* No. 31, The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II. (Autumn, 1995): 86.





(photo Bart Grietens)

A:

**My heart into my Mouth**

*My heart into my mouth* is the first of the performances under consideration. Its director, Norwegian born and Dutch trained Espen Hjort, set out to investigate masculinity and its mechanisms in a piece of devised mainly physical theatre developed in collaboration with his two performers, Felix Schellekens, a Dutch mime artist and Yamill Jones, a Surinam-Dutch actor; all participants are young and at the beginning of their professional careers (both Hjort and Jones graduated in 2016, Schellekens a year before that). The performance that lasts for over an hour hardly uses any text. It was Hjort's intention to research how two males would express themselves without resorting to words, to language. Hjort carefully picked his performers in order to complete his own (white heterosexual) masculinity with a homosexual and a coloured one, in order to cover the topic from different complementary or conflicting angles.

An excerpt from the programme leaflet:

With gender and identity as two major recurring themes of our times, theatre maker and director Espen Hjort asks 'what does it mean to be a man?' In *My Heart into My Mouth* he explores how vulnerability and strength relate to masculinity. Just how much freedom do men have when it comes to shaping their own manliness?

In a set of situations, the two performers enter a playground that sometimes turns into a battlefield and sometimes into a safe haven. The audience is explicitly part of their actions, they start by presenting themselves, showing (not: off) their bodies to the audience, although it is clear from the outset that they are unsure in what way to present themselves. They interact between themselves like performer and audience just as well, continually shifting positions.

At some moments they strike classical (cliché) attitudes of masculinity, but it alternates with attempts to communicate in an individual and honest way and they step over the threshold object-subject throughout the performance. Avoiding articulation in words, they also make efforts to communicate in dance: in an amusing central section of the performance, one of the actors wears a huge, pink, and fluffy phallus-costume, towering 2 meters high and together they execute a cute pas de deux. When interviewed, Hjort stated that he had discovered that

men avoid talking as a means of communication but prefer to use it as a "shield or weapon". "The performance wanted to "visualise the taciturn male" (personal communication, May 2020).

Throughout, the audience remains a participatory presence, but the two performers also keep performing for each other; perhaps this constitutes one of the essential elements of manhood: masculinity means first of all performing for other men (as opposed to performing for a female gaze). But instead of performance as a conscious selection of elements to show yourself in the best possible light, in this show the men don't apply the standard selection of elements: they question them, right from the beginning of the show. It gives the spectacle a warm kind of transparency, inviting the audience to witness their individual efforts to come to terms with their masculine identity. Their playground is the theatre itself, the best place to show things by disguising them, distorting them, looking at them through a microscope, and the best place to express that which can't be expressed in words. Hjort:

The concept for this performance has been to show an alternative masculinity, a masculinity that is listening and stuttering. We talked a lot the three of us about being a man, coming from very different backgrounds and perspectives and perhaps we tried to go beyond standard role models through mutually holding up mirrors. (Personal communication, March 2020).



**B:**

**They/Them**

(photo Thomas Lenden)

*They/Them*, the second performance discussed, is a choreography for two dancers. Sedrig Verwoert and Christian Yav together perform this choreography of which the title already opens a whole set of associations and presumptions. In this strong performance, the dancers have developed an idiom through which dancing itself as an activity turns into a solid metaphor for their own lives. Their movement patterns are executed in a kind of free synchronisation, which is an effective way to provide the similarities as well as the different accents in their individual autobiography: moving simultaneously but not in perfect synchronisation probably is the best way to define it. The comical central part functions as a kind of escape within a perverse carnival and it made the audience smile broadly but the drama of the parts preceding and following this left the audience with a tight throat. At the start we watch two men potting around on a palely lit stage, stumbling, supporting each other clumsily, continuously going forward but with no clear destination. With all the different

nuances and subtleties this remains the basis of the choreography: two men going forward, stumbling, and supporting each other. Sometimes it seems as if they are propelled by whiplashes that make them cringe; their togetherness is intimate and mutually dependent. At times they resemble an injured dance couple that keeps on dancing, long after the public demonstration has terminated, because that's the only thing they can do, driven through energies beyond their control. Even when in the central part discussed earlier the air seems to clear somewhat, there remains a poignant urgency, and in spite of the latino dance steps and the campy stances, we perceive the despair of the pathway that has been fulfilled as well as the stretch still ahead.

Two performers of African origin: this evokes inescapable associations with slavery, oppression, violence. But never are we looking at two objects, on the contrary: we sympathise with two subjects who transform their painful experience and sublimate them to a sovereign level where they are lord and master.



C:

**White Noise**

(photo Jean van Lingen)

*White Noise* is another choreography for two performers, with spoken word added. Christian Guerematchi (choreographer and dancer, together with Guillermo Binker, spoken word artist). The second time I saw this production I wrote about how strong the beginning works, when Binker, hooded, is manipulating scantily dressed Guerematchi as an object until the latter finally succeeds in getting on his feet and starts leading a life of his own. Further on, there is another dramatic confrontation between the two: is Guerematchi resisting Binker's embrace? Is Binker trying to create common ground for both of them? In the end Guerematchi gives in and Binker takes off his tracksuit which is taken over by Guerematchi who wraps the suit around his head and starts moving with high heeled steps around Binker. Towards the end, Binker, turns his back to the audience and starts reciting a text about a lie he would like to believe but only if certain conditions are being met. He might be talking back to the white noise in the title. In the end a fraternal image is created, and Binker starts a lovely (nursery?) song and both of them embark upon a folkloric dance celebrating their regained brotherhood.

The conflict in the beginning is based on the two extremes of the male identity continuum the creators could think of: sissy and bully. Guerematchi explained in an interview how they searched for a way to portray a kind of intimacy and were looking for a way to express this in an honest way, as this is an expression of the black male body rarely represented in the media. Indeed as we have seen in the portrayal of masculinity on stage, intimacy, especially if it takes on a tender aspect, is to be avoided when displaying

hegemonic masculinity. Guerematchi and Blinker succeed in offering an image of black masculinity way beyond the standardized one created by the white gaze.

While initially, Guerematchi had chosen gender and sexuality as a focal point for his work, he gradually moved towards gender and sexuality intersecting with colour, which has led to this performance. As his partner on stage is not a dancer but a spoken word artist, they had to find a methodology for rehearsals that would give their bodies the tools to express this alternative masculinity without relying on a common dance vocabulary. The playfulness, the intimacy, the honesty, the lack of ostentation, all of this is witness to an engaging quest for a full, a complete and an unbiased picture of the black male body to an audience that probably will be majoritarian white in most but not all of the cases.



**D:**

### **Making Men**

(Image Antoine Panier)

*Making Men* is a three-part performance consisting of a media component (a video film) which is coupled to the live performance, and a debate or lecture by a guest speaker is added to the other two components as concluding element. The choreography and the video are by choreographer Harold George and filmmaker Antoine Panier. The dance is choreographed for four Zimbabwean dancers, the film has been shot partly on location in a Zimbabwean landscape and partly in a Brussels apartment. Statements from the press file accompanying the publicity material explain the intentions of the creators:

- Lorsque qu'on pense à la masculinité les mots suivants reviennent le plus souvent: puissance physique, stoïcisme silencieux, audace, bravoure.
- Nous avons choisis d'examiner celle qui pose comme postulat que la socialisation des hommes les prédispose à la violence, et ce, tout d'abord envers eux-mêmes.
- Dans ce projet nous nous penchons plus spécifiquement sur cette question à travers l'homme noir. Celui-ci est traditionnellement perçu comme capable de grandes prouesses et de force physique, comme une représentation exagérée de certains traits stéréotypes de la masculinité. Où est donc la place de la vulnérabilité et de la fragilité dans cette image projetée ?
- Est-il, de même que ceux qui veulent le voir sous ce prisme, mal à l'aise quand il est présenté sous un autre jour ?

And the central question asked, which poses this performance in the heart of this research:

- Existe-t-il d'autres définitions de la masculinité qui ne conduisent pas à la violence envers les autres ou envers soi-même?

This is a show I could not go and watch because of the outbreak of Covid-19, but the choreographer kindly allowed me to watch the filmed part of the performance. It contains two sets of alternating sequences: one is the choreographer himself alone at his Brussels home at his morning routine. The second is filmed in Zimbabwe with four Zimbabwean dancers in a rugged landscape where they perform a ritualistic being together, in daytime wearing contemporary garb, alternating with night time in atavistic attire. There is an open relation to these two sets of images. The dancers might represent the memories of the past of the man in the apartment, or they might represent the collective process every male has to go through in order to come into his own.

The choreography sets out to explore the constructedness of masculinity, as well as the difficulty to escape from its demands, presenting the conflict between the individual needs and longings on the one hand and the pressure society puts on them on the other. The piece takes off from the primal state before a person is imprisoned into one of the only two available genders and shows the process of painful adjustment to a masculinity that is essentially violent towards its own subjects. In a short central sequence, the choreographer encounters an enigmatic horned and masked creature that haunts him, thus adding a deliberate mythological dimension to the topic of how masculinity is acquired.

The motto for this piece could well be the opening statement of the choreographer in the film: he decided to become a professional dancer as that was "the least masculine activity he could think of."<sup>69</sup> Senegalese colleague Alioune Diagne has expressed similar motivation for his choice to become a dancer, he is currently brooding on a new performance on this subject so it can't be included in this study yet, but in any case we have again two examples of consciously choosing the stage as a place where an alternative to hegemonic masculinity can be presented by a black body.

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<sup>69</sup> When dealing with the so-called traditional type of professional dance practices as embodied in the Ballet National-type of companies that are leading a (nowadays precarious) life in certain West-African states, perceptions would be different: male dancers are very prominent.



(photo JLP)

E:

### Notre Aujourd'hui

For *Notre Aujourd'hui*, dancers Samson Padonou, Arouna Guindo, Ezechiël Adande together with actor Gbenakpon Todego devised this spectacle in collaboration with myself as stage director. Aided by a successful campaign for crowd-funding I continued to work with the performers in January 2020, after a first orientation in August 2019 in Cotonou, the principal city of the Bénin Republic.

Reading a text by Sony Labou Tansi gave me the idea to work on what I called the poetry of everyday activities. All four participants have to piece together a living, like the great majority of young men in urban West Africa. They have to combine a range of activities and deals, and in their special case these can be artistic as well as more conventional. Two of them are married men with a family, the other two are single (one of them still a student at university), but none of them has a job providing him with a regular income. I worked with the dancers to elaborate daily chores and actions into abstract sequences and gradually I became more and more convinced that we were working on interesting individual portraits of African (young) men, expressing their own particular philosophy and offering a very nuanced picture of their masculinity. At the presentation for a very small number of invited guests, one of the women made a remark about the absence of women in the piece. I concluded in my notebook:

#### "Note sur l'absence des femmes

J'en ai parlé avec Michael après la restitution. On peut regarder maintenant les 4 hommes, 4 africains, dans leur force et dans leur vulnérabilité. Ils ne sont pas sur scène en tant que représentants du pouvoir, du patriarcat, de la hiérarchie mais en tant qu'individus avec leurs doutes et leurs incertitudes. Ce qu'ils montrent c'est comment ils se comportent entre eux et c'est très beau et rare à regarder. Michael confirmait que les répé[ition]ts n'auront pas eu la même qualité si on aurait eu des femmes présentes."

The presence of women would have affected the way the men would interact among themselves, as already remarked earlier, discussing the *My heart into my Mouth* performance: masculinity is mainly performed for the sake of other men, and it operates especially when there is a female audience. The more's the pity that Nadia Beugré has not been able to create her new choreography for the 2020 Holland Festival as I would have been very curious to see what kind of performances she would have elicited as an African female choreographer

working with an all-male cast as compared to my own position as a white director working with the same. One of the participants is aware of my being gay, but that does not necessarily mean that the others are aware of it as well and I deliberately did not address the issue.

During the rehearsal process that followed in January 2020 the idea grew gradually that the content of the piece we were working on was actually shifting and the idea of a poetics of everyday life had turned into four (self)portraits of soulful and inwardly turned masculinity.

One of the dancers invited me to come and watch a match of freestyle boxing where he would take on several opponents. I wasn't too sure as my gay gaze finds it too depressing to look at muscular handsome young men beating and kicking the shit out of each other, but part of me also felt complimented by the invitation and yes, I admit there is an erotic side to me accepting the invitation as well. And of course it also gave me the perfect opportunity to study masculinity ritualised and aggression channelled into something roughly related to dance. The decisive match itself lasted only a few minutes and Ezéchiél finished in triumph.

*Notre Aujourd'hui* is divided into four parts: morning, afternoon, evening and night. Each of these parts is announced, followed by a collective choreography reflecting the characteristic energy that goes with each part of the twenty-four hours interpreted in individual (preparing breakfast) or collective actions (crossing the busy streets of Cotonou). This part is then followed by a solo from one of the participants, expressing their personal philosophy. Towards the end, a collective scene about friendship and the need to share find its resolution in one of the dancers starting a repetitive and stubborn move, that is gradually taken over by the others and continuously repeating the movement over and over again, they leave the stage one by one.

This is the speech I held just before they started their premiere in January 2020, at the end of the second period of rehearsals that led to the choreography that was performed at the Ecole Internationale de Théâtre du Bénin.

"Le théâtre ne doit pas chercher à plaire son public, le théâtre doit chercher à parler de quoi il veut parler de sa façon à lui. Il faut inviter le public pour suivre vos actions. Le théâtre n'est pas une démonstration mais une invitation. Et cela a même plus d'urgence pour ce spectacle-ci dans lequel vous parlez de vous-mêmes, de votre vie privée et de vos observations personnelles".

## **Conclusions**

The statements and questions articulated in the the leaflet quoted in the discussion of Harold George's *Making Men* can serve as the central questions asked and statements delivered in all of these spectacles.

In all these cases, the black body has functioned as a vehicle to demonstrate the workings of masculinities, from its inscription on the body in *Making Men* to its everyday performance in *Notre Aujourd'hui*, from the violence it has undergone in *They/Them* to the possibility of fraternisation in *My Heart into my Mouth* and *White Noise*. Slavery and colonial discourse have reduced the black body into a caricature of masculinity and all these spectacles present a response, a distorted mirror image, a meditation, in short: an alternative to it.

Edwards presents an overview of the main theories regarding the black body<sup>70</sup> but the problem is again that most of the theoretical attention given to this topic originates in the US and for the largest part it is treated from a feminist or a womanist stance, which in both contexts show a very different approach from one another. He also complains about the general neglect of coloured masculinities in masculinity scholarship: "The study of black masculinities, such as it is, is mostly dominated by specifically black North American cultural and political agenda (...)," <sup>71</sup> adding: there's "[A] job to be done." Activist Don Moussa Pandzou repeats this argument: "We tend to look at the US and to identify with the African American battle. But we have to write our own history."<sup>72</sup>

In masculinity studies, the emasculation theory conceived by Fanon, keeps reappearing in different tonalities throughout the (rare) black masculinity studies. The most outspoken in this respect is Marriott (quoted by Edwards) on his angry condemnation of the way the black male has been reduced culturally in the United States to "black types: imbecile, oversexed, criminal, murderous, feckless, rapacious (...)." <sup>73</sup> Even if Edwards repeatedly criticises the emasculation theory as an unsubstantiated assumption <sup>74</sup> he allows for its credibility "through the documentation of black men's experiences, past and present"<sup>75</sup> and he adds the warning that "no theorising can undo the realities of legacies and practices of racial subordination and oppression."<sup>76</sup> Following up this remark, we enter the phenomenological realm where the performing arts like to dwell.

Assessing black feminist authors on black masculinity, Edwards evaluates Segal's contribution. She criticises the way the anti-racist movement has taken on a black macho sexist character, but she ends her analysis on a more positive and optimistic note, singling out gay black authors that are challenging the standard images of black masculinity. Now Edwards expresses his wonder at this optimism, but fifteen years after the publication of his study of the literature on (black) masculinity, and looking at the performances discussed in this thesis, the conclusion is justified that Segal had seen how the pathway would open up for new directions in black masculinity articulation: *White Noise*, *They/Them* and *Making Men* explore black masculinities beyond the images created in support of slavery, colonialism and its corollaries racism and alterity and offer new conceptions of the black male and his relationship to other black males, while *My Heart into my Mouth* and *Notre Aujourd'hui* explore masculinity beyond the divide created through the racialised image.

The definition of the coloured body has been subjected to colonial, racist, ideological, capitalist etc. mistreatment leading to a very complex process of self-consciousness within the context of a minoritarian position that Dubois was the first one to start unpacking. The previous chapter has been looking into how theatre productions have opened up new images and interpretations of the black body in minoritarian position. The black body in hegemonic position (part of the "global majority" - term proposed by Rosemary Campbell-Stephens, December 2020) might show different views and concepts of masculinity. The next chapters attempt an outline; it will generally be from an etic viewpoint, although the literature referred to often has attempted to articulate emic viewpoints as well and sometimes is based on emic first-hand experience.

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<sup>70</sup> Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 64-78.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, *Cultures*, 77.

<sup>72</sup> "In Brussel wemelt het van de expats", Interview by Marijke de Vries in *Trouw*, 07 April 2021. <https://www.trouw.nl/verdieping/don-moussa-pandzou-in-brussel-wemelt-het-van-de-expats-maar-mij-benaderen-ze-altijd-als-nieuwkomer~b58424f7/>

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Edwards, *Cultures*, 67.

<sup>74</sup> Edwards, *Cultures*, 77.

<sup>75</sup> Edwards, *Cultures*, 74.

<sup>76</sup> Edwards, *Cultures*, 69.



## Intermezzo: my gay gaze

*I know. I should not be writing like this.*  
 Mattijs van de Port

An intermezzo in musical terms is an independent composition that is placed between two major movements; in theatre terms, it used to be a kind of entertainment striking a light note, based on Cicero's rhetorical prescription stating that "variatio delectat". The reason an independent intermezzo figures at the heart of this essay is the fact that the activated gay gaze, is instrumental as perhaps its most predominant heuristic tool. It is this gaze that has detected parallels between contemporary European (dance) theatre and local West African performance practices.

