



Borrowers and Lenders

Exploring Contemporary Intercultural Theatre in Francophone West Africa

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Abstract

For the last decades, an intercultural performance practice has been set in motion in Francophone West Africa. This practice aims at creating theatrical events that integrate elements of local performance practices, often related to indigenous religious/animistic traditions. In the process of creation, the spiritual context is then shed with a view to foreground the inherent aesthetic values. Although the presence of this performance practice is very evident, it has not formed a part of the intercultural theatre debate, even if its development runs contemporary to that debate that started in the last decades of the previous century amongst leading scholars of theatre/performance studies. This thesis proposes that this practice needs to be taken into account as, besides its display of common characteristics with other intercultural performance practices, there are specific worthwhile aspects to be addressed. One of these aspects is the fact that the principal aim of this theatre is to appeal as directly as possible to the indigenous audiences that as a rule are not familiar with European theatrical codes.

The thesis argues that the amalgamation of indigenous performance elements within the context of contemporary theatre practice is accomplished in a way that is congruent with the hybrid character of post-colonial societies. Through colonisation, modes of life, patterns of behaviour, products, commodities and ideas have been imbricated into a hybrid and dynamic complex that still forms the essence of contemporary post-colonial society. It is against this backdrop that the intercultural theatre practice should be understood.

Borrowers and Lenders traces the development of the practice and signals its characteristic creative processes. It places the phenomenon within its context of West African postcolonial society, thus adding a chapter to a neglected part of intercultural performance practice and pointing forward towards a new phase in the development of the genre.

La très grande importance des modes d'expression théâtraux traditionnels vient de ce que, outre le fait qu'ils se suffisent à eux-mêmes, ils constituent une banque d'inspiration pour tous les créateurs modernes.

Jean-Pierre Guingané

Every creative act is in essence transformative in the way it translates a number of sources into a new work.

Guy Cools



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I. Introduction

1. Who Needs Intercultural Theatre

Many different terms, concepts and definitions in theatre studies have been used since the last quarter of the previous century to describe the combination of disparate cultural phenomena and traditions that have created a theatre that reflects the huge changes in society since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's shift towards state capitalism, the onset of the digital revolution and the worldwide acceptance of hypercapitalism as a global force of nature instead of a political choice.¹ The first comprehensive theoretical work on this subject is Christopher Balme's *Decolonising the Stage* (1999), which proposed the term "syncretic" to replace previous terminology that was associated with a fierce on-going discussion, under the heading of "intercultural" theatre. Since then, a wealth of publications has thrown light on this matter, introducing, yet again, different definitions or terms: "hybrid" (Hauptfleisch 1987) "creolized" (Hannerz 1987) "cross-cultural" (Lo and Gilbert 2002), the latest addition being Erika Fischer-Lichte's proposal to talk about "interweaving performance cultures" on the opening of her platform in 2010.²

In comparison, similar developments in other art forms like dance, music and visual arts have, to my knowledge, not suffered from this need to label the phenomenon so precisely. The prefix "world" linked to the term "cross-over" or "fusion" has sufficed to refer to the

¹ Borrowed from: Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where all of Life is a Paid-For Experience*. (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001).

² Erika Fischer-Lichte. "Textures, Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures", *Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being In-Between*. Accessed August 11, 2010. 20-07-2017 <http://www.textures-platform.com/search/interweaving%20cultures%20in%20performance>.

phenomenon of interweaving music cultures, and even though the term "world" in the context of world music (or dance for that matter) is regarded as highly unsatisfactory, it continues to be used for the lack of a better alternative (or indifference to more precise labelling?).³

In the visual arts and literature, the related debate seems to focus more on defining distinguishing hallmarks (and the question whether this is possible or even desirable) of the non-western artist working in fields traditionally dominated by the Western hegemony.⁴

The spectacular rise of commercial home video production in Nigeria, known as the Nollywood phenomenon, and its huge offspring in numerous other countries on the African continent have not been questioned as hybrid, intercultural or syncretic but have been evaluated on grounds of their own qualities (or lack of them), taking for granted their use of dramaturgical models from Euro-American soap opera (or rather, Brazilian *telenovelas*).⁵

Perhaps this difference in approach that sets theatre practice apart from other performance art forms, is due to the fact that the discussion started around the work of mainstream European theatre artists, like Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, work that launched a fierce controversy, called an "interculture war in the 1990's", a term coined by Ric Knowles, between those who attacked their appropriation of other cultures, like Rustom Bharucha (who can be considered as the most articulate of them) and those who defended these artists' attempts to transmit a foreign (marginalised) culture to their public in dominant theatre

³ "The term world dance has different meanings for dancers, various dance practitioners and amongst the wider public where it inconsistently denotes various dances or dance forms. There is no uniformity in its use or even agreement regarding connotations connected with how the term is used". Ivana Katarinčić: "World Dance: A (New) Euphemism in Dance Terminology?" *Stud. ethnol. Croat* 27 (2015): 327–362.

⁴ "Courier International". *Ousmane Ndiaye et Paul Blondé, entretien avec Kossi Efoui: Je ne suis pas un auteur africain*, can serve as a representative example. www.courierinternational.com. 22-03-2017 <https://youtu.be/NtUhs7ijYVs>.

⁵ see the preface to the Nigerian edition of Jonathan Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films*, revised and expanded edition, (Athens: Ohio Univ Center for International Studies, 2000).

culture, as represented by Patrice Pavis.⁶ An echo of this discussion might still be found in the dialogue that Fischer-Lichte and Bharucha held at the opening of the *Textures* platform in 2010.⁷

In these last years, we've been witnessing a return to the older term as the favourite one: intercultural theatre or perhaps: intercultural performance, as suggested by Pavis.⁸ A corpus of literature exists to distinguish it from and get rid of its possible associations with suspicious multi-cultural policies. Furthermore, after Balme's publication, the post-colonial debate has strongly asserted itself in academia. Since the publication (in the same year of Balme's publication) of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (1999), the process of decolonising the mind has greatly influenced the discussion on (intercultural) theatre practice.

The conclusions Pavis drew at the end of his speech from February 2010 for the University of Tennessee, in which he provided an update on the phenomenon of intercultural theatre, posed one question that I would like to put at the heart of this thesis:

What if the intercultural were in fact only an interartistic practice, a form of interdisciplinarity, a crossing, a confrontation and an addition of arts, of techniques, of acting modes?⁹

This question, which sounds like the articulation of an intuition, coupled with the ambition voiced recently by several young theatre professionals in Bénin, Togo, Niger, Burkina Faso has

⁶ Ric Knowles, *Theatre and Interculturalism*. (Basingstoke: Pallgrave. 2010), 30.

⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte and Rustom Bharucha. "Textures, Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures," *Dialogue*, Accessed August 6, 2011. Transcribed and edited by Katrin Wächter.

⁸ Patrice Pavis. "Intercultural Theatre Today," *Forum Modernes Theater* 25. no.1 (2010).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

triggered the need to explore intercultural theatre making in Francophone West Africa, as the major literature linked to the phenomenon does not seem aware of such a practice in this region. My research in these countries, and to a lesser extent Ivory Coast and Guinea, has revealed that there are pockets of theatre production that have explored and are still exploring intercultural pathways of creation that have not been yet recognized. The history of these practices can be traced back to the last decades of the previous century, but it has been largely ignored in the then raging discussion on intercultural theatrical practices. As I will demonstrate, these practices, that have been going on for the last two decades and continue to grow in importance, not only provide an affirmative answer to the question formulated by Pavis, but also shed an interesting light on the intercultural debate that has so far surrounded the practices. As the theatre artists studied are indigenous artists working for indigenous audiences, the most important sub-questions related to the research is about the motivation for these intercultural practices: is there a deliberate, conscious intercultural programme that is being followed. If that is the case, what would be the aim of such a programme? How does it relate to the ongoing discourse on intercultural theatre?

My research of this practice has revealed that the basic drive for this intercultural theatre has not been implementing an intercultural programme as such, but the ambition to communicate, as directly as possible, with the contemporary indigenous (urban) audiences, for whom intercultural processes are as common to their lives as they are in the cities of the global north, in spite of (or sometimes even because of) the huge differences in economic and social development. All the practitioners, who were interviewed, stated that their main concern has been to create a theatre that would speak to the local audiences by using a language (be it a visual or a vocal one) that would be understood by all strata of society. Now this would seem like an ambition any theatre artist would nourish. Even a successful choreographer in the world

of international festivals, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, stated that (quoted in Cools): "my work has become more and more accessible, even popular. I don't want to address only an elite, I want to open doors."¹⁰ In this case, in the marginalized Francophone West Africa, the artists have turned to specific local performing traditions for their theatre work to achieve this. Borrowing and lending, in spite of Polonius' admonition to Laertes, is a daily practice not restricted to financial or material matter, but also in aesthetics.¹¹

I hope to demonstrate that under the lee of intercultural discussions going on elsewhere a practice has evolved in this part of Africa, amalgamating *with ease* the elements of indigenous and international theatre practice. Intercultural theatre has been studied as a mixture of indigenous and international practices, but the specific context of an indigenous audience that has no awareness of theatrical codes as they have developed in dominant cultural environments, has hardly received any attention. This practice in the Francophone West African region has virtually gone unnoticed outside its own boundaries. As its creators are to some extent aware of international theatrical codes and as they use elements from local indigenous performance practice, their products can be classified as belonging to the intercultural theatre as well, but there are two distinguishing elements that set it apart from the practice so far studied in academic debate. Firstly, the fact that the creators do not follow a deliberate programme nor form part of an explicit current, but merely borrow local performance aesthetics that will appeal to an indigenous audience. Secondly: colonisation has produced nation-states that are based on colonial dictate; their borders have been drawn without taking into account cultural, historical or even geophysical considerations. Each of the nation-states are constellations of ethnic/linguistic entities, thus, providing a fertile ground for a continuing exchange on all levels, which Bharucha

¹⁰ Guy Cools, *In-Between Dance Cultures: on the Migratory Artistic Identity of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Kahn* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), 107.

¹¹ Hamlet, Act I, scene 3.

would define as intra-cultural: "intercultural relations across national boundaries and the intra-cultural dynamics between and across specific communities and regions within the boundaries of the nation-state".¹²

A telling example of this is the fact that within one single nation-state, even as small as Togo, the lingua franca of one region (Mina in the coastal areas) might not get you very far in the northern part of the country. Ironically in the northern urban centres, French offers the only solution to communicate with the rich array of peoples and languages assembled there.

Furthermore, the fact that these practices have all sprung up in the important urban centres that exploded within the same period, plays a decisive part in the development of this practice: The number of inhabitants in Cotonou has doubled since 1990, the number tripled in Lomé in the same period, Niamey showed a comparable development (it is estimated that over half of the population on the continent has turned into city dwellers since last year). Although a variety of publications have recently thrown light on the subject of intercultural theatre practice and the global city, covering places like Singapore, Delhi, Cairo, Johannesburg, Francophone West Africa again is lacking on this map.¹³ Further research in this field focusing on the region might yield interesting material for comparison; here, I will limit myself to signalling the phenomenon

¹² Rustom Bharucha, *Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 1993), 6.

¹³ *Performance and the Global City*, ed D.J. Hopkins and Kim Solga (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

2. Preliminary Observations, Discoveries and Controversies

A visit to the Africa Study Centre, in Leiden, will quickly show that the clear majority of theatre research undertaken in this region, focusses on the elitist (and most of the time diasporic) Francophone authors; that research has limited itself to hermeneutics with occasional semiotics thrown in (Chalaye 2004, Coulon/Garnier 2011, Fiangor 2002). The target audience for that theatre is, more often than not, to be found in the global north. Even if these published and well appreciated authors sometimes use intercultural mixtures, the focus of this thesis will be on the scripted (but generally not authored) theatre work by indigenous theatre artists intended for an indigenous target audience in the region at hand.

As already stated, in these countries, interesting pockets of theatre practice have developed. The lack of profitable raw materials has left the region relatively unscathed by economic (disguised and/or manipulated as religious or ethnic) conflicts.¹⁴ The Bénin Republic even offers an example of peaceful transition from a People's Republic to a democracy (March 1991) and Togo is gradually finding its place after decades of dictatorship that ended in 2005 with the demise of Eyadema Gnassingbe. Niger has suffered from the Touareg rebellion and political instability but that has not led so far to devastating large scale collisions; the greatest threat, without question, is being presented by Islamist terror groups operating on its borders with Mali, Algeria, Lybia and Tchad. In these otherwise relatively calm surroundings, contemporary theatre artists have struggled to create a unique body of work, inspired by indigenous theatrical practices.

¹⁴ Zizek in his *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbour*, (n.p.:Allen Lane, 2015), 43 linked the Christian-Muslim civil war going on in Central African Republic directly to the discovery of oil in the north of the country. On page 46, he referred to the UN report analysing the situation in DR Congo along similar lines.

In his aforementioned speech, from January 2010, Pavis drew attention to another aspect in the discussion around intercultural theatre. Pavis retraced the discussion to what he wittily called the "original sin": the attack launched in the 80's at Brook/Mnouchkine whereby they were accused of exploiting and appropriating foreign cultures as true colonials. This had, according to Pavis, led to a situation where artists who have "a natural relationship to other cultures, devoid of complexes..." share the uncomfortable company of "intellectuals (...) terrified by the possible faux pas in the representation and appreciation of the Other".¹⁵ As we will see, in developing countries of the region at hand, this dichotomy hardly plays any role. It is at the crossroads of these observations that this thesis lives. A subjective intercultural remark: In *vodun* countries like Bénin and Togo crossroads is the place where *Legba* will reside, the *vodun* towards which I have always felt a particular attraction...¹⁶

Pavis updated the discussion accompanying what, after having been called so many things, he accepts as Intercultural Performance. The essential need for this update is justified by the fact that since its inception in the last quarter of the previous century, the new world order of globalised economy has caused major shifts in borders, be they material, mental, economic, cultural or psychological, challenging the concept of intercultural in a hitherto unforeseen way. By now, for many it feels as if the whole globe seems adrift, floating towards an uncertain destiny, driven by the forces of an economic model that succeeds in exponentially widening the gap between the have-all and the have-next-to-nothing. This development is staring us in the face and no mass movement seems to be countering it: the have-next-to-nothing seem to prefer

¹⁵ Pavis, 7.

