

Performing the City: An Ethnography of Popular Dance in Kinshasa, DRC

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ABSTRACT

Performing the City: An Ethnography of Popular Dance in Kinshasa, DRC

Lesley N. Braun

Kinshasa's dance music, bands comprising male musicians and female dancers, is a local creation with roots in Congolese Rumba. During its rapid urbanization, with concerts held daily throughout the city, Kinshasa's popular culture has been vital to the city's international musical reputation and cosmopolitan identity. Although the social relevance of the popular musicians has been studied (White, 2009), how female dancers inform or are informed by contemporary perspectives on gender relations, marginality, modernity and socio-economic realities, has yet to be explored. This thesis illustrates the finding and analysis following three months of observing, interviewing female dancers and performing with a popular Kinshasa musical act.

The gaze directed at concert dancers is a recent phenomenon as "traditional" performance was more participatory. Through this gaze at dancers who occupy the lowest position within the band and perform sexually suggestive lyrics and dance gestures, the familiar accepted binaries of public and private, "traditional" and "modern", sacred and profane, appropriate and inappropriate, sensual and sexual are called into question. When concert dancers incorporate "modern" references into their choreographies, they build on "traditional" dance movement. Paradoxically, although female dancers set aesthetic trends seen even in church settings, they are stigmatized on a moral level for assuming "vulgar" roles. It is precisely this marginality that dancers in their concerts, perform and re-affirm.

To the Braun and Rafman families, without whom my research and thesis would not have been possible, and to Chic en Couleurs' choreographer, Gerry, for all the time he spent patiently teaching me choreography.

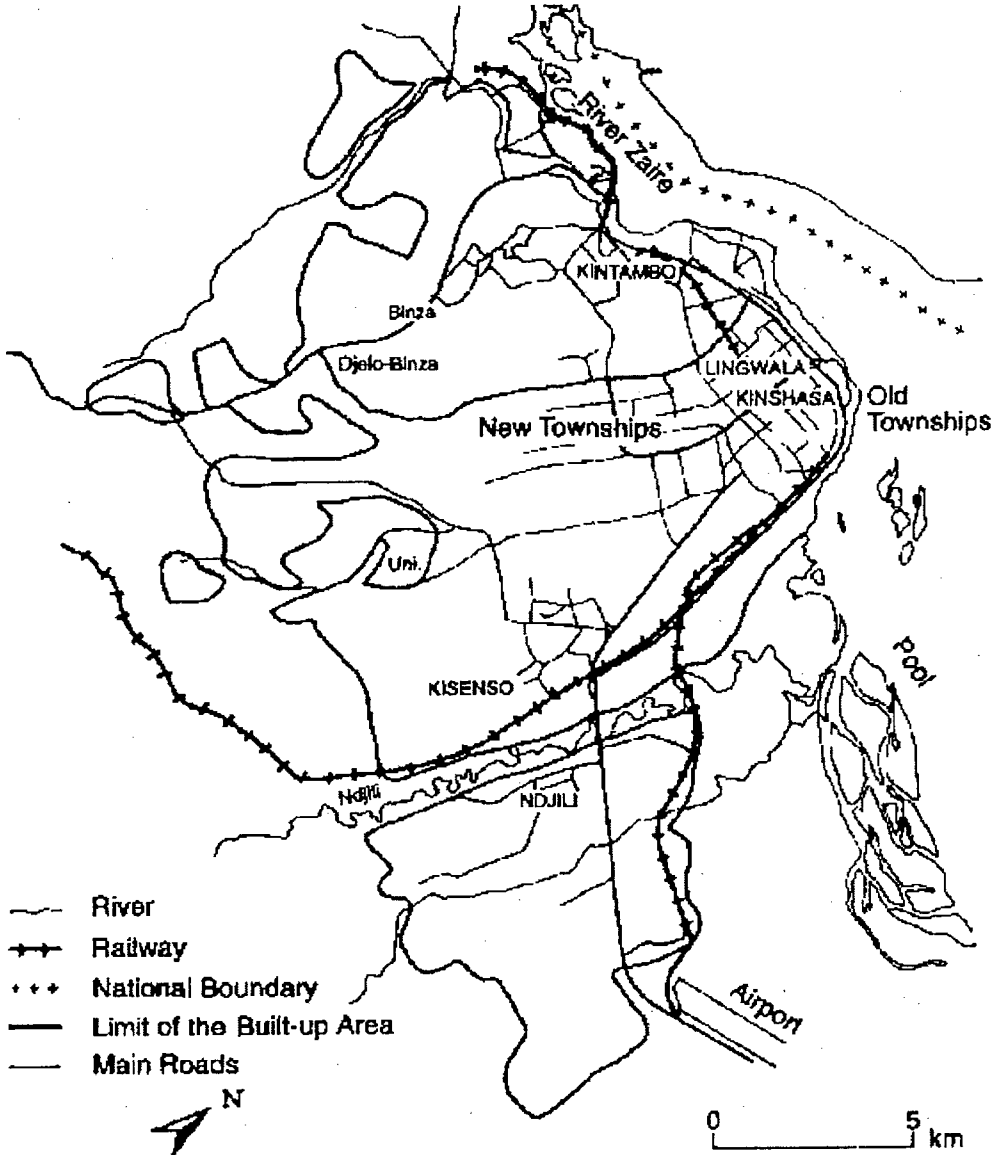
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Figure 1: Map of DRC



Figure 2: Map of Kinshasa



Preface

In the summer of 2009 I traveled to Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to study popular dance. I was particularly interested in female concert dancers or danseuses, and there had been very little written on the subject. Dance in Africa has been largely neglected by scholars which is astonishing considering how present it is in people's daily lives. The summer I spent in the sprawling city of Kinshasa comprises innumerable conversations with Kinois¹ from diverse backgrounds.

Enthusiastic about my topic, I made it a point to discuss my research with various people I encountered, often serendipitously. In most instances, people were equally interested in the idea of a dialogue between dance and society, and Kinois were also perplexed by some of the social paradoxes that I pointed out. The vendor woman who made me an omelette each morning, the pastor's daughter at the Pentecostal church next to my house, the girls who cut my hair in the hair salon, middle aged male taxi drivers, international pop stars like Papa Wemba and the boys who sold me cell phone calling cards are some of the people I talked to about the questions arising from my observations. The conversation generally ended like this: "well, I can't really answer your questions, because I haven't thought about it long enough, actually I've never really thought of it that way, but I'm interested in hearing what you find out".

I mention this because interest in my research relates to the notion of cosmopolitanism. Most people I spoke to in Kinshasa call themselves "cosmopolitan" or "citizens of the world". Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005:222) and Ulf Hannerz (1992: 252) advance the notion that cosmopolitanism involves a conscious engagement with the

¹ The term for people living in Kinshasa.

“Other”. In this way, interest in my fieldwork is testament to their willingness to engage, and find common ground, with a stranger. I am interested in the idea that the ethnographer is implicated in the very praxis of studying praxis. “Not just having been *there*, but having been *then* is what maketh the ethnographer” (Fabian 2001: 29). In other words, interactions through conversations, creating art and performing require sharing time with people. Instead of merely viewing “subjects” through sight, as was the case with classical anthropology, interaction provides an invaluable intersubjectivity which cannot be measured by scientific methods. In some ways, interaction and sharing in the present is the closest one can get to an “objective” anthropology. Why should race and ethnicity be the main differentiators of the Other? I argue that we can understand sameness in terms of coevalness, in that all people are touched by modernity, created by the world system.

Introduction

In this study I present an ethnography of concert dancers in Kinshasa, employing methodologies typical for anthropology, focusing on notions of modernity, marginalization, gender, and the ways in which they interact with each other in order to lead us to a deeper understanding of the urban experience in Kinshasa. The main objective of this research is to deepen the knowledge of the dialogue between dance and society. I am interested in the intersections between anthropology, communications, and dance as well as how they relate to subjectivities within popular culture. I argue that popular, urban dance within the wider world of popular culture is a relevant tool to analyze society, as it reveals many socio-political and economic issues that maybe nuanced in other contexts.

The following chapters will delve into the major tenets of the thesis as I incorporate my findings with existing theory. Chapter one entitled Performing Kinshasa, will outline theories of performance as they relate to popular dance in Kinshasa. Drawing from Turner, Goffman, Butler, Schechner, and Fabian, I will show how performance is a propitious lens with which to examine the ways the social imagination both informs and is informed by popular dance. I do not consider an art form such as dance as separate from social life in Kinshasa, and will thus aim to highlight the interconnections between dance as a form of communication, and dance as a means of creating and experimenting with new identities. Drawing on Fabian's assertion that "much of cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative" (1998: 171), I ask in which ways "modernity" and gender dynamics are expressed through movement and gesture.

Chapter two addresses the research methods I have employed and in chapter three I describe the performance space itself.

In chapter five, *Mimesis in Motion*, I will explore the ways mimesis occurs both in terms of dance aesthetics and in the ways people learn to dance. I will first provide a theoretical framework with which to discuss mimesis. This will then lead to a conceptual analysis of mimickry in traditional and contemporary dancing, particularly the ways in which animal figures, social behaviour, and material objects are evoked through dance. The chapter concludes with an examination of how dance is transmitted and learned.

Chapter six, *Dancing the Urban Experience*, will continue the examination of mimesis as it relates to the ways “modernity” and “tradition” are negotiated. I will investigate the ways in which popular dancers are crucial culture makers, reflecting the social imaginary that is premised on notions of cosmopolitanism. Further, I advance the idea that popular culture challenges the categorical distinctions of Western, modern, traditional, and authentic.

Chapter seven, *An Urban Paradox*, will investigate issues of marginality by shedding light on gender dynamics. Public and private spheres will be demarcated, to illustrate that contextual framing is crucial in understanding the ways in which people perceive female concert performers.

By way of conclusion, I will emphasize how popular dance performance can help us understand shifting notions of womanhood, traditional values, social mobility, and gender relations.

Research Site

I conducted fieldwork in Kinshasa, DRC, from June 20th 2009 until the beginning of September 2009, during the country's dry months. Located on the periphery of the country, wedged between the countries of Angola and Congo, Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is the second largest city in Africa, having a population of approximately 6-8 million (a more accurate estimate is difficult to come by since a formal census is difficult to conduct).

The majority of my research on dancers was carried out in performance settings, such as during formal and informal concerts. In addition, I established a number of contacts in traditional dance troupes, and within the fine art centres. I also conducted interviews in private settings in homes.

CHAPTER 1

Performing Kinshasa: A Conceptual Framework

The city of Kinshasa is widely known throughout Africa and internationally for its colourful musicians, painters, and dancers. Street children, popular concert bands and dancers, are some of the city's performers who create and capture the urban social imagination, or what De Boeck (2004) calls "the unseen reality". Like most cities, Kinshasa is constituted not solely by its architecture, and physical surroundings but by the impression it imparts upon its visitors and the way its inhabitants move within. There is a sense in which something unseen dances between the cracks. Kinshasa's urban landscape is nuanced; on the surface "traditional" belief systems seem distant and non-existent as city dwellers engage in the hustle to make a living. The multiplicity of roles people perform, as they interact with diverse social networks in cities provide fodder for discussions concerning what it means to be a "modern" urban resident versus a "traditional" villager. For Jonathan Raban,

Cities unlike villages are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them. In this sense, it seems to me that living in a city is an art and we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relation between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living (Raban 1974: 9). True for most cities, people are both spectators and participants in an urban drama. "Indeed cities as a whole can be understood as sites upon which an urban(e) citizenry, a practice of everyday life, performs its collective memory, imagination and aspiration, performing in a sense of self both to itself and beyond" (Makeham 152: 2005). In cities, people are able to "try on

things for size”, experimenting with different ways of being and doing different things. Thus the city becomes a space for individuals to envision new identities for themselves (Askew 2002; Simone 2004).

Concepts of marginality vary (Wacquant 2007), however they commonly refer to those who live on the fringes of the city (Lewis 1966; Merton 1957; Powell 1962). In the context of Kinshasa, the “fringe of the city” loses its meaning, as the majority of the population is impoverished. The factors that denote who becomes ‘fringe’ are based on a system that is not necessarily dependent on wealth and income. For instance, public morality and travel to Europe are relevant symbols with which to decipher social status, the latter especially in terms of cosmopolitanism (Biaya 2005; Simone 2004; Weiss 2005). Marginal characters often reveal society’s paradoxes, and are therefore useful in understanding the dynamics of Kinshasa, a society with a complex colonial legacy.

Anthropology has long been dominated by structuralist approaches which perpetuated static visions of society, limiting individual agency. The 1980’s ushered in new discussions about fluidity, the processual and emergent properties of performance genres (Erlmann 1996). Soon, performance and text were regarded as fundamentally different, the former implying social interaction in the process of cultural production.

Victor Turner understands the performance space as a kind of in-between zone where social roles are suspended, and where certain activities and behaviour that would not ordinarily be permitted, can take place (1982). In *Theatre and Anthropology*, *Theatricality and Culture* Fabian states that “much of cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative” (Fabian 1999: 171). Dancers, musicians and actors are the most visible performers of culture and thus intercultural understanding is often facilitated

through theatricality. In order to understand people's lived experiences in Kinshasa, it became appropriate to study the performance and to do so via ethnography. My project as a dancer stems from the idea that cultural knowledge can be gained in part by participating in and learning dances specific to a group.

For Johannes Fabian, "the conventions of ethnography, its habits collecting information and its forms of description, make popular culture a subject difficult to study and even more so to represent" (1998: 99). Nevertheless ethnographic observation may in part be employed to fill in the gaps within existing discourses concerning urban marginality in efforts to capture the lived reality of urban performers. As Wacquant puts it, "This here is a matter not of collecting 'fresh' data to compose 'lively' illustrations of theories elaborated outside sustained contact with the prosaic reality but indeed of enrolling ethnographic observation as a necessary instrument and moment of theoretical construction" (10: 2007). As the literature concerning Kinshasa and the Democratic Republic of Congo is sparse, many of the methods I use in the field are necessarily adapted or revised. Like many ethnographic texts, my account reflects a synthetic process of observation and interpretation and is more an extended comment than a complete description of a single event.

A particular contribution of this study is that my participation as a dancer allowed me to situate theory in time instead of in space, thus negating major anthropological challenges associated with universalizing culture. Rather than looking into the past at "traditional", "primitive" societies (which reduces them to static communities, constrained to one space and point in time), we focus on the present performance of culture. Culture is informed by the past, and the past is made present through performing

memory, which then helps us to remember the present (Fabian 2001: 177). For Fabian, the past must be shared in order to “know” another. But, mutual recognition can occur when the ‘present is remembered’ (Fabian 2001: 177). There is a sense in which participant-observation fieldwork has an ecstatic quality both in its inherent transcendence of the subject-boundaries, and in its performative aspects (Fabian 1985; Hastrup 1992).

By participating as a dancer in a troupe of young women, performing together with them, before audiences, I was able to share in an unfolding cultural process. Dance has an inherent fluidity to its expression. The visual artist such as a painter, struggles to capture the process of life as it exists in flux. However, for the dancer, as movement constitutes dance, it becomes the medium par excellence with which to represent the evolution of an experience.

For Kapferer and Hobart (2005: 20), the analysis of aesthetics within performance is as important as an analysis of social context. While the performance space of the street or the concert stage merits attention, the aesthetics of movement within dance is equally important, “an adequate description of a culture should place the same emphasis on dance as that given it by the members of that society” (Adrienne Kaepler cited in Royce 2002: 14). I have extended this notion to my own research and will examine some of the compositional dynamics within dance.

When representations within dance are analyzed, the artist, in this case, the dancer, represents urban realities, by imitating objects, people, or animals in order to step outside himself/herself to experience alterity (Taussig 1993). For Marcel Mauss (1936), body techniques such as walking or using a shovel are not consciously taught, but rather

are shaped by and express the 'habitus', a notion later developed by Bourdieu in 1972. Learning through mimickry is one of the social modes of transmission, a concept that acknowledges the importance of the body in constituting and maintaining culture. David Howes (1993) and Michael Taussig (1993) pay particular attention to the body and sensory perception. When the emphasis is placed on senses, gesture and movement rather than only the observing eye (Ong 1986: 12), new perspectives are often uncovered. Following Mauss' understanding of the importance of the body as a social site, for dance anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler, dancing is a structured movement system which can reveal aspects of the world view and values of a community (1972), a main tenet of this thesis.

Bourdieu understands "habitus" as a system of dispositions that are cultivated and socially transmitted from one generation to the next without following a code of rules. Through regular routine, these dispositions become "inscribed in the body" (Bourdieu 1977: 15). Therefore, there is a dialectical process between the body and the surrounding environment, such that social interactions leave an imprint on one's body. Dancing is a learned social activity, rather than an inherent 'natural' trait. DeFrantz (2002) echoes this in his endeavour to debunk the myth that Africans are natural dancers. Instead, following Mauss, he acknowledges that knowledge is passed from one individual to another in a community.

The body is a site where notions of the sacred and profane are readily apparent, just as it is symbols of society, delineating boundaries between different cultural groups (Douglas 1970). Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1996) devised a model which categorizes the body into three parts to identify the way in which the body

interacts with society on different levels. The categories include: the body social, individual, and political. Their analysis of the body politic echoes much of what Foucault advanced about the control and regulation of the body. Social norms are bound up in a dancer's body: one obvious example is in the strict regulation of the body's physicality to comply with an image of what a traditional ballerina looks like. While bodies are both source of power discourses as well as their product, in that through bodily activity, discourses and institutions are manifested, the body also wields considerable agency (Reed 1997; Cooper 2005).

In Jane Cowan's book *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (1990) it is shown that asymmetrical gender relations are constructed through and apparent in dance events. She understands these in terms of power relations, whereby the body is the site where hegemony is maintained. Further, for Cowan, the body is where one internally carries his/her worldview (1990: 25). Dance events such as a wedding, an evening dance, and a private party were examined in an effort to locate meaning concerning gender dynamics. She posits that dancers physically embody hegemonic gender norms, and participate in the collective event to uphold these values. In other words, dance events both construct and reinforce gender inequalities.

While bodies are both the source of power discourses and their product, in that through bodily activity, discourses and institutions are manifested, the body also wields considerable agency (Reed 1997; Cooper 2005). "Dancing seems to be a special mode of bodily behaviour which enables dancers to be more reflexively conscious than usual of their bodies. In dancing, the performer is not only aware that he has a body but also that

he is a body” (Erlmann 1996: 183). Dancing produces signs as well as social experience itself (Blacking 1985; Cowan 1990; Erlmann 1996).

