

# National Competitive Festivals: Formatting Dance Products and Forging Identities in Contemporary Kenya

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## **Abstract**

*In the process of dance heritage creation in contemporary Kenya, an essential and until now underestimated role is played by competitive festivals organized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture. Due to their accessibility, visibility, recurrence and national distribution, these events facilitate the dissemination and the adaptation of a specific repertoire—that of cultural dances of Kenya. They build on old local customs and reveal continuity with the colonial era during which the repression of “native” dances led to a particular use of choreography and folklore. Inspired by several aesthetic systems, stage products in competitive festivals are directed by elaborated evaluation criteria, which over the years have been exported outside of that context. This article attests to a circulation of actors and products, as well as a circulation of heritage categories and corporalities. It aims at understanding the effect competitive festivals have on the institutionalization of dances in Kenya, but also on the modes of their existence.*

**Key words:** competitions, traditional dance, dance heritage, assessment criteria, choreography, cultural politics, dance anthropology, Kenya

## **Introduction**

Dance and heritage are two cornerstone notions of the ongoing study this paper stems from—the study of dance heritage creation processes in contemporary Kenya. The polysemous nature of dance as an art form, as well as its amenability to social and political agendas, has been recognized early in the social sciences. Since the 1980s, the most important developments in the field of dance anthropology have been made in studies on the link between dance and politics, on the relationships between culture, body, and movement. Thus, dance as an expression and a practice of power and protest, resistance and complicity, has been the subject of numerous analysis, particularly in the areas of ethnicity, national identity, gender and, less frequently, social class. In more recent years, Andrieu (2007), Buckland (2001), Castaldi (2006), Desmond (1993), Djebbari (2011), Edmondson (2001), Fair (1996), Foley (2001), Gibert (2007), Giurchescu (2001), Nahachewsky (2001), Quigley (2001), Reed (1998) and Shay (1999; 2001) are just a part of the large research community that has centered the debate on folklore dance forms and on their symbolic and political power.

This study joins in that academic tradition, as it focuses on the content and status of social and political practices grouped under the appellation *cultural dances of Kenya*. These are defined as a set of traditional practices reinvented and re-contextualized for a stage experience and a contemporary social use. The (re)invention of these practices is ongoing, as we consider dance itself as a performance constantly recreated by the materiality of moving bodies, and dance heritage not in terms of finished products, but from the viewpoint of processes. Heritage, “a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past,” as defined by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995), adds value to practices, in our case dances, which are no longer viable and ensures their survival.

Thus, our analysis puts an emphasis on the identification of heritage production processes at the local level, while trying to understand the relationship that these empirical procedures have with the national identity debates that continue to agitate Kenya since Independence in 1963 up to present day. In a comparative approach, choreographic products, their creators and the strategies they use, are considered from the perspective of a continuous movement between the local and the national—levels often conceptualized in opposition, but in reality interdependent. This prolonged comparison is rooted in a previous study of the national dance troupe repertoire (Kiiru, 2014), accompanied by the analyses of national policies and institutions relating to traditional music/dance, as well as by ethnographic inquiry in the field in selected regions of the country. It relies on the idea that “vernacular folklore and staged folklore exist in indivisible and unbroken continuity” (Giurchescu 2001, 117) and examines the hypothesis of mutual influence between local dance vocabularies and staging strategies and their national counterparts.

The history of traditional dance practices in Kenya is characterized by a series of significant oscillations in the degree of their visibility. This fact results, in the first place, from the particular historical context of a settlement colony<sup>1</sup> that Kenya was, where “indigenous” dances and music were prohibited or strictly controlled. Historically linked to questions of power, local dances were seen as a direct threat to the political and moral order in the colony. Result of a long period of repression, dances seemed to have almost completely disappeared in some parts of Kenya. Since Independence, their status and presence on the national and the local scene fluctuated, while the content of Kenyan dance heritage and the representations it reflects have, on several occasions, been reformulated to correspond to the political issues of the moment. At the same time, local populations seemed to be experiencing a form of discomfort concerning these practices that the Christian churches condemned for decades.

However, corresponding to the cyclic nature of cultural reflexivity (Nahachewsky, 2001), a renewed enthusiasm for traditional dances and other cultural practices can be noted in Kenya in recent years, a fact connected, among others, to the political and security situation. Since the post-election violence of 2007-2008 and the crisis it caused, the national folklore is seen as a potential catalyst for the process of National Reconciliation, and cultural dances as a privileged medium to convey messages of national unity and a call for peace.

Before we proceed to introduce the topic of this paper, we owe the readership a brief reflection on the terminology used. Although we have offered our definition of the ensemble of practices at the core of our study, one might ask the question of *why call them “cultural dances of Kenya.”* It is important to note here that the term itself was reported from interviews from the field, notably with institution representatives, as well as with artists and practitioners. We have found it pertinent not only because of the problematic nature of alternative terms, including traditional, indigenous, and folkloric, but equally because of its reference to the notion of “culture.” In the discourse of our informants “culture” is opposed to “tradition” since, according to T.O. Bwire, Production Manager of Bomas of Kenya (national ethnographic museum and dance troupe), it describes better the dynamic and evolving character of the practices in question. Culture is ever growing, whereas tradition is static. Although this contrast between the two notions does not correspond to their academic definition tentatives, it reflects the reality of the milieu in which we investigate. Additionally, in the competitive festivals context, it corresponds to the exact nomenclature of dance competition categories—“cultural dance” and “creative cultural dance”—that we shall discuss later in the paper.

In the course of our research into traditional dance practices in Kenya, started in 2011, school competitions in music and dance emerged very early as an important vector in terms of constitution and popularization of these practices. With more than 7,000 presentations performed for 11 days in 440 categories by approximately 97,000 students<sup>2</sup> (Orido 2011), these competitions emanating from public institutions, receive impressive attendance and benefit from significant media coverage.<sup>3</sup> A special place is given to the dance categories whose pieces last between 5 and 15 minutes (depending on the festival in question) and attract many participants and spectators. In the premises of a national school selected each year to host the event, we thus encounter a strikingly large number of groups of youths, immersed in a state of stress and intense emotions at the time of their performance and of the adjudicators’ deliberation. The commotion in the school yard that serves as a backstage, the background sounds of different musical styles as groups practice their performance to come, the visual mixture of various colorful costumes and the enthusiasm and energy of performance inspired ethnographic and artistic interest. In front of us was undoubtedly a fertile ethnographic field and we decided to continue our observations, as well as to further develop them through participation in competitive festivals.

This was made possible in 2014, when we integrated a group of consultants/trainers preparing a secondary school for the National Drama Festival<sup>4</sup> and in 2015 and 2016, when we joined local folk groups in rehearsal and in stage performance at the Ministry of Culture’s competitive festival—Kenya Music Festival.<sup>5</sup> This article is the fruit of analysis of data collected primarily through these occasions of participatory observation, but also through the study of video and photograph archives, official policy documents and publications and a series of interviews conducted with actors of the competitive festival structure (festival administrators, several adjudicators, consultants and choreographers, Ministry of Culture representatives at both national



Photo 1: Saint Phillip’s Mukomari Girls Secondary School students on stage performing a cultural creative *isukuti* dance at the county competitions of the National Drama Festival in 2014.

and county levels, students themselves, etc.).

