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Source: *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, September 2019, Vol. 31, No. 3 (September 2019), pp. 352-368

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26758090

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CULTURAL STUDIES
2019, VOL. 31, NO. 3, 352–368
https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2019.1624154

Decolonising culture, staging traditional dances, creating a new music-dance genre: the National Ballet of Mali's postcolonial agency

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ABSTRACT

Like many newly independent African countries, Mali turned towards its cultural resources, especially music and dance, to build its national identity as part of the decolonisation process. The National Ballet was one of the national state-sponsored artistic ensembles created at the time of the achievement of independence in 1960 and as such, it had to display the music dance forms of the various Malian populations. Despite the Ballet's claims of 'tradition' and 'authenticity', the traditional dances were adapted on stage by choreographers trained in socialist countries within the broader political context of the Cold War. Infused with Negritude and Pan-Africanism and entangled at the same time within a discourse on modernity, the theoretical ambition of the National Ballet was articulated in contradistinction to the colonial legacy. The article interrogates therefore the intricacy of this ideological and political background in order to apprehend the constellation of international relations and currents of thoughts that gave birth to the National Ballet. While examining the various means of postcolonial agency performed through the Ballet's repertoire, the article demonstrates how a new music-dance genre emerged that spread widely in the postcolonial world within the subsequent decades.

KEYWORDS

National Ballet of Mali; traditional dance; Negritude; Pan-Africanism; socialism; postcolonial agency; cultural identity; nation building

On the 28 March 2008, in the Bazoumana Sissoko Great Hall of the Palace of Culture in Bamako, Mali's capital city, I was waiting in the hubbub of the crowd – the venue was full – that began the great Night of National Ensembles (*Nuit des formations nationales*). The lights went out and a man dressed in a ceremonial *boubou* stepped on the stage, microphone in hand. It was Karidjigué Laïko Traoré, the usual master of ceremonies of the great cultural events of Mali.[1] His speech, declaimed with vehemence, went as follows:

> Distinguished representatives of Embassies and Ambassadors, from Burkina Faso, Algeria and Senegal, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, the National Theatre of Mali, the Palace of Culture Amadou Hampaté Ba of Mali say 'Good evening' … The life of the national ensembles gave a whole idea, a whole form of thought to the Malian women and men, to the youth of Mali. That is why Ministers, it is a pleasure for me, for the Palace of Culture, the National Theatre, for these spectators – I was going to say viewers (professional deformation) – to

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> see you together, the Minister of the Youth and Sports and the Minister of Culture. Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, the show that will be presented tonight is a show, if we will, total. That is why, therefore, I ask that you agree with the presentation of the identity card of the national ensembles before the show begins. Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, it was already in 1961, in the aftermath of Mali's independence, that culture had become a priority because no great country in the world could develop without culture. And in 1961, when President Modibo Keïta went to Conakry to attend the Guinean artistic festival, he returned to Mali, he said to Mali: 'We have potential, we must create national ensembles.' The Instrumental Ensemble of Mali was to be born in 1962. Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, the National Ensemble was born in 62, the Folkloric Group of Mali, the current Malian Ballet, was also born in 1962. And these two formations got to be reunited and we called them the National Folkloric Ensemble of Mali. … President Modibo Keïta was right because already, in 1963 at the Théâtre des Nations in Paris, the National Folkloric Ensemble of Mali won its first gold medal, it was the gold medal of folklore. Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, President Modibo Keïta was right because three years later, in 1966, on the occasion of the first Negro Arts Festival in Dakar, the National Folkloric Ensemble of Mali won its second gold medal. Ladies and Gentlemen, it was a three-year cycle, 63, 66, 1969, Mister the representative of the Ambassador of Algeria, it was in Algiers, at the Pan-African Youth Festival, the first of its kind, that again the National Folkloric Ensemble of Mali won the gold medal.[2]

This discourse, lyrical and committed, evokes various issues pertaining to the history of the National Ballet of Mali: the importance of culture in the construction of Mali's national identity since independence, the structuring role of artistic national ensembles for Malian youth, the inscription of the Ballet in an international context through its participation in the great Pan-African festivals, the prestigious list of achievements acquired since its creation after independence (gold medal winner in 1963, 1966 and 1969). The focus on the first decade of independence by the speaker emphasises the crucial importance of the immediate post-independence period in the structuring of the state-sponsored art field in postcolonial Mali.

After this eloquent speech, the show began. The performances of the National Instrumental Ensemble and the National Drama Ensemble followed each other before the dancers of the National Ballet appeared on stage in a new choreographed piece called *Kolon ni kolon kala* ('The pestle and the mortar').[3] As soon as the show started, the audience member sitting next to me whispered in my ear: 'what you'll see is tradition, like in the village'. Whether it be through costumes, staging, dance, music, the narrative theme of the piece evoked by the title, the show offered that night by the ageing dancers of the National Ballet of Mali almost 50 years after the country's independence indeed depicted a rural way of life, seemingly far away from the go-slows on Bamako's 'old bridge' and the many Chinese scooters called Djakarta gathered at the Palace's entrance.