The dancing body has been given very little academic attention for a variety of philosophical and methodological reasons. Cartesian Dualism or the mind/body split has given rise to a privileging of all things explicitly cerebral (Sheets-Johnstone 1992), while marginalizing non-verbal bodily communication. Contrary to Sally Ann Ness (1992), dance is a stigmatized art form, and it is regarded as unproductive as it leaves no material result. Furthermore, because the non-verbal cannot be measured since it leaves no mark, its ephemeral nature presents serious methodological difficulties (Blacking 1985).

Dance is not only a sign or a means of communicating or replicating culture, but a particular mode of thought, expressing what is otherwise not said. As Isadora Duncan expressed it: “If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to dance it”. For Peggy Phelan, dance research involves uncovering the meanings behind the real and the representational, attempting to “find a theory of value for that which is not ‘really’ there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative real...I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable” (1992: 1). Echoing the challenges of post-structuralism Phelan is concerned with identifying both the visible and invisible in notions of the real through an examination of what is communicated through dance.

I do not perceive art as radically separate from anthropological research. My own fieldwork could be viewed as a performance: first, in the literal sense that I perform dance choreography and secondly, in the sense that I become an actor in the unfolding social drama, sharing in and affecting the temporal present experience.

CHAPTER 2: Historical Underpinnings

Kinshasa as a sprawling “mega-city” is a recent development. In 1940, there were only 50,000 inhabitants in the city, which already ranked first in Central Africa in terms of population, and this swelled to 400,000 in 1960 at the time of independence (La Fontaine 1970: 12). Currently, city dwellers are mostly very young, with half of them below age 15 (CIA World factbook). The rate of natural increase in Congo is at its highest in Kinshasa, accounting for three-quarters of its total annual growth.

Since the 1970’s, the DRC has suffered gradual economic deterioration. Spiralling inflation, the collapse of large enterprises, the desperate search for income owing to a major decline in real wages, capital flight, and structural adjustment policies, have all contributed to the overall declining quality of life in the city.

In 1965, only five years after the country was granted its independence, Col. Joseph Mobutu staged a coup and seized power from Prime Minister Lumumba and President Joseph Kasa-Vubu, declaring himself president. He changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko, as well as that of the country to Zaire (Gondola 2002: 137). During the 1960’s and early 1970’s, Mobutu implemented a state ideology called Authenticity to counterbalance lingering Western influences with an imagined conception of what an authentic African state should be. He promoted national unity by staging performances that represented all of the country’s ethnic groups, merging them under a common culture re-presented by *Authenticity* (Gondola 2002: 142). Mobutu supported the establishment of a National Ballet which was intended to create choreography reflective of the country’s many ethnic tribes, uniting them under a single Congolese aesthetic.

Mobutu retained his position for over three decades with the use of brutal force. One of the factors leading to the end of Mobutu's reign was the Rwanda genocide which brought a massive influx of refugees into Congo, culminating in an internal civil war. In May of 1997, Laurent Kabila led a coup d'état with the support of Rwandan and Ugandan troops. He renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

After Laurent Kabila's assassination in January 2001, Joseph Kabila replaced his father as head of state. In October 2002, Joseph Kabila was successful in negotiating the withdrawal of Rwandan forces occupying eastern Congo; two months later, the Pretoria Accord was signed by all remaining warring parties to end the fighting and to establish a government of national unity. A transitional government was set up in July 2003 (Gondola 2002: 171). Kabila was inaugurated as president in December 2006. War persists in the eastern parts of the country despite the presence of international peacekeepers. While one does not 'feel' the climate of war in Kinshasa, people are nevertheless aware of strife in their country. Radio and newspapers keep people informed daily of new developments in the East.

Gender Relations and Urbanization

Like many cities in Central Africa, Kinshasa is a recent creation. The city came into being in 1889 with the railway line connecting the Pool region and the Matadi sea pier. Another major development leading to the construction of Leopoldville (later renamed Kinshasa), was the port, constructed in 1923 to facilitate the upstream river network (La Fontaine 1970: 10). The city, stigmatized as "negative, depraved and even evil" by Christian missionaries (both Catholic and Protestant) and enforced as a "male bastion" by

colonial authorities, discouraged African female migration (Gondola 1997: 66). In fact, both African men and colonial powers upheld rural villages as 'safe havens' where tradition could be maintained. Women were thus regarded as the bearers of tradition.

In his essay "Popular Music, Urban Society, and Changing Gender Relations in Kinshasa, Zaire", Gondola delineates the relationship between gender, urbanization and colonialism in Kinshasa to illustrate the ways in which popular concert music came to be dominated by men. Gradually after World War II, controls and regulations eroded, and women began to migrate to the city, an effort promoted by the colonial administration for the establishment of urban families (La Fontaine 1970: 30). Christian morals and values dating back to the Victorian era characterized the ideology espoused by the colonialists as well as the zealous missionaries who maintained a strong presence in the Congo. Inevitably, this ideology was extended to all realms of society, including gender relations. Females were considered by the colonial authorities as non-citizens, and were not expected to participate in public life. Continuing to be regarded as the safe-keepers of traditional values, colonial officials consequently viewed women as "uncivilized" in contrast to men who were quick to adopt European habits. In contrast to the European fashion borrowed by African men, women preferred the traditional *pagnes* or printed material worn like a sarong over European dresses and skirts (Gondola 1997: 74).

Christianity in Congo

Shortly after the first colonialists arrived in the Belgian Congo, Catholic missionaries began Christianizing the masses, taking over radio and later television stations to spread their messages of morality. In fact, King Leopold II encouraged Catholic missionaries to

“civilize” his new subjects, especially those in the newly formed city of Leopoldville, now Kinshasa (Cornevin 1970). A hostility and disdain towards indigenous dances was particularly acute among Christian missionaries, particularly among Protestant missionaries who strictly forbade dancing altogether. At a missionary conference in 1894, a resolution was passed that “old customs, habits and conceptions, such as dance, all forms of idolater feasts, hair cutting feasts, funeral feasts, gun-salutes and wailing for the deceased, together with the drinking of palm-wine at such feasts, and at palavers, should be vigorously opposed and exterminated” (Covington-Ward 2007: 89). Colonial attitudes toward dancing persisted well into the 19th century.

Pentecostalism was a later import, arriving in the 1960’s via a French pastor. In contrast to the rigid rituals in Catholicism, Pentecostalism is more flexible in terms of approaches to worship. As a result, it spread among the population, giving rise to new syncretic religious churches.

Today, Christianity, in particular Pentecostalism¹, is omnipresent in Kinshasa, informing people’s conceptions of good and evil. A major feature of Pentecostalism in Kinshasa is the repetitive talk of death and the devil (Pype 2006: 301). The city’s identity is heavily shaped by religious activity. With church services taking place in plain view on the sides of streets, weekly revivalist healing rallies held in the stadium, roaming charismatic evangelists, loud speakers, Christian TV shows and radio programs, one cannot escape the constant barrage of talk about salvation and the kingdom of

¹ From my experience in the field, when people talk about Christianity, they are referring to Pentecostalism which is why I use them interchangeably in my thesis

heaven. One reason for the spread of Pentecostalism is the economic crisis during the late 1980's, during the years of Mobutu's political downturn. Disillusionment and feelings of failure in modernization and the economic markets set in, creating what de Boeck refers to as an apocalyptic environment (Fabian 1994; De Boeck 2004).

Pentecostal churches, among other religious movements offered hope to the downtrodden, filling the void created by the corrupt Mobutu regime.

Performance in Pre-colonial Central Africa

Prior to the arrival of European colonialists, communication in Africa, in particular in Central Africa, was largely carried out through participatory performative channels such as song, dance, and theatre. One can observe the oral functionality in pre-colonial Africa performance, for instance, structures of African song, namely, call and response, encourage audience participation. It can be said that improvisation is closely related to audience participation. This can be extended to the realm of dance and Popular Theatre. In fact, pre-colonial Ugandan theatre was an outlet for participation; clapping, shouting, whistling emanated from the spectators in appreciation of the performance (Kerr 1995: 2). A collectivity, or a social ethos, existed in many pre-colonial Central African performance modes, in contrast to the individualism of Western theatre.

What was being communicated during these performances? There are many different categories of performance, many of which are porous, rendering categorization difficult. Dance, song, and theatre often mean the same thing. However, to get an idea of how ubiquitous performance was in pre-colonial Africa, we need to examine religion, life cycle rituals, entertainment, and politics. To illustrate the latter, political performance

helped mediate tensions between the chief's desire for centralized control and the commoner's desire to resist authority (Keer 1995: 9). Class conflicts were expressed through performance---commoners critiqued the activities of the tribal chief with song and dance, ultimately serving as a kind of check to ruling power. In addition to criticizing the chief, pre-colonial performance, especially dance, was an outlet for women to protest male domination. (Nkashama in African Drama and Performance 2004: 229)

For many pre-colonial societies, artistic channels were important in communicating political concerns.

The colonial period appropriated theatre in efforts to improve efficiency in extracting mineral resources from the earth. Further, adult education was driven by the incentive to improve agriculture output as well as to quell any tensions among "natives" who sought privileges from their colonial masters. "Theatre was useful in breaking down pre-colonial authority models in African rural areas" (Kerr 1995: 32). Didactic drama, or theatre productions designed with the intension of teaching Africans, advanced the colonial agenda to civilize Africans by relating to the population through traditional modes of communication. For example, propaganda plays, promoting Western morals and values as well as introducing "modern" ways of life were commonly held. As a result, African traditional theatre had been effectively cut off from its roots, suppressed, and replaced by a new Westernized form of drama. Colonial influence notwithstanding, pre-colonial African Popular Theatre remained in many people's memories.

CHAPTER 3: Methods

I recorded performances and then applied a set of categories to chart who is performing, watching, as well as the context and the function. One category includes demographics of concert dancers (in which neighbourhood did they grow up, socio-economic level, education, etc), as well as the physical space in which the event is held. Another category of analysis refers to the characteristics of dancing among each group of dancers. With the help of choreographers and dancers, I identified expressions of the traditional and the cosmopolitan in the different contexts where dance is being performed (wakes, stage performances during popular concerts, and street performances). Further categories include the role family approval and disapproval, and the economic incentives associated with performance.

In analyzing dance gestures, I conducted a series of ethnographic interviews with dancers about what they are trying to communicate, to better understand from where inspiration is drawn, as well as what dancers may be referencing. Kelly Askew points out that audience members are “active producers of meaning” (2002: 5) and therefore add a new dimension to the production of meaning. Due to diverging meanings, signs, and symbols in a society, I have chosen to focus on meanings “intended” by dancers.

In an effort to understand the reasons why performers are viewed as marginal people, semi-structured interviews with dancers and audience members included questions regarding the appropriateness of performance attire, as well as notions of behaviour acceptability on and off stage.

Research Groups

My research focused primarily on female dancers, or danseuses, between the ages of 16 to 25, employed by local bands, and musicians. I began by attending musical rehearsals throughout the city in pursuit of meeting dancers whom I could interview.

In an effort to identify traditional motifs within popular dance, I attended weekly folkloric dance performances and practices, interviewing dancers as well as audience members. Among several traditional dance troupes was the National Ballet where, apart from watching rehearsals and analyzing the choreography, I met with the dancers and administration to learn about the history of the company.

In addition, I conducted a series of interviews with street children, who often provide inspiration for the choreographies created for popular entertainment.

Popular Wenge Dance Bands

Often referred to as “musique moderne”, *Wenge* music² is characterized by electric instruments such as guitars and keyboards. Bands are composed of male singers, musicians, vocal animators referred to as *atalakus*, and dancers---both male and female. The *atalaku* and in particular dancers occupy the lowest position within the band’s hierarchy and are the least paid members, something I will explore in my thesis. Music played by popular *Wenge* bands is characterized by layered guitar riffs, and harmonized vocals. Song structures, as Bob White (2008) delineates, contain two-parts: the first half sets the ambiance, or tone of the song, while the second half, or *seben*, is marked by an increase in tempo, a signal that it is the dancing section of the song.

² Referred to as Soukous in Europe.

The *atalaku*, a crucial band member is described by White as “a musician who creates and strings together the seemingly random series of short percussive phrases known as “shouts” to drive the fast-pace dance sequences of contemporary Congolese popular music” (White 1999: 2). During the *seben* section, the *atalaku* shouts out the names of rich patron businessmen and politicians who make band performances possible. It is interesting to note that while music performed by the *atalaku*'s band is structured in a contemporary form, shouts often contain traditional Congolese proverbs and expressions.

The *atalaku* merits attention in this discussion concerning the ways in which modernity is expressed and negotiated as well as how dance moves become popularized. White suggests that the *atalaku* exposes the ways in which tradition is objectified within African “modern” culture, such as the use of traditional proverbs in his shouts during contemporary musical performances. Further, the *atalaku* searches for new inspiration for lyrics and dance moves in churches, at funerals, markets, and in the streets where street kids are most active, adding a familiar dimension to stage performances. The *atalaku* selects elements from the sacred regions of his culture, blending them with the profane ironies of modern life (White 1999: 12).

During the *seben* section, female dance troupes dominate the performance space, and entice audience members to dance and hand out money. In this context, the *atalaku* will rally the crowd with his lyrical prowess in hopes of increasing the amount of donations given to the band and dancers.

The Danseuse

In Kinshasa, popular *Wenge* bands hold concerts daily throughout the city playing dance music with roots in Congolese Rumba. Dancers tend to be between the ages of 16 to 25. Male performers can be musicians, singers, and dancers whereas females are limited to being dancers. Danseuses perform during a select number of songs, and usually appear only after the second half of the song when the music gets especially lively (White 2008: 114). There is a sense in which a musical performance is incomplete without the presence of danseuses.

Traditional Dance Groups

While Kinois are very proud of their cosmopolitan identity, they nonetheless maintain ties to their ethnic groups. One means of maintaining a connection is to hire a traditional dance group to perform during life-cycle rituals such as marriages and funerals. These professional performers are often trained by L'INA (L'Institut National des Arts) to perform traditional theatre, songs, and dance. Performers learn a variety of dances from different ethnicities.

Performers in these settings are like animators, as they encourage the audience to participate and dance. Traditional dance groups may help city people who are separated from village life and customs to feel a closer connection to tradition. In addition to performing for Kinois audiences, traditional dance groups often stage performances for the ex-patriot community in Kinshasa. Venues such as La Halle de La Gombe, other Belgian Community centres and embassies often host traditional culture for European audiences.

Kinshasa's national ballet, or Ballet National, holds public practices in an old theatre several times a week. Created during the Mobutu era, the national ballet was instrumental in the *authenticité* official state policy of the late 1960's and early 1970's. In brief, the authenticity campaign was an effort to rid the country of the lingering vestiges of colonialism and Western culture and to create a more centralized and singular national identity. As traditional dance was valorized, Mobutu supported the creation of a ballet that would communicate a national identity to be disseminated worldwide. The Ballet National has toured extensively, and continues to perform for European audiences in Kinshasa.

The Shegwe

The growing number of street children in the urban public spaces of Kinshasa is cause for concern. It is estimated that there are between 12,000 and 20,000 children living on the city's streets (Tshiambala 2002: 19). Kinshasa's street children live in public spaces along boulevards in *Gombe*, the city center, as well as ones in municipalities like *Limete*. Filip de Boeck attributes the increase of street children roaming the streets of Kinshasa in part to witchcraft accusations, though there are a variety of reasons as to why children are living on the streets.

Street children not only occupy themselves with petty crime, they are also important culture creators, inventing new musical instruments from scraps and garbage that produce simple, percussive sounds. Dance is also a popular activity with street children, and new dance steps are invented which reflect their daily realities. Streets kids have popularized certain dances such as *kotazo* and *ndombolo* which I will describe in

further detail later. Many of the popular dances seen on stage during concerts by artists like Werrason are “*shegue* dances”. In some ways, street kids embody the diverging local and global cultural impetuses, reflecting consumption practices, and general desires of young people in Africa today.

Field Research

Semi-structured discussions with dancers

I conducted semi-structured interviews with young dancers roughly between the ages of 16 and 25, in collaboration with a local research assistant who helped me with translation from Lingala into French. Interviews were sex segregated in order to minimize self-censorship between members of the opposite sex. I noted their personal biographies, and questioned them about their experiences living in Kinshasa. On the occasions when it proved to be too far for me to make visits in dancer’s neighborhoods, I set up meetings at outdoor public terraces and provided transport money as well as a small compensation for their time. The preliminary list of focus group questions can be found in the **Appendix**.

Semi-Structured interviews with musicians and bandleaders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with musicians who employ dancers during performances. While musicians were generally open to my questions, some of the more famous ones such as Papa Wemba, Felix Wazekwa, and JB Mpiana were reluctant to answer questions regarding sexuality in the context of dance choreographies. I attributed this to a management of their identities as big international stars. Local musicians and bandleaders including the group I worked closely with, VIP Chic en Couleurs, were more

responsive to questions regarding the sexual nature of certain dance movements. My gender often provoked suspicions as to what my agenda was in asking these types of questions. Preliminary questions can be found in the **Appendix**.

Observation at dance practices

Dancers practice choreography throughout the week in preparation for concert performers. I participated in and observed practices as they occurred throughout the course of fieldwork, in efforts to understand creative process as well as the dynamics among dancers.

Women in Kinshasa have been described as becoming reticent in the presence of male researchers; therefore, as a female, as well as someone who has dance training, I had an advantage interacting with danseuses. DeWalt stipulates that, "Being a man or a woman may be the most significant social fact concerning an individual and obviously should have an impact on participant-observation" (2000: 278).

Observation at concerts

I participated in numerous ways in performances: as a conspicuous audience member, as a documenter via a digital video, and as a dance performer. I conducted feedback interviews with dancers and, in an effort to interpret in a collaborative manner, I often watched and listened to video recordings of performances and interviews with my informants. In addition, I interacted with musicians and dancers during concerts, backstage as well as after performances. These interactions provided me with a better

understanding of a band's hierarchical structure, gender dynamics, relationship with the audience and how dancers are compensated for their work.

Interviews with youth on the streets

I engaged in informal activities with street children known as *shegue* in order to get a sense of what they do, what kind of cultural products they consume, where they draw inspiration, how they create new dance moves, and the ways in which they are involved with professional musicians. I sought to get a feel for how they, their peers, and their families conceive of their status as street children, and concert dancers.

The Collection of Music Videos/Household Reception

Given the ubiquitous presence of music videos of concert dance, I was provided with a natural setting in which to observe people's reception of these videos as well as to discuss behaviour exhibited by dancers. I watched and collected dance music videos aired on television in Kinshasa. In the evenings, I often watched music videos with family members of the house where I was staying. I was able to observe how people without any connection to the music industry saw popular dance as well as how they reacted to the various video clips aired on television.