Before continuing, we would like to mention here that what we refer to as “national competitive festivals” and/or “competitive festival system” consists of three specific annual events, which are institutionalized and regulated by two national ministries. The National Drama Festival and the National Music Festival are competitive institutions hosted by the Ministry of Education. They are therefore organized around the yearly school calendar as their participants are pupils and student of different levels—from primary schools to universities and colleges. The Kenya Music Festival, on the other hand, is hosted by the Ministry of Culture and its lower level administrative units.<sup>6</sup> It brings together amateur, semi-professional and professional folk music and dance groups on an annual basis, but follows a more flexible calendar. Although the three are neither identical nor aim at the same participants, we believe they repose on the same premises. Originally, they all developed from one ancestor: the Kenya Music Festival introduced in 1927 by European settlers organized into music amateur clubs. School children and students used to participate alongside adult performers until the mid-

1960s when a festival dedicated exclusively to educational purposes was formed.

It is also relevant to comment briefly on the genres designation, as dance features in both the music- and the drama-labelled festivals, yet does not possess a festival of its own. The popularly-known fact that dance is conceived as an independent reality in very few non-Western cultures, translates, within the Kenyan context, by the term *ngoma*. This cultural notion, and the corresponding Kiswahili term, corresponds to a vision of music and dance, enhanced with elements of theatrical performance, as one coherent and inseparable whole. Recurrent in the East African region, *ngoma* is a term which can have different meanings. We can assume that the initial meaning was the designation of a particular percussive instrument, then, by extension, it evolved to designate either a particular ethnic music/dance, or a musical/dance event, and, finally, music and dance in a broad sense of the word. Yet the linguistic path might have followed the opposite direction, from generality to particular instrument designation.

Considering the decisive role these festivals organized by government institutions play in the gradual construction of dance heritage, it should be recognized that the competitive occasions of music and dance performance are not a novelty introduced by the state. The first section of this article will demonstrate the historical consistency of competitive musical and choreographic practices in East Africa with special reference to the pre-colonial social context and the British colonial administration's subsequent input.

The second section will focus on the institutionalization of competitive festivals within the context of independent Kenya and discuss their relationship with both the educational system and the wider music/dance policies, as well as to nation building. The third section will evoke and interpret the adjudication criteria in competitive festivals, discuss the specific notion of "authenticity" they rely on and compare the two complementary yet discursively opposing national festivals. Lastly, in the fourth section we shall introduce some of our conclusions on the impacts these festivals have had on traditional dance products and conceptions in contemporary Kenya.

### **Dance and music in East Africa: A Tradition of Competiveness**

In his 1975 seminal work in East African ethnomusicology, *Dance and Society in East Africa: The Beni Ngoma*, the historian Terence Ranger defines the *Beni* associations and their competitive practice as musical and social products of cultural contact. However, despite their strong tendency to imitate European manners and customs, Ranger considers the *Beni* deeply rooted in pre-colonial dance and its competitive modes. When the coastal Swahili population encountered the Europeans, they gradually appropriated the signs and symbols of European military power and began to use it in their previously existent music and dances competitions. At the source of the revolutionary work on the invention of tradition the historian pursued with Eric Hobsbawm (1983), this research has profoundly influenced subsequent studies in the region.

The centrality of associative competitions in music and dance is confirmed and detailed in the collective work edited in 2000 by Gunderson and Bartz. Apart from the search for historical origins of the widespread practice of *Beni* ensembles, a number of authors now propose different approaches to ritual events involving musical and choreographic practices of a competitive nature. The designation used—“competitive *ngoma*”—refers to “a musical setting where drum, song, and dance groups compete before an audience, as entertainment” (Gunderson 2000, 11). However, pure entertainment was not the only driving force behind these performances. Their widespread and historical consistency reveal a social efficiency of competitive practices inherent to the functioning of traditional societies of East Africa.

Different forms of competitions served in the past as social equalizers, consolidators of communities, and identity producers. Through the process of staging internal conflicts of a given society, these competitive events allowed questioning of the existing social order and facilitated the overcoming of differences and the reconciliation of “social classes.” They also promoted the identification of individuals with the group and favored cooperation. These competitive events were widespread in East Africa, where traditional society was characteristically organized into age sets (Peatrik, 1995). A well-known example is that of warriors, where the lives of men of that status were filled with music and dance as educational medium and as vector of a certain esprit de corps essential for combat and war (Hanna, 1977). Internal antagonisms between members of the same age group as well as those between groups, were staged in the form of competitions in the ability to sing, play an instrument and especially dance. The prime example of Masaai warriors and their jumping dance is not an exception. Several warrior communities across Africa used dance as a preferred form of expression; a dance that often follows an aesthetic logic of verticality: the Samburu (Spencer, 1985), the Fulani (Lassibille, 2004), the Tuaregs (Djebbari, 2012), etc. In these demonstrative performances, the most skilled warrior is considered the one who jumps the highest; in other words, whoever was the best dancer and singer was often made the age group’s leader (Marmone, forthcoming).

Although the pacification process during the colonial period, had partially mitigated the need for war dances as physical and psychological preparation for combat, their benefit and functionality for the local populations under foreign rule converted into a form of assertion of traditional independence and of symbolic resistance. Thus, festive gatherings or rituals, which were also opportunities for dance and song sessions, were often judged by the colonial authorities as dangerous and conducive to riot. The administration forbade them and/or controlled them by reducing their duration and their attendance, leading progressively to a very elaborate section in the native control regulations. As stated, for example, by the Chief Native Commissioner G.V. Maxwell (1926):

...I hereby declare that any headman may from time to time issue orders to be obeyed by the natives residing within the local limits of his jurisdiction prohibiting or restricting excessive dancing by natives or the public performance of any native dance of indecent or immoral character or of such nature that it is likely to lead to immorality

or a breach of the peace and determining the hours within which, the place or places at which, and the conditions under which any native dance may be publicly performed. (Maxwell 1926)

However, towards the end of the colonial period, we can note proof of early professional associations of music and dance in the colony, a clear reflection of evolving attitudes towards indigenous cultural expressions. These groups are mentioned in documents referring to their movements around the territory of the colony (and even outside it), where they perform on stages of festivals and agricultural or commercial fairs. At times, they are also hired for private parties by the settlers and recruited on occasions of tourists' safari visits to the colony. We argue that, after a long period of regulation and prohibition, which undoubtedly had an adverse impact on traditional music and dance practices in Kenya, the colonial administration gradually pushed for the creation of a Kenyan folklore and laid the foundation of cultural tourism. The substrate of the set of practices represented under the name of *cultural dances of Kenya* owes its origin to the colonial enterprises of staging and heritagisation of communal ("native") dances of different communities of the country, a process that began in the 1950s. And one of the early components of this process was built on a competitive note.

