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ON DANCING AND FISHING: JOY AND THE CELEBRATION OF FERTILITY AMONG THE PUNU OF CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE

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From as early as 1960 and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the recognition of dance as a relevant topic in their discipline became an issue for anthropologists (Kurath 1960: 233ff.; Kaeppler 1978: 32; Spencer 1985a: 1). Yet despite a considerable growth of interest in the anthropology of the body in the 1990s, the study of moving bodies remained on the periphery (Farnell 1999: 342) and the need for serious scholarship on the subject is still pressing (Williams 2004: xvi). In particular, a focus on emotion as a relevant feature in an anthropological approach to dance remains rather rare. Susan Reed's review of the major developments in dance anthropology (1998), also drawing on African examples, bypasses emotion as a significant analytical category. As a matter of fact, few anthropological studies of African dances stress the emotional experience these practices evoke (Neveu-Kringelbach 2007). Rather, they highlight their ritual function in the affirmation or defiance of social order (Leynaud 1953; Hanna 1979; Blacking 1985; Middleton 1985; Spencer 1985b; Blakely 1993; Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2005; Gabail 2010) or examine the transformations traditional dances undergo and the development of new dance styles in colonial or post-colonial contexts (Mitchell 1956; Ranger 1975; Gilman 2001). Generally, emotion, though a vital aspect of the human condition, somehow suffered from the same disciplinary neglect as dance and has only recently moved centre-stage in the social sciences (Lindholm 2005: 30; Svasek 2005: 1). The crucial move is one that takes us from a view of emotion as a natural, biological force towards one that includes concern for its social relational, communicative and cultural aspects (Rosaldo 1984: 137; Lutz and White 1986: 405; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 1; Leavitt 1996: 515; Harding and Pribram 2009: 2).

In this article dealing with *ikoku*¹ dancing among the rural Punu of south-western Congo-Brazzaville, the emotional experience of the dance is brought to the fore, along with the emphasis placed on this aspect by the Punu themselves. Indeed, joy is the concept used to account for the emergence of a dance event and to appraise its quality.

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¹The transcription of the Yipunu language is based on Mabik-ma-Kombil (2001). I have, however, substituted the transcription -ny for ñ.

The decision to organize a dance event is described as a collective decision to rejoice, and a good dance is one that creates joy. In exploring the way *ikoku* dancing, as a socially significant practice, constitutes the experience of joy, Geoffrey White's concept of an 'emotive institution' proves to be fruitful. Unlike other anthropological approaches to emotion, which often remain firmly anchored in individual-centred paradigms (White 2005: 242), the concept acknowledges 'the significant role played by socially organized activities in facilitating (and creating) culturally meaningful forms of emotion'. 'These are more than "settings" for the expression of pre-existing emotions. They are culturally constituted activities within which understanding of self, as well as social identities and relations are enacted and defined' (White 2005: 243). Although White primarily refers to discursive activities his concept can be usefully enlarged to include a bodily activity, such as dancing. Looking at *ikoku* dancing as an emotive institution highlights the manner in which it constitutes joy as a communitarian experience that shapes identities and relations in a culturally specific way.

According to this approach, emotions are not only considered as culturally constituted but also as constitutive of culture. As Harding and Pribram (2009: 18) claim in their recent reader advocating a cultural approach to emotion, emotions are 'forces that produce human relations, energies and activities, operating in complex circuits of social, cultural and individual relations'. When applied to the study of *ikoku* dancing, this recognition of the productive role of emotions has the advantage of preventing a narrow, functionalist interpretation by acknowledging the need for profound commitment by the participants in order for the event to succeed and to be socially constructive. It will be shown that *ikoku* dancing, by enacting the male/female sexual encounter as well as the inclusion in a maternal universe of well-being and abundance, celebrates fertility in its human dimension, thereby defining gender identities and relations in a complementary way, as well as subsuming them in the (encompassing) maternal. This configuration supports the basic structure of Punu society that generates a tension between conjugal relations based on a patri-virilocal principle and matriclanic belonging. It is only when dancing succeeds, namely when joy emerges through the successful initiatives of participants, that the event has this socially constructive power. Bringing to the fore the emotions as active forces that link the subject to the surrounding social world (Milton 2005: 25) further makes it possible to explore how *ikoku* dancing can occur in different contexts without modifying its basic structures. Through a dance form entailing gendered encounters *ikoku* dancing evolves into a joyful celebration of fertility and shapes this emotive experience in a different way according to the occasion that prompted the event.

