



## Aesthetics of Articulation

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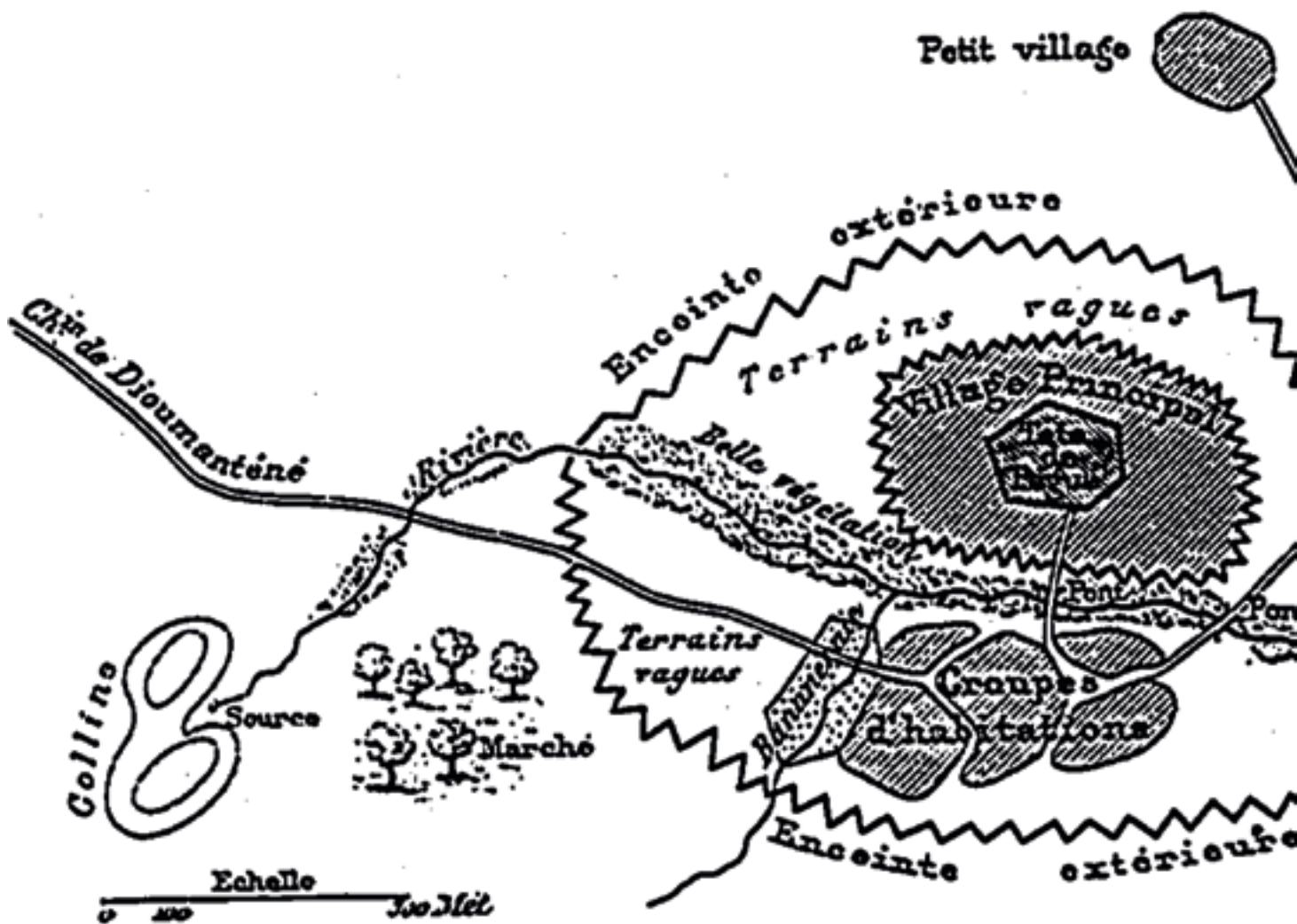
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Plan de Ngélé ou Niélé.

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# Aesthetics of Articulation

The essays in this issue of the Basel Papers on Political Transformations were inspired by the four-year research project *Art/Articulations: Art and the Formation of Social Space in African Cities* funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2015-2019). They represent one of several outcomes – amongst them two PhD theses – resulting from extended field research in the cities of Bamako, Kampala, Kisumu and Korhogo and from collaborative theory workshops.

Art and social space are not conceivable one without another. Nevertheless, only little research has so far addressed this relationship of creative and social practice and its political and aesthetic implications in urban Africa and its global entanglement. Often, art is conceived either as apolitical practice of beautification and decoration in times of peace or as deeply political in times of unrest and oppression. This applies particularly to African settings that tend to be perceived as sites of crisis while evading the attention of mostly Western-centric art theory. It is therefore of particular importance to understand artistic articulation as a social and creative practice that operates also beyond moments of political and conflictual emergency. In what ways does art articulate social and political imagination, and how does artistic practice relate to such social and collective visions? How does articulation work and in what ways is it generative of visual, oral and performative aesthetics? We have addressed these questions in highly diverse cities in East and West Africa that have experienced different levels of political conflict and forms of cultural activity in the last years. The presented three essays are reflective not only of different traditions and cultures of artistic, political and social expression, but also of the fascinating range of methodological approaches to the topic that social anthropology has on offer for both, the actual process of the study and the presentation of its results. Beyond being empirical studies of aesthetic and political articulation, the three essays also speak to theories of articulation. They embrace politics, aesthetics, and not least the formation of social urban space.

We wish to thank our friends, research partners, supporters, and colleagues whose help, advice and collaboration were fundamental for the successful completion of the research project.

Till Förster and Fiona Siegenthaler  
Basel, October 2019





# Art on Rooftops

## Aesthetics of Articulation in African Cities

Franziska Jenni and Frederik Unseld

Rooftops, in many ways, have come to symbolise the transformation of cities across the globe. One of the defining features of the process of ‘planetary urbanisation’ (Brenner and Schmidt 2012) is, without a doubt, increasing property values, with their most-decried corollary, gentrification. In an era of unprecedented capitalisation of urban space, rooftops have long since become multifunctional spaces. They serve a wide variety of purposes, from urban community gardens and agricultural projects in American cities, to floating design apartments for the wealthy. Restaurants, spas, and cinemas can be found on top of buildings around the world. At the same time, the low-income micro-villages on Hongkong’s rooftops (Wu and Canham 2008) are a stark reminder that for those at the other end of the wealth gap (like urban migrants), rooftops may provide a marginal space that reconfigures crucial processes at the frontier of urban transformation.

This article juxtaposes the works of two artists, the photographer Dicko Traoré from Bamako, Mali’s capital, and the poet David Weda from Kisumu, Kenya’s third-largest city. They transformed the rooftops of their houses into makeshift studios from which they create art in order to publish it on Facebook. While Dicko Traoré realised a

photographic self-portrait series from her rooftop, David “Dawe Dawe” Weda shot a series of short video clips of his spoken word performances.

We are interested in the rooftop as a place that is at the same time removed from and integrated into the city, and which provides a compelling example of how upcoming artists in African cities use urban border spaces for their art production. On a continent where the institutionalisation of art is long in coming, this sort of compensation for a lack of suitable rehearsal spaces and studios is nowadays complemented by the use of social media as digital publishing platforms. The spectrum of art exposed on social media ranges from paintings, spoken word, and fashion design, to dance and theatre. Both Traoré and Weda use the combination of a marginal urban border space and Facebook as a platform with great sophistication and command and to rather precise effects. It is art that does not necessarily adhere to the established global art discourse and which is aimed, simultaneously, at a local and international audience, to which (at least technically), both artists’ works are accessible.

By comparing these two series, we identify three comparable moments in the unfolding of their artistic procedure that we frame as moments of articulation (Förster, under review). Both artists’ series involve strong links with their respective cities and offer insights into the perception of urban citizens in general. The specific virtual embeddedness and the fruitful communication situation that both artists create in their works results in a deep entanglement with their urban audiences both off- and online. In order to capture these multiple, simultaneous connections, we propose to frame art as articulation, that is as a “... practice establishing a relation among elements [e.g. artists and other actors] such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985 [2001:105]). To articulate disparate elements is to interpret, bring into order, re-arrange, and re-frame the very sociocultural reality that art may then, in turn, help to shape.

We feel that much of the scholarly debate about African art focuses either on art with a long but often unknown local history (usually termed ‘traditional’) or on art that is contemporary, highly mobile, and becomes part of the discourse of the international art world. Despite the intensifying interest that is directed towards art from Africa and its diasporas, the knowledge that situates Africa and its art continues to be produced in the Global North (Enwezor 1999, Simbao 2017). As we will show, in the “abject” post-colonial life-worlds characterised by structural economic violence (Ferguson 1999) the propensity to articulate becomes crucial for imagining purposeful lives – whether for one’s immediate, individual trajectory or for collective ways of living together.

Both Traoré and Weda belong to a generation that has come up in the 1990s in societies that were still marked by structural adjustment (in general Ferguson 1999, for Kenya see Smith 2008) and in which a deep crisis of social reproduction was palpable (Weiss 2004). Mbembe and Roitmann’s *Figures of the subject in times of crisis* (1995) is still cogent today, with its description of early 1990s Cameroon as an example of a post-colonial, neoliberal life-world gone awry and out of joint. One point that the authors eloquently emphasise is of significance here, namely the particular physical and mental violence that arises from a ‘breakdown of meaning’ in such a setting, or in Mbembe and Roitman’s words:

“... the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (*facticity*) and the corpus of significations or meanings (*ideality*) available to explain and interpret what happens [and] to act efficaciously” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 324; emphasis in original).

Both Weda and Traoré take up the challenge of inspecting and counteracting this mental violence by establishing links between discursive elements that are silenced, suppressed, and frowned upon. We contend that much of the vibrant, social creativity in African cities can be attributed to the plural nature of their life-worlds, which is ultimately caused by an

intentional and systemic neglect of the population by the powers that be (Chabal and Daloz 1999). In a context of hand-to-mouth survivalism, where actors constantly juggle multiple sources of income (Thieme 2017), the social is no longer unified by an ensemble of necessary values and norms. Making art as an articulatory practice in such a setting may assume an existential dimension in its potential to imagine purposeful lives.

In a social space characterised by stark competition over limited resources, the overwhelmingly young majority of urban dwellers – the ‘youth’ – is restricted to a marginal position. Their ability to articulate and thereby create sociocultural realities and to imagine new positions for actors within social spaces and ways of acting efficaciously, however, could become a powerful tool of social transformation as well as a resource in a merciless urban economy.

Both Traoré’s and Weda’s artistic series produced on the rooftops of the houses they inhabit began as a reaction to the experience of violence. For Traoré, it was the sudden death of the filmmaker and visual artist Bakary Diallo, her friend and role model, who died in a tragic plane crash in northern Mali. Re-approaching the visual arts she had shared passionately with her friend became a way for her to carry on with life. Out of a moment of grief, she began to take a series of performative self-portrait photographs on the roof terrace of her family’s home in the Kalaban Coura neighbourhood of Bamako. David Weda, after finishing secondary school, found himself outside of any support system following frictions with his family. Weda moved into a shared tenement in Nairobi’s infamous shanty town of Kibera and, like many before him, found himself with his back to the wall in the unsparing metropolitan economy. To secure his survival, he resorted to crime and for nearly a year, Weda lived the life of a hoodlum – robbing people at night with a plastic gun from a video game shop. Weda consequently sat a one-year prison sentence but was finally acquitted. In a bid to turn his life around, he joined a film school and later on started doing spoken word pieces; a turning point in his life that he describes as a “second chance” offered to him by God.

By comparing the two series, we deduced three different articulatory moments. The first moment describes the process of how both artists constitute their artistic voice by looking at how they link different images of the social. The second moment goes a step further. In the course of their series, both artists challenge hegemonic discourses by bringing to the fore latent discursive elements that normally remain silenced – such as those around gender-based violence. To do this, both artists draw on discursive formations that are by and large introduced by NGOs and international development agencies, thereby establishing links to this important economic market. In the third and final moment that we discern, both artists go even further and assume an outright socio-political stance. Dawe Dawe, in his series, connects with another artist and activist in town and the episode of his series takes on an explicitly political character. Traoré also focuses on the general political climate in her country and beyond, establishing links to the political situation in other African countries.

## Step 1: “#performance\_with\_myself”: Making of an Artistic Position

Between 2014 and 2017 Dicko Traoré used the family’s rooftop as a kind of outdoor studio in the early mornings to create a series of around 20 photographs, which she regularly (re) posted on Facebook and which she also exhibited at three different restaurants in her home town Bamako. The photos of the series all show carefully staged scenes in which several characters are involved in a plot, as if they were present on a film set. A closer look reveals that all the characters depicted are performed by the artist Dicko Traoré herself.

References to the cinema played an important role in Mali's earlier studio photography (from the 1950s onwards). After seeing a film in the movie theatre, young men in particular loved to go to a photo studio to be photographed in the same poses as the stars they had just admired on the screen (see for example Keller 2008 for Mali, but also Egloff 2013 for Cameroon). At that time, the subjects portrayed often took on a theatrically exaggerated pose while looking directly into the camera, as is usual for studio portraits. Dicko Traoré intensified the cinematographic effect in her pictures: the depicted personalities are completely immersed in their respective actions without paying attention to external viewers. Her pictures are also taken outside of the artificial space of the studio, using the real environment of the family's house terrace as a backdrop, as well as the broader cityscape emerging in a more distant background.

At the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasséké Kouyaté* in Bamako, as well as in many different occasional workshops, Dicko Traoré received both an education in photography as well as in filmmaking. She still moves professionally as a freelancer between the two genres or, as in this series, combines them in a creative way.

Since it is extremely difficult for prospective filmmakers in Mali to obtain the necessary financial and professional support to carry out a whole film project, this photo series can be perceived as kind of a lambent, low-budget substitution, in which Dicko Traoré presents a series of pictures as if they would be film stills of a TV series she is about to produce. To keep the costs low, Dicko Traoré did not only turn into an actress in front of the camera in order to remain in the analogy of cinema, she was also the photographer, the director, the editor, and the promoter of her work. In short, it was a one-woman show. Every photograph can be seen as a TV-like episode of a series she called *Les folies de Djambaar*, 'The follies of *Djambaar*', or *#performance\_with\_myself*. Each 'film still' provides insights into what events and themes discussed (or oppressed) in broader social discourse are absorbed by the artist, how she relates to the social context in which she lives, and how she tries to re(shape) it through her art.

The choice of two titles for the series suggests that Traoré addresses both a local and an international audience. The word *djambaar* in the first title means 'brave' or 'courageous' in the Wolof version of the Fulfulde word *jaambaaro*. Dicko Traoré integrated this term into her artist name, which is Dickonet *Djambaar* – 'Dickonet, the brave and courageous'. In the first title of this photo series, Traoré ironically describes her photographs as follies. This term is congruent with how the majority of Bamako's society perceive artists in general, namely as "crazy" people who pursue an idiosyncratic, not always comprehensible and unprofitable occupation. Her second title is based more on an international social media culture, in which hashtags are used to make specific posts easily searchable and thus, more visible and popular. The title also alludes to the ubiquitous circulation of the selfie portrait, which has perhaps become *the* token photograph to promote oneself on social media.

Another unifying feature of the photos in this series is that the process of their creation is very similar to that of a film. Like a cinematographer who shoots short sequences that are later montaged into a whole movie, Traoré edited her final photographs by meticulously stitching several pictures together in a lengthy digital post-production process. All the depicted scenes are created *ex post* and have therefore never taken place like this on the rooftop.

In the first two pictures (below), the artist appears twice, like a pair of twins. The two Dicko Traorés – or rather, her digital doubles – wear the same dress, which reinforces this interpretation. Again, Traoré relates to well-known West African pictorial aesthetics, since even in earlier studio photography, customers had photographic double portraits<sup>1</sup>

1 In the scholarly literature, photographic double or "twin" portraits include different kinds of photographs representing different ideas and concepts. See Sprague, 1978; Micheli, 2011 and in contrast to the latter also Keller, 2008, who interpreted especially the portraits of similarly to equally dressed persons in a picture not as an expression of "twinness" (Micheli), but more convincingly of "*badenya* relationships".



Fig. 1: *Les dimanches à Bamako ...!*  
 'Sundays in Bamako ...!'  
 Dicko Traoré 2015,  
 courtesy of the artist.

made. In this case, I (Franziska Jenni) am referring only to the photographs taken by the technique of double exposure, in the sense that on the surface of these pictures the same individual is shown twice<sup>2</sup>. However, as Angelo Micheli (2011) suggests for this kind of photographs, the two depicted persons have to be perceived as one human being and its respective spiritual twin or *ja*<sup>3</sup> (Keller 2008) who is “the double of a person’s soul [*ni*]” (Keller, 2008: 440). This double belongs to the realm of the invisible but is an integral part of the Manding<sup>4</sup> understanding of what a *person* is. While the persons in the older double portraits were almost always staged symmetrically in the same rigid poses, Traoré’s “twins” are now portrayed in different positions to each other and therefore create more narrative content and dynamism.

Through the dual appearance of the artist, it seems that Traoré is able to externalise internal conversations that she may have with her *ja/ni*. By visualising them through photo montage she is able to let the viewer participate in the most intimate dialogues one can have, namely with oneself.

By showing these intimate scenes, Traoré herself becomes vulnerable. At the same time, precisely by staging her own inner struggles, she gives hope to others in showing that they are not alone and that it is important to care about one’s own well-being – physically as well as mentally; this in a context of survival in the environment of a post-colonial, neoliberal, African city. She demonstrates her own vulnerability without making it a complete autobiography by maintaining a relationship to others, real and imagined.

In the first picture, the artist is lying comfortably stretched out on the balustrade of the roof terrace while her spirit double is sitting behind her, giving her a gentle head

- 2 Of course, there are also other types of double exposures, such as the mounting of a portrait with a short text for greeting cards or portraits of different people (Keller, 2008: 262).
- 3 In *bamanan* the term *ja* – to complicate the subject – refers to all kinds of double images that are provoked by “shadows, reflections, and images” (Keller, 2008: 440). In this sense the photograph of a depicted person itself may be understood as “the double of a person’s soul”.
- 4 In literature, Mande and Manding are often used as synonyms, which is confusing. Mande is scientifically referred to as a primary branch of the Niger-Congo languages, which encompasses very different cultures like the Vai, Mende, Soso, Soninke, Kpele, etc. But it also includes the Manding speaking people, who in turn are divided into three subgroups, Bamana, Maninka and Jula. In this article I refer mainly to the latter because in Bamako and its surroundings they make up the majority of the population. They do not only speak related languages, but also share cultural, religious, and socio-political idiosyncrasies (Keller, 2008:12).

massage. Both women are dressed alike. The colours of their clothing fit perfectly into Bamako's urban cityscape, which appears in the picture as a part of the terrace and a house wall in the foreground with the wider architecture in the background. Visually, the silhouette of Traoré's lying body merges with the architecture in the background, demarcating the otherwise fluent passage between rooftop and cityscape. The viewer might imagine traffic sounds from afar being audible from the terrace. While the usual hustle and bustle of the city commences in the morning as city dwellers prepare to tackle a new day, Dicko Traoré is lying down, resting.

In the composition, her body is located at the intersection of the city and her private home, between noise and calmness, between the hyper-connected urban space, indicated by satellite dishes and radio masts that rise up into the sky, and the undisturbed place of the home terrace, where one can re-connect with oneself before facing the hectic city life of the capital.

The vantage point of the rooftop becomes a means of situating herself, to create a standpoint from which she makes her presence felt, reflects on herself and the society she is living in, and makes her worldview, wishes, concerns, and desires visible. By working on and depicting the rooftop, using it as a standpoint and visual frame of mind, Traoré is able, or so it seems, to calmly relate to herself and her surrounding – the city, the society, and the world at large.

Over the course of three years, Traore re-posted her pictures of this series regularly on Facebook. By doing so, she constantly re-contextualized her pictures by giving them new captions<sup>5</sup> and linking them to events or emotional states of mind in the respective present. At the same time, the process of re-posting, of re-iterating her articulations, allows her to add density to the temporally dispersed publication of her series. This way, Traoré keeps her series and her artistic persona “updated”, an important component of the fast-paced attention economy of Facebook.

The process of re-posting and re-interpreting her own articulations by means of captions enables Traoré to establish more or less permanent links with her audience. On August 16, 2017 for example, she captioned the above-mentioned picture: *Parfois la vie peut être injuste, mais ce n'est pas une raison pour renoncer à elle*, ‘Sometimes life can be unfair, but that is not a reason to give up on it’. In this sense, the depicted scene might be perceived as a moment of withdrawal into solitude to recover after a difficult situation or passage, and an invitation or encouragement for the audience to do the same.

An earlier posting of the same photograph with a different caption shows that the process also allows to use such articulations for distanciation. On April 23, 2017, Traore posted the image with the caption: *Les dimanches à Bamako...!*, ‘Sundays in Bamako...!’. This half-begun phrase, familiar to those who know Malian music, alludes to the catchy song *Dimanche à Bamako* (2005) by the well-known duo Amadou and Mariam. The three dots of her caption evoke the rest of the chorus' first line: *Les dimanches à Bamako c'est le jour de mariage*, ‘Sundays in Bamako are the wedding day’. Indeed, Sunday is the preferred day to celebrate weddings in Bamako. Weddings are key social events in Manding culture, through which important social ties between families are reaffirmed, guaranteeing the survival of large extended family networks. This picture's caption represents the broader societal discourse in Bamako, namely one's duty (especially women's duty) to go to weddings on Sundays, socialising and celebrating with others. There is an expectation for women to show up in nice and expensive dresses and by doing so, represent their husband's financial capacity. Dicko Traoré obviously withdraws herself from the conventional process of social reproduction in the picture. She distances herself from social conventions. Instead of visiting weddings on a Sunday, or even becoming a bride herself, the artist seems to suggest that she would rather enjoy a time-out with herself, on the rooftop.