¹⁶ For those interested: a comprehensive study of the Vodun and the pantheon can be found in Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995).

to seek refuge in either religion or racism and the tyrants of the 20th century are being replaced worldwide by the rogues and scoundrels of the 21st century.

Furthermore, Pavis rightly remarked that over the last decades, the intercultural has lost its utopic aspirations and now needs to deal with globalisation, a process through which identity and culture have turned into fluid configurations instead of fixed and recognisable positions.¹⁷ So far intercultural seems to remain the handiest term, albeit covering a bewildering array of practices, of which Pavis enumerates what he considers to be the most important categories.

When focusing on the African continent in this context, a slightly uncomfortable position in the discussion can be detected. This is partly due to the chasm dividing the continent into the former French-speaking and the other (mainly English-speaking) ex-colonies, which has an important bearing on the theatrical infrastructure, policies and even the cultural dynamics of the former colonies. The English-speaking African theatre practice as well as the academic world can boast of a very advanced level of discourse, leading to the recent foundation of the Working Group of African Theatre and Performance at the International Federation for Theatre Research¹⁸. Its first project has materialised into the publications like Kene Igweonu's *Trends in 20th Century African Theatre and Performance* (IFTR, 2011), a comprehensive treatment of the theme, but sadly it only discusses theatre practices in English speaking parts of Africa. So far, nothing on a comparable scale or of a comparable scope has been produced for the Francophone part, but things are rapidly changing and I hope this thesis will be one of the contributions to counter this lack of attention.

Thomas Riccio remarked that "the traditional French language theatre propagated in Francophone West Africa today, tends to be rooted (i.e. stuck) in the dramaturgy of the 19th

¹⁷ Pavis, 14.

¹⁸ Kene Igweonu, and Osita Okagbue, *Performative Inter-actions in African Theatre 1-2-3* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).

century", an observation that makes perfect sense if one studies the standard repertoire that is produced and shown on the stages of the formal theatre venues.¹⁹ As the theatre artists practising the intercultural theatre researched steer away from the French language and present their works in a very different context compared to the French language author-driven practice that is the mainstay of the French cultural centres, there might be an element of silent opposition playing a role here, that would be worthwhile to investigate further.

Besides the division into Francophone and Anglophone, there is also a horizontal zone division that plays an important role: the Mahgreb counts for the Middle Eastern hemisphere and South(ern) Africa historically constitutes a case of its own.²⁰ Each part of this division will include a (very) different context, if we look at cultural life and provide a different set of parameters with which to approach theatrical practice. If we take Sub-Saharan Africa as the most current geographic definition (albeit I'm extremely reluctant, not to say bluntly opposed to conceive of this geographical region as a cultural unity: the term "Sub-Saharan" designates as much or as little of a cultural unity as compared to "European" or "South American"), it shows that concerning theatre studies, compared to the Anglophone parts of the continent, the Francophone parts seem underrepresented both in research and academic literature.²¹ Zooming in on West Africa, the same picture appears, which is all the more remarkable as the majority of

¹⁹ Thomas Riccio, *Performing Africa: remixing tradition, theatre and culture*. (New York: Lang, 2007).

²⁰ Bernard Müller in *Africa Remix* (Paris: Adagp, 2005), 306: "En témoigne (...) la construction d'une culture africaine reposant sur les délimitations du continent: se faisant elle intègre les pays de l'Afrique du nord, l'Afrique du Sud et les pays d'Afrique subsaharienne".

²¹ see David Kerr, *African Theatre 10: Media and Performance* (Cambridge: Currey, 2011), XV.

the countries in the region are in fact ,Francophone.²² Recent academic initiatives point to a welcomed change in this situation.²³

As the whole region is still very much syncretic (in its beliefs as well as its religious practices), the presence of traditional ceremony, rituals, liturgy and celebrations is very evident, operating alongside the services of mosques and temples of the most diverse sects, and although the victory of monotheism everywhere on the continent is staggering, the syncretic practices survive even in the context of the hybridisation machine called the big city.²⁴ Out of curiosity ,but also from a need to get a better understanding of the workings of this essential part of West African life, I studied the literature on this subject, which is inevitably to be found in the discipline of anthropology, and attended several publicly accessible ceremonies (thus, discovering another field of syncretic practice namely the fact that the percussionists who worked weekends with a contemporary dance group or accompanied the video clip filmed of a popular singer, were the same that accompanied the traditional animist *Egungun* or *Zangbeto* ceremonies).

The fact that lately, an increasing number of students and alumni at the schools and organisations where I have worked in Bénin, Togo, Niger, have articulated ideas about mixing performance practices from their own regional cultures with their training as contemporary theatre artists, has made me realize the importance of tracing the development of this need in the

²² Continental West Africa stretches from Mauretania to Mali and Niger in the north, Senegambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissao, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Bénin, and Nigeria to the South and land-locked Burkina Faso in its centre. 9 of these countries are Francophone, 5 Anglophone and 2 Lusophone.

²³ One PhD at New York University and one at UC Louvain besides one other Master thesis at Niamey University besides this one are being prepared on contemporary theatre in Francophone West Africa simultaneously.

²⁴ A critical article by Uche-Chimnere Nwaozuzu on the consequences of religious proselytising for indigenous dramatic forms can be found in *African Performance Review* 3. no.1, (2009): 86–99.

theatrically neglected region, i.e., Francophone West Africa - and in the end, this has led to this thesis.

I will concentrate on a part of Francophone West Africa with strong intra-cultural currents: Bénin, Togo, Niger to which Burkina Faso should be added (and, consequently, flanking Ghana and Nigeria excluded, even though the same people, like the Yoruba in Bénin-Nigeria and the Ewe in Ghana-Togo, live astride the borders of their neighbours). I'm singling out the intra-cultural aspect here, as there is a lively exchange going on throughout the whole region. One can encounter actors and directors, originally met in their home country, unexpectedly in a neighbouring country where they will be involved in a theatrical activity and it turns out that especially the most ambitious theatre artists move freely and constitute new collaborative units throughout the region, regardless of national boundaries. The Ecowas/UEOMA political organisation of West African states allows, in principle, interregional travel for citizens within the territory of its member states without (visa) restrictions.²⁵

As this thesis will address theatre practices in Francophone West Africa, which is a part of the world that probably will be terra incognita for most of its readers, it will include an unusually lengthy chapter to provide the reader with the minimum knowledge necessary to acquire some context for the issues raised.

Following (in all modesty) Cools' example, this thesis will leave room for at least two distinctive voices: the academic one, necessary for this work to conform to the criteria of a Master's thesis, as well as an artistic one: I have been privileged to work as a stage director and a theatre teacher in the region, and thus, have first-hand experience of intercultural practices which is the focus of this study. Furthermore, stimulated by the inclusion of subjective positions regularly articulated by scholars in anthropology, and by the postcolonial acknowledgement that

²⁵ For further information on the ECOWAS/UEMOA see www.ecowas.int

a scholar should be aware of the position he is writing from, I allow, in the background, the soft murmur of a subjective voice of personal anthropology, as I am a second generation migrant from a country that at the time was geophysically European, but culturally and politically a backward and isolated dictatorship.²⁶ As a stage director and a theatre teacher, my involvement with West African theatre life started in 1999 and has led to a series of theatre workshops, stagings, courses, accompanied by lively correspondence with alumni and colleagues up till the present time.²⁷

3. An Interdisciplinary Theoretical Patchwork

Creating a patchwork is something quite different from producing a weave. Through weaving, different strands of fibre are interwoven to create a new fabric with patterns that will show through the foregrounding of some coloured threads and the masking of others. For a patchwork, one will need a basic (mostly woven) fabric onto which will be applied fragments from other (mostly woven) fabrics to form a pattern appliqué to the basic fabric that might or might not get completely masked by the patchwork. The weaving creates a wholly new fabric, the patchwork recycles existing ones.

The basic fabric for this theoretical patchwork will be Pavis' speech from 2010, already quoted on several occasions throughout these chapters. I will start from this speech and present a

²⁶ Ric Knowles, *Theatre and Interculturalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 53. "White is not neutral, it's a position from which to speak, work and negotiate across acknowledged historical and material differences."

²⁷ I have been involved as a teacher in the foundation of the *Ecole Internationale de Théâtre du Bénin*, and have become a member of its *comité scientifique*. Furthermore, I teach at the *Studio Theatre d'Art de Lomé* (Togo) and occasionally at the *Ecole Nationale de Théâtre et Danse* in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). Only the EITB and the ENTD issue a valid and recognized Bachelor diploma, the STAL is a preparatory programme issuing a certificate, that eventually will lead to a more formal structure.

succinct overview of its main arguments, as it provides a useful set of basic notions for my patchwork. The intercultural aesthetic products studied for this thesis will be placed within the framework provided by Pavis and they will constitute an additional category, which I propose to add to the ones defined by the author. His sixth remark, quoted in full in the first chapter of this thesis, where he questioned the debate itself and wondered if intercultural theatre practice should be rather perceived as an interaesthetic phenomenon, will be investigated in the next chapter.

One of Pavis' pertinent observations was on the absence of an all-encompassing theory since the publication of Balme's *Decolonising the stage*. Next to Pavis, who articulated the "crisis of theory"²⁸ other scholars (Lo and Gilbert 2002, p. 32, Holledge and Tompkins, 2000) have discussed the problematic place of theory in the intercultural debate. All of them agree that up to a certain point, theatre is by definition an intercultural process, summarized by Pavis' remark: "Indeed, what would be the point of an intercultural theory if cultures are already intertwined?" (Pavis 2010). The postcolonial debate, globalisation and theatre practice in developing countries is a complex about which Pavis rightfully asked the rhetorical question: "how could intercultural theatre itself not be in complete and constant mutation or even disintegration?" The conclusion, since the onset of the debate, can only be that at present the intercultural has reached the streets, instead of remaining an elitist treat, restricted to theatre, concert hall and museum, thus, radically changing the essence of the debate accompanying it.

Pavis did not attempt to propose a new model to replace his famous hour-glass model of intercultural theatre from 1992; ten years later, Lo and Gilbert had revised and adapted the model to bring it in line with postcolonial viewpoints. Knowles, in his overview of the state of affairs in intercultural theatre debate from 2008, provided the additional patch by relating the praxis to critical studies that have emerged since the turn of the century, studies that have had important

²⁸ Pavis, 7.

repercussions for the discussion on intercultural theatre. He finished by acknowledging the fact that the praxis has entered into a new phase, which he characterised as "rhizomatic".²⁹ Thereby the hourglass model, both in its original shape or in its modified version, is effectively dismissed as no longer useful a tool for the analysis of contemporary intercultural practice. A rhizome is a process, an endless becoming, and will not provide a useful model comparable to the updated hourglass model. For a rhizomatic approach of intercultural theatre practice, identifying and analysing the forces that shape and change its territories seems the most appropriate. This will entail the consultation of a range of interdisciplinary theoretical works, as intercultural performance is a phenomenon also studied within anthropology, sociology, art history, comparative literature and of course performance and cultural studies. These disciplines provide the patches that will contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of intercultural theatre; besides, a range of discourses going on in academia that have led to relatively new (critical) studies cannot be ignored in this context, as Ric Knowles had pointed out.³⁰ Throughout this study, I will dwell on the postcolonial debate, globalisation and the theatre practice within the ex-colonies, with special emphasis on the French speaking world. Ferguson's remark that "transnational traffic (...) led not to global monoculture but to complex forms of creativity" might constitute a common thread in each chapter of this thesis.³¹

The central statement at the beginning of Pavis' speech is the fact that "theory and practice of intercultural theatre of the eighties seem to be left behind (...)" and he relates this to the fact that, due to globalisation, theory and practice of intercultural theatre can no longer be linked to a national or cultural identity. By now, a rather fluid identity has become the most

²⁹ Knowles, 59.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ James Ferguson. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neo-Liberal World Order* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).

acknowledged definition as accepted by a majority of the artists discussed, quoted or referenced in this thesis.

Following the traces of intercultural theatre in the last decades, Pavis suggested that the intercultural theatre might have been a reaction to the fragmentation of societies. Arjun Appadurai's anthropological studies loom large, as that discipline has come up with a useful analysis and introduced valid concepts for global cultural flows with far reaching consequences for the intercultural theatre practice.³² The conclusion he drew is that "in Europe and everywhere else, western intercultural theatre did not become a new genre which would federate all other genres (...)".

Pavis continued by listing the genres of intercultural performance (rather than theatre) as they are being practiced in the first decade of the 21st century. Eleven different (although sometimes overlapping and yes, interweaving) categories appear. If one follows Pavis' classification of the intercultural performance genres, the only one that partly applies to the examples studied here is the one under the heading "syncretic theatre", which he borrowed from Balme and narrowed it down as the bringing together of materials from indigenous cultures mixed with European forms. But from the specification that follows ("often deal with problems of colonialism or neo-colonialism") it is very clear that Pavis had a specific repertoire in mind, created under very different circumstances and in a different part of the world and not the intercultural theatre from indigenous theatre artists for indigenous audiences that has developed over the last decades in West Africa. A possible definition of this theatre practice as a category, following Pavis' own train of thought, would perhaps be: interaesthetic popular theatre.

³² Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota, 1996).

Interaesthetic, as its practitioners borrow indiscriminately from indigenous performance sources, and popular, as they aspire to reach a broad range of audiences, *predominantly unfamiliar* with European theatre codes.