The ethnographical exploration of this argument is conducted on two levels. First, following a geographical and historical setting of the research area and a brief description of the fieldwork, I place the *ikoku* dance in its social context. I depict the course of a dance event, revealing thus its aim as the awakening of a communal

feeling of joy through a succession of 'proud' (see below) individual and couple-based dance sessions. Second, the socio-cultural meaning of the act of dancing is explained through an outline of the metaphorical associations evoked by dance movements and patterns – these associations are denoted by Punu people through the names they give to movements and patterns, and in their comments on and evaluations of the dancing. Through these associations the act of dancing is connected to the fecundating sexual encounter and to the action of collective pool fishing, linking the dance universe to the maternal life-bearing universe of the water spirits. The joint enacting of sexual differentiation and maternal containment is then explored in its linkage to the structures of Punu rural society, as well as in its relation to joy, which shapes and is shaped by it. In a last section, I point to actual changes in *ikoku* dancing, namely to its growing politicization in urban contexts; the deterioration of its quality in rural contexts due to the emigration of talented youngsters; and the impact of churches and changing socio-economic conditions on the gender and spirit conceptions that are operative in the dancing.

THE PUNU OF CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE

The Punu people belong to the cultural area of the Lower Congo, more specifically to its northern region (Jacobson-Widding 1979: 10). Oral tradition places their origin in the south-west of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Koumba-Manfoumbi 1987: 46). They were a dissident fraction of the Yaka people who fought against the Kongo kingdom in the sixteenth century, were driven away, and progressively moved to the north (Perrois and Grand-Dufay 2008: 16ff.). In 1906, with the division of the French Congo into three autonomous colonies, the Punu territory was split up by a border and the largest part of it became part of Gabon. The Punu of Congo-Brazzaville occupy two districts, Nyanga and Divénié, where they cohabit with the Nzebi.

Some differences can be observed when comparing the Punu of Gabon and Congo. Influenced by the neighbouring peoples, who originated from the centre of Gabon and moved to its southern part (Perrois and Grand-Dufay 2008: 17), the Gabonese Punu have adopted some of their institutions like the initiation society *Bwiti*. The Congolese Punu stayed in closer contact with Lower Congo peoples such as the Buissi, Lumbu and Kunyi. As is characteristic of the peoples of this north-western Congo region (Soret 1959: 93; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973: 30ff.; Jacobson-Widding 1979: 117ff.; Merlet 1991: 45ff.; Hersak 2001: 622), their belief system gives a central role to nature spirits, particularly the water spirits named *bayisi*. They are considered to be the primary agents of society's well-being, ensuring the fertility of women and crops and the abundance of game and fish.

Fieldwork was conducted in the district of Nyanga for a period of 20 months, from May to October in 2005 and from June 2006 to September 2007. I learned the language and participated intensively in the daily lives of women and dance events. This article is based on

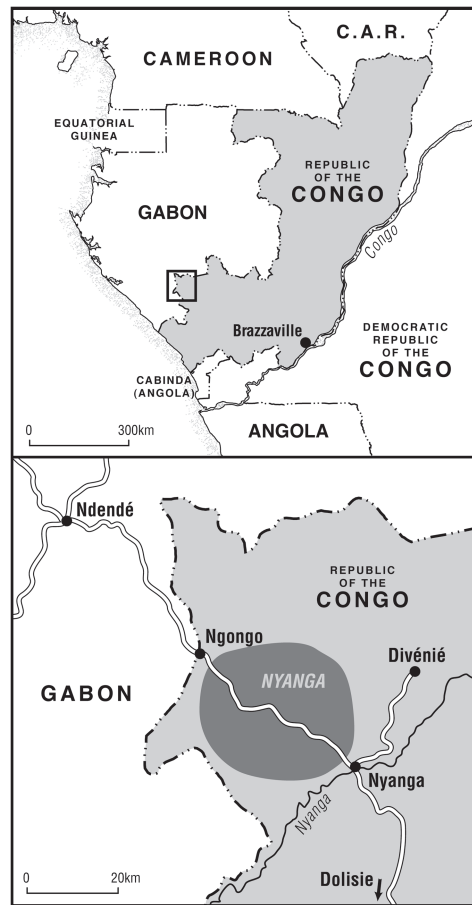


FIGURE 1 Location of the research area in the district of Nyanga

that participation, especially with the renowned dancers of the village of Bihongo. I also interviewed singers and dancers, ranging in age from approximately 25 to 65. Consequently, the article presents the *ikoku* dance as performed both nowadays and some decades ago.²

THE AWAKENING OF SHARED JOY IN *IKOKU* DANCING

A collective rejoicing

The *ikoku* dance is not the only one in Punu society, but when people talk about dancing, they usually refer to this dance. The *muteluku*,

²No story is related on the origins of this dance. *Ikoku* dancing is said to have existed 'in the time of the ancestors' and the Congolese Punu are considered its best performers, astonishing the Gabonese Punu by the ardour of their dancing.

which originated in the 1980s from the former *ngwate*, is considered a minor form as it is a dance for young people. The other main dance, the masked stilt dance *mukudji*, has disappeared from Congolese villages. The common element among the three dances is that they are dances of rejoicing, and they are referred to by the verb *u yine* and not by the verb *u kimbe*, which is only used in the context of water spirit celebrations. While the first verb has an intransitive form, a direct complement, namely ‘the water spirits’ or ‘the twins’,³ is added to the second. This reveals a fundamental difference between the dances of rejoicing and the water spirit dancing. While the latter only exists at the behest of the spirits, who determine the occasion for dancing through their revelations, and is obligatory in order to please them, the *u yine* dances stand by themselves and result from human initiative. When I asked dancers when they perform the *ikoku*, they generally replied: ‘When we decide to rejoice’, and named the excellent drummers, dancers and singers that have to be gathered to confirm the soundness of this decision. Only subsequently would they invoke the actual occasions of such rejoicing.