5 Due to lack of space, the photographs printed here have only been labelled with one caption each.



Fig. 2: *Réveils-toi et agis... parce que personne ne le fera à ta place!!!*, 'Wake up and do something... because no one will do it for you!!!'  
 Dicko Traoré 2016, courtesy of the artist.

Dicko Traoré's spiritual double is now standing upright on the roof terrace (above). She holds a bucket of water in her hands, which she pours over herself without a trace of pity. The Dicko sitting with outstretched legs on a colourful woven plastic mat tries to protect her head from this rude awakening. She does not seem pleased by this unexpected morning shower. This image visualises a much rougher internal dialogue and illustrates just how difficult it is to develop a purposeful imagination of one's life individually while rejecting other, important aspects of social life.

Dicko Traoré posted this picture again several times on Facebook, accompanied with captions stressing the overall importance of individual will and motivation: *Réveils-toi, lève-toi, bats-toi pour ton avenir...*, 'Wake up, get up, fight for your future ...' (April 20, 2017) or *Réveils-toi et agis... parce que personne ne le fera à ta place!!!*, 'Wake up and do something... because no one will do it for you!!!' (August 10, 2017). The image is a wakeup call to the artists' peers and age-mates: in a society, where one can no longer expect any stepping stone for one's own progress, one has to depend, in large part, on oneself.

To survive in an everyday, post-colonial, African city, one has to be psychologically and physically very strong. This is especially true for most young people in Mali, who often do not have permanent jobs. Every morning they have to decide where and with whom they should try their luck. Therefore, even to get up in the morning, to motivate oneself to tackle a new day, may become a huge challenge.

Other images in Traoré's series replicate the idea that relying on oneself is better than relying on others. This emphasis on individuality is diametrically opposed to long-standing concepts of thought in Manding culture, in which *mɔ́ɔ́ɔ́*<sup>6</sup> or 'personhood' plays an integral role. When I asked Dicko Traoré how she would circumscribe the meaning of *mɔ́ɔ́ɔ́* she answered by quoting a proverb: *Ibina moko ou bolo, ka balo moko ou bolo, ibita moko ou bolo*, 'You come into the world in people's hands and you leave the world in their hands'. The saying implies that social relations precede individuals, and will last even after their death. Therefore, as Saskia Brand writes, "it is only by means of social ties that one can achieve personhood" (2001: 16). It is only through cooperation and participation in social acts, through observance of norms and values, that an individual human being becomes a whole person (Whitehouse 2017).

In a country that finds itself in an even more insecure political and economic situation since 2012, social relations among people (on all levels of society) are exposed to more and more tensions.

6 <http://www.mali-pense.net/bm/lexicon/m.htm> (last accessed on August 31, 2019)

Traoré is not alone in her judgement of broken social links. She joins an influential female artistic voice from Bamako, famous singer Oumou Sangaré, who also addresses the loss of social cohesion as a danger in today's society. On her latest album (2017) the singer complains repeatedly in her lyrics of the title song *mɔɔɔɔ* that the people of today can no longer be trusted. Neither with someone who needs your help, nor with your own spouse can you be sure that he or she will not become your enemy.

Sangaré's lyrics, as well as Traoré's photographs, resonate with a broader discourse among Malians judging today's society and the broader situation of their country in terms of loss and nostalgia. During the times of Sundjata Keita, in the 13th century, large parts of today's Mali belonged to a prosperous, influential empire in West Africa. Malians speak with pride of that era at any occasion. But this glorious past stands in sharp contrast to current everyday life. Today, the country is one of the poorest in the world. Its narrow political leeway on the international stage is further narrowed down by multilateral geo-political power struggles that have affected the country for several years. Since the last round of armed conflicts in 2012, many Malians mourn the loss of the former social cohesion of their country. In a society in which a large majority tries to survive under harsh and insecure economic and political circumstances a concept of personhood that is based on mutual social interdependency is constantly in danger of losing balance. On the one hand social relations are indispensable to survive due to the absence of a welfare state. On the other hand, the circumstances in which they unfold are so difficult that they are also described simultaneously as suffocating, exhaustive, conflictual, and a source of mistrust. Dicko Traoré's first two pictures deal with the more problematic aspects of social ties. She does not do this so much by depicting them visually. Rather, she asks her audience to look out for themselves from time to time, to take distance in order to be able to (re)connect with others again.

The theme of tense social ties and broken relationships is also treated by David Weda, whose artist name is Dawe Dawe Weda. Based in Kisumu today, Weda grew up in his rural home in Siaya, western Kenya, as well as in Nairobi's socially mixed Mathare North neighbourhood. His art bears the imprint of both the culture of the rural hinterland and the cosmopolitan, highly-connected capital metropolis. Weda also uses the rooftop of the student housing in which he stays while undergoing training as a nurse to disseminate his poetic reflections on city life in Kisumu. Dawe Dawe usually performs his spoken word pieces live during various artistic events in the city, such as the spoken word program *Poetic Hour*. In 2017, he began working on a series of short video clips of his spoken-word performances, recorded solitarily on his rooftop.

While there are many commonalities between Traoré and Weda's work, there is a clear difference in tone. Where Traoré works with carefully composed pictures, joining elements to create calculated provocations, Dawe Dawe's 'selfie' videos of his spoken word performances, are coarse, rugged, and direct. In his (to date) eight pieces of poetry in Dholuo language, Dawe Dawe treats established themes and topics in local popular music (Prince 2006). A dominating theme is the ambiguity of romance and of sexual relationships (and of social relationships in general), as well as the crisis of social reproduction (Weiss 2004) that runs deeply through the poet's life and art.

In the following, I (Frederik Unseld) analyse the first piece in his series and emphasize how, through specific textual and performative means, the artist joins disparate elements into a convincing communication situation, articulating an art genre that establishes the artist as part of a Luo cultural sphere as well as of the realm of the global hip-hop movement.

The title of each piece in the series simply bears the series' title followed by a Roman numeral. *Juogi Wuoyo I* is a love song, addressed with great lovesickness but in an accusatory tone to the loved one, who has opted to leave for wealthier competitors. It is a feverish complaint, marked by feelings of shame, as well as tenderness for the former partner. The first four lines establish the conflict of the poem, the loss of the loved one, and the nostalgic retrospect of the narrator incited by his feelings of heartbreak and grief.





Fig. 3: Stills from the poet's performance on the rooftop, filmed by himself with a smartphone.

Baby rwak lepi wadhi ba e show  
 Baby be iparo ka watugo 'by sho'  
   I love you baby  
   But I can't have you baby

Baby dress up and let's go to the show  
 Baby do you recall us playing 'by sho'?  
 I love you baby  
 But I can't have you baby

The beginning of this first part of the series begins with a clever and rather concealed comment on the speaking situation, through which the poet attempts to establish his artistic persona. The first line *Baby rwak lepi wadhi ba e show*, (Dholuo 'Baby dress up and let's go to the show'), is a reference to a Benga song by the late Okatch Biggie. Through his reverence, the poet situates his own hip-hop-derived spoken word within a longer local tradition of Luo poetry and music, which has provided vivid socio-cultural commentary to Kenyan history through the centuries (Ogude 2012).

The poem's second line further weaves the rooftop performance into a local context. *Baby be iparo ka watugo 'by sho'*, (Dholuo 'Baby do you recall us playing 'by sho'?') evokes again an intimate, heartfelt relationship, that lies in the past: The narrator asks the heroine if she recalls playing 'by sho', a hand-clapping co-ordination type of game usually played by children. That way, the poet evokes the innocent character of a relationship that lies in the past, perhaps a childhood or teenage love. By referencing the popular game, the poet evokes a broadly shared collective memory – at least for listeners from his own generation – as well as the more recent social media phenomenon around the game. The game is commonly accompanied by a rhyming recital. The story of the lyrics of this recital went viral when the real lyrics, apparently stemming from South Africa, were published on social media alongside the common makeshift 'translation' to English (an approximation, really) to the nearest-sounding English word, that had rendered the original lyrics more or less meaningless. Followed by the caption "You've been singing it wrong all these years," the clarification went viral on Facebook.

Dawe Dawe references this well-known language imbroglio and raises questions over communication in general, both on- and offline, between hero and loved one, and between online poetry and audience. Dawe Dawe or *Juogi* wisely points to the possibility of his performance getting lost-in-translation, a real risk considering his choice for the local language Dholuo (see below). The communication situation, or at least its visual aspect – the background of the rooftop as a setting, is brought up by two spectators. In the video, Weda uses the typical framing of a selfie portrait, holding the camera slightly upward with his right arm, making himself the better part of the frame. The most visible

difference between the episodes is the different colour of his shirt. As Weda slowly moves around, we perceive the unfinished walls of the upper floor of the house in which he stays, with steel girders pointing to the sky. Facebook user Ododo Lameck comments in Swahili on the place in one of the episodes posted on Facebook: *hamko kwa building, mko nje ya building*, ‘you are not inside the building, you are outside the building’, followed by laughing smileys. The user comment alludes to the staple phrase in hip-hop culture, “I’m in the house”. The phrase is used by rappers to indicate their acute presence, their *Dasein* – their *being-there* – in the situational context of the performance, be it on stage or on a record. The user’s comment suggests playful depreciation for the rooftop as a setup, revealed through the (sub-cultural) pun, “you are not in the house, you are outside the house”. Dawe Dawe replies to the comment indirectly: *haha hii ni holy grounds*, ‘haha, these are holy grounds’, imbuing the place of the performance, jokingly, with an exaggerated sense of importance. This is well in line with hip-hop sub-culture’s reverence for urban margins like street corners, back alleys, etc.

The importance of the seemingly negligible question of the place and setup, where the performance is recorded, is taken up in yet another reply to user Ododo Lameck’s original comment. User Jimmy Mwendwa comments in Swahili: *wako outstanding ama??? kuuliza tu*, (‘They are outstanding, right? Just asking’), followed by laughing smileys. The comment refers again to the contentious question of the space from which the poet speaks. This user’s comment is a pun that plays with the double sense of the English verb ‘to stand out’, which denotes both something physically protruding, as a rooftop, and someone with exceptional qualities or abilities, like the performer in the video. When the user comments that the performance is ‘outstanding’, it is again a playfully mischievous, but really approving meta-comment on Dawe Dawe’s shrewd combination of performative abilities and use of social media.

The danger of getting lost-in-translation with this new communication channel becomes understandable when one ponders the social creativity involved when performing a poetry piece that owes to Benga music of the 1990s as much as to the spoken word style of performance established by U.S. rap label Def Jam during the same decade. The decisive factor in establishing a link between the two poetic traditions – that may seem stylistically as much apart as geographically – is using Dholuo language. Dawe Dawe and his mentor and peer-poet Brian Oundo, alias Janabii, with whom I equally shared many conversations, both pioneered this style.

Dholuo is one out of the three languages habitually spoken in Kisumu, often interchangeably with English, Swahili and Sheng, an urban slang language combining Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages. For this reason, Dholuo is effectively understood to varying degrees in Kisumu by different actors, especially because it is often the language that is taught last to children, as English and Swahili are deemed more valuable for a child’s future. Dawe Dawe grew up in his rural home in Siaya, in the north of Kisumu and brings a ‘deep’ understanding of the language that may not be well understood by all listeners. „I have to dig a lot of sources to inspire me to come up with a Luo piece, listen to Luo radio shows, Luo songs, new vocabularies ... when I’m back in the countryside I ask a lot of questions ... like, what does such and such word mean?“

The desire to work with the very cultural roots of his home region in turn demands a special effort on behalf of the audience. Members of the audience of the poetry events in Kisumu that I have attended reported difficulties understanding Dawe Dawe’s lyrics and even asking the poet about the meaning of specific words after performances. In this sense, Weda not only establishes links to global media, but also looks into the culture of the rural hinterland, in order to anchor his art. He takes the calculated risk of droppings in the reception process, but with the advantage of inscribing himself into a Luo media sphere of local TV and radio stations. After the exposition of the topic, the subject of the piece unfolds, namely the failure to retain the loved one because of one’s financial limitations. The rejection of the narrator by the heroine for financially more able competitors is the central conflict of the poem.

Nikech ntie jok moheri	Cuz there are guys who love you
Ma oro ni gha Ferrari	Who send you taxis
Mar idho ferry	To board ferries
Ma koniga ni JuoGi giri gi be jokmaseri?	Guys who tell you that JuoGi is not eligible to be your suitor?
JuoGi cha be ok en serious	JuoGi doesn't seem serious

In this somewhat ironic panegyric, the hero appears terrorised by the idea that his rivals are able to send the beloved one transport money. Instead of using the more neutral term “taxi”, the poet uses the colloquial street-level loan word “Ferrari”, used for transport in general, whether by private means or bus. There is a fine line between self-mockery and bitterness, when the poet invokes this experience of a decomposing masculinity, in a context, where structural economic violence has transformed the idea of a male breadwinner into something of an aspirational ideal. The pressures of the financial limitations, crushing the narrator’s need and desire, lead the hero later on in the poem – in the romantic tradition – into suicidal thoughts and to the border of insanity because of his unanswered attempts.

Like in Traoré’s puzzling visual self-explorations, Dawe Dawe ultimately stands and remains alone on his rooftop. There is no crowd of friends and bystanders who could cheer him up and performatively approve his recital. He is very much all by himself, up for his own approval, and later, perhaps anticipated approval on Facebook.

In such a situation, one has to befriend oneself. Like Traoré, Dawe Dawe takes part in a new process of making the self in his digital performance, and uses self(ie)-art to create a digital *doppelgänger*. Weda does not use his usual stage name Dawe Dawe for the present cycle, but he adopts the name of his other artistic persona, *Juogi*, ‘the spirit’, hence the title of the series *Juogi Wuoyo*, ‘The spirits are speaking’. This adds another layer to the speaking situation, in which the writer establishes a plurality of voices. In a stream-of-consciousness like internal monologue, the narrator starts imitating the voices of those competitors badmouthing him in front of his beloved one, voices who sarcastically frown upon the narrator’s financial unsteadiness and social significance, which makes the narrator refer to himself in Dholuo in the third person: *JuoGi cha be ok en serious*, ‘JuoGi doesn’t seem serious’. The speaking situation is further fragmented, when one considers that the performed piece was posted on Dawe Dawe’s Facebook site, but filmed on the rooftop of the house where David Weda lives his everyday life. Within the seemingly-mundane performance, the purportedly undividable in-dividuum is divided into self and digital other. This strategy, chosen consciously or not, establishes a distance between speaker, audience, and the emotions that are palpable throughout the piece. By ‘filtering’ the heartfelt complaint through different physical and digital identities and presences, the poet establishes a delicate and fruitful communication situation. The audience that is factored into the solitary performance on the rooftop, only comes in after the moment of production, once the video is uploaded into cyberspace.

We have looked at how both artists constitute a communication situation, a space from which to express themselves and perform their art. Both do it alone, doing self(ie)-art and publishing it on social media. In their performances they draw on discourses from global media but also weave their performances into a local sphere of media circulation, using distinctly local idioms.

In the following second step we look at how both artists draw on elements of humanitarian discourses and the development industry to establish links to specific emancipatory liberal discourses (largely silenced in their own societies), thereby inscribing themselves into an international aesthetic of protest.

## Step 2: “*Mon corps n’est pas un tam-tam*”: Challenging dominant discourse through an international aesthetic of protest

In recent years, voices in Mali have grown louder with regard to domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment against girls and women. The preliminary peak<sup>7</sup> was reached by the end of 2017 and beginning 2018, when a young receptionist was found murdered by her husband in an office at the presidential palace. It peaked a second time when several gang rapes in Bamako became public shortly after each other. One of these gang rapes was even filmed and later widely spread on social media (a first in Mali) causing a public outcry and wave of indignation in society but not at state level. There are no reliable statistics on domestic violence because only very few offences are reported and end up in court. Most of the affected women do not talk about it because they fear stigmatisation and prejudice.

Traoré took up the delicate topic in a committed manner and with an activist aesthetic, formulating a pertinent way to visualize this difficult subject.

While the view on the broader city scape was a prominent component in the first picture mentioned, the urban surrounding in this third photograph is reduced to a section on the wall of Traoré’s house and a part of the roof terrace. Through this much narrower framing, the persons depicted immediately come into the focus of the viewer’s attention as well as their respective positionality in relation to each other instead of their connection to the outside world. In the foreground three women are squatting on a cement brick, their upper bodies bent forward. Their faces are turned away from the camera. They have all wrapped an indigo dyed cloth around their bodies. Their upper backs are exposed and bloody wounds, only provisionally treated, can be seen on each of them. Dicko Traoré stands upright and almost protective in front of the wall, wrapped in a blue cloth as well, holding a cardboard sign in her hands that says, *Mon corps n’est pas un tam-tam*, ‘My body is not a drum’.

The dark blue died wrappers embellished with lighter blue ornaments are mostly used to cover the bride’s face during the ceremonial washing of her body at the end of her wedding day before she is accompanied to her husband’s compound. To a local audience or to people familiar with the cultural background, it becomes immediately clear that these women have been injured through acts of domestic violence. The perpetrator is not present in the picture. The violent act is already over, but the traces are still visible. The standing Dicko Traoré has backed them up with the cardboard sign in her hands, condemning this violent act declaring that women’s bodies are not to be confused with drums.

Traoré posted this picture twice on Facebook (February 6, 2017 and December 27, 2017) without any captions. The comments show that Facebook enables a new forum for discussion where such topics may be opened up to new audiences. For the first post she got 434 likes. Many female followers (and also some males) responded to her by leaving a written reaction<sup>8</sup>. For instance, Aissata Ba wrote: *Merci pour la photo et le message. La violence économique et psychologique: invisibles mais réelles*, ‘Thanks for the picture and the message. Economic and psychological violence: invisible but real.’ Charles Niare shared: *Tout à fait mais [il] faut aussi rester sage, digne, fidèle, honnête etc... comme le bon Dieu [le] demande à tou[te]s les femmes dans le saint coran*, ‘Exactly, but it is also necessary to remain wise, dignified, faithful, honest, etc ... as God asks all women in the

7 Interestingly, these voices against violence against women in Mali became more audible around the same time as the *Me too* Movement flared up in Western countries. In Mali, however, little reference was made to it in the news or on social media.

8 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1584179838265841&set=pb.100000215205784.2207520000.1567088551.&type=3&theater> (last accessed on August 29, 2019)



Fig. 4: *Mon corps n'est pas un tam-tam*, 'My body is not a drum'.  
Dicko Traoré 2017, courtesy of the artist.



Holy Quran.” To which Maria Lavielle responded: *Si les hommes respectent les paroles de Dieu comme il le dit dans le coran aussi il n’y a pas de raison que les femmes n’en feront pas pareil*, ‘If men respect the words of God as he says in the Koran, there is no reason why women would not do the same.’

On the one hand, social media channels were used to spread the terrible, filmed gang rape. On the other, women activists and Dicko Traoré<sup>9</sup> used the same medium to denounce violence against women. The state, however, remained silent; it neither took more rigorous measures against the perpetrators nor did it attempt to initiate a national discourse on domestic or gender-based violence.

The different reactions to Traoré’s photograph show that a debate among young Malians is ongoing about how women and men should live together. Even if the steps are small, the established notions of femininity and masculinity are blurring and shifting and are the subject of ongoing societal debates and negotiations.

The work that Traoré once entitled ‘9 Sisters’ on Facebook is a clear example of such negotiations. In this picture, Dicko Traoré appears nine times, each time dressed differently, standing in a line, shoulder to shoulder on the rooftop. Each outfit stands for

9 In the same year (2017), Dicko Traore also addressed the topic of rape in her first longer feature film entitled *Mouna Né*, ‘Why me?’.



Fig. 5: '9 Sisters'.  
 Dicko Traoré 2016, courtesy  
 of the artist.

another female identity. All nine women stand on small wooden stools that are usually used in the kitchen while cooking. Wittily, these small chairs associated with the conventional female realm of domestic work are transformed into pedestals on which the '9 sisters' stand, proudly elevated, presenting themselves. Metaphorically speaking, they are emancipated from the idea that women are restricted to the realm of domestic work. They now consider for themselves a variety of possible life plans. Traoré told me<sup>10</sup> that the dominant discourse in Malian society remains that women should be submissive, modest, and courteous, above all. With this picture she wanted to glorify women inviting the broader society to look at them differently and show them more respect.

The first Dicko on the left represents a decent, conventional Malian woman – probably married – who looks after her family's home. She wears a white dress, which has been tailored in precious *Bazin* cloth. Her dress reaches down to her ankles, the appropriate length for a married woman. She represents the kind of womanhood that young women are encouraged to adopt, especially by the older generations. The second Dicko from the left wears a pair of pyjama-like trousers and a casual, colourful shirt. Traoré described this figure as a kind of a rebel who wears what she wants without

10 Dicko Traoré, Mail exchange, August 30, 2018.

respecting the opinion of others. The third Dicko is dressed like an ambitious basketballer. The fourth Dicko wears a white coat and a pair of black trousers like a nurse. The fifth and the sixth Dicko are dressed like university students. One wears a shorter skirt and the other a stylish pair of pants while both wear a tight-fitting top. The seventh Dicko wears an armless shirt with a dyed indigo cloth wrapped around her hips. In Bamako, this outfit is predominantly associated with maids who migrate on a seasonal basis to the capital to earn money for their dowry. The eighth Dicko is dressed in a long modern Western dress. On her head she wears a cheeky straw hat. To the artist, this figure represents a professional model working in the fashion industry. Last but not least, there is the ninth Dicko who is dressed in a military uniform, representing a female soldier who swore to serve her home country even if it means her own death.