Since Mulvey introduced the idea of a male gaze in 1975, it has attracted a lot of attention and not only in the field of film studies: it has been applied to a wide range of topics, from advertising to contemporary art, so much that it can be considered almost a household term.<sup>77</sup> More recently, Columpar has been the one to propose to add further qualities to the male gaze which she articulates as the ethnographic and the colonial gaze, and for this study the questions she asks and statements she delivers cannot be ignored.<sup>78</sup>

In contemporary anthropology, the researcher has to position himself and be aware of his own agency, especially in field research. Inspired by the work of Van de Port over the last decade, in this intermezzo I investigate my subjective gay gaze in order to measure its colonial and/or racist hidden processes.<sup>79</sup> When I let my gay male gaze hover over ethnographic images, how colonial and/or ethnographic is the process that is set into motion then? According to Columpar, the ethnographic gaze will place the one who looks at the image in a hierarchical position towards the one depicted, thus defining difference, and highlighting alterity. But the gay dimension to my gaze ignites a different process as well, adding notions of erotic albeit marginalised desire to the process. Of course, the same can be observed when discussing the hegemonic male-ethno-colonial gaze upon the images of (naked) female non-white bodies; the traffic in ethnographic picture post cards still produces several sites with large quantities of eroticized females from especially sub-Saharan or Mahgrebian origin. Yet there is a difference: the hierarchy defined by Columpar is, when we're dealing with homosexual desire, not grounded on gender difference, and looking at a non-white naked male body as a homosexual sets in motion a process different from the one set in motion by the white heterosexual male focusing on a non-white naked female body. Admittedly, in gay porn and dating habits, "ethnic men" is a category, catering to gays with specific preferences, but the hierarchy involved in the practice is of a very different nature if one compares the homosexual practice with the heterosexual: the latter one's categorisations in this context function as part of the colonial project. The hierarchy is fixed and stable in that second case but deliberately unstable and open to shifts in the first. Anthonissen and Van Straaten, reviewing queer art in Europe and confirming this opinion, explains how David Hockney plays with this aspect in his earlier work: the dominant element in homosexual relationships is much more fluid, and can allow for temporary shifts in position and practices.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 no. 3 (1975): 6-18.

<sup>78</sup> Columpar, "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30 no. 1-2 (2002): 25-44.

<sup>79</sup> van de Port, *Ecstatic Encounters* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP (2011)), "Genuinely made up," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, " 18 no. 4 (2012); In love with my footage," *Visual Anthropology Review*, 34 no. 2 (2018).

<sup>80</sup> Anton Anthonissen and Evert van Straaten, *Queer* (Zwolle: Waanders 2019): 223.

Bordo articulates as detailed as possible the process of her own female gaze upon a nineties Calvin Klein advert.<sup>81</sup> The draft of this prelude had already been written when I read her text and I was struck by the parallels between her observations and my own, pointing towards possible similarities which might be interesting to investigate further. The picture I have used to articulate my gay gaze has been taken from Hermann Forkl's *Heil- und Körperkunst in Afrika* (1997), where it was reproduced on page 131, as Abb. 130. The source for the picture: the archives of the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. It is reproduced here on page 37: a black and white picture taken in 1962-63 showing a Nuba male. Without any doubt it is one the most erotic pictures of a nude male I have ever come across. It is a feast for the gay gaze.

Why: There is of course the well-shaped body, with the nice (surprisingly uncut) dick. The perfect proportions of this body are enhanced by the scarifications (the intent of the picture is probably to foreground precisely these scarifications). Besides the abstract signs that are typically used in scarification practices, there are horned animals depicted on his chest. Is he a renowned huntsman, is that why the scarifications have been shaped as animals? And the index as well as ring finger of his left hand looks battered, did that happen while he was hunting a particularly fierce prey?

But the incredibly sexy belt that looks as if carefully draped by a gay expert stylist is the element that really performs. Other pictures of Nuba males at times can show a belt of a row of beads or a piece of cloth, but this looks like a present from a foreigner, a common mass-produced clothing accessory. Did it originally belong to the photographer? Has there been an exchange and has the Nuba man swapped his beads for the leather belt? Did he receive the belt as reward for posing for the picture? Is he actually showing the belt as a newly acquired accessory instead of the scarifications? Speculation. Leni Riefenstahl started to produce her well-known pictures at around the same time and they also show Nuba men occasionally sporting leather belts as ornaments.<sup>82</sup> The belt is there for no other visible reason than to enhance the body, just like the beads would have done. And it draws oblique attention to the dick as its perfect *repoussoir*; the half closed buckle cries out to release the one pin still holding the belt in position and show the man in all his glorious naked splendour.<sup>83</sup> The same stylist must have proposed the elegant classical *contrapposto* attitude and the sizeable earring in the left ear. The association with one of the most famous *contrapposto* sculptures from the Renaissance is unavoidable: further down this paragraph one can study the original template our imagined gay stylist used (Bordo in her aforementioned explanation of her female gaze actually also singled out the *contrapposto* pose taken by the Calvin Klein model).

The Dinka man looks directly into the camera, I think he is indeed instructed to show off his -no, not his body or his dick- but his scarifications. There is something in the left corner of his mouth and I automatically interpreted it initially as a straw or something similar on which he is chewing. That would be a very cool thing to do, proving how much at ease the man is while posing in front of the inquisitive camera. A nice touch, added at the last moment by the gay stylist, a second before the photographer pushed the button. I had subsequently started to have doubts if that was indeed the correct interpretation, instead of a product of my gay gaze, when I discovered I was right after all, as one can make out the shadow of the straw projecting on his right pectoral. Once more I had found myself out at gay gazing: a masculine male photographed in the nude, chewing on a straw is an iconic Camel man-like image of

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<sup>81</sup> Bordo, *Male Body*, 168-171.

<sup>82</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 35+100+116. In 1982 Chris Curling produced a video documentary on the startling and disruptive effects her work has had on the Nuba community after publication of her work.

<sup>83</sup> Barbara Brownie in *Undressing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7 and 53 states that "unstable coverage creates erotic tension between dress and nudity" and "Fasteners cry out to be unfastened."

confident masculinity; but the Dinka man might in reality just as well be chewing on a drug or cleaning his teeth.

I can't help thinking that the prime attraction of the picture is the fact that he looks so innocently available in a non-sexual way; it looks as if he would agree to make the spectator release that easy buckle. Ewoud Broeksma, the late Dutch photographer, has arrived at portraying the same innocence when photographing men-in-the-street, first in their daily attire, and a second time taking the same pose but this time in the nude. The men pose without ostentation, they are not selling their masculinity, they are showing it.



David by Donatello (Bargello Museum)



from: Ewoud Broeksma *Dubbelaars/Doubles*

All of this is very well except that to my knowledge it would be extremely unlikely that a gay stylist could have been present at the session with the Nuba man, in the early sixties, well before the moment that the (almost) naked male model had been discovered as a successful commodity.<sup>84</sup> The difficulty with these ethnographic pictures is that they are almost always manipulated but it's impossible to establish how much "styling" has been applied. The Linden Museum Archive is not online, so I can't compare or research to ascertain my assumption that this picture might be part of a series to document Nuba scarification practices, as on the same page of the publication there is another picture from the same source (Abb. 129) of a woman's back prominently showing a complex pattern of scarifications.

Susan Vogel explains the meaning of the verb "nian" in the Baule language as covering a range of actions like looking, watching over, staring, discovering, in short: as a performative way of gazing.<sup>85</sup> Reflecting on my own reaction to the image: why do I discover after writing this paragraph that I didn't even mention the body as being black? As if that is not part of my appreciation of the image. Of course, I have to take into account that I as a well-travelled white old male have a more than average experience of African male bodies in the nude, would that explain why I omitted the fact? Or might I have succeeded to stop categorising in that way? Sporting a decolonised gay gaze is something I'm always working on, and it looks as if my mind simply did not register a black body as such. It might have to do with the focus on the scarifications that makes it different from just watching any naked well-shaped black male in the nude: the scarification phenomenon is the intended centre of the picture and that drew more attention than his colour. That is for all intents and purposes

<sup>84</sup> Bordo, *Male Body*, 193.

<sup>85</sup> Susan Vogel, *Baulé: African Art, Western Eyes* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 136.

the element that distinguishes an ethnographic from a pornographic image. It is the belt that activates the gay gaze, the belt is my Barthesian *punctum*. But then again: through the *studium* I did register and mention the uncut quality of the dick as rare - for a naked male African body.

And as a second afterthought: funny enough, the picture does not arouse me, it does not affect me as a pornographic image, yet I find it extremely erotic. Even after half a century, ethnic "postcards" seem to have kept their power to perform ambiguously and satisfy the scopophiles. So I will have to look again and continue decolonising my male gay gaze.

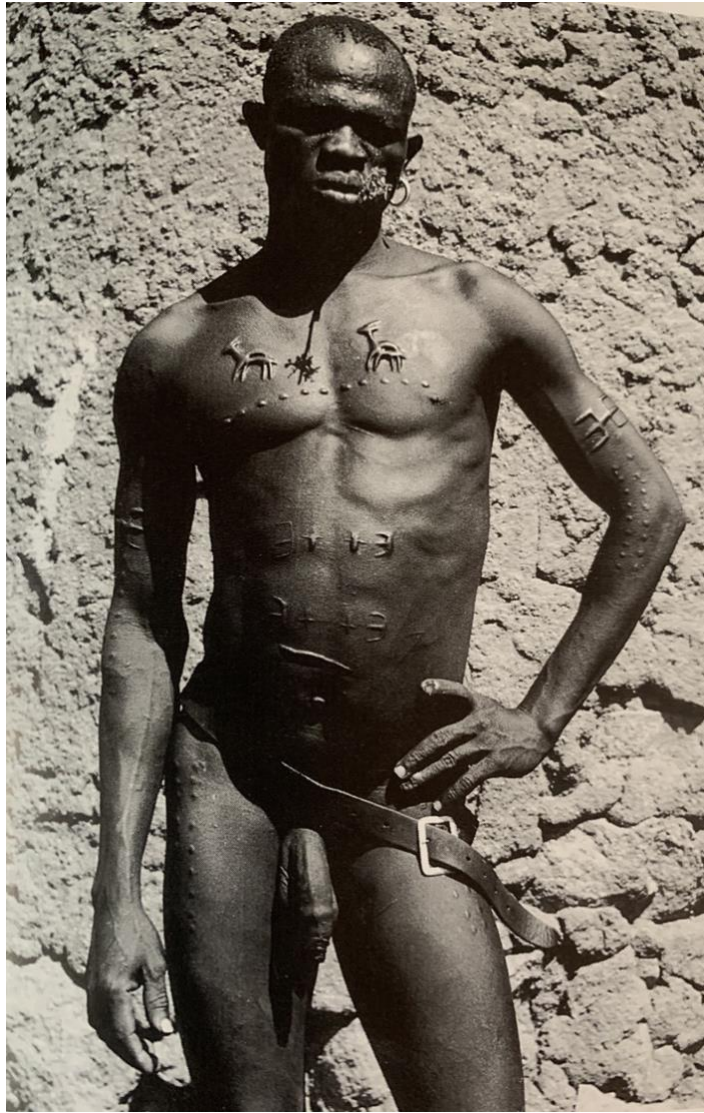
So far, I have mostly been looking at an object, as was the photographer's intention. We don't have a name for this man, he has no individuality. My gay gaze allowed for some agency on behalf of the model, but nearly not enough to regard him as a subject; that is a process that needs more time, more attention and more importantly: a shifting of position.

The man's picture was taken in the early sixties of last century. If I guess his age broadly at somewhat between 30-50, he would have had the age of an elderly brother of mine (which I don't have) or even the age of my father (whose identity is unknown). Where would I be able to find a comparable image of this imagined elderly brother or father, in the nude, full frontal, as an objectifying illustration of a local practice? Any remotely comparable picture of this supposed brother or father of mine would have been taken in either a very private or a very professional setting: either a picture taken by a fond lover in the intimacy of the bedroom and jealously guarded for decades, hidden between the pages of a rarely consulted book, or a picture made for the trade in pornography: a marketable commodity in those days, when it was still illegal to sell pornography in many of the countries in Western Europe (ethnographic pictures excepted of course, they provided a safe way of selling material that otherwise would have been considered pornographic). But I would never be able to find such an ethnographically motivated (excused might be a better word) image of this imagined brother or father.

The next step in my effort to decolonise my gay gaze: I wonder how an Afro descendant might look at the same picture. Would they be considering the possibility of the existence of similar nude pictures, showing an uncle or other close relative, photographed in the rain forest zones of former Dutch colony Suriname to document their local life style? But in any case, Geffen in her book on queer and black inspiration in pop music has summed up succinctly and truthfully the quality of the gay gaze: "(...)a gaze that desire[s] its objects without othering them."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Sasha Geffen, *Glitter up the Dark*, (Austin, Univ. Texas, 2020), 16.



# Centre fold

alternative masculinities in contemporary visual arts.

Saliou Dione in her contribution to *Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on Orality, Literacy and Gender Studies*, states in her article on recent trends in the representation of sexuality(ies) in African writing, that after "(...)perpetuating for a long time, the male-female binary system dictated by the politics of patriarchy and capitalism" a new trend has developed "(...)which attempts to explore new long-time-held taboo issues such as sex, sexual orientations and sexual identity(ies)."<sup>87</sup> If we turn to the visual arts we can signal a similar trend. The visual arts that thrive on queer topics have developed all shades of gender fluidity with sometimes radical results. The work of artists like Antonio da Silva, Tim Lienhard, Marc Quinn and from an earlier generation Hockney, Gilbert and George, Salomé, Erwin Olaf and many others have demonstrated a range of visual interpretations of masculinity on the widest continuum conceivable.

Zooming in on Afro descendants and their diaspora, artist like Rotimi Fani-Kayodé, Ajamu, Evan Ifekoya, Paul Maheke, Charl Landvreugd, James Chuchu have created queer works on the intersection with "race" and sometimes class that explore notions of the (gay) male black gaze that have shed new light on the way in which the black male body is (re)presented. Samuel Fosso with his series of self-portraits is another example, like the more outrageous Ike Ude, and often, it comes with a deliberate political stance. Isaac Julien's "aesthetic of reparation" is a good example of this.<sup>88</sup>

Mixing examples of their artistic work together with field photographs of African performance practices yield eloquent results. In the previous chapter, my gay gaze has been examined and evaluated as a heuristic tool for this research, but I should add a second non-academic tool to that: my forty years of experience as stage director has informed and guided my observations, both in the case of the dance performances in Europe as well as the performance events in West (and South) Africa. The centre fold can be considered the outcome of the combined "ways of seeing".

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<sup>87</sup> Osisanwo, Abebiyi-Adelabu and Mosobalaje, *Literary and Linguistic Perspectives* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2018), 413.

<sup>88</sup> Isaac Julien, "The Pleasure of the image," Interview with Brendan Wattenberg, *Screen* (April 2016).



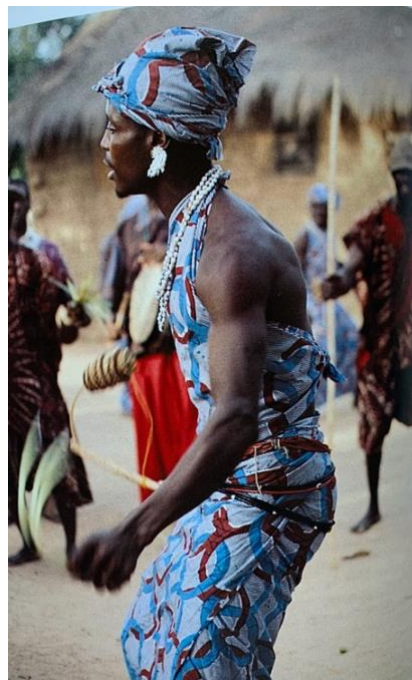
Fosso - La Bourgeoise



Fosso - Businessman



Ike Ude



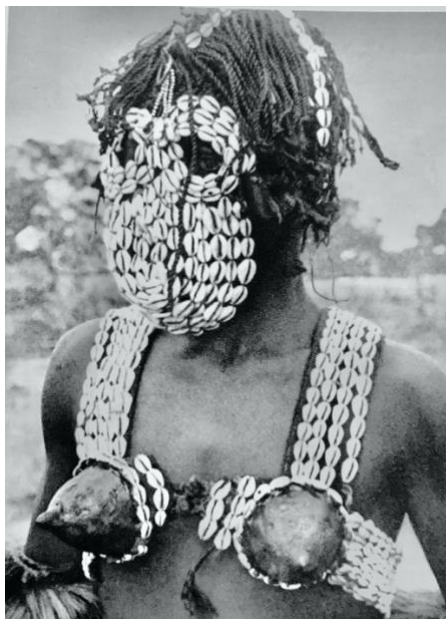
Baga ceremony



Erwin Olaf



Ajamu

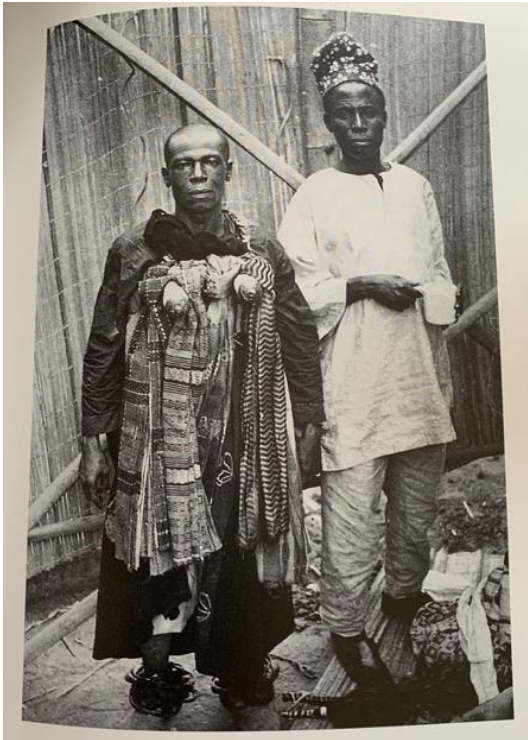


Dogon masque



Rotimi Fani-Ayode





Tetede mask wearer in the process of dressing



Dancer in Baamaaya dance costume



Mikael Owunna

Perusing the new ambitious London based glossy *NATAAL* that up to the present moment has published two issues, besides offering an internet site,<sup>89</sup> one comes across contributors who deliberately play with gender identities, creating images like those by Rudi Geysler (photography), Marvin Desroc (fashion), Kristin-Lee Moolman (photography, one of his portfolios wears the title *Another Man*), Faith Aluwajimi (fashion), Tyler Mitchell (photography), John Edmonds. The parallel with the performing arts is very clear and it surely is not a coincidence that many of these visual artists work with life performances and/or time-based media.