These practices will be discussed in Chapter IV of this thesis and a necessary theoretical patch will be contributed by Fischer-Lichte's 2008 definition of new aesthetics. I will argue why the practices from a marginalized region can be regarded as examples of performance art comparable with the examples from Euro-American culture.

An important additional patch is provided by the three-volume set of publications by Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue.³³ Their approach to the African theatre phenomena leans on performance studies and its definition of performativity, which they explained in an exemplary way in their introduction to the large collection of essays.³⁴ The rhizomatic quality that Knowles attaches to the current practice is well illustrated by the examples in these volumes. But more importantly, it gives rare examples of indigenous, non-diasporic intercultural theatre products for an indigenous audience, and in that respect, it gives examples closest to the practice under scrutiny in these pages, thus providing a wider scope and adding more weight to the phenomenon of indigenous intercultural practices in West Africa. It can finally be identified as one of the many strands of contemporary African performance practice on both sides of the language barrier. In his introduction to *African Theatre and Performances*, Okagbue, in 2007, first gets rid of a range of preconceptions and misunderstandings concerning African theatre as it has been discussed in the dominant culture of the global north.³⁵ African indigenous theatre generally does not fit the paradigms of European drama but its characteristics do pertain to

³³ *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre 1*, ed Kene Igweonu and Sita Okagbue (Newcastle on Tyne: CSP, 2013) 1–16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. "(...)all traditions of theatre in Africa are functional at their most basic level."

³⁵ Osita Okagbue. *African Theatres and Performances* (London: Routledge, 2007).

theatre and performance. Performance studies has been instrumental in the development of appropriate tools for the study of African indigenous performance practices. The leading voices in the debate on African theatre have only too rarely been African ones. But in the three-volume set of essays on African theatre from 2013, he and Igweonu also concluded that:

since [the rise of performance studies], there has been a rise in the number of Africanist scholars who are beginning to theorise and analyse African theatre and performance by drawing on a range of indigenous frames of reference - most of which acknowledge and extend, but do not necessarily accede to dominant western discursive frameworks.³⁶

This patchwork will serve as a backdrop to the observations and will help hold together the analysis of the rhizomatic intercultural theatre practices that are studied.

4. Professional Theatre Life in Bénin, Togo, Niger And Burkina Faso: A Bit of Context

In this chapter, an overview is presented of the most important bodies in the region that support or maintain professional performances, with a view to identify existing policies or analyse their influence in the creation of intercultural theatre.

A portrait of the professional theatrescape will inevitably have at its centre the international theatre festivals. These festivals are the major platforms for contemporary theatre, and they always present a programme of African as well as foreign companies and productions, mainly (Francophone) European.³⁷ The festivals are instrumental as they provide rare occasions of showcasing new work and exchanging with (international) colleagues. One could expect these

³⁶ Igweonu Okagbue, *Performative Inter-Actions 1*, no.2.

³⁷ Arguably the most important of those are the international festival of Bénin, FITHEB (www.fithebenin.com) and the MASA (www.masa.ci) in Abidjan (Ivory Coast), the latter in fact a trade fair instead of a festival).

festivals to be vital elements in the development of intercultural theatre, as they offer possibilities for artistic exchange on an inter- as well as an intra-cultural level. But looking into the activities and programmes of these festivals a different picture appears and it looks as if the organisations, which are the most important agents for the creation of theatre work, do not play a significant role in the creation of intercultural products.

The international theatre festivals mostly present both an author-centred contemporary theatre and a traditionally popular and largely improvised one. In both cases, the theatre is heavily dependent on the text and the narrative; the Marché des Arts du Spectacle Africain (MASA) also includes music groups, which in fact constitute the most important element of it, as the MASA's aim is to promote and export African performing talent worldwide and draw impresarios from inside as well as outside the continent in their search for exciting musical talent.³⁸ In almost all the countries in the region, these festivals are the only state-supported artistic activities.

In this environment, intercultural theatre has not been identified as a genre, although specimens of it have been presented. (*L'oeil du cyclone*, Festival International de Théâtre du Bénin (FITHEB) 2004, *Tonton Dindin*, FITHEB 2006, *la Nuit du Songe*, FITHEB 2016, *Sogolon Kedjou*, MASA 2003, *Bak'in Gado*, *Ziticomania* are two theatre companies presented at the MASA 2016, of which the first one used to be led by Marie-José Hourantier, see chapter III). Syncretic, hybrid, intercultural theatre is something that has not appeared as a topic in the many round table gatherings, conferences and debates that form a standard element of any festival programme, and although issues related to it sometimes are addressed, there is no current discourse around the issues raised by this genre.³⁹

³⁸ The second of their official goals being: "la facilitation de la circulation des créateurs et leur production en Afrique et dans le monde."

³⁹ "Fithebbenin". <http://www.fithebenin.com/Gazette001.pdf>

Other organisations that have the means and power to stimulate the production of performing arts are to be found in diplomatic service. Until recent restructuring on behalf of the French government, the Centre Culturel Français (CCF, now: Institut Français-IF) in the capital cities as well as the most important secondary cities of the region were instrumental in maintaining a theatre life, catering primarily to the bourgeois and expat communities in the respective cities. They all boast of a large auditorium (*théâtre verdure*) of roughly 1000 seats, a smaller one that can double as a studio, a lecture hall and workshop space, invariably an intensely visited *mediathèque*, a space for film screening and exhibition spaces.

Riccio was extremely critical of French cultural policies, speaking out that: "As in colonial times, those in power, the educated elite, whether French or local, are those who control the purse strings and in turn, shape its theatre".⁴⁰ Like the festivals, the IF and comparable institutions do not have specific policies concerning intercultural projects, although ad hoc support for a specific intercultural project sometimes happens. At the time Riccio wrote this, the Centres Culturels Français in the region were using their state funding to mainly support activities to promote the French language and culture. The restructuring of these centres has inevitably led to cuts in funding; in a city like Lomé, the Goethe Institute seems to have taken over the prominent position of the former CCF, offering a programme of performances, workshops, collaborative activities and creating a platform as well as a venue for theatrical and musical activities. The new government in France has not revealed its policies concerning the link with the former colonies, but the discussion about the (in)famous Franç-afrique construction will doubtlessly have its impact on the extent of French (cultural) influence in the region.

⁴⁰ Thomas Riccio. *Performing Afric: Remixing Theatre, Tradition and Culture* (New York: Lang, 2007), 159–173.

When using the term professional in this geographical context, it is important to understand that besides these major festivals, the non-existence of infra-structural elements in every conceivable sense (theatre venues, subventions, career perspectives, even box offices), will force each theatre professional in this region to accept a mixed practice of theatrical and non-theatrical activities to gain a livelihood, thus turning a permanently ongoing artistic development into a dream, which is only rarely accomplished. The only exception to this rule being the National Ballet of Bénin, but even the members of this group, although touring regularly to remote places (Poland, Russia, 2013, Mexico 2016), will not secure a stable income for their families.⁴¹ In 2009, the establishment of a state National Theatre, Ballet and Chorus was launched officially in Togo. Following the then successful example of Guinée, in the 1960's, a lot of countries, Togo included, after having gained their independence, created a national ballet company. This newly revived initiative to install a national theatre group received instructions to follow government assignments, but no trace of a follow-up of this initiative could be found on the internet. I'm currently researching the fate of this initiative.⁴² The aim of these companies is to promote the different indigenous (music and dance) cultures of the respective countries and their artistic ambition to present the diversity of "authentic" traditional music and dance, which point at the opposite direction, away from the intercultural ambition.

Thus, we can conclude that the major bodies of professional performance practice have not implemented policies of the intercultural artistic agendas. The initiators of intercultural theatre projects have to be looked for elsewhere. The rare professional training centres in the

⁴¹ according to a mail communication (24 04 2017) from a former member: members gain a monthly salary of 50.000 CFA (about 75€). On tour, expenses are paid but no additional sum.

⁴² mail communication with an ex-member (04 05 2017) revealed that the group still exists but members do not receive a salary.

region and individual artists provide the unique source of intercultural theatre practice, as will be shown in the rest of this chapter.

Being a professional artist in West Africa means following a road full of dilemmas. This has nonetheless never deterred any young aspiring artist to pursue his or her dream and it is admirable to witness the dedication and perseverance of so many an aspiring theatre practitioner in the region. The students who graduate from the recently established drama school (Ecole Internationale de Théâtre du Bénin (EITB, first cohort graduated in 2006) or training programmes (STAL, Togo, first cohort 2012) are especially showing remarkable stamina and artistic ambition to invigorate contemporary theatre in the region. Alumni like Christel Gbaguidi, Patrice Toton, Michael Todego, Alanda Koubidina among others created their own organisation following the French legal "*association*" model, through which they initiate theatre projects, apply for (international) grants, negotiate performances at schools, offer workshops in their own rural communities, collaborate with NGO's and the like.⁴³

The establishment of the EITB in 2004 has generated a touchstone, a reference point for a whole new generation of talents. This generation seems convinced of the strengths and values of the local practices and intend to adapt these practices to suit their own work, unaffected by the academic discourse surrounding interculturality, but at the same time aware (to a certain degree) of some of its issues raised by their work.

Concerning the international aspect of the EITB: since its foundation, students have been accepted from the whole region on the condition that they communicate in French. It is

⁴³ For further information:

"Arts Vagabonds Rezo Afrik Benin", www.arts-vagabonds-rezo-afrik-benin.org.

"AssociationKatoulati", <http://associationkatoulati.blogspot.com>.

"Dadobokreativ", <https://dadobokreativ.wordpress.com/author/michaeltodego/>

"Kadam-Kadam", <http://kadam-kadam.com>

important to bear in mind that even small countries like Togo and Bénin contain a rich array of peoples and languages, each one with their own set of cultural habits, traditions, attitudes and beliefs. An experiment whereby Yoruba-speaking Anglophone Nigerian students had been accepted, has not met with success, so the international aspect necessarily has to be limited to the former French (- speaking) colonies.⁴⁴

Concerning the academic field: Theatre or Performance studies do not figure as separate disciplines in the academic programmes of the region. All the countries have adopted the French LMD system (comparable with our Ba-Ma-PhD), for this thesis contact has been (re)established with the few specialist professors in the respective countries: Prof. Bienvenu Koudjo (University of Bénin, prés. comité scientifique EITB), Prof. Togoata Apedo-Amah (University of Lomé, prof. Lettres Modernes, sémiologie théâtrale et dramaturgie) and Prof. Antoinette Tidjani Alou (Université Niger, prof. littérature française et comparée). Occasionally, a paper or a study is dedicated to an example of intercultural practice, but the examples are very rare, and there is no evidence of a discourse going on in these surroundings. In all those years of my theatre practice in the region, the intercultural element was never addressed as a topic, even though the director of the EITB deliberately integrated indigenous elements in the study programme of his school. In my own practice, I have interwoven local performance cultures into the fabric of my contemporary (music) theatre stagings in Bénin and Togo.

A final word in this chapter is dedicated to the indigenous performance practices with a view to detect intercultural tendencies. Outside the professional circles, there is a whole world of traditional performance practices in the region that form a separate and highly organised entity.

⁴⁴ although: to complicate things even further I have to mention that Togo used to be a German colony from 1885-1922, when the Versailles treaty handed over the region to France, which explains why the Goethe Institut in Lomé is still a major provider of funding, material support and resources for theatre life in Lomé.

The strictly hierarchic and often rather difficult to access institutions responsible for the regular manifestations of masked ritual, traditional celebrations, official appointments, crisis management, political rallies and the like, follow their own set of rules and regulations and, even more importantly, follow their own economical dynamics. Regrettably, there is a lack of concrete data about the economic aspects of traditional practices, while one might expect that these are major elements in the economy of daily life (urban as well as rural) in the region. A glance at Anne-Marie Bouttiaux (red): *La Dynamique des Masques en Afrique Occidentale/ Dynamics of Masks in West Africa* (Tervuren: RMCA, 2013), which I reviewed for African Arts in 2015, can provide the curious reader with a glimpse of the richness, variety and impact of these performance practices, but this is just one example of the extensive amount of publications on the phenomenon that is particularly strong in this part of the continent.⁴⁵

These practices rarely overlap the profane theatre practices described above. Musicians and dancers, who are often highly trained specialists, sometimes move between these practices. They will participate in official manifestations like the opening of the Festival International de Théâtre du Bénin (FITHEB), albeit with a program that is tailored to the situation, calling for folkloric entertainment primarily. Intercultural projects that look to combine both practices will need, as we will see later on, careful and often time-consuming strategies on behalf of the theatre artist who takes the initiative to engage traditional specialists to perform in the context of a purely aesthetic production. If one defines "professional" as the activity that will provide you with (part of) an income, traditional performance practices might be economically more important than the contemporary theatre practice *tout court*. But the initiative for intercultural activities will invariably rest with the theatre artists from the professional field described above.

⁴⁵ Okagbue, *African Theatres and Performances*, 14. Of the sixteen major masquerade traditions listed by him on this page, thirteen belong to West African groups.