The line-up of possible female identities that Traoré depicts and honours in her picture interestingly starts with the decent housewife and ends with the soldier (if seen from left to right). Even if they cannot be more antithetical, they have maybe more similarities than recognisable at first sight. While women were admitted to the army relatively early as soldiers to actively serve the country (since the 1970s), housewives, who have remained in the domestic realm, have also played a decisive role in the history of Mali at various times. It was, for example, housewives and mothers who first began to support the student movement which led to the dismissal of Mali's long-time dictator Moussa Traoré and who pushed for the first democratic elections in 1991 (Wing, 2000). In 2012 again, it was the soldiers' mothers and wives, as Wiedemann (2014) reminds us, who started the protest against the president Amadou Toumani Touré after videos appeared in Bamako showing how Malian soldiers were being killed in large numbers in the north by better equipped Tuareg secessionists and their Islamist allies. Again, this march of soldiers' mothers and wives brought with it the removal of the former president, a fact that was barely reported in Western media.

Traoré's work reconfigures diverging discourses about female identities in Malian society today, asking how one can find a balance between respecting long-standing mores while experimenting with new options and life plans. Through her work as a female photographer and filmmaker she pushes herself into the tech domain and appropriates its skills, which has long been attributed only to men<sup>11</sup>. Traoré told me that since an early age she has been fascinated by technology. She became obsessed with the camera and the computer. Over the course of endless hours she taught herself large parts of her current expertise by manipulating these devices. Slowly but steadily she became a master in image post-production, fascinated by the new possibilities to create and visualise virtual scenes, which have only happened in her own imagination. Interestingly, Traoré told me that when many people first saw her pictures either in one of her exhibitions in Bamako or on Facebook, they actually thought that she was being portrayed with her twin sister. Audiences were irritated because some of them knew that Traoré did not have a twin sister. Only when she started posting pictures in which she appeared more than once did the Bamako audience start to decipher her images differently. Several commentators of her pictures on Facebook expressed their recognition of her technical skills in such a way that they describe Dicko Traoré as a *génie*, which in French can mean both genius and a spirit with supernatural power. They are very much interested in the astonishing process of how to make something visible which does not really exist.

When scrolling through the endless comments on her pictures on Facebook, one realizes that there are some young men who are visibly irritated by Traoré's technical

11 It was not until the 1990s that women in increasing numbers began to become photographers in Mali. This is not an accident, but is directly related to wider socio-political changes after the country entered a new era of multi-party democracy and women have gained more power and access at all levels of society. In 1996, as Allison Moore (2008) writes, Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko initiated the first photo school in Bamako, which was specialized in the education of young women. For many of them, this school was the entry point into a profession that had previously been practiced almost exclusively by men.



skills. MS Papamoriba, for example, writes: *Non sister, il faudra que tu me montres certains trucs*, ‘No, sister, you have to show me some stuff’. A user named Gaoussou Doucouré becomes even more explicit by stating: *Je n’aime pas tes images car je ne les comprends pas. Dis-moi comment tu fais*, ‘I don’t like your images because I do not understand them. Tell me how you do it.’ Or Cherif Ibrahim says: *Explique-nous, on n’a rien compris!*, ‘Explain to us, we didn’t get it.’ Dicko Traoré answers them by posting: *Toi-là, je ne t’expliquerai rien!* ‘You there, I won’t explain anything to you!’ It becomes clear that with these images Traoré has left some men behind, setting new standards. They want to know from her as a woman how certain things work in the realm of technology.

With her photo series Dicko Traoré does not only advance into a technical field, she also claims an original stand-point in visual meaning production in which she as a woman is not merely in front of the camera as a model but sets up specific topics and aesthetics that she is interested in. Traoré actively intervenes in and pluralises political and social debates using both media – photography and filmmaking – as a tool of questioning the longstanding, restricted role of women in the public space and bring topics that are important to her into view. Dicko Traoré joins a long line of young female online users and bloggers who have created virtual spaces in which

... popular [or more artistic] forms of female self-imaging may offer the opportunity for political engagement, radical forms of community building – and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation (Murray, 2015: 491).

Dicko Traoré’s photographs can also be seen as an empowerment strategy in which she uses her body in front of the camera, as well as her technical skills in a playful way. Never grim and always positive, the concerns of women (but also of fellow citizens in a broader sense) are made visible in a global cultural climate that so often tries to negate (black) women and citizens of countries from the global south, preferring to leave them in the realm of the invisible.

It becomes clear that part of the bargaining of gender roles that Traoré does with her work does not only take place on the level of enunciation, but also on the level of her production process itself, as she uses ways of fabricating images and manipulating them that have, for a long time, been attributed only to men.

By posting these photographs on Facebook Traoré was able to draw the attention of several NGOs. Thanks to her pictures, she has gotten some well-paid jobs. In this sense, the posting of this series of pictures has also empowered her financially.

Dawe Dawe in his series, likewise, takes up the thread of a Western humanitarian discourse, in order to criticize gender-based violence on the one hand, and to establish links to powerful NGOs in the field on the other. *Juogi Wuoyo IV* is a rather minute rendition of the sexual defilement of Akinyi, a class 8 pupil, by her uncle. The piece is narrated through someone close to Akinyi, perhaps a sibling or boyfriend, who finds himself face to face with the wailing girl in the morning. The narrator inquires until Akinyi opens up and tells the story of her uncle’s ceaseless infringements on her through threats, intimidation, bribery, and sexual harassment. At 2½ minutes, the chilling piece is by far the longest of the series. The detailed report of Akinyi’s plight, culminating in her being locked in the house “where no one can testify” with her uncle “running his hands over her frame”<sup>12</sup>, forcing himself on her.

The poet explores this violation to its fullest extent, using local imagery to render the brutal act visual in Dholuo: *Awuoro tong’ ma kochuyo ranbolo to nyaka wuog ka leny*, ‘I wonder how the spear goes into a banana tree and comes out shiny’. To describe the

12 Translation by the poet.

sexual defilement of a minor by a family member in such vivid detail amounts to great vulgarity, especially in a cultural context where sexual explicitness is strongly discouraged. The Benga artist Okatch Biggy, whom the poet references twice in his first piece, can be seen as a source of inspiration here. Biggy's lewd style of Benga was heavily criticized in productions like his posthumous hit *Adhiambo Nyakobura*, from 1998, where Biggy's detailed description of an erotic scene forced the audience to mentally undress the singer's lover, Adhiambo. By describing a scene of defilement in similar detail, Dawe Dawe uses this established device to make sexual violence against women a subject in unexpected ways.

Like Traoré, Weda seems to relate to latent discourses - existing but not manifest or fully expressed. Like the rape videos in Bamako, Kenya saw a wave of indignation over teenage pregnancies in 2018. Media reports abounded when many of the pupils - most of them 12 to 13 years of age - came to the primary examination pregnant, a handful of students even giving birth during the three-day exam period. In a newspaper article, Education Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohamed admits that "...preliminary statistics show that the magnitude of the problem [of teenage pregnancies] is far bigger than we had initially thought. We are staring at a national challenge in the face."<sup>13</sup>

The poet knows the modest reach of political inquiries into such matters. Rape and sexual violence are a capillary problem in Kenya, caused by a complex mix of the country's colonial history, economic injustice, social attitudes, and law, amongst other factors. Knowing that any political reaction is likely to pay lip service to the problem that is difficult to contain in a context of economic impoverishment like Kisumu's low-income settlements. At the time of my research in Kisumu, gossip about a motorbike taxi driver in Manyatta circulated, whereby he had allegedly obtained the consent of school-going teenage girls to engage in sex with him for the mere promise of buying them slippers or primary school text books. Dawe Dawe's poetic piece mirrors such foul arrangements, when Akinyi's uncle, who has taken her in and financially takes care of her education, promises her new slippers in order to persuade her to give in into sexual contact. User Biko Steve comments on the video, thunderstruck: "Dagi rwako slippers ema kelo wach" (Dholuo, 'Could slippers be the reason for all this?'), to which Dawe Dawe simply and confirmingly replies "champat", which in Dholuo denotes the cheap and light rubber sandals in question.

The piece illustrates the vicious cycle that many (half-)orphans in Kisumu and similar contexts experience as they are taken in by their extended family. They find themselves at the lower end of the social order in these situations and often experience hardships, assuming the roles of maids and houseworkers. As I learned in several interviews with young women in Kisumu, often times their precarious stability is dependent upon their reaction to sexual advances by their patrons, which are, in turn, difficult to voice or address because of their ongoing economic dependence on the perpetrators of the violence.

Another similarity to Traoré's work on sexual violence against women needs to be mentioned here. Like Traoré, Weda can hope that his artistic work, which clearly reveals a more socio-political activist stance in this part of his series, aligns with international humanitarian discourse about women's rights and about sexual violence against women.

One of the organisations that furthers this issue is the Kenyan branch of Amnesty International, of which Dawe Dawe became a member after strongly identifying with the NGO's work. His affiliation with Amnesty International enabled him to perform several times at different occasions, for example in the filled auditorium of Nairobi University. The NGO also partnered with the Kisumu spoken word program *Poetic Hour* - supporting the frail artistic platform financially and in return spurring the poets to

13 <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001303295/number-of-teenage-pregnancies-higher-than-thought>, accessed 02.09.2019.

tackle delicate themes like terrorism, police brutality, or in this case, violence against women, which are part of the NGOs program and portfolio. While voicing such topics publicly may be understood as a provocation on behalf of state actors, the NGO – at least momentarily – offered some safety, contributing to the creation of a convenient space of free expression. Such performances are also comparatively well paid, ranging on average between 30 and 100 USD per performance. Dawe Dawe, like most Kisumu artists nowadays, actively attempts to establish links with the NGO sector because they are among the few who offer better paid jobs.

The fact that more socio-political stances may also be of interest to media corporations is apparent from the reaction to the very first episode posted on Facebook. The comment is by Aduda Cele, a Kenyan media personality who owns a media production house, who tells Dawe Dawe “manya”, ‘come look for me’ (Dholuo), apparently taking active interest in his new production.

The possible broader relevance of Weda’s work is also suggested in the next comment by Norman Simon, who states that such pieces are suitable and of interest for national media: “U should appear in KTN artistic Tuesday or Thursdays!”

Both artists produce for a local market and, at the same time (this being no contradiction), their enunciations address an international emancipatory discourse, in which they are simultaneously inscribed. By doing so, they further their chances of making their work visible to possible patrons and unlock potentially available jobs in the NGO sector.

As Schneiderman notes in view of the relationships of Ugandan musicians to campaigning politicians, artists rarely adopt an attitude of *either* praise *or* protest (Schneiderman 2016). Schneiderman describes artists as “brokers”, who very consciously negotiate the relationships with such powerful institutions and actors. The balancing act of furthering one’s own artistic agenda, all while tactically adapting and sometimes even compromising one’s work, in order to create useful relationships with influential actors, may also be described as co-optation (Siegenthaler 2019). The examples of Traoré and Weda’s work, as well as the reactions by members of the online audience, shows that the artists manage do to two things at the time: First, they relate to actors and potential economic markets in the field of humanitarianism and second, they do so from a distinctly local point of view that is appealing to both local as well as international audiences.

### Step 3: Articulating solidarity in times of crisis

In the last section of this paper, we are concerned with how, from the removed standpoint of the rooftop, both artists reach out to other actors. We are interested in how they establish links to other actors and struggles within their respective cities in order to reflect the broader socio-political landscape. By connecting their works with larger societal issues, both artists increase the reach of their articulations.

Dawe Dawe, in part VI of his series, quite literally carries his concerns out into the city when he leaves the secure reserve of the rooftop for the whirlwind of events at the Kondele roundabout – the informal heart of the city, a convergence point of the adjacent low-income settlements. In March 2018, Kisumu activist Boniface Ogutu started a hunger strike performance lasting nearly seven days at the Kondele fly-over. The reason for this act was the forceful deportation of the last opposition candidate, lawyer Miguna Miguna, who at the time seemed bold and popular enough to stand a chance against President Uhuru. Uhuru had just infamously started collaborating (or colluding, as many believed) with opposition leader Raila Odinga. Ogutu performed the hunger



Fig. 6: In Part VI of his series, the poet leaves the rooftop and joins Kisumu activist Boniface Ogotu during his hunger strike.

strike against the blatant disregard of court orders and the constitution by the incumbent government. As a consequence, Ogotu managed to appear in several national prime time television news shows. Ogotu declared he would not leave the roundabout and refused to eat until Miguna was allowed entry back to Kenya. The massive pillar of the fly over in the background of the video shows posters with many signatures. Capital letters in the colour of the Kenyan flag declare: “Hunger strike in the support of Miguna Miguna”.

The sixth part of Dawe Dawe’s Juogi Wuoyo series on Facebook is the only one with a descriptive title: “Juogi wuoyo Kondele. In solidarity with Brother Boniface Ogotu Akach in his day 6 of hunger strike. Uphold the rule of Law and respect the constitution.” By taking up Ogotu’s slogan, Dawe Dawe links the two performers, activist and artist, around an agenda of equivalence in their indignation over the blatant disrespect for the constitution and the rule of law.

The Kondele overpass construction has become a landmark structure for Kisumu, especially for the inhabitants of the low-income settlements that converge at Kondele. The construction has also become the city’s cultural identifier, where Kisumu is often represented as a city of rioters and Kondele being the place where the riots, lootings, and forms of protest usually have their starting point. In this way, again, the place of articulation is crucial. Ogotu constructs a relationship between the fly-over as Kisumu’s cultural identifier and its potential of protest with the last remaining politician at the time, who was believed charismatic enough to bring back justice. Dawe Dawe, in turn, extends this relationship of solidarity by establishing a link between the hunger strike at Kondele with his social media campaign on life in Manyatta.

The 20 second clip shows an excerpt of Dawe Dawe performing his piece alongside percussionist Kwach Rading. The video clip, recorded with a smartphone, shows the pillar with the posters in the background, Ogotu and the musicians are separated from the audience and onlookers with a small rope.

Ogotu does not really appear in the video. He is lying on the floor, his head only occasionally appearing at the lower right end of the screen. Dawe Dawe, in his lyrics, addresses the curious onlookers rather directly:

Pod idai ni idich	You still claim that you are very busy
to Bonnie ma wuod Akach ma	Yet Bonnie, the son of Akach from
wuod Nyakach	Nyakach
riyo kech	Is on a hunger strike
E tie round about	Under the flyover in the roundabout
Bang madho amuna	You drink a lot of booze
Idai ni toki tek ka mar	And then develop the tough demeanor
miguna miguna	of Miguna Miguna
Omera surrender your passport	Hey surrender your passport
Kichopo e airport	After reaching the airport
nono wanyalo deport	Or else you will be deported
I ma onge transport	And we won't even charge you the
	transport

The communication situation has changed from the poems on the rooftop. Dawe Dawe now addresses the audience in a confrontational tone, a way of speaking that predominates in the small-scale trader businesses and the transport sector around Kondele: *Pod idai ni idich*, ‘You still claim that you are very busy’, is a typical reproach, rebuking someone for being a busybody, an idler, a good-for-nothing. The reproach is re-constructed in the poem by contrasting the busybody with Boniface Ogutu, or “Bonnie” – dignified by the detailing of his ascendancy from Nyakach – who is on a hunger strike for the greater good.

Like Traoré in her composed image *Mon corps n'est pas un tam tam*, Ogutu also establishes a link to an international discursive formation of protest when he chooses a hunger strike at Kondele roundabout (one thinks of Mahatma Gandhi) as a means of making his indignation visible. In a country where food insecurity is a chief concern for the majority, and in a region that is comparatively poor (Branch 2011, 295) and susceptible to drought, the voluntary renunciation of food – based on however noble a principle – is prone to ridicule and may seem absurd to some. On the other hand, several elements of the performance are in line with the national discourse about Kisumu’s place in political culture: the subtly clownish dimension of the performance, the one-against-all attitude of Ogutu’s defiance, and his firm believe in an underdog victory match the popular conception of Kisumu’s defiance well

In his poem, Dawe Dawe contrasts Ogutu’s noble action with the everyday bearing of citizens around Kondele, who appear as interfering busybodies, as meddling or prying persona, intoxicated, and who then develop the “tough demeanor of Miguna Miguna”. Dawe Dawe’s performance is cunning. If a local activist on a hunger strike at Kondele is likely to be ignored or laughed at, perhaps even aggressed, taking a stance for the controversial lawyer cum politician Miguna is not likely to yield support either. In this sense, both artists, however semantically open their politically charged claims may appear, need to be seen as taking a tremendous performative risk.

Dawe Dawe’s trick is to confront the ‘typical’ bystander at Kondele (read: ‘rowdy’) and locate the tough and rebellious character of Miguna within the bystanders themselves. The poet thereby establishes a connection that is both surprising and, in its cheekiness, difficult to reject. After having established that link, the poet goes on to literally put the audience into Miguna’s shoes, pushing the listener towards a stance of solidarity: *Omera!*, (Dholuo, ‘hey [you]!’), “surrender your passport!”, further threatening the listeners in Dholuo: “*wanyalo deport/I ma onge transport*” (‘you will be deported/



Fig. 7:  
 #Pas ça à Bamako.  
 '#Not this in Bamako'.  
 Dicko Traoré 2015, courtesy  
 of the artist.

and we won't even charge you the transport'). Again, simply but cunningly the poet links greater political concerns – the forceful deportation of an oppositional politician – with the intimate, everyday economic concern of a lack of transport money, which for many bystanders at the bus station will likely feel familiar.

Instead of giving an intellectual comment on the situation or further criticising it, Dawe Dawe strategically weaves the audience into his poem. The poet addresses the listener individually, articulating his or her intimate hardship with the broader socio-political crisis of the day. Whether consciously planned or not, this type of direct address also works on Facebook, where the recipient of the short excerpt is usually consuming the performance individually. In contrast to Dawe Dawe's performances discussed above, where he treats more subjective, intimate, and emotional topics within the solitude of the rooftop, the direct address and the fact that the performance relates him to other actors – another artist/activist, an opposition politician, urban citizens, and bystanders – gives this video an appellative character. It also shows that the performances at hand, though performed solitarily and consumed by audiences individually inside the interface of the world's largest communication giant, are not idle pastime but a deeply political practice.

Likewise, Traoré created images in her self-portrait series dealing with Mali's broader socio-political and geopolitical situation following the outbreak of the last round of armed conflicts in 2012. When scrolling through the comments posted below these kinds of pictures on Facebook a question repeatedly appears: *Où va le Mali?* 'Where is Mali going?' Many citizens of Bamako asked themselves this question when the first deadly terrorist attack took place in the midst of the capital in March 2015. Suddenly, the conflict afflicting the country's northern regions for more than three years showed its ugly face in the capital with a single blow. The violent incident took place in the bar called *La Terrasse*, a well-known place of Bamako's vibrant night life. The bar is especially popular among the Euro-American expat community. Dicko Traoré also visited the bar occasionally with friends. During the attack, five people died and nine were injured, including a French friend of Dicko Traoré. She was in a state of shock. She had lost a friend from one minute to the other again. She created the following picture immediately after this tragic incident.

It might again be seen as a kind of a mental and visual processing of terrible news. For this image, Traoré transformed her own roof terrace into the scene of crime. Crumpled clothes are lying everywhere on the terrace's floor and balustrade. Some of them have traces of blood, the only colourful dots in the black and white picture that immediately



Fig. 8: *Où va le Mali?*  
 'Where is Mali  
 going?'  
 Dicko Traoré 2014,  
 courtesy of the artist.

attract the viewer's attention. Dicko Traoré appears in the role of two witnesses who have just come to see the scene, both speechless, not believing their eyes. One Dicko inspects a blood-stained T-shirt that she holds as if she were showing it to the spectator. The other Dicko looks horrified at her bloody palms, as if she had been contaminated by the crime. Here, too, Traoré does not re-enact the violent confrontation itself, as she did not in the picture in which she stands against domestic violence. What is captured in the picture is the immediate moment of silence afterwards, which spreads heavily over everything.

In the picture, Dicko Traoré brings different elements together once again. She relates herself to the incident and the broader political context in which the crime took place. She expresses her empathetic solidarity with the victims and, at the same time, makes a statement against terrorist attacks in her country.

In the same activist way as her work on domestic violence, Traoré integrates an element of an international protest aesthetic, namely a hashtag containing the short but clear message: *#Pas ça à Bamako*. A friend of Traoré's launched a Facebook page with this slogan immediately after the attack. A lot of young citizens in and beyond Mali, including supporters from other African countries, stood up against the terrorist attacks in Mali and its capital. Most of the people who uploaded their portraits were holding either their phone or a piece of paper up to the camera with the slogan *#Pas ça à Bamako* written on it. Among the protesters are several Malian celebrities from the music industry and sports, alongside many children and older women expressing their compassion.

Traoré integrated this same slogan into her own work through two T-shirts with the message printed on them. In this way, she visually combined different efforts of civil courage to support her friend's initiative, but also to channel the common message to reach a wider audience for their goal. Her two photographs received 550 likes on Facebook. Interestingly, she reposted them again on several occasions, whenever a terrorist attack occurred either in Mali or elsewhere on the African continent.

For example, Dicko Traoré posted the two pictures on the following dates. The pictures are an empathetic sign of manifest solidarity with the respective country: March 18, 2015, against the attack on *La Terrasse*; April 4, 2015, due to the deadly attack at the Garissa University College in Kenya; November 22, 2015, against the attack on the Hotel Radisson Blu in Bamako; January 16, 2016, against the attack on the restaurant *Cappuccino* in Ouagadougou; March 6, 2016, in remembrance of the attack at *La Terrasse*; and January 18, 2017, against one of the deadliest attacks on a Malian military camp in Gao.