Rudi Geysler



Tyler Mitchell



Makonde pregnant women mask



John Edmonds

<sup>89</sup> <https://nataal.com/#home-main-1>

#### 4. This is a man's world: female masks, male dancers, crossdressing, and gender identity exchange in West African performance practices.

*The skin is faster than the word.*  
Brian Massumi

##### 4.1. Gender identities: changing tunes

It is disappointing to research the extensive African Studies Library at Leiden University and discover that the academic literature on masculinities in West Africa is indeed very scarce. The next discovery is that the huge majority of the titles found is focused on the anglophone part of the region, especially Nigeria and Ghana, whilst the francophone part hardly gets any attention at all; South Africa invariably is the odd one out: there the academic literature on this subject is plentiful, covering all the familiar topics, from violent masculinity (the website of the South African Gender Justice organisation will list extensively from the academic literature on this topic<sup>90</sup>) to queer activism (in 2019 a queer contestant participated for the miss South Africa contest).<sup>91</sup> Literature on masculinity in the context of the performing arts in West Africa is practically non-existent. Interestingly, a very recent and comprehensive general study on world-wide drag performance<sup>92</sup> does not include one single article on drag practices on the African continent, a sign that either the disciplines in performance studies do not acknowledge African performance practices as valid objects for study in this context, setting them apart from practices in the rest of the world, or that drag practices, so widespread on the whole continent, are not viewed on these terms in academic literature. One wonders if this might be due to the construct of the "heterosexual Africa" Epprecht has analysed, in combination with the aforementioned world-wide categorising of the African continent as an exceptional case.<sup>93</sup>

In an interview the Indonesian performer Didik Nini Thowok " (...) disrupts and interrogates the strict gender differentiation that has *increased with Westernization and modernization*" (my emphasis).<sup>94</sup> Even superficially looking at mask ceremonies and local religious practices on the African continent, one can conclude that the gender differentiation there might be much more similar to the one found in Indonesian society before colonisation and agree with Thowok that "Westernization and modernization" (in this case alternative terms for colonisation) have profoundly shaken existing earlier more gender fluid conceptions. We are reminded of Oyewumi's contentious work where she states that "Gender was not an organising principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the west".<sup>95</sup>

Worldwide there are many phenomena concerning gender fluidity that have been shaken to their core through colonialism, westernisation, modernity, thus spoiling practices that had found multiple ways to deal with gender identity and gender roles.<sup>96</sup> Many of these practices found their expression as performance practices. In future research, it would be necessary to include African societies into this matter, as the field seems very promising.

Some examples to illustrate the gender (role) fluidity in West African performance practices will follow hereafter. The important literature on specific practices most of the time

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.justgender.org/masculinities-in-south-africa-and-violence-an-indisputable-link/>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2019-07-15-meet-miss-sas-first-openly-queer-contestant-sibabalwe-gcilitshana/>

<sup>92</sup> Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier, *Drag Histories* (London: Methuen, 2020).

<sup>93</sup> Chabal, *Politics of Suffering*.

<sup>94</sup> Ros, "Mask, Gender, and Performance", *Asian Theatre Journal* 22 no.2 (2005): 215.

<sup>95</sup> Oyeronke Oyewumi, *Invention of Women*, (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota, 1995), 121-156.

<sup>96</sup> Attitudes in India towards Hijra or the Muxe in Mexico as a third gender being a good example of this phenomenon, like the suppressed practices of Canadian First Nations and Native American peoples.

does not focus on the phenomenon of men portraying women, either by masking or by cross-dressing, and when there is a chapter on gender issues, it's invariably a research into the participation of women in the liturgies or celebrations and the gender a-symmetry in society. The special issue of *African Arts* on women's masquerades devotes one chapter to women's masks worn by men and shows the best known/most beautiful examples, but besides a short commentary stating that "an interesting tension is created: he is transformed into a woman while at the same time remaining a man,"<sup>97</sup> it doesn't discuss the topic any further. For the whole continent, the only serious body of research in this field is again to be found in South Africa. Now this neglect I find interesting; it looks as if sub-Saharan Africa just can't be regarded as the place to host gender fluid practices in the global North's view and it's very tempting to evaluate this fact as yet again another aspect of the colonial construct called "Heterosexual Africa."

Collecting data from the literature for the purpose of this chapter has been a somewhat capricious undertaking but piecing together elements of research and observations in situ has resulted in an overview in broad strokes of cross-dressing and gender transformation in West African performance practices. The "transformative power of performance" articulated by Fischer-Lichte<sup>98</sup>, in these examples applies to the performers themselves, providing the male participants with a persona of what is perceived as the opposite sex during the time span of the liturgy or celebration. Potentially it can be viewed as a source of inspiration to develop alternative masculinities, as will be argued in the second part of this thesis.

The fluidity of gender identities can take many shapes, as will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs. Ceremonies as a site for non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality have been signalled before in the context of Hausa trance cult events.<sup>99</sup> Also in Ghana, this observation has been made<sup>100</sup> and the phenomenon is so widely spread that it can be assumed that a range of objectives can be met on a broad continuum between asserting and critiquing hegemonic masculinity. Ceremonies involving masks as well as trance practices, create a liminal environment where gender and power relations can be questioned through performance. It is this liminal quality of performance events that are filled with potentiality and offer the perfect playground for alternative masculinities, in West Africa's porous performance spaces as well as on the European stages.

By way of an upbeat: somewhere in his *mémoires*<sup>101</sup> (but I don't remember exactly where and the bulky volume isn't equipped with a search engine; but he mentions a similar fact in his book on Tierno Bokar<sup>102</sup>) Hampâté Bâ goes at great lengths to explain that in his region, a great warrior who turns chief can be seen gaining recognition by working on embroidery and weaving. He emphasises his insistence in this matter, being very much aware that masculinity appears in a different guise in Europe, where embroidery and weaving is seen as an exclusively female activity with associations that run decidedly in the opposite direction to battlefield heroics.

An interesting case of shifting gender identities in ritual context is provided from the Casamance region in Sénégal and is researched by Mark Peter, Ferdinand de Jong and

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<sup>97</sup> Cameron, "Men portraying Women", *African Arts* 31 no. 2 (1998):72.

<sup>98</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 11-23

<sup>99</sup> Okagbue, "Deviants and Outcasts", *New Theatre Quarterly* 24 no. 3 (2008): 278.

<sup>100</sup> Geoffrion, "Ghanaian Youth and Festive Transvestism", S55.

<sup>101</sup> Hampâté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l'Enfant Peul. Mémoires no. 1.* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 1991).

<sup>102</sup> Hampâté Bâ, *Vie et Enseignement de Tierno Bokar*, Paris: Seuil, 1980. <https://hi-in.facebook.com/notes/village-amadou-hampate-ba/amadou-hampate-ba-le-fonctionnaire/327145633970811>

Clémence Chupin.<sup>103</sup> They describe the process of (mass) initiation called *bukut*. A men's collective initiation has been a Jola tradition for at least thirteen generations in the Casamance which takes place every twenty-five years for all the males between twelve-thirty-five years of age. The influence of Islam has dislodged circumcision from the ritual as muslims practice circumcision at a very early age. In 1994 the authors witnessed the first *bukut* since 1964 and they map the developments, changes and adaptations. One of the interesting observations: the initiands are helped by the already initiated (all male) and the latter wear cross-dress attire (skirts, beads, wigs) - not to take on female identities but to mingle gender roles (this might be explained by the fact that they have to help the initiands as if they were their mothers/sisters or the like).<sup>104</sup> Their attire is defined as harkening back to the liminal situation before they had "become" men.<sup>105</sup> The initiands themselves go through a process where each phase is marked by a special costume. In contemporary theatre, a male character giving a performance that can be characterised as: "I am an adult male but if I want to, I can treat my friend as if I were his mother or sister" and adding appropriate elements to his physical appearance to underline the fact would certainly look and feel an appropriate illustration of alternative masculinity. Interestingly, there is an Akan song cited in Kwabena Nketia's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan people* that runs "although a man, you are a mother to children" pointing into the same direction where a man can take on a function belonging to the opposite sex.<sup>106</sup>

It was disappointing to miss an opportunity (the dancer being indisposed) in North Togo to watch a cross-dressing role that is part of the Pongd-ceremony with the Moba people. I expect there are numerous examples of this to be found in a big number of rituals and ceremonies in West Africa, pointing towards a playful attitude towards gender identities. But luckily, later that week I could attend a funeral in the same region and witness an interesting feature of the funeral ceremony: there is dancing going on and among the dancers I could discern an elderly lady wearing a man's jacket and smoking a pipe. As my friend explained, this is a feature in any Moba funeral, where there is someone who actually takes on the role of the deceased and parades with paraphernalia and items of clothing belonging to the deceased, parodying the deceased's idiosyncratic behaviour or way of talking. Now the deceased whose funeral we attended was an uncle of my friend but the fact that a woman portrayed him didn't stir any comment at all. When asked, a teacher and well-informed member of Moba society affirmed that a man also could take on the role of a deceased woman, provided that he would be good at it.<sup>107</sup> Histrionic talent takes precedence over gender in this case.

A journalistic source, Gert Chesi, gives several examples of Mami Wata-priests who dress as women,<sup>108</sup> a set of good quality illustrations shows the priests in action, both on their premises where they perform rituals described by Chesi, as well as in public, during sessions on the beach attended by hundreds of adepts; earlier on during a dance session one of the adepts known to Chesi appears dressed as a woman.<sup>109</sup> As diverse as possible sources often

<sup>103</sup> Peter Mark, Ferdinand de Jong, Clémence Chupin, "Ritual and Masking Traditions in Jola Men's Initiation", *African Arts* 31 no. 1 (1998): 36-47.

<sup>104</sup> A similar observation is noted by Langeveld, "Initiation Rituals", *Mande Studies* 6 (1998):123 and in a footnote a similar observation is made in Uganda initiation ceremonies.

<sup>105</sup> Gender is mostly acquired after an initiation process, before that stage has been reached gender is not strictly defined yet. We are reminded of portraits of young boys clad in long dresses of the baroque period. Moreelse (1632), Rotius (1666), Van de Vliet (1638) all painted young boys dressed as girls and there is an anonymous portrait of Louis XIV clad similarly when still the Dauphin (ca. 1640).

<sup>106</sup> Kwabana Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, (Ann Arbor: Achimota, 1955), 195.

<sup>107</sup> "l'homme peut imiter la femme s'il peut bien jouer le rôle." Personal communication, 23 January 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Gert Chesi, *Voodoo* (Wörgl: Perlingen, 1979/80), 159.

<sup>109</sup> Chesi, *Voodoo*, 127+157.

mention in the passing examples of cross-dressing and gender role exchanging. Biebuyck in his monography on the Lega remarks about an initiation ceremony how cross dressing for both sexes plays a part:

Mijnheer Kandolo leidt drie *kanyamwa*-vrouwen het initiatiehuis binnen. Hij draagt een *sawamasebe*, een imitatie van een vrouwenkapsel van zwart gemaakte en met kralen versierde vezels, terwijl de vrouwen de *kindi*-hoofddeksels van hun mannen op het hoofd hebben, in een ritueel dat in het teken staat van de "eenheid" van de volledige complementariteit tussen de *kindi* en zijn *kanyamwa*.<sup>110</sup>

Kwakye-Opong and Salifu state in their article on Dagbamba dance ceremonies in Northern Ghana that "(...)the theme of the Maamaaya dance and the philosophies surrounding it has necessitated a cross-over of dressing."<sup>111</sup>

Men cross-dressing or performing female roles: on the continent, thus the examples abound. Another example, this time not within the context of religious ceremonies, is the Ghanaian-Togolese Concert Party mentioned before. Originally, this type of entertainment started off as an exclusively male stage affair. Cole, Collins e.a. provide passionate studies on the subject.<sup>112</sup> The best groups could fill complete stadiums with their performances that easily could take 3-4 hours. The Concert Party was a very popular performance practice half a century ago and in developing, it shed its all-male exclusivity and included women in their shows. Of course this type of cross-dressing belongs to well-known and widespread theatrical practices, but it is interesting to mention it here in relation to another phenomenon taking place in Ghana:



Female impersonators in 1960's Concert Party

In Southern Ghana an occasion has been documented and researched<sup>113</sup> where once a year cross-dressing males roam the streets. This festive occasion has been interpreted in some

<sup>110</sup> Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega* (Brussel: KBC, 2002), 62.

<sup>111</sup> Regina Kwakye-Opong and Jebuni Salifu, "Semiotics of Costume", *Journal of Performing Arts* (2015/16): 153.

<sup>112</sup> Catherine Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 2002). Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard, *West African Popular Theatre* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1997).

<sup>113</sup> Geoffrion, "Ghanaian Youth and Festive Transvestism", 2013.

media as a manifestation of Ghanaese gay pride<sup>114</sup> but it is not clear if its publication has been a purposeful action to denounce the practice or simply a publicity strategy to attract more readers. The occasion itself has nothing to do with the pride movement - although one can guess it can serve expressive purposes comparable to the way the Hausa *bori* ritual attracts marginalised participants, as can be observed in that context.<sup>115</sup>

The Yoruba Apidan Theatre has been researched in depth by Götrick and (unsurprisingly because of its ritual origin) has been yielding a comparable result: women could participate in the chorus but the (masked) performers were exclusively male.<sup>116</sup> One of the popular elements in Apidan is the performance of the Pansaga ("the harlot") who displays characteristic female movements and gestures and Götrick stresses the fact that "The movements were well balanced and far from exaggerated".<sup>117</sup> Instead of mere impersonation, it looks as if transformation is called for in this practice but again: no research into this aspect has been included in the study.



Apidan Theatre Gambari woman dancing

Although Apidan performances did not depend on a fixed narrative structure, it invariably finished with a performance of Iyawo (the beautiful woman) always played by the leader of the Apidan theatre company, but the content of that closing scene is not fixed and the Ijawo can appear as a bride to be, or a seductive presence flirting with male audience members, or she is masked and dressed as the spouse of the Imperial District Officer and accompanies him smiling and waving at the public.<sup>118</sup>

The examples given in this chapter and elsewhere throughout this study suffice to point to a standard practice of men performing as women and some cases of women performing as men in a liturgical or/and celebratory context that is well developed and possibly can boast pre-colonial roots.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Gay-Pride-Parade-In-Ghana-169348?gallery=1>

<sup>115</sup> Okagbue, "Deviants and Outcasts", 271.

<sup>116</sup> Götrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama*, (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1984), 39.

<sup>117</sup> Götrick, *Apidan*, 70.

<sup>118</sup> Götrick, *Apidan*, 100-101.

<sup>119</sup> Speculatively, we might surmise that this wide-spread practice had an influence on South American carnival practices, further research on this subject might yield a wealth of interesting material.

## **4.2 Gender and local performance practices: between impersonation and transformation**

As late as 2003, folklorist and playwright Sam Ukala still attempts to approach African ritual through the concept of European drama, and impersonation is singled out as the latter's most characteristic constituent. His definition of impersonation is the following: "the imitation of the appearance, speech and behaviour of a character."<sup>120</sup> He is careful to warn that his article should not be read as an attempt to legitimize African rituals through Western theatre forms but continues to evaluate a number of examples anyway with a view to their shape as drama rather than as performance, though he seems to be aware of performance art as a theatrical genre being much closer to African ritual; but he dismisses this as not belonging to "mainstream theatre" (possibly meaning commercial theatre) where impersonation is its most distinguishing feature. At the end of his article, he draws tables of the dimensionality of impersonation for each performance he has studied and its approximate equivalent of Western Theatre, in order to demonstrate that African ritual is a rich source of theatrical display of all kinds, even including examples that closely resemble European drama. At the time of writing his article, Lehmann's influential articulation of postdramatic theatre had appeared only in German, the English translation was published in 2006, and the narrow parameters outlined by Ukala influenced by Stanislavskian principles for drama no longer hold. Impersonation in this thesis will rather be defined as a specific kind of embodiment, linked to specific liturgical or celebrational contexts.

A number of local performance practices in West Africa will be closer looked into on the next pages. Especially masked and trance dance performances will be investigated as often these include activities where masculinity is performed, questioned, celebrated, or diluted.<sup>121</sup> In all cases the performance tradition is upheld by men exclusively, although women in most cases have their own part to play.

In a few instances, I have personally been a witness to the ceremonies, but in most cases I rely on the existing literature. For this research, I studied the monographs on specific rituals and ceremonies from the point of view of how female gender is articulated, embodied and acquired by the male dancers and mask wearers in cross-dress and masked practices. As stated before, it is rare to find extensive attention paid to the gender change that accompanies so many masked practices. Bouttiaux' catalogue of the great mask exposition in Tervuren compares a couple of practices but does not delve deep into the topic and limits herself to the discussion of how the femininity of the mask is expressed through the carving, even if the author is obviously very much aware of the essential link between mask, music, costume, accessory and kinetics.<sup>122</sup> Thompson Drewal however does devote a chapter on the topic in her Guéléde study.<sup>123</sup> Although Vogel pays a lot of attention to gender questions too in her monography on the Baulé, her main focus is on matters of power (a)symmetry.<sup>124</sup> In other studies, the topic is only hinted at in the passing or even completely ignored: the research mostly remains limited to mentioning the fact that the female masks are inevitable worn by male dancers, but do not seek to problematise or delve deeper into the transformation process involved.