The association of the Ballet's show with the notion of 'tradition' as well as the importance of its role in the creation of Mali's national cultural identity – as clearly asserted by the speaker – represent some of the issues that will be addressed here. This article investigates the use of traditional dances in the nation-building process of Mali's first decade of independence (1960–1970) in order to understand the National Ballet's enduring legacy today. Despite its importance in the shaping of the artistic scene in postcolonial Mali– as scholars working on Mali's music and cultural policies have clearly acknowledged (Charry 2000; Counsel 2009; Polak 2004; Schulz 2001; Zanetti 1996) – there is a lacuna over the National Ballet as a cultural institution, as an artistic repertoire, and as a postcolonial music-dance genre able to shed light on Mali's endeavour to assert itself as an

independent nation. The article aims therefore at analysing the National Ballet of Mali's postcolonial agency in dealing with the many ideological and aesthetic complexities inherent to the process of cultural decolonisation at independence.

For the last decades, a great number of studies have demonstrated how music and/or dance represent a powerful medium to perform different registers of identity in various local, national or diasporic contexts. This article is informed by the numerous works that have analysed the political agency of performance within nationalist endeavours in postcolonial Africa (Apter 2005; Askew 2002; Moorman 2008; Turino 2000; White 2006) as well as in other parts of the world (Buckland 2007; Gibert 2014; Hughes-Freeland 2008; Savigliano 1995; Shay 2002). The essay aims to engage with an increasing number of studies that focus on the national dance companies created in postcolonial Africa as part of their respective nationalist agendas (Andrieu 2009; Castaldi 2006; Cohen 2012; Edmondson 2007; Franco 2015; Gore 1986; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Plancke 2015; Schramm 2000). These compelling works have provided the interested reader with detailed analyses of the multi-layered issues pertaining to the process of building national identity through performance. In so doing, they have proved how the realm of performance practices represents an exceptional site through which postcolonial issues about national identity formation in Africa can be addressed.

Following on this substantial body of scholarly works, I integrate another dimension by taking into account both the music and the dance in the constitution of the ballet genre, and I approach these as equally important. I deem the artistic form produced by the National Ballet as a music-dance genre that is for that matter locally called 'ballet'. In so doing, I hope to reconcile the divide that exists among many of the scholarly works addressing the question of decolonisation processes through the lens of performance practices, which often focus either on dance or on music. My work on the National Ballet of Mali attempts to give equal attention to both components, arguing that the musical codes and the specific drum orchestra (see Figure 1) that emerged from the 'mise en ballet' of the dances created a new music-dance form that became later on the symptomatic apparatus of many 'African dance' classes open in the West (Djebbari 2013).

Drawing on intensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out over eighteen months between 2007 and 2012, I interrogate the ideological and political background of Mali's independence achievement in order to apprehend the constellation of international relations and currents of thoughts that gave birth to the National Ballet. While examining the various means of postcolonial agency performed through the Ballet's repertoire, I demonstrate how a new music-dance genre emerged that spread widely in the postcolonial world.

Decolonising culture

Mali officially achieved its independence on the 22 September 1960 after more than eighty years of French colonisation. On the 20 January 1961, the first president of the new Republic of Mali, Modibo Keïta, gave the following speech at the National Assembly:

> A double effort of research and reflection is then necessary to reassert the value of our national culture: first, we have to get rid of foreign inputs unadapted to its essence and inadequate towards its development; then, we have to analyse the cultural assets of our country to take the most dynamic components, that is to say those most likely to be integrated into the process of modern evolution.[4]

Figure 1. Musicians of the National Ballet of Mali, Modibo Keïta stadium, Bamako, 2008 © Elina Djebbari.

This excerpt outlines the main goal of the cultural policies led by Modibo Keïta's government (1960–1968) at Mali's independence: 'to reassert the value of our national culture', as well as stating the two main means to achieve this goal. On the one hand, 'foreign inputs' ('apports étrangers') were seen as marks of acculturation that had to be dismissed. On the other hand, a selection of indigenous cultural aspects able to contribute to the new modern nation-state had to happen. This dual objective reveals the tension that arises when specific values are attributed to certain cultural forms according to their potential alignment with 'modern evolution'. The preponderance of considerations about 'culture' within state policies was summed up in Modibo Keïta's famous formula: 'culture is the alpha and omega of all policy' (quoted in Cutter 1968, 75), and the accompanying argument that 'there is no viable independence without cultural revival'.[5] The rhetoric of the new Malian cultural policies inscribed culture as a weapon and a *sine qua non* condition to achieve independence from the former coloniser.[6] The foregrounding of culture at large meant that notions such as 'tradition', 'folklore' and 'heritage' became the corollaries of Malian nationalist rhetoric.