Fig. 9: Dawe Dawe (right) holding a Nyatiti lute, during rehearsals with percussionist Kwach Rading. The two artists point over the roofs of their neighborhood Manyatta.

Therefore, she created a chain of equivalence and the pictures became her kind of activist icon against terrorist attacks. One might even be tempted to see it as an act of pan-African solidarity and an attempt to achieve greater visibility in worldwide social media. Whenever a terrorist attack takes place in the U.S. or in a European country, people around the globe immediately empathise with the respective country by uploading a profile picture frame of compassion, which is often directly provided by Facebook. Rare are the frames of solidarity when it comes to terrorist attacks on the African continent; they never receive the same attention and empathetic condolence.

While Dicko Traoré created the image discussed above on the basis of a certain event in the past, the next picture is more of an attempt to visualise the general state that Mali has been in for several years now.

In this photograph the artist is again depicted twice. She and her alter ego confront each other combatively as they each hold one end of a Malian flag in their hands. Their bodies are tense and they are trying to pull the flag to their respective sides with all their muscle power, as if they were playing tug-of-war. Do the two characters, almost entirely dressed in black, symbolise the opposing forces that drag on the fate of Traoré's home country and its people? This struggle about the country's future is staged in front of the panorama of the capital. In no other picture does Traoré reveal as much of the cityscape as in this one, as if to show that this struggle, fought on her roof terrace, is an existential one that applies to the whole country.

In this picture Dicko Traoré symbolically visualises the different oppositional forces that tear at the country, represented by the flag in their grip. It is not clear for whom these two rivals stand. Traoré leaves this question open. All kinds of opposing forces can be projected onto these two persons: the Tuareg secessionists against the



Malian government, civil society against the state, one political party against another, different foreign actors against each other, etc. The list can be continued at will and can also be traced back to the private sphere of the individual with the question: Shall I stay in Mali or shall I take the risk of a big adventure and migrate to Europe or the United States?

## Conclusion

In this article we have contrasted the self(ie)-art of Dicko Traoré and David Weda that both artists produce in the solitude of their rooftops, and from which they establish various links to the urban space and the world at large that surrounds them. While the similarity between the rooftop-studios may appear as a rather specific commonality here, we'd like to point to the fact that many border spaces in African cities have become "studios", from which young people record their art. Publishing art on Facebook may perhaps not diminish the power of established gate-keepers in the global art industry, but the use of social media platforms such as Facebook as an online gallery, as we have shown, points to novel ways of exhibiting and criticising art in African cities.

Furthermore, we have argued for the necessity to understand art as situated in the urban social spaces from which it emerges. Art in African cities is increasingly produced for both local and international audiences. Particular attention should be directed to the various markets and economic opportunities that artists consider as part of their aesthetic strategies. Indeed, the very dim economic opportunities for artists in both Kisumu and Bamako, where mass unemployment has become a perennial manifestation of urban crisis, requires research that examines how an everyday marked by physical and mental violence interrelates with and fosters artistic expressions. We relied on Mbembe and Roitmann's description of life-worlds in dislocation, which the artists attempt to re-collect and to re-articulate in their respective series. Based on the comparison between the two bodies of work, we discerned three moments of an articulatory process.

In the first moment, we identify how both artists, even though working in different media, use what we refer to as self(ie)-art to constitute a communication situation that is both original and highly contemporary, and which uses Facebook as a technological device to reach urban audiences in novel ways. Based on the empirical data collected during fieldwork in Bamako and Kisumu, we contend that there is a strong tendency towards these more individual approaches. We find that particularly the aspect of communication through digital 'doubles' in such works merits further investigation. Both Dicko and Dawe withdraw into the solitude of the rooftop. Based on life stories and the works that jumpstarted the artists' series, we maintain that the reason for this tendency seems to lie in a perception of increasingly broken social ties, a theme that is taken up intensely in both artists' works.

In the second moment, both Traoré and Weda relate to Western humanitarian discourse in order to articulate a critique of gender-based violence. We show that drawing on such discursive formations allows the artists, on the one hand, to criticise social ills prevalent in their societies and, on the other hand, to actively shape relationships to NGOs that have become important patrons in the art market, whether for photography or performance art. We have pointed to how both artists use specific elements that are relevant and indeed comprehensible only to local audiences, while also drawing on an internationally established aesthetic of protest, thereby maximising their potential audience as well as clients.

During the third and last moment of articulation, both artists move beyond the self-inflicted confinement of their rooftops to establish links to other actors in the city, and even to relate to the situation in other African countries. Dawe Dawe co-creates a performance, supporting a well-known Kisumu activist on a hunger strike, taking his spoken word performance away from his rooftop and into the middle of the city. Traoré

establishes links to other bloggers who express their discontent with the greater Malian socio-political situation by way of articulating solidarity with victims of the recent terrorist attacks in Bamako. Despite the initial withdrawal of both artists into their studios, and the publication of their works as part of the fast-paced attention economy of social media, we contend that both Traoré and Weda's work are deeply political articulations. The study of the potential efficacy of artists like them, speaking from the urban border spaces to their own societies and to the world at large, merits further attention.

Fig. 10: Dawe Dawe in the workshop of fellow Kisumu artist Nikomambo.



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# Art Practice as a Field of Articulatory Engagements

## Fred Mutebi's Promotion of Barkcloth in Local and Global Networks

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### Introduction

Although the established international art world tends to have a blind eye on contemporary art from Uganda, artists working in Kampala are highly aware of and engage actively with a wide range of local and international partners in their artistic practice. Some artists specialise in paintings for a select range of local clients, others cater for a thriving tourist market and an expat community. While some artists rely on their expertise of such markets and the requirements of their clients, others deliberately experiment in artistic forms and genres. In either case, they create links between different stakeholders, aesthetics and social spaces by means of their social and artistic practices, and they often function as important mediators between local and international individuals, representatives and institutions.

This essay presents a major project of artist Fred Kato Mutebi that involves a particularly high and diverse number of stakeholders, aesthetic traditions, entrepreneurial initiatives and social engagement. Known since the beginning of his career

as an inventive and experimental artist, university-trained master printer Fred Mutebi started some years ago to explore the ecological, technological, aesthetic, cultural, political, social and economic potential of barkcloth, a culturally significant material with a long tradition in Buganda. By promoting the production of barkcloth, facilitating training opportunities, opening up new creative markets, and emphasising the sustainability and cultural value of barkcloth, he successfully links different local, national and international discourses within his practice as an artist and as a social entrepreneur. I argue that Mutebi disposes of a particular mastery in creating moments that render possible articulatory practices, and he does so with regard to different conceptual understandings of articulation. On the one hand, he acts as a key mediator and communicator between stakeholders with different interests, languages and social practices. He foresightedly and diligently connects diverse seemingly unrelated social and discursive fields into a network that he oversees. Doing so, he links fields that are perceived as unrelated by most of the stakeholders involved in the project in order to work for his major vision, namely to increase the appreciation of barkcloth for its ecologically and economically sustainable features and to strengthen its marketability locally and internationally. Promoting historically seasoned African technologies and connecting them with aspects of neo-traditionalism and the revaluation of the ‘community’, he places a local product like barkcloth deliberately into the global discourses of sustainable development and global warming.<sup>1</sup> Barkcloth thereby functions as a jack-of-all-trades. It is an aesthetically and symbolically attractive material for artistic practice, it underscores and promotes Ganda cultural pride, and it is celebrated as an asset for social and economic development. The rhetoric of cultural and environmental sustainability offers key discursive strategies to promote its properties in the creation of new markets. It speaks to international audiences as an autochthonous product and to Ganda constituencies as both, a reflection of cultural identity and as a sublime gesture of protest against current national politics. Above all, it is a key means of articulation for Mutebi as an artist and social entrepreneur that forms part of a wider network he develops.

In the following, I first introduce my understanding of the term articulation that is inspired by theoretical and conceptual strands from linguistics, economic anthropology and political theory, followed by an extensive discussion of the different stakeholders and activities that form part of Mutebi’s articulatory practice. In our conversations, he never spoke of ‘articulation’ as being part of this practice. Nevertheless, it seems to be constitutive of his current involvement in barkcloth. Furthermore, it relates in instructive ways to his earlier and still continuing work as a printmaker.

The core argument of this contribution is that Fred Mutebi – as many other artists in African cities – has developed a particular repertoire of discourses and cultural as well as artistic practices that feed into a variety of markets and stakeholder interests. As articulatory practice, this repertoire enables him to secure, expand, and source quite flexibly from several economic contexts and constituencies and helps him to operate from a flexible and likewise reliable range of positions to implement his visions.

## Articulation

“For me, I picked out barkcloth at university. For the time, I decided, now, to ... change the world. Because, I assessed: It’s a tree, and the world needs trees. And then I’m like: What makes it different from other trees? Because there are also other trees that could be even more important than that tree. But

1 The focus of this contribution lies not so much on the contingency of sustainability, but on the way articulation capitalises on such discourse, no matter if it is an “empty signifier” (Brown 2016) or not.

because those trees are elsewhere, they are not in my jurisdiction. But the more I promote this, the more possibilities I have to meet the other people. So, now I am driving the vehicle of the *mutuba* tree<sup>2</sup>, but, also, somewhere along the track, there're some other people driving, other movements, you understand what I mean? [...] I am not saying Fred Mutebi has all the solutions, no! I am saying ... this is how I think. But I also want to work with the other one, the other one, and the other one. But I am also very selective. If I think you are not a better ... a good partner with me but a good partner with the other, I let you go." (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017)

Fred Mutebi formulated these reflections in an interview with me in Kampala almost a year after I had accompanied him to the fields and barkcloth artisans in Bukomansimbi. Already on our way to Buddu county in the year before, he had made full use of the time offered by the car trip in the early morning hours to explain to me his motivation, his vision, and how it relates to alarming phenomena like global warming. Although Mutebi had struck me as a very articulate personality at the very first encounter, I however only realised two years after the interview that this quote, in some ways, is a reflection about articulation in its many conceptual appearances. The decision to "change the world" is one that requires political articulation; the realisation that the *mutuba* tree is not only different from other trees but also within his own purview reflects an awareness for possible limitations in his economic agency; and his determination to connect with people "along the track" and see what these connections can generate demonstrates his ability to engage a diverse and changing selection of other people for his vision. He relies on connecting and de-connecting with them in a way evoked by the English term *articulation*, a loanword from French that is used to describe the joint that simultaneously connects and separates two elements.

While the theorisation of his agency lies beyond Mutebi's own interests, – he is a man of action – Mutebi's quote nevertheless inspired me to link theoretical concepts of articulation with his social and artistic practice in a way that acknowledges his talent and determination to create for himself a field of agency that relies strongly on articulation as a linguistic practice, as a social, economic and creative phenomenon, and last but not least as a political practice.

The term articulation has different meanings in different scholarly fields of research and theorisation. In the context of this contribution, four concepts are highlighted in particular. The first designates the connecting point between two elements that are autonomous but related to each other in a specific way, largely in the sense of the Latin term *articulus* that refers to a knuckle, the (anatomic) articulation of the arm or leg, but also to a knot (botanical), and a part or a section (of a talk/discourse). In temporal terms, it also designates a turning point (Menge and Pertsch 1994, 56). Articulation, then, is a joint that has two simultaneous functions; namely to connect different elements and by doing so, to emphasise their difference and (compromised) autonomy. It connects and distinguishes the upper and lower parts of a leg or arm that are connected but can move differently, or consists of the points where a door connects to the door frame. In an interview, Stuart Hall refers to an articulated lorry that consists of two parts that can be connected, disconnected and reconnected (Hall 2000, 65). More than any other theorist, Hall remarkably emphasises the temporal and historical aspect of such articulations – elements may be connected for a while and then separate into autonomous entities that reconnect with others at another moment in time (Hall 1996 and 2000).

This entangled relationship of seemingly autonomous elements was a key feature of Marxist-structuralist approaches to articulation by Wolpe (1972, 1980), Meillassoux (1972) and other economic anthropologists, which represents the second notion of ar-

2 *Mutuba* (*mituba* pl.) is the Luganda term for the ficus tree species that provides the bark which is in turn processed into barkcloth.

tication in this discussion. They described the dependence of ‘traditional’ subsistence economies on the globally operative and dominant capitalist system as one of articulation. Capitalist production modes only seemingly replaced other production modes (such as subsistence) and instead concurrently and often implicitly relied on the continuation of the latter, thus creating uneven relations of domination between and within these systems and among the various actors involved (see also Hall 1996, especially 31–33, and Hart 2007). However, such hegemonic dynamics remain unnoticed by the dominated group because the cause of their underprivileged position lies beyond their reach. While production modes like subsistence farming increasingly became dependent on the vagaries of global markets, the affected farmers remained unaware of this global entanglement and therefore were unable to foresee or even explain the reasons for their increasing poverty. Articulation in this Marxist-structuralist understanding thus emphasises the ubiquity and global entanglement of seemingly independent modes of production.

I claim in the following that Fred Mutebi not only identifies, but also creates, supports and partners in the “joint” and “knuckle” that connects actors and stakeholders from different fields with different interests. He facilitates temporary and long-term moments of connecting two or more actors into his diverse and ambitious project of barkcloth promotion, thus continuously creating new connections that together contribute to a functional and changing network of stakeholders, each with their particular role in the dynamic barkcloth system.

For this purpose, Mutebi makes use of his talent as a communicator and orator, which relates to a third and fourth notion of articulation, namely those derived from linguistics and political theory. To address select conversation partners and speak to them about the cultural meaning, the planting, harvesting, processing and marketing of barkcloth and those engaged in these activities means to work towards “chang[ing] the world”. Accordingly, talking to people about the potential of barkcloth to reach this goal goes beyond mere enunciation; it is an articulation. As Förster (under review) argues, articulation in a post-marxist and post-structuralist understanding does not just mean enunciation (*énonciation* with Foucault) because this would imply that it is subject to discursive power and hence rather weak in its potential for (cultural, political, subaltern) resistance (Foucault 1966; 1973; 1976). Rather, articulations are moments in which discourse is challenged or even potentially changed.<sup>3</sup> As I argue elsewhere (Siegenthaler 2017, 187–189), this claim is backed in at least two ways by Chantal Mouffe’s and Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of articulation as, first, something that may but also may not be language-based (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985]), and second, a practice that can emancipate itself from existing discourses to an extent that it triggers political awareness. In Mouffe’s and Laclau’s understanding, articulation constitutes the relation between powerful discourse and subjectivity; it is through articulation that subjects can either merge with or dissociate from dominant discourses, especially through collective action that generates new social formations (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985]). In their understanding articulation is not only “any practice establishing a relation among elements”, but it does so in a way “that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985], 105). Articulation therefore also is “generative” (Hall 2000, 68) and “performative” (Förster under review) – in being performed, it creates something new.

For this reason, articulation has two seemingly contradictory features. On the one hand, it subscribes to existing structures and discourses because it generates from there and depends on existing forms of communication in order to facilitate collective terms and values. On the other hand, articulation marks a point of distinction from the existing discourse while emphasising its dynamic connection to it (Hall 1996, 36; Hall 2000, 65) and therefore has the potential to question these very structures. This is why

3 Förster rightly argues that the reasons and mechanisms of discursive changes in the course of history are insufficiently explained by Foucault and structuralism more generally (see Förster under review).



articulation as a social practice always also is political in Mouffe's sense (Mouffe 2005, 2007). It reflects moments of (collective) political subjectivisation that triggers new discursive formations (Hall 2000, 68).

While this potential of articulation is certainly part of social practice, it bears particular significance for artistic practices that address and engage in social and environmental politics. This is exactly the case with Fred Kato Mutebi's current barkcloth-related engagement.

## Fred Kato Mutebi

"It is a whole long journey ... [...] As long as you are earning from agriculture and you have issues of climatic change, it becomes *everybody's* responsibility to ensure that you mitigate it, you slow it down. That's one of the drive[s] in my art. ... I am a social critique in subject but I don't want to be critical without having a solution." (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017)

Fred Kato<sup>4</sup> Mutebi was born in 1967 as a member of the mmamba (lungfish) clan<sup>5</sup> and graduated in Fine Arts from Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA) at Makerere University in 1992.<sup>6</sup> He has gained an international reputation primarily as a printmaker, but already early in his career, he started experimenting with popular techniques like batik. Social engagement has been a fundamental part in his work, too, and the three fields of printmaking, social engagement and the exploration of easily available resources for artistic work are a core foundation of his activities.<sup>7</sup> More recently, he started experimenting with local materials for printmaking like barkcloth and papyrus with the idea to eventually replace the Japanese and Chinese printing paper that is imported at considerable prices (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

Coming from Kibinge, Buddu County in Masaka district which is reputed for the quality of its barkcloth, Fred Mutebi is familiar with the tradition of barkcloth production and its cultural and spiritual significance for the Baganda and their king, the *kabaka*. However, in recent decades, the mastery of barkcloth production was disappearing due to rural-urban migration of young men. On their search for employment in the city, they created a lack of apprentices and labour force in the agricultural sector and the barkcloth production in particular. Therefore, only few master *bakomazi* (barkcloth makers) like Paulo Bukenya Katamiira remain. Mutebi considers them crucial for transmitting their knowledge to a younger generation and revalidating barkcloth culturally and economically. Therefore, he has been engaged for several years now in reviving the appreciation of barkcloth, the professional training of *bakomazi* as well as in developing a barkcloth market nationally and internationally. He thereby convinces a diverse range of partners of the potential of barkcloth to solve a plethora of contemporary problems. First, the climate-friendly features of the *mutuba* tree that provides the bark prevent the

4 Kato is not an actual name but refers to Mutebi's status as the younger of a set of twins. This identity as a twin has important cultural implications that also involve barkcloth. Their discussion would exceed the aim of this contribution, but see Nagawa 2018.

5 The *mmamba* clan is one of the biggest and most influential among the fifty clans in Buganda.

6 Information on his biography, artwork and social engagement is available on his homepage <https://fredmutebi.org>. Accessed August 22, 2019.

7 His commitment to barkcloth production is not his first socially informed initiative. Already in 2007, he founded the non-governmental grassroots organisation *Let Art Talk (LAT)* to engage war-affected children in art classes in the north of Uganda where the LRA, poverty and AIDS had destroyed families, livelihoods and perspectives. Besides a therapeutic effect for the children, the workshop facilitates exchange between youth from the central and northern regions of Uganda respectively. These regions stand for a long history of cultural, political and economic difference and inequity.

soil from desertification. Second, the artisanal barkcloth production as well as the material itself are free of environmentally dangerous substances. Third, the cultural revival of *ebuyaffe* (things royal) after the reinstatement of the Buganda Kingdom in 1993 and the inclusion of Uganda's barkcloth in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (originally proclaimed in 2005) has increased its economic potential locally and internationally, especially in the tourism and design industries. Such new industries based on artisanal skills can contribute to the well-being of local communities, an argument that also Mutebi puts forward. These are the three key pillars on which Mutebi explicitly builds his articulatory practice in the promotion of barkcloth. There is also a fourth pillar to be discussed later in this paper, namely the political symbolism of barkcloth in the Ugandan context. However, when discussing the qualities of barkcloth, the artist is less explicit about this last aspect.

In Mutebi's view, the planting of *mutuba* trees, the production and sale of barkcloth and its use in artistic and other fields of practice offers a solution to many of the current and future social and economic problems and contributes to the battle against environmental destruction and global warming. This encouraged him and his brother Stephen Kamywa to establish in 2012 the *Bukomansimbi Organic Tree Farmers Association (BOTFA)* in their home area with the support of the United States Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The idea is to professionalise the cultivation of *mutuba* trees by offering an apprenticeship program in a workshop that supports and promotes community work (*kkomagi*) and *obuntu bulamu*, a philosophical concept of "harmonious living and sharing sensibility between people and nature" (Nagawa 2018, 345; with reference to Kasozi 2011). The Management Union of Trees International (MUTI) association further formalised these activities in 2016 with the aim to promote the environmental cause. It involves the regular and correct harvesting of bark, the growing of *mutuba* seedlings for sale to other farmers and the promotion of planting *mutuba* trees also in urban environments. As Nagawa (2018) states, this activism does not only transcend rural-urban binaries but also a cultural limitation to Ganda culture – informed by its long Ganda history, the cultivation of the *mutuba* tree is of national and international relevance, environmentally, but also economically.

Although based in Kampala and having travelled internationally, Mutebi has maintained a close connection to his family and the community of his birthplace.<sup>8</sup> Without this rootedness and the knowledge about local history and social intercourse, it would have been impossible for him to gain the trust and reliability of his collaborators on site. On the other hand, this project strongly relies on the financial support of foreigners. Mutebi occupies precisely the mediating position between the farming community and the supporters/investors.

## Barkcloth as Natural and Cultural Heritage: Between Discourses of Indigeneity and Sustainability

Barkcloth is made from the bark of a fig-tree species popular in Buganda, called *omutuba* in Luganda (*ficus natalensis*).<sup>9</sup> The *mutuba* tree has many positive features which encourage Mutebi to promote its planting. It is "a native fig tree intercropped in small-scale farms", mostly among coffee and plantains (Nagawa 2018, 344). Its branches provide shade for

8 For a more detailed discussion of the rural-urban link in Mutebi's practice, see Nagawa 2018.

9 The tree is known also in Kenya and further south, but Baganda claim a particular tradition and quality in the processing of its bark.



these plants, its leaves fertilise the soil and the berries attract birds. The *mutuba* tree features two particularly outstanding qualities. First, it turns arid soils fertile as its roots conserve rather than consume the water. Therefore, it stands in contrast to plants like eucalyptus that perpetuate desertification by lowering the ground water and instead provides for fertile farming land even in arid areas. Second, it produces bark that can be removed and processed to barkcloth annually. When treated carefully, the tree recovers perfectly from the harvest and generates new bark for the next harvest. These two features of keeping arid soil fertile and producing barkcloth sustainably are the core arguments that Mutebi contends

Fig: 1 *Mutuba* tree in Bukomansimbi. The rounded edge below the branches derives from harvesting the bark.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
October 16, 2016.

for barkcloth as a sustainable material for Uganda and beyond. It is an effective measure against desertification while offering a sustainable alternative for other, damaging materials, including those used in the art sector. For instance, Mutebi argues that many canvases available today include plastic, a material that is made from non-renewable petroleum, requires an energy-consuming production and is not entirely biodegradable.