Video Recordings and Limitations

I relied heavily on my small digital video camera to film performances and practices which I later watched and analyzed with dancers, choreographers, and other informants who are not affiliated with the music industry. In this way, I was able to ask questions concerning specific dance movements and gestures in order to gain a better understanding

of their significance. I am aware that the multiple meanings derived from my research cannot be subjected to one single perspective, or a “tableau-vivant”. Because dance moves contain no universal meaning, following Wieschialek (2003), actors, spectators and other participants are important sources of information. Furthermore, in contrast to Malinowski, I do not assume that the totality of a society is implicit in dance performance.

In addition to this thesis, I have included several visual examples of dance to complement my research. “As such, these texts, of course not only underscore the fact that ethnographic representation is not about the representation of some authentic ‘other’, but, at best a record of what some performers say about what they think they are doing and what ethnographers believe they saw and heard” (Erlmann 1996: 29).

Participant-observation is not an unchallenged method. Personal biases and theoretical approaches shape the way in which the data is gathered. In other words, a degree of subjectivity is inherent in the praxis of participant-observation. DeWalt advocates a subjective analysis of the effects of “biases, predilections, and personal characteristics” in terms of anthropological research (2000: 291). Choices of target groups, key informants, and interview questions will be informed by my personal research agenda.

Becoming a Dancer

While watching a local young band called VIP Chic en Couleurs rehearsing in Lingwala, the neighbourhood where I was staying, I was called up into the performance space to dance. After the rehearsal, the bandleader, Oli 5, asked me if I would like to

become the band's guest dancer. I accepted and began to participate in the tri-weekly dance practices to learn the choreography. In addition, I danced during the band's weekly rehearsals, performed in two public concerts, and accompanied the bandleader during interviews at several TV stations. The rapport I built with the dancers and the choreographer enabled me to ask many questions that I might not otherwise be able to ask as a stranger. I formed friendships with our choreographer, Gerry and three danseuses: Fanny, Patience, and Latecia.

Ndombolo Dance

The *ndombolo* is a style of dance that is foundational to Congolese popular urban dancing. Characterized by moving one's pelvis in a circular motion, occasionally thrusting the hips with the help of the bent knees, the *ndombolo* has become widespread not only across the DRC, but across Africa as well. In fact, many Africans refer to Congolese popular music as *ndombolo*. In countries like Cameroon, *ndombolo* dancing has been banned by the government for being too vulgar or obscene (BBC online news July 25, 2000). While the origins of this dance are unknown, there is an urban mythology surrounding it. Some Kinshasans say that it was created to mimic the way Kabila, the president who overthrew Mobutu, walked as he limped into the country from the Eastern forest region. The older generation (above the age of 40) say that the *ndombolo* imitates apes and monkeys, still others insist that the word *ndombolo* is derived from the Hindouill word for marijuana, which they claim that makes one's body go wild with movement. Whatever the origins, it is a seminal dance that has given way to other popular dance moves.

Chapter 4: Performance Space

The performance space in which popular dance occurs merits attention. I have created a system of categories for analyzing the nature and type of events, venues, their use, and function. Although public and private is probably more continuous than dichotomous, the table below nevertheless provides an at-a-glance description of the various types of dancing done in Kinshasa. This table shows that dance is an important activity during major life-cycle ceremonies. It is also present in both sacred and profane milieus. My thesis addresses the ways in which context matters in terms of notions of appropriateness.

Event	Location/Venue	Public/ Private	Audience	Purpose	Type of Dancing
Funeral party	Under a tent on the side of the road	Semi-Private. commuters and people on foot can witness the party	Family members (multigenerational) friends of deceased	Social bonding, celebrating the past life of the deceased, express, evoke & transform emotion, renew spiritual outlooks, entertainment	Hired folkloric dance group encourages audience participation, functioning as animators
Wedding	Backyard, reception hall	private	Family members (multigenerational) friends of deceased	Social bonding, celebrating the newlyweds, express, evoke emotion, entertainment	Hired dance troupe, sometimes an ethnic folkloric group encourages audience participation, functioning as animators, hired popular concert band
Popular Music Concert	Outdoor, indoor halls, yards, fields, hotel	Public, private	Mainly young adults	Entertainment	On stage dancing, some dancing in the crowd depending on venue.
Church	Indoors/outdoor sometimes makeshift backyard hall	Public	Multigenerational, open to all	Social bonding, express, evoke & transform emotion, spiritual renewal,	Led by pastor, or church animators, congregation

In the following chapters, I shall add my own steps, turns, and leaps to the overall choreography within the themes of performance as social practice.

I begin with a description of my involvement in the popular concert dance scene to shed light on the relationship between dance aesthetics, “modernity” and gender dynamics.

VIP Chic en Couleurs Concert Dancers

Every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday around 2pm the danseuses for the young musical group, *Chic en Couleurs* convene in the small courtyard at band leader Oli 5’s family house to practice choreography. Our choreographer, Gerry, awaits us, eager to get started with our routine. I and the other three dancers, Patience, Fanny, and the cheftaine, Laticia, begin by clearing away objects in our practice space and sweep the unevenly paved concrete that is often filthy with dog excrement, or as they put it, “les histories”. There are frequent squabbles over who exerts themselves the most in this cleaning process. One day, when Gerry was feeling particularly fed up with the competitive whining, he shouted that I, the foreigner swept up the best, prompting sneers from the girls. This was heated territory, and I knew that I had to tread very carefully so as not to threaten the other dancers, who relied on their memberships in *Chic en Couleurs* to pay their bills. Apart from the occasional flare-ups over stage placing and costume selection, my presence as the fourth dancer was welcomed, and as the weeks went by, friendships began to form.

Three times a week I found myself holding hands in a circle with the other dancers, praying to God to keep us safe, and free from injury. These prayer sessions were part of our rehearsal ritual. Dance rehearsals consisted of a one-hour conditioning to improve flexibility, strength, and stamina, followed by a two to three hour choreography practice

where we repeated movement sequences until Gerry was happy with our improvement. On Wednesdays, we practiced with the drummer, who hammered out the rhythms to the songs, and Fridays we practiced for an hour with the full band. Friday practices were themselves performances as they were open to the public.

The first time I saw a Chic performance, I was intrigued by the way the dancers seemed to be the stars of the show, diverting the attention from the musicians as they danced in the front-centre of the performance space (see figure 3). As I will elucidate in this thesis, when dance is staged, as is the case for all popular concerts, the audience is in a position to gaze at dancers. Rather than being surrounded by musicians and dancers, as is the case with more “traditional” dancing, the audience is separate from performers.

After finishing their set, the dancers sauntered off to the dark corner to wait for their next song. As I watched these girls waiting in their bathing suit costumes, I wondered if they felt self-conscious among the young men that seemed to be watching them from the corners of their eyes. Seldom does one see women exposing so much skin in Kinshasa and seeing the bathing suit clad dancers in front of an audience for the first time is somewhat shocking. The liminal quality of the performance space allows performers to dress as they please, partly because it is understood that they are evoking a role or a character. In fact, when I became a dancer for Chic en Couleurs, I was given a stage name: Blanche Neige.

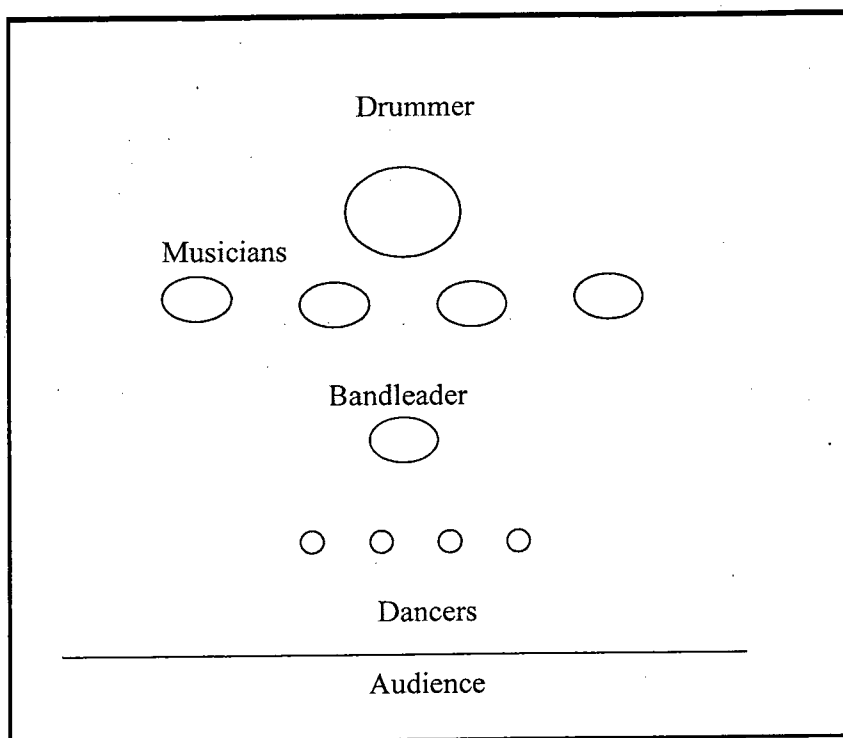


Figure 3

Friday night, June 2009

On the night of the show, the band, including the dancers, were expected to be ready and waiting at Oli 5's house at 9pm. I arrived around 7pm with the danseuses to pick up our costumes chosen for us by Oli 5's sister. Because of her small business of bringing back clothing from Paris to sell to people in Kinshasa, we could pick from a variety of styles and sizes. We all wore one piece fitted suits which looked to me like disco outfits, I was given a black one since it is the smallest, Fanny chooses the yellow, and Latecia got the red one. After we doused ourselves in cheap perfume and putting on several layers of makeup, we pronounced ourselves ready to go. Interestingly, the boys took longer to get ready, incessantly combing their hair, applying white powder to their faces and fixing the angles of their hats. I made a joke about their primping which goes went unheard as they jostled each other for a spot in front of the mirror. The male dancers found their own

outfits which mainly came from the *tombola*, or second hand clothing stalls at the market. I was always impressed with the pastiche of outfits that the male dancers manage creatively to coordinate. Name brands, or *giffes* like Versace and D&G were most popular among them, and great lengths were taken to give the second hand clothing the illusion of being name brand. In many cases, designer tags were actually sewn onto the sleeves of clothing.

A large jeep belonging to a friend of the band pulled up to the gate of the house, along with another car. We all piled in and left for the outdoor venue in Limete, a large municipality roughly 25 minutes away. When we arrived, the dancers and I scurried to an area that was designated as backstage, when actually it was a small sheltered area off to the side of the stage. After what felt like hours of waiting, the show finally got started, and we opened the show with a *mutuashi* dance, a traditional dance from the Kasai region of Congo. As our limbs sliced through the air, with empowering gestures, it felt strange to be referencing traditional culture in our very tight fitting disco outfits, and I, the token white girl suddenly became very aware of myself. I couldn't help but wonder about how the audience saw me. Did I look ridiculous to them? The first dance went reasonably well, despite my state of self-consciousness. Once backstage, we discussed the audience while sharing a large bottle of beer. Latecia thought that there might be some good tippers in the crowd. She shrugged when I asked her how she knew, and told me that she made frequent eye contact with various male audience members in hopes that they'll come up to the stage and 'spray' her with money. Tipping, or 'spraying' at a concert enables audience members to participate in the performance by coming up to the stage, sometimes dancing on the way up, and 'spraying' their favourite musician, *atalaku* and/or

dancer with dollar bills. Generally audience members give 1,000 francs, roughly the equivalent of 1 US dollar. Dancers in particular will often single out a male audience member if the stage is close enough to the crowd, and pay attention to him, charming him with sensuous dance moves, coercing him with the help of the *atalaku* who shouts into his microphone 'she's beautiful, look at her' to tip her. In most cases however, audience members readily displace themselves to hand out money during an impressive dance section.

As the night progressed, I grew more comfortable being on stage, but the impending solo sessions remained an anxiety. Dancers rehearse solo choreography with the drummer to master the cues of the passages to new rhythms. There is an interesting dialogue between dancers and drummers: in fact, I soon learned that contrary to Western dance pedagogy where dancers are taught choreography by counting out the steps, Congolese dance is premised, not on memorizing the step count, but rather listening to the drummer for cues. Conversely, drummers must be perceptive to a dancer's hints as to when she is ready for the passage beat. Pulling up one's pants or extending an arm in the air are common hints used by dancers. In my case, I would have to listen to the drummer for indication of the passage beat. The drummer will punctuate the dancer's movements with hits on the cymbals for each hip thrust she makes, in effect creating more of a spectacle and increasing the suspense of her solo. Latecia, the cheftaine, was a masterful solo dancer as she moved with subtlety and grace, waving and circling her body parts with boneless articulation. Just before the drummer hit the cymbals she rushed to the edge of the stage, jumped in the air and landed in a split leg position only to gracefully move back into her original upright position, all the while maintaining a cool facial

expression of indifference. The crowd feverishly applauded her flexibility and agility as people came up to the stage and threw dollars at her feet and forehead.

Although solo dances look improvised, each dancer skilfully crafts solos in advance to showcase her particular talent. These are moments that the dancer can break free from the synchronized choreography and shine alone in front of the crowd. I will examine this moment of individual creativity more fully in a later section.

Dancing at Funeral Parties

As I moved about the city, I noticed that funeral services are held on the sides of the road, in public view. Serge, one of my research assistants, explained to me that because space is limited inside people's homes, and because people don't generally have large backyard areas, funerals are more conveniently held in spaces where chairs can easily be set up to accommodate a few dozen people. I took note of several popular spots for funerals, one of them near the National Ballet theatre, where I frequently visited to watch ballet rehearsals. One late afternoon, upon my leaving the theatre, a lively funeral was underway, complete with music and a young male dancer. I decided I would ask some of the attendees if I could take a seat and watch. As I approached, I was met with smiles and curious stares. I asked a group of ladies if it would be alright to watch the funeral party, as I had never seen one in Kinshasa before. They laughed, and motioned for me to take a seat next to them.

A young, lanky man dressed in jeans and a T-shirt was dancing to music blaring from an old stereo in front of the seated crowd. His style of dancing was similar to what I saw in music videos on television, and on stage during concerts. I soon realized that his

role was to animate the crowd, and encourage people to get up and dance. Women were reluctant at first, but when a Michael Jackson song came on (Michael Jackson's death during the period of my research prompted a new appreciation for his music), the crowd began to move.

Dancing in Church

Dance has historically been a vehicle with which to channel spiritual energy, or invisible powers. For Pentecostals, working one's body into a state of frenzy to the point where fainting and convulsing occurs is part of the process of communicating with the divine. Pentecostal pastors often encourage their congregation members to dance during the lively musical worship segments of the church service. While dance in the context of the Church is regarded as "good", pastors often address what they believe Christianity views as 'bad' dancing in their sermons. Katrien Pype, a researcher who has spent considerable time in Kinshasa, investigates "worldly" and "Christian" dance movements to reveal that this seemingly neat binary is actually blurry and at times hardly distinguishable (2006: 298). In this section I will describe some of the dancing I observed in church.

During the first month of my fieldwork I stayed with a family in Limete, 17eme rue, deep in an impoverished neighbourhood where most homes have no running water. The lady of the house, Mama Bea, is an active member of a nearby Pentecostal church run by a husband and wife. Church services are held every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday evening, but I had to convince Mama Bea that I didn't need to accompany her more than once a week, even though she thought my research would benefit from going

more often. “Ca bouge et ca chauffe à l’église” she often told me after I explained that I was researching popular dance in Kinshasa. She went on, “Popular dance? Well, it’s popular to dance at Church. Everyone dances, you’ll see how exciting it gets”.

Indeed Sundays at this church are highly charged, complete with a full band and singers who belt out fast-paced worship songs. Mama Bea was right: people danced at church, to music that sounded similar to the “profane” music I heard on the streets. I was surprised to see women move in similar ways to concert dancers, undulating their hips and thrusting their pelvis to songs praising Jesus.

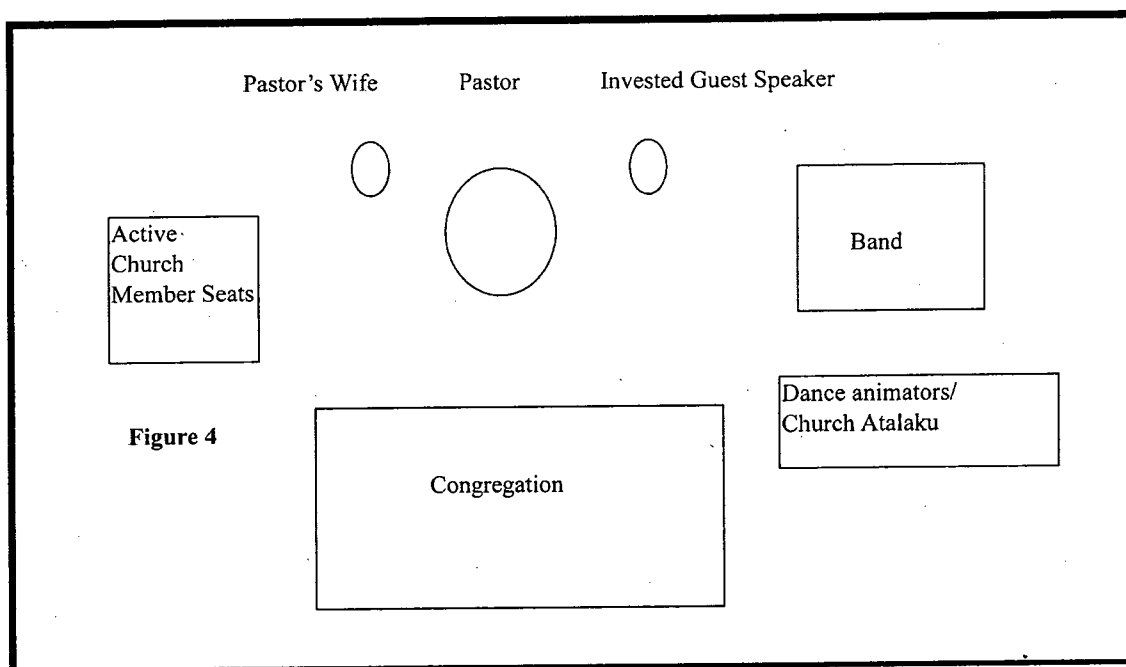


Figure 4

Figure 4

I was equally astonished to observe the presence of an *atalaku*-like figure in church, engaging the congregation by shouting spiritual phrases, while sometimes playing a percussive instrument like the Congas.