These contexts have been changing in line with the transition from colonial to independent rule and further on throughout post-colonial times. In the colonial era, the main occasions for *ikoku* dancing were evenings heartened by moonlight and, less frequently, the welcoming of chiefs, namely the *chef de canton*, the *chef de terre* and the *chef de village* as they were hierarchically structured under the colonial administration. From independence onwards, political leaders have been welcomed in the same way and events organized by them, especially in electoral periods, are still generally enlivened by *ikoku* dancing. Since the 1980s the dance is also performed at vigils at the end of the mourning period, where it partly replaces the *dingumbe* performance which typically marks this occasion. In all of these contexts, the main drummer and the best song and dance performers lead the event, bringing in the other participants through their exemplary initiatives. When welcoming a politician, his supporters can take an active role in the dancing; in the case of a vigil at the end of the mourning period, the grandchildren of the widow often lead the animation. All adults – people near the age of marrying or already married – can join in the dancing, although chiefs and wise men rarely do, as they are supposed to maintain a certain reserve. There is no initiation required to participate and no formal apprenticeship. People learn first by watching, then by joining and imitating others.

The evolution of an ikoku dance event

A prerequisite for an *ikoku* dance event is the presence of musicians. Two male drummers are seated on an oblong tambour with double

³The Punu consider the twins as water spirits that come to live amidst the humans. For a more detailed account of Punu twin beliefs and rituals, see Plancke 2009.

membranes. The main drummer plays the longest tambour; the second one, who augments his playing, is seated on the shorter one. The lead drummer plays variations on a basic uninterrupted rhythm marked by a man beating two sticks on a metal barrel—it used to be a piece of bamboo. The dancers line up in two rows, a row of men to the right of the musicians and a row of women to the left. These two rows, facing each other at a certain distance, delineate the dance floor. The dancers usually wear a cloth tied around the waist knotted at the back or, less frequently and usually in the case of male dancers, in front of the body. It is this knot, called *ikoku*, that gives its name to the dance.

To launch a dance event a singer introduces a song and sets the rhythm through regular hand clapping. Once all participants respond to the proposed song and the singing increases in volume, the drummer starts playing in rhythm to the hand clapping and the player of the metal barrel reinforces the basic rhythm. The lead singer is also the one who starts dancing. This dancing evolves in two phases: a first phase called *u sayise*, made up of steps or jumps enhanced by regular hand clapping and encouraged by accentuated beats of the drummer; and a second phase called *u dyame*, consisting of intensified hip movement and sustained by the drummer beating a more continuous rhythm. This phase can be performed alone or as a couple, generally but not necessarily made up of a man and a woman. After this dance, the dancer who came onto the dance floor to form the couple recedes to his or her place and the dancer who was first present moves on to the row of the opposite gender to invite someone by thrusting the hips. The chosen one enters the dance floor while the preceding dancer returns to the row; in turn, the new dancer will move to the opposite row to invite the next participant. These alternating invitations continue until a dancer decides to re-introduce the jumping dance phase, followed by the hip dancing phase in front of the drummer, and so on. When the dancing heats up, the coupled dance sessions can follow one another without intervening jumping phases, and sometimes two couples dance simultaneously.

The joy-stimulating succession of proud dance sessions

As seen from this description, the *ikoku* dance is not based on pre-set choreography. The basic structure lays out the evolution of the dance through a regulated succession of phases, making it an event that gradually evolves according to the inspiration of the participants. It is only when initiatives are answered by positive responses from other participants that a dance event is successful, which for Punu people corresponds to joy. A condition for this joy to occur is the absence of shame. The most common answer dancers gave me to the question of what they feel while dancing was the following: 'You do not feel shame any more . . . the appetite/desire to dance [makes] you just go ahead.' *Ikoku* dancing is also named 'the dance of the proud people'.