Several authors (Fiebach 2004, Igweonu 2011) have emphasized the performative character of the African society. Igweonu argued that this fact might have been the reason why in the past it seemed so difficult to identify African theatre, as the paradigm for anything to be recognized as theatre has been inevitably set by Western dominant culture. Thus, the fact that performativity might be a major constituent of the African society has been overlooked. Through my many visits to and projects executed in a number of West African countries, I can only support such a point of view. Whoever happens to be on the spot in the midst of political rallies during election time in Bénin, or present at wedding festivities in one of the numerous hotels and party centres in Cotonou, Lomé, Parakou, Niamey, Abidjan, or witness religious services celebrated, visit elementary and secondary school classes, present at the end of the school year prize distributions, or attend fashion shows will inevitably have great difficulties in distinguishing the performative mode from the performance itself if one observes performers as well as the audience.⁴⁶ Igweonu and Okagbue remarked that

African performances flow out of and back into society (...) This is because the distance between the performed reality (the performance) and the lived reality (society) is constantly negotiated and breached, so that the boundary between them is forever porous and therefore ultimately they remain as one. (...) Performance is the tool for negotiating the complexities and anxieties of existence, and it is the phenomenon of performativity that enables this to happen - African peoples, it can be said, perform to be.⁴⁷

This aspect deserves to be mentioned also because of the special place dance has in this context: as dance is such a common constituent in any celebration, it has a difficult time in being perceived as a professional artistic activity that would merit remuneration. In traditional

⁴⁶ For a detailed analysis of Pentecostalism in Africa viewed from a performance studies perspective see Okoye, Chukwuma, "Technologies of Faith Performance: Theatre/Performance and Pentecostalism in Africa", *African Performance Review* 1.1 (2007): 80-95.

⁴⁷ Igweonu and Okagbue, *Performative Inter-actions 1*, 9–10.

performance, this aspect is well taken care of through tradition itself: any dancer that stands out because of the quality or virtuosity of his performance will get rewarded in the act by individuals of the audience attaching bank notes on his sweating forehead. But on the other hand, a professional dancer might have difficulties negotiating their fee, as was explained to me on different occasions by the members of young and aspiring contemporary dance groups. Furthermore, according to Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu, the performance practices are under violent pressure from both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, which for the last decades have caused the disappearance or at least the weakening of some 150 indigenous performance practices continent-wide of which he named a few examples; some of them are well-known masked ceremonies.⁴⁸

In this chapter, I have presented the main forces at work in the field of professional theatre in the region at hand. I myself have been an actor in the field for longer than a decade and have witnessed the rapid spread of digital and other global commodities, which greatly affect the field in many ways. The chapter cannot do justice to the fluid, ever-changing, evolving, adapting practice one will encounter in the region. Nor can it do justice to the daily struggle that the theatre artists have to undergo in order to survive while creating under circumstances that should shame the rich part of humanity.

The remainder of this thesis will be constructed along the following lines: as the practice in Francophone West Africa of intercultural theatre has not been properly recorded, I will give a brief inventory of the history of this genre, focussing on early examples to contribute to a more comprehensive documentation of all of theatrical life in the region. After general notes concerning contemporary theatre practice, I will analyse and compare representative examples of

⁴⁸ Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu, "Theatre and Globalization: Emerging Trends in the Dialectics of Performance in Sub-Saharan Africa", *African Performance Review* 3. no.1 (2009): 86–99.

the intercultural theatre practice as it has evolved for the last decades and outline a number of projects undertaken by young theatre artists, who all have in common an aesthetic based on or at least inspired by indigenous performance practices, which have been a part of their local upbringing.

Hybricity: A Visual Essay

Approaching a theme like intercultural theatre in West Africa with the view of writing a thesis is an essentially rhizomatic affair. There are so many influences, so many forces and currents, so many frames, so many disciplines to take into account, that separating all these elements into self-contained units would not do justice to the practice it tries to capture in all its dynamism. When I started preparing this thesis, I composed its outlines on a grey cardboard sheet with different colours of post-it leaves to demarcate the different chapters (yellow), literature (purple), subchapters (green), unclassified (white) and this first board represented a rather scattered (and aesthetically pleasing) image, true to its rhizomatic nature. Almost half-way through the writing, I needed to rearrange as the chapters started to take shape and the outlines of the thesis came into focus. Once I had arrived at 12500 words, four-fifth of the planned thesis volume, a third version became necessary, and this time the cardboard, initially used in a vertical sense, changed to horizontal, showing the thesis as one flow of reasoning in Latin reading direction. I had tamed the rhizome into a schedule. This would not do justice to the theme of the study, and in order to include at least one element of the rhizome which constitutes intercultural theatre in West Africa, I'm adding this visual essay, as poignant illustrations of some of the aspects covered in these chapters. All the pictures are my own, except for the two works of visual artists (5 and 25), which were copied from their respective official websites.



1. Language hybrid: Franglais. Paris, 2017



2. Visual hybrid: Yoruba traditional Gelede mask, topped with a motor taxi. Cotonou (Bénin) 2006



3. Car decoration. Niamey (Niger) 2017



4.Children's playground. Plage Jacquot (Bénin) 2016



5. Aimé Ntakyiwa, *WIR*, 2003. Africa Remix exhibition 2005



6. Lomé (Togo) 2016, member of New Stars Dance Cie.



7. Young muslim's bedroom. Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire) 2015



8. In front of the theatre during a performance. Togbin (Bénin) 2017



9. Everyday outfits, rehearsal of a traditional dance group. Calavi (Bénin) 2015



10. Studio photograph. Lomé (Togo) around 2015



11. Street publicity and street sign. Lomé (Togo) 2017



12. Street publicity. Lomé (Togo) 2017



13. French baguette bakery, Baguida (Togo) 2017



14. Dutch treats 1, Lomé (Togo) 2017



15. Dutch treats 2, Surroundings Porto Novo (Bénin) 1999



16. Film screen on outdoor stage. Lomé (Togo) 2016



17. Two petrol stations. Baguida (Togo) 2017



18. Window shop. Lomé (Togo) 2015



19. Window shop. Amsterdam, 2017



20. Black Laurel and white Hardy. The Marolles, Bruxelles 2017



21. Primary school. Cotonou (Bénin) 2017



22. Sofa pantomime: plywood acting as cushions, Lomé (Togo) 2017



23. Plastic Louis XV chairs, hand made hardwood tables. Jacquot Beach (Bénin)

2017



24. Bar decoration, Cotonou (Bénin) 2012



25. Yinka Shonibare, *The swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001



26. Theatre prop. Lomé (Togo) 2017

II. Borrowers and Lenders

As the images in the previous essay show, West African society seems to be able to effortlessly integrate imported practices, commodities and influences into its everyday fabric. The ease with which outside influences are integrated into daily life can serve as a model when investigating artistic/aesthetic environments. Examples from daily life abound, and for this chapter, I would like to zoom in on how the theatre practitioners deal with this phenomenon in the professional field, to arrive at an understanding of the intercultural theatre practice within the context of the ongoing discourse, or rather, an understanding of why this practice has so far not made an appearance in the discourse and likewise why the discourse has not been playing a role in the practice.

Bharucha, while replying to Fischer-Lichte, in the exchange they had at the occasion of the opening of the Interweaving Performance Cultures centre in 2010, made a firm distinction between intercultural theatre (which he dismissed as a phase which had its place in the 70's and 80's) and interculturalism, (which he regarded as a "hugely important phenomenon"). He continued: "it's a phenomenon that encompasses a spectrum of exchanges that, increasingly, go beyond the cultural domain. However, I would not want to free it entirely from aesthetics".

This "spectrum of exchanges" is blatantly visible in any urban context in the global north of the 21st century; some of its elements have a background that goes back to the second half of the 19th and early 20th century and have kept intact until the present day (Chinatowns in the global north like the ones in New York, San Francisco, Montreal, Amsterdam, to mention just a few); others have, over the centuries, developed into autochthonous cultural features of a national identity (English breakfast tea, tulips from Amsterdam), a few are the direct result of imperialist politics (the Hmong community in French Guyana, established in 1970's), and the

recent flux of migration has contributed to a rapid increase of these elements in the fabric of contemporary life in the global north itself.

But globalisation in the first decades of the 21st century has produced a similar effect on the urban landscape of the global south. Migration is as much a part of African reality as it is in the global north.⁴⁹ James Ferguson in his *Global Shadows* (2006), has convincingly demonstrated how in some respects the African city can be considered modern but that that should not obscure the inequalities at the socio-economic levels. He characterised African modernity as a hybrid modernity, where the most up to date hypercapitalistic developments can be encountered next to practices based on family or ethnic ties. These hybridisations together form African reality: high tech exploitation of minerals next to stagnant agrarian communities and the city as the battlefield of these forces.⁵⁰ For Slavoj Žižek,⁵¹ the fact that two thirds of the urban population in Africa live in a slum is an integral part of globalisation's mechanism.⁵² But whoever visits one of West Africa's huge markets would marvel at the bewildering array of industrially produced imported commodities, delegating the home (hand)made artefact to products that are either not to be taken too seriously, or as belonging to the sphere of (animist) religious practices, or to be ordered for special (ritual, celebratory or other grand performative) occasions, or simply destined for the tourist market. An amusing anecdote in this respect will sum up the inherent dilemma: at the market in Conakry (Guinée), I spotted a very simple and basic hand woven shirt; not only was it hand woven on a traditional strip loom, but the cotton

⁴⁹ "United Nations OECD". World Migration in Figures, October 2013. April 2017. <https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/World-Migration-in-Figures.pdf>

⁵⁰ James Ferguson. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), 48–49. See illustration 17.

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: from the End of History to the end of Capitalism* (n.p.:Lane, 2015).

⁵² Sylvie Brunel, "La Ville Africaine, menace pour le monde ou opportunité", *Conflits* 5 (2017): 77–79.

used was also home produced, instead of imported. I, of course, had to haggle, but not so much over the price; the seller almost refused to sell me the home-made shirt because I did not choose one of her (doubtlessly Chinese import) printed modern shirts.

This anecdote is telling in more ways than just one, but I would like to emphasize the fact how imported (cheap) commodities swiftly replace the home-made product, which thus acquires a new role, if it is not discarded altogether: the latter fate can be observed regularly when confronted with artefacts related to indigenous religious practices like vodun. Through their rapid spread, obscure Christian sects are becoming (if they haven't already) the dominant religious force in the coastal regions.⁵³ In everyday life, this is illustrated eloquently by the huge amount of newly erected temples that can be observed in every neighbourhood, vying for attention with the generally well kept mosques. The poignant story related by the theatre artist, Marlène Douty, in chapter IV about how he was forced to forsake his animist roots by one of the evangelical sects into which he had been introduced, is a telling example of how this process works (offering perhaps an interesting insight into this artist's choice for intercultural theatre). It also hints at the conflicts and violence through which this globalised hybridity is achieved.⁵⁴

This rapidly changing society needs to integrate new commodities, absorb with ease a host of influences on all levels, adapt to new habits and technologies even if the society is still in a continuous state of development, lagging behind in almost every respect compared to the dominant part of the world that used to be its colonisers. Appadurai, in his 1996 study, convincingly demonstrated how the phenomenon that he defined as ethnoscaapes thrives on

⁵³ B.A.C. Obiefuna and A.C. Ezeoba's, "Globalisation, Imperialism and Christianity: The Nigerian Perspective," *African Research Review* 4 (2010): 75–89 analyses the spread of Christian sects as part of globalisation because of their shared imperialist nature.

⁵⁴ Nwaozuzu's article mentioned in footnote 48 offers a worrying insight into this process with a view to the threats posed by Christian as well as Islamic fundamentalism to indigenous performance practice.

multiple (mass) media that are omnipresent, even in the unevenly developed technoscape of West African society.⁵⁵ Any quick research, looking for traditional practices in West African performance on YouTube, will produce an avalanche of footage, often edited and credited, ranging in qualities from very crude to very sophisticated, showing demonstrations of local performance practices, sometimes from remote and unexpected locations. Besides the fact that these ceremonies and rituals are videotaped, the presence of microphones and loudspeakers, and often a mix of traditional and modern European instruments testify to the hybrid mix that is a part of the everyday routine in the region, including the field of aesthetics.

Ferguson (2006) already remarked that "transnational traffic (...) does not lead to homogenisation (...) but to a surprising borrowings, ironic reinventions and dazzling resignifications".⁵⁶ This phenomenon can thus be observed in the field of aesthetics as well, where the same mechanism applies. Moving on to the field of the performing arts: an apt illustration of this ability to absorb and adapt to new contexts, was noted at the recent celebration of the International Dance Day with an activity called Dance Impro Stage by a Beninese dancer, Rachelle Agbossou, who remarked that: "Aujourd'hui, des danseurs de break dance ont commencé par exécuter leurs pas de break dance sur des morceaux traditionnels, c'est heureux et cela est à l'actif de Dance Impro Stage qui met l'accent sur ce partage et ce rapprochement culturel interdisciplinaire."⁵⁷

Another example is provided by Chaïbou Dan Inna in his recent monography on Yazi Dogo's theatre work. Inna considers this theatre artist

⁵⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: UMP, 1996).

⁵⁶ See illustration 3, 21, 23.

⁵⁷ "Benincultures". 04 mai 2017. <https://www.benincultures.com/fr/dance-impro-stage-une-6e-edition-sous-le-signe-de-la-diversite-de-l-expression-corporelle/>

(...)représentatif des Nigériens avec une personnalité culturelle complexe: ils est natif d'une région où les survivances des traditions culturelles animistes sont encore vivaces; c'est un musulman pratiquant convaincu et la fréquentation de l'école occidentale en a fait aussi un produit ouvert au monde de la modernité qui porte les valeurs de l'enseignement qu'il a suivi dans les écoles et collèges de missionnaires catholiques.⁵⁸

All these different influences had to be negotiated simultaneously within the same urban space; and all these influences express themselves in separate languages as well, leading to theatrical work that is deliberately multilingual (and thus constitutes an illustration of Pavis' first item on his list of intercultural theatre practices: the multilingual theatre). Inna considered Yazi Dogo (who started his theatre work in the 70's of last century and is still active) as a representative of Niger's cultural complexity and the same could apply to other examples for neighbouring countries.