The emphasis on culture through performative aspects – chiefly music, dance and theatre – was 'presented by the ruling party as a necessary preservation of authentic Malian traditions from the distorting effects of Western cultures and values imposed under colonial rule' (Schulz 2001, 172). Culture was thereby conceived of as a tool for decolonisation; four national state-sponsored artistic ensembles were created soon after independence: Instrumental Ensemble, Modern Orchestra, Drama Ensemble and National Ballet.[7] The last was thus one of the cultural institutions within which 'the theoretical and ideological claims of decolonisation were to be translated into practice' (Schramm 2000, 341).

As Charles H. Cutter observed about Mali in particular and African countries in general, 'for the new states, the period of colonial domination represents a destruction of culture, a denial of history and a rejection of identity' (1971, 15).[8] Indeed, for the National Ballet's current director N'Tji Diakité, this state of mind was at the core of the Ballet's mission in the 1960s:[9]

> During colonisation, they tried to put in our heads that there was not a developed culture in Africa. They replaced our dances with European and other imported dances: bolero, bossa nova, biguine, waltz … The coloniser said that we had backward dances, the coloniser made us believe that. For them, our cultural aspects did not have value. So, the Ballet's goal was that: the reassertion of our cultural values. (Interview, Bamako, 14 February 2007)

For Diakité, the Ballet's mission was to help in 'the reassertion of cultural values' through the realm of dance. For him, Malian dancers had to forget what they were forced to do under colonial rule, they had to abandon waltz and 'other imported dances' and retrieve their own dances. It was therefore a re-education of the body that had to happen. To this effect, skilled dancers were recruited and gathered in Bamako to integrate the National Ballet and to learn a repertoire of traditional dances carefully selected by the Ballet's director in conjunction with the heads of the cultural sector to reassert Malian 'cultural values'.

Despite anti-colonialist claims and hostility towards French cultural intervention at the beginning of Mali's independence (Despres 2012, 47–52), Malian cultural policies were nevertheless mostly inherited from the former coloniser. The adoption of the French term 'Ballet' among former French colonies to name their national dance ensembles, albeit conceived as an anti-colonial tool, was itself symptomatic of this tension. In his essay *La danse africaine et la scène* (1957), Guinean choreographer Fodeba Keïta explained and defended his use of the term 'ballet' to name his dance company, arguing that African dances deserve the same respect as Western Ballet (1957, 23). Hence, evolutionist theories that derived from colonisation were symbolically put on trial, yet at the same time, the Ballet format was seen as a model to follow for African dance to achieve world renown.

The National Ballet adapted Malian traditional dances to the stage as a means to protect and enhance cultural aspects denied by the former colonisers, yet by using methods inherited from them. In so doing, the Ballet performed what Jean-François Bayart addressed in terms of 'cultural extraversion' – that is the process that 'consists in adopting foreign cultural items and submitting them to autochthonous goals' (1996, 80). The capacity to use and transform for their own purposes ideas or institutions inherited from the former coloniser was challenging the anti-colonial ideology while allowing the constitution of a postcolonial 'indigenous discourse' (Chrétien 1999, 496). The use of the colonial legacy in order to articulate anti-colonial theories is not evidence of discrepancies but rather representative of the National Ballet of Mali's sinuous strategies, required in order to craft postcolonial agency and correlative self-determination.

'Return to the roots'

In the scene described in the introduction, I mentioned how an audience member alerted me to the fact that the show given that night by the National Ballet was 'tradition, like in the village'. By this comment, the spectator testified to the ways the Ballet's repertoire became considered the custodian of Mali's traditional dances, and remains so until today. Two kinds of pieces constitute the Ballet's repertoire, both highlighting the

embodiment of the 'return to the roots' ideology. The 'traditional' or 'ethnic dances' represent ethnic groups supposedly recognisable through the specific features of their dances associated with social or ritual events. The 'thematic ballets' (sometimes also referred to as 'creation pieces') are longer narrative pieces which draw on various dance genres to address different themes, mostly historical and cultural narratives. The themes of the pieces, the dances, and the costumes emphasise traditional values (*Culture*), religious and initiation rituals (*Gomba*, *La danse des possédés*), masks (*Kanaga*), pre-colonial narratives (*L'Epopée de Sunjata Keïta*) and an image of village life shaped by ritual ceremonies and festive events (*Dansa, Sunu*).[10]

The oral testimonies and archival documents pertaining to the Ballet's early shows attest to the fact that the stage decor and backdrop mainly featured natural and rural elements like a savannah landscape with a flamboyant painted sun, baobab trees and huts with straw roofs.[11] Built in opposition to the modern city and its imagined vices, the space of the rural village was conceived of as a peaceful place where traditional cultural values were preserved, untouched by the distorting effects of colonisation. African authenticity could thus solely be conceived of as rural (Bayart 1996, 59). Accordingly, a pre-colonial rural time was opposed to the (post)colonial urban city. The imagery of an undetermined, ahistorical, timeless and locally undefined African village as the main stage decor of the National Ballet of Mali contributed to the spread of a fantasised vision of Africa through symbolic images that would prove to be highly durable.