"African Tribal Dance competitions" were proliferate in most districts of the colony in the mid-1950s, while the earliest found record of efforts to organize an "All Kenya" competition that would bring together teams of dancers from different communities dates from 1960. The African Cabinet of Business and Entertainment states, concerning a competition to be held in their organization in Nairobi on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1960 that:

...such dancing functions should receive the greatest measure of support so that we may foster African culture and keep alive the Traditional dances of all tribes; to present to all races and tribes in Kenya and to overseas visitors a true picture of African Tribal Dress and Dancing. By doing so we hope that we may at least add to the standard of Kenya economics through such social activities whilst trying to make some of our people refrain from politics, worries, use of violence, etc. (Githuku 1960)

Even though contemporary national competitive festivals refer to 1927 as the date of their establishment, it is within this historical context of the end of colonial period that we can retrace the emergence of a form similar to their current one. According to Ogot, "the festival started in 1927 as a private organization which catered solely for the Europeans living in Kenya" (1995, 227). The collective participation of local populations awaited for the inclusion of the "African Folk Song" category in the 1950s, a category "whose prescriptions were outlined by the then Colonial music and drama Officer, Graham Hyslop" (Kidula 2015, 1). The educational work, research, composition and publication of this British musicologist has had a crucial impact in the region. Dedicated to the promotion of a musical syncretism that would join African and European sensibilities, Hyslop considered that festivals offer "... a great stimulus to music making and a rise in standards of performance" (Hyslop 1971, 21).

His writings confirm that the transfer of competitive elements from pre-colonial

traditional music into the framework of institutional festivals began as early as the 1940s and that he himself was at the source of this initiative.

Support for Hyslop's vision of an annual syncretic music festival using African and British folk songs grew, until by 1949 competitions in all the provinces were being held. [...] On the strength of the success of the initial festivals, Hyslop went on to become the country's Drama and Music Officer, a position which he held up to 1977. His policies regarding national competitive festivals in Kenya had a marked impact on Tanzanian practices as well. (Gunderson 1999, quoted by Bartz 2000, 427)

Some of Hyslop's official duties included: "(1) Organisation of Music Courses...; (2) Choice of music for festivals; (3) Adjudication at festivals; [and] (4) Development and recording of African Music..." (Buttery 1957), as the colonial government expresses its' wish to "...develop and revive that zest and enjoyment for life which was such a feature in what might be called the old Africa and which is unfortunately now tending to disappear. It is feared moreover that if it is allowed to disappear society will inevitably suffer" (Ibid.).

The historical emergence of national competitive festivals is additionally clarified by the characteristic continuity of a great number of institutions and usages imported from the colonial Empire into the new Independent State, which in 1963 became Kenya. The educational system reproduces the specific competitive modes of the British model, wherein competition is an essential principle rooted in both national and private education. A final national examination system (KCPE and KCSE<sup>8</sup>) creates ranking lists and encourages students to compete for the best possible results, in order to ensure a place in a better, often more costly, school. According to our surveys among stakeholders, some of the extra-curriculum activities are gradually gaining importance in this competitive system. Trophies and good results obtained in national competitive festivals are a source of esteem for institutions of any level of education and have an impact on their overall placement in the public eye. Therefore, "all schools will have to up their game"<sup>9</sup> and make the necessary efforts in order to not only participate in drama and music competitions organized by the Ministry of Education, but also achieve high results. Since, the better the overall ranking of a school, the more candidates it will receive in the following generation, the higher the fees structure it can implement, etc.

The importance and influence of competitive festivals seems to conflict with the extra-curricular status of music and dance in Kenya; they are currently an optional component of the national curriculum. In practice, this translates into music being offered as a separate subject in a small number of schools, for financial and logistic reasons. Interestingly, whether incorporated in the music or the physical education national syllabus, music and dance sections do not bypass the important competitive festivals reality. Festivals are present in the program as a skill to develop and as an activity to participate in. For example, the primary teachers' education syllabus practicals in music include: "learning new traditional folk songs suitable for festival purposes" and "acquaintance with organization of Music festivals and adjudication"

(Ministry of Education, Primary Teacher Education Syllabus 1994, 259).

Finally, the history of presence of these artistic practices in the national education curriculum reflects the variability of government's cultural policies and the changing political expectations of them. Despite this, the National Drama Festival and the National Music Festival continue to grow each year, not only in terms of number of participants, but also in the intensity of competition and rivalry between different schools, in the complexity of presented stage products, the financial rewards for consultants, the time and energy invested by schools at all levels in preparation and competition.

### **Institutionalization: National Education Policy, Music and Dance**

After Independence the country suffered from the lack of an official cultural policy. Although the first president Jomo Kenyatta, who received training in anthropology, proclaimed himself defender of traditional artistic practices, all attempts to establish a national cultural policy and corresponding institutions seem to have been doomed to failure. Simultaneously, another government agency, the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies, in a 1976 report denounced the education system, which would have acted in the past as an agent of alienation of Kenyans from their own culture, and proposed reforms that would carry out the necessary *corrections*. One of the proposed measures was to “adopt various ethnically based practices as part of a national culture” and “integrate traditional practices with modern scientific and technological developments” (Republic of Kenya 1976, quoted by Opondo 2000, 18).

In the 1980s, the government responded to the absence of a policy framework by the appointment of a commission for music which was, after delivering a highly influential report, promoted into a permanent unit of the Office of the President, *Permanent Presidential Music Commission* (PPMC). One of the main recommendations of the commission was to ensure the teaching of music at all school levels, and the other was to ensure that “opportunities for music and dance performance, such as concerts, organized festivals, (to) be abundant in all areas for the provision of entertainment and exposure to (our) cultural heritage during most times of the year”; and for it to be “... available to all people at minimal cost and effort” (PPMC 1984, viii).

The convergence of all these institutional recommendations made the Ministry of Education a key player in the implementation of new policies, a role it fulfills mainly through the preparation and implementation of curricula, but also through the organization of national music and drama festivals for educational institutions of all levels.

The competitive festivals system organized by the Kenyan Ministry of Education is highly elaborate. Just like any institution of the state, inspired as well by the old colonial administrative system, it develops gradually over four levels: sub-county level (corresponds to the former administrative units of districts), county level (corresponds to former provincial administrative units); regional level (counties resembled in eight regions); and finally the national level (the final level). This hierarchical framework

puts groups of students in annual competition in a multitude of categories and covers all educational levels from primary schools to universities. The accessibility, the geographical extent of the entire country and the annual fixed schedule which they follow, brand these competitive events as powerful weapons for the promotion and preservation of scenic arts in Kenya.

Moreover, their mission does not stop at that. They aspire to identify, promote, and develop the artistic potential and talent among youth by providing opportunities for expression and actualization (Ministry of Education 2014). As an example, the National Drama Festival Official Rules cite the following objectives:

- facilitate the development of artistic potential and talent among Kenyan - learners for holistic growth into responsible citizens;
- promote a sense of nationalism and patriotism;
- give the Kenyan learners an opportunity to acquire and develop positive - values, attitudes skills and competences;
- provide a forum for the Kenyan learners to share and enrich their artistic experiences as individual Kenyans, members of the East African and international communities;
- appreciate, develop, preserve and promote Kenya's positive diverse cultures;
- promote Kiswahili, English, Kenya Sign Language and indigenous languages of the people of Kenya;
- provide a forum for the Kenyan learners to interact and co-exist peacefully as members of one cohesive Kenyan family;
- develop the participants' eloquence in expressing their ideas and feelings so as to enable them communicate effectively and convincingly in their daily lives;
- educate and create awareness on topical and emerging issues affecting the society;
- provide an opportunity for edutainment and quality use of time;
- promote social equality and responsibility» (Ministry of Education 2000, 3-4).