Next to dance and drama, striking examples of this complexity can be observed in the field of visual art. Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo declared on his website "I try to make sense of my current realities, investigating various means of expressing this reality through the hybridity of my artistic journey and utilising the image of new territories to research a true mobile identity."⁵⁹ In the visual arts, again but on a different level, we can witness the same processes: the spreading popularity of a rather recent addition to the local pantheons of the figure of Mami Wata, a benign water spirit in most cases, has produced a variety of images. The iconography of this spirit has been derived from popular Hindu imagery that found its way from the shores of the Indian Ocean to the whole of the Atlantic shore across the African continent and can be found in disparate contexts like masked dances, altar statuettes, publicity material, paintings,

⁵⁸ Chaïbou Dan Inna, *Yazi Dogo et l'art du théâtre populaire au Niger* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2015).

⁵⁹ "Vitshois". <http://www.vitshois.com/texts.html>. May 2017.

jewelry and the like. The realm of animist practices is as rhizomatic as that of daily life, the earliest examples recorded of this phenomenon might be the gin bottles used in vodun ceremonies in the Haïtian version of vodun. Accidentally, Haïtian and Brazilian syncretic practices, which combine elements of West African vodun with catholic saint worship, are outspoken examples of this ability to absorb, modify, imbricate, adapt all kind of influences and shape them into "new" traditions.⁶⁰



27. Togolese Mami Wata figure,
Bwoom Gallery collection



28. Beninese vodun shrine, source: *Tumbler*

⁶⁰ Mattijs van de Port, *Ecstatic Encounters: Bahian Candomblé and the Quest for the Really Real* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2011) provides many examples.



29. *Mami Wata mask, from the collection of the Fine Arts Museum San Francisco*



30. *Mami Wata society in Nigeria. Source: Tumblr*

I would like to emphasize this factor as I think it forms a vital perspective to better understand the creative process of the professional theatre artists in the region. This phenomenon forms a part of the historical continuum already recognised by Robert Young in his *Colonial Desire* (1995), when he used Deleuze/Guattari to dissect colonial history as a process of de- and reterritorializing, leading to "(...) a paradigm that will acknowledge the extent to which cultures were not simply destroyed but rather layered on top of each other, giving rise to struggles that themselves only increased the imbrication of each with the other and their translation into increasingly uncertain patchwork identities."⁶¹

This quality to absorb and adapt has shaped the postcolonial societies in West Africa to the extreme. Next to the organic hybridity, mentioned earlier (of which the history of how, through

⁶¹ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995): 174.

Dutch colonial agency, the batik printed textiles from Indonesian origin have turned into an African icon),⁶² a process of imbrication started through 19th century colonisation and has never stopped since, thus creating (following Appadurai's definition) ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples and ideoscaples of dramatic hybridity. The process has doubtlessly been traumatic, but whenever possible, societies have been resilient enough to deal with the phenomenon in a pragmatic way.

An artist like Werewere Liking has pointed the way. Her multi-disciplinary approach might be symptomatic for the cultural and societal imbrication characteristic of West African societies. All theatre artists discussed here, practice actively diverse disciplines besides directing themselves, like acting, writing, designing, music making, dancing, or they are directly implicated in projects including these disciplines. Indigenous performance practices provide the artist with a range of materials pertaining to all these amalgamated disciplines where they can draw from. It has rightly been remarked by Marie-José Hourantier that the indigenous performances practices rely on skilled professionals. These professionals, by definition, have to approach their job holistically: the complex cloth costume for the Egungun masquerade must be conceived not as a static image to look at, but as an embodied spirit that will move, speak, threat, and praise the family that commissioned its presence. It is precisely this spiritual dimension that will speak to audiences, even if they are not familiar with the specific cult itself. This element, this ability to communicate recognizably on a spiritual level, using aesthetics derived from indigenous performance practice was stressed by all the artists who have been discussed in this paper.

⁶² Vermeulen, Ingelies. "Van boerenzakdoek tot Afrikaanse mode: Kleurrijke wereldstoffen van Vlisco". *Handwerken zonder grenzen* 146 (2008): 30.

Conclusion

The intercultural theatre practice under scrutiny in Bénin, Togo and Niger, and by extension Burkina Faso and Mali, easily falls into the category of multi-disciplinary amalgamation of indigenous performance practices mixed with contemporary international practice; its programme serves an aesthetic purpose as well as a popular one and it is unique because of its use of very specific local rituals, ceremonies, celebrations or liturgies. But instead of this practice being linked to and playing a part in the discussion of intercultural, syncretic, creolized or otherwise defined theatre, it finds a place firmly within the rhizomatic continuum of hybrid postcolonial society where negotiations between disparate entities are as much part of daily life as they are of entertainment, education, trade, politics and indeed, aesthetic products.

Pavis did ask a pertinent question in 2010, but the artists in the region were already well on their way in providing the answer, even though the question itself never bothered them. The intercultural practice, as it is developing in the region, has at its core not the discussions about authenticity, identity, appropriation, but the apparent crisis in the popularity of the medium as perceived by the theatre artists themselves.⁶³ The development, signalled by Knowles in the multicultural urban centres globally ("urban interculturalism" is the term coined by him in his last chapter), has its counterpart in the global south.

⁶³ For an approach to this crisis see Patrick Ebewo and Ofonime Inyang, *African Theatre and the Quest for Audience* in: Igweonu and Okagbue, *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre* 3, (2013) 72–87.

III. Precursors of Intercultural Theatre in West Africa



31. *The author meeting Werewere Liking in Abidjan in 2012*

Tracing the prehistory of the intercultural practice in the region, it is possible to study precursors in positions comparable to those of the contemporary practitioners: indigenous theatre artists working for indigenous audiences. Two very different examples of intercultural practice, from two very different backgrounds, will be discussed in this chapter. Starting with a well-known theatrical practice in Mali based on an indigenous performance practice, *kòtèba*, that has been adapted to function as a specifically Malian form of contemporary theatre, the work of renowned multidisciplinary artist Werewere Liking and her collaboration with Marie-José Hourantier in Ivory Coast will be examined in more detail. The combination of these examples will serve to better understand the range of choices related to the practice of intercultural theatre in the region.

In his historical overview, Sada Sissoko described how the indigenous *kòtèba* performance characteristics gradually reached the official European style stages in Mali. The first attempts of this can be traced back to 1963-64, just in the wake of independence, but the serious amalgamation of both the imported and the indigenous style started from 1978. This led to the introduction of, what the author calls, *théâtre total*, which he described as

Pour nous, c'est un même et unique spectacle, englobant l'ensemble du programme de la soirée, c'est-à-dire une combinaison harmonieuse des numéros sous forme de séquences finies et interdépendantes. Vous verrez se dérouler en un même lieu et dans un même décor notre morceau d'ensemble instrumental, notre danse folklorique, notre pièce de théâtre, notre solo, notre chœur et notre ballet moderne.⁶⁴

This characterisation with its strong emphasis on multidisciplinary should be read in the light of the elitist theatre practice in Mali (and neighbouring countries with an active Centre Culturel Français) which favoured text-driven theatre to the extreme, up to the point where one commenter observed that the Malian actors sound and behave like French actors, sporting awkward family names. The initial resistance to this attempt at intercultural theatre practice is a recurring theme throughout the practices studied: the elite seems to have been rather reluctant, but the pioneers of the intercultural theatre, like Sissoko and Liking, as we will see later, have inspired new generations of theatre artists to further develop these practices. As late as 1982, Philippe Dauchez, an ex-teacher at the Institut National des Arts in Bamako (Mali) created, what he calls, Théâtre Utile in Mali, a community-theatre based version of the *kòtèba*, through which every day issues are treated theatrically with a view to inform audiences and raise consciousness on matters like AIDS, vaccinations, family planning and the like. This example shows how

⁶⁴ Sissoko, Sada, *Le Kòtèba et l'Evolution du Théâtre Moderne au Mali* (Bamako: Jamana, 1995).

varied the application of performance traditions can be, covering a range of ambitions from purely practical to purely aesthetic. As the aesthetic application is foregrounded here, theatre practices that aim at the spread of useful information and awareness on concrete matters, is not included in the research for this thesis.

This drawing upon traditional sources obviously became so successful that the Malian national theatre company decided to remodel itself around 1990. When interviewed in 1990, on the subject of this sudden change operated by the Théâtre National du Mali who, having started out as a French repertoire company, decided all of a sudden to change their theatrical concept and start working along the lines of the indigenous *kotèbà*, one of its members remarked that, "nous prenons aux sources mais sans refuser les réalités modernes".⁶⁵ Most of their members came from Institut National des Arts, ("L'école du Blanc", as another member of the company characterises the organisation in the same interview). The ease with which the company members switch from their European based training to the demands of the very different acting style necessary for *kotèbà*, where a very expressive style is called for and obligatory extemporisations are needed to communicate with the audiences, is quite remarkable. In itself, it is again an example of the ease with which switches and adaptations are accepted and digested, in the society as well as in the performing arts.

In the late 70's-early 80's of last century, the same period that saw Peter Brook working on his *Mahabarata* and Ariane Mnouchine preparing her first Asian theatre inspired productions, Hourantier, in collaboration with Werewere Liking, articulated the concept and practice of the théâtre-rituel. The aim of this theatre was to transform essential functions as well as specific processes and aesthetic elements from certain West African (especially Camerounian and Ivorian) rituals into a theatre that would speak to a contemporary audience. Jacques Scherer, an

⁶⁵ Interview in *Théâtre Sud* 1 (1990): 141-148.

eminent French theatre scholar, wrote on the cover of her book on théâtre rituel: "Ainsi s'élabore, loin de l'Europe, le théâtre de demain." The two elements I'd like to foreground in this chapter: first the fact that the théâtre-rituel does not make an appearance in the intercultural war discussion and second, the procedures followed for the development of the théâtre-rituel in order to transfer the ritual to the theatrical.

Although Hourantier published extensively on this subject, the théâtre-rituel has never played a role in the intercultural war referred to by Knowles. Is this because Hourantier and Liking worked mainly in a marginalised environment in the ex-colonies instead of the hegemonic artistic centres like the Parisian Cartoucherie or the Bouffes du Nord, and thus, catered primarily to an indigenous audience? Has it been possible for an internationally orientated audience to follow Werewere Liking and Hourantier's work?⁶⁶ Did the creators have the means to show their productions in the surroundings of the dominant culture? Or does this type of intercultural theatre-making challenge the then hotly debated issues of appropriation? Perhaps this théâtre-rituel followed a different trajectory altogether and as such could not be accommodated to fit the arguments on either side of the debate spectrum. Only in 2010, decades after the intercultural war had raged, a scholarly volume of essays in English appeared to evaluate the place and honour the ground-breaking work of Werewere Liking.⁶⁷

This thesis confirms the fact that the théâtre-rituel did not constitute an element in the intercultural war. In that respect, it will sit next to more recent practices, and thus, form a continuum of theatrical practices that have remained underexposed in the intercultural debate, as argued in previous chapters. The aim of the théâtre-rituel is to mould a ritual into theatre -

⁶⁶ Werewere Liking received the Prince Claus Prize in 2000

⁶⁷ John Conteh-Morgan and Irene Assiba d'Almeida, *"The Original Explosion that Created Worlds": Essays on Werewere Likings' Art and Writings* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), the most important publication in English on this subject, does not place her within this context.

meaning theatre as it functioned in Europe, turning it into a veritable African theatre which would function as a cathartic mirror for an audience that would be able to recognise and participate in its process. In her detailed descriptions, Hourantier emphasised that it doesn't suffice to just copy or imitate or quote elements from the chosen rituals (so her programme is not just about superficial borrowing of aesthetics) but that the théâtre-rituel transfers the essential working of rituals onto a theatrical experience. Important elements to deal with when embarking on this undertaking are as follows:

- + profanation of the sacred; a process will start whereby the sacred first needs to be de-sacralised, which then will be followed by a process of re-sacralisation (Hourantier stressed the fact that the west has ritualised theatre; she proposed to theatricalise ritual, thus transmitting the power of ritual onto theatre practice).
- + preparing the actors for a non-mimetic approach to their work, as they need to manifest themselves in a ritual context, which is non-representative.
- + engaging the audience to become part of the theatrical process which will work out as an initiation, both for the actors as for the spectators-participants.

Pavis' famous hourglass-model is certainly applicable to the process Hourantier proposed, albeit with one important difference: source audience and target audience are the same, a fact that must have major consequences/repercussions for the process.

Hourantier's dissatisfaction with dialogic narrative (naturalism) in the theatre position her ideas firmly within the context of the emergence of what later would be labelled as postdramatic theatre. But her focus is different and perhaps surprising: instead of seeking to invigorate contemporary European theatre praxis by borrowings from other cultures, the théâtre-rituel focusses on the indigenous West African audience and seeks to apply the energy and vigour of ritual practices to serve profane purposes.

The théâtre-rituel met with a mixed reception; there was a critical article published by one Jacqueline Boni in the magazine *Ivoire Dimance* on 1st June 1980 wondering whether or not this ritual théâtre would be masking the inequalities of power division and material position.⁶⁸ At the end of the 80's, Liking and Hourantier broke their collaboration; Hourantier continued with the théâtre-rituel and founded her company Bin Kadi So, while Liking established her centre Kiyi M'bock in Abidjan, where I met her in 2012, during the political troubles, which were shaking the Ivory Coast.⁶⁹

Hermas Gbaguidi, one of the directors who will be discussed in the next chapter, came across Werewere Liking and her work in the early nineties at the Centres Culturels Français in Cotonou (Bénin) and elsewhere when he was still a student. These encounters sparked his interest in her théâtre rituel. In a mail message, Gbaguidi communicated to me (28 april 2017) that: "We [students] said to each other that something must be possible, we [Africans] did have things to bring to the theatre, we could indeed use our own cultures and our own habits and customs to provide elements that would be compatible with theatre and art in general." (translation JLP).

Liking's work inspired Gbaguidi and others to continue the exploration and update the practice of théâtre-rituel; Hourantier and Liking (even if they have split up their collaboration, both of them, are still actually quite active with their respective companies/projects) has produced an offspring that has inherited and modified their material and their ideas. There is a direct link between the

⁶⁸ In spite of my multiple efforts and to my great disappointment I have not been able to retrace the full article.