The emphasis on rurality, peasantry and villages – actually common to all nation-building processes whether in nineteenth-century Europe (Thiesse 1999) or in anti-imperialist models (Bayart 1996, 56) – somehow reinforced the 'African' images that mid-century anti-imperialism had attempted to counter. Paradoxically then, Mali's and other African ballet companies alike (Edmondson 2001, 153; Franco 2015, 11–12) fought against and contributed to foster a colonialist imaginary by sending African dances back to the fantasy of their primitiveness. As Francesca Castaldi ironically puts it: 'Africa and dance make a good duet, supporting each other in the making of stereotypes of primitiveness' (2006, 2).

Interestingly, despite the traditionalist rhetoric applied to the pieces of the repertoire, the whole process of staging traditional dances was simultaneously conceived of as modern, while spreading at the same time what could be regarded as an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Therefore, the transformations applied to the dances are to be interpreted in terms of creative means strategically deployed to develop a new dance genre that specifically draws on a heritage newly formulated as such.[12] The showcasing of traditional dances on the modern stage represented a way to reconcile the aspirations of newly independent Mali: grounded on its cultural traditions while open to the outside, claiming the richness of its pre-colonial history while embracing modernity and entering the postcolonial era.

However, the elite nationalist discourses calling for a 'return to the roots' did not necessarily express the aspirations of the Malian society, especially the urban youth, who were more interested in the cosmopolitan and international cultural expressions of 'modernity'.[13] As Malian writer Manthia Diawara puts it: 'Despite our attempts to catch up with the modern world, they have trapped us in a narrative of return, a permanent identification with the heroes of old griot songs: Sundiata, Mansa Musa, and Samory Touré … ' (1997, 26). This Malian 'narrative of return' was actually part of a broader intellectual context.

Negritude and Pan-Africanism as cultural resources

In 1963 the Ballet's first director, Mamadou Bajan Kouyaté, created a piece called *Culture*. Featuring early on in the repertoire, this piece is still performed today. As the title indicates, the show highlights 'culture' in every aspect of the term. By stressing the working of the land and the domestication of nature, the piece also celebrates the formation of a new national culture. The male dancers' gestures evoke agricultural postures while the female dancers help the men and harvest the fruits of their labour. By emphasising work, community and productive collaboration between all components of society, the piece embodied the ideal values conveyed by socialism and sought at the crucial moment of nation building. However, as one former member of the National Ballet who performed the piece in the 1960s told me: 'it is not only Mali that *Culture* represents, but also all Africa. And even, the whole world. Everybody cultivates in the same way. And if the crop is good, people are happy'.[14] By the breadth of its theme, *Culture* is not limited to a nationalist frame, rather it allows for a Pan-Africanist, even universalist, reading of the piece.

Afro-centred currents of thoughts such as Negritude and Pan-Africanism constituted the intellectual background of the independence era. These intellectual movements and exchanges emerging from the Black Atlantic space (Gilroy 1993) shaped the intellectual framework of Malian nationalism within a wider and multi-layered 'ideoscape' (Appadurai 1996), already transnationalised on a very large scale. The entanglement between Pan-Africanism and Negritude (Jaji 2014), as well as their cross-fertilisation along with nationalism and socialism (Thomas 1966, 234), was palpable among anti-colonialist African elites committed in the search for an 'African personality' (Nkrumah 1963). Numerous criticisms towards the bearers of the Negritude movement address their ambivalent posture as representative of the 'acculturated' African elite trained in the metropolis and institutions of the former colonisers that took over the leadership of newly independent African countries. Nevertheless, Negritude as well as Pan-Africanism together influenced aesthetic positions and artistic productions in postcolonial Africa. This 'ideoscape' is therefore key to understanding Mali's cultural policies as well as the National Ballet's orientations throughout the 1960s.

Modibo Keïta's speeches during state celebrations such as the National Youth Weeks are particularly useful in illustrating how resistance to colonialism merged with the premises put forth by Negritude in the decade following independence. Keïta's closing speech to the Sixth National Youth Week in Bamako (9 July 1967) pronounced:[15]

> Once again, our primal goal, after decades of cultural domination, has to acknowledge the existence of our own culture and to reassert its value, to affirm our personality, our originality, in a word our negritude, to employ a term that had been successful within the great poets of our race, in order to bring our contribution to the universal civilisation. (quoted in Samaké 2008, 172)

As this excerpt underlines, Negritude was for the Malian president an intellectual matrix supporting the necessary reclaiming of cultural values denied by the West.