Although bark is also gained and processed in other parts of Uganda and Central and East Africa, barkcloth is considered typical for Ganda culture and is said to be produced since the 14th century, but the exact origins remain unclear (Nakazibwe 2005, 42–43). The bark consists of fibres crossing each other at right angles “as do the warp and weft of true cloth” (Kyeyune 2003, 44), and this texture also remains after the lengthy process of beating it into a thin cloth of typically about 8 to 10 meters in length and 3 meters in width. It has a long history which is especially related to royal life and ritual practices. John Roscoe mentions it in 1911 as an important part of clothing (Roscoe 1965 [1911], 403–404) and of royal bedding (*ibid.*, 406), but it was also used as architectural element in the Ganda hut (*ibid.*, 404; Kyeyune 2003, 45), as a room divider between the *ekibiira* (forest) and the public side of the royal tomb, as a tax contribution, and as a dowry in *okwanjula* (introduction) ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> It is an important ritual material in context of birth, initiation and twin cults, and even its production is associated with spiritual power as the ‘music’ that *bakomazi* generate while beating it has a spiritual effect (Kyeyune 2003, 45). This is why *bakomazi* play a vital role in the material, symbolic and spiritual meaning of barkcloth and enjoy high esteem within and without the royal court. However, with the introduction of cotton by Arab traders and the enormous impact of proselytisation in the 19th and 20th Centuries, barkcloth underwent a negative symbolic transformation. Increasingly associated with ‘heathen’ rites and cultural practices, barkcloth was replaced by cotton as an appropriate material for Christians and Muslims, a process that was backed by the intensification of industrial production of cotton in the protectorate (Nakazibwe 2005).

Nevertheless, barkcloth continued to be associated with Ganda culture, and after the abolishment of the kingdoms, including Buganda, through Milton Obote in 1966, it even became associated with Ganda political dissent in the modern nation state.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, it is mainly known as the material used to wrap the dead for burials and therefore has lost a lot of its prestigious reputation. Many young Baganda are not aware of the rich ritual and symbolic legacy of barkcloth in Ganda culture and have adopted an ambivalent and often even negative stance against it because of its association with death. As a result of these developments, the spiritual and social significance of *bakomazi* in Ugandan society faded, and the profession almost died out.

It is mainly through the re-introduction of the Buganda kingdom in 1993 that barkcloth regained popularity and esteem (Nakazibwe 2005, 298–324), resulting in its inclusion in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (Nagawa 2018, 340).<sup>12</sup> It continues to be used for long-established rituals such as the coronation of the *kabaka*, but it is also being re-invented as both, a symbolic expression of Ganda identity in opposition to the current national leadership, and as a marketing item for the growing tourist and other industries.

The Uganda Museum, underfunded by government but a proud host of promotional heritage events, was recently gifted a particularly large piece of barkcloth in

10 The *okwanjula* ceremony is the most important step towards marriage and consists of the official introduction of the involved families and the negotiation of the dowry. The meaning and protocol of *okwanjula* have changed over time and nowadays tend to combine ‘traditional’, Muslim and Christian marriage practices.

11 It had been a symbol of political dissent already during the colonial rule and especially in the 1950s as a reaction to the deposition of Kabaka Fredrick Edward Muteesa II by the colonial administration on November 30th 1953 (Nakazibwe 2005, 210–218).

12 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/barkcloth-making-in-uganda-00139>. Accessed August 27, 2019.

occasion of an event co-organised by Fred Mutebi in collaboration with representatives of the *bakomazi* from Kibinge, with Dr. Venny Nakazibwe, a leading expert in the history of barkcloth in Uganda, and fashion designer José Hendo in October 2016. Tellingly branded *Bark to the Roots 2*, this event was supported by the US ambassador to Uganda and consisted of introductory talks, a demonstration of barkcloth production by the *bakomazi*, an exquisite catwalk of José Hendo's most recent collection, and booths informing the visitors about the role of barkcloth for product design and applied art.

Such events help to promote barkcloth as a contemporary asset. They reposition barkcloth as a modern product that relies on a long and proven tradition and simultaneously promote its potential for creative exploration and economic investment in a growing national economy. Moreover, the barkcloth market is particularly interesting for the Buganda Kingdom. Because its re-instatement was bound to the condition that it does not assume political functions but exclusively 'cultural' ones, the Kingdom cannot collect tax or other revenues from its subjects and hence must support itself in other ways.<sup>13</sup> The markets related to cultural heritage therefore are of major significance for the kingdom and are reflected in the way it promotes barkcloth – the material most associated with its history and cultural importance. However, such promotion requires investment to an extent that Buganda cannot fulfil. It must rely on partners who recognise the economic potential of barkcloth, who identify with its tradition and who develop markets beyond Buganda. Mutebi's articulatory practice represents exactly such a mediating link.

Fig. 2: *Bakomazi* from BOTFA presenting their craftsmanship at the Uganda Museum, Kampala, in occasion of *Bark to the Roots 2*.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
October 14, 2016.



13 Nelson Kasfir (2017) traces in detail the complexities underlying such distinction between 'cultural' and 'political' fields of action of the Buganda Kingdom Government.



Fig. 3: Pillow covers made from barkcloth by Sarah Nakisanze's *Easy Afric* design company.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
August 27, 2019.

## Barkcloth as an Economic Perspective: Networking and Mediation

Promoting the importance of barkcloth for environmental sustainability and Ganda culture, experimenting with it as an artistic material, and engaging in its development as a solution to ecological challenges are as much part of Mutebis mission as its promotion as a social and economic asset. Social entrepreneurship therefore is a guiding principle in his activities since the early 2010s when he started with barkcloth farming and community work in Bukomansmbi. As he says, “Part of it is to empower the farmer and the processors. So, the more options there is [sic] to use barkcloth, the more money will go to that.” (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017) A key element in this process is the establishment of a community-driven farmer association where the farmers, producers and traders of barkcloth are immediately connected to each other, without middlemen who tend to press the acquisition prices from the farmers in order to gain a bigger profit on the market. The institution of apprenticeships offers youth opportunities for both, an artisanal education and a reasonably paid professional engagement in their village as a viable alternative to moving to the city. Moreover, women in the village create bags and other items from barkcloth which they display for sale whenever foreigners visit BOTFA on Mutebis invitation. Developing barkcloth as an economic asset, therefore, is not limited to its planting, harvesting and processing, but also to opening new markets – design markets as much as what we may tentatively call the beginning of sustainability tourism.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Mutebi and the members of BOTFA create new markets with the purpose to generate new, sustainable and autochthonous resources of income in a marginalised village. Most importantly, the collective is in control of the value chain. With the model of community farming and direct sales, the profit goes directly back to the community.

14 With this term I suggest that sites of ‘sustainable projects’ are made accessible to visitors and tourists but may or may not comply with principles of sustainable tourism.

Part of this value chain is also a sustained collaboration with creatives such as designers and artists who use barkcloth as a working material. Developing pillow covers, wallets, coasters, storage bags for tea, and an impressive range of other products sold in the tourist and craft industry, artists and designers have found a pocket of income. PhD candidate and designer Sarah Nakisanze for instance collaborates with Mutebi in barkcloth research and sources the barkcloth produced by BOTFA for her *Easy Afric* design company and Lususu collection that she runs in cooperation with a team of women who produce wallets, pillow covers, handbags and other design items.<sup>15</sup>

The fashion industry has been so far one of the most prominent stages where barkcloth is being promoted as both a traditional and environmentally sustainable material and at the same time as one with great potential for further technological development. The most famous promoter in this field is Uganda-born and London-based José Hendo who collaborates closely with the farmers of Bukomansimbi and Fred Mutebi to harvest and produce “eco-sustainable” design based on exquisite qualities of barkcloth.<sup>16</sup> Together with Mutebi and others, she explores new ways of dyeing it and making it more versatile for contemporary fashion design needs. She also experiments in developing new textures and combinations with other sustainable materials.

Fig. 4: Catwalk of José Hendo's fashion design collection at Uganda Museum, Kampala in occasion of *Bark to the Roots 2*.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
October 14, 2016.



15 See her homepage: <https://easyafricdesigns.com>. Accessed August 26, 2019.

16 <https://josehendo.com>. Accessed August 24, 2019. See (besides many other clips online) the informative video produced by CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/12/21/spc-inside-africa-uganda-fashion-b.cnn>. Accessed August 24, 2019.



However, Mutebi together with the *bakomazi* community does not only promote barkcloth as a material for artists and designers; he also started to promote it as an actual artistic item. Mastery in beating high quality barkcloth requires many years of training and skill. Mutebi has known many of the Bukomansimbi *bakomazi* since decades and is familiar with their particular signature production. He knows their individual preferences and specialisations and can attribute specific pieces of barkcloth to their creator. But normally, their names go lost once their products enter the market. Mutebi aims at maintaining the visibility of the barkcloth producers also after entering the market by labelling or perhaps also embossing their names in the barkcloth (Nagawa 2018, 351). This procedure would not only acknowledge the individual contribution of the masters to the excellence of Ugandan barkcloth but it also emphasises the exclusivity of the product, approaching it to the status of an artwork or special design piece which in turn opens up again new markets. Indeed, responding to a general trend of re-discovering indigenous aesthetic traditions, contemporary art initiatives and exhibitions in the last years included not only the work of artists who use barkcloth in their work such as Sanaa Gateja<sup>17</sup>, Xenson<sup>18</sup> or Mutebi, but also work by master *omukomazi* Paulo Bukenya Katamiira himself. His work was included in the KLA ART Festival exhibition of 2014, for example (Serubiri 2014, 17–18).

An important economic aspect in Uganda is philanthropy and the dominance of foreign aid. Every visionary initiative in this country must rely on foreign supporters who often adopt the ambiguous role of philanthropist and investor likewise. This is also the case with Mutebi's project. One of his friends and most passionate collectors in the

17 For more information on Sanaa Gateja, see: <https://www.sanaa-gateja.com>. Accessed August 27, 2019.

18 For more information on Samson Ssenkaaba aka Xenson, see: <https://xenson-ssenskaaba.pixels.com>. Accessed August 27, 2019.





Netherlands, Ruud Boon, has been supporting him not only as printmaker in his earlier career, but also as a patron for his projects in his place of birth. As a chairman of the organisation *Children of Uganda/Kinderen van Uganda*<sup>19</sup>, he engages in programs to support child education. Funds raised by the organisation have, for example, sponsored the community hall that replaced the school after it was destroyed by a storm. He also engages in coffee and barkcloth production and export, and when I met him, he was busy attending a soccer tournament that his organisation supported as a pass-time activity for the village youth in cooperation with Ugandan youth chaperons.

Selling art to a collector in the Netherlands and collaborating with the same collector for a social engagement in his village and in the development of barkcloth production are linked to one and the same aim for Mutebi. He illustrated this for me by explaining the seemingly far-fetched connection between the growing barkcloth industry in Uganda and the reduction of floodings in the Netherlands: If the Netherlands experience flooding due to global warming, the collection with his work will be lost. In contrast, if the development of a sustainable barkcloth industry can contribute to slow down global warming, the Netherlands and its art collections will be saved (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

This associative way of thinking fundamentally shapes Mutebi's success in promoting his project – connecting topics and people is deeply anchored in everything he does.

His invitation to a two-day trip to Bukomansimbi and the *mutuba* plantations offered me an ideal occasion to observe Mutebi's ability to mediate and communicate not only his ideas, but also between different people. He introduced me to his family,

Fig. 5: Fred Mutebi (right) with fashion designer José Hendo (to his right) and three farmers in the *mutuba*/coffee/plantain fields of Bukomansimbi. They are filmed for educational and promotional purposes.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
October 16, 2016.

19 <http://www.kinderenvanuganda.nl>. Accessed September 4, 2019.

Ruud Boon, José Hendo and the various projects he and his team are involved in. Generously sharing his time, his social connections, his car petrol and hours of conversation is in the nature of this artist, but he is also highly aware that this kind of social sharing is an investment that benefits his projects.

A gifted mediator between foreign scholars and patrons, political representatives, school directors and community workers, his family members, and international business partners like José Hendo, Mutebi represents a crucial knot in a wide network of collaborative support and business. Mastering all linguistic and discursive skills needed for such diverse constituencies and generously sharing his knowledge and network, he incorporates the perfect mediator between the many individuals and stakeholders in his network. He jokes around in Luganda with the village children, includes some Dutch terms in his conversations with his collector friend, and employs the vocabulary of the United Nations' sustainable development goals when speaking to new acquaintances from foreign embassies and NGOs. While adopting economic vocabulary when speaking to possible investors, he emphasises the relevance of cultural values and traditional knowledge when speaking to a social anthropologist and art historian like me. Doing so, he connects both different social actors and different projects with each other. A statement in occasion of his speech of gratitude for the donation of the new community centre may serve as an example: After Boon disclosed the amount of money collected for the new community centre, Mutebi proposed to release this money only once 5000 trees are planted – this is the number of children in the division. Directly addressing the school and village representatives attending the meeting, he added: “We *must* go ahead, with no delay, the clock is ticking”, and “trees translate into money”. Explaining to them that “[y]ou know there’s nothing you can give them [the Dutch sponsors]”, he encouraged them to “realise our plans and work!”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, while *mutuba* trees translate into barkcloth that produces an income through sale, there are also other ways of generating funds with trees. For instance, Mutebi encourages visitors and sponsors from abroad to plant a *mutuba* tree and adopt it by sponsoring 30US\$ of which a third goes into school fees for a local child, a third supports its family, and a third goes into administration. His pragmatic approach is unambiguous in this regard: financial support deserves gratitude, but the receivers must go beyond that and generate new ideas and projects.

## Barkcloth as Subject of Collaborative Research and Education

Mutebi also seeks ways to use barkcloth for new products. To this end, he explores it experimentally, researching ways to give it different levels of strength, texture, colours and shape to make it viable as a sustainable alternative to environmentally threatening materials and as a local alternative to imported products. As a print master, printing paper is one of his main subjects of research. So far, he has developed largely two types of paper, one consisting of 100% barkcloth, whereby he partly re-uses material that is thrown away in the process of barkcloth production, and the other consisting of barkcloth in combination with various other materials such as papyrus which is also grown in Uganda. Another research strand is barkcloth as canvas. He works on improving its features in a way that it can replace imported canvas from Asia and elsewhere.

Mutebi's understanding of research and knowledge production is however not limited to his own experimenting with barkcloth for artists' material. In the contrary –

20 Quoted from my fieldnotes on October 16, 2016.



and this is a particular skill of his – he is highly aware how important it is to tap into knowledge from other stakeholders. A crucial constituency especially in the barkcloth farming and processing context are the elderly as transmitters of knowledge to a young generation, and Mutebi’s initiative to introduce an actual apprenticeship program overseen by the master *bakomazi* is proof of this awareness. But Mutebi also collaborates with other initiatives that strive to develop affordable objects and materials from local renewable resources. For instance, he had an exchange with an American cyclist who first was interested in developing bamboo bicycles that would be affordable for Ugandan buyers. He then also created a prototype of a bicycle frame made from barkcloth by stabilising the limp material with a particular glue developed in the USA. Mutebi sees a potential in this technology to produce chairs, notably not just the fabric to sit on, but also the frame, from barkcloth (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017). He also teams up with artist friends to explore art and design products based on barkcloth – his studio in Kampala is home to several such prototypes.

Fig. 6: Fred Mutebi with a visitor in the courtyard of his studio and home in Kampala. He uses the dyed bits of barkcloth spread on the ground for his paper and canvas experiments.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
August 2, 2017.

Fig. 7: Fred Mutebi in his studio sitting on a rocking chair with a seating surface of barkcloth that he made in collaboration with an artist friend. Barkcloth is piled to his left and hand-made paper containing barkcloth lies to his right. The *mutuba* tree sap in the jerrycan between his feet is used as a remedy against ulcers.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
August 2, 2017.



It is speaking that while Mutebi is critical of Chinese or Japanese imports of art products to Uganda, he remains open for a potential future collaboration with researchers from these respective countries. In his view, there is no contradiction in emphasising the production of local and sustainable material while collaborating with international partners for its technological development. Rather, he sees such international exchange as a resource to learn, for instance, about Asian paper making traditions and explore their potential for local barkcloth paper production. In our interviews, he also expressed interest in collaborating with students from a European university for applied sciences to explore new technological possibilities with barkcloth (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

Mutebi wants to expand and intensify this research practice and especially the training and education on farming and processing barkcloth. For this purpose, he is developing an accredited instruction centre in Bukomansimbi that he currently describes as an “Indigenous knowledge innovation centre”<sup>21</sup>, where the coffee, plantain and barkcloth fields are located and where also a printmaking workshop should find its place. At the time of our interview in 2017, he was busy looking for partners and investors who

21 Quoted from my fieldnotes on August 2, 2017.

would help setting up workshop and residency buildings for the apprentices and visiting researchers. According to Nagawa, he also plans to set up an experiential museum on the site where visitors can learn about cultural values and rituals related to barkcloth and twinhood (Nagawa 2018, 349). It would educate about and harness Ganda culture, encourage material research and design education, and help to promote his barkcloth mission to a potential supporter base.

## Fred Mutebi's Art and Political Articulation

Finally, there is obviously also a political aspect to Mutebi's work which corresponds to the conception of articulation as formulated by post-Marxist political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. By inserting himself into the economic system and employing international discourses of sustainable development and global environmental activism as reflected in the United Nations' sustainable development goals, he creates new structures of particularly local interest: economic innovation, employment opportunities and a renewed acknowledgement and pride of precolonial heritage and knowledge. He merges environmental activism with a political conviction that there is little reason to rely on the government to change the economic and environmental situation in Uganda. Rather, he feels an obligation to take things into his own hands and, as he says, not only criticise but also offer solutions to the problems. Accordingly, his criticism is not one of outspoken and unidirectional protest, but rather a discreet articulation of an alternative that addresses many different stakeholders.

Interestingly, a similar observation was made with regard to his print work where political criticism is present but also "veiled" in a way that it speaks to a large range of potential viewers and clients (Kakande 2008, 228). Discussing Fred Mutebi's prints from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s in his dissertation, art historian Angelo Kakande claims that the artist, along with Bruno Sserukuuma, has "invented appropriate vocabularies with which they question the NRM's<sup>22</sup> administration without being subversive, without attracting sanctions and without compromising their ability to sell their works" (Kakande 2008, 3). In his view, the idioms Mutebi uses are "instructive and insightful on how an artist can survive in a globalising market without being disengaged from debates on urgent issues such as bad governance and corruption which continue to haunt Uganda" (ibid.). He shows how Mutebi consequently created aesthetically appealing work that was at the same time subtly political, thus adopting a "strategy of indirection" by bringing "the political and the aesthetic together while avoiding to offend" his audience (Kakande 2008, 227). Using metaphors and symbols such as marabou storks or a group of bespectacled and bow-tied elite beer drinkers for corrupt politicians, and formal arrangements like disorganised groups of humans for political confusion, he makes political comments while packaging them into aesthetically attractive compositions and colours that secure him patronage. The same goes for his animal prints which may look simple and playful to viewers, but they also reflect his environmental concerns (see Kakande 2008, 244). A viewer needs some familiarity with the symbols used and their Luganda expressions to understand the full range of political criticism in the images.

In the case of his barkcloth engagement, Mutebi addresses other topics than corruption but nevertheless frames them in a global context, such as the revival of indigenous traditions in *ebyaffe* as a cultural asset in a globalised world, environmental activism against global warming, and the struggle against rural poverty through social entrepreneurship. As a result, he exceeds national politics and engages in political issues of both, local and

22 The National Resistance Movement (NRM) is the ruling party in Uganda, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni its leader.



Fig. 8:  
Fred Kato Mutebi,  
*Abannyunyunsi*,  
2005, woodcut,  
16" (h) x 20" (w).  
*Courtesy the artist.*

global concern. Similar to his prints, his barkcloth engagement is political “without being subversive” or “attracting sanctions”. Rather, political articulation is expressed in his practice of communicating, networking, and connecting different fields as does the common notion of ‘articulation’. He creates joints between seemingly separate constituencies and thus links them with each other. His profiles and homepages in new media like Facebook and internet add to this networking and promotion as do other media like television. They help Mutebi to reach both a local and an international audience, art lovers, environmental activists, philanthropists, local artists and potential investors. Even interviews like the one I conducted with him are just one element in his practice of creating moments that allow for articulation between potential stakeholders and his project: By speaking to visitors from economically strong countries – including journalists and reporters –, he sensitises them for the value of his work and may gain them as investors, supporters or collaborators. They are an element in the network he develops, and he invests a lot of time and repeated hours of patient explanation in order to strengthen this field of action that depends on both, himself and his partners.

But the engagement with barkcloth is also political to an extent that a certain client base considers it an expression of Ganda pride and a silent defiance against current national politics. It stands for a reawakening ethnic pride on the one hand, and for a sublime protest against the corrupt national government on the other. Several young artists in Kampala wear hats, carry bags or create other items from barkcloth as a political expression of defiance against the gerontocracy of President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, his corrupt party members and the lack of lived multi-party democracy.