FIGURE 2 Agathe Dyanga and Jean-Claude Pama of the village of Bihongo executing the hip rotation phase of the *ikoku* dance (Nyanga, 31 July 2006)

Indeed, dancers display an attitude of pride while dancing—a straight upper body, open shoulders, an upright head and a solemn look. This gives an impression of inner, concentrated strength that keeps the body straight without rigidity. The knot tied by dancers at the waist implies this same conception of strength. As in other societies of the same cultural area (De Boeck 1991: 39), the action of tying or knotting is a key symbol for evoking well-being as a flux of forces regulated in a way that is neither too tight nor too loose. The dance engenders this attitude of inner strength that brings forth a self-affirming attitude. It is after a dance session that the body relaxes and literally bends, a smile appearing on the face. Dancers can also be seen cheerfully jumping when returning to the dance row. In this way, the succession of self-affirming dance sessions induces a communal joy, generating ever more pride while dancing. Besides the Kikongo word *kini*, the Yipunu word that is commonly used for joy, *inyunge*, also means admiration. Discerning the self-affirmation of a dancer stirs admiration and the desire for a similar experience. It is this desire to affirm oneself that gives the impulse to launch into the dancing, making for an event of collective rejoicing (*u sagene*).

In the Punu view, joy is an emotion that overcomes a person when life blossoms and well-being is established. I have seen people start to sing

and dance out of joy when capturing a big catfish, being informed of the birth of a granddaughter, or when receiving money to undertake a long-awaited trip. I have also seen a woman throw herself on the ground and jump up when I gave her a present. Joy is considered something that takes possession of the body. It is this feeling of being overwhelmed that is needed for a good dance and that needs to be shared. A singer told me that it is when 'joy seizes her' in the midst of a dance event that she 'goes ahead' and launches a new song that will 'bring everybody in the mood to dance'.

While pride is required to enter the dance space and is experienced through dancing, joy seizes the participants once they feel this self- and life-affirming confidence—and it is joy that fuels proud dancing. This dialectical movement progressively engenders an event of collective rejoicing. In *ikoku* dancing, the individual impulses have to be supported collectively in order to have a real effect. At vigils at the end of the mourning period grandchildren of the widow, as noted above, are supposed to lead the animation by suggesting songs or by inviting people to join the dancing. But if their efforts aren't sustained by others, this initiative peters out, the dancing stops, and people choose to go to sleep for a while on their mats. A lack of enthusiasm while dancing, or boasting and provocative interventions, also stir reproving reactions that break the dance flow. Only when the individual dancing receives a positive response from the other dancers, from the attendants—who can give money to show their appreciation—and from the organizers of the event—who often distribute more palm wine to stimulate the dancers—will the desire to dance captivate more and more people, thereby leading to an event of shared joy.

FECUNDATING DANCE ENCOUNTERS AND COLLECTIVE POOL FISHING

Notions of sexuality and fertility in ikoku dancing

In *ikoku* dancing the rows of dancers are gendered and the ultimate phase of the dance is face-to-face hip dancing, ideally between a woman and a man. By way of this structuring and also through the growing intensity of the dance—combining a phase of animation and one of sustained dancing—*ikoku* dance stages the sexual encounter between man and woman. The two main phases of the dance, the steps or jumping and the rotation of the hips in front of the drummer, also entail gendered connotations, although men and women dance them. The jumping phase is considered to be more masculine. The qualities that are needed for this phase are agility to move the feet, strength to execute the jumping, and speed and unpredictability in the movements in order to draw the attention of the dancers. These qualities are also required for hunting, the quintessential male activity in Punu society. The rotational phase, on the other hand, is deemed more feminine. It demands flexibility, ease and endurance, qualities that are said to be distinctive of women. When a man is capable of expertly executing this

rotation, Punu applaud his ability to dance 'like a woman'. It is also remarkable that men, while dancing, often wear a loincloth like women. Besides, the rotational movement of the pelvis is a movement typical for women during sexual intercourse, as is expressed by the verb *u ryenge*, which is always applied to women.

The idiom adopted to talk about *ikoku* dancing sustains this metaphorical association of dancing with the sexual act of impregnation. The images that define the high quality of a dance often refer to actions where strength is repeatedly applied to something to produce change. Sexuality is evoked through a similar imagery. In this respect the action of cutting is most evident. A very good execution of the rotational movement of the hips provokes comments like '(s)he is cutting his or her belly' or '(s)he is shattering his or her spine'. More particularly, the actions of cleaving and smashing wood or of pulling out roots are recurrent in dance evaluations. To voice admiration for someone's dancing, Punu say that '(s)he has been cleaving the wood (with a machete or an axe)' that '(s)he has been smashing wood (against the soil in order to crack it)' or that '(s)he has been uprooting'. Similar images can suggest sexual intercourse. For example the verb 'to fell' is very common, especially in songs, to hint at sexuality. The actions of pounding the pestle and of crushing things with a pestle are not only metaphors for dancing but also for love making, as in other societies of Central and Eastern Africa (Devisch 1993: 100; Moore 1999: 20–1). Another action commonly linked to love making in African societies—beating the forging hammer (Jacobson-Widding and van Beek 1990: 20; Herbert 1993: 98ff.; Bekaert 2000: 140ff.; Blakely 2006: 99ff.)—among the Punu also suggests a heated *ikoku* dance. Generally, the notion of heat is recurrent in describing how a good dance should feel. It is one that 'shines strongly (as the sun)' or one that 'contains fire'. In a similar way, the verb 'to burn' conjures up powerful dancing and intense love making. Bad dancing on the other hand is described as being 'cold' or 'flavourless' while good dancing is sometimes compared to 'eating sorrel'. As spicy or sour tastes are also suggestive of feelings of sexual excitation for Punu people, the inherent linking of dancing with sexuality once more appears.