Léopold Sédar Senghor's numerous essays published in the francophone journal *Présence Africaine* transmitted the ideology of Negritude as the 'ensemble of the cultural values of the black world' (*l'ensemble des valeurs culturelles du monde noir*) (Senghor 1964, 9). Among the many different key words that one could extract from Senghor's oeuvre,

I will particularly stress his emphasis on the notion of 'rhythm'. For Senghor, rhythm represents the very essence of African creativity and philosophy (1956, 60–65), always attached to the evocation of Africa, where 'nowhere the rhythm has reigned so despotically' (1956, 65) in every possible domain, especially in the realm of arts (sculpture, music, dance, etc.). With such emphasis on the notion of rhythm, along with the ubiquitous mention of 'tam-tam' and 'drums', Senghor paradoxically conveyed stereotypes able to feed the imaginary already fully fabricated by the 'colonial library' (Mudimbe 1988). To a certain extent, although Negritude and Pan-Africanism were seen as theoretical tools for decolonisation, they nevertheless contributed – together with the colonial library – to create 'this simplified vision [that] became a background of the imaginary widely shared and undisputed, that has also served as a frame to the reductive conceptions about Africa seen as an undistinguished totality' (Ficquet 2010, 409).[16] The tendency to use the idea of 'rhythm' as a metonym for 'Africa' outlined how such a broad and undefined concept as 'African rhythm' could be so widespread.[17] Thus the necessity of an assertion such as Kofi Agawu's comment: '"African rhythm", in short, is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie' (2003, 61).

In the realm of dance, a similar generalisation occurred, both resulting from and producing an analogy between 'African rhythm' and 'African dance'. The focus on the drums in West African ballets as the typical musical accompaniment of the various dances (see below) certainly contributed to spread the correlative idea of 'African dance' worldwide. The process of 'balletisation' of local traditional dances on the national stage was associated with a Pan-Africanist need to fit into the wider frame of 'Africa'. In so doing, the staging process did subsume at once the local, the 'ethnic', the regional and the national, therefore contributing to the further spread of stereotypes about a so-called 'African dance' (Lassibille 2004, 687–688).

The combined use of Negritude and Pan-Africanism as cultural resources in independent Mali provided the intellectual background for the creation of the National Ballet. The Ballet's repertoire thereby reflected the different currents of thoughts constitutive of the ideological framework of the independence era (Adewole 2003, 298; Castaldi 2006). Accordingly, it reproduced several ideological discrepancies as well as contributing to the spread of continental stereotypes. As shown through the piece *Culture* mentioned above, the emphasis on the 'return to the roots' and rural life has also to be understood in the light of Mali's socialist policies.

Socialism and international cultural exchanges

Like many other independent African countries, Mali adopted a socialist policy. Therefore, Mali's nationalism also drew on the political connections of the new 'global ecumene' (Hannerz 1989) that emerged during the Cold War. The tensions that arose from the entanglement of national and extra-national ideals are then to be understood in a broader frame of political polarisation. In the frame of the Cold War, Mali's anti-imperialist positioning as well as its involvement in the non-aligned movement led to the development of privileged relationships with other socialist countries worldwide. The USSR, China, North Korea and Cuba became Mali's main partners in the realm of culture (Schulz 2001, 168). The cultural exchanges consisted mainly of sending Malian students and civil servants abroad for training,[18] building cultural infrastructures, organising cultural events, and reciprocally

facilitating tours of national artistic ensembles (Toure 1996, 76–77). For instance, Malian choreographers were sent to Moscow, youth managers to China and North Korea, while musicians were trained in Cuba (Djebbari 2015; Skinner 2012).[19] The first tour made by the National Ballet of Mali abroad was, accordingly, in the USSR in 1962 (Schulz 2001, 176).

These cultural diplomacy policies were the frame for N'Tji Diakité who directed the National Ballet for more than fifteen years. He had been sent to the USSR to pursue training in cultural management and choreography in the late 1960s. He explained to me:

> I was sent to Moscow with about fifteen people. This was in 1967, from 1967 to 1968. Originally, it was a training course for youth management. But, in addition to the core curriculum, there were various specialisations (sport …). I was the only one to choose choreography. I did internships at Bolshoï, at the Soviet Union of Choreography, between China and USSR. Every day, I attended the rehearsals. This is what gave me my expertise, even if I already had some skills since I already was in the field. I learnt about mise en scène, decor, choreography, everything. There I saw how to make dancers exit or enter, create patterns with lines, I learnt how to do a beautiful show. (Interview, Bamako, 25 August 2008)

In this excerpt, Diakité presented his training in Moscow as crucial for the development of his expertise as a choreographer and cultural manager. The main guidelines to make 'a beautiful show' lay in the synchronisation of the *corps de ballet* – all dancers executing the same steps at the same time – and the choreographies that present the dancers mostly in a frontal way, moving in lines drawing geometric patterns on the floor.