Mutebi himself was a keen supporter of the NRM for a very long time – like most Ugandans who were happy to see the decades-long civil war end and the revolutionary president re-build the foundations for foreign aid and new economic initiatives (Kakande 2008, 224–225). However, already in the early nineties criticism emerged as corruption had become a dominant practice. Mutebi did not only stop supporting the party in practice, but also increasingly expressed criticism in his art, albeit in a “veiled” mode as stated by Kakande. The prints speak to informed Ugandans with a politically charged symbolism while at the same time they appeal aesthetically to viewers and potential buyers unaware of this symbolism. They thus serve as both, political criticism and aesthetic pleasure – an observation that also applies to Mutebi’s engagement with barkcloth. It is interesting to interpret the political articulation in Mutebi’s prints as an anticipation of his more recent engagement with barkcloth which stands for a cultural identification with Ganda cultural heritage rather than the nation state. Mutebi’s decision to develop new technologies with traditional knowledge therefore has a political dimension that is driven by environmental activism, social engagement and political convictions that find themselves increasingly at loggerheads with current national politics.

## Conclusion: Barkcloth Promotion as a Mode of Articulatory Engagements

Fred Kato Mutebi is a master in creating moments of articulation between himself and his partners and audiences. He discovers, practices and co-creates articulations in at least four notions of the term. The probably most obvious one reflects the connecting capacities of the artist between things, persons and discourses. He sees and analyses the connections between seemingly distant and unconnected phenomena in a globalised world, he reconstructs their interdependency and formulates them in the terminology of current discourses that dominate environmental activism and the UN sustainable development goals. He creates a logical argument for how barkcloth in Uganda can contribute to the solution of both local problems like unemployment and desertification and global challenges like global warming. He sensitises his visitors, collaborators,



Fig. 9: Teaching material created from barkcloth at the school of Kibinge.  
 Fiona Siegenthaler,  
 October 16, 2016.

colleagues and partners for the often invisible or unnoticed interdependency between regional or national economies and their wider global entanglement. While this ability is characteristic for many Ugandan and East African artists, it is unusually pronounced in Mutebi's very persona and the energy he invests in explaining the connections between different spheres of social life, economy, ecology, politics and creativity and how to solve complex problems by addressing them with the simple solution of barkcloth production. He does so by speaking to different constituencies in their most familiar languages, adapting to the individual settings and situations. He is creating an actual *Lebenswerk* in which one element cannot exist with the other – they all are going through an articulation by being singled out individually and at the same time put into context and inevitably linked to the other elements within his field of agency.

Listening to Mutebi when he speaks about his project, I was reminded of his Christian conviction not so much with regard to the content, but the way he talked about his mission. Like a priest he works toward convincing his stakeholders of the urgency of his mission by means of engaging in clear arguments, adopting a firm voice, and illustrating abstract ideas with concrete examples from everyday life. His is a skill of clarifying complex problems and at the same time convincing his listeners of the integrity and efficacy of his own engagement in solving them. This is one of his articulatory talents: He speaks in comprehensible terms of his project and thereby successively convinces stakeholders of different backgrounds. An essential element of his conversations are also questions. While passionately communicating his project and involving other individuals into his world, he is also a gifted asker. He asks his conversation partners specific questions for instance about technological history, engaging them as active contributors to the conversation and at the same time learning from them. Mutebi's practice goes beyond mere discourse: by engaging people in the conversation, he creates new situations and opportunities and develops an actual market with barkcloth at its centre. This is the performative and generative aspect of articulation as argued by Förster (under review) and Hall (2000).

In addition, Mutebi raises awareness of the power imbalance resulting from capitalist markets and the imminent extinction of long-standing pre-capitalist production modes such as the farming and artisanal production of barkcloth. His attempt at reversing this



history by re-introducing artisanal production and reaffirming cultural validation of barkcloth can be read as an attempt of Mutebi to re-articulate this relationship between capitalist and artisanal production in favour of the victims of globalisation. In the process, he does not only support the experts at the roots of the production – the farmers, the *bakomazi* and their families – but he also actively pushes the secondary markets that involve barkcloth such as those related to Buganda and its symbolic representation with barkcloth, those related to tourism and the expat community and their interest in buying fashionable items with an “ethnic” touch, those related to social entrepreneurship and job creation, and those that promote a “traditional” technology like barkcloth for contemporary, international and sustainable fashion and lifestyle. This secondary market remains closely attached to the actual site and people involved in the production of barkcloth and is geared toward directly benefitting and supporting the latter and their communities. In the spirit of fair trade, Mutebi attempts at keeping control over the intermediary traders to make sure that any income generated in the barkcloth value chain finds its way back to the farmers, the artisans and their communities. Accordingly, his practice is also an attempt at overseeing and identifying the key points in the barkcloth market in order to avoid unequal and abusive market structures.

Fig. 10: Soccer tournament in Kibinge. The tables in the foreground are covered with barkcloth.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
October 16, 2016.



He responds to the economic disparity between local agency and global dependencies. Accordingly, his practice can be understood as a response to the dependency pointed out by Wolpe, Meillassoux and others as key feature of articulation in colonial and postcolonial modes of production.

In this respect, Mutebi's re-articulation of the barkcloth economy can be seen as a political act that challenges hegemonic power structures. For Mutebi, barkcloth is a promise for the future with a meaning in the past, and it is clearly a future that should not rely on a dysfunctional nation state but instead source from other stakeholders and their individual contributions to benefit the producing communities. Mutebi's political interest in barkcloth therefore does not only consist of its symbolical representation of Ganda pride and a sublime statement of political defiance, but in its very materiality as a cultural, social, economic and political asset. As Margaret Nagawa summarises, "[t]he renewed sense of identity among the Baganda, Mutebi's mining of rich subject matter from such political circumstances, and his role in the revival of barkcloth production are instrumental in creating synergies among artists, art, place, and political positions" (Nagawa 2018, 348). His engagements for environmental, political, cultural, entrepreneurial and educational issues all are part of an articulatory process addressing different fields of agency. His work therefore – as did his earlier prints – is like a tool-kit offered to different audiences who can pick what fits best into their agenda while supporting Mutebi's vision. Establishing these points of shared interests and collaboration, Mutebi creates the foundation for a whole set of joints that relate elements to each other in direct or also indirect ways, thus generating a structure of practices and institutions that are flexibly connected to each other. This articulatory practice clearly exceeds the symbolical and representational modes of his prints and embodies the central principle of his and his partners' social and environmental engagement.

Fig. 11: Canvas experiments with barkcloth.  
Fiona Siegenthaler,  
August 2, 2017.



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# Masked Politics

## The aesthetics of political articulation in Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire

Till Förster, Basel

Masks are arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feeling, at once faithful, discreet, and superlative. Living things in contact with the air must acquire a cuticle, and it is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts; yet some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, and with words for not being feelings. Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than the substances they cover but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation. (George Santayana 1922,131–32)

## Articulation and the Arts

In everyday language, art and articulation only seem to be vaguely linked. However, etymologically, the two terms do relate to each other. Both words are deduced from Latin and moved into English through medieval or early modern French. Art does not only stand for an object, the work of art, the noun also hints at the skills that are needed to produce that object. As an object, the artwork is not necessarily endowed with material but rather with sensorial and experiential qualities. A dance and a play can be as much an artwork as a painting or a sculpture. Paraphrasing classical philosophies of art, one may posit that the artwork as an object is an imagined entity that others can perceive and conceive in a way that makes them aware of their sensory judgments – that is, their aesthetics (e.g. Dewey 1934). From an anthropological perspective, art is not the outcome of a solitary act of creation<sup>1</sup> but rather emerges when and where the productive and perceptive skills of actors work hand in hand. The renaissances and rediscoveries in the history of art would be inconceivable if art were only the creation of the artist. It needs to be re-discovered by someone or a group of people who share similar sensory skills and can perceive it as art.

Interestingly, the Proto-Indo-European root of art is *\*ar-*, “to fit together”. Of course, that may mean the figurative composition of bits and pieces so that they can be perceived as one object – but in a larger sense, it may also mean the context and the attitudes of those who engage with their sensory experience to perceive something as art. Articulation grew out of the same semantic field. Its Latin root *articulare* means “to separate into joints,” and in a broader sense “to utter distinctly”. The latter meaning became dominant in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it still implies the more basic understanding of articulation as a joint or joining. The setting of bones – still dominant in the French term *articulation* – is probably still the best illustration of its basic idea. Very much as bones are linked through joints, leaving a specific freedom of movement to the other limb, they also limit its position and range of movement. Putting it into more general words, articulation points at how separate elements act on each other and fit together. The articulate uttering of sounds is just one example among many: words and sentences are composed of sounds – phonemes in linguistics – but meaning only emerges out of the context that speakers and hearers share. Articulate speech then stands for a practice that both speakers and hearers as social actors can engage in – a space where patterns and rules but also variations and change emerge.

Very much as its etymology suggests, articulation is a double-sided concept in the humanities as well. On the one hand, it points at the expressive and creative capacities of those who engage in articulatory practices, and on the other, it hints at how these capacities are framed and limited by the specific cultural and social context of the historical background. In the arts, articulation is probably best understood as the link between expressive and perceptive dimensions on both sides, that is, the artists and their audience. Indeed, keeping the two apart may not be possible in many societal settings. Drawing a line between those who “produce” an artwork and those who “perceive” it certainly characterises the modern artworld – but it is far from universal. This dichotomy may be more related to the traditional understanding of art as object and the classical economic triad of production, distribution, and consumption. From an anthropological perspective, it is crucial not to attribute definite roles in advance but rather to explore how actors articulate toward each other by aesthetic means – and to explore the inherent political dimension of such interactions (Rancière 2000, 2008). Articulation thus means to shift the attention from individual and collective agents to how they relate to each other and how this interaction shapes their identity as politically visible actors. Their

1 Many scholars have argued that the “cult of the artist” has replaced religion in modern times as the artist takes the place of God as creator, e.g. Völlnagel and Wullen 2008.

identity as political actors is not only related to these articulatory interactions – articulatory practices largely create it.

Unsurprisingly, articulation is also a key term of discourse theory. In an emerging discursive formation, actors may change their position and engage in new roles according to articulatory necessities instigated by the ongoing interactions between them. Spectators may thus take the role of active performers while others may turn into spectators when the former take the lead. Very much as producer and spectator, the strict division of stage and audience is not universal and cannot guide anthropological studies of the arts. Actors have to situate themselves in a field to adopt one or the other position by articulating their own convictions and claims in a convincing way – that is, in a way that shows their skills and creativity in making their claims heard. They may do so as actors on stage but also as actors in the audience. Their identities are situational and much more flexible than conventional studies of the arts believe. Instead of projecting the role models of the modern artworld on other social and cultural settings, it is more important to examine how the taking of positions is done, how aesthetics play into it, and how that leads to more or less stable configurations of actors.



Fig. 1: The carrier of the *kà pã cãŋ* basket creeps over the ground in front of elders.  
*Korhogo, February 2015.*  
*Till Förster.*

As in all discursive formations, the legacy of past interactions and role ascriptions also has an impact on emerging articulatory practices. The habitual dimension of human agency comes into play whenever actors have to face new situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). It is almost always more convenient to cast new experience into the schemes of what one is already familiar with than to conceive a situation as something completely new. However, in most cases, articulatory practices work somewhere in the middle between the legacy of former interactions – which the actors may experience as constraints – and the need to go beyond established schemes to make oneself visible as an interesting, creative person that has something to say or to show.

Exploring this middle ground where articulatory practices link actors and shape political as well as social identities is the subject of this contribution. It looks at a city as a social space where these articulatory practices unfold, embedded in a history of articulation that dates back to pre-colonial times while being entirely contemporary. Very much as the discursive figurations of actors have their history, the current articulation of political identities is well and truly addressing the present – and not the past. Not only are the identities of the actors flexible, so is past and present.

## Korhogo and the formation of political space

As a city, Korhogo has a comparatively brief history. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Korhogo was a big village, not significantly bigger than many other villages that had served as safe havens and grown rapidly during the wars of Samory Touré. During the late 1880s and 1890s, when Samori began to move his kingdom from its former heartland around Siguiré, now Guinea, further North and East, many peasants fled their homes, searching refuge in the few bigger settlements that already existed in the largely acephalous societies of farmers. While Samory's war against 'pagan' people devastated large swath of land in the area, such villages, often fortified by walls or palisades, seemed to be the only places where ordinary people could hope to escape the atrocities committed by Samory's soldiers – although that sometimes did not work out. In many places, the populace still remembers defeat and the looting and pillage that followed, leaving the survivors hopeless and destitute. Since their granaries had been plundered, there were no seeds left for the next rainy season. To make things worse, a smallpox epidemic contributed enormously to the desperate state of the land. When French officer and explorer Louis-Gustave Binger passed through the area in 1887, he reported empty villages, ruins and rotting bodies (Binger 1892, 68ff.)

During the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement patterns changed profoundly. With the exception of a stretch of land directly East of Korhogo, later called *la zone dense*, bigger villages began to dominate the area. They were often composed of neighbourhoods that still carried the names of the places of origin of their inhabitants, thus reflecting the settlement's history (fig. 2). The first settlers served as earth priests. Because they had been the first to cultivate the land, they had to establish regular and reliable relationships to the beings of the wilderness that were perceived as the real proprietors of the earth. As earth priests, they were in charge of making yearly sacrifices to the dwarfish beings. If their primordial rights to the soil were not respected, they could cause bad harvests and even diseases among the settlers. Only when the earth priests had performed these rites, other farmers were entitled to cut the grass for the roofs of new houses at the beginning of the dry season or to plant and sow when the hot season came to an end. Hence their authority when latecomers settled in their villages and asked for land to cultivate.

The descendants of the first settlers served as intermediaries between farmers and the beings of the wilderness as the original owners of the soil. However, if latecomers



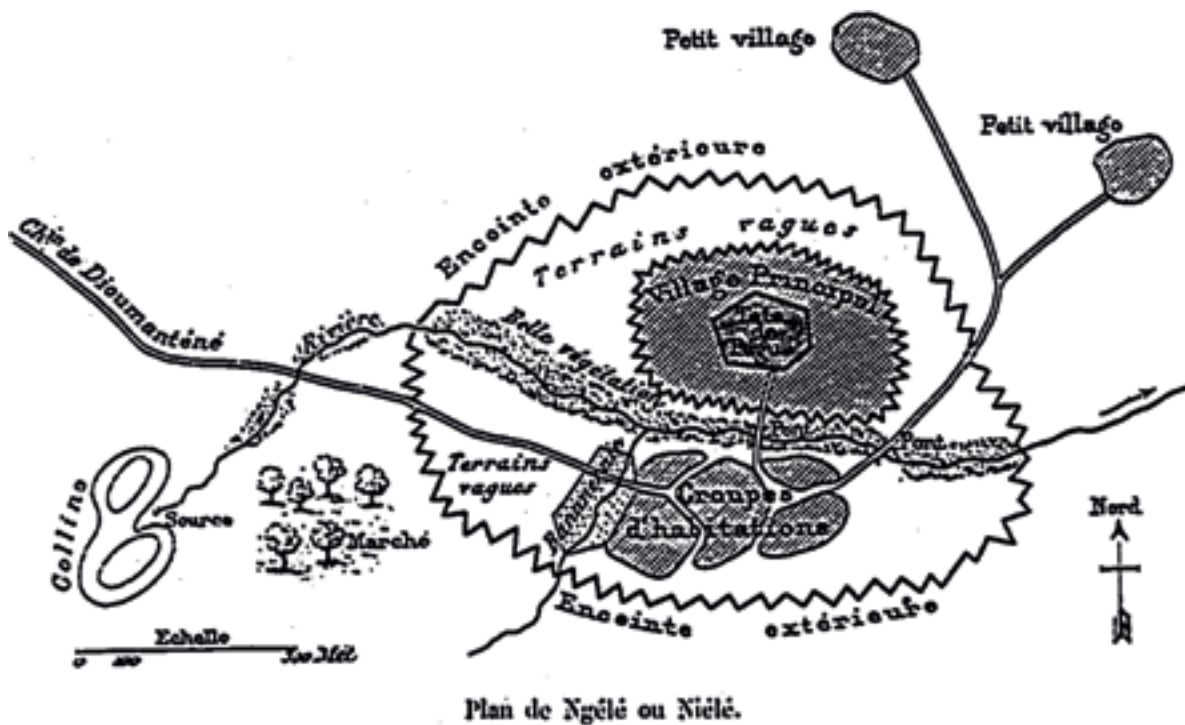


Fig. 2: Plan of Niélé after Binger (1892, 256). The centre of the settlement is occupied by the main village with the fortified tata of the chiefs, while latecomers are settling at the periphery inside and outside the stockade. Today, Niélé is the principal town of a sub-division of about 25 000 inhabitants.

had been earth priests in their places of origin, they remained so for that particular tract of land. So, bigger villages with a longer settlement history were usually home to more than one earth priest. Those who had been first in this particular place had a dominant position and were expected to mediate between their peers if conflicts arose – just as ‘ordered anarchy’ implies (Evans-Pritchard 1940,6 and *passim*, Sigrist 1967). Though they were never considered to be proprietors, their position resembled that of landlords, and they could also serve as spokesperson for the entire village if strangers were asking for an addressee. Because of their position, they often were expected to mediate between the different interests of the farmers – not only in case of land disputes. However, they rarely became powerful leaders who could impose their will on other inhabitants. When one or the other became known as a ‘chief’<sup>2</sup>, it was because of his personal skills as a mediator who could manoeuvre between the different groups and interests in a way that enhanced his own influence. They usually knew more about all sorts of dissent in their vicinity than average farmers who worked on their fields day in, day out.

Political dissent in segmental village societies of the savannahs was largely articulated along two lines: the centuries-old relationship of first settlers to latecomers (Brooks 1994) on the one hand and kinship alliances on the other (Fortes 1969). Both were so deeply embedded in daily social practice that they had become habitual for most farmers, artisans and traders. Most often, strangers were quickly integrated into the local social fabric – regardless of whether they were farmers who asked for land to cultivate like anybody else or whether they were artisans who asked for a place in the village to construct their workshops. Traders were no exception. They were given their own ‘village’, which meant that they were allocated a place where they could freely construct their compounds and live according to their own rules and, being mostly Muslims, where they could construct a mosque and follow their faith (Launay 1982, 1992). Such neighbourhoods were the basic zoning of emerging towns. Conflicts between inhabitants of one or the other neighbourhood were conceived along the lines of the settlement’s history, and the descendant of the first settler were naturally mediators between them as that history was inscribed in the collective memory of their lineage.

2 The Senari term *ka’afolo*, which is usually translated as *chef de village* into French, means, literally translated, ‘owner of the village’. It neither implies any central function nor domination in a political sense.



Fig. 3: "Dark One" approaches the audience, accompanied by musicians of the *kà pā cǎŋ* ensemble. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.

Most of the time, first settlers and latecomers got on fairly well – also during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when villages began to grow faster than before and eventually became towns. No wonder that these emerging towns became the subject of cultural and social imagination – an imagination that was related to resistance, self-reliance and the social integration of people of different regional and cultural background. Korhogo was one of these emerging towns. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had been a market town as many others in the region. The first census of the French administration, published on behalf of the 1903 colonial exhibition in Marseille, counted a little more than 2000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> That was a little more than the average of other bigger villages, but it was not exceptional. Unlike many other towns, however, Korhogo increasingly profited from two overlapping strands of the profound historical transformations that rocked West Africa at the time.

3 Delafosse 1906:383. Delafosse lists four towns of more than 2000 inhabitants in the district of Korhogo, which covered at the time almost the entire North of the young colony: Odienné, Landiougou, Samatiguila besides Korhogo itself. 15 towns had between 1000 and 2000 inhabitants.

First, it lay at the southern fringe of the kingdom of Kéné Dougou (Quiquandon 1891, Tymowski 1987).<sup>4</sup> The kingdom was one of the few polities whose capital Sikasso, today in Southeast Mali, had resisted the attacks of Samory in 1887.<sup>5</sup> It survived even the subsequent 15 months siege of the town. Though conquered and looted by French colonial troops in 1898, Sikasso showed that Samory Touré, the Almami, was not invincible. Literally, his title meant ‘the imam’, but in the local context, he was ‘the commander of the faithful’, uniting military and religious claims. It was Samory’s *nom de guerre*, that is, his name of honour and at the same time a threat to those who refused to bow to him. Sikasso’s history fed into the imaginary of bigger towns as sites of power and resilience that could serve as a safe haven to all people threatened by Samory’s conquest (Peterson 2008).

Second, Korhogo’s geopolitical situation was ambivalent. On the one hand, it could seek support from its northern neighbour, the mighty Kéné Dougou, and on the other, it had roots in the local populace of largely segmental village societies. In addition, it also had ritual ties to another powerful actor in the region, the principality of Kong in the East – a Muslim polity like Kéné Dougou (Green 1984). To balance these powers in volatile times as the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century demanded great skills. Although the nobles of the town later claimed otherwise, Korhogo was surely not powerful enough to impose its own will on others. Its chieftaincy, whose regional influence grew together with the town’s size, had been weaker than its neighbours – but it was savvy enough to balance the different powers in the region and to seek allies on different sides at the same time.

Péléforo Gbon Soro, the son of chief Zouatchognon Soro<sup>6</sup> of Korhogo, was a master in this regard.<sup>7</sup> As a young man, Gbon – his short name – had been sent to the court of Babemba Traoré, then king of Kéné Dougou. As Babemba was a fervent Muslim, Gbon converted to Islam and changed his name from Soro to Coulibaly, the Manding denomination of his clan. Gbon came back to Korhogo in 1894 because the smallpox epidemic had killed his father and three of his brothers. As successor without direct competitors, he was able to influence the fate of the town to a degree that was exceptional in the entire region and later throughout French West Africa. Instead of fighting against the obviously superior military of Korhogo’s neighbours, he sought compromises that allowed him and his populace to survive. He first recognised Kéné Dougou as dominant regional power, then submitted to Samory when his forces moved eastward to conquer Kong, and eventually acknowledged the superiority of the French, revealing to captain Pinneau the emplacement of Samory’s troops.