These objectives evoke similar enterprises in West Africa and elsewhere in the world. The important role played by different folklore oriented institutions in the construction of national identity, the promotion of respect for cultural diversity and other values, was the subject of numerous studies (Cf. Kadende-Kaiser & Kaiser 1997; Shay 2002; Askew 2002; Castaldi 2006; Gibert 2007; Djebbari 2011; etc.). In the context of this study on the creation of Kenyan dance heritage, it is our desire to rather put the emphasis on choreographic strategies and staging mechanisms practiced by actors of competitive festivals. These will progressively reveal themselves in the following chapter, as we proceed with an analysis of assessment criteria of which they are a direct reflection. An interpretation of large-scale impacts competitive festivals have on

cultural dance practices and realities in contemporary Kenya (in the last chapter on circulations) will re-evoke some of the identity issues we chose not to elaborate on in this chapter.

### **Formatting Stage Products: Adjudicators and Adjudication Criteria**

In our initial survey on competitive festivals, in 2011 in Nakuru, the fourth largest city in Kenya situated in the former Rift Valley Province, first impressions were unquestionably strong. Instinctively, our attention was drawn to the explanatory comments given by the jury before proclaiming the winner in each category. Their remarks somehow condensed working conceptions on what Kenyans defined as cultural dances, and what are, in their eyes, the traits important to preserve and pass on to younger generations. Later, a thorough analysis of the evaluation task carried out by the jury members revealed marking schemes corresponding to a long list of pre-defined criteria, intended to objectify judgments. Although several attempts at codification have been made (e.g. Wambugu 2015, 121-126), the details on how each *item* (piece, presentation) should be judged are not openly explicit or written down, which ultimately allows each jury member to deploy a certain degree of subjectivity.

Within the National Drama Festival items are marked by a jury of three members, while at the National Music Festival by two jurors only. These individuals are mainly part of the teaching staff, but sometimes music, dance and/or theatre practitioners can be hired for the job. Jurors are selected based on their previous achievements in the field in question and form a decision making group whose influence extends outside the competitive events structure.

In a country where training in the art of choreography does not exist, government competitive festivals act as crucial recruitment grounds. Many administrators, officials, and practitioners in the music and dance field have earned their reputation as experts through their participation and their victories in competitive festivals. The group that makes up today's elite of the cultural dance milieu in government institutions followed, almost without exception, the same professional path: "simple" teachers passionate about music and dance have gained esteem because of consistent success at competitive festivals. This initially leads to their recruitment as a member of jury at competitions. From there they are gradually assimilated into the system and often recruited by a government institution, whether at local or national level. The factuality and the internal bond developed by participants of the national competitive festivals (administrators, adjudicators, trainers and consultants) is exemplified by the existence of a group entitled "I am a product of the Kenya National Drama Festival" on social media.<sup>10</sup>

But how exactly is a dance presented on stage at one of these competitive festivals judged? What are the factual criteria used by the jury? Before we give a response to these questions, we must specify the logic of presentation of ethnographic materials in the following paragraphs. The evaluation scheme referred to hereafter comes from the National Drama Festival, but it is presented within the context of continuous dialogue

with the National Music Festival's regulations, stressing the differences between the two. These differences between the two national competitive festivals are deemed crucial to the construction of dance heritage in contemporary Kenya. In a general manner, the two festivals represent two extremes, two visions of staging traditional dances.

The National Music Festival aims to be more conservative and promotes staging products that would be the closest possible to the "original" version of dances, that it to say to that of their traditional, communal context of execution. Still, this does not signify the search for "absolute authenticity," but takes into account the "forces of dynamism that have acted on the songs and dances as they are recontextualised for performance in different public arenas" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 63). There is talk of growth and innovation, as opposed to "fossilisation" (Ibid., 64) In this context, the first reconfigurations and content modifications of African folk songs and dances were prescribed by Graham Hyslop in the 1940s, and some of them are still retained (Omolo Ongati 2015). However, new guidelines developed throughout the years are considered to be more respective of the "communal aspect of performance that integrates music, dance and instruments as practiced within the African communities hence bringing out the African articulation" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 65). This comment illustrates a definition of authenticity in opposition to European ideas and values of performance and evokes Bendix's suggestion that the crucial question to ask is not so much *what is really authentic*, but *who needs authenticity and why*, as well as *how authenticity has been used by different groups* (Bendix 1997, 21).

Let us illustrate the conservative attitude of the National Music Festival with some comments from the jury: "Here we are trying to stick to the culture of the people you are try trying to represent ..."; "Stick to the cultural ..."; "Capture the idiom ..."; "We have seen some very foreign movements."; "Careful about the artefacts and cultural sounds and shouts. Let them be controlled."; "These were movements from Sakata."<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup>; "Remember you are operating in a well spelled out idiom and it has its own demands...You need to understand the rhythmic behaviours; how do rhythms behave in that community....Don't impose yours, because when you impose yours, then it is no longer an arrangement, you are composing. It's a composition."<sup>13</sup>

The National Drama Festival is more open to creation and innovation, in all presented categories. This is manifest in the "creative" adjective added to the common name of the competitive dance category: thus, the *creative cultural dance* category coincides with what we would classify as "dramatized dance." This staging choice acclaimed by Kenyans consists of introducing a story or a problematized theme in the dance. In the words of our informants: "What you can say to make it simple is that it has to have drama infused in it. The thing is that you have to act and sing and in the process of acting make sure it's not a playact."<sup>14</sup>

George Orido, journalist with long experience of covering the national competitive festivals, as well as participating in them and adjudicating, explains the difference between the two festivals from an authenticity point of view: in the (National) Music Festival the performers "actually bring the traditional, authentic form that was done

many years ago," whereas in the Drama festival "they are not that authentic" because "if you keep to the authentic idiom, you will go nowhere."<sup>15</sup>

The conceptual difference between the two festivals is also reflected in the composition of the dance pieces: "In Drama they concentrate more on the patterns, they give you creativity, they tell you the formations were good, they'll tell you all those things. But there has to be no *masking*."<sup>16</sup> But in Music, masking is allowed because it's a traditional dance, those dances were danced that way."<sup>17</sup>

The existence of difficult adjudication criteria to be met in the Music Festival seems to result in fewer groups selecting to perform in the "cultural dance category." This fact is at the source of an increased popularity of the National Drama Festival, in which the criteria is considered to be freer. According to Orido, the Drama Festival is "more powerful in terms of educational message"<sup>18</sup> and easier to adjudicate on regardless of the ethnic category one presents the item in. It is "not something that is remote"; "it's not academic, it's real."<sup>19</sup>

The adjudication schema for *creative cultural dance* is a grid which consists of three main components. Each stage *item* is first evaluated on the theme of the dance (e.g. female circumcision) and the cultural idiom chosen for interpretation, namely the type of traditional music/dance. As observed in traditional music competition contexts elsewhere in the region, the theme/topic is of paramount importance, because it is used to convey a message the public is sensitive to. "The thematic concerns of the songs inform the communities about political, economic and socio-cultural issues..." (Cooke and Dokotum, in Gunderson and Barz 2000, 277). Some examples of themes staged within the dramatized dance experience include that of corruption, road accidents and public vehicles security, premature marriage for girls, FGM, alcoholism in the family, infidelity, lack of financial stability, issues of not meeting the school fees on time, tribalism and ethnic violence, etc. As we have identified earlier in our definition of cultural dances, the themes and the concerns they express correspond to contemporary problems within the national context, and are not specifically related to the community practices of the idiom (music/dance genre) the performers use.