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<sup>120</sup> Ukala, Sam, "Impersonation in Some African Performances," *Research in African Literature* 34 no. 3 (2003): 133.

<sup>121</sup> Instances of cross-dressing dance without masks and not aiming at trance possessions have been recorded as well (Kwakye-Opong & Salifu, "Semiotics of Costume").

<sup>122</sup> Bouttiaux, *Persona*, 12.

<sup>123</sup> Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*. 172-190.

<sup>124</sup> Vogel, *Baule*, 167-168.



What follows in the next section, is a random selection limited to West Africa based on general studies of African classical art<sup>125</sup>, but many more are known throughout the region as well as the rest of the continent, of which as examples that have been studied:

- in Tanzania we find the Makonde with an elaborate wooden female upper body mask (similar masks can be found in Yorouba Guéléde),
- in the DRC we can find the *mbuye*, *gambanda* or *kopoko* from the Pende,<sup>126</sup>
- Turnbull on the subject of liminality offers poetic descriptions of *ekokomea* and other rituals/games observed in the 1950's by the Mbuti of the Ituri forest, where taking on the opponents gender is essential to the ritual.<sup>127</sup>
- Zambia *makishi* masks show a display of female masks of a range of characters<sup>128</sup>

In West Africa other regions than the ones studied hereafter can be added<sup>129</sup>:

- the Ijo (Nigeria) with the *idinla* mask,
- female *elu*-masks of the Ogoni (Nigeria),
- the deliberately ambiguous character of the *angbai* mask from the Loma in Liberia,<sup>130</sup>
- in Sénégal there is the very popular dance/game called *simb*, where young men disguise themselves through make-up as a "lion" who is accompanied by his "lion-wives" which are played by his peers. These "lion-wives" actually are called *goor-jigeen* which is a word in Wolof meaning men-women also used to designate homosexuals (personal communication Alioune Diagne, may 2020).
- The Bidjogo of Guinea Bissao reportedly have girls dancing ceremonies where in the past ritual axes played an important role that "(...)perfectly reflect(s) the gender ambivalence of the original rite".<sup>131</sup>

And during the writing of this thesis, turning at every corner I keep discovering yet more examples of cross dressing and gender exchanging events, pointing to a fluid gender identity in performance practices through the sub-Saharan part of the continent, calling out for further research.<sup>132</sup>

Fluid gender identity in this context can take on many shapes: there is a whole continuum starting from a male dancer or actor or participant only perfunctory putting on a female piece of clothing, jewellery, accessories, or make-up, up to a very elaborate

<sup>125</sup> the most important being Kerchache, Paudrat & Stépah, *L'Art Africain*, (Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 1988) and Leiris and Delange, *Afrique Noire, la création plastique* (Paris, Gallimard, 1967).

<sup>126</sup> Lamp, *See the Music*, 248.

<sup>127</sup> Schechner and Appel, *By Means of Performance*, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Manuel Jordán, *Makishi*, (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum UCLA, 2006), 32-43.

<sup>129</sup> Martha Anderson & Philip Peek, *Ways of the Rivers*, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 2002): Chapters 6, 9.

<sup>130</sup> Lamp, *See the Music*, 56

<sup>131</sup> Frank Herreman and Elze Bruyninx, *In the Presence of the Spirits*, (New York: Museum for African Art, 2000): 175.

<sup>132</sup> rummaging through video recordings of ceremonies in Ivory Coast, I stumbled unexpectedly on footage (2016) from an Atchan ceremony called Fatchué where an eleven second glimpse can be caught of a group of cross-dressed men, starting to practice a feminine dance. Even after having finished the last chapter of the thesis and without any specific purpose going through Jean Rouch's ethnographic films, I stumbled upon his 1972 footage of Dogon Sigui ceremonies in Yame where the men cross-dress and "les hommes se fardent des tatouages des femmes." In Jean Rouch's wellknown 1956 film *The Mad Masters*, a young man makes an appearance whom we have seen earlier in a Hauka trance session begin possessed by the spirit called Madame Lokotoro and Rouch comments "Madame Lokotoro is to be found in Penjabi's shop. Madame Lokotoro, the doctor's wife, is a rather effeminate boy who uses a lot of hair vaseline but as a shop clerk is excellent."

transformation including a mask, breasts (sometimes with breast-fed children attached, in some Yorouba cases the breasts actually produce milk, sprinkling the delighted audiences), demeanour, dance style, voice masking. In the first case, there is no doubt that we're dealing with a man who has appropriated certain female paraphernalia. In the last case, the identity adopted by the masker has obliterated the individual male and replaced him by a spiritual female identity. An outward expression of this changed identity does not necessarily have to be operated through mask and costume: in trance ceremonies, the spirits take possession disregarding gender, and the one possessed will behave according to the manipulations operated by the specific spirit.

If the perfunctory model can be defined as a man impersonating a woman, the examples in the trance model can be defined as a man turning into a woman. For the theatrically well-versed, this will certainly recall the different acting styles commonly referred to as on the one hand total identification with the character, generally associated with Stanislavski-derived acting methods, and the Brechtian style where the actor's own identity resonates in his acting. There is however one issue that complicates such a comparison: after the performance the Stanislavskian actor will have a vivid recollection of his actions, he will even be able to evaluate the audiences' responses, while one possessed in a trance ceremony will have no recollection of the time he had been controlled by the spirit that took over. The consequence of this being that on the scale between impersonation and transformation, African trance events offer the most radical possibility concerning the process of transformation as ultimately the actor's self-consciousness is switched off.<sup>133</sup>

If we look into masking ceremonies, there is a distinction to be made between masks that serve mainly for entertainment purposes and the powerful masks that fulfil a specific (for example prophylactic or therapeutic) function and have strong agency. But here again, we're dealing with a continuum: even the ancestral Egoungoun masks that play an important part in the Yorouba environment contain elements of entertainment. Vogel explains that with the Baulé in Ivory Coast a *goli* masquerade can be performed "both as an entertainment and for the funerals of important men."<sup>134</sup> Generally it can be concluded that in the entertainment context, impersonation will suffice for the actor/dancer and his male gender will remain an active agent. It can even be argued that in some cases the male gender will actually be foregrounded by the elements of female paraphernalia exhibited.<sup>135</sup> Masked actors in the spiritual context will need a more elaborate process to embody a female spirit, but it is precisely this aspect that has so far remained under researched. The embodiment processes going on in trance ceremonies take place on a different level altogether, so in the next chapter, the mask ceremonies will be divided into entertainment masks, spiritual masking practices and trance ceremonies, but only for the sake of practicalities, as stable categories do not exist for this rich cultural phenomenon. Next to the division of the masks in these three categories and the continuum covering the processes of gender identity acquisition (including the material element necessary to bring about the desired transformation, ranging from every day accessories through mask and costume until full spiritual possession), where possible, triangulation with the quality of gender acquisition would be addressed: it would be interesting to research if the mask has transformed the male dancer into a female identity, or has it transformed the dancer into a combination of male/female elements, or finally, has the dancer acquired a gender of their own, a gender beyond male or female, either through the agency of the mask or that of a spirit that has taken possession of the dancer. And can such an acquired identity still be called a gender identity or are we moving into a different concept

<sup>133</sup> For a detailed investigation into this phenomenon see Omoregie Fani-Kayode, "Styles and Levels of Acting in Zimbabwean Traditional Performances," *Marang. Journal of Language and Literature* 18, (2008): 121-136.

<sup>134</sup> Vogel, Baulé, 169.

<sup>135</sup> Geoffrion, "Youth and Festive Transvestism", S52.

altogether. But an answer to these questions has been impossible to give, as we're dealing with a fluid concept of gender where gender is on a continuum and the complementarity is emphasized instead of its opposition. On the rare occasion that researchers asked questions about the gender of the mask, they were replied rather through raised eyebrows, or evasive comments or a *non sequitur* as the issue simply does not seem to play a part in the context. Not having a gender is a concept alien to the global north, where until recently gender and sexual organs have been considered indivisible. But before initiation, Rouche explains in the introduction to his film on Songhay circumcision "Par ce rite, les jeunes garçons, qui *jusqu'alors n'avaient pas de sexe*, vont devenir des mâles" (my emphasis) and as a non-gendered identity is conceptualised for boys before initiation, the same might apply to the gender identity of certain masks.

Fischer-Lichte distinguishes the embodied presence of the actor on two levels, which she defines as the semiotic and the phenomenal body.<sup>136</sup> Applying this to masked performance, both bodies perform a different gender, the semiotic body being the female mask, the phenomenal body belonging to the male dancer, but there is a unity that is arrived at through the kinetic aspect, that links the phenomenal body to the semiotic one. This can be achieved on different levels, as this telling photograph illustrates powerfully. It shows a female mask ceremony from the Igbo, which will be discussed later.



Igbo *okoroshi* mask with attendant

Both men show a semiotic female body as well as the phenomenal male one. The maleness of the one on the left is fully concealed by mask, costume and actions, while the one on the right is contradicted by the female attire, thus illustrating the principle of the different stages which the transformation can accomplish. We are witnessing an actor impersonating a female next to a male dancer transformed into a female entity. The function of the impersonator is not elaborated in Cole and Aniakor's monograph, he is only designated as an attendant to the main mask.

One final word about masks in African context. Several definitions have been tried<sup>137</sup> as the noun "mask" carries too limited a load to be applicable to the much wider range of

<sup>136</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*, 94.

<sup>137</sup> Cameron, "Women=Masks", 57.

elements and actions (encompassing next to the visual, the kinetic, auditive and even the olfactory) that go far beyond the mostly wooden sculpted element that covers the face of the dancer. The simple definition given by Kasfir is the one that fits this research best: something which both covers and transforms<sup>138</sup> although it should be noted that the musical element in mask performance generally is an inseparable aspect by which the mask obtains its identity, and even part of its power, especially in performative events that contain an element of trance or possession.<sup>139</sup> It can be argued that it is indeed the music that often is the motor of the transformation process intended,<sup>140</sup> as communication with the spirit world takes place through and in music.<sup>141</sup>

The following section will discuss a selection of West African ceremonies where male dancers personify or transform into a female character in more depth. To start with, under section I the examples so far introduced of cross-dressing practices where the phenomenal male body is given a semantic female twist will be enumerated. This is followed by section II, discussing examples of masked ceremonies where the male persona is dissimulated completely and replaced by a female one. The final examples under section III discuss examples of trance possession where the male medium is taken over by a female spirit.

### I. Female impersonation

The following examples have been given so far of female impersonation limited to cross-dressing:

- Transvestism in Southern Ghana<sup>142</sup>
- Jola *bukut* initiation support <sup>143</sup>
- Moba dances and funeral practice (personal observation)
- Lega initiation<sup>144</sup>
- Epprecht's early sources from Kongo and Angola<sup>145</sup>

To these can be added similar practices that are part of Baulé celebrations<sup>146</sup>, Baga dances<sup>147</sup>, Igbo ceremonies<sup>148</sup> and probably many others that have not been documented so far.

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<sup>138</sup> quoted in Cameron, "Women=Masks", 57.

<sup>139</sup> Osita Okagbue, *African Theatres* (London: Routledge, 2007), 91-94.

<sup>140</sup> Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama*, 89.

<sup>141</sup> Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Los Angeles: Univ. California, 1974), 204, and Appendix 251-275 with numerous emic testimonials.

<sup>142</sup> Geofrion, "Ghanaian Festive Transvestism."

<sup>143</sup> Peter Mark, Ferdinand de Jong and Clémence Chupin, "Ritual Masking Traditions," *African Arts* 31 no. 1, (1998): 36-96.

<sup>144</sup> Biebuyck, *Lega*, 62.

<sup>145</sup> Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, 37, 47.

<sup>146</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 167.

<sup>147</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, (New York, Museum for African Art, 1996), 73.

<sup>148</sup> Cole, *Igbo Arts*, 168.

## II. Male to female transformation through dance masks.

### A: Yoruba Guéléde/Nigeria and Bénin



Guéléde mask private collection photo JLP



Guéléde performing Cotonou 2020 photo JLP

The first practice studied for this section is perhaps the most obvious one, as it is without doubt one of the best researched mask ceremonies: the Guéléde, widespread in Bénin and West Nigeria.<sup>149</sup> The aim of the Guéléde ceremony is to honour (and propitiate) the women in Yoruba society, especially the elderly who are past childbearing, as those women are endowed with special powers that need to be placated. So it belongs to the practice of spiritual mask performance, but parts of the ceremonies do function as popular entertainment, although a sensitive outsider will be aware of a spiritual dimension even if dealing with entertainment contexts.

A full Guéléde spectacle contains two very distinct parts: the nocturnal part and the following day-time section where during the afternoon (pairs of) masks perform, each with their own songs and dances. It is one of the best-known West African ceremonies (it obtained non-material world cultural heritage status) and it can be studied both in anglophone Nigeria as well as in francophone Bénin, home to a sizeable percentage of the Yoruba. The night preceding the daytime Guéléde is the time when Efe appears, the culmination of the nocturnal Guéléde, but he is preceded by a number of deities of which the last one is Tetede, his female counterpart, Efe's spouse or maybe his twin sister: it is an important masque that sings and dances.<sup>150</sup> She is female and both Ibitokun and Lawal<sup>151</sup> show the complicated process of dressing the Tetede/Efe dancers for the part (the dancer in the low quality pictures that accompany the Ibitokun's text is made unrecognisable). Ibitokun supplies an emic stance on the local Ketu (Bénin) ritual, completing (and sometimes correcting) the etic approach from Drewal and Thompson Drewal. He finds that especially the performance aspect of Guéléde is neglected in the Thompson Drewal & Drewal study and deplores the influence the Egougoun masquerade has exercised over Guéléde, characterising the first as a masculine

<sup>149</sup> Drewal and Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama* (Lagos: Obáfémi Awólówó University Press, 1993); Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle* (Seattle, Univ. of Washington 1996).

<sup>150</sup> Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 258.

<sup>151</sup> Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama* 50-58; Lawal, *Gelede*, 169-171.

masquerade, where the second is the feminine one.<sup>152</sup> He also gives a graphic description of Tetede's dancing where "feminine and masculine attributes contend, and blend: Here is a big-nippled dancer whose show of physical force in dancing goes beyond that of the second sex".<sup>153</sup> Farris Thompson comments on the dancer performing Tetede "He moved in a larger-than-life manner because of the heavy padding of his costuming. He sang while alternately waving his arms(...)." <sup>154</sup>

The next day, following the night performance, the popular day time Guéléde takes place. I witnessed one ceremony in Calavi; it was the type reportedly originating from Covo, but now spreading all over Bénin, using animated masks, where on top of the wooden face that is carried on the head of the dancer, a scene is depicted that can be animated through the dancer himself, who, while dancing, pulls concealed strings that make the sculpted figures come alive, or create a magical effect like a tail growing to endless proportions, all of this to the happy enjoyment of the audience. Scenes like a girl filling a basin with (real) water, birds picking food, a father lifting his toddler son, acrobats, a primary school class having lessons alternated in a motley parade. Each mask has its distinctive song, and the music was provided by an energetic male chorus and a set of three drums. The costumes have been conceived to emphasize the female shapes: accentuated hips and protruding buttocks adding effect to the dances that are generally in an *andante comodo* tempo with pointed accentuation by fly whisks carried in both hands, thus helping to dissimulate the manipulation of the strings. The transformational process in these cases: the embodiment of the female spirit needs mask, costume, props, kinetic training and the dancers will need assistance as it is physically impossible to dress on their own (see ill. p. 43 upper left).

Lawal directly interviewed practitioners on the question why Guéléde was not danced by the women themselves. The answers confirm ideas of hegemonic masculinity like: you need to be a strong man to be able to manipulate a Guéléde masque, or with the opposite: masking is an action that can interfere with the reproductive powers of a woman. And if the women are honoured, they can't participate themselves surely. Lawal does not problematise these statements, he limits himself to the conclusion that it is "a public acknowledgement of the vital contribution of the female sex to the community."<sup>155</sup>

In an interesting fragment he explains how children (boys?) from childhood learn the language of the drum and start imitating the dances executed by the adults. Although this study will not turn to investigate the way men are prepared to take their (gendered) roles in society, I remember being present at a trance dance session in a Moba village in Northern Togo that I would like to report. After the "official" part of the session had ended, the dancing still continued: it was mostly the younger boys (average age around 12) imitating (and effectively practising) the trance dances, only at one moment a younger girl joined in. The actual session had been attended and participated in by both men and women. In any case, I was aware of being present at the preparation of future male bodies in the process of being inscribed by the necessary skills to be able to participate in ceremonies of this nature. In that respect, the ceremonies also function as schools where embodied episteme is transferred between generations.

As mentioned before, in her study on Yoruba ritual, Thompson Drewal explores the gender binary at the level of ritual, and especially Guéléde, with its explicit link to gender topics, provides her with a set of observations concerning how gender roles are negotiated. She is the only researcher who really addresses the subject, dedicating a full chapter on the topic of gender play in Yoruba society. Her conclusions will be discussed at the end of this

<sup>152</sup> Drewal and Thompson Drewal, *Gelede; Ibitokun, Dance as Ritual Drama*, 19-20.

<sup>153</sup> Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama*, 95.

<sup>154</sup> Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion*, 200.

<sup>155</sup> Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 79.

chapter. For the Guéléké ceremonies the embodiment of the female masks are operated through mask, costume, kinetics and music, leading to the acquisition of a spiritual female identity, although we can't be sure whether the dancer will have acquired a momentary different gender. In the case of the Efe-Tetede male-female partnership this identity might involve deeper aspects. The author who is most outspoken on the matter is Benedict Ibitokun. In his monography on the Ketou Yorouba Guéléké ceremony, he vividly describes the medicine the dancers have to turn to in order to be able to perform safely in their Tetede costume as well as the role of the assistants that help the dancer into their elaborate costume and mask: "Then a dresser who excels in the art of spewing incantations at every prop he takes (...) is called upon."<sup>156</sup> Further on, he emphasises the "ritualistic evocation of vitalistic forces" that accompanies the wearing of breast and buttocks enlarging contraptions belonging to the Tetede costume, but nowhere is there any mention of the process the gender change entails for the dancer. Concerning the Efe mask, Tetede's partner (or twin brother), who is higher in hierarchy and appears last, after Tetede during the night Guéléké, the matter complicates even more, when the author explains that in spite of his male attire, "the Efe dancer represents a goddess." He goes to some length to explain its complex spiritual identity and later on describes Efe as a "god/goddess."