I observed that people's dance gestures in church are generally coordinated with song lyrics which often conjure up strong images of fighting the devil and/or fighting sinful behaviour. Dance moves which looked to me like people washing themselves, were later confirmed by Mama Bea as an exemplification of the purification process that occurs during a baptism. Pype similarly describes people dancing to songs expressing military-like themes of spiritual battles between good and evil. I noticed women sensuously dancing what they refer to as *ndombolo* style to fast-paced. *Ndombolo*, as I will describe later is a "profane" dance that has become the foundation of all popular music in Kinshasa. Pentecostals in Kinshasa have divided music and dance into two different categories: the sacred, or religious music and profane, or worldly music (Pype 2006, 308). It is apparent that the church I was attending had appropriated *ndombolo*, and re-contextualized it as sacred, or done 'for Jesus'. I will delve into this more deeply in the chapter concerning gender construction.

Dancing at a Birthday Party

The upper-middle class family with whom I stayed during the later half of my trip lives in Lingwala, a neighbourhood not far from Gombe, the city's administrative centre. Laura, the lady of the house who is roughly my age and a mother of 3 children, is not particularly religious, nor does she attend church. I spent many evenings with her talking about my research and talking generally about our lives. When I inquired about concerts,

she told me that while she would never go to an outdoor show, she likes to attend those held at the Grand Hotel or at other more expensive venues. Furthermore, she considers bands like Werrason “low class” and for street kids.

Lesley: Do you like to dance when you go to concerts at the Grand Hotel?

Laura: Sure, if my husband is there with me, we dance together. But I’m not one to draw attention to myself and show off. Anyway, the majority of the dances that you’ll see on stage are vulgar and low class.

Lesley: Are you knowledgeable of the latest dance moves?

Laura: No, no. I don’t keep track of that sort of thing.

Laura decided to host a birthday party for her baby’s first birthday. Extended family members and friends came to the house for an early dinner. I noticed immediately that the women were socializing in a different area from the men, who were smoking cigars and drinking in the salon. The women were in the front courtyard drinking beer and listening to a small outdoor stereo. As soon as a Werrason song came on, everyone got up to dance, including Laura, who began to demonstrate the latest dance step. I looked at her and gave her a wink and a smile to signal that I knew the dances she was doing. She laughed aloud and urged everyone to dance with her. We all took turns showing off our best moves, trying to outdo each other. Suddenly, the electricity went out, as it does so frequently in Kinshasa, especially in the neighbourhood of Lingwala, ending our impromptu dance party.

Distinctions between public and private are relevant in this discussion. In the

privacy of her home, and among her friends and family, Laura danced to songs she considers to be “low class”. Furthermore, it was apparent that she was managing impressions when she told me that she was not “au current” with the most popular dances, when in fact she was privy to the latest trends in dance.

Conclusion

From the descriptions of locations where dance occurs, it is apparent that dance is a popular activity. It is also evident that people are aware of the styles of dance seen at popular concerts and on television. As illustrated in the examples of the funeral and birthday parties, women actually copy popular moves, and in doing so, signal to people that they are aware of the current trends. In the following sections I will analyze why it is that female concert dancing has come to be known as vulgar and inappropriate in rhetoric, but is nonetheless appropriated by people who demonstrate their own dancing skills at various social events.

CHAPTER 5: Mimesis in Motion

My findings on dance in Kinshasa's concert milieus echo several concepts in Taussig's book *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993). For Taussig, the mimetic faculty can be described as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (1993:25). In studying the Cuna in Colombia, Taussig discerns the ways in which people from one group adopt another's nature and 'culture' while maintaining distance. He draws from Frazer's concept of "sympathetic magic" whereby laws of similarity render it possible for the magician to act through symbols in the world. By developing a symbolic world, people can better understand what is meaningful, whether real, or unreal. Through the act of mimicking, the copier brings the copied into the physical world (1993, 106). This not only fosters empathy, it allows for an experience whereby binaries between subject and object are blurred, enabling identity experimentation. Furthermore, through mimesis, influences are absorbed, and the individual can retain his/her own identity without having to become what is being imitated.

Dancing, as I will show, is a process of "becoming" what is communicated. Similar to acting out a role on stage, dancers convey to the audience a persona or an identity. My findings suggest that cosmopolitan identities are expressed through concert dance in particular. This will be further examined in chapter 6 entitled "Dancing the Urban Experience".

In an article about intercultural performance, Coco Fusco critiques the ways in which white audiences interpret performances of artists of colour (1994). Rather than

seeing the nuances within performances as communicated through metaphor, satire and allegory, white audiences experience performance as 'authentic' and mimetic. Similarly, Hastrup argues that for dancers, their actions, or performance is not simply acting, rather it is itself real. "If it is an imitation of action, it is still an imitation in action as well" (2004: 198). In other words, imitation becomes a lived experience, with more at work than simply an impersonation. Individuals derive meaning in the very actions. "The play achieves its realistic effect not by copying, but by way of emplotment—that is, by making a whole configuration out of successive events" (Ricoeur 1991 in Hasterup: 198). Following Hasterup, I will elucidate how mimesis is a process that enables people to experiment with identity and publicly perform their desires.

Following Kapferer and Hobart who argue that an analysis of aesthetics is as important as an analysis of social context (2005: 20), I hold that the aesthetics of the movement within dance is as important as an analysis of the performance space of the street or the concert stage. I intend to examine the compositional dynamics within dance to develop a deeper understanding of cultural performance. Dance in the context of folkloric groups demonstrates how imagined traditional themes and symbols are embodied by performers, communicating "traditional" pre-colonial identities and ways of life. As I will highlight, these are often imagined identities created by choreographers to speak to an opposing reality to that of the 'mega city' of Kinshasa. I found that representations of animals are common to both folkloric dance and contemporary concert dance. I will examine some of these animal-like gesticulations to demonstrate some of the common themes that distinguish what people perceive as modern and what people perceive as traditional dance.

Finally, I will discuss my own process of learning Congolese style dance, one which is foreign to me, and not a part of my habitus. Bourdieu understands “habitus” as a system of dispositions that are cultivated and socially transmitted from one generation to the next without following a code of rules. Through regular routine, these dispositions become “inscribed in the body” (Bourdieu 1977: 15). There is a dialectical process between the body and the surrounding environment, such that social interactions leave an imprint on one’s body. Dancing is a learned social activity, rather than an inherent “natural” trait. I will show how learning dance is a process of mimeticism that triggers the body’s reflexivity, enabling the self-consciousness to be enhanced and experienced differently. For Ingold (1990), imagination is the main agent in self-reflection (1990: 111) and what enables the individual to experiment with ways of being in the world. By imagining and visualizing myself a part of Kinshasa, I began to master aspects of the aesthetics of Congolese popular dance. I will highlight how learning how to dance entails that the individual internalize certain cultural codes associated within a particular cultural group. For instance, knowledge of pop culture, or what Bourdieu refers to as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) must be embodied before cultural references can be articulated through dance.

Mimicking Female Work in Traditional Dancing

The government-sponsored National Ballet in Kinshasa became a site in which I could examine what Congolese choreographers considered to be reflections of their country. The National Ballet does not resemble the classical French ballet; rather, it is a stylized dance rooted in folklore, meant to reflect an African aesthetic. Its mission,

following the fallen dictator Mobutu's ideology, is to promote a vision of a cohesive Congolese dance aesthetic nationally, and internationally. In fact, the National Ballet mainly tours abroad and performs in European festivals. I watched a rehearsal of a performance entitled "Going up the River" which chronicles the different dances from the different regions of the Congo. After interviewing the director of the company as well as the main choreographer, Assina Kititwa, I learned that the choreography was an imagined, stylized version of what is actually danced in rural regions. This essentialized version of Congolese dance was intended to gain wide appeal by reflecting dances from different regions within Congo.

Because there are over 450 ethnic groups in Congo, the National Ballet has amalgamated different dance styles to create a kind of bricolage aesthetic to reflect a centralized and singular national identity.

Mobutu's Authenticité campaign during the 1970's was an effort to rid the country of the lingering vestiges of colonialism as well as stave off Western imperialism to create a more unified national African identity. Due to the geographical vastness of the country, and the hundreds of ethnic groups, Mobutu sought to offset regionalism and tribalism to create an imaginary 'Afro-Congolese' identity. The threat of secession in the eastern part of the country, as well as in the southern province of Katanga where there is abundant mineral wealth, cultural propaganda was implemented to quell political instability. The National Ballet linked the newly independent state of Zaire to the cultural patrimony of a pre-colonial past, uncontaminated and cleansed of the influences brought about by colonization. Bob White describes the authenticity campaign as a means of projecting an image of pre-colonial tradition into the present. "La nature double d'un tel

geste s'exprime dans l'expression si souvent entendue « nous les Zairois authentiques », qui associe le passé (l'authenticité culturelle) à un présent-futur imaginaire (l'identité nationale)” (White 2006: 46). The state privileged and valorized ‘traditional culture’, hence the National Ballet became a vehicle with which to create a national identity.

I attended several rehearsals with my friend Rudy, whose family I had initially stayed with, only to discover that these outings to the old theatre near the borough of Kinshasa bored him endlessly. I watched as dancers on stage mimicked graceful women bearing heavy burdens on their heads, stirring large pots of food or washing laundry in the river with muscular elegance. There is a sense in which mimicking idealized “traditional” activities increases the prestige of the dance as it appeals to European audiences who are seeking what they consider to be an “authentic” image of “Africa”. It was apparent that women in this dance were celebrated as bastions of traditional values, speaking to a forgotten past. Yet I noticed Rudy yawn in an exaggerated way. I inquired as to whether the idyllic bucolic scenes of women paddling in a canoe, or cooking food made him nostalgic for a rural past that he has never experienced. He thought about it for a while, and then replied “I know how hard life is in the village. I don’t wish that on anyone, not my mother or my sister. Why are we celebrating something that looks like hard work? And anyway, we are not village people any more, we are modern just like the rest of the world.” It is clear that, for Rudy, the National Ballet doesn’t reflect or capture his experience of living in Kinshasa.

Perhaps what struck me most from his response was the distance he put between his reality and the one portrayed in the dance. Furthermore, the idea of romanticizing female

hard labour in a rural setting seemed ridiculous to him. Although I will not highlight the various problems with romanticising female labour in a lyrical dance drama, I would like to point out that by upholding the National Ballet as “high” art (in contrast to the “low” art of popular concert dancing) old colonial and nationalist agendas are perpetuated.

Female Traditional Dance Movement Incorporated into Concert Dance

Much of what is being danced today in popular settings such as the concert stage is rooted in Congolese traditional dance. The foundational movement particularly in female dance stems from the bent knee posture that characterizes African dance throughout the continent (Dagan 1997). The “natural bend” in a dancer’s posture permits a wide range of movement particularly in the waist and hip regions of the body. I will not, however, enter the discussion concerning the origins of dance nor will I outline the reasons many structuralists have given as to why people dance (Williams 1991). Instead I will attempt to understand what it is people are trying to communicate through dance.

Makuandungu, Zebola, Zambele Ngingo dance rhythms make up part of Congo’s folkloric tradition, one that has been incorporated in popular music (Seck & Clerfeuille 1986). In this section I will focus on *Mutuashi* since it is a dance with which I became most familiar during my fieldwork.

The first day I attended a ‘Chic En Couleurs’ dance practice, I was informed by Gerry, the choreographer, that I would learn *Mutuashi*. A Kasai dance from the South Eastern Congo, *Mutuashi* became popularized by a singer named Tshala Muana in the 1980’s. Considered to be the “Queen of *Mutuashi*”, Muana is known for her outrageous stage outfits and extremely sexy dancing. This ethnic Luba dance is characterized by

smooth figure-eight hip movements. A crowd pleaser, popular bands including Chic en Couleurs, often incorporate *Mutuashi* as a folkloric intro to certain songs, ultimately to warm up the crowd before the song begins. Dancers are either accompanied by the drummer, and/or the entire band. I felt self-conscious learning the *Mutuashi*, especially when half the band watched me as I undulated my hips to the staccato rhythm Gerry clapped out to keep the time.

Urban artists exploit folklore dance like *Mutuashi*, exposing the sensuousness of the dance for the purpose of entertaining the crowd. Traditional dance like *Mutuashi* have been de-contextualized when used in popular concerts, creating confusion in terms of notions of femininity. The erotic femininity that is vigorously performed in front of an audience has become a point of contention for many Kinshais, in particular for religious groups. In chapter 6, I will further discuss shifting notions of public and private as well as how this relates to gender norms and values.

My friend and research assistant Serge arranged a meeting with Lambio Lambio, a famous choreographer for popular bands like Papa Wemba's Viva La Musica. We met him at one of his rehearsal spaces in the courtyard, or "parcelle"³, of a small house Matonge, historically one of Kinshasa's popular nightlife neighbourhoods. Lambio is a portly middle age man who commands presence with his deep booming voice. As we passed through the gates to his compound, we entered a courtyard space where one of Lambio's band, Vijana, was practicing. There were people milling about everywhere, some watching the rehearsal, others attending to daily chores. Serge, Lambio, and I took

³ A "parcelle" is the plot of land where one or several houses stand often surrounded by a wall and a gated entrance. There is also usually a small courtyard within this space that provides a kind of private outdoor space.

a seat out in front of his compound where it was quiet. Two girls came out with chairs for us to sit on. After singing his praise, and letting him know how much I respected him as a choreographer, I introduced the topic of traditional dance. I wanted to know if he consciously chose to incorporate traditional dance movement in his choreography. Without responding directly to my question, Lambio called out to one of his dancers, who emerged from the back of the small house, sudsy from washing clothes. He firmly requested that she show me the way the Mongo tribe dances. I felt a pang of guilt for having interrupted her work to perform for me on command. Void of any facial expression she began to dance. I felt awkward filming her dancing so I put my camera down and started to imitate her moves. This immediately made her laugh and put her more at ease. It also amused Lambio, who later offered personally to teach me how to dance, whereby I politely declined. Lambio then asked her to show me a piece of a dance he has created for his band; it was clear that the Mongo dance had made its way into his contemporary choreography. Next she showed us a version of Mutuashi, a Luba dance I discussed earlier in this section. Lambio could not explain to me why exactly he was drawing from traditional dances, though he kept telling me that he was inspired by “everything in surrounding him”. His choreographies were palimpsests whereby old and new influences were combined to create a crowd-pleasing spectacle.

Representations of Animals in Traditional Dance

From the research I gathered among traditional dance groups, I noticed that there were numerous gestures that looked to me like depictions of animals. When I enquired as to what the significance of these dances were, performers told me that they were, in fact,

mimicking animals as they played out scenes from oral folktales. Among the recurring motifs were birds, monkeys, dogs, and leopards. Congo's ancestors, according to Angela Samba, the leader of a folklore dance group, were taught ways of thinking through "dancing the animals". While he did not elucidate this for me further, it was clear that he thought that animals are channelled through dancing to teach the dancer something that cannot be put into words.

The following section is taken from an interview with Angela Samba carried out on June 30, 2009 in a small 'parcelle', in the borough of Lemba.

Lesley: Where do you perform, and why do people hire your company?

Angela Samba: We mainly play at funerals and weddings, but we are trying to get the expatriate community's attention because we think they would appreciate seeing some authentic African dance.

L: Authentic? What makes this dancing authentic?

AS: We are all trained professionals, some of us studied at L'INA (Institute of Fine Arts). And we also have a few dancers that come directly from rural areas in Congo, and they bring to us the dances that are still being done there today. This way we have a direct connection to traditional rural culture.

L: Does your dance troupe perform dances from a specific area in Congo?

AS: We know a lot of different dances from different regions. This way we have a good repertoire, and can satisfy people when they request particular dances.

L: Is this how people stay close to their roots?

AS: Absolutely. In a city like Kin, we're all mixed together but still maintain a sense of ethnicity. This comes out especially when there is a death in the family or a marriage.

L: While you are performing, do you think the audience is transported to a traditional setting?

AS: Yes. I think when they see our dances, and hear the stories we tell, they feel closer to that way of life.

L: What about for you as a performer? Do you feel closer to that way of life, or does it feel like just a job?

AS: I personally feel like I'm transported to a different place. And also, I think it's important to us to really feel it so that the audience really feels the story. We have to become what we are performing for the show to be successful.

L: What role do animals play in your dances?

AS: Animals can represent different things. For example, the lion is strong and the monkey is clever. These are traditional images in many folk tales.

From this interview, there is a sense in which dancing becomes a vehicle for city people to imagine themselves in a village setting. For many people, rural traditional ways of living are foreign and something they've never experienced. From the funerals I witnessed where folkloric groups performed, I observed the ways in which 'traditional' dance performance encourages more audience participation than during popular concerts. People like Angela Samba play the role of the animator, inspiring audience members to

participate in the celebration. Thus, the performance becomes a collective activity, rather than an event where there is a division between spectators and audience.

According to Angela Samba, contemporary urban dances often originate in traditional village-setting dance, something I describe briefly in the following section. Animal representations are observable in folk dance as well as urban popular forms of dance, revealing a kind of continuum between the old and the new. Lets consider now the ways in which dance in Kinshasa is a palimpsest of influence.

Representations of Animals in Contemporary Popular Dance

Kinshasa is undoubtedly an urban environment and a representation of modern life for many people living in other parts of the DRC; however, there exists an unseen connection to village life, or a representation of an older more 'traditional' way of living. De Boeck discusses what he terms 'villagization' in *Kinshasa: Récits de la Ville Invisible*. Because of the failure of the state, people have had to adopt a 'do it yourself' attitude in order to survive. New spaces are continuously being re-fashioned and communities of people, harkening back to village social relations, show that solidarity and collectivity continue to thrive in an urban environment. While social conditions give way to a sense of the collective, competition is a defining feature of the city's ethos.

In addition to the city as a space that echoes some of the features of village life, popular dance also incorporates some of the same themes within folkloric dancing. In this section I provide several examples of how traditional dance motifs have made their way into more modern contexts. In addition, I show that in portraying representations of animals, state censorship concerning public morality can be circumvented.

Instances of incorporating traditional ceremonies and events into popular culture abound in Kinshasa. White suggests that the *atalaku*, or a popular band's 'animator', exposes the ways in which tradition is objectified within African contemporary culture, by identifying traditional proverbs in the *atalaku*'s 'shouts' during contemporary musical performances. The *atalaku* searches for new inspiration for lyrics and dance moves (the *atalaku* often invents new dance steps to compliment his lyrics) in churches, at funerals, and oral stories to add a familiar dimension to stage performances (White 1999, 12). Similarly choreographers reference traditional life through dance gestures. Here are a few prominent examples:

- *Le pigeon* (pigeon)

A dance conceived by the group Werrason. Because Werrason is associated with street culture, dances associated with this popular band tend to circulate among street children who then adapt them to create new ones.