The second element of evaluation is called choreography. This can account for a maximum of 80 out of 100 points and covers a much wider definition of the term than the one to which we are accustomed to. To demonstrate this, we wish to draw on the definition of choreography within the Music Festival context, explicated by Rose Omolo Ongati (2015):

Choreography is the act of designing and directing a dance sometimes also referred to as dance composition. The two most important levels of choreographic content are usually the choreographic structures and sequence of movements. The first involves those artistic features that characterise a particular dance genre or style making it recognisable to that culture e.g. the *otenga* (shoulder gyrations), squatting, etc. The second is the sequence in which these elements are structured into dance themes including the tempo, rhythm and effort with which they are executed, as well as the characteristic use of space, levels and formation modalities to be able to communicate logically. (Omolo Ongati 2015, 72)

“Choreography” is divided into four interrelated elements: music, the story, the costumes and décor, and dance. Regarding the “dance” criterion, the judges of the dramatic festival observe and mark the choice of movements and dance steps, the level of harmony and refinement in these movements, uniformity, adaptation of movements to the storyline (each dramatic action should be associated to a dance movement without it becoming mime). Finally, the most important is that “...whatever movement it is, it needs to be in the rhythm, in tune with the music.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of music, the jury examines the harmony of singers; soloists; the chorus; the aptness of instruments playing, etc.

The third marked element, entitled “achievement,” refers to the general impression each adjudicator had of the dance. This is probably the most subjective criterion. It is supposed to be based on each individual’s recognition of the flow between music, dance, and dramatized theme. Finally, the marking grid is, in the National Drama Festival, accompanied by another document—the *script*. During the preparations for competition, all the songs and the formations/patterns that will be presented on stage are “scripted.” In other words, they are written down, recorded in graphic form using simple diagrams and drawings, rather than a certified dance notation system. This significantly affects the process of adjudication, since the adjudicator is invited to refer to a written document and assess the degree of compliance with the choreographic intentions stated in it. Our informant considers this method of choreographic construction beneficial for the competing groups, since, in case of problems, the dancers can always rely on the mentioned document which records their initial plan. In his own words: “...don’t you think at the end of the day you will have better choreography then when they are not compelled...”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the competitive institution that proclaims to be liberal and focused on creation, does not however manage to leave a lot of freedom to the interpreter. On the contrary, it creates a fixed and explicit framework, which, due to the annual repetition of national competitive festivals, provokes a return effect. The guidelines and comments, which are also distributed in print to participants at the end of each competition, govern their future choreographic work. Since it is considered that:

...the general aim of any festival is for the music groups to perform and be evaluated so that all the performers can learn from it. It is therefore imperative that performers get an opportunity to learn from the experience in order to improve their performances.  
(Wambugu 2015, 121)

This is the main channel through which competitive festivals have influenced traditional music and dance practices in Kenya. Annual repetition, which aspires to victory by adapting to adjudicators remarks and to the general evaluation criteria, transforms performances to artefacts (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

They become canonical. They take forms that are alien, if not antithetical, to how they are produced and experienced in their local setting, for with repeated exposure, cultural

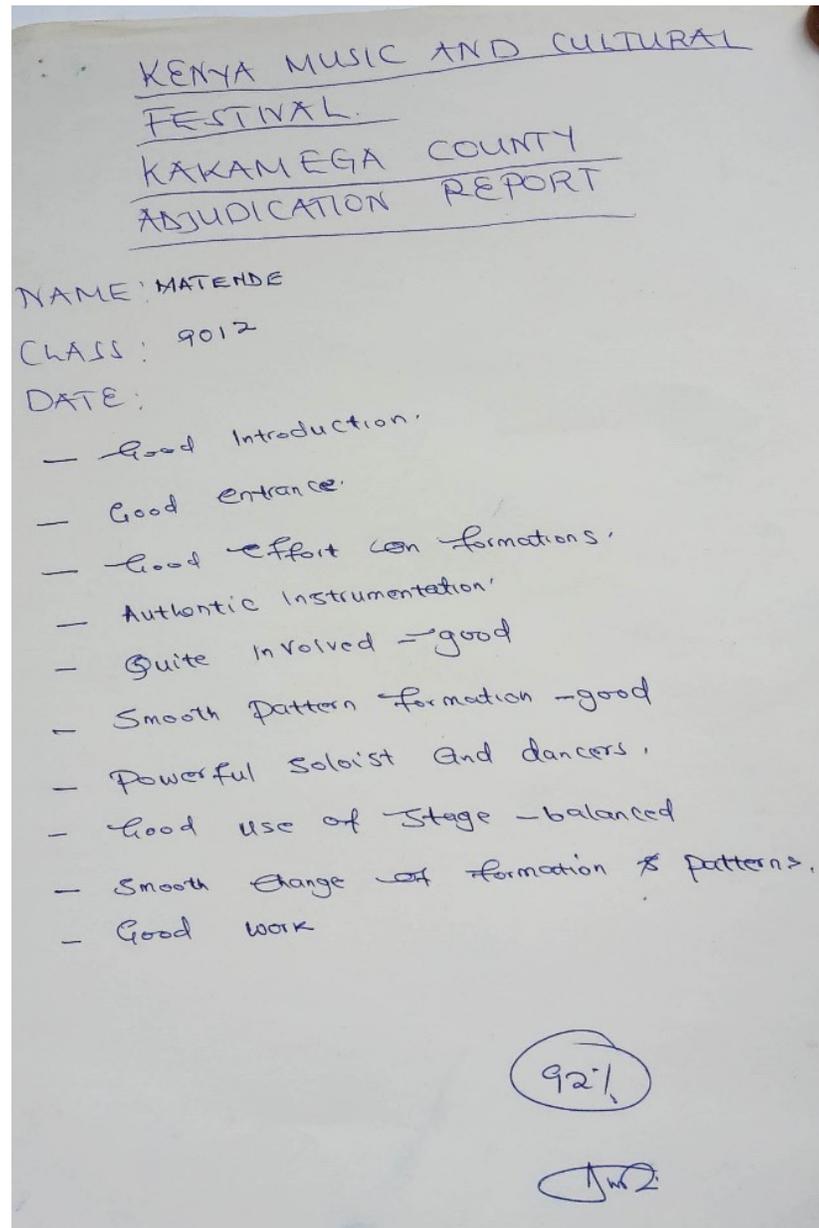


Photo 2: Adjudication comments sheet handed out to *Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth Group* at the end of the Kenya Music Festival 2015 finals held in Kisumu.

performances can become routinized and trivialized. The result may be events that have no clear analogue within the community from which they purportedly derive and that come to resemble one another more than that which they are intended to represent. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 64)

The ambiguous effect national competitive festivals in Kenya have on the dances (and musical content) they (re)present will be detailed in the following chapter.