The creation of national dance ensembles in postcolonial Africa must be understood within this broader socialist-friendly context of the independence era that coincides with the worldwide spread of the Soviet model for national dance companies in the Cold War (Shay 2002: 28–29). The appropriation of Soviet choreographic modes and their adaptation to Malian dances were then the result of a larger political context.[20] However, the very format of the ballet, combined with the staging of traditional dances, contributed to the definition of a new artistic genre which aimed to represent the country both locally and internationally.

A Ballet for whom?

Used as a tool for cultural diplomacy, the National Ballet's shows often targeted foreign audiences, either performing for foreign visitors to Mali or touring abroad, especially in socialist countries, in the 1960s and 1970s. In this peculiar political context, the Ballet's members were considered as both custodians of Malian traditions within the country and 'cultural ambassadors' abroad, committed to reach both a national audience and an international arena.

On the one hand, the Ballet's repertoire was supposedly turned towards the Malian population, to support the quest for a national cultural identity. However, the Ballet's repertoire proved quite unable to represent the country's cultural diversity. It must be noted that the repertoire largely privileged the populations from the south of the country, especially those from the Mande (and among them, particularly Bambara/Malinké). A piece such as *L'Epopée de Sunjata* (*Sunjata Epic*) emphasised the constitution of a national history rooted in a precolonial time marked by the figure of Emperor Sunjata Keïta and his reign over a vast territory in the thirteen century, thereby highlighting the Mande culture to which he belonged.[21] As Susan Reed pointed out, 'political ideologies play a critical role in the

selection of national dances' (1998, 511). Therefore, the unspoken yet clear emphasis on the southern populations of Mali – whether through the repertoire, the dance features, the music or the instruments – reflected the creation of a national identity that was largely Mande-centred (Durán 2013, 229; Lecocq 2002; Schulz 2001).

On the other hand, 'the national ballet became a showcase directed to foreign audiences' wrote Eric Charry (2000, 211) about the Malian troupe. Therefore, the supposed internal efficiency of the Ballet was challenged by the expectations of an international audience as assumed by the Ballet's choreographers. In an article published in 1968 in *African Arts*, Jean Decock related his impressions of a show given by the National Ballet of Mali. This account emphasised the notion of the 'sacred' while acknowledging the staging of the dances:

> Theater lamps have replaced the evening firelight, but the authentic scenes of ritual and of folkways have been modified only insofar as Western conventions limit performances to approximately three hours. Certain traditional dances have not been changed at all. (1968, 33)

Decock gave a contradictory description of the adaption process implied by the staging of traditional dances. On the one hand, additions and transformations due to 'Western conventions' are acknowledged. Yet on the other hand, statements such as 'certain traditional dances have not been changed at all' are firmly asserted. This reception of the show by a foreign spectator indicates a longing for authenticity as well as the difficulty to completely deny the Western inputs within the show.

Moreover, Decock's account also showed how the Ballet's repertoire was able to satisfy Western expectations and a taste for exoticism and 'otherness' (de L'Estoile 2007) by stressing certain features of the dances. As Decock wrote: 'It is not surprising, therefore, that critics and audiences were most affected by the scenes centred around the Dogon masks and those portraying the ceremony of spirit possession' (Decock 1968, 35). The emphasis on masks (see Figure 2), acrobatics and possession as well as the dances performed by bare-breasted women within the Ballet's repertoire at that time were embodying a phantasmatic vision already wide spread in the colonial library, the colonial exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the interwar music-hall shows (Bancel et al. 2004; Decoret-Ahiha 2004).[22] Instead of an actual rupture, the Ballet pursued and eventually took over a process that had first emerged during the colonial period. In so doing, the Ballet members and directors took on the responsibility for an 'auto-exoticisation' (Reed 1998, 515; Savigliano 1995)[23] through the spectacles mainly offered to a foreign audience, while 'indigenising' a music-dance genre claimed by the stakeholders as Malian and African at once.

The creation of a new music-dance genre

From the complex framework addressed above emerged a new music-dance genre that spread worldwide within the subsequent decades, especially from the 1980s onwards. The careful analysis of all aspects of the repertoire, from the data collection to the staging, from the musical instruments to the costumes (Djebbari 2013), showed that the adaption of the traditional dances to the stage led to the creation of many new musical and choreographic modes. Indeed, the staging of the Malian traditional dances according to specific settings – called 'Eurocentric conventions' by Castaldi (2006, 25) – implied the

Figure 2. *Kanaga* performed by the National Ballet of Mali at Théâtre des Nations in Paris in 1964. (Source: Pic 1964).

transformation of several features of the dances such as the duration of the performances, entrance/exit, distance and non-participation of the seated audience. Some dances that could last for hours had to be shortened so as to become a short piece within a larger show, aiming at displaying the diversity of Malian dances. The highlights of each dance were selected and put together in order to present the most dynamic parts. Then, once the choices were made, the choreographer, dancers and musicians employed their creativity to link the different parts and to produce a flawless display of choreography. In this process and to ensure the delivery of the show, new musical and choreographic conventions were developed, and new dance steps, musical phrases, and costumes were created alongside.