This connection also spreads to notions of fertility. The expression 'to cut the belly' sounds similar to the expression 'to cut the moon', in reference to the absence of a menstrual period. Likewise, the onset of a pregnancy is conveyed as the 'cutting' of 'a pregnancy'. In dancing the image of cutting the belly depicts very aptly the concentration of strength in the belly that is required by the rotational movement of the hips and the consequent isolation of the upper and the lower part of the body, making the movement of the lower back very flexible. In relation to pregnancy, 'cutting' alludes to the interruption of the menstrual flood and the retention of blood in the belly to fashion the foetus through a process of boiling, an exegesis of pregnancy that is recurrent in the region (Devisch 1993: 136; De Boeck 1994: 271; Moore 1999: 21; Bekaert 2000: 229). The equivalent of pregnancy in men, and an

extension of their procreative capacities,⁴ is the act of hunting, as has been convincingly argued in Central African ethnographies (Devisch 1993: 90; De Boeck 1994: 272; Bekaert 2000: 146). In Punu society, as among the neighbouring Vili and Yombe (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973: 36), this equivalence is most evidently revealed by the fact that the wife's pregnancy brings bad luck for the hunter. As I have suggested, in *ikoku* dancing the masculine jumping phase displays the features of the hunter. Hence, in the complementary dance phases, the genders are enacted in their regenerative and procreative capacities, making the dance event a distinct celebration of fertility. The correlation between dancing and fishing, as is manifest in the dance patterns, while sustaining this observation, gives an even broader dimension to it.

The analogy between dancing and pool fishing

The verbs designating the two main phases in *ikoku* dancing, *u sayise* and *u dyame*, are also adopted in the context of pool fishing, a female subsistence activity of considerable importance during the dry season. *U sayise* is the action of stamping both feet with force and speed near all of the edges of the pool in order to disturb the fish that are hidden in the grass, so as to make them swim into the fyke net placed at a short distance away. In *ikoku* dancing the phase of *u sayise* consists of a speedy up-and-down movement of the feet. After each rhythmical step or jump, directed to one row of dancers, the dancer makes a gesture towards the dancers in the rows who respond by clapping their hands and by joining the jumping. So, in both contexts a rapid movement of the feet is directed to the borders of a space with the aim of stirring an action in those located at these borders. The verb *u dyame* denotes the action of bending the knees and also the one of diving or of plunging something into the water. While fishing it is used when the women go into the deep water. A coordinated action takes place as follows: the women first fix their fyke nets in the middle of the pool with the openings to one side and then line up at the border of that side of the pool. While advancing slowly together, they plunge their fykes to the right and to the left into the water. When fish enters the fyke, they grab it with their hands and put it in a small basket tied to their backs. Upon arriving at the fyke nets, they lift them up to collect all of the fish that, fleeing their advance, have entered the nets. They then turn the fyke nets to the other side and repeat the whole process. In *ikoku* dancing, during the phase called *u dyame*, the dancer bends his or her knees to be able to rotate their hips. (S)he leaves the row, at the border of the dance floor, to intensify the movement in front of the drummer. When dancing two by two, after having finished the dance, the couple usually

⁴Indirectly, the connection between hunting and male procreative capacities is evidenced by the conviction that a wife's adultery brings bad luck to the hunter. Human fertility requires the conjugal fidelity of the wife so that the foetus can be regularly fed by the sperm of one man. As successful hunting is also affected by the wife's fidelity, an analogy is shown between hunting and insemination.

turn, change position and start dancing again. In the two contexts, movement from border to centre and the action of turning are markedly parallel.

The prominence of the link between fishing and dancing is well illustrated by the following anecdote. At the beginning of my stay, the women insisted that I go fishing with them. When the woman who served as my host asked a friend to show me how this fishing was done, she immediately started dancing while rhythmically miming the actions of fishing. Moreover, excellence in dancing or drumming can be acknowledged through images from the water universe. In a song a good dance is compared to a deep well that never dries out. Of a distinguished drummer I heard this praise: 'You would say they have soaked it [the drum] in water'. An excellent dancer is said 'to dance like the little barbus who has become drunk with poison'. Dance movements can also be likened to the movements of larvae or snakes. The verb meaning 'to move the buttocks a lot' (*u rikule*) is derived from a small motile water larva named *irikule*, and the flexible hip movements of the dancer are thought to match the lissom movements of the two-headed snake.