### **Circulations: the impact of competitive festivals on dance practices in Kenya**

The study of adjudicators' remarks and assessment criteria facilitates the understanding of the common aesthetic and the trends derived from these competitions, which are applied to cultural dances staging all over contemporary Kenya. Because over the years these guidelines have been exported outside the context of festivals and, some say, "interfere with cultural dances."<sup>22</sup> It is clear that "these guidelines created a new idiom and invented a tradition of performing African folk at the KMF space/stage" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 65), and beyond.

Authenticity, the leitmotif of these guidelines is accompanied by explicit advice on how to adequately stage a specific dance and on the most accurate manner to present the tradition of a particular community. Paradoxically, all of these advice inform us of a contemporary vision of the dances in question—of their stage version. To adapt a traditional dance for a stage, a number of changes must be made in terms of its' configuration in space and time, changes put in place primarily so that the viewer does not lose interest in the show. The most common of transformations are the following: reduction of space the dance occupies; decrease in the number of dancers; shortening of the duration of the dance performance; spatial separation of active performers from the passive audience; establishment of a frontal orientation (in order to face the audience); variations in the configuration of dancers on stage and in their movement trajectories; etc. (Dagan 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Gibert 2007).

A second facet of influence the national festivals have had on the practice of traditional dances is the appearance of adaptations characteristic of the competitive environment. The rivalry between competing groups pushes them to give their best, to excel, a strategy that often translates into excesses in musical or choreographic composition. Specifically, we noted that over the years the rhythm of certain dances was accelerated, as an unintentional by-product of the desire to win. Needless to state, this change in musicality mirrors in the rapidity of dance movements. And this musical enthusiasm can also lead to innovations in singing, especially in the solo parts.

A third visually striking impact is the transformation of costumes used for some traditional dances. This is implied by financial and logistic criteria, but also reflects changes in culture and mores. The materials necessary for the manufacture of certain costumes are expensive or difficult to obtain; for example, in many Kenyan communities, in communal ceremonies men used to wear hats and vests made of colobus monkey skin, an animal which is now a protected species. This type of

problem was solved by the gradual introduction of modern materials, a practice that has been accepted by most contemporary folk groups. The example of *isukuti* dance of the Luhya community is illustrative: sisal skirts were gradually replaced with textile flounced skirts for women, and trousers and shirts with ruffles on the sides for men.

Another explicitly cited reason for certain costume transformations is one of a “moral” nature: avoiding excessive nudity. “You do not show people your undergarments ... My God, we are Africans, so let us be decent.”<sup>23</sup> Decency and Christian values are at the source of lengthening of skirts, addition of ruffles and pieces of material at any zone judged inappropriate to expose. Once all these reasons were combined, dance costumes were subject to a certain degree of simplification and codification. An interesting reflection of the codification process can be seen in the colors used for stage costumes by groups from different parts of the country.

Within the Kenyan setting, members of the audience have learnt to attach some colours of costumes to some communities for example the Masaai are usually in red, the Agikuyu in soft brown, Pokot in black, etc. Whenever they line up on stage to perform, members of the audience would automatically know the community represented from the costumes worn by the performer before they stage their performance. (Omolo Ongati 2015, 72)



Photo 3: Typical Agikuyu folk costumes worn by a female cultural dance group from Nyeri, Central Kenya at the Kenya Music Festival 2015 finals. Notice the head jewelry modifications (earrings tied with a head band), the white t-shirts they wear underneath the costume, the costume material and ornaments and the characteristic brown color that replaces the original leather material.

Finally, the constant quest for innovation and originality, that each group pursues in order to distinguish itself from its rivals, frequently leads to the introduction of foreign elements in the dance vocabulary, borrowed from "African popular dance" (in particular the Congolese rumba, referred to in Kenya as *lingala*) or styles of "international dance" (for example, elements inspired by African American music videos).

In short, scenic products of national competitive festivals reveal, like many heritage enterprises, a tension between two poles: the wish to "change nothing" so as to "stay close to what used to be done" and the idea of a need to "take the audience into consideration and to please it", which implies change (Gibert 2007). To this opposition is added the powerful catalyst of rivalry which causes various changes within the musical substrate. The combination of conservative strategies for tradition safeguarding with modern choreographic mechanisms and innovations by a competitive framework gives birth to a new aesthetic and to a specific dance vocabulary that has been incorporated by practitioners and replicated in other dance situations and contexts. Their echoes are easily noted in the dance vocabulary and stage strategies of folklore groups on different levels, both local and national, as well as both rural and urban based ones. Let us draw here on examples from two regions of Kenya, two dance genres belonging to two communities: *isukuti* dance of the Isukha and Idakho Luhya communities<sup>24</sup> in Western Kenya and *gonda* dance of the Giriama Mijikenda community<sup>25</sup> in the coastal region and coastal hinterland.

If one watches several performances of Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth group, a locally based folk group from Kakamega town, he/she will note a consistency in the level of choreographic elaboration (patterns, sequences and design) as well as in the apparent quest for accuracy and uniformity. Whether they are performing at a national public celebration in Nairobi, at a home-coming event for a victorious local politician, or for a commercial event (commissioned by a supermarket for the opening of a new branch), there is a certain quality to their style of performance, a choreographic intent that does not vary. Even when the spatial setting and the social context of the occasion, notably a local funeral, do not allow for elaborate formations, patterns and uniformity, they retain the idea, the intent of it in the way they dance. They are subsequent winner of the Kenya Music Festival and a favorite group of the county government of Kakamega. On the other hand, a recent experience at the Kilifi county Kenya Music Festival levels held at the Takaye social hall (a village near Malindi town) confirmed our hypothesis. The group we had been dancing with in the context of our inquiries on *gonda* dance was not selected to proceed to the nationals. The jury indicated that, although their originality and authenticity was appreciated, they had lacked stage presence and their "item" did not correspond to some of the festivals predetermined conditions. Consequently, the group leaders started discussing adaptations to their usual repertoire and planning for next year's participation in the competitive festival in question.

At the same time, the aesthetic and technical guidelines provided by adjudicators leave their mark on individual dance skills, as both (semi-) professional dancers and amateurs who take the ritual stage center for the pure love of dance, have almost

without exception gone through the national competitive festivals system in their school education years. Eventually, the two parallel traditions—dance in the field and dance on stage—“approach one another in the use of ‘authentic’ elements found in the choreographic output of the professional companies as well as in the degree of theatricalization found in ‘traditional’ performances” (Shay 1999, 31).