For instance, specific musical elements such as 'calls' and 'breaks' made by the lead drummer were systematised (Djebbari 2013, 252–254; Polak 2004, 113–114; Zanetti 1996, 172). The 'call' is a short melodico-rhythmic formula that serves as a starting and ending signal and gives the tempo for all to follow. The call is also regularly repeated throughout the piece at specific moments to cue the dancers that they must change steps and move from one choreographic pattern to another. The calls play an important role in the synchronisation of the *corps de ballet* that became privileged to the detriment of improvisations otherwise made by individuals within many Malian dance genres. The creation of these musical codes implied the ordering of the dynamics pertaining to the music-dance relationship that may follow other relational patterns off stage.[24] These new performative rules allowed the dancing bodies on stage to transmit to their audiences a sense of order and balance by displaying well-structured and carefully choreographed shows.

Every dance piece follow these musical conventions performed by two kinds of drums: *jembé* and *dunun* (or *dundun*) (see Figure 3).[25] Although these drums were mainly present in the south of Mali – particularly within the Mande region (Charry 2000; Polak 2004;

Figure 3. *Jembé* and *Dunun*, the two main drums of the National Ballet of Mali's orchestra, Bamako, 2010 © Elina Djebbari.

Zanetti 1996) – they became the main instruments of the Ballet orchestra, able to accompany all the Malian dances introduced to the repertoire, regardless of whatever might have been their initial musical accompaniment. The rhythms otherwise executed on different kinds of drums were then adapted to the *jembé* and *dunun* in the Ballet. This process transformed in turn the playing techniques of the *jembé* in order to reproduce specific timbres (Charry 2000, 218; Djebbari 2013, 241–242). This drum orchestra provided a unified sound to the diversity of the dance steps and rhythms. Moreover, the Ballet crystallised the combined use of the *jembé* and *dunun*, consecrating thereby another feature of this music-dance genre.[26]

The various dances showcased in the Ballet's shows were then presented in a unified format whereby musical and choreographical conventions provided new codes of performance. These conventions became subsequently central to the teaching of both drumming and dancing, and especially in the context of the 'African dance' classes opening in the West from the 1980s.

Conclusion

This article's account of the overall intellectual context of Mali's independence achievement has sought to demonstrate how the construction of Malian national identity has been torn between complementary as well as divergent ideologies. Pan-Africanism, Negritude, socialism, anti-colonialism and nationalism informed the independence era's multilayered ideoscape. Their conflation led to a disruptive ideological articulation,

representative of the complexity of postcolonial strategies regarding identity formation. As Robert Foster points out, 'elite nationalist discourse perpetuates the presuppositions of colonial domination in the very act of challenging that domination' (1991, 240). Indeed, despite a position based on the idea of rupture from the former coloniser, the National Ballet embodied, conveyed, and even perpetuated some colonial stereotypes.

At the same time, a 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988) appeared to be the route for postcolonial subjects to present themselves and accordingly activate a form of postcolonial agency. Deployed to the end of building the national cultural identity of postcolonial Mali, the 'strategic essentialism' of the Ballet's repertoire resulted from its own agency in selecting the cultural assets that were showcased on the national stage. The emphasis on the traditional values of the dances as well as the stage decor reproducing the romanticised frame of the African village fed at once Western expectations, Pan-Africanist aspirations and the 'return to the roots' ideology.

At the level of the National Ballet of Mali, this particular framework also generated creative dynamics that shaped a new music-dance genre that would become highly successful. This account of the National Ballet in the early years of independent Mali thus confirms the role of music and dance in the creation of Malian modernity at the moment of decolonisation, while revealing the inherent postcolonial convolutions of the process. As an emanation of the broader process of 'invention of Africa' (Mudimbe 1988) here embodied through music and dance, the Ballet's repertoire contributed to spread a successful yet imagined 'African dance' to the furthest audiences worldwide within the subsequent decades, ultimately becoming a cultural commodity in the global world.

Infused by the intricacy of the very historical context of its creation, the different models from which it has been issued and the goals with which it has been invested, the National Ballet of Mali illustrates both an 'African mode of self-writing' (Mbembe 2000) and an 'auto-exoticisation' process. Its histories reveal the multiple and intricate ways of performing postcolonial agency in order to achieve what the poets of Negritude called the 'universal'.