⁶⁹ "The Atlantic" <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/two-years-after-civil-wars-end-c-te-divoire-is-still-unstable/278210/>

ideas and methods laid down by them and the practices encountered in the next generations of theatre artists in the region, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

On another level, when following the continuation of intercultural practice in Euro-American culture represented by Mnouchkine and Brook, there is an interesting itinerary that starts to show. The intercultural practice that appropriated other cultures, has turned into a practice where the migrant, the Other, is modifying the European identity into something "minoritarian and nomadic", as Cools maintained in the last chapter in his book on Cherkaoui and Khan. These choreographers can perhaps be considered as the new representatives of the intercultural practice, bringing their own migrant culture into the heartlands of what used to be the dominant culture: the international festival circuit, and the National Ballet Companies they work for. Interestingly, these representatives work in the field of dance theatre, which might be a telling development, as I cannot think of a new generation (perhaps besides Bob Wilson and Robert Lepage) that has taken the place of Peter Brooks and Ariane Mnouchkines in the field of straight theatre. In intercultural performance, the body has come increasingly into focus. One of the conclusions when looking closely into the indigenous intercultural practice at hand might actually yield the same result: the projects of current practitioners of intercultural theatre in Francophone West Africa which is the object studied in the next chapter, un-coincidentally rely principally on the performing body instead of the dialogic narrative. The debate related to this theatre practice in the global north however, is a distinctive one if compared to the practice in the region studied. In the first instance, the discourse continues well into contemporary theatre practice as Pavis' updating of it in 2010 and Cools' analysis of Khan's and Charkoui's work show. The practice in marginalized and Francophone West Africa, however, still does not form part of it and indeed has not been implicated from the start of the discourse. This is not to say that it has been deliberately ignored; in those days, it was easier to overlook certain phenomena, while

current techno- and mediascapes have made it possible to access these remote practices directly. What is more: all the rapid developments in these fields have a direct impact on the theatre practices and this is not restricted to the dominant culture. For example: media use has entered West African theatre practice even in a context as unsophisticated as the Veilles théâtrales de Baguida (Togo), a local festival that is running its second season this current year (2017). Live video recording was used for the staging of a new play by Rodrigue Norman, *Eka tutu (Délivrances)*, a play in French and Mina; it seems that intercultural theatre practice for the last decades is widening its scope, at least in Francophone West Africa, and it will not be for long before we will witness mixtures of media, traditional performance practices and performance art elements with dialogic drama thrown in, all these elements working together to communicate with indigenous audiences. Perhaps the term intercultural theatre is already in the process of wearing itself out; we might be living a transition, intercultural theatre might be in a liminal state moving towards uninhibited combinations (traditional practices included) to create theatrical events that will address urgent topics of contemporary life in postcolonial societies for indigenous audiences, necessitating yet a new term for a new genre. But this is not the place to speculate.

IV. Current Practitioners of Intercultural Theatre

In the introduction to their three-part collection of essays, Igweonu and Okagbue, next to the investigation of all aspects of performativity in African theatre practices, state to: "(...) equally extend our examination to how African theatre practitioners work today, with an active (not passive) recognition of international theatre practices, while striving to create works that remain locally relevant and that are rooted in indigenous practices—thus successfully negotiating the global vs. local shifts in theatre practice."⁷⁰

This chapter aims to contribute to their agenda through the addition of theatre initiatives from the West African Francophone region, as their collection of essays is almost exclusively (with one single exception) restricted to the Anglophone part of the continent (Sub-Saharan as well as South African), whilst theatre artists who follow their criteria can be identified in both environments. In the following, I will present examples from three different generations of theatre artists. The way through which integration of the traditional (local) performance elements into the fabric of the final productions has been achieved will be investigated and the issues raised by this process discussed, bearing in mind that we're dealing with local artists exploring local sources for a local target audience, which is a phenomenon, which has been so far rarely studied in the Sub-Saharan African context. Fischer-Lichte's study on the essentials of performance (art) will provide the theoretical framework for approaching these examples.⁷¹ The examples make use of isolation of aesthetic elements from ritual practices where they serve

⁷⁰ Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue, *Performative Inter-Actions*, 2.

⁷¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008).

prophylactic or therapeutic goals and recontextualise them within the framework of a theatre spectacle, transforming them into aesthetic performances, thereby changing their original aims. It will be argued that characteristics of the contemporary performance practices studied by Fischer-Lichte are comparable with these practices, and thus, these practices have their place within the discourse that so far has ignored them. I would like to point out that, in spite of the extremely different contexts, the intentions of the creators as well as the strategies followed, might be surprisingly similar to the examples Fischer-Lichte gives, examples which are derived without exception from dominant Euro-American culture. However, the ritualistic character of the performance will be perceived in a different way. Ritual as a cultural phenomenon in West Africa, as demonstrated in Chapter I.4, is still very much a part of everyday life, urban environments included; the theatrical use of ritualistic elements will speak directly and recognisably to an indigenous contemporary audience, whereas ritual as a social event in the global north, has a much more limited scope or has transformed itself to completely different contexts (soccer matches).

Two Generations: Hermas Gbaguidi, Alanda Koubidina

HERMAS GBAGUIDI



As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Hermas Gbaguidi discovered the théâtre-rituel when he came across Werewere Liking's work. She made it possible to create a style that could integrate indigenous performance practices. Gbaguidi has since then initiated many intercultural projects, none of which (!) have been documented in any way. However, he has finally created a Facebook page for one of his recent projects. This is the bamboo dance performance which will be discussed in this chapter. For this project, he created a group of performers called Agbehoun de Houedo. The performance starts with 4 drummers, a couple of gongs, a calabash strung with beads, a chorus and a solo singer alerting the audience. Costumed performers walk around warming up their bodies. A differently costumed Master of Ceremonies with a microphone and a fly-whisk builds up the tension. In the centre of the playground (an empty space in a village compound), three bamboo poles are stuck upright in a triangle, each approximately 5-6 meters high at 1,5 meters from one another. While the orchestra and chorus continue their energetic and exciting singing, the first dancer climbs one of the poles. Bare-footed, only wearing a pair of

shorts in the colours black, red and white (each one belonging to a different deity in the *vodun* pantheon, which I remember from a particular ceremony I once underwent) and a cap. The audience watches and comments throughout the performance. Women set up market stalls selling fruit, drinks, peanuts. A man has collected a bench from somewhere and is looking for a place to put it from where he and his family can watch the performance. The dancer climbs to the top of the pole, only using his dexterity and once he has almost arrived, he grasps the top end of the pole with his right hand and hangs for a moment, dangling dangerously, suspended by one hand from the pole high up in the air. Then he climbs the last one and a half meters, positions himself by putting the end of the pole firmly onto his stomach, and starts dancing, moving both his arms and legs, and turning slowly around with the muscles above his belly button as the centre. After this, he lowers himself, planting his feet against the pole and gently shakes the pole to and fro until he's moved close enough to the pole to his left, which he grasps with his left hand, in the end he ends up hanging between the two poles. In this position, he starts a second dance, executing dance steps in the air, until with a sudden movement, he grabs the third pole with his feet. For a couple of moments, he stays suspended on the three poles as he were lying outstretched on a comfortable bed instead of precariously hanging six meters above the ground. After a final dance, he descends, head first, and when he reaches the ground, he continues walking on his hands parading in front of the enthusiastic jeers of the audience. Finally, with an elegant flourish, he jumps to his feet.

This beginning creates an impression of the kind of spectacle the group has to offer. It's half way between dance and circus and it uses an appropriate dramaturgy, which might be characterised as episodic rather than narrative.

Gbaguidi provided an introductory text to explain this traditional spectacle. He himself rightly associated the bamboo dance as an activity close to circus entertainment, but it originally

derives from a religious practice, as he explained: "Dancing on bamboo poles is a knowledge that is prepared in Beninese convents.⁷² But it is a disappearing phenomenon. To practice it, an apprentice needs training, both in the physical as well as its mystical aspects." (translation JLP)

The nucleus of this performance is constituted through a basic technique, but that has been elaborated to a great extent by Gbaguidi. Through trial and error and with a lot of imagination, he explored additional techniques (incorporating elements of traditional dance movement, acrobatics and fitness training), thus developing a repertoire able to entertain greatly the assembled audiences for about an hour. The demonstration of skills, plus the necessary daring provide its essential entertainment value, and, like with circus entertainment, there is the all-important element of defying death. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, we need sometimes to remind ourselves, was an arena for bear-baiting when it was not used to stage plays. Death-defying entertainment, ritualistic or not, might prove to be a worldwide phenomenon that might yield interesting matter for interdisciplinary research, but here it is mentioned to point to the difference in the relationship between the aesthetic spectacles that are performed and their original ritual context and meaning. The dance has been taken out of the closed environment of the convent (where it was part of the initiation process) and brought into the public sphere in order to let an audience undergo the excitement of the dangerous routines and admire the skill of the dancer. The performative elements have been reassembled to function as a theatre spectacle and the theatre artist has succeeded in creating an event that is recognized and appreciated by the audience without depending on specific codes announcing a theatre event.

⁷² Convent is the conventional name in French given to the localities where rituals and ceremonies are prepared, masks and other paraphernalia are kept. It's a place where novices are trained for their initiation.

ALANDA KOUBIDINA



Alanda Koubidina was a student from the pioneering first cohort of the Ecole Internationale de Théâtre du Bénin, from which he graduated in 2006. Prior to studying for his Bachelor grade (Licence Professionnelle) in "Arts et Techniques de Théâtre", as the programme is officially called, he had already established his own organisation, the company Kadam Kadam. After struggling for some years, he decided to move with his family and the whole organisation and settle himself in Agoè, the vast northern suburb of Lomé, Togo's capital. His aim was and still is to run a centre for the community where the arts are accessible through performances, exhibitions, workshops and similar activities.

In 2014, *BanlieuZ'arts ou l'Initiation* was performed, first in Lomé and subsequently it toured widely both through Togo, as well as the region and internationally. I saw it in 2015 in Agoè in a clearing between low housing blocks.

The show starts after sundown, with the light discovering a young man clad in white sitting astride, wide legged, sporting a long-sleeved shirt and wide trousers, on the ground in a heap of, what looks like, white clay or a similar substance. It is not clearly visible yet, but to his legs are attached a set of wooden poles. He is sitting with his back against a white structure, a cube of about 1x1 meter. Music is accompanying his actions: slowly he starts covering his body

and face with the white clay surrounding him. Once his face is well covered in the white substance, he starts a slow rhythm beating time with his hands.

Two stilt walkers dressed in colourful garments enter the scene. The stilts of different sizes measure two meters for the shortest, the other one slightly higher, 2,5 meters, so the figures reach a height of 3,5-4 meters. They move in circles around the young man in white. At a given moment, the young man covers his face with his hands, the two stilt walkers approach him and start helping him to get on his feet, clumsily like a new-born deer on his uncertain legs. Once upright, supported by the two stilt walkers, wooden steps are heard in the distance, slowly approaching. Gradually, arriving slowly, a third stilt walker enters, this one on stilts measuring 4 meters, so the whole figure towering almost 6 meters high. The group of 3 walk in circles while watched and followed by the newly arrived. Then the two stilt walkers put the young man in white on the central white cube.

The three stilt walkers start walking in circles around the white young man, chanting in a language unknown to the audience. So far, not a word has been spoken. After the chanting, the circle continues and the stilt walkers start throwing bags of liquid with force onto the body and face of the young man, who, as is clear by now, is the candidate to be initiated as the title indicates. Then there is a moment of spoken lines, in an African language translated into French, after which the tallest stilt walker executes a spectacular and awe-inspiring dance accompanied by percussion and singing voices (pre-recorded).

When the dance stops, the music changes and the candidate starts making efforts to get up without the help of the other stilt walkers. Then suddenly he gets up, and makes his first independent steps, while a chorus accompanied by percussion and a flute happily provides a celebratory note. The first two stilt walkers carry a calabash, the third one a broom-like object with which the candidate is anointed, using a substance from the calabash. The initiated

candidate dances with the tallest stilt walker. A final question and answer song rounds off the spectacle, culminating in a dance by the tallest stilt walker on one stilt only, (the other one removed by the second stilt walker), urged on by rhythmic singing and clapping from the other performers.

The traditional element in that performance has been exploited to the fullest: the use of stilts, which is part of the spectacular initiation ceremonies of the Akposso people. When asked about his aim, Koubidina articulated his programme clearly: to modernise tradition in order to create a theatre that speaks to the local people. His presumption is that audiences are happy to watch the rich theatricality of the traditional ceremonies turned into a spectacle, and he has succeeded even beyond: the performance has been appreciated in a wide range of (international) contexts. Its theatricality hinges on the physical prowess of the performers, like the performance of Gbaguidi; but in this case, the interaction between the performers plays a vital role. The dramaturgy here consists of a situation unfolding, instead of a sequence of episodes. Traditional performances, as a source for contemporary intercultural theatre, do not restrict theatre artists to one specific type of event, nor does their appeal seem restricted to an indigenous audience.

Intercultural Performance Art?