Fishing itself takes on sexual connotations in the Punu view. The fyke, which has the shape of an inverted funnel and is used to capture fish, is compared, based on gestures I noticed by certain women, to the vagina capturing the penis. Very often, women make sexual allusions while fishing. Moreover, the fertility of a pool where a good catch can be made is likened to the fecundity of women bearing many children. The fyke net embodies the woman's reproductive function (cf. Devisch 1993: 100) and is symbolically applied in fertility-stimulating practices. When one woman only bears girls or boys, and wishes to bear a child of the opposite sex, another who has borne only children of the desired sex constructs a little fyke net and fixes it to the loins of the former. Seemingly, human fecundity is contained in a larger life-bearing power situated primarily in the aquatic environment. According to Punu conceptions, the water spirits that guarantee the fertility of the people and its land dwell in these fishing pools.⁵ Consequently, the human dance world is linked to the spirit world, and the human fecundity that is celebrated in *ikoku* dancing is seen as part and parcel of a greater fertilizing power.

THE DANCE JOY: A JOY FOR DAWNING FERTILITY

Gendered differentiation and maternal containment in ikoku dancing

The *ikoku* dance quite markedly stimulates male–female contact. The aim of the dance is to entice members of the opposite gender to

⁵The spirits carry the same name as the pools they inhabit. Every village has one or two main spirits whose pools are situated near the village and who ensure the well-being of its people. The fishing techniques I described are the general techniques that can be used for all pools. The fishing of the pools of the tutelary spirits sometimes requires different techniques or the observance of certain prohibitions, and it used to be—as sometimes it still is—preceded by a celebration of water spirit dancing.

dance with each other. The jumping phase and the hip rotation phase also have gendered connotations and are generally better executed by one gender, exemplifying respectively masculinity and femininity in Punu society. However, quite frequently two women or two men dance as a couple and the two dance phases are executed by both genders. Especially for men it is highly valued when they are capable of rotating their hips as flexibly as a woman. This feminine dance phase is the ultimate sequence of the *ikoku* dance and can stand for the dance event as a whole. The musical configuration of the event further supports this view of an encompassing female. During the hip rotation phase the drummer plays a continuous rhythm very much aligned to the basic rhythm beaten out on the barrel that anchors the dance event. While marking the hip thrusts performed to put an end to the rotations and to invite someone from the other dance row, and also during the male jumping phase, the drummer superposes a distinctive rhythm with strong accentuations and interruptions in order to launch a new dynamic that enables and sustains the interplay of imitation and differentiation each time. Nevertheless the basic rhythm of the barrel never fails to resound. Hence, *ikoku* dancing at once marks gender differentiation and blurs it by containing both genders in the (encompassing) female/maternal. This feature also characterizes the water spirit world. As a rule the spirits live as a couple, but they are also addressed as mothers and more generally the water spirit world is regarded as a maternal world.

The distinction of two dance phases that have gendered connotations and that are linked to the main tasks of both genders, of bearing or of hunting, underpins the Punu institution of marriage based on notions of gender complementarity. The dance even gives a cosmic dimension to this socially regulated union by suggesting that the fecundity of the male/female encounter is the human part of the fertility granted by the water spirits. Moreover, the simultaneous enacting of sexual differentiation and maternal containment in *ikoku* dancing manifests the social tension between conjugal relations and maternal belonging. This tension is highly palpable in Punu society through the alliance of the principles of patri-virilocal residence and matrilineal descent, accounting for a dispersal of the matrilans, with many women leaving their natal village at marriage.⁶ It is the emotive quality of the dance

⁶As *ikoku* dancing encourages male/female encounters, we could wonder whether it does not also have a stimulating or regulative function for concrete partner relations. As this dance mainly concerns adult, married people, it does not seem to involve much seduction. Participants are expected to invite someone of the opposite gender as a representative of that gender, not to show a concrete sexual interest. It is generally the excellence of a dancer that leads to his being frequently invited. Indeed, during or after dancing, I rarely heard commentaries on the partner choice but always on the quality of the dancing. In this respect, the *ikoku* definitively contrasts with the *muteluku*, a dance for young people. While having the same structure as the *ikoku*, the *muteluku* privileges the reciprocal invitations without the intervening phases of jumping and hip rotation. This already was the case of the *ngwate* dance from which it evolved. The *muteluku* clearly allows for a play of seduction aimed at distinct people and consequently can provoke conflicts resulting from competition or feelings

that, by linking the subject and the surrounding social world, is constitutive of this reality. By progressively awakening a shared joy through the stimulating initiatives of participants, *ikoku* dancing shapes the gender identities and relations that uphold Punu society, and the joy itself takes on a culturally specific content.