Notes

1. Traoré had been the National Ballet's director from 1979 to 1982 and in 1992.
2. All translations from French to English are mine.
3. The title of the piece is in *Bamanankan*, Mali's national language.
4. http://modibokeita.free.fr/Discours.html.
5. Quotation from Modibo Keïta's closing speech, National Youth Week, Bamako, 9 July 1967 (Samaké 2008, 170).
6. The rehabilitation of culture was already part of the cultural policy developed before Mali's independence within the US-RDA political party (Cutter 1968, 75; Toure 1996, 73).
7. The National Ballet of Mali, often called 'the Malian Ballets' (*Les Ballets Maliens*) nowadays, also appeared as National Folkloric Troupe within official archives till 1978. The National Ballet grew out of an existing troupe prior independence called *Jeunesse Tam-Tam* (Schulz 2001, 176). It was modelled on Guinea's *Ballets Africains* founded by Guinean Fodeba Keïta in Paris in the late 1940s before being nationalised by Sekou Touré at Guinea's independence in 1958 (Cohen 2012). Mamadou Bajan Kouyaté was the Ballet's first director till the fall of Modibo Keïta's government in 1968; he was then the choreographer of the early pieces of the repertoire mentioned in the essay.
8. The rehabilitation of cultural forms considered denied by the coloniser was one of the main ideological struggles for independent African regimes at large. To this effect, strong cultural

policies were implemented throughout the continent (Askew 2002, 169; Counsel 2009, 3; Cutter 1971, 15; White 2006).

9. N'Tji Diakité was the National Ballet's director from 1982 to 1986, then from 1993 to 2000 and again from 2007 till now.
10. For more information about the pieces mentioned here and a detailed account of the whole repertoire of the National Ballet from its creation until today, see Djebbari 2013, 151–198.
11. Other African Ballets shared those features (Adewole 2003, 303; Castaldi 2006, 18; Neveu Kringelbach 2014, 41).
12. Other African national dance companies shared this aspiration to modernity through the staging of traditional dances 'to create a new dance culture' (Schramm 2000, 354; see also Apter 2005, 113).
13. Laura Edmondson offered the notion of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' – in addition to 'alternative', 'collaborative' and 'strategic' – to capture the 'multiplicity of practices, strategies, and processes that were marshaled in the composition of the nation on the popular stage' (2007, 7). In Angola, Marissa Moorman has also analysed how cosmopolitan practices 'moved toward nation and not away from it' (2008, 18). However, the Malian state was quite repressive against cosmopolitan social behaviours, modern dances and fashion considered 'amoral', especially in the latter half of Modibo Keïta's government (Rillon 2010). They were nevertheless displayed with fervour in Bamako's nightclubs in the 1960s as Malian photographer Malick Sidibé reported on images. Accounts by famous Malian musicians who were youngsters in the 1950s–1960s describe how difficult the transition period towards independence in the realm of culture was, especially regarding the encouragement of going back to Malian traditional cultural expressions (Bamba 1996, 60; Diallo and Hall 1989, 172).
14. Interview, Bamako, 18 July 2018.
15. The National Youth Weeks were a state-sponsored festival held every year in Bamako from 1962 to 1968. Youngsters from all the country were organised in troupes competing in artistic and sportive disciplines according to a pyramidal system of selection, from the local to the national level. For more information, see Arnoldi 2006; Djebbari 2013; Samaké 2008; Schulz 2001; Toure 1996.
16. For an account complicating the apprehension of nationalism and decolonisation by Senghor and Césaire, see Wilder 2015.
17. In her book *Performing Africa*, Paulla Ebron carefully analysed some of the processes that contributed to associate the whole of Africa to the very notion of 'rhythm' (2002, 33–52).
18. Especially artists, movie makers and cultural managers (Toure 1996, 103).
19. Therefore, youth mobilisation methods and animation practices used in USSR and China were adopted in Mali (Thomas 1966, 86–87; Toure 1996).
20. Hélène Neveu Kringelbach mentions that Senegalese choreographers got trained in the Soviet sphere in the 1980s (2014, 43).
21. For more on this piece, see Djebbari 2018.
22. In addition to these early mises en scène in Europe, traditional dances performed by selected troupes were also required for the official celebrations of the colonial power in Africa. For instance in Mali, they were part of the French National Day (14 July) or to honour the visit of a colonial administrator in any locality (Polak 2004, 59).
23. According to Susan Reed, auto-exoticisation 'is the process by which the colonized come to represent themselves to themselves through the lenses of the colonizers. Globally, dance has come to play this role in many postcolonial nations' (1998, 515).
24. For more information and details about these new musical and choreographic conventions, see Djebbari 2013, 225–260.
25. The *jembé* is a skin-covered wooden goblet drum played with bare hands. *Dunun* is a generic term related to cylindrical wood drums covered with skins at both ends and played with a stick on one side.
26. Indeed, their association within the Ballet orchestra emerged from a series of historical and social developments (Charry 2000, 195).

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Ananya Kabir and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on previous versions. Although the article draws on ethnographic materials gathered for my PhD dissertation, I wrote it in the frame of my postdoctoral research associate position within the ERC-funded project Modern Moves directed by Ananya Kabir at King's College London (2013–2018). Therefore I acknowledge gratefully the resources of the ERC in enabling the writing of this article as well as the curation and editing of this special issue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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