- *Le dindo/kuku dindon* (turkey)

Introduced by Papa Wemba and his band Viva La Musica.

- *Le lezard* (lizard)

A dance characterized by rapid, darting movement.

- *Le singe* (monkey)

Another Werrason dance. Imagery of the jungle is often used in dance gestures and music videos, partly because the forest represents a magical place from where individuals can derive power. Werrason's second name is 'Le Roi de la Forest' or 'King of the Forest'.

- *La vache* (cow)

Popularized by the group Wenge Musica. In this dance, the cow throws punches in the air.

- *Le poisson/lopele* (fish)

JB Mpiana, renowned for evading censorship by creatively using sexual double entendres, sings about a fish having three parts: the head, stomach, and tail. This is meant to signify the parts of the body that are exemplified with dance as the lyrics are called out.

From the above descriptions, it is clear that animal behaviour, for a variety of reasons, is an influential factor in the production of popular dance. Although I will not delve into all of the possible reasons for the re-occurring animal motifs, I want to point out that state censorship and images of masculinity are relevant in this discussion.

As discussed earlier, state censorship is something that popular bands must be wary of, especially in terms of racy lyrics that may pose a challenge to rules about public morality. Many musicians from JB Mpiana to Koffi Omilde have written songs that are particularly sexual in nature. One way of bypassing any problems that might arise with censors involves the use of double entendres, metaphors and allegories. The example of the lopele or fish dance is a case in point. In a JB Mpiana song, the fish is divided into 3 parts: the head, stomach, and tail. The dance accompanies the lyrics which describe the different parts of the fish. When the atalaku sings about the tail, dancers sensuously move their behinds in a circle to mimic the fish tail. Sexual connotations within this song

abound, but because an image of a fish is evoked, the song and dance becomes appropriate for radio, and music videos.

Katrien Pype writes about animal imagery reflected in Mukumbusu, a martial art created in Kinshasa. In this case, gorillas are mimicked to demonstrate their ruthless and uncompromising behaviour in efforts to obtain the power and strength of these animals (Pype 2007). There is a sense that images of animals provide the individual with something real from which to channel energy. In communicating notions of strength, sensuality and humour, animal representations provide a means for dancers to draw from real-life figures instead of more abstract concepts.

Kotazo: The Big Man Dance

During my fieldwork in Kinshasa, the most popular dance was called *kotazo*, created and popularized by street children or *bashegue* (plural). Street children, like female concert dancers or danseuses, are marginal figures in society, in part, because they both live outside of traditional kinship structures⁴. Street children express new urban realities through dance as they reflect an amalgamation of images seen on foreign TV, and local symbols, in effect creating a kind of hybrid expression of life in Kinshasa.

Extremely buff young *pumbas* promenading the streets in Kinshasa have become a common sight due to the increasing popularity of bodybuilding. Filip De Boeck draws parallels between bodybuilding and architecture, identifying the body as the only “building” that people can maintain (2007: 238). According to De Boeck, corporal

⁴ They also represent a challenge to national and religious agendas, something I will address in greater detail later.

aesthetics are among the most meaningful activities in the urban space of Kinshasa especially because of the decrepitude of the city that has been ravaged by dictatorship and civil war. Let us examine some of the ways in which the body mirrors the city's imaginary.

Kotazo is an aggressive, intimidating dance created by street children to mimic the ways bodybuilders or *pumbas* move. Street children, because of their vulnerability in the face of street gangs, and police, uphold physical strength as a necessary feature of survival. *Pumbas* reflect a vision of security for these children. The dancer's posture evokes an image of muscles, with arms floating beside one's torso as though they are too bulging to rest flat. Dance movements are sharp and fists are clasped tightly. Occasionally arms circle the head, darting out with punching gestures directed at spectators. There is a sense that through mimickry, children are able to channel the *pumbas'* strength and in doing so it gives them courage to face their violent reality. My findings go beyond Taussig's discussions of mimesis (1994) largely because his is a theory of visual representation. *Kotazo* introduces sensoriality whereby street kids actually experience the sensation of becoming what they mimic. In other words, popular street dance adds a dimension of sensation to Taussig's theory of visual representation. Though *kotazo* belongs to the most marginalized segment of society, I observed that its signs and symbols have become a dominant expression of the modern urban social imaginary for the majority of Kinshais.

Given that "masculinities are multiple, historical, relational and contradictory" (Hodgson 2001: 109; Butler 1993; Cornwall 2005: 5) Pype and De Boeck offer a dynamic approach to the productions and enactment of masculinities in Kinshasa. The

“strong man” image of the soldier, the fighter are only a few embodiments of the masculine ideal observable in Kinshasa’s different layers of popular youth culture. Following Pype, I agree that the “Kinois ideal of manhood is publicly acted out within a public culture where social identity depends upon appearance” (2007: 251). In the context of dance in Kinshasa, identities are expressed through the process of mimicking certain figures in society. In the case of *kotazo*, masculinity specifically for the shegue is embodied and communicated through the image of the *pumba*. As I will examine in a later section, Latecia, one of my danseuse friends danced *kotazo* during her solo part of the dance. Contrary to the more feminine dance styles, Latecia chose to channel masculine energy in her personally choreographed solo. There is a sense that the *pumbas* strength is a quality mimicked across gender and among different segments of society.

Kotazo, a reflection of street children’s fantasies of strength and power, has been appropriated by professional concert dancers who perform this aggressive dance onstage. Concert dancers have tapped into society’s deep desire to transcend the horrors of life in a failed state. There is a sense in which young people in Kinshasa, disheartened by the failed colonialist modernity, are rejecting state and church imposed views on morality by using their bodies as vehicles to comment on societal failures. “Without always necessarily breaking with global society, or being relegated to its margins, street culture nevertheless clearly demarcates itself by its own forms of logic. There are in fact, active modes of violent reclamation (whether symbolic, linguistic, restrained or effective violence) in opposition to any hegemonic project the state may put forward” (Biaya 2006: 217). Young people, in particular *shegues* are engaging with society by morally critiquing their lived realities through dance. Concert dancers appropriate this moral

critique when they perform the shegue dances like *kotazo*, elevating them to a level of national and international popularity. The street children's mimicking of bodybuilders represents experimenting with different ways of being. Because of the influence that popular dance wields in mainstream society, *kotazo* has become widely popular even on video streaming sites like youtube. Thus, some of the most marginalized members of society, street children, have become culture creators.

The National Ballet presents spectators with a static image of the country in contrast to the dynamic *kotazo* which mirrors the ever-changing realities of living in a city of over 10 million people. Furthermore, there is a sense that the popularity of urban dance is attributed to the fact that it has organically grown out of everyday city life. *Kotazo* has not been created for foreign consumption, nor has it been choreographed with the intention of bridging ethnic divides, rather it is an embodiment of an urban reality. In contrast to the National Ballet which speaks to an invented tradition, *kotazo* speaks to the reality of Kinshasa's streets. In this way, the *shegue* is performing the city.

How and Where People Learn To Dance

Marcel Mauss's essay "Techniques of the Body", which was first published in the *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique* in 1936 advances the notion that quotidian movement, the forms of bodily motion we most persistently naturalize, are all culturally determined, from walking, squatting and sitting to swimming, fighting and dancing. For Mauss, gender is privileged as the primary category in any given culture that differentiates the ways in which people acquire movement vocabularies. He begins and ends his survey of body techniques with two choreographies deeply enmeshed in sex

and sexuality: those of childbirth and of lovemaking. I will now examine some of the contexts and spaces wherein people learn and try out new dances.

Prior to the introduction of television, dancing in Kinshasa was learned through direct transmission from the body of the teacher/performer to the body of the student/spectator. As dancing is imitation, it is therefore directly related to the concept of mimesis. There still remains a strong physical aspect to the process of learning how to dance, in that dance moves are acquired by being present in the same space as the teacher/performer. In recent years there has been a shift to learning from physical presence to the two-dimensional image of the television screen.

Television has allowed popular music and dance to circulate more widely across different social spaces. Consequently it is a primary site where people gain knowledge of popular dance moves. The music videos that people watch and learn from are often filmed in Europe, partly because of the added prestige it gives the musical group. Put simply, when music videos are filmed in Europe, the band is perceived as wealthy and internationally successful. Music videos filmed in Europe also provide viewers with vivid images with which to fantasize. Appadurai suggests that this integration between the body and its mediation through global technology has created a world in which the imagination becomes social practice. He advances that “the world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global processes: the imagination as a social practice” (1996: 31). This is not to suggest that viewers watching music videos are passively absorbing influences, but rather there is a process of picking and choosing which elements dancers wish to emulate in their own

lives. In other words, dancing involves a selection process whereby some moves are chosen to be learned while others are ignored (Parviainen 2002: 24). It can be said that the choice of certain movements and styles is influenced by culture where particular schemes of preference, valuation and meaning are at work (Dyck 2003: 9).

On several occasions, I observed little children and even adults mimicking the dance moves they saw on music videos aired on television. In the privacy of their own homes, they attempt to master the latest popular dance styles. I even witnessed a mother lovingly reprimand her daughter for not imitating the dance moves exactly as they were shown in the video. Intrigued, I enquired as to whether she as a mother would be happy if her daughter became a professional dancer as seen in music videos. She scoffed at the idea and reminded me that her daughter was a “good girl” who would never go that far. Clearly it is one thing to know how to dance and another actually to dance in public for a salary. Furthermore, for many people I spoke to, some of the dance movements are considered lewd and vulgar, and would only be performed by sexually loose women. The socially liminal positions that female dancers occupy render it possible for them to move in public ways that wouldn't ordinarily be permitted to women. This is something that will be examined in the following chapters.

My Own Experience of Learning by Seeing

The methodological position of participant observer is mirrored by the parallels between my role as dancer and role as ethnographer. Both strive to become an integral part of a foreign world, in the dancer's case, that of the choreographer's world. As a dancer, I took on the challenge of playing a particular role, which demanded that I become

vulnerable and open to the unfamiliar. Dancing requires the dancer to follow the choreographer's instructions, and execute movement while maintaining the integrity of the choreography in an effort to do justice to the choreographer's artistic vision. In the same way, to gain an understanding of other people experience in the world, and to effectively communicate this mediated experience, the ethnographer must learn through interaction and participation.

My membership in Oli 5's band required that I learn the latest repertoire of dances if I wanted to perform on stage. As a result, I learned new patterns of moving that were not part of my dance vocabulary. While I was familiar with Congolese popular dance, having attended several concerts in Montreal and after watching countless Youtube videos, executing the movements remained foreign to me. Consequently, during practices I had to remain hyper-aware of my gestures and movements. Judith Lynn Hanna argues that the development of movement styles depends on observation and practice (1979). To reproduce effectively the choreography that Gerry was patiently teaching me, I had to imagine what Gerry was feeling as he danced. Mimicking Gerry not only entailed observing him, but also that I needed to identify the nuances within movement in order to reproduce it. Practice was a process of embodiment.

Shopping at the grand marché with three of my girlfriends one day, I witnessed a woman get her purse snatched. She began yelling, pleading with people to stop the perpetrator who had already made a speedy get away. When it became clear that there was no way of recovering the stolen purse, bystanders including shop merchants and shoppers excitedly commented on what had happened. I noticed people making waving hand gestures above their heads when they recounted the event. I inquired about the

gesture, and my friend explained to me that what I was seeing was a hand sign for robbery. They informed me that this hand gesture had been made into a popular dance move called *kisanola*. We all went to an Internet café to look up the *kisanola* dance on Youtube; there were dozens of posted videos to choose from. I realized that I had seen this move before, performed on stage. There was a whole realm of communication I was not privy to. Learning body language would become a major priority, especially since it was clear that it was part of a larger process in learning about what was communicated through dance. To begin to understand some of the body language commonly used by people, I had to become acutely aware of people's hand gestures and the way they moved in different contexts.

As I grew more familiar with local body language and gestures I began to connect with people on a different level. For instance, in taking taxis, one must know the various hand signals to communicate with drivers. As taxis are all shared and operate on designated fixed routes, drivers and customers use hand signals to indicate locations. For example, a finger making a twirling circular motion indicates that the driver's destination is *Victoire*, or one of the city's central locations marked by a large roundabout. It took me considerable time to learn the dozens of different hand signals which change depending on where you are positioned in the city. I loved the grace with which people extended their arms to make signals to the extent that I began to mimic taking taxis in my own onstage dance solos. Audience members were delighted and thrilled to recognize the hand signals. In this embodiment of cultural code, I was able to reference a common experience of the city. Bourdieu defines this as artistic capital or cultural knowledge

(1986). There was a sense in which the audience recognized my own recognition of the city.

Chapter 6: Dancing the Urban Experience

Much as the city symbolizes modern life (Friedman 1994; Appadurai 1996), urban spaces such as the concert stage represent new sites of modernity in Kinshasa. Highlighting the cultural dimensions of urban dance in Kinshasa, I strive to contribute to “cosmopolitan urban studies” (Robinson 2002: 533) in the context of an African city. Scholarly literature rarely includes African cities in discussions concerning globalization; instead African cities, as Robinson (2002) points out, are viewed primarily within the framework of development studies. Because African cities are not seen as leaders of urban development, they are not viewed as modern societies. In a collection of essays entitled *Modernity in Africa*, Birgit Meyer and Petel Pels pose the question: “How can we talk about modernity without lapsing into discourses of modernization and their teleological views of world history?” (2008: 1). The main thread of this thesis lies in how popular urban dance, performed to what is locally referred to as “musique modern”, can facilitate an understanding of African cities in the contemporary world system.

Smith argues for an alternative view of cities, one that defines urbanism in terms of cultural, rather than strictly economic or geographical underpinnings (2001: 5). Hannerz similarly advances that “genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (1996: 103). Drawing from Hannerz and Smith, I take cosmopolitanism to mean a “structure of feeling” (Raymond Williams 1958), and a web of relations between Kinshasa and the rest of the world. Furthermore, in a city like Kinshasa whose population

comprises Lebanese, Indian, Chinese, Greek, and over 450 different Congolese ethnic groups, expressions of worldliness and cultural hybridity are inevitable. Furthermore, the many Kinois I spoke to referred to themselves as “cosmopolite” and “citoyen du monde”, insisting that I see them as “city people like in Paris, London and New York”.

Kinshasa has long been regarded as a “stop-over city” for people with aspirations of emigrating to Europe. For this reason, Kinshasa is bursting with people from diverse backgrounds who hope one-day to be provided with an opportunity to leave the country. Thus, moving from the village to the capital is viewed as a necessary first step before traveling to Europe. The city has also become a kind of marker of modernity while the village is relegated to “tradition”. In fact, people from rural areas are derided and called ignorant or more specifically, “bumpkins”. Although people claim that village life is backwards, rural moralities continue to inform the urban identity of the city (De Boeck 2007: 41).

The various people I spoke to during my fieldwork made it clear to me that despite the city’s shortcomings, being Kinois is something to be fiercely proud of. Part of this pride stems from the way they see themselves vis-à-vis Africa and the rest of the world and also from Kinshasa’s vibrant musical culture, one which is emulated in many other African countries. The 1930’s ushered in a new Congolese musical style, termed popular music as it spread among a great number of people of various ethnic origins (Gondola 1997: 69). There is a sense that popular music has become a part of a transethnic national consciousness, in that it transcends ethnicity and class, appealing to a wide spectrum of people. Popular dance music has enhanced Kinshasa’s image beyond its borders, becoming an enviable international export. When international singers like

Werrason, Fally Ipupa, and Felix Wazekwa fill stadiums in Paris, all Congolese proudly appropriate their success (Trefon 2004: 18).

My research shows the ways in which dancers shape and are shaped by the sentiments of Kinshasa's youth who simultaneously struggle to position themselves within the contemporary globalized world, while attempting to extract themselves from the "vernacular orders of indigenous modernities" (Diouf in Makers and Breakers 2005: 229). Through performance, young people carve out a unique space reflective of their experience in an urban African city, one where ideas, commodities, and people continuously enter and leave the country. This raises a slew of questions concerning the asymmetries of modernity between the West and the "rest". I will not enter a discussion as to whether creativity has become subject to the world capitalist system, rendering it another practice of consumption; instead I analyze the ways in which young people creatively build on older traditions, re-contextualizing them to make them new. Further, my research highlights the ways in which popular performance carried out in the public sphere comprises "routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life" (McGuigan 2005: 435). This, is especially useful to analyze concert dance in Kinshasa as it reveals layers of meaning within the context of a society that grapples with the reality of living in what many Kinois consider to be a failed state.

"Performance can never be text, for performativity is located at the creative, improvisatory edge of practice in the moment it is carried out" (Schieffelin 1998: 198-9). The concept of performance implies a mode of behaviour associated with personal identity, play, sport, aesthetics, and popular culture, all taking place in the public sphere. Further, as it is in a constant state of flux and not confined to a specific location (Turner

1982), a text-based medium cannot easily capture the process of life. Perhaps what is interesting about dance is the inherent fluidity of its expression. Because movement constitutes dance it becomes a propitious medium with which to represent the evolution of an experience.

The vast realm of cultural production in Kinshasa cannot be characterized as Western, modern, traditional, authentic, or indigenous. In fact, much of the art coming out of popular culture straddles these distinctions (Barber 1997: 2). “Congolese popular music presents a different perspective on notions of modernity and tradition. For example, during the 1950’s, for every musician searching for something new, ‘traditional’ instruments and dances were incorporated” (Gondola 1997: 69). For scholars such as Karen Barber and Ulf Hannerz, African popular culture is cross-fertilization of global, national and local elements. My findings suggest that conceptions of cosmopolitanism are communicated through modes of performance. I show how both traditional and modern elements are embodied in new corporal expressions of cosmopolitanism, and how shifting notions of appropriate behaviour have shaped male and female dance performance. I believe Deborah Heath says it best: “The struggle over the meaning of dance has to do with shifting notions of appropriateness, grounded in relations of power” (1994: 90).