Gbon’s ‘flexibility’ surely did his town a better service than military resistance and possible defeat. The tributes Korhogo had to pay to Samory were heavy, but still preferable to the destructions and enormous losses of lives that other towns had to face, among them prosperous Kong, then probably the most important centre of trade in the region. Despite the heavy burdens, Korhogo continued to grow. It increasingly served as a safe haven for those who tried to escape Samory’s troops and his scorched earth policy. The town’s position as a regional market place grew significantly, and it was further boosted when the French made it the seat of their regional administration in 1904 (Delafosse 1906, 332–340, Person 1975, 1993, n.246). Only one year later, Gbon was appointed *chef du canton Keimbara* by the colonial administration. He became an intermediary ruler and loyal partner to the French, thus carrying forward his relationship to

4 Capitaine Quiquandon notoriously abused his position as colonial officer and held slaves on his farm (Tymowski 2000).

5 See Person 1968, 1970, 1975, whose work on Samory is still unrivalled. On the ambivalent position of chiefs under colonial domination see van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987a,b, von Trotha 2006, Comaroff and Comaroff 2018.

6 French spelling, the name is also noted as Zouacognon or Zuaconyon Soro.

7 The life of Péléforo Gbon Coulibaly is meticulously covered by Ouattara (1977). Unfortunately, the literature on Gbon often adopts a hagiographic perspective and overestimates his power and influence.

captain Pinneau. Gbon's fief corresponded roughly to the later subdivision of Korhogo and made him the sovereign of some 15,000 subjects.

Still more remarkable was Gbon's career as administrative chief throughout colonial domination. He collected the capitation for the colonial administration and also provided the forced labour that the colonial administration was in desperate need of. Gbon was named knight of the legion of honour, invited to the colonial exhibition in 1922, then appointed Provincial Chief of the Senufo, and finally in 1942 Paramount Chief Senufo (Ouattara 1977, 302ff.). He saw himself no longer as part of the colonial administration – which he actually was – or as an intermediary ruler, but as an absolute monarch under French dominion. Accordingly, the Coulibaly, his clan, was no longer one among other cantonal chiefs and their lineages – but rather the royal family Senufo. In the late 1940s and 50s, when the end of colonial rule was increasingly foreseeable, Gbon again demonstrated his flexibility and allied with Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the leader of the African Agricultural Union who would lead Côte d'Ivoire to independence. His reign only ended when he died in 1962, two years after independence. His family, however, continued to play an outstanding role in urban, regional and repeatedly in national politics.

## Contemporary Korhogo as post-colonial political space

Gbon Coulibaly's reign had profoundly re-oriented political space in Korhogo and the region that became the prefecture of Korhogo after independence. The Coulibalys continued to dominate politics in the emerging city, making it their power base that, for decades, nobody dared to question. The alliance with the father of the independent nation, Felix Houphouët-Boigny made them still more invulnerable to the criticisms that usually came up in the acephalous society of the Senufo. As paramount chief and intermediary ruler, Gbon had to collect taxes, among them the infamous head tax, which was the first and most basic taxation of the colonial state (Idrissa 1993). Until 1946, taxes were complemented by forced labour (see Spittler 1981, Fall 1993). For that purpose, each and every canton under his domination had to have a sort of store house in Korhogo. These storehouses were usually situated close to the market and the neighbourhood of Soba, where Gbon had his residence. The young men had to gather there, and in-kind contributions to the paramount chief, for instance heavy logs for his construction sites, were also stocked there before they were handed over to him.

The emerging cityscape of the growing town was largely oriented towards its three social and political pillars: On the one side, there was the hill where the French *commandant* has his residence. An open square at the bottom of the hill was the visual centre of the colonial town, named *Place du 14 Juillet*. In its middle, the French flag was flying, and when the square became Independence Square, the Ivorian tricolour. The two most important administrative buildings of colonial administration were facing the flag from the other side of the square; the administration of the *cercle*, which became the prefecture, and the town hall, the *mairie*. Between the two, an alley of Mango trees ran straight to the big market and the commercial neighbourhood where the big Muslim traders had their stores. Another alley on the other side of the town hall lead towards the Catholic Mission and further on to the square where the so-called 'customary authorities' had their seats. Gbon's impressive residence was here, and opposite of it his own mosque and compounds where his closest relatives and their families lived. From here, streets lead to the big market on the one side and into Soba neighbourhood, which became the centre of town and the first entertainment district of Korhogo.



Gbon's residence – which was also called le *palais royal* – was a two-storey building and oversaw all other houses in its immediate environment. The store houses of the cantonal chiefs were close by, and also the compounds of the other Coulibalys who held positions in the (post)colonial administration. Many villagers saw the site as a visual representation of power that they remembered for decades. When Gbon the Elder died in 1962, his younger relatives took over from him and allocated the various positions – 'traditional' as well as 'modern' – to some elder or younger brother of the next generation. In fact, tradition and modernity merged into one patrimonial network, which allowed them to establish a sort of local dynasty with a remarkable influence at the national level. This trajectory from colonial to post-colonial statehood began to blur the clear spatial distinction that had organised the emerging city – very much as it blurred the dividing line that French colonial authorities had drawn between 'modern' and 'traditional' institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Fig. 4: The carrier of the ritual basket enters the scene. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.

<sup>8</sup> The colonial centre, Soba and adjacent neighbourhoods were separated by a small stream from another part of town where artisans and many old families of Muslim traders lived, see Launay 1982.



However, the Coulibalys did not survive as an undivided corporate group. The longer their reign lasted and the more self-understanding their hold on the city seemed to be, the more internal fissions arose. After two decades of relative peace, *la guerre des Coulibaly*, “the war of the Coulibalys” (Airault 2010) became a dominant issue of urban politics in the 1980s.

Three sons of Gbon the Elder struggled over his legacy and shared political ambitions: Béma, the first, succeeded Gbon as *chef de canton* – a position that was no longer considered as colonial but as ‘traditional’. Béma was the father of Kassoum Coulibaly, who owned a transport company and also headed the transport business association as well as the transporters’ union of the entire country. His wealth became legendary in town where he owned real estate in almost all neighbourhoods and in particular in areas central to the further development of the city.

The second son, Amadou Gon Coulibaly – later called Amadou the Elder – was father of Gbonblé, literally “Gbon the Little”. Gbonblé had three sons: Issa Malick, a medical doctor who served as minister in the last government under President Gbagbo, and Amadou Gon the Younger who carried the name of his grandfather. He was a founding member of the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR), to some extent an offspring of the former single political party, the *Parti Démocratique de Côte d’Ivoire – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (PDCI-RDA), party of the founding father of the nation, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. After having served as a technical advisor to Alassane Ouattara in the early 1990s, Amadou Gon the Younger was elected mayor of Korhogo in 2001 and officially stayed in office throughout the rebellion while simultaneously serving as minister of agriculture under President Gbagbo. As the urban council had ceased to operate under rebel governance, Amadou Gon remained largely invisible in urban politics. However, in 2010, he directed Ouattara’s election campaign, became Secretary General of the Presidency in 2011 and eventually Prime Minister in January 2017 (Duhem 2018).

Lanciné Gon was the third son of Gbon the Elder (on Lanciné Coulibaly see Coulibaly 2004). As the two Amadou Gon, he bore the famous name of their father and great-grandfather, written in an abbreviated form. As his father and all other politically active members of the clan, he had initially been a partisan of the PDCI-RDA. However, when President Houphouët-Boigny introduced a multi-party system, he returned his membership card of the PDCI-RDA and became a member of the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI), the party of Laurent Gbagbo, the most prominent opponent to President Houphouët-Boigny in the 1990s. The FPI was a member of the Socialist International while the RDR became a member of the Liberal International. However, party platforms and political orientations along the left–right polarity did and do not play a decisive role in urban politics. The people of Korhogo perceived the struggle much more as an antagonism of two branches of the big clan of the Coulibalys.

The struggle that was later labelled as the beginning of the ‘war’ began with the contestation of the elections to the National Assembly in 1980. After the intervention of President Houphouët-Boigny, Lanciné Gon, by training a lawyer, was finally elected vice president of the National Assembly. Still more important were, from a local perspective, his claims to Korhogo’s highest office. In 1979, he ran against his nephew Gbonblé for the newly created position of the city’s mayor. The campaign was fierce, and the competition between the two did not only divide the family into two camps, it also divided the city as the candidates tried to enlarge their own patrimonial networks at the expense of the other. Both candidates made ceremonial visits to venerable elders, tried to co-opt various communities in town as, for instance, Jula and Hausa traders, and made ceremonial offerings and sacrifices at funerals when the dead are transformed into benevolent ancestors. Their networks also extended into the prefecture where they deepened their alliances with local village headmen.

There are very few if any inhabitants of Korhogo that do not make claims to the city as a political space. However, the game got rough when the clan of the Coulibalys split into opposing factions: Gbonblé, “Gbon the Little” and his son Kassoum both

Fig. 5: A *kodáli* mask stops before approaching the audience, kneels down and points at younger spectators with its stick. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.

were members of the PDCI-RDA, while Lanciné Gon, the mayor, became member of the FPI, and Amadou Gon the Younger, finally member of the RDR. They were the heads of the factions that also sought larger alliances at the national level. But the family did not split along these lines. When Lanciné Gon joined the FPI in the early 1990s, he became a partisan of its chairman Laurent Gbagbo who stood in for a socialist development strategy. To the surprise of many, Kassoum, still member of the PDCI-RDA, supported Laurent Gbagbo who would later become president of the country and lead it into its biggest crisis. At the time, the two, Kassoum and Lanciné Gon, were perceived as one part of the clan while Gbonblé and Amadou Gon were seen as their opponents. Hence, from a local perspective, the opposition between the two branches of the Coulibalys was much more important – and divisive – than their political orientation at a programmatic level. Many ordinary people had indeed difficulties to keep the two competing branches apart as the political programmes of the two factions were not always known to them.

## The *kà pã cãŋ* ensemble

Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korhogo had been a predominantly Senufo town, had its poro groves, and most of the arts that were related to the secret society. However, since Péléforo Gbon's conversion to Islam and not least because of Korhogo's growing significance as a regional market place, the percentage of Muslims rose continuously. Already in the 1990s, the majority of the populace professed to the faith of prophet Muhammad. Many of them were tolerant to local beliefs. Still in the 1970s and 1980s, older Jula did not see locally bounded forms of belief and the practices that accompanied them as religious, but rather as a proof that the '*kafir*' did not have a religion. Farmers and artisans classified as 'Senufo' would sooner or later turn towards Islam as the only true religion. Until then, many argued, the locals could do whatever they thought appropriate to advance their community. It would not interfere with religion, many said, and some Jula even became members of poro and other associations besides being 'good Muslims'.

The Jula community was by far the most important one besides the Senufo (Launay 1982, 1992). However, with the expansion of administrative services after independence, more and more civil servants from other parts of the country came to Korhogo. Some had to serve for a short time in one of the many administrative offices, others stayed for many years. Those who came from the centre or the southern parts of the country were predominantly Christian. More often than not, they also did not speak Jula, the market language of the region. To articulate one's political claims in such a context meant to balance different forms of cultural expression that would address the increasingly multicultural urban audience. Since culture – in particular Senufo culture – was largely associated with the arts, it was handy to make use of them as political instrument.

Building on local arts meant to iterate them into the present so that they would meet the newly emerging urban culture of *les Korhogolais*, the people of Korhogo. In addition, they should carry the message of the two camps in town, the two branches of the Coulibaly clan. To transform them to some degree meant to bridge the tension between the image of an old and unchanging Senufo culture, the true and only faith of Muslim believers, and not least the yearning of the urban youth for something new that related local culture to wider horizons. It also meant to enlarge one's own network by co-opting sympathisers left and right and to draw them into one's own clientelist network. Political claim making was a difficult task that could not rely on pre-configured social and cultural boundaries – it rather produced them through articulatory practices.





*Kà pã cǎŋ* was the answer. It was an art of articulation that adopted the form of a masquerade introduced by the Gbonblé faction of the Coulibalys. Literally, its name meant “We’ll know who [will win]”.<sup>9</sup> *kà pã cǎŋ*’s political purpose was obvious right from the beginning, and it was recognised as such by both the supporters and the opponents of this branch of the Coulibalys. A *kà pã cǎŋ* ensemble, often called a “Club”, typically consists of five components: First, a basket filled with ritual objects; second, a sculpted wooden figurine; third, a big drum with two drumheads; fourth a set of masks, and finally, of an ensemble of musicians playing percussion instruments. The basket and the sculpted figure belong together and constitute the core of the ensemble. They are borrowed directly or indirectly from an older ensemble of objects that is usually known as *kàfigèlè jo*, literally “say clear things” or “say the truth”.<sup>10</sup> As an ensemble, *kàfigèlè jo*

Fig. 6: A *kà pã cǎŋ* basket at a wedding. Korhogo, November 2013. Till Förster.

9 *kà* – prefix of the kii class of nouns, which usually stands for non-living objects of middle or bigger size; *pã* – verb “to come”, future tense; *cǎŋ* – adj. “know”, “being conscious of”, “to see”

10 *kà* – prefix of the kii class (see above); *\_fi\_* – adj. “clear, transparent, white”; *\_gèlè* – plural suffix of kii class, *jo* – v. “to say”.

Fig. 7: A *kà pā cǎŋ* ensemble greets the owner of the ceremony (left). The figure carried horizontally on the head is balanced as carefully as the basket but the movements of the man who performs with it are much faster, and through his movements, he also interacts with the audience.  
Korhogo, February 2015.  
Till Förster.



had been in use since at least the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Senari speaking people of Korhogo see it as a part of their cultural heritage and by the same token as a powerful “fetish”<sup>11</sup> that is as active and effective until the present day. The basket contains numerous power objects as bones and horns of sacrificial animals, smaller baskets that contain cowry shells which are also used as divination objects, money and dice. The basket also contains a bundle or sometimes two of feathers and porcupine spines wrapped in leather or some vegetal ribbon. The entire basket is wrapped in a fabric and often covered by sacrificial blood and hence black with a few red traces (see fig. 4,6).

When *kà pā cǎŋ* performs – or “comes out” in local parlance – a man carries the basket on his head. This person always moves slowly and shows how carefully he is balancing the object. The basket “must not fall”, which would be a sign of failure and dangerous to both the carrier and the entire group. Most often, however, the performer and the other members of the group would insist that the basket cannot fall because of the extraordinary power that it lends to the medium.

The carrier should fully focus on his own bodily movements and shows an inward-turned facial expression. In other cases, he may demonstrate his bodily control by moving freely as if he would not carry any load on his head, rarely smiling at bystanders and not reacting to their movements. They have to give way to him as he follows his invisible path through the crowd. He would not talk to them. In his inward-turned attitude, the performer appears as an independent actor – as somebody who does not take care of what happens around him. The difference between him and the other members of the group is well visible – as if he would belong to another world. The man also carries an iron stick and a leather ribbon with a small bag. The latter contains a remedy that is expected to protect him against the malevolent influences of bystanders and other dancers who may compete with him on the occasion of other performances.

The other central figure of a *kà pā cǎŋ* ensemble carries the sculpted wooden statue, the *kàfigèlè jo*. Most often, the figure displays the traces of former sacrifices, for instance

11 Fetish, or *le fétiche* in local French, had been a loanword introduced by catholic missionaries and the colonial administration. It testifies more to the lack of understanding Senufo religious thought than to some experiential meaning.

encrusted blood which lends the sculpture a deep black colour. However, such traces may be visible only on the head of the figure where the encrusted blood glues white chicken feathers onto the wooden face of the statue. Sometimes, the entire figure is dressed in a fabric. In such cases, the colour of the cloth may correspond to that of other paraphernalia of the ensemble so that the group is easily discernible as a corporate entity. Besides the colour of the fabric, the group may also have a sort of dress code. The musicians of the group may, for instance, all wear jeans and T-shirts of the same colour, which sometimes matches the fabrics' colour that covers their basket. Some groups have the name of their village or neighbourhood printed on the musicians' T-shirt (see below).

Every ensemble is accompanied by a group of musicians. Outstanding is a drummer, rarely two, who play a cylinder drum with two drumheads. Sometimes, the drumhead displays the name of the group. The drummer gives the beat of the entire ensemble and thus the speed of the performance. Many ensembles also have a second lead musician who plays a calabash which is struck with pebbles, cowry shells or little bones tied into a net that covers the lower, hollow part of the calabash. Besides these two lead musicians, the ensemble consists of four to eight young men striking an iron tube with a short iron stick. The tube has a slit on the upper side and is widely used by smiths during funerary rites (fig. 9 and fig. 14).

The home town or neighbourhood of the group has a special significance for the corporate identity of the group. When *kà pã cǎŋ* was founded in the 1980s, the display of the name of the neighbourhood immediately became part of the political articulation between the two Coulibalys. Performing with the name of the neighbourhood or village made visible meant to state that this place – and not only the performing musicians and dancers – was supporting the Gbonblé faction of the clan. Hence the importance of baseball caps as well as so-called traditional bonnets that could also display the name of the group and their home place. Patron–client relationships indeed sustained the corporate character of the group and the entire masquerade.

When *kà pã cǎŋ* ensembles became highly popular and more and more numerous, Lanciné and his followers had to react to the challenge that the clubs had become. They created their own associations and called them *solo mugu jo*, “say it aloud”.<sup>12</sup> The name insinuated that the supporters of that masquerade would not accept the “lies” that the other faction would spread on the incumbent mayor Lanciné. On the one side, *solo mugu jo* reproduced more or less the same model as *kà pã cǎŋ* – or, as the faction of Gbonblé later said, the Lanciné people simply “copied” their masquerade. On the other side, Lanciné’s followers claimed that their *solo mugu jo* would be “better” than whatever the Gbonblé faction had realised.

However, *kà pã cǎŋ* remained the generic name of all masquerades of this kind. The masquerades of the *solo mugu jo* ensembles stayed within the varieties of style that the genre permitted, and outsiders would have been unable to tell whether a particular group was performing *kà pã cǎŋ* or *solo mugu jo* – if it were not written on the performers' T-shirts or the drums and masks. Neither the appearance of the groups and the masks nor the dance itself would have been specific enough to draw a clear line between the masquerades of the two parties. Since the distinction of the two was essential to their roles in the clientelist fabric of the city, they needed to develop some distinguishing features. Together with the reference to a particular neighbourhood or “village”, printing or writing the name of the masquerade on T-shirts was a simple solution to identify a particular masking ensemble as supporter of one or the other faction. More compelling was, however, the aesthetic dimension – a dimension that demanded more skills but which also attracted a bigger audience and hence more possible supporters for one’s own party.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the masks of a *kà pã cǎŋ* ensemble were very simple *kɔdáli* (fig. 10 and 16). These masks consisted of jump suits that covered the body and a reversed bag that covered the head of the performer. They were made of ordinary

12 *solo* – “just do [it], only do [it], do not hesitate to”; *mugu* – “to open”; *jo* – “to say”.

cotton cloth, usually dyed in a brownish or dark blue shade and sometimes decorated with darker dots. *Kodáli* is a generic term that covers all masks not submitted to ritual restrictions. Though they may perform in ritual contexts, everybody is allowed to see them – an important precondition for political articulation in a multicultural urban context. And because they do not need to fulfil any iconographic or representational requirements, the groups that perform them are more or less free to modify them and their dance if they want to. In a sense, *kodáli* masks are more an open platform rather than a fixed type that is always reproduced in one and the same way. Because of their iconic and performative openness, the masquerades provide ideal conditions for the aesthetics of political articulation.

Fig. 8: The *kāfigèlè jo* of a *solo mugu jo* ensemble is displayed to the audience after having been presented to the owner and organiser of the event. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.

The masks of primary *kà pā cǎŋ* ensembles had and still have no decor nor are they remarkable for their materiality. Elaborated masks only emerged when the ensembles became popular and served as means of fierce political competition. However, right from the beginning, their dance was very acrobatic: The *kodáli* performed flic-flacs and did cartwheels to impress their audience. In the older ensembles, *kà pā cǎŋ* masquerades rely much more on their performative dimensions rather than elaborated costumes and materiality. The tension between the basket that is always carried solemnly on the head and the fast movements of the masks is a stable element of all *kà pā cǎŋ* performances.





Fig. 9: The musicians of a *solo mugu jo* ensemble walking around a kneeling mask. The lead drummer accelerates the beat and thus stimulates the mask to perform. The drumhead displays the name of the group, its home town and the year when the current equipment was acquired. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.

## The fast and the furious

A *kà pā cǎŋ* performance begins with a ceremonial greeting of the “owner”<sup>13</sup> of the rites or ceremonies. Accompanied by the carrier of the wooden figure and the drummer, the leader of the group approaches the man who has organised the event or who is in charge of the rites. Most often, the owner sits somewhere at the margins of the site where the performance will take place. Oftentimes, he pretends not to notice that the group is coming and looks in another direction – just as if the dancers would not be of any interest to him. Showing no visible interest in the group has two effects: First, the owner prompts the performers to pass in front of him and to show the earnest respect for him that he expects. Second, it addresses the audience that will have a closer look at how the group approaches the owner and what they might see a couple of minutes later.