A joyful celebration of fertility

By way of the dance structures stimulating male/female encounters in an encompassing female context, and also through the analogy operating between the dancing on the one hand and the fecundating sexual act and the action of pool fishing on the other hand, the dance joy is constituted as a joy for dawning fertility. The common points between the former and present contexts of *ikoku* dancing all refer to fertility and well-being. For Punu people, as for other peoples of the Kongo area, the moon has the power of fertility. Being the wife of the sun and the husband of the stars, she is both male and female (cf. Fu-Kiau 1969: 127; Jacobson-Widding 1979: 326–7). A congruence can be noted between the lunar and the feminine cycle (cf. De Boeck 1991: 40; Devisch 1993: 70ff.). The word for moon, *ngondi*, denotes a woman's menstrual period and the full moon is likened to a pregnant woman. These cycles are further linked to the seasonal cycle of growing and rotting of vegetation (cf. Devisch 1990: 117; De Boeck 1991: 40). Hence, banana trees, taros or pumpkins are always planted at full moon, to guarantee a good harvest.

The function of the chief of the village is to ensure the well-being of his people. In pre-colonial times, the chief of a village was also the chief of its ruling matriclan, owning the surrounding forests and lakes (cf. Jacobson-Widding 1979: 25). He needed the approval of the water spirits to rule over the territory (cf. Ibamba 1984: 165) and, in times of famine, it was his task to invoke their aid, moving them to restore the fertility of the land (cf. Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973: 31–4, 62). Current political leaders, during electoral campaigns, always give money and alcohol to the people who welcome them: in this way they associate themselves with a vision of leadership in which the right to rule and the duty to provide well-being for the people are inseparable (cf. Vansina 1990: 74). The end of the mourning period, to cite another example of *ikoku* dancing in the contemporary period, also implies a celebration of fertility. It marks the passage that enables the widow to resume ordinary life, including the possibility of remarrying and returning to the cultivation of land.

Through dancing, this dawning fertility is celebrated and the occasion that gave rise to the dance is confirmed as one that guarantees

of jealousy. The songs of the dances of rejoicing, with their moral content, illustrate this difference. While the *ikoku* songs transmit a moralizing message in a proverbial form or by referring to an actual event as a prototypical situation, the *muteluku* songs do not just have a function of exemplifying norms, but also allow singers to directly jeer at others and accuse them of counter-normative behaviour.

well-being. The song repertoire also accounts for that. Certain songs present the natural world as an ordered universe where all beings try to expand their lives through productive action. Others have a more explicit moral content, condemning anti-social actions like theft, adultery or sorcery, as well as vices like jealousy, laziness or hypocrisy. These songs state that it is an ordered universe, cosmic and social, that guarantees fertility, thereby asserting that the occasions that call for dancing, namely the apparition of the new moon, the arrival of a dignitary or the end of a mourning period, are moments of this ordered universe that precede fertility. When welcoming a political leader, singers explicitly name and praise him/her, sustaining his/her function as a provider of well-being. When politicians fail in this function, they can be scolded explicitly. For example, a group of dancers invited to a nearby town in Gabon in order to liven up a political meeting had to sleep on the bare floor without food or drink, waiting the whole night for the politician in question to arrive. The moment he did so, a singer promptly launched into the song 'The dogs have seized the female ape' to denounce the avarice of the politician – a vice symbolized by the female ape. The politician, knowing he had been taken to task, interrupted the song and offered the singer 10,000 CFA.

ACTUAL CHANGES IN *IKOKU* DANCING

The creation of ikoku dance groups as political campaign tools

This example illustrates not only how local performances are integrated in new political contexts (Reed 2001) but also how *ikoku* dancing becomes politicized, a phenomenon especially prevalent in urban areas. During political campaigns, in every rural village, people dance to welcome every candidate, whether they support them or not. During the local campaign for the election of representatives in July 2007, I observed that quite often people did not know who was actually coming but were keen to dance because of the material gifts that are distributed. Outstanding performers are even directly remunerated on these occasions. Sometimes candidates invite a group of dancers to support their meetings, and some also travel with a group of young singers or dancers who, at every stop, join the local people to enliven the dancing and to introduce songs praising the candidate concerned. In towns like Libreville and Pointe Noire, groups of *ikoku* dancers have been created and are supported financially by politicians with the explicit object of advancing their campaigns. This shows that *ikoku* dancing is becoming an electoral tool for certain parties or candidates, a feature of political culture that can be observed in other African democracies (Gilman 2001; White 2008). In these urban contexts, *ikoku* dancing no longer unites the whole community, as happens in rural dancing, but only certain factions that support the politician.

One of the further consequences of the creation of these dance groups is the emigration of talented youngsters, especially good drummers and

singers, to join these groups, and the subsequent deterioration of the quality of village dancing. Excellent dancers even become angry and refuse to participate any longer. This migratory phenomenon is part of the rural exodus that has been observed in Congo-Brazzaville since 1945 (Bernault 1996: 55) and was swollen by the civil war that broke out in 1997 and devastated the country (Eaton 2006). As the Punu of the district of Nyanga live near the border of Gabon, the war caused a massive flight to this neighbouring country, especially of men, as is often the case in intra-African, conflict-induced migration (Lumembu 2004: 92). Ever since, attracted by the greater economic prosperity of the country, mainly young and middle-aged men have continued to move to Gabonese towns. The ensuing feminization of village life has also influenced *ikoku* dancing. Women often make up the majority of the participants now, and sometimes a circle is formed instead of two rows. The dance structure is not altered but there is an increase in same gender invitation and dancing couples, which indirectly has an effect on the dance and its structure of relational self-affirmation so profoundly linked to gender complementarity. Older people especially complained to me that the *ikoku* is no longer performed in a correct way and that real dancing has died out.