“I Want to Make People Dream”: Narratives of Desire and Female Sexuality

One afternoon, I set out with Serge, a long-time friend and research assistant of Professor Bob White, for the Hotel de la Funa to watch Felix Wazekwa, an internationally famous singer, rehearse with his band. Despite the poor directions we received from several pedestrians, and after a series of wrong turns, we eventually arrived at the location. The hotel lobby, dominated by a dozen tough looking young men dressed in the latest European urban fashion, drinking beer and playing cards, nonchalantly informed us that we would have to ask the security guard to let us in to see the band. After persuading the security guard with 2 large bottles of Primus beer, the gate of the outdoor courtyard rehearsal space was unlocked for us. Despite the aura of secrecy created by the tight security, once inside the rehearsal space, I was surprised at how friendly everyone was. The band manager quickly made sure Serge and I had chairs, and a good view of the action. Although Wazekwa's band is internationally successful, practices are nevertheless held in a courtyard similar to the one where I rehearsed.

I noticed that what is true for most bands, including the one I danced with: women rehearse separately from men, which is partly due to the fact that on stage, though men and women are positioned next to one another, they nevertheless dance separately, without making contact. Watching the male dancers, I was struck by the many gestures woven into the choreography, gestures that reference cell phones, laptops, cars, watches, Michael Jackson, businessmen, and wrestlers. I observed hand gestures that, to my eye resembled the grabbing of imaginary items floating in the air. There was a clear sense in the movements that the male dancers were demonstrating objects they desired. Furthermore, through their performance of the act of desiring, they positioned themselves

as individuals who are participating in the capitalist world system, even if they are not actually consuming anything. Serge remarked that “ils font le patron”, in other words, the dancers were putting on airs of authority.

After the rehearsal I caught up with some of the dancers, to question them about their choreography⁵. Serge speculated that the representations of the cell phones and watches were in part intended to communicate to the audience that dancing in a group with Felix Wazekwa was a prestigious position which brought material rewards. Serge and I managed to get a short interview with Felix Wazekwa about dance choreographies. The following is a short section from this interview.

Lesley: What do the people in Kinshasa relate to most when they see your dancers' choreography depicting fancy fashion, cars, and trips to Europe?

Felix: All that stuff is to make the audience dream. I don't make music to “wake people up”, I want to let them dream. I also want to remind people that they are in a city that most country folk dream of coming to. I want to remind them that being in Kin is cool and where there are possibilities.

In cities when people often “try on things for size”, these efforts are best done outside the scrutiny of large crowds, where individuals can feel less self-conscious (Simone 2004: 64). Within the liminal zone of the performance space, certain roles,

⁵ Serge acted as my translator, as many of the dancers could only speak Lingala. When dancers caught a glimpse of my digital camera, they grew eager for me to film them. This proved to be beneficial in terms of translation, as Serge and I were provided with a transcript of the interviews, which we later reviewed together.

activities and behaviours, that would not ordinarily be permitted, can take place. Concert dancers, especially male dancers, take advantage of the liminal space of the stage to imitate social behaviour, events, and characters meaningful to their lives. From the research I gathered, it is apparent that these young men exercise their creative power by using their bodies to “set in motion a process of self-realization and promotion of social status through consumption and expenditure, appearance and fashion” (De Boeck 2005: 11). Dance moves can be read as an expression of identity, a projection of what is considered to be “the good life”. As discussed in chapter 5, Taussig refers to mimesis as a desire-driven practice of becoming that which is imitated and performed. Similar to the *kotazo shegue* dance, male concert dancers inhabit and act out the virility of mass-mediated figures like the wrestler. In this way, the masculinity of the young dancers is “more real” than the images they imitate. This relates to what De Boeck describes as a crisis of meaning in Congolese society: “Very often what poses as true is actually false, the lie becomes truth” (De Boeck in *Modernity in Africa*, 2008: 134). The signifying real and the represented imaginary become blurred or even liquefied, thus the dancer can actually become a powerful businessman by representing one in his dance. In this way, concert dance both mirrors society’s attitudes toward masculinity and also works to uphold and further shape gender norms.

From my observations of concerts and rehearsals, it was apparent that male dancers most often express images of masculinity by mimicking American wrestlers like Shawn Michael, armed soldiers, local actors from Kinshasa, and businessmen. I also recorded many gestures which I later learned were representations of sexuality. For instance, a move popularized by Papa Wemba’s group of dancers depicts young girls’

small breasts or *nyonyo* with blinking hand motions near one's chest. The face one makes during a sexual act is another popular representation, illustrated by dancers who distort their faces, dramatically opening and closing their eyes. Although these contorted faces can appear monstrous, but after speaking with a few dancers, I learned that they are actually intended to be humorous.

There is a clear display of sexuality in Kinshasa's popular urban dance; some say even an excessive amount. Danseuses often dance provocatively, incorporating sexually suggestive gestures to compliment evocative song lyrics. Male singers manage to evade state censorship by referencing sexual content through the use of double entendres. Kofi Olmidle, Felix Wazekwa, and Papa Wemba are only a few examples of popular musical stars who have sung about the pleasures of the female body.

Dances may include narratives about travelling to Europe and falling in love, buying clothes, and driving around in cars. The importance of sports, transnational television, fashion, and technology in the construction of masculinity is expressed in male dancing. Appadurai describes this as "the work of the imagination, which draws attention to new forms of social identity" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 5). This is not to say that identities communicated in urban popular music are shaped solely by Western importations. In addition to external sources of inspiration, a wellspring of local inspiration for concert choreography exists in Kinshasa. According to Lambio Lambio, who choreographed Papa Wemba's dances, inspiration comes from children playing in the streets, sayings he hears, and gestures he sees in public spaces such as the market and at bus stops. Ideas for new choreographies are also largely found in folkloric dances from Congo's different ethnic regions. This echoes Kelly Askew's work on Taraab

music in Coastal East Africa. Urban popular dance in Kinshasa is based on aesthetic principles of music, such as continual innovation, inventive borrowing, figurative language and intertextuality, characteristics that blur the lines between traditional and modern movements (Askew 2002: 417).

As male dancers express masculinity, as well as sexual and material desires, female dancers tend to be more preoccupied with attracting male gaze in hopes of gaining extra tips. Tipping during a performance is a common practice in many African countries. In her book *Performing the Nation*, Askew describes the tipping practices in Tanzanian Taarab music as a means for the audience to participate by communicating with performers through small gifts (2002: 22). The first time I was tipped by an audience member, I was dancing a small solo that I had choreographed myself. In the wake of Michael Jackson's death, I decided to incorporate a few of his signature moves. This included some of his spins as well as some gestures from the *Thriller* choreography. Upon recognition of my references to the pop star, audience members began to get up one by one, walk or even dance up to the dance floor, and place bills in my pockets. In doing so, they were communicating their pleasure in recognizing my references. Audience members were a part of the cosmopolitan scene whereby I, a *mundele* white person, was referencing an artist from the West through the aesthetics of Congolese popular dance.

Most danseuses receive tips by singling out men in the audience, making direct eye contact, and sometimes even pointing at them. During slow ballads, danseuses become ornamentation, slowly moving their hips from side to side behind the musicians. During fast paced songs, they are the focus of attention, positioned on stage front and center. Instead of gestures indicative of material objects such as cell phones, plane

tickets, and watches, Felix Wazekwa's danseuses express female-oriented experiences. One of the movements that particularly caught my attention was when the dancers began to rub their bellies in unison. Later I enquired about this move, and was informed by one of the dancers that it was an enactment of a cautionary tale about abortions. Danseuses wanted to convey their feelings about abortion and the importance of caring for one's baby. I was uncertain whether the danseuses were expressing their own feelings and views through dance, especially because the band's main choreographers are male. After asking some of the danseuses if they participate in the creative process, I was met with a barrage of answers. It was apparent that many of the danseuses were eager to claim ownership over new choreography, and many informed me that they were responsible for popularizing several dance steps. Despite their claims, I was reminded by the choreographers that the overall concept of each dance comes from the head choreographer himself.

The extent of the danseuses' involvement in the process of creating choreography is unclear. As is true for most popular bands in Kinshasa, males mediate female expression as they are the choreographers. It is difficult to discern where the male choreographer's involvement begins and ends. Themes of serving one's husband, caring for babies, mocking women who use bleaching products, and staying beautiful were most prevalent among the Wazekwa danseuses. Though maternal gestures of open arms and caressing hands dominate the choreography, instrumental sections in songs, especially faster paced songs, allow for more freedom. I observed dancing become more vigorous and aggressive as the danseuses took turns rushing up to the front dance to show off their best moves. This struck me as a demonstration of an unbridled female id, in that a kind of

wildness dominated the performance space. This “untamed” behaviour is not considered conventional womanly behaviour, revealing a dichotomy between the danseuses’ attitudes and styles of dancing. They are at once subservient nurturers and sexually free individuals. In the following chapter I discuss how this image of onstage sexually free behaviour is of concern among many Kinois. One can draw parallels between Biaya’s description of the “femme libre” and the danseuse as “incarnating the image of a successful modern woman by imposing herself as the master key of the “ambiance” that she transformed in a ‘a mode of action’ (Biaya 1996: 345). In other words, there is a sense in which the danseuses’ stage performance is in itself a modern expression as it blurs the binaries between good and bad, traditional and modern.

Traditional dance is often referenced by danseuses, especially for *Chic en Couleur*, where two songs in each set begin with a traditional dance intro accompanied by percussion. This is something uniquely feminine, as masculine dancers rarely incorporate traditional dance segments into choreography. This raises an important question about gender differences in people’s notions of modernity. There is a sense in which women are viewed as the bearers of tradition, while men are more free to experiment with new cultural phenomena. To illustrate this further, here is a segment from an interview with Felix Wazekwa.

Lesley: Tell me about the differences between masculine and feminine dance.

Which gender is more creative?

Felix Wazekwa: Male dancers are more creative, and they take more risks by incorporating new movement. Crazier, more physically demanding moves are reserved for men.

L: Do female dancers ever get the chance to showcase their abilities?

F: Oh yeah, during solos, that's when our they can show off their talent. That's when the audience gets to see their individual style. They are artists, and very talented. Most of them have been dancing with us since 2001.

In Chic En Couleurs, the band I danced with, danseuses exercise their creativity in a more nuanced manner than men. Instead of making direct references to material items like imaginary watches and cell phones, women are less explicit in what they are communicating onstage. Attitudes, rather than overt gestures, characterize feminine dances. In some ways their mere stage presence is an expression of their identity as women who make their living by performing in a public context, something I examine in further detail in the following chapter.

As is true for the different bands I spoke to, the cheftaine, or head dancer exercises authority by choosing the danseuses' stage costumes. These outfits are elaborately constructed and vary with each performance. For instance, performance at a wedding would dictate an elegant attire in contrast to what would be worn for a neighbourhood concert. I shift now to discussion of fashion as a creative outlet for dancers.

Dress & Body Politics

Following Erlmann's examination of the symbolic inscription of the body through clothing (1996: 197), I will discuss fashion in relation to dance performance and the ways in which the performer's body expresses a desire to carve out a space within global culture. As De Boeck writes, "The urban aesthetics of display and public appearance are most clearly illustrated in the city's most private space, which is simultaneously its most public theatre: the body" (2007: 54). During an engaging discussion about performance and the body, Andre Yoka, an outspoken Congolese professor, referred to Kinshasa as "une ville spectacle" or spectacle city. Bodies of performers become vehicles of expression, publicly displayed with the intention of attracting the public's gaze. It can be said that in situations where people do not have any other technology to work with, the body becomes an important focus of expression.

While there is a kind of liberating quality in bodily expression, the body is not immune to external control. The suppression of the body during colonial and post-colonial times is a relevant dimension in this discussion concerning public displays of one's body. European colonists brought with them Cartesian dualism which posited a formal and universal rationality, privileging mind over body and ignoring other "ways of knowing" such as with the body. In contrast, theories of embodiment (Browning 1995; Taylor 1998; Dunham 1969; Hahn 2007) stress the continuity between the non-linguistic bodily experience and cognition---a closer reflection to the worldview held by many people native to the region.

African bodies were suppressed by both the Protestant and Catholic church as well as subjugated by colonial authorities. Covington-Ward describes the ways in which

dances of the Kongo tribe, located in the lower-Congo region during the early 1900's, were seen as excessively erotic and thought by colonialists to pose challenges to public morality. In fear of the power imbued in these performances, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries as well as colonial administrators outlawed public dancing (Covington-Ward 2007: 74).

Although Mobutu had freed the body from previous colonial moral prisons and allowed public dance once again, a nationalist political agenda operated beneath the surface. Loyalty under Mobutu's reign was expressed by bodily gestures in public dance events. Colonial authorities and religious missionaries deemed dance in the lower Congo as unacceptable. In contrast, with Mobutu's inauguration as President, "song and dance would be come an integral part of Mobutu's elaborate propaganda machine, one that relied on the power of public spectacle as a means of mobilizing support for the state" (White 2008: 69). Mobutu re-contextualized dance as part of the country's national heritage and staged large public dance spectacles to achieve political goals. "Animation politique", or lively political rallies resembling concert performances, were intended to project an image of national unity and patriotism. "It was a way of mobilizing the masses literally through their bodies" (White 2008: 78).

Mobutu's 1973 visit to Beijing inspired a new vision regarding how his cabinet ministers as well as all public figures people should dress in public. In conjunction with the authenticity campaign, he insisted that women wear garb that consisted of traditionally inspired skirts and dresses from material called *pagnes*. Men were forced to abandon Western suits for the Mao-style tunic that he named the "abacost", a word derived from the French *a bas le costume*, or "down with the suit".

Today there are no restrictions on public dress and people can freely express themselves through fashion. This is not to say that standards of morality are not enforced by other means. Evangelical churches address public morality and standards of dress, often scolding women for dressing too provocatively, though restriction on male fashion choices is not as salient. In fact, Pentecostal preachers stand before their congregations in Armani and Versace suits, claiming that “one has to be clean before God” (De Boeck in *Modernity in Africa*: 133). There is a double standard regarding individual expression among the sexes and one wonders whether new expressions of cosmopolitanism leave room for women. The strict divide between gender as it relates to notions of cosmopolitanism is something I will examine in the following chapter.

Popular bands place great importance on style and fashion. *Chic en Couleurs* as the name denotes, is especially preoccupied with conveying an image of style. In fact, before every performance, the bandleader, Oli 5, and cheftaine, Leticia, surveyed our outfits to assess if we were aesthetically ready to perform. On one occasion, Leticia decided that I needed more eye makeup and an Indian bindi in the middle of my forehead. For *Chic en Couleur*, fashion is the main signifier of their knowledge of the world. By looking chic in clothes, and by wearing adventurous outfits, dancers construct images of themselves which are meant to communicate to the audience that they are “in the know”. The pastiche aesthetic of outfits signifies that they are not bound to one geographic location, but rather mobile enough to dip into a variety of locations for aesthetic inspiration. They are mobile in both the physical and the imaginary sense, in that whether or not they perform abroad, dancers can still experience and reflect the world. Pirated DVD Hollywood movies, Mexican soap operas, European fashion

magazines, and imported fashion items sold by Indian and Lebanese merchants in the grand marché are only a few examples of where inspiration for concert outfits is derived. It can be said that the danseuses' choice of stage costumes reflect their ideas of how a cosmopolitan woman dresses. It is also indicative of the necessity for danseuses to be appealing to the opposite sex.

Attracting masculine gaze is particularly important for danseuses. Costumes worn on stage are tight fitting, designed to show off their posterior, thighs, and breasts. Body piercing is common; women adorn their lips, cheeks, tongues, eyebrows and belly buttons with sparkling jewellery imported from China. Upon being invited to make an appearance on national television with my dance group, I was "made-over" by the bandleader's sister who chose matching outfits for all of the danseuses. I was given cut-off jean shorts, a tight black tank top, which I was told was made by Dolce and Gabbana, and red high heel boots. This was a drastic departure from the sweat pants and gym gear I wore to practice every day. When the dancers and I began to rehearse the number we were going to perform on television, I suddenly felt vulnerable, as though I was being consumed visually. In contrast to my new feeling of insecurity, I got the sense that the other dancers felt more confident in the expensive clothing and heavy makeup. They kept telling me that we finally looked like professional dancers, like the ones on music videos. Our matching outfits were in some ways part of a fantasy, for both men and women. Wearing clothing that looked as though it had been bought in Paris, we looked like rich, and "sexually liberated" young women, a reflection of what Lisa Rofel describes as a "cosmopolitan desiring subject" (Rofel 2007: 21). Clothing in this context

complicates norms concerning public attire, an idea I will further elaborate in the next chapter.

My next observation illustrates how fashion has become an important means to communicate a cosmopolitan self and especially, to perform Kinshasa. The day Oli 5 appeared on national television for an interview was the day Congolese across the country witnessed his dazzling suit of keys. Invited to appear with Oli 5's to discuss his new album, I was told that it was imperative we make an impression by looking our best. Oli 5's sister had a suit from Paris delivered to him via a network of people⁶. It was made of blue denim, but Oli 5 was unsatisfied with the monochromatic colour of the ensemble, so he decided to alter the suit in such a way that it would make him "stand out in the crowd." "I want a suit that when people see me on television, they will remember me." After much deliberation as to how the suit could be made unique, it was decided that sewing on a hundred or so metal keys would transform it into a show-stopping ensemble. When I enquired about the decision to embellish the suit with keys, he responded in an instant, "because keys open doors." On the day of the interview, he proudly entered the television studio, jingling and jangling as the keys clinked against each other. He told everyone that the suit was an original design from Europe.

Traveling to Europe, referred to as *poto*, is in some ways likened to making the Hajj for the young and old. My description of concert attire shows that an individual can secure identity as an urbanite through clothing (Davis 1992; Klapp 1969). When concert

⁶ Because there is no efficient means of sending and receiving packages, people in Kinshasa rely on networks of people who make voyages or "va et vien" between Europe and Congo. Oli 5's family happened to be connected to several individuals involved in import/export, a valuable connection for a musician.

dancers dress themselves, it is not in act of imitation, but creative individualized style.

While there is a blatant appropriation of Western clothing styles, there is a sense in which people refashion the West in their own terms (De Boeck 1999; Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 1999; Yoka 1991). This is exemplified in Oli 5's suit of keys. For Ruth Benedict, "The creative agent is one of those gifted individuals who have bent the culture in the direction of their own capabilities" (1932: 26). This is true of the performer's ability to express desires and attitudes through fashion.

The dichotomy between Kinshasa (here) and the West or America and Europe* (there), has created a demand for certain fashion items. Gell (1988) posits that there is a sense in which consumers desire fashion items partly because of their unattainability. More than simply motivated by greed or vanity, fashion consumption is "a sphere of social practice in which identity is achieved through the individual accumulation of otherness" (Erlmann 1996: 197). There is a sense in which outlandish costumes speak of a refusal to be overlooked in public, while the same time dancers and musicians fashion themselves according to their personal standards of taste.