The Kenyan dance heritage is in a permanent adjustment process through which multiple stakeholders (individuals, groups, communities and institutions) interact within a complex network that they themselves contribute to knit. National competitive festivals are important nodes in that network. They represent both a physical space for demonstration and creation of heritage products and a symbolic space of their legitimization and their dissemination. In them products are formatted and put in motion in a particular way, and the entire system of circulation and exchange finds renewed energy therein. Fruit of an institutional decision, the competitive system appears to be self-sustaining as carried by the civil society. In this, it is representative of a mode of operation typical of contemporary Kenya.

Although the official design of the festivals aims to showcase the music and the dance from all regions of the country, leaving the competitors with a free choice of dances they wish to stage, our observations show that schools pick, almost without exception,<sup>26</sup> on a dance of the majority population in their home regions. In the case of exceptions, comments and remarks from other groups and participants can be harsh, as they mention “adulterated” or “fake” e.g. *isukuti*. In that sense, “the performers at the festival are to be those to whom the arts ‘belong’ by virtue of their having been acquired in a traditional manner and setting, that is, by insiders from insiders—by descent” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 75). As suggested by various studies, descent still plays a decisive role in our formulations of heritage. Thus, the journey through the nation festival of a specific school or folk group, their victories and failures become representative not only of their school (at the county level), but also of their ethnic tradition (at the regional and national level). In this primary sense of geographical circulation, competitive festivals offer different populations of Kenya the opportunity to take their dance traditions on a journey, to present them on the national stage.

They also promote the exchange of knowledge and of dance materials between young people from different regions, and in some cases, these exchanges develop into musical and choreographic loans that leave a permanent mark on the traditions in contact. The National Drama Festival with the creative cultural dance category is especially favorable for ethnic styles blending, since it “allows you to go out there and bring in all those forms.”<sup>27</sup> Certain stage products bring together elements from different ethnic traditions as a means of achieving creativity: “In drama now you have a Kikuyu cultural dance, but the movements and even the tunes is Luhya or Luo... The words, the lyrics are Kikuyu but the tune is Luo, and even the movement is Luhya or Luo.”<sup>28</sup> Others incorporate contemporary popular music tunes, at times in Kiswahili, with traditional dance movements.

These unusual arrangements are encouraged, as can be seen in the official school syllabi, which state pupils should practice:

“...innovating dances in various traditional styles, combining different skills they have learnt. For example, introducing the rhythms and movements of a Luhya dance into a Kikuyu dance; creating a dance in a Tanzanian style to illustrate ‘ujamaa’, or using the steps for a Scottish dance to make a new dance, etc.” (K.I.E., Psychical Education Syllabus for Upper Primary 2001, 133).

Therefore, “cross-fertilization” becomes an integral part of the dramatized cultural dances spirit. In line with this, we can also talk of encounters between various body techniques and of a mixing of corporealities, which gradually produce a consensus on the body movements that are “truly Kenyan” and even “African.”

Besides the mobility of actors and products, we believe these festivals effectively facilitate the circulation of categories and models. Thus, the tradition of dramatizing cultural dances is found in other heritage institutions (including the national dance troupe of Bomas of Kenya). Dramatized dances and their codes have had a profound influence on the definition of Kenyan cultural dances in general. Their way of occupying the stage, of associating songs of a musical genre, of problematizing current social and political issues are now part of the heritage knowledge of all stakeholders. We talk here of the effect that competitive festivals have had on the institutionalization of dances, but also on the modes of their existence in Kenya.

Thus, the symbolic recognition a local dance obtains through successive victories in competitive festivals represents an essential point on its journey to access the ensemble of practices designated as Kenyan dance heritage. This is due not only to the dissemination of previously unknown (or unfamiliar) traditions to a wider audience, but also to the opportunity to attract attention of government authorities. Access to heritage designation for dancing traditions passes through the network of key stakeholders of the competitive festivals. The decision making network in the field of promoting cultural dances is closely linked to these festivals, since the same people who adjudicate in the festivals (and/or serve as festival administrators) are later integrated into government offices at different levels.

In this context, it is interesting to note the path of *isukuti* dance of Isukha and Idakho Luhya communities, which was recently (in November 2014) inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The origin of this initiative and the research that led to the constitution of the nomination file, lead us back to the same key actors and reveal the importance of political ties and ethnic favoritism in the world of dance heritage Kenya. At the same time, the UNESCO nomination file’s reference to “commercially oriented *isukuti* performances” (UNESCO 2014, 6), indicates the complexity and the fuzziness of the national government’s authenticity concept, as well as its readiness to conform to international discourse tendencies and categories in order to gain access to a certain status for cultural practices, and especially to the accompanying financial support. In fact, our field experience demonstrates that *isukuti* is far from being extinct or in danger of extinction. It is very much present in the local populations’ rituals and communal celebrations, as much as it is prominent

on the national folklore stage. This brings us back to the importance of the competitive festival system.

We believe that *isukuti* dance owes its popularity and support largely to its success at national festivals, which it has been dominating for decades. Our informants confirm this observation and elaborate further on the categorization of ethnic styles in competitive festivals:

Initially (in the 1970s and 1980s) in the dance category was, everybody just came... And you know what happened, it was either a Luhya or a Luo dance that won. And everybody felt so bad. Do you mean these other cultures don't have dances that can win...It is that concern, people started breaking into categories.<sup>29</sup>

The reasons behind this supremacy is the nature of dance rhythms and movements: "it's cause of the intensity and the level of competition it brought (even) at the festivals."<sup>30</sup> The Luhya and Luo dances are specifically favorable for the stage experience and for a competition "because they are vigorous, they're energetic, so they carry the moment with cheer power."<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the competitive festivals are experienced by their participants and by the public as major popular entertainment. At the end of the day, the staging of differences and the process of putting these differences into competition produce a special kind of cooperation and of coexistence that strengthens communities as it creates links between them. This makes the National Music Festival, the National Drama Festival, and the Kenya Music Festival some of the few secular institutions in Kenya in which ethnic identities are experienced non-antagonistically.

An inherent characteristic of dramatized staging of cultural dances makes them particularly suitable for the transmission of messages of pacification. For, "dramatized dances thrive on conflict and then conflict resolution."<sup>32</sup> A stage piece constructed according to this logic both reflects conflict and implies its condemnation, a way to promote the ideal of peace and harmony between groups and individuals. In the fragile political and geopolitical context of contemporary Kenya (post-election violence of 2008, International Criminal Court convocation of the country's leaders, the threat of terrorism, insecurity, politicized power problems, etc.), the role of Reconciliation attributed to these dances is well exploited by politicians who remain close to national festivals, as every year winners are given the honor to perform for the President and his entourage. This circulation between categories and social hierarchies is another typical feature of the competitive institutions.

Finally, another particularly interesting feature of the mobility integrated in the system of national competitive festivals is its latent character. The valorization, dissemination, heritage development, and pacification proceed without explicit claims. The influence that these festivals have on the set of practices designated as *cultural dances of Kenya* and more broadly on the Kenyan society seems unintentional and hardly commented.

## Conclusion

Although school competitions in music and dance are not unique to Kenya or East Africa, their origins, uses, and manifestations are particular. These competitions are an extension of former local practices, in the same way that the competitive education system and the institutional framework established by the British Empire coincided, though involuntarily, if not with the frames of pre-colonial societies, at least with the ethos of initiation and learning systems of age sets.