Fischer-Lichte's 2008 study on performance art can serve as an appropriate piece of theoretical contribution in giving these practices a place in the discourse on intercultural theatre. The first question of concern is: can the examples presented in this chapter be defined as performance art. The contexts are extremely different, one could hardly find a greater contrast between the

audience in a museum watching Marina Abramovic flagellate herself in the one case or the agrarian community in the outskirts of Lomé watching performers dancing on extremely high stilts in the other. The most consequential of these differences probably being the fact that in the first case the audience has paid money to access a performance that might shake their existing perceptions and expectations of (performance) art, while in the second case the audience is confronted with actions they will not recognize as (performance) art at all, as they don't have any perceptions or expectations of the genre and they will frame the performance in their own particular way. Still: in both cases we are discussing an aesthetic experience through performance and the characteristics listed by Fischer-Lichte apply to both.⁷³

In her analysis of performance mechanisms, she repeatedly referred to ritual as an essential model that provided her with the necessary elements to define its "transformative power".⁷⁴ One recurring aspect is mentioned that is of interest for the examples studied: when discussing Abramovic's performances she explicitly mentioned the "fairground spectacle" element (besides the religious one).⁷⁵ In her final chapter again she referred to the circus as a non-semiotic performance, "instead triggering wonder, amazement, horror and shock in the spectator", which is one of the strategies employed to create the liminal state, both in artistic as well as in ritual performance. This circus aspect is very strongly present in the examples chosen.

When discussing the autopoietic feedback loop, her definition of presence as the performer's "ability to generate energy" is particularly valid as the transmission of energy is almost palpable in the performances, which have been witnessed, injecting energy in the spectators in the same way as a ritual does. The realisation of the autopoietic feedback loop proposed by her as a vital element in performance is secured through the transmission of this

⁷³ Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power*, 166.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

energy, and the aesthetic means through which the performers arrive at it are related to the reality-creating aspects of the performance. "All performances are self-referential and constitute reality", as she puts it succinctly.⁷⁶

Both the bamboo dance and the stilt performance originate in the rituals of initiation and are linked to the traditional honouring of the ancestors. Gbaguidi emphasized the social value of the ritual and quoted from the specialist who passed on his knowledge and insights to him: even if the value of the theatrical version for the audiences is entertainment mainly (including the darker side of a death-defying spectacle), for the performers the spiritual values are guarded rigorously as elements that cannot be disposed of if one wants to practice this dance in safety. Detaching the aesthetic from the spiritual to recycle it into performance art needs negotiating. Koubidina and Gbaguidi needed to allow certain ritual aspects to be taken into account in order to not to compromise the ritual origin of the spectacle. This imbrication of the purely ritual with the aesthetic is a specific characteristic of this theatrical practice, similar to the examples already mentioned in everyday life in postcolonial society.

As mentioned before, all of Fischer-Lichte's examples refer to performance art practices in Europe and America. However, in her chapter on the performance as event, she dedicated a section on liminality and transformation that is particularly revealing for the performances at hand. This liminal aspect of performance (art) is a central concept of Fischer-Lichte's theory. Aesthetic liminal experience is the aim of performance art. She argued that the nature of performance as an event depends primarily on the experience of liminality that can be brought about in many ways: intensity, deviation and surprise, conspicuousness that guides the audiences' attention, are devices listed and commented upon. Liminality constitutes a term borrowed from ritual studies, and even though Fischer-Lichte was reluctant to equate artistic

⁷⁶ Ibid., 170.

with ritual performance, she admitted to the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between artistic and ritualistic performances.⁷⁷ She enumerated the similarities between them concluding that the essential difference lies in the fact that in ritual the participants' social status is permanently and irreversibly altered, and this is acknowledged by the society they form a part of, but in artistic performance this is not the case. The way the creators have integrated this aspect, without compromising the ritual element, has been alluded to earlier in this chapter: Koubidina by integrating an initiate into the cast of performers and Gbaguidi by allowing his performers to fulfil their ritualistic duties as preparation to the secular performance, acknowledged the social status of the initiated (and in the process actually foregrounding the aesthetic aspect, as the ritual aspects are not part of the performance but dealt with hidden from the audience). In the performances at hand we have an amalgamation of both: the status acquired through ritual is confirmed within the framework of an aesthetic performance. The case of Koubidina's *BanlieuZ'arts* is particularly interesting as the performance in fact depicts the experience of the process of liminality in a ritual context, it is its main subject matter. The central character needs to undergo physical experiences (some of them painful) in order to acquire a new status. The violence with which he is bombarded with bags of liquid has its immediate effect on the autopoietic feedback loop, and thus, opens the pathway to liminality for the audience as well.

Perhaps the one vital distinguishing aspect, if one compares performances in the West African context with the examples given by Fischer-Lichte, lies in the fact that the West African society as a whole is not familiar with the codes of theatre-visiting as they have developed in Europe. As remarked before, the bourgeois elite are aware of these codes, but the general audiences approached through the performances by Gbaguidi, Koubidina, Alougbine, Douty, and many others will react directly to the modified reality presented to them in the shape of a

⁷⁷ Ibid., 175.

performance. The theatrical space to start with is a fluid affair: for Koubidina the theatre space was often at the roadside, for Gbaguidi a clearing in the fields, in both instances with porous demarcations.⁷⁸ When a theatre building or a museum raises expectations that will either be met or challenged by the performance, the public road can be the stage of anything or nothing in particular. When setting up for a performance in that context, the audience (or rather the bystander or the pedestrian) is alerted that something out of the ordinary is going to happen, which produces the perfect prerequisite for the creation of a liminal state. Curiosity, excitement, expectation – all of these heightened states of being are induced by the preparation of the space. Related to this aspect is the fact that the economics of performance practice in marginalized circumstances are totally different as compared to the dominant culture: no entrance fees, no box offices (the performers will get paid by the members of the audience as described in chapter I.3) nothing to prepare the audience for what is going to happen other than the material preparations and attention drawing actions: publicity most of the time consists of a display of some elements of the performance, especially music and costumes.

Once an audience has been assembled, the heightened state of expectation is further increased by highlighting the aesthetics of the performance. Careful costuming, including costume changes *à vue*, musical accompaniment, preparatory interactions with the assembling audiences, demarcation of the area of action, torches when performing after sundown, construction of decorative or structural elements, most of the time structured in a gradual *crescendo* build-up leading up to the first entrance of the performer(s) and the start of the performance. These procedures are very similar to the ones observed when attending a ritual performance, such as an *Egungun* or *Guelédé* masquerade, thus providing a recognisable frame

⁷⁸ For an insightful analysis of the dynamics of performance space in Africa: Victor Ukaegbu, "Re-constextualising Space Use in Indigenous African Communal Performance," in: *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre 3*, K. Igweonu and O. Okagbue 29–49.

for the audience. All of these elements contribute to the aim of creating the liminal aesthetic experience.

Where Fischer-Lichte detected the ritualistic nature of a lot of performance art, in these instances it can be observed how the ritualistic is modified into performance art. Margaret Thompson Drewal's plea to approach indigenous performance traditions in Africa through the frame of Performance Studies instead of Anthropology, which she proposed in 1991, was an early understanding of the proximity between performance art as it has developed in the course of the 20th century and performance traditions in Africa. This chapter has investigated how theatre artists have been and still are exploring this proximity, and the remainder of it will pay attention to its increasing momentum.

The New Generation: Marlène Douty and Souleymane Elh Karim Adamou

As many more of these intercultural projects are being considered for future realisation, this chapter will make space for the youngest generation of theatre artists to speak of their artistic ambitions. Two young artists will be presented as representatives of their generation of theatre artists. As the chapter will be based on interviews and observations, the tone will be rather journalistic and unavoidably subjective, but I do believe it will constitute a valuable contribution to the thesis to let the younger generation express themselves. The intentions of the theatre artists, their strategies to conquer an audience, their ambition to create intercultural aesthetics, combined with the hybridity of their life choices will portray the rhizomatic society they are a part of and whom they create for. Knowles diagnosed the birth of an urban hybridity in the

global north as a "rhizomatic practice from below"; this has already been growing for decades in Francophone West Africa.⁷⁹

Adamou will finish his Masters at the University of Niamey this academic year, after graduating at the EITB in 2016. Douty will finish his Masters at Law School at Lomé University this year too, after which he will pursue a second Masters in Theatre Studies at a University still to be decided upon. In March 2017, I interviewed Douty on several occasions. The items addressed, the opinions voiced, the themes treated are representative of the aspirations of the younger generation of theatre artists, and touch upon many other aspects that influence theatre practice in the region. I visited Karim Adamou in Niamey for my internship in February; an abstract of his thesis on the subject of an intercultural performance will serve to illustrate his approach.

Marléne Douty is the youngest of the theatre practitioners aspiring to do intercultural theatre work.⁸⁰ As an actor, he participated in the central role of the initiation candidate in Kadam Kadam's performance *BanlieuZ'Arts*, of which we watched a video recording together. He is currently finishing his Master's in Law but his aspirations are decidedly theatrical and he is planning to acquire a Master's in theatre studies after this, perhaps in Bénin at the EITB if they decide to offer a Master's course as well, or otherwise in Belgium or Canada. We spoke on two separate occasions about his views on the integration of indigenous culture in his theatrical work.

His motivation to use the traditional culture of the Moba people to which he belongs has a long and painful, even violent history. Douty stated that he thinks of himself as a *déraciné*,

⁷⁹ Knowles, *Theatre and Interculturality*, 59.

⁸⁰ a common male first name in his own language of the Moba people of Northern Togo which is causing him a lot of confusion, he might decide to opt for an alternative spelling Marleyne for instance.

someone who has been cut from his roots. The examples from his own surroundings that he gives are telling: a family where the father and the mother speak the local African language but the child speaks French. The history of how he arrived at his views concerning the traditional Moba culture starts with the rather heavy opposition of the dominant (in this case Christian) culture. He has been a member of the church for 12 years and that has meant a violent fight against everything that belonged to the Moba tradition. Their animist cosmogony was condemned as the work of the devil, it was forbidden to have contact with these "satanic heathen", even if they were members of one's own family. Religion, by Othering the animists of the same community, has been instrumental in cutting him off from his roots, and his way back has been a long and tormented one. He describes the stages that gradually brought him back into contact with the animistic world of his family. The Moba believe in reincarnation and he had to start by acknowledging the reincarnation through a ritual practice, which involved the sacrifice of a dog to the person one reincarnates, as that person is known. Slowly, Douty rediscovered the Moba part of his identity. At a certain point, he missed a call for a scholarship that would have been perfect for him and he still believes that that might be due to the fact that he had neglected to go and pay his respects to his grandmother when it was traditionally called for. He maintained that the faith itself is the agent, not so much the ritual or the sacrifice. At an earlier occasion, Douty defined himself as actually agnostic rather than animist.

At this moment in his life, on the verge of attaining a professional career in theatre, he thinks that drawing from this traditional and rural source might act as a weapon against the devastating globalisation and urbanisation, which wreaks havoc on all levels, including the cultural one. When I pointed out to him that tradition, as often as not, is a construct, he wholeheartedly agreed and even described the process himself: an invention that gets repeated and embodied, and in the end, turns into something that is perceived as a tradition. He himself

pointed out the spread of the Dutch Wax as the quintessential (West)-African identity emblem, and I could add to that the colonial history of the famous Dutch Wax, still ubiquitous in the region.⁸¹

Besides this political-cultural motivation for his intercultural theatre ambitions, there is a downright aesthetical one. The Moba culture is theatrically very rich. He provided numerous examples of this:

+ the chanting of the elderly around a heap of earth before the sacrifice of a dog. The language used is only known to the initiated. Douty singles out the sense of an underlying spiritual unity emanating from such a chanting. This brings us to the subject of how much spirituality the purely aesthetic contains. Dr. Mattijs v.d. Port (professor of anthropology at Amsterdam University) has suggested in a personal communication that trance might be comparable to the kind of heightened concentration needed for a sports performance or artistic creation. The realms of the spiritual and the aesthetic have at times been specifically foregrounded in visual art (Mondriaan). I suggested to Douty that we start analysing traditional ritual from the point of view of artistic (creative) production and compare production methods from the field of contemporary theatre with the methods used for traditional ritual, ceremony or liturgy.

+ the dances are sometimes rather spectacularly acrobatic.

+ the Gourmantche culture has a complex system of divination, where the diviner first writes in the sand. It is through spiritual possession that this writing is produced and after the writing has been transferred, the diviner starts the second part, which is the interpretation of the writing.

+ there is a second divinatory system, the Djaba operated through an object called the Djabagbani: it is a cord of animal hide, split at the end to which all kinds of small objects are

⁸¹ Brommer, *Bontjes voor de Tropen*, 27-31;

attached, like bones, cauries, bottle caps, eggs etc. This object is thrown and the configuration of the objects is interpreted by the Djababoul.

+ the songs carry a beauty in their melodies that in themselves are spiritual; they can be antiphonal or responsorial, solo or chorus, they evoke the spirits and are accompanied generally by two drums, but the beads and cauries attached to the dance costumes add an extra layer of percussion to the songs. The drums are beaten by a crooked stick.

+ Douty vividly remembers a dance for the elderly hunters that wear their specially woven garment, an example of which, surrounded by myths, can still be found in the Dapaong museum.

The foremost theme that Douty plans to showcase in a theatre spectacle in 2018 is famine: in 2005, the northern region was struck by a famine that many still remember with painful sharpness. The famine was brought about through the fluctuating prices of cotton. At a moment when cotton was commanding a particularly interesting price, the majority of the farmers chose to replace their food crops with cotton. The most important motivation for their investment would be to obtain a motor cycle, as that is the dream all farmers share. Normally the money obtained from the cotton would serve to pay for food and other necessities but unexpectedly the prices of cotton dropped. So, in the end they were left with no money and not enough food crops to feed the population.

By way of imagining how such a theme could be worked out, he gives an example of a film that has made a great impression on him, the title is: *The Mob* and it is about a rich merchant's plans to demolish an area dear to a group of hip-hop dancers, who protest these plans. In particular a scene where the hip-hop group enters the offices of the merchant, clad in costumes, ties and carrying briefcases, execute a hip-hop dance. This is the kind of scenes that Douty dreams of for his intercultural theatre; it equally serves as yet another example of aesthetic hybridity in 21st

century African society: an American movie used as a model to process traditional local performance practices into an aesthetic product of contemporary theatre for an indigenous audience.