The global north's oppositional gender binary encounters an environment here where it's not applicable: the Guéléké spectacle is centred around gender factors and the role they play in society. Looking at the elements that together constitute the ceremony, we are dealing with male dancers in female guise during the daytime ceremony but in the preceding night time part we have the most important masques, a couple that is alternately described as husband and wife or twin brother and sister, of them being female but her male partner being a female entity. This points to a concept of gender fluidity in the Guéléké societies responsible for the staging of their ceremonies.

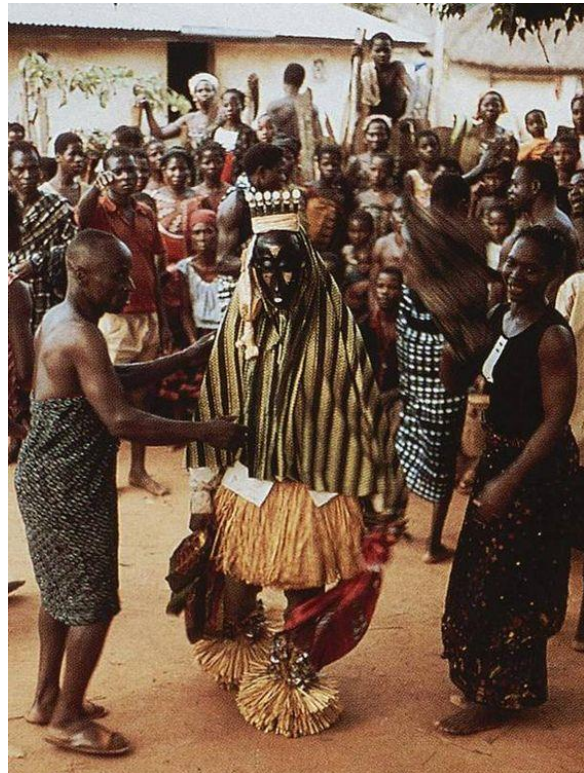
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<sup>156</sup> Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama*, 43.

**B:** Baulé *mblo* portrait and *goli* paired masks/ Côte d'Ivoire



Baulé portrait mask



Portrait mask and model together

A second but very different example of transformation through dance mask can be found among the Baulé of central Côte d'Ivoire.

male dancers evoke the most beautiful female dancers of the community, and such masks are escorted by “namesake” women whenever possible. The clean surfaces, embellishments of jewellery and scarves, beautiful cloth, and fresh green leaves of *mblo* costuming announce that the best of Baule culture is on display. Meant for entertainment, *mblo* are not secret or off-limits as many Baule sacred objects are, yet they are not displayed publicly between performances.<sup>157</sup>

As the performer Kalou Yao explained to Susan Vogel, “If we don’t look at it, it is because of women. It is a beautiful thing. The day it comes out .... the woman who is its *ndoma* (namesake) and the other women think how beautiful it is. I dance the mask for those women. It is not for yourself, a man, that you take it out and perform it ”.<sup>158</sup>

Vogel in her monography builds her argument partly on the ground that she has observed a non-binary tendency in aesthetic products of this people, presenting a more complex point of view on gender, which is never expressed in words but ever so present in sculpture, masks, dances, mythology etc.

The human world may be conspicuously organized around the oppositions of male and female (...) but works of art express more subtle minglings and nuances. Various art forms, most notably the *goli* dance (...) reiterate this hidden truth.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Nooter Roberts, "The Inner Eye", *African Arts* 50 no. 1 (2003): 71.

<sup>158</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 72.

<sup>159</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 49.



The *goli* masks she describes might suggest to represent "a single persona with both a male and a female manifestation."<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, she signals in the masquerade a deliberate but never outspoken complexity, hierarchies concerning gender, prestige and seniority playing a subtle game when the four pairs of masks that constitute the masquerade are performing one after the other. Vogel addressed the gender issue of the *goli glen* paired masks directly and asked the dancers themselves but "they had no ready answer" to the question of which of the two was the male mask of the pair.<sup>161</sup> The fact that in many other regions throughout West Africa masks appear in pairs comparable to the way they do in the *goli* ceremonies, is hinting at what has been observed by several researchers: the gender concept in these cases is complementary rather than oppositional. In the *goli* masquerades this is reflected through the near identical shapes of the pair of masks.

The *mblo* masquerades are another good example: the portrait masks of beautiful women come out to perform worn by the male dancer, but this wooden effigy will only appear accompanied by its real model, who thus is doubled by the mask that thus obtains a (hidden) male component. Alongside the portrait masks worn by men, cross-dressed men can appear during their performance, wearing skirt, false breasts, earrings etc. "He does not buffoon the role and I have heard audience members speculating on whether he is a man or a woman."<sup>162</sup> Other popular masked entertainments like the *goli* likewise express this non-binary idea. The Baulé also sport the habit of taking care of a counterpart from the other world who is inevitably from the opposite sex. Vogel concludes:

In some sense the spirit spouse is an alter ego, a sort of opposite sex twin of the human partner(...). Spirit spouses seem to suggest (...) that humans might harbour in themselves elements of the other sex.<sup>163</sup>

Earlier on Vogel expresses an assumption that *goli* masquerades "(...)present[s] the Baulé world in all its complexity, teaching of the great divisions (...) but also alluding to the mysterious unities that bind these contradictory elements together."<sup>164</sup> Implicit in her argumentations is that she interprets these artistic manifestations as an illustration of pre-colonial concepts and cosmogonies that found a way to adapt to the demands of colonial domination.

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<sup>160</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 171.

<sup>161</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 185.

<sup>162</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 167.

<sup>163</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 267.

<sup>164</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 186.

C: Chokwe *mwana phwo* mask/Angola

Moving southwards along the west coast, another example has been well documented.



Mwana Phwo mask



Dancer in full attire

Chokwe peoples of the DRC, Zambia, and Angola also have masks that honour women, but rather than being portraits like *mblo*, these are representations of female ancestors who incarnate ideal womanhood in Chokwe society.<sup>165</sup> Called *pwo*, such masks, sporting an inward gaze, depict proud and accomplished female characters honoured by the community.<sup>166</sup> They are performed at the culmination of boys' initiation rites into adulthood and are especially beloved, for they encapsulate the shifting relationship of a mother to a boy as he ascends the ranks to manhood. *pwo* masks embody the beauty and integrity of women as pillars of the community and the ancestral bedrock of society".<sup>167</sup>

The *mwana phwo* ceremonies offer one of the rare instances of a performance practice where research has been done on the gendered choreographic element: Guerra Marques is a scholar as well as a dancer/choreographer. As she is the only one who pays attention to the process of transformation the male dancer goes through in order to appropriate the female personality, I will refer liberally from her study (even though the geographic area is not the Francophone west but the Lusophone south-west of the continent) as her work provides concrete tools to study this process.<sup>168</sup>

She describes the *mwana phwo* young female mask (*mwana*=child and *phwo*=women) that performs alongside its male counterpart *cihongo* in ceremony. The qualities of the female appreciated by the Chokwe are described as: "fertilidade, beleza, força da juventude & delicadeza nas atitudes".<sup>169</sup> The dancer has to prepare meticulously:

O bailarino de Mwana Phwo deve mesmo "imitar" a mulher, resgatando os pormenores dos seus movimentos e mostrando *não simplesmente a gestualidade mas*

<sup>165</sup> Jordán, "Art and Initiation", *African Arts* 32, no. 2 (1999). And <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/20?start=10>

<sup>166</sup> Cameron, "Men portraying Women," 79.

<sup>167</sup> Nooter Roberts, "Inner Eye", 72.

<sup>168</sup> Guerra Marques, *Mascaras Cokwe*, (Lisboa: Guerra et Paz, 2017): 140 "Através da máscara Mwana Phwo o homem Cokwe enaltece a mulher, (...) dentro da máscara (...)um homem iniciado (...) lhe dê a "alma" e forma humana. "Through the Mwana Phwo mask, the Cokwe male impersonates a woman, inside the mask an initiated male will give it "soul" and human shape." (translation JLP).

<sup>169</sup> Guerra Marques, *Mascaras Cokwe*, 138.

*as qualidades* e os comportamentos femininos tidos como ideais, a mulher perfeita(...).<sup>170</sup>

The actions and movements sometimes are coded and recognisable as such by the audience: whenever the mask takes a stance with the arms crossed, it is clearly depicting a woman holding a small child. In practising, the dancer will take care that his movements are always controlled and keep within a limited range.<sup>171</sup> Her conclusion, based on interviews with the dancers, is very firm:

Segundo os entrevistados, o bailarinho mascarado não sofre qualquer alteração no seu estado psicológico durante o seu desempenho ou seja, não há transe, pois ele não encarna o espírito do antepassado que representa, mas evoca-o produzindo movimentos que demonstrem com clareza o carácter, as características e as intenções desse antepassado.<sup>172</sup>

The researcher being a European scholar and artist might get the answers perceived as desirable by the interrogated of course, but it seems clear in this instance that the dancers - unlike trance dancers - do not assume the identity of the female ancestor but serve as embodied messengers of its intentions. Their bodies supply the vessel for the ancestors to communicate through and like the examples we found with the Baulé *goli*, like the report in the annexe on Bedik mask performance, the masked dancer seems to acquire an identity beyond gender.

Jordán discusses another female mask that appears in the frontier region of Zambia<sup>173</sup>, the RDC and Angola: the *kashinakaji* mask and the graphic actions of this mask shed a particularly interesting light on the impersonation/transformation process. The mask represents an old woman, her flat breasts proof of nourishing an extended offspring. According to Ellert, her task is to check whether the young initiated men are able to sport an erection, thus pronouncing them fit for their function as adult male. For the purpose, she carries under a blanket a dried calabash representing an enlarged vagina with which she tests the boy's aptitude.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> "The Mwana Phwo dancer must "imitate" the woman, taking care of the details of his movements and showing, *not only the gesticulation but the qualities* and female behaviour as the ideal of a perfect woman". (translation JLP). Guerra Marques, *Mascaras Cokwe*, 169 (my emphasis).

<sup>171</sup> Guerra Marques, *Mascaras*, 173. Jordán in *Makishi*, 24, remarks how other female masks in the same region are accompanied by female members of the audience who dance along to check that the masked men show the appropriate behaviour.

<sup>172</sup> Guerra Marques, *Mascaras Cokwe*, 171. "According to the interviewed, the masked dancer does not suffer from any alteration of his psychological state during his performance, there is no trance, because he does not embody the ancestor spirit he is representing, but he evokes it, producing gestures that clearly show the character, characteristics as well as the intentions of this ancestor." (translation JLP).

<sup>173</sup> Jordán, *Makishi*, 40.

<sup>174</sup> Henrik Ellert, *The Magic of Makishi: Masks and Traditions in Zambia* (Bath: CBC Publ., 2004),



*Kashinakaji mask*

**D:** Baga *a-Bol* and *d'mba* dance/Guinée



D'mba mask



D'mba mask dancing

Frederick Lamp in his exhaustive study on the Baga gives a lot of attention to the gender question, as Baga societies offer an interesting field for research. Part of *a-Bol* performance practices demand men to perform a "sensuous dance", all of them dressed in a certain female style. In Baga world view all children before they have been initiated, are attributed a female status. A group of boys that are identified as younger, having the status of an uninitiated child, would dress to symbolize this. This might explain the practice of cross-dressing in certain ceremonies. His attempts to further research the topic were fruitless: "This gender switch, common throughout Baga subgroups in the context of masquerade representing the female, is a complex subject on which we received little satisfactory information".<sup>175</sup> He states further that "In the dances we saw in 1987, the men's movements were homoerotic"<sup>176</sup> but he does not enlarge upon this observation, and one can't help wondering what "homoerotic movements" would amount to. His research also unearthed a reference to homosexual behaviour, he found indications that homosexual action was expected from young men before they married.<sup>177</sup> This seems to evoke alluring echoes of Pritchard's well-known research among the Azande on this topic.<sup>178</sup>

The same cross-dress phenomenon accompanies the performances of the well-known *d'mba* masquerade. The people interviewed for the research insisted that *d'mba* does first of all represent an idea, an ideal perhaps, and not a deity or not even a spirit. *d'mba* is the embodiment of the ideal female force, and she has to be carried by a very strong and powerful male dancer as the mask is extremely heavy. A whole group of men has to help the dancer and together they lift the mask to place it on his shoulders. Thus, the *d'mba* represents the amalgamation of the perfect female with the perfect male qualities. The heavy mask (70-80 kilos) always depicts an adult woman, her breasts flat after nourishing an abundant number of children, but *d'mba* carved figures that also exist do come in female as well as

<sup>175</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 165.

<sup>176</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 73.

<sup>177</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 74.

<sup>178</sup> Edward Evans-Pritchard, "Sexual Inversion among the Azande," *American Anthropologist* 72 no. 6 (1970).

male versions, suggesting that the ideal represented by *d'mba* crosses gender lines. The figures demonstrate how gender operates in this continuum: one carver will carve a figure wearing the *d'mba* mask with the semantic female body, the other will carve a similar figure with the phenomenal body of the dancer. Lamp continues to explain that with the Baga the hierarchy that gives men a higher status over women is an extremely complicated conundrum as at the same time the women are considered superior. When attending auditions in Conakry, some years ago, I was invited to a Baga dance group performing, and there I witnessed another remarkable element in Baga culture: the fact that it is the women who play the very tall drums to accompany their dancing.

The existing research for the four practices chosen for this thesis pays scant attention to the topic of a male dancer embodying a female character. More is the pity, as a quick search learns that in other parts of West Africa and (next to the masked dances discussed for Angola), elsewhere on the continent the appearance of female masks uniquely worn by men is no exception either. Many more can be added, for instance in Nigeria where the Urhobo perform with their *oniedjo* and *oyunworio* masks, female masks that play an important part in *orhowu* celebrations<sup>179</sup>, or the Efik with their *okpo ekak* masquerades where adolescents express the awakening of their sexual persona.<sup>180</sup> And elsewhere, we can find ever more (documented) examples: an overview of some of the best-known examples follows to illustrate the spread and importance of the practice.

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<sup>179</sup> Perkins Foss, *Where Gods and Mortals Meet* (New York, Museum for African Art, 2004), 123-127.

<sup>180</sup> Onyile Bassey Onyile, "Okpo Ekak", *African Arts* 49 no. 3 (2016): 55-56.

○ Dogon *dama* ceremony/Mali



Dogon young girl mask



Dancer in young girl mask

The Dogon have masks like these ones, where the artificial breast form part of the mask. When we are discussing masks, we need to remind ourselves that it does not mean the mask is limited to the wooden sculpted part: the mask is a unit with costume, accessories, music, dances, texts, actions.<sup>181</sup> Next to these young girl's masks there is the *satimbe* mask who also represent a female figure: in the mythology of many peoples in West Africa, there are many examples where the masques often have been introduced by women, but in order not to disturb the power balance the men have appropriated them and excluded women from their ceremonies. With the Dogon this rule is still quite strictly applied, with the exception of one single woman: the *ya sigine* Priestess.<sup>182</sup> But nowhere in the literature this transformation of the male dancer into the female mask gets attention as a separate topic, all the more surprising as the continuation of masked performance practices has largely become a matter feeding the tourist business.

<sup>181</sup> The Overture to Lamp's 2004 catalogue for the Baltimore Museum of Art offers a strong articulation of this all-important aspect of Masked Ceremonies.

<sup>182</sup> Alain Bilot, et al. *Masques du Pays Dogon* (Paris: Biro, 2003), 37.

- Another example from Nigeria: Igbo maiden mask



Maiden masks and musician



Maiden mas and two attendants

Although Cole's study on Igbo arts contains some intriguing photographs of cross-dressing (Ill.261 p 149, plate 30 p. 176, plate 33 p. 181<sup>183</sup>, ill. 334, p.221), he does not dedicate a special chapter on cross-dressing nor of performances of men masked as women.<sup>184</sup> In the introduction to his 1985 collection of essays on African Masquerade Arts though, he specifies that certain masks of the Igbo are shown "as mediators between women and men(...)" and "Actually, the maskers form a continuum, with a number being quite neutral or in-between, partaking of both worlds."<sup>185</sup> Discussing the Maiden Mask dances with the well-known *agbgo mmuo* masks he only mentions that the men add acrobatics to their refined movement, creating a masculine layer. In some instances, the Maiden masks perform with male masks who act irresponsibly and thus offset the gracefulness of the maidens (Cole 121). Other examples are given: the female spirits participating in *okperegede* drama. The accompanying illustration shows the masks arriving incongruously on bicycles.

In another part of Igboland, women have taken over since 1975 a specific dance called *ogbodo enyi* after an oracle had commanded this take-over. The *okumkpa* demands for the young men to be dressed as unmarried girls.<sup>186</sup> The ceremony culminates in a scene where an actor who is playing "a beautiful young girl who refuses to marry a series of suitors". Another Afikpo masquerade calls for female mask characters, incarnating young girls who are the focus of this masquerade. And the same mixture of awe and fear concerning women plays its ambivalent part as we saw earlier with the *Guéléde* of the Yoruba.

<sup>183</sup> included in this thesis on p. 53.

<sup>184</sup> Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1984), 113.

<sup>185</sup> Herbert Cole, ed., *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1985), 25.

<sup>186</sup> Cole, *Igbo Arts*, 167-168 Plate 31.



- Dan slit eyed masks /Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire



Author's collection (photo JLP)



Dan mask performing

Reed in his comprehensive study among the northern Dan, although he pays attention to the way gender role is acquired through initiation<sup>187</sup> does not discuss the gender of the masks, except his mention that a certain mask type is defined by the French speaking northern Dan of Ivory Coast as a women's mask.<sup>188</sup> But Fischer and Himmelheber do pay some attention to this aspect and relate an amusing interaction between masks of the *deangle* type, one male, the other female. When the female mask complains about the loss of two of her metal teeth, the invisible guardian of the initiation camp where the *deangle* mask assists the initiates, remarks that this is due to the fact that she is a woman and she should not have entered into contact with the male because he is the one who beat her which led to the loss of the teeth.<sup>189</sup> This points to a decidedly toxic masculinity at work in the dealing between male and female masks, but as the wearer of the female mask is necessarily a male as well, the altercations obtain an ambiguous overtone.