Conclusion

My research shows that the social imagination in Kinshasa is partly constructed through dance, incorporating visions of Europe, fashion, and material goods. These visions are not merely a blank slate upon which is inscribed the hegemonic imprint of mass mediated Western culture. For postcolonial theories, the emulation of the colonizer is never an exact replica, nor will it ever be because the dominated subject must also always stand for difference (Bhabha 1994; Taussig 1993). The binary between “traditional” (local) and “modern” (imported, global) elements is blurred when analyzing popular concert dance in Kinshasa, a hybrid genre of old and new influences. Following the Comaroffs I argue that, “the world has not been reduced to sameness” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xi). Congolese dancers are not merely projecting a replica of Western lifestyle; they are enacting a local vision of what the “good life” consists of. Clothing and consumption are reflective of a process of re-appropriation of culture, whereby status symbols are re-made and re-contextualized to reflect the aspirations and desires of society. I observed that references to cell phones and clothing are symbols of consumption and are a means to compete for social status. The references to material items which are incorporated in dances also signal to the audience that dancers are ‘in the know’ and savvy of the latest trends in technology and fashion. For Goldola, “popular culture also allows African urban youth to build a dreamlike order, otherwise unreachable” (1999: 25). This is highlighted in my interview with Felix Wazekwa where he described his mission to inspire young people to dream. It is apparent that these dreams largely take on the form of consumption practices whereby fashion and technology reign supreme.

My research reveals that female concert choreography is created by male choreographers, and therefore is not an accurate representation of female artistic expression or sexuality. Instead, it is representative of a society largely dominated by men and images of masculinity. Women continue to struggle with imposed visions of femininity, either by the church, religious groups, the former colonial government, or Mobutu's fallen regime. Danseuses negotiate the modern and the traditional in their stage performances, adhering to the society's gender norms but also departing from what is traditionally accepted of women. The following addresses why the danseuse, a crucial figure in Congo's modernist cultural identity, one who earns a living through public performance is nonetheless stigmatized by society and maintains the lowest position in a band's hierarchy.

CHAPTER 7: An Urban Paradox

Performing Marginality

“Being marginal can mean you switch on and you switch off because you are either too conspicuous or invisible. Too invisible, that’s the point at which you emerge as color---walking color, at that” (Taussig 2009: 29).

Historically, marginality has been a popular notion among scholars who tended either to romanticize the marginalized woman by portraying her as cultural hero, or to expose the ways she is victimized. In particular, scholarly representations of African women range from victim to heroine depending on Western feminist waves of thought (Abu-Lughod 1990). I am not interested in painting a romantic portrait of Africa’s resilient women, nor do I strive to tell a tale of oppression. Instead I present an analysis of the freedom (albeit a limited freedom) associated with positions of marginality, which can foster creative innovation. In this chapter, I describe some of the ways popular bands are marginalized, focusing particular attention on the position of the danseuse and the ways in which her medium of expression has the potential both to maintain and change social relations. I will focus on the paradoxical relationship between popular dance and society and will highlight the binary opposition of the “good” and “bad” which is associated with women.

Marginality Within the Ranks of the Popular Band

Young people in many African countries are marginalized in that they are politically excluded and are completely constrained in the economic space. (Diouf 2005: 230).

Janet Macgaffey argues that despite their disproportionate numbers of youth, urban African cities do not offer young people a place in society. Consequently youth, especially young women, find themselves at the margins of the formal economy (Macgaffey 1993). Popular bands often hire young women who have spent time living on the streets, partly because they are knowledgeable of the latest dances and because many are willing to work for low wages. A good example is the role of the *ndumba*, a figure who, like the danseuse is not constrained by family pressures to be “good Christian women” often because they come from broken homes⁷ or have been stigmatized in their village for not keeping with “traditional” female roles (Comhaire-Sylvain 1968). Many of the danseuses with whom I spoke come from large families of more than ten children located in very poor municipalities like Njili, Massina and other more remote rural areas. In this way, female danseuses are marginal because they mostly come from poor families, sometimes living on the street, desperate to earn a living, and transgressing both “traditional” and Christian notions of womanhood when they become dancers. Many of the danseuses I encountered had little more than a primary school education and a limited knowledge of French. If it were not for the opportunity that popular bands presented to danseuses, their futures would be limited. Concert dance provides young women with the possibility of income and travel, but not without a price. Expected to sleep with musicians once they join the band, danseuses occupy the lowest position within the band’s hierarchy, both in terms of how much they earn as well as the sexual expectations.

⁷ It is not uncommon for children in Kinshasa to be raised by a grandparent or another relative due to financial troubles, family death, and/or abandonment.

Karine, a former danseuse with a popular band told me stories about how she was encouraged to sleep with the rich businessmen who attended the band's performances. On one occasion, after an evening show, the band informed Karine of a man eager to meet her. They insisted that she agree to go on a date with the man as there was a possibility that he would provide the band with financial support. Astonished by Karine's matter of fact tone, I inquired if she felt any resentment toward her band. Laughing, she responded that she was happy to go for nice dinners with suitors and that she never felt any pressure to engage in sexual activity.

Lesley: Don't the men who take you out on dates only want to sleep with you?

Karine: Well, maybe, but they really just want to be seen in public with popular dancers.

L: You mean it gives them prestige?

K: Yeah, men in Kinshasa are romancers and want to show everyone that they are good romancers. To be a good romancer there are many things, but the main thing is you have to have money. Or you have to be willing to spend money on women.

L: So, then you didn't sleep with these rich businessmen who took you out on dates?

K: No.

L: How did you get away with that? What if they put the moves on you and you refuse? Wouldn't they just go to your band and complain to them?

K: Maybe, but I would tell the band that the man brutalized me, or was a pervert.

My research suggests that popular bands rely on their danseuses for more than entertaining the audience. In socializing with prominent men, danseuses gather additional sources of income for the band, something crucial to their success. It is interesting to note that despite these additional expectations, the danseuses are the least paid band members. Kinshasa's popular music has evolved in such a way as to maximize profit. For instance, prominent businessmen are solicited for support through the mention of their names in songs (White 2008). Concerts are the bread and butter of Kinshasa's music industry, hence the need for extravagant stage shows and the presence of female dancers.

Performing on Television

Music videos and interviews with musicians are aired daily on national television, leaving people with the sense that the state endorses images of scantily clad dancing women and boisterous musicians in outrageous outfits. The state actively censors song lyrics but assumes a relaxed stance towards visual representations. In other words, there is little evidence that the state censors dancing or costume choices. I observed that dancing women are fixtures in most videos, suggesting that they are crucial to the success of a video. In many households in Kinshasa the television set remains on throughout the day. People pay close attention to the latest music videos played on TV in restaurants and bars, discussing with each other trends and politics within the music scene. In fact it was a favourite pastime among my dancer friends to watch music videos and critique dancer styles and their outfits. These videos are an important medium through which

popular bands can advertise themselves, attracting attention by appealing to a broad group of people.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I gave several interviews and performances on live national television as “Blanche Neige”, member of Chic en Couleurs. On both occasions, interviewers, both of whom were men, wanted to know if I was single. The question prompted me to answer defensively whereby I lied and said I was engaged, a response I thought would prevent any solicitation. The interviewer inquired about my fiancé’s opinion. He then asked if I thought it appropriate for an engaged or married woman to dance like this, leading me to ask if dancing in a band is suitable only for young single women.

When I left the second interview, Oli 5 asked me if I thought it had gone well. I told him I thought we both sounded articulate and that it went smoothly. Grinning at me and looking down at his feet like a schoolboy, Oli 5 meekly added “it would have been nice if you had said you were single”. I laughed and asked him if he thought such an answer would have boosted the band’s popularity. Oli 5 only responded with one word: “voilà”.

Concepts of performance are fundamental to the cultural construction of gender, and gender roles. Because “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler 1999: 33), dance is an important activity in which to analyze gendered difference. Foucault also reminds us that there is an ongoing struggle within all relationships which needs to be decoded (1975). In accordance with the idea that gender relations are primary power relations (Scott 1988), I

will now focus on power relations among female concert dancers, musicians, bandleaders, and the wider community.

Public-Private Moral Dimensions

Popular concert dance has become a signifier of Kinshasa's cultural identity and is both celebrated and denigrated. To understand why popular dance has become controversial, I now explore some of the ways in which female concert dancers or danseuses challenge perceived binaries of public and private, sensual and sexual, appropriate and inappropriate.

My research suggests that Kinshasa's female dancers are marginalized for moral rather than economic reasons. Erving Goffman delineates three types of social stigma: "abomination of the body", "blemishes of the character", and marks of "race, nation and religion" (1963: 4-5). The second type is most akin to the marginality of the performer. Viewed by society at large as morally suspect, musicians and performers confront social stigma propagated by local evangelical churches, who often claim bands have sold their souls to the devil in exchange for fame. Further, musicians are often characterized as uneducated, immoral, alcoholics, marijuana smokers (an activity associated with the very poor and destitute in the city) and womanizers. Anyone associated with a popular band becomes vulnerable to criticism from friends and family. For instance, a young man interested in marrying a danseuse will find it particularly difficult to persuade his family to accept his decision.

The emergence of the modern star system, a phenomenon that has its roots in an earlier period of Congolese music, is a source of wonder and excitement for many Kinois. It represents a model of upward social mobility outside the realm of national politics or other unwhitened forms of post-colonial prestige. For some, however, it is a source of great concern because popular musicians have become role models for an entire generation of young Kinois. Musicians' behaviour is perceived as being symptomatic of a general moral decline in contemporary Congolese society (White in Trefon 2004:188, citing Devisch, 1996).

Many of the danseuses with whom I spoke attend church regularly and pray before each rehearsal. However, in addition to the frequent prayer sessions, dancers often surreptitiously smoke marijuana. Contrary to Pentecostal groups, who condemn any use of drugs, there does not seem to be a contradiction for these girls. This is not to say that all danseuses smoke marijuana; in fact most of Felix Wazekwa's danseuses claim they do not smoke or even drink beer. However, the general perception in Kinshasa is that performers indulge in alcohol and drugs. I agree that despite their career choice, most danseuses wish to be accepted by society and be viewed as decent women, and thus manage impressions when they are not performing.

In the presence of my host family, and among some of my friends in church, I felt self-conscious about my own research of popular bands, as well as of my role as a dancer in *Chic en Couleurs*. Talking about my research with my host family provoked suspicion and concern that I would be corrupted. In fact, I felt a sense of shame every time I left the house to practice, and I carefully kept secret my involvement in any upcoming shows. Some of my shame was self-imposed and a projection of how I thought my host family

would react, when in reality they didn't try to stop me from spending time with bands, but there was a definite sense that they wanted me to see myself as socially superior to performers, just as they did. I frequently heard jokes about performers who were likened to court jesters and buffoons. The fact that I am a white Westerner somehow protected me from the criticism that a middle class young Kinois woman would experience if she took an interest in becoming a popular dancer. In other words, my Canadian identity afforded me more liberties and I could "get away" with certain behaviour.

I interviewed male and female concert dancers from a variety of popular bands about their parents' sentiments concerning their jobs as public performers. In most cases they said their parents were reluctant to condone involvement in popular bands due to the bad reputation associated with musicians. However, once they receive financial support from their child, they are more inclined to accept concert dancing as legitimate employment. Generally, many parents change their attitude when they see their child performing in front of large crowds and on television in music videos.

In an interview with "Standard", one of Papa Wemba's male dancers, passion for dancing was the primary incentive to join a popular band. Despite his parent's disapproval, "Standard" was adamant about pursuing a career as a dancer, and he joined when he was 9, or when he was what is referred to as a *kaboso*. He proudly recounted to me, "My first big concert was in Kinshasa's stadium in front of thousands of people. When my mother saw me perform, she decided that I would have more opportunities in life as a dancer. But it took a long time for my father to accept my vocation. He accepts it now".

Patricia defied her parents and joined Papa Wemba's band as a danseuse at the age of 9 when she was what is referred to as an *onion*. Hired because a boy in her neighbourhood paid one of the musicians 30 American dollars, Patricia was forced to leave home because her mother refused to let her dance with the band. It was only when her mother saw her performing live on television, that she invited her daughter to move back home. For Patricia, dancing is both a passion and a job that has enabled her to travel extensively within Africa and to Europe. I asked her what she plans for the future. She replied, "I hope to get married and have children". When I asked what she would do for money, she became taciturn. I asked her if she would ever let her daughter become a concert dancer, whereby she replied with a stern "no" and changed the subject.

The longevity of concert dancing is limited; women generally stop dancing professionally before 30 years of age. Concert dancing, for women in particular, provides opportunities for economic advancement. However, it comes with a price: social stigma.

"Good" and "Bad" Women: A Brief Historical Analysis

One can begin to understand the gender underpinnings in Kinshasa by examining the figure of the *ndumba*. The *ndumba* has come to embody the hybrid nature of the city, (one where "modernity" and "tradition" are in constant articulation) as she too is a bricolage of colonial legacies, as well as of new conceptions of "modernity". A female urbanite, sometimes a single mother, the *ndumba* has played an interesting role in urban life, dating back to when Congo was a Belgian colony. Christian morals and values characterized the ideology espoused by colonialists as well as zealous missionaries who

maintained a strong presence in the Congo. Inevitably, this ideology was extended to all realms of society, including gender relations. Females were considered by the colonial authorities as non-citizens, and were not expected to participate in public life. In fact, Christian missionaries propagated the image of the female temptress, wielder of malicious powers. Women were expected to emulate the roles of daughter, wife, and mother.

Leisure activities in Leopoldville, now Kinshasa were dominated by men who took pleasure in heavy drinking, smoking and obscene sexual jokes. (Gondola 1997: 70). With the increase of colonial officials in Leopoldville over the years, a new social position for single women emerged. Unmarried women in rural areas were able to escape the strict gender codes by reinventing themselves as companions for lonely colonial officials, as well as for urban migrant men. The introduction of women in the city which had for many years been limited to men by the colonial administration, inspired a culture of "Don Juanism" whereby men spent their leisure time pursuing women romantically. In fact, music evolved into a kind of troubadour style, centered on romantic songs about wooing women.

According to early postcolonial research, "Sexual success, in men and women, demonstrates superiority over others" (La Fontaine 1974: 97). Being sexually active and capable of attracting multiple sexual partners is a major source of symbolic power even today. In my daily interactions with people, I would often hear gossip about mistresses and lovers from both men and women. Clearly, being desirable to the opposite sex is something that is very important to Kinshais, and a barometer for social success.

In this context, the *ndumba* not only provided companionship to men, but she also became the provider of “ambiance”, in bars and night clubs, facilitating the atmosphere needed to make patrons feel that they were participating in and experiencing the city’s “hottest spot”. In this way, the *ndumba* played an active role in culture creation, even though she acted as a facilitator. She performed the role of a “modern woman”, someone who provides for her family, and someone who dictates the terms of her relationships (Gondola 1997: 76). « Elles étalent leur richesse dans les bars et se moquent quelquefois des femmes mariées de leur connaissance qu’elles incitent à briser leur union pour mener comme elle une vie de liberté » (Comhaire-Sylvain 1968: 166). Shirking the expectations imposed on her to marry and have children, the *ndumba* was free to lead an independent life.

The *ndumba*, unlike other women, was expected to pay taxes as she was seen as an urban wage earner (Biaya 1996: 5). The *ndumba* infiltrated the public space of the bar and nightclub, spaces which became dependent on these women for “ambiance” (Biaya 1996: 10). It can be said that the liminal space which the *ndumba* occupied neither virtuous nor stigmatized unwed woman provided an outlet to forge a new role and a new identity, separate from those imposed by missionaries and colonial officials (Comhaire-Sylvain 1968: 163), something that is echoed by the role of the danseuse.

In terms of traditional gender roles, similar to the Christian values, women were expected to marry and have children. Those who did not respect this “traditional” value, were left with the only role available to them, that of the *ndumba*. For divorced, sterile, single women, the only option was to flee the village stigma by migrating to the cities where they could freely maintain relations with men. There is a sense in which the city

offered a kind of refuge for women who sought a new modern way of life. Hodgson and McCurdy write about “wicked” women, or women who “transgress ideological boundaries such as cultural norms of respectability or material boundaries such as legal restrictions on employment, residence, marriage, and divorce” (2001: 8). Urban areas attract women seeking new opportunities, even those that are not considered respectable by the wider society. The city becomes a kind of liminal zone or new space for women to assert their own visions of female expression.

The *ndumba* figure and the female concert dancer or danseuse share similar traits. The danseuse earns a living in a domain dominated by men and is therefore, subject to criticism as she is not adhering to conventional roles for women. In fact, walking home with Latecia, the band’s *chefaine*, I heard a woman balancing a large basket of vegetables on her head call her *ndumba*, prompting Latecia to suck her teeth and shout back “tu est complexé” as we walked by. After questioning Latecia, I learned that she did not know the woman who had insulted her and she assured me that she did not frequently encounter public insult. She informed me that she mostly encounters Christians who try to convince her to give up dancing for popular bands.

The danseuse, like the *ndumba* is often socially marginalized even before she chooses her role/career as *ambianceur*. Willie writes, “Marginal people who fall between the cracks may be alienated, but marginalized people who rise above the cracks are synthesizers” (Willie 1974: 13). This is apparent in the concert dancers appropriated by Kinois, young and old and replicated during life-cycle events like weddings and funerals. I discovered that the dancing done by these stigmatized ‘*ndumba* dancers’ is observable in sacred spaces such as in churches. To reiterate the main tenet of this thesis, culture

creators, like the concert dancer, are at once stigmatized and mimicked by people who consider themselves morally upright citizens.

La Kinoiserie

The notion of “la Kinoiserie” is particularly relevant in the discussion concerning male/female relations. A complex term, I will briefly describe it as being characterized as a kind of joyful, *joie de vivre*, “la Kinoiserie” is a mood or “ambiance” attached to the general atmosphere. When I was conducting research, the city’s “hot spots”---places where ambiance was palpable---were Beaumarche and Bandal. In the past, Matonge was heralded as the neighbourhood with the most exciting nightlife, partly because of Papa Wemba, an international musical sensation and his weekly performances. Celebrated for encouraging this joyful nightlife atmosphere are beautiful women and well-dressed men (preferably with money) who love music. Embodying the characteristics of “la Kinoiserie” does not necessarily require men to have been born in Kinshasa or even to have lived in the city for a long period of time; rather one only need be “elegant” or stylish. This elegance includes speaking French, knowing how to dance, and a knowledge of the latest music. In other words, passing as an “ambianceur” or someone who understands “la Kinoiserie” is learned activity, reproducible and possible for anyone to master.