Yet, even if the history of Kenyan competitive festivals testifies to a continuity with the colonial era, they must be thought of as a creative response and not as a simple copy of colonial practices. When a cultural form is oppressed or eradicated, another emerges to fill its void. Finally, the colonial prohibition of “indigenous” dances conceals an interesting paradox. To be able to monitor and contain music and dance events more effectively, administrators encouraged their “staging.” It is a case of a particular use of spectacularization and folklorization, in which choreography is a tool of partial censorship. If the practice of certain dances had been reduced dramatically or completely stopped, still their folklorized or re-invented practice quickly took the baton.

Co-constructed by all these historical roots, competitive festivals organized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture progressively became very elaborate structures that draw upon several aesthetic systems. The cohabitation of sometimes conflicting recommendations and evaluation criteria is not perceived in terms of tension, but described in the speech of informants as a homogeneous whole. “As it is within competitive...performances that seemingly conflicting aesthetic systems often demonstrate both rigidity and flexibility, formality and adaptability” (Barz in Gunderson & Barz 2000, 396-397).

The differences displayed between the two major festivals, the National Music Festival and the National Drama Festival, and their underlying implications, are not without consequences. Their explicitly different missions and standards are complementary and jointly provide for the objectives inherent to all heritage projects: to preserve and to safeguard but also to promote creation and development of performing arts. The combination of these two dimensions enables Kenyans to negotiate in one single dance form the process of affirmation of cultural specificity without sacrificing the national dimension of their identity (Gibert 2007). National competitive festivals fulfil their role in the formation and consolidation of imagined ethnic communities, as well as in the construction of the Kenyan nation. Competition and rivalry become an effective way to mediate conflict by staging it.

Locally and nationally, competitive festivals have had a profound influence on the vision Kenyans today have of their cultural dances. They forged a vision of dances appropriate for the stage experience; favored their separation from the original context of execution; trained Kenyans in the arts of staging and choreography; encouraged young people to pursue music and dance as a profession; and others. Their accessibility, geographical extent, and recurrence define them as key agents in the study of processes of diffusion and adaptation of the repertoire of dances that form the heritage designation *cultural dances of Kenya*, a topic that merits further investigation.

## Notes

- 1 The Colony and Protectorate of Kenya was officially established in 1920, after the territories of former East Africa Protectorate (also known as British East Africa) were annexed by Britain. Officially, the term “Colony of Kenya” referred to the interior lands, whereas the “Protectorate of Kenya” designated the 16 km coastal strip together with several islands which remained under the sovereignty of the Sultan of Zanzibar until Kenya’s Independence. The British system of indirect rule was introduced in the colony, together with a large number of White immigrants who settled in the central highlands attracted by fertile soil and good farming conditions. This presence of Europeans and their cohabitation with African populations (as well as with Asians – notably the economically and culturally influential Indian community) lead to particular attention to native’s customs and behaviors.
- 2 These numbers are from the 2011 National Music Festival finals held in Nakuru. The participation has since that time most likely risen.
- 3 After a certain editing delay, a selection of performances is also aired on national television.
- 4 In March 2014, we worked with a group of consultants, headed by the chief choreographer George Litswa (of the Department of Culture) in training a group of girls from St Philip’s Mukomari Secondary School in Kakamega County (Western Kenya) for the county level of the National Drama Festivals. We acted as a dance consultant for an *isukuti* creative cultural dance performance.
- 5 From October to November 2015, we incorporated a local folk group – *Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth Group*, and took part in daily rehearsals and the final stage competition at the county level of Kenya Music Festival held in Mumias (Western Kenya). The group won and proceeded to the nationals. In October 2016, the local folk group we had been conducting our research within the coast—*Charo Nyundo Gonda Dambala* from Gede, also participated in the county level of Kenya Music Festival. We, of course, joined them on stage.
- 6 Since the promulgation of a new constitution in 2010, Kenya has been going through an important political and administrative reform—Devolution. The implementation of devolution has presented many challenges and opportunities. This includes the formation of forty seven county governments as well as the subsequent transfer of functions, resources and responsibilities from the national government to the county governments. Culture is one of the functions that was devolved and this had direct consequences on the organization of all cultural events—Kenya Music Festival (KMF) included.
- 7 After Independence (1963), his position is renamed as “Organising Inspector of Music and Drama”.
- 8 Kenya Certificate of Primary Education and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education.
- 9 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 10 Facebook group referred to can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/101451811231/> (last consulted on January 28<sup>th</sup> 2016)
- 11 Sakata is a popular music and dance television broadcast created by Citizen TV channel, which also takes the form of a competition between groups of young dancers from different urban areas in Kenya and East Africa.
- 12 The remarks quoted here for illustration are those made by Ms. Faith Mbote and a second unidentified adjudicator during National Music Festival’s finals (university level) held in Nakuru on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011.
- 13 This remark is a quote from those made by Mr. Khadambi, an adjudicator during Kenya

Music Festival finals held in Kisumu on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2015.

- 14 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 15 Quotes from interview with Mr. George Orido, reporter covering drama and music festivals for Standard newspaper, held in Nairobi on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 16 The term masking is used here as a technical term in choreography and it refers to ways of positioning dancers on the stage. The placement of performers is such that performer 1 prevents the audience from seeing performer 2 - he hides/masks him.
- 17 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 18 Orido interview, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Quote from interview with Wycliff Indakwa Ombwayo, National Drama and Music Festival consultant and regional level administrator, also adjudicator at national levels, held on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 in Kakamega.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Quote from a remark made by Ms. Faith Mbote at the National Music Festival in Nakuru on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011.
- 24 The Luhya (or Luyia) are in numbers the second largest ethnic group in Kenya. This amalgam of Bantu populations, settled in what was in the colonial days referred to as North Kavirondo, named itself into existence through “a self-consciously creative process” (MacArthur 2013, 352) in the 1930s. The Isukha and the Idakho are two constituent groups of that entity, inhabiting predominantly the rural areas of Shinyalu and Ikolomani constituencies, not far from Kakamega town in Western Kenya.
- 25 The Mijikenda (literally translated as “Nine Towns”) are a group of nine related Bantu ethnic groups inhabiting the coast of Kenya, between the Sabaki and the Uмба rivers. The oral history, as well as some archaeological research, identifies their origins in Shungwaya and other parts of northern Somali coast, where from they were pushed down south by the Galla (Oromo) around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Giriama are among the largest of the Mijikenda “houses” and inhabit the area bordered by the coastal cities of Mombasa and Malindi, and inland towns of Mariakani and Kaloleni.
- 26 Within this context, schools from the capital Nairobi and other major urban areas (Mombasa, Kisumu) are an exception and their choice of dance would make a pertinent case study.
- 27 George Orido interview, held in Nairobi on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Gladys Midecha, April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 31 Orido, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 32 Quote from an interview with T.O. Bwire, Production Manager and choreographer of the national troupe—Harambee Dancers from Bomas of Kenya, conducted on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012 in Nairobi.

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