<sup>187</sup> Reed, *Dan Ge Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2003), 95-97.

<sup>188</sup> Reed, *Dan Ge*, 80.

<sup>189</sup> Fischer and Himmelheber, *Die Kunst der Dan* (Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 1976), 14.

- Punu *mukudj* mask/Gabon

Finishing off with an example of the masks well appreciated in the global north:



Mukudj mask



Mask dancing on stilts

*Mukudj* masks made by Punu peoples of southwestern Gabon<sup>190</sup> are idealized portraits of beautiful women of “refined physiognomy.”<sup>191</sup> Raised patterns of scarification were once inscribed on women’s faces to denote and enhance their charms and social standing. White clay adorning a *mukudj* is associated with the spirit realm “and, in the context of the dance, transforms the subjects represented from mere mortals into transcendent beings who command formidable powers.”<sup>192</sup> Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of such masquerades is that they are performed upon ten-foot-tall stilts by young men who accomplish acrobatic choreographies with astounding agility”.<sup>193</sup> A separate study dedicated to this type of mask<sup>194</sup>, tracing its history and its popularity in the wider region contains interviews with carvers as well as dancers who have performed in the mask, but the researcher does not question the gender transformation the dancers had to go through. Instead, the danger of the acrobatics wearing a mask restricting their view is expressed, as well as the way they protect themselves from evil influences when executing the perilous dancing.

<sup>190</sup> Plancke in her work on the Brazza Punu has observed gender complementarity at work in their dance events.

<sup>191</sup> LaGamma, *The Art of the Punu*, (Charlottesville: Univ. Virginia, 1995), 208, Fig. 24.

<sup>192</sup> LaGamma, 208.

<sup>193</sup> Nooter Roberts, 72.

<sup>194</sup> Stringfellow, *Female-Ancestor masks among the Punu*, (Dissertation Yale Univ. 2006): 122-130.

### III. Identity obliteration through possession

- Hausa *bori* trance possession /Niger



*Bori ceremony*

The most radical transformation is also the most difficult one to study, as examples of trance dance practices in the global north are such an exceptional societal phenomenon. Thompson Drewal distinguishes cross-dressing in ritual from possession trance, where she maintains that "there are more literally gender transformations."<sup>195</sup> which aligns with the observation that cross-dressing can be equated with impersonation, where transformation will need a more elaborate process in order to take place, but I would rather propose to place the radicality of trance possession in a category of its own. Possession trance in relation to gender, unlike masquerades, has received thorough attention in ethnographic research. The fluid gender concept has been stressed in this context: "(...) spirits of various pantheons often establish their masculinity or femininity as fluid rather than fixed, offering gender as a continuum of qualities found in both females and males."<sup>196</sup> This observation is followed by a list of examples to support this statement covering regions from West and East Africa alike. The most radical example of gender transformation has been studied by de Sousa: she analyses possession on the Bijago Islands collectively experienced by women who transform into young deceased males that have missed their initiation into adult manhood.<sup>197</sup> While possessed, the women abandon all of their chores and duties being the province of the women in their community ("Housework and nursing") and "(...) adopt a warrior's behaviour appropriate to the age group of the young men they incarnate (...) singing, dancing and drinking palm wine and the very strong local spirits."<sup>198</sup>

Although less radical than described by de Sousa, trance practices I have been a witness to indeed seem to transcend the boundaries of gender. If it is true that the spirit world

<sup>195</sup> Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 190.

<sup>196</sup> Heike Behrend & Ute Luig, *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), xvii.

<sup>197</sup> Alexandra de Sousa, "Defunct Women: Possession among the Bijago's Islanders," in *Spirit Possession*, eds. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 81-88.

<sup>198</sup> de Sousa, "Defunct Women", 84.

is conceptualised as a mirror image to the physical world<sup>199</sup>, it will not accommodate the gender binary as the all-pervading construct it is in the global north. In the global north, the first question asked about a newly born is invariably the question of the sexual identity of the child, and it thus constitutes the first step in gender inscription on the individual. It looks as if in precolonial times in many regions on the African continent, boys and girls only acquired gender at initiation; prior to that they had an undetermined gender and the theory that calls for circumcision, both for boys as well as for girls, consisted of cutting away the feminine or the masculine part of the sexual apparatus in order to obtain a proper gender.<sup>200</sup> Whether this means that children were considered androgynous or simply lacked gender is difficult to ascertain in an environment where the oppositional binary is not the basic concept of gender. According to Lang and Kuhle, "in Africa (...) originally mankind has been 'two sexed'. In boys the foreskin represents (...) the female part, whereas in girls the clitoris is assumed to be the male part." When we turn to Europe before the industrial revolution, children's gender in certain circles can show more fluidity: it was not uncommon that little boys were clothed in girl's dresses. A late example of this is documented by a picture of the British statesman Winston Churchill as a young child in a girl's dress, proudly displayed by his mother for the photographer.<sup>201</sup>

And while we're on the topic of pre-industrial revolution gender concepts: what would her plea to "unsex" her actually have meant to Lady MacBeth? Who are the spirits she's addressing? Is it really an appeal to remove her genitals? Or is she rather asking to acquit her of her female function in society? Are we able to find an answer to these questions when our habitus has inscribed the oppositional gender binary into all our perceptions since the arrival of the industrial revolution? In a personal communication, theatre scholar prof. Sola Adeyemi wrote "(...)the idea of a fixed binary, normative gender system as we know it is actually the non-normative factor in many communities in Africa, where gender is not about personality but about roles and identity in the society."<sup>202</sup> If we can't answer the questions evoked by Lady Macbeth's plea, how can we understand the processes taking place in an environment that can be characterised as patriarchal, maintaining a strict hierarchy between the sexes, but also cultivating a complementary view on gender, besides offering many liminoid as well as liminal occasions to participate on different points of the continuum. Patriarchy in the global north has been questioned and criticized for a long time and one might hope or suppose it is in the process of being dismantled, sometimes even successfully, but the oppositional gender binary and what it entails still has a long way to go, as attendance at any corporate board meeting or any house of parliament will reveal. How does one go about negotiating a constellation of continuums then?

As an example of the process of trance possession and its relation to gender, the well-researched Hausa practice of the *bori* will serve. The Hausa is a large (the largest) ethnic group in the region that lives mainly in Niger and Nigeria. They are predominantly Muslim, but the ancient pre-Muslim practice of *bori* trance dance is still very much alive. Certain theatrical characteristics of the *bori* practice have attracted the attention of scholars in theatre and performance studies<sup>203</sup> as well as photographers because of its spectacular impact.<sup>204</sup> Interestingly, where in the previous examples the female identity is acquired through adding

<sup>199</sup> on this matter see Anderson and Kreamer, *Wild Spirits*, 45.

<sup>200</sup> Jordán, *Makishi*, 20. "Circumcision is interpreted as removing the femaleness (foreskin) from the male sexual organ." (Including a reference to Griale for other parts of Africa).

<sup>201</sup> <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/M444653/The-young-Winston-Churchill>

<sup>202</sup> private mail message 7 May 2021.

<sup>203</sup> Besmer, *Horsemen, Musicians and Gods*, (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello Univ. 1983); Okagbue, *African Theatre*, "Deviants and Outcasts."

<sup>204</sup> Alida, *Bori*, (Milano: 5 Continents, 2010).

semantic (female) material to the phenomenal (male) body, in the case of the *bori* trance practice it is the other way around: once the dancer (or perhaps they should be called the medium in this context) has been possessed by the unpredictable spirit, its identity can be interpreted from the actions of the possessed dancer and only then they will acquire the appropriate costume and paraphernalia belonging to that particular spirit.

Besmer, in his detailed study of the *bori* phenomenon, lists (part of) the huge pantheon of spirits that are identified in *bori* sessions, each one with its own genealogy, characteristics and musical material. As an example of how these practices go: the *sulemanu* spirit will be recognised by its "bossy" behaviour, "declining to do anything himself and directing others to wait upon him." Furthermore, he is "displaying a stereotypical chiefly posture (...), dances or perhaps rocks rhythmically while seated, and attendants (...) agitate the air around him with ostrich-feather fans."<sup>205</sup> Besmer also states that "interestingly (...) the only person I observed who was possessed in this way was a woman." Once the medium is possessed by the spirit and the behaviour displayed is recognised, attendants will dress the medium in the appropriate attire, which in this case calls for high quality accoutrement to match the status of the spirit, "only the best gown, trousers, shirt, and accompanying garments, shoes, staff, prayer beads and fans may be used."

Okagbue has signalled the fact that *bori* is especially a vehicle for female participants with which they "try to subvert the authority and dominance of the men folk and the Islamic laws which keep them down"<sup>206</sup> but a colleague of mine in Niamey, who is studying the *bori* as a possible source for new directions in contemporary popular theatre, replied when asked about the measure of participation of men/women in the possession trance sessions that it depended on the locality and responsible organisation: some will show women as the main participants, others will show a gender parity (personal communication May 2021). Besmer indeed distinguishes two different types of performance: *amada* performances are exclusively female and performed in a more private setting, whereas gender mixed *bori* occasions are public affairs with professional musicians participating.<sup>207</sup> In those public *bori* sessions men as well as women participate as mediums. Okagbue himself admits later on in the chapter on *bori* practices that his perception of this phenomenon changed when he got into contact with another much larger and professionally organised *bori* group at a different compound in Zaria.<sup>208</sup> This observation then concords with Besmer's description. On the other hand, Alida maintains that "Membership in the *bori* is open to men and women, although female devotees predominate".<sup>209</sup> The trance dance sessions I witnessed in Northern Togo were equally balanced genderwise, an observation that was confirmed in a personal communication by rich source of emic knowledge, a Moba teacher who is well versed in the local cultural phenomena. In general however, possession trance on the continent is practiced mostly by women.<sup>210</sup> Behrend and Luig added in their study on spirit possession in Africa "That the great majority of the possessed were and are women (although in the last years the numbers of men have increased)."<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> All quotations from Besmer, 69.

<sup>206</sup> Okagbue, *African Theatres*, 59.

<sup>207</sup> Besmer, *Horses, Musicians & Gods*, 28.

<sup>208</sup> Okagbue, *African Theatres*, 75.

<sup>209</sup> Alida, *Bori*, 15.

<sup>210</sup> Besmer, *Horses, Musicians & Gods*, 16-17 dedicates some paragraphs on this matter for the *bori* case. Further literature on this matter: Bourguignon, Erika. 'Suffering and Healing, Subordination and Power: Women and Possession Trance'. *Ethos* 32.4, (2004): 557-574. Plancke, Carine. "The spirit's wish: Possession trance and female power among the Punu of Congo-Brazzaville." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41.4 (2011): 366-395.

<sup>211</sup> Behrend and Luig, *Spirit Possession*, xvii.

Osita Okagbue analyses how the position of *bori* practice has attracted marginalised members in a Muslim society, thus turning it into an arena for cross-dressing and gender-bending display.<sup>212</sup> Besmer, writing decades before Okagbue, seems to confirm this observation.<sup>213</sup> Okagbue maintains that "Cult activities also give them the chance and the means to assert cultural, gender, or sexual identities that are normally clandestine or driven underground."<sup>214</sup> Thus, the *bori* can function as an empowerment tool for the marginalised in an environment where Islam is hegemonic and dictates the hierarchy between the sexes. Despite its unaccommodating context it offers a public space to negotiate gender as well as sexuality to the marginalised,

It is not possible to ascertain the measure of wilful control playing a part in possession trance sessions. My personal observations suggests that there is a certain amount of readiness necessary to get possessed, it is instrumental in order to open the pathway for the spirits. This readiness can be induced by drugs in some cases and certainly in all cases by musical-kinetic actions. The image of the group of children imitating (practising, rehearsing?) the trance dance after the possession ceremony proper had been finished keeps lingering in my mind.

## Conclusions

*Non perché mi piace il giglio  
Gli altri fiori sprezzero*

*Paulo Antonio Rolli*

A preliminary remark: in the sub-Saharan performance practices studied in these chapters, the black (male) body in ritual contexts is majoritarian and doesn't need to operate through Dubois' double consciousness. Even in the rare occasions where there would be a (partly) white audience present, their position remains majoritarian and the dancers can decide which image they want to present to the outsider, either conforming to prejudiced gazes or challenging them, or taking a ludic approach. The black body becomes black only when it is perceived through the white majority, so in the ceremonial context this distinction must be made between the performances studied in chapter three of this thesis and the ones studied in chapter four.

Working on this study, a moment arrived when it struck home that sub-Saharan Africa as a colonial construct has been denied a discourse on gender fluidity, while the reality of its performance practices seems to call out for it. Practically nowhere in the literature the transformation of the male dancer into the female mask is studied as a separate topic. Some authors do pay some attention to the way the feminine traits of the mask are carved by the sculptor: high forehead, small slit eyes, thin nose, and a lush mouth in the case of the Dan masks. But with the notable exceptions of Guerra Marques and Thompson Drewal, they don't elaborate on the way the men who wear them are instructed and no attention is paid to gender issues in this context. This is all the more surprising as the phenomenon is quite widespread, as even a perfunctory internet research will learn. Only some scattered remarks and chapters refer to it: Bouttiaux in the introduction to her collection of essays, signals the fact that a certain number of female masks also can act in a way one associates with masculine

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<sup>212</sup> Okagbue, "Deviants and Outcasts" 280.

<sup>213</sup> Besmer, *Horses, Musicians, & Gods*, 150.

aggression and agitation<sup>215</sup> but she doesn't elaborate on the phenomenon. Luckily Elisabeth Cameron<sup>216</sup> provides us with a lively report on *lwena mwana wa pwevo* performance describing how the female mask as part of her dance routine sculpts a woman's body out of sand with prominent breasts and simulates sexual intercourse with the sculpture. Götrick's observation that "By the fact of a male actor enacting the female role, masculine vigour and feminine gentleness are combined to a pleasing entity, again emphasising the necessity of balance and harmony in society" might well be drawn on a more general scale.<sup>217</sup>

My assumption is that there is a broad continuum at play, between impersonation on the one hand and transformation on the other. At the impersonation end of the continuum, in the comical context, female behaviour is demonstrated, criticised, ridiculed even. The women are, as one would say in Brechtian parlance, "demonstrated" by the performers, allowing the performer the space to comment on the behaviour/actions/movements of the female he exposes. But in the case of spiritual appearances the female spirit inhabits the body of the masked or cross-dressed male and a transformation takes place.<sup>218</sup> Jordán, when interviewing Zambian mask (*likishi*) dancers about the process of transformation, noticed that they "described their experience as "losing" or "forgetting" themselves with the *likishi* character" but they denied being possessed. Within trance ceremonies however, a different process has to be taken into account, as the spiritual possession of a medium is beyond the ludic domain of impersonation or the performative one of transformation and has no equivalent on the stages of the global north.<sup>219</sup> Next to impersonation and transformation, there is the more radical process that will lead to possession, where the spirit itself is not embodied in the dancer, but where it takes total control. The dancer himself has turned into the spirit, the phenomenal and the semantic body have become one and the same.

Evidence of a gender concept that is complementary instead of oppositional abound in many of the examples studied. Quoting Neyt on this matter: "Zoals talrijke volken in Zwart-Afrika geloven de Luba in één God die zowel het mannelijke als het vrouwelijke principe overstijgt."<sup>220</sup> Such a complementary conception of gender acknowledges the continuum between male and female and opens the possibility to negotiate for an individual between their male and female side, as they are not in opposition with each other but are present side by side. For this thesis I have been tempted to attach the quality "gender-queer" to the *bori* ritual and comparable practices witnessed or studied. But queer in the global north can only be understood as a contestation of the strict gender binary. In an environment where male/female are conceptualised as complementary, the need to create a queer category collapses as any gender will include elements of each. Furthermore, in that environment the other binary homosexual-heterosexual collapses too.<sup>221</sup> Where in the global north gay is considered an identity, in other environments it is a behavioural option. Jagose is very explicit in her *Introduction*, when she states that "Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-

<sup>215</sup> Bouttiaux, *La Dynamique des Masques*, 19.

<sup>216</sup> In Lamp, *See the Music*, 278-280.

<sup>217</sup> Götrick, *Apidan*, 101.

<sup>218</sup> Götrick, *Apidan*, 88, comments on the transformation process from human to animal (i.e. python) in the *Apidan* spectacle, but does not pay attention to the transformation from male to female.

<sup>219</sup> An exception to this rule is studied in Njaradi, D. 'Trance in western theatrical dance: Transformation, repetition and skill learning', *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 4: 1, (2012), 23-41, doi: 10.1386/jdsp.4.1.23\_1

<sup>220</sup> Neyt, *Luba*, (Paris: Dapper, 1994), 176.

<sup>221</sup> the first decades of the Twenty-first century, non-gay MSM are appearing regularly in film, literature as well as studies on the topic in sub-Saharan Africa: in novels by Edozien, Dibia, films like *The Wound* (2018), *Walking with Shadows* (2019) and articles by Spronk, Kopano and others.

structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions."<sup>222</sup> The consequences of a different conception of genders, sexes and sexualities in sub-Saharan Africa can only be glimpsed at from our etic viewpoint and the imbrication with the colonial dominant views of the global north has immensely obscured the study of these topics. When I maintain that abstract art, like gay marriage, had been invented in sub-Saharan Africa long before Picasso was born and Holland opened marriage to same sex couples, I'm only partly ironizing.

In the societies researched, the gender binary in the sense the global north has defined it as being in mutually exclusive opposition, is not applicable in these contexts. Philosophic systems in the societies researched emphasize the complementary character of the gender binary. This view does not entail however that the patriarchal hierarchy is not maintained: generally, as concluded by the researchers on Yorouba<sup>223</sup>, Baulé<sup>224</sup>, Dogon<sup>225</sup> and other practices, the occasions where cross-dressing or role exchanging are practiced, in the end function to affirm the existing hierarchy rather than challenge it. Nevertheless, a liminal or liminoid space is created where the boundaries of gender identity become porous and non-normative masculinities can be expressed.