In the contemporary setting of post-independent Congo, the *ndumba* continues to transgress the role allotted to her by both colonial authorities as well by the “traditional” village. The *ndumba* uses her wily ways to charm men, in efforts to gain monetarily and materially. “She incarnates the image of a successful modern woman by imposing

herself as the master key of the “ambiance” that she transformed in “a mode of action.” In doing so, she takes revenge over the male powers who generated her” (Biaya 1996: 354). This parallels the danseuse, who in the process of dancing on stage, in part to appeal to male desire, becomes demonized as she is now depended on for “ambiance”. There is a sense in which entertainment and leisure activity became contingent on the *ndumba*.

Researchers like Pype have shown that La Kinoiserie is not an expression of all citizens. Those who regard themselves as “good Christians” criticize this lifestyle as being morally wrong (Pype 2008: 45). Alcohol, music, dancing, and sexuality are demonized by Christians who urge people to avoid going to bars and nightclubs. This is something I will elucidate in the following section.

Dance Politics

In this section I discuss the distinctions between “good” dancing (in the name of God) and “bad” or profane concert dancing. Kaepler highlights the fact that similar dance movement may be considered differently depending on the context (Kaepler 1986: 92). I will show how dances like the *ndombolo* change meaning in different social spaces.

I observed that most Kinois know how to dance the *ndombolo* and dance this style at parties, funerals, weddings, concerts, and even in church. I recognized no difference in the aesthetic of the *ndombolo* during church services or during popular concerts. In fact, during one church service I witnessed the pastor’s wife gyrate her hips with such fervour that she looked like she could rival any of the women I saw in popular music videos.

The controversy surrounding popular concert dance can be historically traced back to colonial encounters where the Kongo tribe located in the lower-Congo saw no contradiction in the sacred and profane residing together in dance (Covington-Ward 2007). That is not to say that there were no distinctions between sacred and secular dances; rather, movements often overlapped and overflowed into both categories of dance. Social dancing beginning in the context between the *ndumba* and colonized African man took its shape by drawing upon both the secular traditional and religious forms. This set the stage for a clash concerning the definitions of licentiousness. Today, in Kinshasa society, as in most western countries, it is divided between mind and body.

Pentecostals in Kinshasa believe that the act of inventing new songs is one that is inspired by invisible forces. “Spiritual power and guidance are the basis of all craftsmanship” (Pype 2006: 308). Artists are divided into two camps: “good”, working for God, or “bad”, working for the devil. If, for Christians, *ndombolo* dancing is considered “bad behavior”, why did I observe this dancing during church services? Katrien Pype’s research posits that ministers have become eager to re-appropriate the dance and purify it as “good” dancing meant to be done in the context of worship (Pype 2006). This phenomenon became apparent to me when I observed my girlfriend, Romance, dance *ndombolo* in church one evening. Previously I had asked her if she knew how to dance *ndombolo*, whereupon she denied she did, and reminded me that popular music was a space where the devil lurks. She added, that her little tape player was used only for playing Christian songs so as not to “corrupt” it with evil tunes. Yet, that evening during a church service I looked over to find Romance’s pelvis moving in sensuous circles, thrusting forward to accentuate the downbeat of the rhythm. I observed

that nearly everyone in the church was engaging in some form of *ndombolo* dance, and I even witnessed several young men making *mayeno* gestures, a movement meant to represent young female's breasts popularized by Papa Wemba's popular band.

After church, I jokingly confronted Romance that she was a better dancer than popular singer Kofi Olmilde's dancers. She laughed, and retorted, "Of course I KNOW how to dance! But I dance in the name of God whereas the girls you are hanging out with dance for the devil. I can dance any way I want as long as people know it's for Jesus".

Male Gaze

Popular concert dance is not radically different from dance in church services. Observing similar dance movements and gestures in these sacred and profane spaces, I argue that the context of the dance changes when it is done on a public stage with the intention of capturing the audience's gaze. Performing in front of an audience in flashy European inspired clothing for money shapes the moral nature of the event. In other words, women who are paid to entertain on a public stage, in front of an audience comprised of both men and women, frames the dance as morally illicit.

For Jane Cowan, "meaning does not lie in the body" (1990: 25) but it is a space where worldviews are embodied. Following the idea that dance is a medium and context expressing social mores, I argue that dance in Kinshasa has a potential to invite new discussions about gender and social relations. One might say that the relationship between eroticism and dancing performed during popular concerts stresses the agency of women as independent erotic subjects. Cowan describes how women express their sensuality and seduction through dance, but do so under the male gaze and control

(Cowan 1990). In the context of Kinshasa's concert dancers, one might argue that danseuses exhibit spectacular kinaesthetic movements that both tease and resist visual objectification. This is echoed in Castaldi's description of *sabar* dancing in Senegal where "the best dancers will control the gaze of spectators, dramatically shifting between carefully choreographed stillness that allows the viewers to apprehend with leisure the dancer's body and extraordinary kinetic engagement that resists visual objectification by its active intensity" (2006: 82). After seeing a variety of performances, I cannot deny the over-sexualization of the choreography that has been created by male choreographers. However, I came to see solo dances or "shines" as spaces where danseuses showcase their own creativity. On more than one occasion I felt as though the danseuses were performing beyond a simple demonstration of sensuous hip thrusts, in fact, there was something almost terrifying about their displays of sexuality. Terrifying in the sense that danseuses move in such a way that is beyond sexiness in so far as that their hyper-sexual movements signal to the men in the audience that they are 'too much women' to handle. I see these solo sessions as a representation of sexual transmutation, or an attempt to transform sexual energy into creativity. Furthermore, the solo sessions provide an opportunity for the danseuse to shine an image of individuality through the city's multitudes.

On the evening of one of *Chic en Couleurs* performances, Latecia was preparing to showcase the new solo choreography she had been working on. The show went on as usual with no major setbacks such as a power outage, and we performed our dance routine as planned. Curious to see Latecia's new solo, I positioned myself where I could see her dance. As the drums began hammering out the staccato rhythms, Latecia rushed

out in front of the crowd and began to dance her usual routine, until she jumped into the air and landed in the splits. Splayed out on the ground Latecia began to make the same gestures one would see during a *kotazo* dance. She continued with the *kotazo* theme, throwing punches at the confused audience who did not know what to make of this seemingly masculine dance created by street children.

Latecia, Chic en Couleur's cheftaine is a masterful dancer and choreographer in her own right. By incorporating *kotazo* dance style, (discussed in chapter 4) an aggressive dance associated with weightlifters or *pumbas* which is generally only done by men, Latecia is, in her own way, challenging the gender binaries as expressed in concert dance. There is a sense in which concert dance has the potential to confront social mores and norms partly because it is carried out within the liminal space of the stage. De Boeck puts it well when he states, "The perceived marginality and liminality of youth places them squarely in the center and generates tremendous power" (2006: 8). For this, the government is careful and keeps a close eye on popular bands, and censors content that might pose a direct challenge to the social status quo. Specifically, concert dancers, both men and women represent a challenge to Christian morals, previous colonial and current post-colonial models of behaviour. The dances created and popularized by *shegues*, specifically *ndombolo* is representative of a prominent street culture that poses a threat to political stability. This is clearly observable in the censoring of the *ndombolo* dance, created by *shegue* as a criticism of President Kabila's walk. In fact, there has been increasing attention paid to content aired in music videos as more people are growing uncomfortable with sexually suggestive musical lyrics. Street slang originating with *shegues* has made its way into popular music and manages to evade state censorship due

to its ambiguity and because few people in ministerial positions recognize the slang of the day (Digitalcongo.net 13/02/2009).

For Randy Martin (1990), the body is not only shaped by domination, it is also a site of resistance contrary to what Foucault advances. As discussed in chapter 5, concert dance is symbolic of a new urban identity after colonialism and dictatorship. As a result, there is a sense in which Christianity, including all of the various denominations and sects, is reacting against the culture created by the street, attempting to fill the vacuum left behind by colonialism and Mobutu's dictatorship, fighting for a place within Kinshasa's social urban imagination. Following Biaya, I argue that the bodies of African youth are both at the forefront and on the margins of mainstream socio-cultural production, opening up new possibilities that challenge restrictions, and shedding light on contradictions of colonial and postcolonial models (Biaya cited in De Boeck 2005: 11).

Though cultural agents and artists often reside on the fringes of society, they are free from some of the many societal constraints such as kinship structures (La Fontaine 1970: 145). There is a sense in which individuals are more at liberty to experiment with different identities when they are not preoccupied with tarnishing other people's reputations. In other words, what you do in public is reflected on your family, especially in tightly knit rural communities. Thus the city offers people a space where they can distance themselves from the pressures of the family. There is a freedom associated with performers in so far as their expressions could not otherwise be acceptable or appropriate. For the danseuse, her moment of expression or "moment of freedom" as Fabian would put it, occurs during her solo session. While danseuses occupy a low position within society and their band, they are nonetheless engaging with a public space that has the

potential to shed light on society and offer new perspectives. Unfortunately as men continue to hold the positions of master choreographer, danseuses are not encouraged to express any creativity, except during their own solos. The danseuse is thus a performer of her own marginality, complying with the band's image of how she should dance and behave.

Male dancers are encouraged to be creative and express an image of how they see "the good life" while the dances choreographed by men for danseuses are sexualized and do not leave space for their own fantasies. Furthermore, women are caught in the binary between old colonial norms where a woman had to marry and assume traditional women's activities: sewing, knitting, nursing and housekeeping (Gondola 1997: 68) and a "modern" lifestyle where they are wage earners. The irony is that in Kinshasa men depend on women to earn a living in order for them to maintain a "traditional" home. There is a sense in which the public stage could become a space where danseuses could assert themselves and challenge the stereotypes that depict them as mere sexual ornamentation for concerts. However, "traditional" African morals and values as depicted in the National Ballet offer women no alternative to the role of the mother, a role that Christian missionaries also propagated. This is not to say that female concert dance is void of agency, in fact there is a great potential as exemplified in Latecia's *kotazo* solo session for expression and empowerment.

It is apparent that despite the stigma associated with dancers, people attend concerts by the thousands in Kinshasa, copy the latest dance moves and perform them during various events like birthdays and weddings. Popular dance is an important cultural dimension in the lives of Kinois and people are not willing to forsake their pop stars

because of religious criticism. Kinshasa has struggled too long with colonial and authoritarian, and now civil violence to abandon their unique cultural product that is recognized worldwide. Street culture as expressed by the *shegue* has become a kind of counterbalance to the power of the church, representative of society's "enfant-terrible" who expresses himself/herself as she pleases. However, people remain conflicted over "appropriateness" as it relates to gender dynamics.

According to Bauman, performers are both admired and feared, "admired for their artistic skill and power...feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo" (1977: 45). In openly expressing her sexuality on a public stage with the intention of capturing the male gaze, the danseuse, despite the fact that male choreographers chose the movement sequences, is commenting on colonial, "traditional", and Pentecostal morals. On a systemic level and from a structuralist perspective, marginalized people allow for a functional social "centre" to exist (Willie 1975). There is a sense in which a danseuse sacrifices her membership in the dominant culture to help create a popular culture in which everyone is welcome to participate. Further, as she is considered by society at large to be an immoral woman, band members exploit her because she has no other economic options, thus reflecting the gender imbalances within Kinshasa's society.

In the same way that Taussig describes marginal people as "walking colors", concert dancers manage to shine through the megalopolis that is Kinshasa despite their stigmatized status, reflecting gender relations, shaping them and sometimes as Latecia exemplifies, challenging them.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine how the ongoing negotiation of urban life is reflected in the way people perform as well as experience performance and to understand why there is stigma associated with female concert dancing in light of its popularity. I show how dances created by street kids are appropriated by concert dancers and then publicly performed in front of an audience, ultimately resulting in the setting of dance trends. A careful analysis of dance helped understand the challenges of modernity as well as reflect on shifting notions of womanhood, traditional values, social mobility, and gender relations. One of the main goals of this thesis was to contribute to the understanding of the urban experience and some of the issues facing the marginal and the youth of “megacities” such as Kinshasa. As such, I examined the ways in which concert dancers both captured and shaped the urban social imaginary reflecting desires and aspirations.

My research suggests that danseuses are communicating an identity that reflects their position in society, one that is markedly marginal. My research explored why paradoxically, Kinshasa’s urban performers, so vital to the integration of the traditional and contemporary experience, so core to the city’s national and international cosmopolitan identity, are nonetheless marginalized figures in Kinshasa. I illustrated that the marginal position of culture creators such as musicians and dancers express desires that are reflective of their audiences. The interview with Felix Wazekwa best exemplifies this when he stated, “We perform to make people dream, not to wake them up”. Signs and symbols still have value in Kinshasa and are expressed in movement and gesture. Furthermore, street culture as expressed in popular dance can only be performed in public

by individuals who maintain close ties to the street and who are perceived as leading unconventional lives.

Concert Dance as Art?

A native Kinshasa, university professor, UNESCO consultant, and frequent guest journalist for national newspapers and magazines, explained to me in an interview that although both concert dancers and National Ballet dancers earn a living, and make dancing their business, the former is a lewd public display while the latter is a formalized art form with its own discipline. This Professor subscribes to the idea that “low” and “high” art forms exist and can be clearly identifiable. He understands the National Ballet’s expression of African culture as an “authentic” art form that can compete with any other Western artistic medium that is characterized by the Frankfurt school as “high” culture. As Bourdieu describes, the concept of the popular has long been denigrated as “low” and vacuous (1983), an idea consistent with elites. While popular dance is integral in the constitution of the African urban experience, it is nonetheless widely regarded as a “low”, and viewed as something detrimental to the progress of the city.

There is a struggle over representation in Kinshasa, one which manifests itself in dance. It is interesting that both religious leaders, and defenders of “tradition”, or those who claim that “Africa” is being eroded and replaced by a homogenized culture, stigmatize popular dance. Individuals constituting the newly formed elite are quick to label popular dance as a commodification, corrupted by the West. Instead, “untainted” artistic expressions such as the one espoused by the National Ballet are preferred and are supported by government funding to promote an ideal national image.

“Much of what is consumed by “the people”, “the masses” in Africa is also produced by them, according to small-scale methods of the modern informal sector” (Barber 1997: 4). By imposing distinctions on what is considered as “high” and “low” art in Africa whereby the medium of the “traditional” is automatically superior to new, popular expression, a dichotomy emerges that situates Kinshasa as caught in the middle of two opposing worlds. The hybrid nature of popular dance, one which combines old and new movement is an ambiguous zone where morality is in constant motion, changing with each context.

Dance as a Hammer

I addressed some of the ways danseuses perform their marginality as they dance routines created for them by men. In contrast to cosmopolitan references in men’s dance, choreography created for danseuses either depicts a hyper-sexual woman or a maternal mother. My findings suggests that women are confronted with two polar images of womanhood and are automatically condemned by Christian churches in Kinshasa as “wicked” or “bad” because they are making a living by publicly performing with a “profane” popular band. “Good women” do not perform on stages in front of a male gaze for money, thus only women with questionable morals become danseuses in popular bands. Female sexually suggestive movements are stylized versions of ethnic dances such as the Luba tribe’s *mutuashi*. While movement and gestures may resemble or even be a direct replica of traditional dance, costumes worn on stage re-contextualize the dance, provoking moral confusion. It can be said that the danseuse is a reminder of the

strict gender norms and social behaviour in this society where “tradition” and “modernity” are not so clearly demarcated.

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (Bertold Brecht). Indeed, concert dance offers women the potential to communicate their own desires and aspirations. The liminal space of the stage offers danseuses an opportunity to transgress some of the social norms and values. However in the dance I observed, the danseuse are predominantly concerned with providing visual ornamentation for the band as well as drawing in the male gaze from the audience in hopes of additional monetary remuneration.

Finally, I argued that dance solos performed by danseuses reflect what Fabian refers to as a “moment of freedom” (1998) in that there are moments in performances when danseuses exercise a freedom from the constraints of the choreography. During these “breaks” in the choreography, there is a sense in which the danseuse resists visual objectification by employing aggressive movement that sometimes transcends hegemonic sexual norms.

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Appendix

Preliminary Semi-Structured Interview Questions - Dancers

1. Please provide your name, name of performance group, and the length of time you have been dancing for this particular group.
2. How long have you been dancing?
3. How did you get involved with your group?
4. Are you able to support yourself with what you earn from performing?
5. Who creates the choreography for each performance? Do you contribute to the creative process?
6. Where does the inspiration come in terms of creating choreography?
7. Are you conscious of what kind of movements the audience wished to see during a performance?
8. To what extent do traditional movements and dance factor into contemporary shows?
9. Do you consider yourself a traditional dancer or contemporary dancer, and why?
10. Is there any kind of social stigma attached to being a dancer? And if so, how do you deal with it?
11. What are your plans for the future? Do you plan to keep dancing professionally?
12. Are you hopeful that you will be chosen to perform with your band abroad (to Europe)?
13. Will going to Europe advance your career? What do you imagine will change when you come back?

Preliminary Semi-Structured Interview Questions – Band Leaders

1. Please provide your name, name of performance group, and the length of time you have been involved with this group?
2. Are you responsible for choosing the dancers?
3. Where are dancers scouted? For instance, at fine arts centres, or the streets?
4. What kind of qualities do you/the band look for in a dancer?
5. What is the dancer's role? What is expected from her?
6. What do you think an audience wants to see in a dance routine?
7. Does the band provide creative input in the creation of choreography?
8. Do you think that traditional dance is highlighted in the dancer's choreography?
9. How are female dancers' perceived by society at large?
10. Who is in charge of conceptualizing music video clips?

Glossary of Lingala Words

Wenge: A genre of music with roots in Congolese Rumba.

Atalaku: A band's hype creator, or animator.

Seben: The fast-paced section of a song.

Kotazo: A dance style

Ndombolo: Genre of dance also encompassing the genre of music.

Shegue/bashegue: Street kid/plural

Mutuashi: A traditional Luba dance.

Tombola: Second hand clothing market.

Pumba: A weight lifter, or 'strong-man'.

Kisanola: A dance move or gesture that signifies getting robbed.

Mundele: A white person.

Pagnes: Patterned material with which women use to make clothing from, often wrapped around their hips like a sarong.

Poto: Foreign country, generally used to describe the West

Ndumba: A woman of 'lose' morals. A word dating back to Belgian colonial Congo to describe a single woman who moved from the country to the city.

Kabosso: A young man.

Nyonyo: A word to describe a young adolescent girl. Also means small breasts.

Mayeno: A young woman