When asked to elaborate on the difficulties he could expect when he would start out on this adventure, the first thing that crossed his mind was politics. Dapaong is a city in the north and it is a miniature version of Togo, with all its implications. Furthermore, he wondered how he would go about introducing "foreigners" to the Moba culture. While on the other hand, he had to find a strategy to introduce the Moba specialists to "theatre", which is a phenomenon they have never witnessed nor been aware of. Indeed, when discussing with the traditional specialist, Douty maintained that the word "theatre" so far has not even entered the Moba vocabulary. I suggested him a way to start such a project by inviting each of these two groups of participants to prepare a brief spectacle for the other, which would include an item where the other group also would have to participate.

Thus, the intra-cultural will be a non-negligible aspect of this project, and Douty is only too proud to spread the culture of his people among a wider stratum of society. Budget trouble will be unavoidable and I proposed that he elaborates the project on three different scales: the maximum, the optimum and the minimum. The maximum would be a big project involving sizeable chunks of traditional spectacle within a theatrical framework for a big audience. The optimum would be to be assured that all aspects that he wants to research will receive proper care, attention and funding, and the minimum of course the smallest scale that would still make this an interesting project. And as this is Africa, there must be a plan B and a plan Q. The most important element of this project is, in my view, the fact that he clearly has the support of his community, who might even be willing to furnish at least part of the necessary funding. His artistic talent, critical mind and organisational skills will take care of the rest.

Karim Elh Adamou has sent me the abstract of his Master's thesis which I translate and present here.

In Niger, the Bori is a word that means to cook but it also refers to a dramatic and religious ritual that aims at healing the sick and stabilize society. It employs an aesthetics of its own. The cult is based upon a conception of the world where the univers is populated by invisible beings, spirits, that walk together with humans.

The Bori ritual has a lot in common with contemporary theatre. Analysing the spectacle of the traditional cult will provide the possibility to extract a dramaturgy that will be very close to contemporary theatre. One can discern the presence of actors, a stage for action, roles, a stage director who is the Bori priest and an audience. Music, dancing, costumes and poetry employed links it to the sacred origins of the theatre itself.

Our aim is to analyse the Bori through existing documentation (writings, films, documentaries, scientific articles) and direct observation plus interviews as an indigenous traditional aesthetic that can serve to open up perspectives in order to revive and energize contemporary theatre practice, and thus re-establish its contact with the general public.

The questions raised that will be discussed: What is Bori? Who are its actors? How does it work? Where? At which occasions? What is contemporary theatre? What materials does it employ? How does it employ them? What can Bori contribute to our theatricalities. Can the notion of myth be introduced into contemporary theatre?

This work will be undertaken in three chapters: The first will be a presentation of the Bori cult as a ritual. The second will study the origin, challenges and characteristics of contemporary theatre and the third and final one will be dedicated to perspectives offered by the Bori to revitalize contemporary theatre making. (translation JLP)

Adamou is not the first one to remark on the theatrical potential of the rather exuberant Bori ritual. Several theatre scholars have studied this phenomenon and commented on its performance practices.⁸² Its position as a kind of safe haven for minorities in an Islamised society has given rise to interesting observations and analyses.⁸³

⁸² Osita Okagbue, *African Theatres and Performances*, 58-99.

Faulkingham, Ralph Harold, "Rituals of spirit possession" in *Research Report 15: The spirits and their cousins: Some aspects of belief, ritual, and social organization in a rural Hausa village in Niger*. (Amherst: AmherstUP 1975).

⁸³ See: Maarit Sinikangas, Yan Daudu, *A study on Transgendering Men in Hausaland West Africa* (Uppsala: Uppsala UP, 2004).

Osita Okagbue, "Deviants and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa Bori Performances," *New Theatre Quarterly* 24.3 (2008): 270-280

These are only two examples of a host of young theatre artists ambitiously pursuing the practice of intercultural theatre in Francophone West Africa. It might be a further step in shedding the hegemonic dictate of drama in French dialogue towards an international cosmopolitical theatre language. Even if this amounts to speculation, I'd like to think that, though a work like Congolese Dieudonné Niangouna's *Nkenguegi* (première Lausanne, november 2016) has not been produced in West Africa yet, a similar artistic result might well be within reach in the years to come.

V. Globalisation and its Theatres

The following fragment is my translation from a report by a Dutch delegation who visited the king of Dahomey (actual Bénin Republic) in 1733.

We sat at the table and I requested the king's permission for my two trumpeters to play music, along with the violinists. At this request the musicians were immediately fetched. The king disappeared into another room after curtsying, only to reappear wearing a black garment, richly embroidered with gold. When he heard the violins being played, he requested to dance in his own manner. I granted him his wish and paid him a lot of polite compliments. At which, his black Majesty started to dance executing the awkward jumps they make when dancing in this country and all the great men joined him. After this royal *opera*, the king again took his leave only to reappear in a long red velvet garment trimmed with silver. After having eaten, I asked the king if he had ever witnessed the white people dancing, at which he replied that he had not. I asked permission to the king and danced with Jan de Heere a French minuet and with Hoffmeester in the Polish manner, which -as it seemed- provided the king with a lot of pleasure. (...) Furthermore, the king made the ladies of his court (accompanied by some eunuchs and a couple of dwarfs) dance in the forms of this country; in spite of the rain that was falling, they were obliged to continue dancing, and the nicest thing about this *opera* was that an ugly hunchbacked negro preceded the negresses with a couple of steps to chase away the flies in the heavy rain.⁸⁴

This is an amusing anecdote, and one can picture this scene in technicolour, as part of a Hollywood movie with Denzel Washington playing the king of Dahomey, while the Dutch actor, Michiel van der Sluys, would be the right age to play Elet. This early example of intercultural exchange through music and dance is preserved in the journal that Elet had to keep to satisfy his employers, the Dutch West India Company. The actual goal of his journey to the king of Dahomey (whose palace complex partly survives in the royal city of Abomey and has been inscribed on the world heritage list of the UNESCO) was to strike the best deal possible with the

⁸⁴ From: *Naar de Koning van Dahomey, het Journaal van de Gezantschapsreis van Jabob Elet naar het West Afrikaanse koninkrijk Dahomey in 1733, ingeleid door Henk den Heyer* (Zutphen: Walburg, 2000), 149-151.

king concerning the slave trade. The kings of Dahomey, like their colleagues in present day Ghana, the Ashanti kings, were instrumental in the organisation of the slave trade. For a certain period, the king of Dahomey controlled the trade on what was, for a long time, called the Slave Coast. In the scene described in the report, we encounter two parties whose capital interests are competing against each other, in the act of dividing their spoils and deciding on the lives of thousands, while enjoying their food and drink and being entertained by artists. Are we witnessing the roots of globalization here?.

For this thesis, finding the correct frame has been a struggle, perhaps more so than in other fields of theatre research. Comparing Hourantier's unproblematic appropriation of Cameroonian ritual in order to satisfy an agenda to introduce the western function of drama to an autochthonous audience in Ivory Coast on the one hand, to the way Cherkaoui and Khan negotiate multiple (polyphonic) identities for global audiences in their choreographic work on the other, will either lead to highly abstract reflections on the changes economic globalisation has brought about in culture, society, art in general and theatre and dance specifically, or, alternatively it would lead to a list of boxes to compare where some have been ticked and others have not because West Africa (working in post-colony) is not Europe (working in dominant culture), theatre is not dance (but post-dramatic theatre has greatly blurred the divides), 1980 (pre-crisis, pre-wall, pre-everything except post-modernism) is not 2017 (post-everything, including post-modernism), etc. Especially the global developments of the last decades make it impossible to link the utopic optimistic energy of Hourantier and Liking's work to the tormented disjointed elegance of Cherkaoui and Khan.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Pavis, 2010: This is so, because intercultural performance is a notion which stems from the 1960s, from the utopia of social mixture, of hybridization, of social progress, of sharing rather than plundering.

The Intercultural phenomenon has left its exclusive environment and has turned into a major issue to be encountered and negotiated daily in the streets of the big cities. In the most poignant way this has been articulated by Bernard Müller's article in the catalogue accompanying the *Africa Remix* exhibition from 2005, when he compared the seminal exhibition from 1980 les *Magiciens de la Terre* with the 2005 one concluding: "Ce ne sont pas tant les artistes qui ne seraient pas *vraiment* Africains que l'Afrique qui est devenue autre".⁸⁶ This observation underscores how Africa has been affected by and how (visual) artists have responded to the globalising world, and it is especially relevant when thinking about the fluid identities analysed by Appadurai. Müller himself, further on in the article, stresses the same process: "soulignons le fondamental cosmopolitisme et le caractère polyglotte du milieu social auquel appartient la plupart des artistes contemporains".⁸⁷

It is noteworthy that what all the theatre artists, studied in chapter IV, have in common is the fact that they reacted against the dominant (i.e. French) culture: Gbaguidi discovered that African performance traditions have a value and theatrical power that can be exploited, Koubidina moved away from the elitist artistic milieu in the city centre to the periphery of the capital's vast *banlieu*, Douty, after being violently alienated from his animistic roots, returned to them with renewed appreciation. They have all turned to intercultural practices, but their fluid identities permit them just as well to function within the context of the dominant culture: Gbaguidi has published as a playwright at Lansman, the most important (Belgian) publisher of contemporary drama, Koubidina has just finished a long-term theatrical collaboration with Caribbean and European partners, Douty is active as an author (in French) as well and regularly performs as a guest actor in contemporary repertoire. Chika Okeke-Agulu even maintains that

⁸⁶ Exhibition catalogue: *Africa Remix* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2005): 302.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 307.

hybridity is an inadequate term for the condition of neighbouring postcolonial Nigeria and remarked that "(...) artists create their agency through their use of a "compound consciousness that constantly reconstituted itself by selective incorporation of diverse, oppositional, or complimentary elements".⁸⁸

Cools' study of Cherkaoui's and Khan's work seems to carefully avoid the use of the word "intercultural" or anything related to it (except for hybrid, which crops up as a term now and again), even if (or more probably, because of the fact that) the study has been undertaken at the Berlin Institute for Interweaving Performance Cultures. Perhaps Sally Banes' article on the "tradition" of hybridity in the dance world can shed some light on this (I'm not aware of a similar study undertaken in the field of theatre). In the article, she convincingly demonstrated how dance culture in Europe has been essentially a hybrid continuum, especially, but not exclusively, when looking at the innovations introduced in 20th century dance. Young, quoting Brathwaite, has proposed the term "organic hybridity" as "the imperceptible process whereby two or more cultures merge into a new mode".⁸⁹ (Post)Colonial societies are the arena where elements of organic hybridity appear next to imbricated layers of cultures. Artists move between all these categories.

I think Sally Banes might have opened an interesting discussion when she concluded her article by pointing out the paradox that hybridity might well serve to hang on to identity in a post-identity world. Pavis, Bharucha, Knowles, intuitively seem to await a new development to take shape, reaching beyond the discussion on intercultural theatre. The practice studied in these

⁸⁸ Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonisation in Twentieth Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015) quoted in a review by Francine Kola-Bankole in *African Arts* 50.4 (2017) (forthcoming)

⁸⁹ Young, *Colonial Desire*, 21.

pages then might, perhaps, illustrate a practice as a precursor to a wider development, a practice about which Knowles is the most outspoken while proposing the term "urban hybridity", characterising it as a "rhizomatic practice from below" (already quoted in chapter IV), mirroring fluid identities in a digitalized and globalized urban world. The intuition expressed by Pavis in 2010 had already turned into artistic practice in Francophone West Africa, and it is still continuing.

The fact that intercultural theatre seems to be in a liminal state has further complicated the search for the right frame. The focus is no longer on the exchange between two or more well-defined identities but has shifted to the study of multiple (fluid, polyphonic) identities. The artists presented in this thesis work with the set of identities so well-articulated by Okeke-Agulu and I'm greatly looking forward to starting new collaborations with these and other artists and explore artistically what it means to share what I would like to propose to define as an "inclusive identity". As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis can't be detached from my artistic practice in the region, it is in part a reflection on it. In a certain way, that practice constitutes the real frame, encompassing the experiences and reflections it contains. Finally, I concluded there was only one way of framing the thesis: to concentrate on the aesthetic products at hand, as the work of my West African students and colleagues has not been conceived to address issues like the Global North or the Other, it was not even in the back of their minds, but purely from an artistic need to communicate with a wide audience.

The research has raised questions opening new or additional research.

- + The visual essay about the city as a hybridisation machine should have a counterpart; the dynamics of urban development in Francophone West Africa and its repercussions on performance practices (mediatized or otherwise) would possibly yield interesting perspectives.
- +When considering contemporary ethno-, ideo-, finance-, media- and technoscapes in

Appadurai's definition, is it still possible to borrow without appropriating? Do the conflicts that accompany these developments appear in the performances, and if so, how are they perceived?

+ One of the questions raised by the research: why does Werewere Liking not possess the same international status as Ariane Mnouchkine (even if the latter would probably only be too happy to support the same question)? My quest to find the right frame did lead me to a detour, exploring the visual arts, where I found an echo to this question. Sammy Baloji, the Congolese visual artist and musician, posed a question when he was interviewed in relation to his participation for the Venetian Biennale 2015:

Lorsqu'on ramène avec soi ce qu'on considère être une oeuvre, une expression artistique, à partir de quel moment est-ce que cela sera accepté au niveau international ? Qui sont les décideurs?⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Sarah Demart and Gia Abrassart. *Créer en Postcolonie. 2010-2015, Voix et Dissidences Belgo-Congolaises* (Bruxelles: Bozar/Africalia, 2016), 290.

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Part of this research has been performed during my internship in Bénin, Togo and Niger, February-March 2017. A report is available, including interviews with an additional number of artists of all generations that practice the intercultural theatre described in these pages.