The list of practices examined for this thesis is certainly not exhaustive and is only hinting at the variety of practices involving a degree of cross-dressing and identity exchange in ceremonial and comparable contexts in West Africa. In all of these examples it can be stated that the male dancer is reshaped into a dancer that is no longer only male but has acquired a persona that includes female elements on a wide continuum between superficial adornment and full transformation. The research undertaken has not come up with an answer as to the gender identity created by the mask; as the environment in which the practices take place will rather support a complementary view of gender rather than a mutually exclusive binary, ascribing a gender to a mask might be a *contradictio in terminis* as illustrated for instance by the reaction reported in the personal communication on Bedik mask ceremonies.<sup>226</sup> Hypothetically, the identity taken by the dancer might fall outside gender categorisation. The gender acquired through the masking process is to be defined on spiritual rather than sexual terms. Guy le Moal's research on mask types in Burkina Faso seems to arrive at a similar conclusion when he states that it is "(...) jamais jugé utile de préciser leur sexe"<sup>227</sup> thus pointing to an undetermined gender that has to be prepared through a process of depersonalisation: "Pour qu'il y ait "masque" il a fallu qu'un homme s'efface, c'est à dire cesse d'être lui-même, se dépouille de son individualité, pour devenir un être nouveau et différent: le masque."<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (New York, New York Univ. Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>223</sup> Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 187-190, gives a detailed analysis of the gender and power relations in Yorouba society.

<sup>224</sup> Vogel, *Baulé*, 185, explains the complexities of the mask identities' hierarchy when dealing with a complementary view of the gender binary.

<sup>225</sup> Bedaux & van der Waals, *Dogon*, 98, explicitly mention the antagonism between male and female that comes out during mask ceremonies.

<sup>226</sup> See annexe II.

<sup>227</sup> Guy le Moal, *Les Bobo: nature et fonction des masques*. (Tervuren: MRAC, 1999), 165.

<sup>228</sup> le Moal, 168.



## **5. Intercultural playgrounds: performing alternative masculinities**

*Art is the place where we can explore the things we don't want to explore.*  
Sulaiman Addonia

Fischer-Lichte dedicates a whole paragraph in her monograph on performance art to define the difference between theatrical performance and ritual, but she admits that "it is difficult to find criteria for a clear distinction between them."<sup>229</sup> After some considerations, the only distinctions she is able to find, are that in ritual the liminal experience leads to "first, durability (irreversibility) and second, social recognition."<sup>230</sup> The ceremonies that have been studied for this thesis however, do not fall under the ritual categories Fischer-Lichte is referring to: *mblo*, *mwana phwo*, *a-Bol*, *mukundj* and others are ceremonies that serve social as well as aesthetic purposes. Initiation ceremonies involving masked dancers and transforming the other participants' ontologies are manifold, but they have not been under consideration as we're dealing with the performers' transformations and not those the participating audiences are subjected to. The ceremonies studied here do indeed create liminal/liminoid events, but the transformations operated on the performers are neither irreversible nor leading to a socially recognized permanent state. They can be categorized as theatrical performance, comparable to the performances she is referring to in her study of their "transformative power." In this thesis then this type of events is under consideration as performance art.

Perhaps the main difficulty in the writing of this thesis lies in the field of categorisation. Strict categories, fixed positions, unambiguous semantics do not apply to the field of performance. Gender has to be approached as a continuum, and the masked dance phenomenon also has to be approached as such: Picton, in the introduction to his article on masks and masquerades, states that he is "not advancing the proposition that someone is more or less categorically different in virtue of the mask that he had put on, for this is a proposition that can not be taken for granted."<sup>231</sup> Not only gender is on a continuum, so are mask identities and masquerades. Picton draws a figure of a four point continuum, differentiating three types of masks and adding a conspicuous fourth one, which is defined as all mask types not belonging to the other three, and he stresses the fact that "we are not dealing with self-contained categories, but with functional polarities distributed along a four-part continuum."<sup>232</sup> His examination of the practices of *ebira* masquerade in Nigeria carefully avoids simplification, reduction, even categorisations are always presented as a moment in a process rather than fixed starting or arriving points. This turns out to be the most fruitful way to approach the topic for this thesis.

And perhaps we could even add a third continuum as another constituent for the topic of gender expression: in this case a three point continuum, involving the real world, the metaphysical world and performed reality. Authors like Ben Okri in his *The Famished Road*-trilogy (1991-1998) have well captured the dynamics of such a continuum for an etic audience. The continual flow of metaphysical, performative, and physical/material elements in his trilogy are perhaps the most accurate rendering of an ontology that is alien to the global north. Another novelist, from a very different part of the continent, has provided the readers with the description of the continuum of sexuality and gender identities from an emic position. His novel is set within the exceptional heterotopic liminal space of a refugee camp in an African conflict zone. Sulaiman Addonia's *Silence is my mother tongue* (2018) is an

<sup>229</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*, 175.

<sup>230</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*, 179.

<sup>231</sup> Picton, "What's in a mask." *African Languages and Cultures* 3 no. 2 (1990): 49.

<sup>232</sup> Picton, "What's in a mask," 61.

overwhelming read where each single page is filled with physical, sensorial experience, illustrating how gender and sexuality evolves and articulates if the usual binaries don't apply. The author, who acquired his knowledge of the English language through study in the United Kingdom, offers us an emic vista of the fluid gender and sexuality in his Eritrean/Ethiopian/Sudanese surroundings reformulated into the acquired language of the global north, thus presenting the reader a valuable combination of emic observations translated into an etic language system.

The constellation of these continuums has provided the framework to evaluate the performance practices on their portrayal of a range of masculinities.

Comparing the performances discussed in Chapter 3.1 and looking for common solutions they propose in order to challenge hegemonic masculinity, the following elements stand out offering an alternative to the toxic variety: tenderness, together with non-competitive playfulness, next to solidarity against a hostile outside world and especially the shifting, changing and continuously evolving qualities of a relationship constitute the major elements in these productions offering alternative masculinities:

- A relationship that is mutually transformative is often the base of the performance and instead of fixed positions that enter into conflict, we witness a continuous shifting, turning, changing, redefining of positions throughout the performances. Perhaps the influence of a queer gaze is playing a part in this: as already remarked: heterosexual relationships have a built-in asymmetry that sets them apart from homosexual relationships, for which the roles can change and for which hierarchies can be a choice made temporarily.
- The display of tenderness between men is problematic, as the performances of Ruggeds and Attou clearly showed. Whenever physical contact between men threatens to obtain a tender quality, it is quickly dispelled by ironizing it, or turning it into the standard rough and ready repertoire that one can witness between men at sport schools. The theatre artists Hjort and George among others have acknowledged in their rehearsal processes that masculinity is mainly performed between men, it's about men performing their masculinity directed at other men, and not so much for the sake of the women. Here, my gay gaze switches on when I wonder how they behave amongst themselves when there is no other audience present. Because one cannot be mistaken about the quality of the demonstrations: it is tenderness in disguise and it takes on the only approved shape among heterosexual men, otherwise they would be entering gay territory, which is a thing to avoid - at least in public certainly. But in West Africa two men walking hand in hand is standard practice without any suspicious connotations, while European gays, even if they live in reportedly tolerant societies like the Dutch, know all too well how risky this type of display can be. Both the Ruggeds and the Attou performances avoid the element of tenderness carefully by poking fun at it or simply by rejecting it when someone initiates something resembling it. This forms a marked difference with the other performances discussed in more detail. In those performances, tenderness is an element that only can be reached through torment and conflict. Melancholy, mourning, loss but also hope are the painful cornerstones of this tenderness.
- Non-competitive playfulness, perhaps surprisingly, is an element that is recurring in all the performances discussed. Where the standard masculine playfulness will always contain an element of rivalry (again the Ruggeds and Attou show this abundantly), in these alternative settings the playfulness demonstrated refers to shared pleasure and the ludic (camp stances, phallic costume, a high heeled strut) might even contain a

method of contestation, perhaps in line with Butler's suggestions concerning pastiche and parody.<sup>233</sup>

- Solidarity against a hostile outside world. This is an element often implicit in the performances that walk the intersection tightrope between gender and colour in a society where white is majoritarian as well as hegemonic. The titles like the brilliantly ambiguous *They/Them* and *White Noise* already point in that direction. Dubois double consciousness plays a part but it is beyond that level that the performances seek to operate.

The alternative masculinities we have observed in African dance and ritual in Chapter 4.2 can be very multifaceted, defying categorisation as they cover a wide range on the continuum between impersonation and transformation. To single out some of them:

- the brother accompanying the boy who is to be initiated can dress and act as mother or sister in Jola men initiation. The adolescent initiated males take on female functions, marked by their attire.
- *vodun* priests will transform into female spirits. Both a male as well as a female *bokonon* (*vodun* diviner) can practice their rituals in the guise of the other gender; Preston Blier in her thorough monography of *vodun* practices states that "Sorcerers in this area are said to be of both sexes (...)"<sup>234</sup> The difference between oppositional and fluid gender binary is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in *vodun*, the adepts become *vodunsi* - literally "wife of the *vodun*", whether the adept (or the *vodun*) is male or female is of no importance<sup>235</sup>, while in the Roman Catholic church, the girls who did their holy communion around their twelfth birthday until the late sixties of last century at least were clad in white elaborate long wedding dresses<sup>236</sup> - not so the boys, if I remember correctly (and I'm sure I would have remembered such a happening, it would be an interesting question to research at what moment in life the gay gaze actually starts operating as such).
- the deities do not distinguish gender when they want to interfere with the banalities of life: they pick their objects at random and turn them into subjects through which their agency is channelled. During the possession trance ceremonies I witnessed, one male medium disappeared to return in a different dress, carrying a power object and turning dizzying pirouettes for what seemed an eternity, elegantly displaying the skirt attached to the bodice.
- in Moba funerals, the person who will act out the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the deceased when still alive, that person's gender does not have to be the same as the actual deceased. The quality of the performance is the thing that counts, regardless of the gender.
- Dan masks can change gender during their career, and even decidedly female masks with an unmistakable female coiffure can sport little beards.<sup>237</sup>

This is just a selection of the wide range on the continuum of masculine identities that can be performed in ceremonies, celebrations, and rituals. Without any doubt, many more could be added, as the work on this thesis has revealed further examples can be found in a wide variety

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<sup>233</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York, 1990), 188.

<sup>234</sup> Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Aft, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>235</sup> Preston Blier, *African Vodun*, 392, note 38.

<sup>236</sup> For those unfamiliar with this practice:

<https://www.oudwezelopdefoto.be/p880488130/h1f3d11c3#h1f3d11c3>

<sup>237</sup> Gottschalk, *l'Art du Continent Noir, Volume 2* (Düsseldorf, Gottschalk Verlag, 2007), 64-65- 66-67.

of regions on the continent.<sup>238</sup> The contexts as we have seen can be on a continuum as well between extremely private (an individual consultation of a diviner or healer to extremely public (Guéléde daytime celebrations), between extremely formal (Dogon *dama* masquerades) to very informal (Ghanese festive crossdressing). In their respective contexts, they all mark a point on the continuum, offering the possibility to perform it as such, while the aim of the performances discussed in 3.1 is to comment upon, criticize or even queer the oppositional binaries of gender and sexuality. This thesis then supports the view that, despite their different environments, not only the contemporary stage in the hegemonic north addresses the issue of masculinity and offers possible alternatives to its toxic manifestations, but that comparable dynamics can be observed in ceremonial performances throughout the continent. We're dealing in both cases with playgrounds for performative expressions of gender fluidity, and we're rubbing shoulders with Douglas Clarke's observation, quoted by Spronk that "Africa has a model for queer theory that is largely unexplored in the Western world."<sup>239</sup> This observation aligns with the much earlier conclusion drawn by Coullie in 1996 about "(...)traditional black practices being eroded by Western hegemony."<sup>240</sup>

Now in their original context researchers have analysed in many cases that especially the mask practices in reality function to maintain the hierarchic power structures related to gender. The conclusion might be shared that was drawn by Janson, studying shifting gender norms of the Tablighi Jama'at Islamic movement in The Gambia, that "Paradoxically by reconfiguring gender norms Gambian Tablighis eventually reinstate the patriarchal gender order"<sup>241</sup> But it is equally important to emphasize that the cross-dressing and gender-exchanging events do provide possibilities for transgression, and the liminal event created for the ceremonies can be a site where non-normative behaviour can find an expression. As already mentioned, Okagbue has made pertinent observations in this respect on the Hausa *bori* cult.<sup>242</sup>

An important conclusion has been reached by Thompson Drewal in her study on Yoruba ritual:

So even with rigidly structured gender roles, both men and women in Yoruba society have institutionalized opportunities within ritual contexts to cross gender boundaries and to express the traits assigned to the opposite gender.<sup>243</sup>

She has reached that conclusion after extensive fieldwork in the last quarter of the previous century. Even if her conclusions apply to Yoruba culture, there are enough observations to be made that this conclusion might apply to a number of African societies. Her last conclusion is very significant for this research. When discussing a female Sango adept with whom she has had a lot of exchanges Thompson Drewal states:

Unlike cross-dressing and female or male impersonations in the West, her results are true reversals - temporary gender transformations, opposite and symmetrical.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Fani-Kayode, "Styles and Levels of Acting", 130, refers in the passing to examples he witnessed but did not study in Zimbabwean performances where "Maria was a young man trained to behave, dance and wriggle like a woman. His costume and mask impersonate a female."

<sup>239</sup> Rachel Spronk, "Queering Love", in *Routledge Handbook Queer Africa Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 26.

<sup>240</sup> cited in Nonhlanhla Dlamini. "Negotiating legitimacy and normalization of queer desires in Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*," *Journal of the African Literature Association* 10 no. 1(2016): 69.

<sup>241</sup> Janson, "Male Wives", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 46 no. 2-3 (2016): 187.

<sup>242</sup> Okagbue, "Deviants and Outcasts," 271.

<sup>243</sup> Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 190.

<sup>244</sup> Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 190.

Now cross-dressing and female impersonation are as common in Africa as they are in "the West" so Thompson Drewal is creating a dichotomy that is a simplification of the practices studied for this thesis: in both contexts it's a continuum we're dealing with although the continuums in both cases are not the same. Of course, many stages between the one or the other pole are discernible, even in the course of the same event: in Guéléké for example, the nighttime part where Tetede appears, the dancer performing in the mask has reached the role through a process of transformation, while in the afternoon dances the dancers performing in their female mask and attire are closer to impersonation.

Thompson Drewal's firm statement about the true reversal that has taken place forms a rare example where this gender transformation has received the attention it deserves. From the examples studied, it can't be concluded that these "true reversals" are always in operation and the example she gives might constitute one pole on the continuum, beyond which we would be entering the realm of possession trance.

Earlier on, I already stressed that (masked) African ceremonies for this study are firmly categorized as performance art - but this is in itself a contradiction, as "Performance by its nature resists conclusions, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries and limits so useful to traditional academic writing (...)"<sup>245</sup> and "performance is an anti-discipline" of which "the trickster is its guru".<sup>246</sup> Carlson defines it in his conclusion as:

[A] specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences, both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in -emotionally, mentally and perhaps even physically.<sup>247</sup>

This is followed by a statement on the aim of (theatrical) performance:

In theatrical performance, performance and audience alike accept that a primary function of this activity is precisely cultural and social metacommentary, the exploration of self and other, of the world as experienced *and of alternative possibilities* (my emphasis).

An association with carnival might well be justified here: at certain moments, in certain cases and within well-defined parameters, the (patriarchal) hierarchy will be mimicked in a distorted mirror, providing the saturnalia that offer both release from the strict hierarchy and an occasion to mock the powers that be - in order to re-establish doubly its power after the event. In certain practices discussed this might be the case, or partly the case, but the continuum is so much filled with all kinds of nuances that in other instances a site is created where many different gender identities can temporarily be assumed. The Guéléké spectacle is not just celebrating patriarchal power, it is also about pleading with the women to use their female power in a positive way; the *bori* trance dances create a space for the marginalised in the hegemonic Islamic environment and provides them with an agency they would never have in "real" life. Guerra Marques, discussing the Chokwe mask ceremonies adds an interesting notion when she concludes that

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<sup>245</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, 26.

<sup>246</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, 206.

<sup>247</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, 214.

Estas duas máscaras (i.e. Mwana Phwo and Cihongo) em representação de dos polos sociais fundamentais (...)pode ser apreciadas numa perspectiva de riqueza e complexidade artísticas, mas também pela sua capacidade para articular novas ideias, normas e valores.<sup>248</sup>

Gender dynamics have moved between and betwixt the colonially imported oppositional gender binary and are operating in a perspective of possibly pre-colonial gender complementarity of which the Dogon's Eighteenth-century hermaphrodite mythological statue in the Metropolitan Museum might be the most perfect expression.<sup>249</sup>

There are many parallels between the two practices compared in Chapter 3.1 and 4.2, but a vital distinction that separates the practices needs to be emphasized as well: as has been remarked, the position of the black male body either in the minoritarian or in the majoritarian context entails different performances of masculinity. On the stages of the global north in front of a hegemonic white audience the extra load of associations, meaning, historical tensions, affect even, will always resonate in the performances at hand, where this dimension is not playing a role in the (non tourist-driven) ceremonies in West Africa.