While approaching the organiser of the event, the group is aligned in a row headed by the man who carries the wooden figurine on his head, the *kàfigèlè jo*. The sculpture, which can be up to one meter tall, is a heavy object. The dancer has to balance it carefully so that it does not fall. If it would, it would immediately be interpreted as sign of failure that the witnesses could attribute to the inability of the carrier, the incompetence of the group to choose an able man, but also to sorcery if the competition between the different ensembles in town is fierce. Though rare, such accidents are discussed and debated for a long time among the participants and the audience. Very few would attribute it to bad luck, almost everybody would seek the reasons elsewhere – not least in the highly contentious political climate that the masquerades heat up rather than illustrate.

The performer places the figurine horizontally on his head and begins to move fast, compared to the others. He often displays his skills – and simultaneously the power of the *kàfigèlè jo* – by turning quickly from one side to the other, keeping the wooden figure in a horizontal position while balancing with his arms. Then again, he may kneel

13 The “owner” is usually the person who had invited the *kà pā cǎŋ* ensemble. In case of a wedding, it may be the bridegroom or an elder of his family. If it is a ritual event as, say, the sacrifice to a powerful being, commonly called *fétiche* in local French, it is usually the owner of the object who invites a *kà pā cǎŋ* ensemble to perform and who also has to cover their expenses.



Fig. 10: A *kodáli* mask creeps over the ground after having performed its acrobatic flic-flacks at a wedding.  
Korhogo, November 2013.  
Till Förster.

down so that the figure is at eye level of those who are attending the performance from chairs in the front row. Such movements are often much slower than the walking. On such moments, bystanders and later, when the performer is closer to the audience sitting on chairs and benches, can watch the sculptural features of the figure and how finely it is carved.

The fastest part of the performance is the dance of the masks. It is driven by the iron percussion instruments and the drum that the musicians use to mark the beat. The sound of the ensemble drowns the voices in the audience and to some extent even the shouting of the men who play the iron tubes. They call out for the masks to come to the dance floor, most often a sandy place in front of the owner's house or in his courtyard, by singing a refrain that hints at the identity of the group and what it does. While calling for the masked dancers, the audience aligns opposite of them, leaving some open space for the performers. Chairs and benches are brought to the place or, if they are already there, they are re-arranged in a sort of semi-circle opposite of the musicians. The masked dancers would step into this arena from aside one by one, rarely two together. At this time, the stage is not yet set, it rather emerges and settles when the performers enter the scene.

The masked dancers walk in one by one. Their bodies first seem to be affected by some kind of paralysis – as if their limbs would not belong to them when they set their feet on the dusty ground, bending forward, seeking something that nobody can see, then turning towards the musicians and, while the percussion swells and swells, eventually towards the people behind them. Then, suddenly, they straighten up, raising their hands

in which some of them hold long sticks that they lean upon as they were turning around. Some of the masked performers are hiding their faces behind other parts of their attire, kneeling down so that the audience cannot see much more than an enigmatic fragment of the mask (fig. 11). The iron tubes are as loud as ever but the dancer is again motionless as he holds on his sticks. As if the dancer were waiting for it, the drummer approaches the mask, gets closer to it until the instrument almost touches the dancer's body. Then, suddenly, the mask jumps up while the body of the dancer swings back and forth. Its movements are strong and vigorous, turning left and right. Only now, the people become aware of the faces of the masquerade.

Not all masks have the simple cotton cover hiding the human face of the dancer. Some wear elaborated pieces composed of raffia tied to an inverted basket as if one were looking at the bottom of a container as it is used in many households in town. Additional objects can be fixed on it, for instance cowry shells or little horns of sacrificial animals. Other masks are adorned with feathers or the fur of monkeys and dogs. Still others have leather straps and shiny plastic tapes that flow around the face. Showing the face is not about revealing a secret as everybody may see the masks when they approach the dance floor – but it is a dramatic moment of performative staging. At times, one can hear children and teenagers screaming if they are loud enough, and one sees elder people sitting next to them, smiling at them and putting their hands on their shoulders.

In the sound carpet of the massive percussion, the occasional shouting of the musicians is interwoven with exciting moves of the masked dancer. He may turn his back towards an elder and eventually seat himself on his lap, freezing his movements for a moment. Being honoured as a patron links past and present. On the one side, the elder may have contributed to the group by providing money or some material that they needed, for instance, the cloth for the costumes, the musical instruments or the guidance that they needed in a difficult situation. On the other side, the group may prompt somebody in the audience to donate a few coins or even a bill to the group if they believe that the man could be willing to do so. How much the person gives does not only depend on his means but also on his ambitions to inscribe himself in the social and political space that *kà pã cǎŋ* relates to. Seating oneself on the lap of an elder in the audience thus



Fig. 11: The beginning of the performance: The dancer kneels down in front of the audience and hides his head behind his hands and the raffia bundles at his wrists. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.



Fig. 12: A *kodáli* mask presents itself to the audience by jumping up.  
Korhogo, February 2015.  
Till Förster.

creates or confirms a patron–client relationship and situates the event in the social web of urban politics. Other performative acts can lead to the same outcome. The musicians may pull somebody on the dance floor and accelerate the beat to make him dance faster.

As *kà pã cǎŋ* and *solo mugu jo* are thoroughly political events, such guidance is often crucial to avoid severe afflictions that can harm the entire ensemble as well as each and every individual member. Afflictions may come from other groups that belong to the opposite camp, that is, the followers of Lanciné if one is part of a Gbonblé *kà pã cǎŋ* group and vice versa if one belongs to a *solo mugu jo* ensemble. They may also come from people who are simply ‘jealous’, as the members of the ensemble often say. There are signs of such aggressive acts. Stumbling and falling is rarely attributed to hazardous movements of the dancers but much more often to the invisible influence of somebody who wants to make them fall. In particular the porter of the wooden figurine, who usually does not move as fast as the masks do, could be afflicted by malevolent intentions of others. As he is, together with the carrier of the basket, a central figure of the ensemble, his fall would immediately be interpreted as a sign that the group is unable to protect itself and needs to end its performance. Such incidents are rare, but when they occur, the audience remembers them vividly.<sup>14</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many dancers try to protect themselves by the same means that others might use for their aggressions. They may carry small wristlets with tiny leather bags that contain protective ‘medicine’, that is, substances that they ordered from a healer or, more rarely, from a Muslim *marabout*. These people and their remedies are as ambiguous as the things that they promise to combat. Another source of protection may come from the *dozo*, the (in)famous “traditional hunters” who are sometimes offering their own protective devices to those who may act as partners in urban politics. More often than not, the performances of outstanding *kà pã cǎŋ* clubs are the subject of gossip in town.

14 I have never witnessed such an incident, but several cases had been reported to me during my fieldwork in 2013, 2015 and 2016.



## The dark side of masquerading

There is a dark side to *kà pā cǎŋ* and *solo mugu jo*. It is less visible when a club performs at a wedding, but surfaces time and again on occasions related to urban politics such as funerals of high-ranking members of the dominant clan of the Coulibaly, its branches and allies. Some ensembles have a mask that is entirely dressed in dark, almost black cotton. It carries an iron trident and has a small basket on its head, decorated with black and red feathers. Its performance resembles that of the other masks – with a notable exception. Its dance is not as fast as that of the other masks but also not as slow as the pacing of the men who carry the figurine and the basket. Called “the Dark One” (fig. 3), its movements seem to be informed by invisible things that the audience does not perceive. The mask may suddenly turn its head to the side where, it seems, something attracts his attention – something that ordinary people do not see. Those who are not familiar with its performance may suspect that the mask is irritated or that somebody has done something ‘wrong’ and provoked its reaction. And when the mask gets up, it may suddenly turn towards another place, approaching a person that was neither in its way nor in that of the musicians who try to form a semi-circle behind the masked dancer. No movement is predictable, and neither is what the masks will do.

Fig. 13: A dancer seats himself on the lap of an elder who is a patron of the ensemble.  
*Korhogo, February 2015.*  
*Till Förster.*



Fig. 14: The percussionists have urged a patron, in this case the owner of the ceremony, to dance with them. They form a half-circle around the dancer and later hold his arms up in the air to show their support. Korhogo, February 2015. Till Förster.



The real dark side of *kà pã cãŋ*, however, has to be sought elsewhere. It is related to the enmity of the two factions of the Coulibaly clan and the rivalry between the clubs, which has a social, an aesthetic and last but not least a political dimension. From the perspective of an individual member of a club, a *kà pã cãŋ* masquerade is an occasion to display one's excellence, which includes the skills to carry the basket or the heavy figurine without making it fall. Such bodily skills are always complemented by aesthetic elements. The percussionists bend their bodies widely back and forward, adopt postures as if they were standing on squashy soil, while the drummer often turns the two drumheads in a wide gesture toward the audience so that they can read the name of the club if it is written on it. The acrobatic and furious dance of the masks is in itself a display of bodily proficiency that nobody else should dare to challenge. By the same token, it is a mis-*en-scène* of the mask's character. Very much as playing the instruments, each and every move is a bodily gesture that addresses the audience, in particular the knowing people who are competent enough to judge such performances.

Although the individual who wears the mask is not known to outsiders, the clubs are known for their masks and the specificities of their performance. "The solo *mugu jo* of Gbodonon has a very good *kodáli*. It's faster than others. You'll know when you see it! It has white rings on its jump suit."<sup>15</sup> Such comments are frequent, and comparisons between the clubs of different neighbourhoods and villages as well. For the average spectator, the first criteria for judging the performance of a *kà pã cãŋ* masquerade are its experiential, aesthetic dimensions – or put simply, how compelling it is. For these people, the literal translation of its name – "we'll know who [will win]" – is less a political claim but more a term that refers to the aesthetic competition between the groups.

To some extent, the performers' perspective corresponds to the way how the performance is seen and judged. Being known for one's performance is a matter of pride. Though not framed as individual prestige, the reputation of belonging to a good club and being one of its best dancers is high. The relationships between the clubs of different neighbourhoods and towns is primarily based on the aesthetics of their performance.

15 Comment of a spectator (est. 40) from the neighbourhood Haoussabougou of Korhogo while the solo *mugu jo* ensemble was preparing its performance.

They breed the rivalry between *kà pã cǎŋ* ensembles. Of course, that does not exclude its political significance – the aesthetics of the masquerade performance rather enhance it.

Korhogo is a heavily politicised city – and it cannot be otherwise. Else, the wide patron-client networks would be meaningless. Many inhabitants have to rely on clientelism to get a job and would be unable to make a living on their own. Unsurprisingly, the web of the Coulibalys penetrates each and every corner and the *kà pã cǎŋ* ensembles are no exception. As their creation was instigated by political leaders of the Coulibalys, it is risky, if not impossible for a club to emancipate fully from the patronage of the powerful clan.

Adama is in his early 50s. He owns a coffeeshop near the terminal station of one of the long-distance coaches. He also has a *maquis*, a small African restaurant. There is little in town that he has not heard of. In 2014, he described the situation of the ensembles as follows:

These clubs were important. Years ago – a decade or two [in the 1990s] – they were everywhere, sometimes two in a neighbourhood. There was no funeral where you couldn't see them, most often late at night. And when one came out, the people said that you're against the other. So, you were either [pro] Gbonblé or [pro] Lanciné. Even when you just liked the dance! Standing there and looking at the dance of Gbonblé was what the others didn't like. Or Lanciné's dance. ... Sometimes, they came up to me and asked me what I was doing there. They expected you to go away if it wasn't their group. Oftentimes, they were talking to the owner of the funeral [a relative of the deceased person] and urged him to make sure that only their club would perform. And then, when they were dancing, the supporters of the others were shouting at them, stepping in their way – spoiling the entire event. The group had to stop – and the guys became angry as well! In the dark, they knocked the others down, sometimes two against one [man]. Or at least, they tried to do so. There were funerals where 20 or 30 men were fighting against each other. Boxing. But then, they also used knives and clubs. You had to pay attention! ... Well, I don't like to talk about this. It made everything so ugly.

Still more reluctant is Namogo, the headman of a suburban neighbourhood. He is around 60 and has witnessed many *kà pã cǎŋ* performances in his own and other neighbourhoods in town.

It's because of the two Coulibalys. They were quarrelling so much.<sup>16</sup> There is no harmony<sup>17</sup> in that family. It's war. It still is, but they won't talk about it anymore. How would you expect the *kà pã cǎŋ* to be peaceful if the patrons are fighting each other? And it didn't end when Lanciné and Gbonblé were no longer there. Have you seen the former residence of Lanciné? They looted it. There is nothing left – nothing. It can happen again. It's better not to talk about it.

Though the masks are no secret and anybody can have a look at them, their drastic movements and their attire does have an impact on the audience. The costume, the movements and the gestures of the Dark One and sometimes a couple of other masquerades are deduced from the idiom of violence. The Dark One may carry a bullwhip and swing it in a way that that seems to aim at one or the other bystander. Or it can take its trident and point at a man in the audience, stopping only a hand's breadth in front of

16 *Ils étaient tellement palabreux*. 'Palabreux' does not exist in metropolitan French. It is a term with a wide semantic field in Ivorian French and translates best as 'quarrelsome' or 'quarrelling' into English.

17 *Entente* in the French original.





Fig. 15: A “Dark One” kneels down in front of respected elders while a little child is scared by its appearance.  
Korhogo, February 2015.  
Till Förster.

his face. Most of these movements are mere gestures, but their performance has an impact, in particular when the man is unknown to the others. The man may be suspicious, and suddenly, he may find himself standing alone while watching the performance while the others who have surrounded him take a step back. Another mask may tremble and ‘threaten’ a young boy with a wooden axe – and turn away when the boy begins to cry, approaching a woman that may also be afraid of the masked figure. It is as if the masks were trying to sort out who is who among the spectators, and at certain moments, one may expect that the violent aspects may take the upper hand.<sup>18</sup>

The members of the group can elaborate the *kòdàli* masks in many ways, both with regard to their iconographic features as well as their performance. The two dimensions often work hand in hand. Adding raffia bundles to the wrists, neck, hip and the ankles highlights movements when the dancers perform. Simple masks do not have such bundles, but given that the *kòdàli* is expected to dance very fast, to jump and to impress the audience with *flic-flacs*, these additions are easily at hand and are enhanced further. It is not easy to hear spectators comment spontaneously on the performance. The percussion is by far too loud and prevents almost all conversations. However, some people yell at the dancers when they jump and others scream when a mask performs an extraordinary, ‘dangerous’ move and when it ‘threatens’ somebody. It is, an elder of the solo *mugu jo* club of Gbadonon told me, a moment when others can become angry – that is, when they realise that they are not as good as those who dance in front of them. “Then”, he added, “they use their fists – because they know they can’t beat us by other means.”<sup>19</sup>

## Masking urban politics

Urban visual culture is a culture of showing one’s identity and articulating one’s interests. It begins with the most ephemeral facial expressions, sometimes only a twinkle in the eyes of someone whom one meets by chance in the streets. It comprises all practices of making and moving pictures across the cityscape, both in a material as well as in a social sense. Eventually, however, it can also lead to a hardening of visual expressions – of images that many people will take as stable and unchanging emblems of their urban identities.

The clubs of *kà pã cãŋ* and their masquerades illustrate the latter, the partial freezing of collective images and identities. However, images are never simply stable nor are they endlessly flexible and fluid, as some studies suggest (e.g. Boehm 2001). They have to be kept stable – or made fluid –, depending on the actors’ collective intentions and their individual subjectivities, based on how the masked body of the performer is seen. The performance of the entire ensemble of performers, carriers of ritual objects and musicians is an inherently plural experience composed of the multiplicity of bodies and their movements. The movements of the masks are not strictly repeating a ritual scheme that the spectators are already familiar with, but they embody it to address the audience as political body. Both the aesthetic and political dimensions of the performance become clearer to the audience when the memory of past events informs the experience of the current one.<sup>20</sup> In that sense, a *kà pã cãŋ* performance is a sort of episode in a long sequence. Even after the death of Lanciné, it was still informed by the stark opposition

18 I have not witnessed directly a *kà pã cãŋ* performance turning violent. Twice, it seemed that it was about to change from play to serious conflict. However, I repeatedly attended events where people threatened each other at the margins of a *kà pã cãŋ* performance or immediately after it had ended.

19 Such interpretations in favour of one’s own ends are widespread. Personal communication Feb 04, 2015.

20 In his work, Bergson explores two forms of memory of which the first, the embodied, habitual repetition of past actions comes close to the experience of such collective performances (1996 [1908]).

of the two factions of the Coulibaly clan but also by the aesthetics of the political articulation that this political articulation entailed.

In a dense urban context, the formation of collective intentions that aim at keeping certain images stable or to freeze them so that they become visible as a specific picture, is a process with social as well as political dimensions. Past experience turns into expectations of how the masks should act and how these acts should address the political opponent. By the same token, the variations of former performances leave some free space for acts that do not simply repeat earlier ones. The specific iconographies and styles of *kà pã cãŋ* clubs unfold in this space – a space that is eventually framed by the contours of urban politics and sociality. Identification with the picture, in this case the masks of a particular *kà pã cãŋ* club, is a starting point from where such processes become more transparent. Identifying with the masquerades of a *kà pã cãŋ* club unavoidably has two sides. On the one side, the audience will judge the masquerades and their performance according to the experienced sequence of former ones that have turned into expectations – not least the expectation of political struggle. On the other side, the intentions of the members of the respective clubs will turn into projective and creative acts that may increasingly deviate from earlier performances, including their own ones. It is impossible to “freeze” urban social life – but the more the masked politics of the city adopts new forms, the more continuity it has.

One may also look at this process as a mirror of urban society. In a city as Korhogo, the audience of such public performances is, of course, composed of people with largely diverging cultural, social and economic backgrounds which the *kà pã cãŋ* clubs must consider. Unlike discrete power associations as *poro*, everybody is a possible spectator and can identify with the respective club and its masks. As no ritual knowledge is needed to attend the events, and also because the client–patron networks of the Coulibaly cut across ethnic identities, the masquerades have to be attractive or ‘interesting’ to everybody because of their iconography and performance. There are strong incentives to develop them further. While *poro* masks display an iconography that only initiated members of *poro* can judge and identify with (Förster 1997), the masks of *kà pã cãŋ* ensembles have to be open enough to adopt compelling forms for followers of one or the other faction. The same holds true for their performative dimension. The core masquerades of *poro* perform ritual acts that have very little appeal but guarantee that certain rules are respected. They are not meant to be attractive.<sup>21</sup> Outsiders are and should be unable to read them as ‘symbols’ for something else – what they are supposed to do is mere orthopraxis (Bell 1997, 191–96). The masks of a *kà pã cãŋ* ensemble, however, can and do perform in many different ways, depending on the skills of the dancer and the entire ensemble of musicians. Only the carriers of the basket and the wooden figurine will stick to a comparatively unacrobatic and sober way of moving and showing their objects. Accordingly, the audience’ identification with the masquerades is much more based on general, aesthetic criteria than on the dense local knowledge that masquerades of *poro* as village-based power association require. The masks of the clubs have to be open platforms on which every club can develop its own version. So, the varieties of *kà pã cãŋ* are easier to identify with a particular neighbourhood and its club but also with one or the other branch of the Coulibaly clan. As already mentioned, urbanites expect the clubs and their masquerades to represent the two branches – which means to make them distinct.

From this point of view, there are two discursive layers with regard to performative aesthetics. The first focuses on the inventiveness and the acrobatics of the masked dancer while the second emphasises more the relationship with the political actors in town. The two layers are nonetheless part of one and the same discursive formation. Sometimes, the spectators have to switch between the two aspects – for instance, when

21 Glaze’ interpretation of ritual acts in front of the *kpaala* as ‘beautiful’ (Glaze 1981, 171–74) is a projection of modern aesthetic autonomy on Senufo culture. Senufo peasants judge the performance of *poro* with regard to ritual criteria.

Fig. 16: A *kodáli* mask performs in front of the musicians. Its dance is as fast and acrobatic as possible.  
Korhogo, February 2015.  
Till Förster.





the followers of the two camps confront each other and things get rough. As a practice of political articulation, *kà pã cãŋ* separates the two camps but by the same token ties them to each other. Even when fist-fights and knifings begin to dominate the events. It is not exaggerated to say that there is no stronger incentive to focus on the other than such violent interactions. They tie the actors to each other. Unsurprisingly, the violence only died down when the insurgents marginalised the Coulibaly clan after September 19, 2002. However, sudden aspects changes remain possible. A considerable part of the audience feels that violence can still occur during or after a *kà pã cãŋ* performance.

In a paradoxical move of creativity and hardening, of encounter and distancing, the two factions of the Coulibaly clan created their masquerades as opponents to the other. Gbonblé's *kà pã cãŋ* clubs came first, but the majority of the urban populace today does not remember whether they or the other side, Lanciné's solo *mugu jo* clubs were historically the first ones to "come out". For most of my interlocutors, it did not matter. Much more important was the political tension between the two branches of the Coulibalys and the opposition between the masquerades that it bred. As an element of urban politics, neither dance existed as a specific performance until one was counterbalanced by the other. Forgetting about the origins of both *kà pã cãŋ* and solo *mugu jo* also means that the respective positions in the political cityscape were experientially created and made visible in a literal sense when the spectators could compare the two.

To compare means more than juxtaposing the political claims and ambitions of the two sides – it means to judge the dance and the masks as elements of a staged performance. It has to be compelling in itself – and not only because of the political claims it raises (Menke 2013). The opposition between the two factions of the Coulibaly is endowed with an aesthetic dimension that allows each and every inhabitant of the city and then its hinterland to judge it by other criteria than the personal rivalry between Gbonblé and Lanciné and later their successors. The aesthetics of political articulation had become a driving force that fed the conflict as much as the claims to power of the two political camps. The political regime is thus translated into an aesthetic regime (Rancière 2000). As such, *kà pã cãŋ* and its masquerades survived the two protagonists and became part of the imageries that make the visual culture of the city today as much as its politics.

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