As an interestingly side-line in this perspective, and providing an illustration of the gradual evolution of masked performances can be followed when looking at some examples that have been documented of mask ceremonies where dancers wear a mask depicting a white European who is (often) being poked fun at.<sup>250</sup> Without question these performances harken back to colonial times, as the mask represents invariably an official representative of the colonial administration, sometimes accompanied by his spouse clutching her handbag (or, amusingly, an anthropologically interested person doing fieldwork, carrying along her notebook and/or camera). These displays offer an entertaining example of impersonation as critique. Van Beek describes how a Dogon mask representing a white person has evolved:

Once upon a time the performer would walk round the perimeter of the dance, asking for money. Upon receiving it he would write a receipt and salute - the colonial administrator and tax collector! Nowadays the same mask has a wooden camera in its hand, weaves through the dancing masks, pushes people aside to get a better view, takes "shots" from impossible angles and is generally obnoxious to everyone: the tourist in action!<sup>251</sup>

While writing the thesis, I got evermore convinced of the importance of the different concepts of gender that are playing a role in the two sets of practices studied. Gender identity on a continuum instead of in constant opposition will carry along a different outlook on the other gender and this thesis has only made a first attempt to explore this topic by focusing on celebrations and liturgies where gender definition is played with. Gender is approached in many places and on many occasions from a very ludic viewpoint: I reminded myself of the ease with which my Beninese actor borrowed make up from his female colleague and the

<sup>248</sup> Guerra Marques, *Máscaras Cokwe*, 194." These two masks as representations of two fundamental social poles (...) can be appreciated for their artistic richness and complexity, but also for their potential to articulate new ideas, norms and values." (translation JLP)

<sup>249</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/736448>. Luc de Heusch, citing Marcel Griaule in his film on the Dogon, explains it as follows: "Nmomo, l'ancêtre des hommes, était androgyne. Dieu lui trancha la verge, les testicules, le clitoris. Il le sacrifie et le fit renaître comme couple procréateur".

<sup>250</sup> <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/chapters/cultural-exchange/exchange/?start=4> The Iowa university *Art and Life in Africa* project shows interesting field photographs taken in the eighties of last century. More recent examples can be found in Jordán, *Makishi*, 50 and 66.

<sup>251</sup> Walter van Beek, "African Tourist Encounters", *Africa* 73 no. 2-3 (2003): 275.

argument of the market woman that I could just as well use the female figurines because men had breasts as well, as reported at the beginning of the thesis. I especially wondered at my own reaction on both occasions: why did I -a seasoned homosexual male of a certain age- react with so much surprise to these occasions? It was obvious that my gay gaze at the time had not suspected such an easy and relaxed dealing with gender matters in this environment - meaning a West African country. With hindsight, these two incidents are symptomatic, both of the difference in gender concept but also of the heterosexual Africa construct to which I had fallen victim myself when I started out working in West Africa. This becomes even more telling when I realised that I was not surprised at all to discover that the secretly organised big gay parties (two hundred participants being no exception), regularly thrown by what could be designated as the local gay community in the capitals of Togo and Bénin, invariably featured a drag catwalk parade as the highlight of the evenings' fun.

Important characteristics of theatrical performance that are shared in African ceremonies as well as contemporary theatre are manifold. The behaviour displayed is consciously separated from the person doing it and demonstrates a specific way of embodying restored behaviour as famously defined by Schechner. Focusing on the gender aspect it is very clear this is an important topic in performance activities, whether they are manifest as contemporary theatre work or as African masked or trance ceremonies. Both show non-standardized models of gendered behaviour. The intention in one case can be to present alternatives and set in motion processes of change: "[P]erformance attempts not to tell (like theatre) but rather to provoke synaesthetic relationships between subjects"<sup>252</sup> but in the other case it can just serve opposite goals and serve to underline existing gender definitions instead of undermining them. Matthias Eck discusses recent German stage plays but his observations also apply to performance events:

As a space for imagination, they can provide alternative masculinities. By the same token theatre can also create masculinities that are close to the hegemonic ideal. Plays and the stage can simultaneously be the arena for gender critique and gender fantasy, they can criticize traditional images of men and at the same time uphold them. Gender fantasy can be both complicit in and critical of hegemonic masculinity because plays by their very nature allow for contradiction—the same contradiction and ambiguity men may feel about masculinity. In a context in which hegemonic masculinity is challenged and has become socially unacceptable, plays which simultaneously criticize and present fantasies of hegemonic masculinity may be comforting and enjoyable for the male reader and spectator. As such theatre provides a space for ambiguity and evasion.<sup>253</sup>

The theatre artists I interviewed for this paper were unanimous in their opinion that the contemporary stage provides them with the possibility to question, problematise, analyse and especially criticize hegemonic, toxic and other harmful forms of masculinity. Sometimes they have taken their own ontological paradigm to devise theatrical events, sometimes they started from observations of processes in society, sometimes they reread existing repertoire with new eyes from the perspective of hegemonic or alternative masculinity. And in all of these cases they experimented with alternative behaviour, thus mirroring practices of what can be described as alternative masculinities in certain African liturgies, celebrations and comparable performance practices.

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<sup>252</sup> Féral, *Performance and Theatricality*, cited in Carlson, *Performance*, 151.

<sup>253</sup> Eck, "Theatre and the Stage", *European Drama and Performance Studies* 10 no. 1 (2018): 187.

The strong tendency to categorise that is so characteristic of the global north's culture, not only has established a fixed gender binary, it also has relegated the liminal space where this binary can be questioned or at least blurred to the heterotopic space of theatre venues. The global majority on the other hand allows for many more spaces where this can occur and has often integrated these dynamics into everyday life. I remember vividly my reaction to the performance I saw in Amsterdam of the Wodaabe's *geerewol* dances: the men aligned in elegantly embroidered costumes, bejewelled, wearing make-up, rolling their eyes, baring their teeth, shamelessly advertising their beauty and elegance to the outside world. This was indeed a very different display of masculinity that was presented in front of my gay gaze. In Abidjan, some years ago, I witnessed a similar event when I attended one of the yearly *bagnon* competitions, a male beauty contest that is an recurrent event in the Bété society of West-Central Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>254</sup> Young men show their prowess and elegance at dance and other types of performance (demonstrating how to move in local (considered traditional) as well as in international contemporary costume, including swimwear) in front of a hysterical (there's no other word to describe the deafening din it made) audience. In a local rag the next day an article complained that this beautiful traditional event threatened to be highjacked by the gay community, and there's no doubt that the *bagnon* in Abidjan has absorbed the influence of metropolitan culture and probably would have functioned in a very different way in its original context, possibly much more similar to the *geerewol* dances. Hendricks and Spronk, in a recent article, have signalled that "(...)researchers from all over the continent are courageously confronting the heteronormative regimes of knowledge in their respective academic settings, unearthing often-hidden queer lives, worlds and stories(...)."<sup>255</sup>

All these examples can serve to demonstrate how fluid gender identity can be articulated in different contexts in West African societies, where the global north has reserved the theatre venues to that purpose. But despite the major differences it has become clear that aesthetic performance practices in both worlds can offer the ludic environment to define as well as transgress gender or sexuality and its dictates.

### Further research

- This thesis only contains a general proposal: further investigation into the functioning of performance practices as a site for alternative masculinities within specific sub-Saharan cultures might yield interesting vistas. Okagbue's research into the *bori* practice might serve as a valuable pointer. A happy coupling of performance studies specialists and anthropologists would be ideal to start excavating this field. And perhaps material might be unearthed to support the view that pockets of pre-colonial gender and sexuality concepts are still detectable in certain performance practices.
- The Covid situation has limited the range of research for the second part of this thesis; it has mainly remained literature study, where I had planned a (short) stay in Togo: I could have done some fieldwork during the theatre festival I had been invited to, as the Festival International du Théâtre et Arts Plastiques would have assembled performing artists from many regions in

<sup>254</sup> <https://rezoivoire.net/ivoire/patrimoine/2273/le-bagnon-ou-culte-de-la-beaute-dans-la-societe-bete.html#.YJriI8Rppk>

<sup>255</sup> Thomas Hendricks and Rachel Spronk, "Rethinking Sexuality from Africa", *Codesria Bulletin* 1-2 (2017): 28.



(mainly) West Africa, many of them working in international as well as local performance practices. The festival has been postponed to November 2021, so I won't be able to include my future findings into the thesis.

- The *théâtre populaire* of Francophone West Africa might not have survived as a live event in the region: a couple of years ago, on a visit to Paramaribo, capital city of the former Dutch colony Suriname, I was lucky to witness the Surinamese equivalent of the genre and it was very alive and kicking. For more than two hours of roaring laughter and general merriment I attended a splendid piece of popular theatre in Sranantongo, a language I don't speak, but that didn't prevent anyone from enjoying the spectacle. The cast was headed by an exuberant actor - in drag. There was no programme so I can't give credit where credit is due, I can't even provide the title of the play, but of course much of the play was improvised on the spot. As Dutch still is the official language of the country occasionally a Dutch word or phrase was uttered, adding to the mirth.

In Holland, a very popular Dutch comedian with roots in Suriname has had his own tv-show for a couple of years until fairly recently. The highlight of each episode, at the end, was the appearance of his *alter ego* Tante Es (Auntie Es), who enters executing a short dance, fully dressed as a *kotomisi* (a woman clad in a traditional *koto*) including the African-derived headscarf called *angisa*. In this attire (but sporting her elegant moustache as well) she receives a special guest that can come from all walks of life.

Of course, these examples are perfectly comparable with other events of cross-dressing for comical entertainment purposes and can be just as well read as means to support the fixed gender binary - or just its opposite, as it has this potential side to it as well. In the second example the comedian actually has often pleaded for downright acceptance of same-sex relationships in what can be a reportedly homophobic environment.<sup>256</sup>

Research has been done and is going on concerning the relationship between Latin American carnival celebrations and celebratory practices on the African continent. Cross-dressing being an integral part of carnival manifestations, further research into possible links might yield interesting results. The influence of ritual or celebratory practices from Africa on carnival celebrations might include the fluid gender aspect that could be the topic of further research.<sup>257</sup>

- One aspect has been left out in this research which I originally intended to include as well, but I think it deserves a separate study: the economy of masked ceremonies, celebrations, dance events, liturgies would need to get much more attention than it has had so far in academic research. Only occasional remarks appear (f.i. Götrick where it is mentioned that from the earnings for an Apidan performance half goes to the drummers, underscoring

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<sup>256</sup> <https://caribischnetwork.nl/2019/07/23/er-ontstaan-nu-twee-felle-kampen-op-curacao-over-het-homohuwelijk/>

<sup>257</sup> <http://ayibamagazine.com/african-roots-carnival/> "Enslaved masses, many from West African regions, brought with them to the Americas a variety of musical instruments, dance rhythms, and singing styles that gave birth to today's Carnival sounds. The *batuque*, for example, a rhythmic percussion sound essential to the music and dance of *samba*, is taken from Candomblé, a religion practiced by many Afro-descendants in the region of Bahia, Brazil. The religion is infused with Yoruba traditions dating back to slavery. In the past, practitioners danced in the streets to the sound of music, a crystallized moment of release from everyday oppression." *The Drama Review* 42 no. 3 (Fall 1998): 24-37 contains an article on this subject, like *African Arts* 43 no. 4 (Winter 2010): 42-59.

the agency of the music often observed in ritual and ceremony).<sup>258</sup> Especially an emic investigation into the dynamics of the economic aspect would probably add a significant element to the understanding of the phenomena researched for this study.

*This essay-turned-thesis has been started on March 22nd 2020, one week after the drastic measures of forced behaviour related to the covid pandemic were introduced in Holland too. Foucault was very present during the writing process of it. Biopolitics have never been so convincingly demonstrated as for the past year.*

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<sup>258</sup> Götrick, *Apidan*, 107.

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p. 27 The Ruggeds

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p. 28 My Heart into my Mouth

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p. 30 They/them

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p. 31 White Noise

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p. 32 Making Men

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p. 40 David by Donatello

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p. 40 Two pictures Ewoud Broeksma

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p. 44 upper left: La Bourgeoise

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p. 45 upper left: Erwin Olaf

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upper right: Ajamu

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lower left: Dogon young girl mask

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lower right: Dancer in young girl mask

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p. 46 upper right : Tetede mask in the process of dressing

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upper right: Dance in Baamaaya dance costume

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p. 47 upper left: Rudi Geysler

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lower left: Makonde pregnant woman mask

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p. 53 Apidan Theatre

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p. 58 Igbo mask

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p. 63 left: Baulé Portrait mask

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right: Portrait mask and model together

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p. 65 left: Mwana Phwo mask.

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right: Dancer in full attire.

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p. 67 Kashinakaji Mask

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p. 68 left: D'mba mask

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right: D'mba mask dancing

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p. 70 left: Dogon young girl mask

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right: Dancer in young girl mask

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p. 71 left: Maiden masks with musician

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right: Maiden mask with two attendants

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p. 72 right: Dan mask performing

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p. 72 left: Mukundj mask

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right: Mask dancing on stilts

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p.74 Bori ceremony

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Annexe I Interview

Annexe II Personal communication Julen Villarreal october 2020

(For my paper on alternative masculinities on stage)

Interview/Interview

Espen Hjort	<i>My heart into my mouth</i>
Christian Guerematch	<i>White Noise</i>
Sedrig Verwoert	<i>Them/they</i>
Harold George	<i>Making men</i>
Ryan Djojokarso	<i>Giovanni's Room</i>

De onderstaande vragenlijst is niet bedoeld als een strict protocol: ik stip alleen een paar noties aan die van belang zijn voor mijn paper getiteld: *Comme you Spirits, Unsex me Here: Contemporary Theatre and West African Ceremonies as a Playground for Alternative Masculinities*. Als je liever een verhaal schrijft over deze onderwerpen, is het natuurlijk net zo welkom, maar ik hoop het werk voor jullie te vergemakkelijken door het samenstellen van deze lijst. Hartelijk dank!

The following list of questions is not intended as a strict protocol that has to be kept to: I only hint at a couple of topics that are important to my paper that bears the title: *Comme you Spirits, Unsex me Here: Contemporary Theatre and West African Ceremonies as a Playground for Alternative Masculinities*. If you prefer to write your own story about these topics, that is fine with me of course, but I hoped to make the job easier through the composition of this list. Thanks a million!

1. Als je terugdenkt aan de omgeving waar je opgegroeid bent, wat heb je daarvan meegekregen voor wat betreft man-zijn. Zijn er specifieke *do's and don'ts* die op dit gebied aan jou overgedragen zijn door gezin, familie, school, vrienden.

1. Thinking back to the environment where you grew up, how did that shape your person as a male. Are there any specific *do's and don'ts* that have been transferred to you in this matter by your family, school, friends you frequented.

2. In jouw voorstelling toon je een manier van man-zijn die voorbij gaat aan de gebruikelijke clichés op dat terrein. Kun je aangeven op welke manier je gezocht hebt en hoe je uiteindelijk gekomen bent tot de vormgeving van het man-zijn zoals je die hanteert.

2. In your spectacle you show a way of being a man that goes beyond the usual standardised characterisation. Could you explain in what way you researched this topic and explain how you developed the characterisation that you finally chose.

3. Kun je iets zeggen over het parcours dat je afgelegd hebt dat uiteindelijk leidde tot de keuze voor dit onderwerp/thema?

3. Could you enlarge on the trajectory that you pursued that in the end led to the choice for this topic.

4. Ben je (als toeschouwer of als deelnemer) in je jeugd in aanraking gekomen met manifestaties van cross-dressing of gender-bending en herinner je je nog wat voor indruk dat op je maakte.

Annexe II: Personal communication 29 october 2020, witness account by Julen Villarreal.

Anécdota con los Bedik (Senegal)

En julio de 2018 viajé al denominado País Bedik, situado en la Región de Kedugu (Kédougou, en francés), Senegal. En el pueblo de Indar, situado al oeste de Bandafassi (capital del distrito administrativo homónimo), conocí a un hombre llamado Jean-Pierre

Ñapam Kamara, hijo del jefe de tradición del mítico pueblo de Ecuwar. El señor Kamara fue

mi guía durante aquellos días.

Era el periodo de lluvias, y los Bedik se disponían a labrar y sembrar nuevos campos de

mijo, cacahuets y maíz, entre otros. El trabajo campestre tiene un gran componente social e

incluso religioso. El dueño del campo convoca a los vecinos del pueblo para labrar y sembrar durante una dura jornada. El dueño del campo se encarga de dotar a sus vecinos de

cerveza de mijo y vino de palma, y se convoca a una o dos 'máscaras', seres intermedios

entre la gente y los genios del bosque, cuyos cantos repetitivos animan y dan aliento a los

campesinos. A esto último también contribuye la ingesta gradual de las bebidas alcohólicas

antes mencionadas, las cuales hacen que el trabajo sea menos pesado.

Pues bien, en una de estas ocasiones ocurrió una anécdota que considero significativa. Lo

curioso es qué estas máscaras tienen género propio: hay máscaras masculinas y máscaras

femeninas. De hecho lo más común es que venga la pareja de máscaras al campo: la máscara mujer y la máscara hombre. Yo, por mis lecturas, sabía que solo los hombres tenían

derecho a "transformarse" en máscara, jamás las mujeres. Para transformarte en máscara

tienes que haber sido iniciado y solo los hombres son iniciados en aspectos de la cultura que

incluyen la mayor parte del conocimiento relacionado las máscaras, con los genios del bosque, etcétera.

Entonces, yo hice la siguiente pregunta: "¿Quién hay dentro de la máscara? ¿Es un hombre

o una mujer?". A lo cual mi guía y amigo el señor Jean Pierre Ñapam Kamara respondió un

tanto confuso. Hizo una pausa que claramente demostraba su confusión, (probablemente

nadie le había preguntado esto antes) y me dijo "Es una máscara". En ese momento me di

cuenta de qué me pregunta había sido estúpida.

Desde el momento un hombre va al bosque, y utiliza diferentes tejidos vegetales que recoge in situ para transformarse en máscara, se convierte pues en una máscara y deja de ser un hombre. Esa máscara puede ser una máscara femenina o puede ser máscara masculina, pero lo que está claro es que no hay nadie dentro de la máscara, la máscara es. Pongo el siguiente ejemplo: Javier, imagínate la confusión que tendrías si yo te dijese "¿Javier, quién hay dentro tuyo?" y tú dirías "Dentro mío no hay nadie, soy Javier", la máscara es de la misma manera que Javier es, no hay nadie dentro. Y, de hecho, el género de la persona que se ha convertido en máscara no determina el género de la propia máscara: los hombres pueden ser una máscara mujer.