The influence of churches and changing socio-economic conditions

The growing presence of churches has further led to a profound modification of the outlined meaning of the dance. In 1940 a Protestant church was established in the neighbouring centre of Loubetsi, and Protestant and Catholic churches gradually spread in the area. Since 1980 the anti-witchcraft movement of Simon Zéphirin Lassy, which originated in Pointe Noire in 1953 (Soret 1959: 98; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973: 193ff.; Hersak 2001: 621), took root in the district of Nyanga. Its influence markedly diluted local practices, foremost among them the water spirit celebrations. The latter are associated with witchcraft in the growing polarization between local 'evil forces' and 'good' Christianity (cf. Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1987: 11). An elderly mother of twins told me, for example, how she took her newborn babies to the church in Loubetsi. The church authority recommended that she should stop singing to her twins, but pray for them twice a day instead. Preachers of Lassy's church even forced mothers of twins to throw away the pots in which they kept the placenta(s) of their children for ritual purposes (cf. Plancke 2009: 189ff.), something which they called a sorcerous practice. During the last decade, Pentecostal assemblies have penetrated the area, attracting a minority of youngsters who condemn, with even greater severity, local practices that are not guided by Christian principles (cf. Pype 2006: 308ff.). One of my translators, a member of one of these churches, refused persistently to join in *ikoku* dancing because of its overt sexual connotations. However, there seems to be no diluting contact between the musical repertoire of the churches and *ikoku* dancing. The Christian songs, generally

sung in Munukutuba, one of the national languages of Congo-Brazzaville, are not introduced into the *ikoku* repertoire; their music, stemming from the region in Congo where the church originated, differs from that which accompanies *ikoku*, and is played on other instruments. The influence of these churches concentrates more on the repression of *ikoku* dancing itself, and of the water spirit world revealed through it.

Recent and predictable changes in the socio-economic situation of the rural Punu also seem to call for modifications in the gender and spirit conceptions that mark the experience of the dance as a joyful affirmation of fertility. Except for the villages closer to the forest stretches of the arboreal savannah that constitutes the environment of the district of Nyanga, hunting is becoming a minor activity of the men with the depletion of game. Professions such as trader, bricklayer or truck driver are replacing it. And although fishing, the way I described it, is still a major occupation for women during the dry season, this activity is threatened by the lack of fish due to the increasing practice of net fishing by youngsters. I do not think, however, that these socio-economic changes necessarily induce a transformation in the dance structures themselves, as the example of urban *ikoku* dancing reveals. At a dance event in the town of Dolisie performed in honour of the President, I saw that the dance patterns and basic movements had not changed, although the activities of hunting and fishing are extremely rare in urban contexts. The experience of dancing as a sign of rejoicing for well-being and abundance also persists, as is revealed in the expectation that money and alcoholic drinks will flow freely. It is rather the content of the dance joy, and of the notion of well-being, that is changing. The reference to the water spirits as the ones that guarantee well-being and the linking of gender identities and relations enacted in dancing with the institution of marriage no longer come to the fore. Moreover, the communal, reinforcing effect of the dance acts differently. In a rural context, the structures of the dance itself sustain this function. The coexistence in dancing of experiences of maternal containment and sexual differentiation orients the binding power of the dance to a strengthening of the community constituted by matrilinic and conjugal bonds. In an urban context, the dance as a shared joyful activity acts to foster political affinity or, when it is performed alongside other traditional dances, ethnic identity.⁷

This possibility of transformation in the context and the function of a dance, while its bodily structures and emotional quality are maintained, underpins our analysis of *ikoku* dancing as an emotive institution. Acknowledging that joy is the driving force and aim of *ikoku* dancing, and that the dance structure in itself is an incentive to gendered fecundity-evoking encounters, makes it possible to understand how

⁷Especially the stilt dance *mukudji*, which is nowadays only performed in towns at important political events, has become a kind of emblem of Punu identity (cf. Perrois and Grand-Dufay 2008: 50).

the contexts of the dance can vary without necessarily modifying the dance—but changing the way the emotional experience it evokes is constituted, and the way this experience makes up its surrounding social world. A similar point is made by Wendy James in her study of the choreographic form of an all-embracing circle among the Uduk-speaking Sudanese. It is the form of the dance itself—defining ‘a special, inward space of its own, a centre to which participants orient themselves and through which they relate to each other’ (James 2000: 143)—and the experience it evokes for the participants—of ‘some kind of claim to a space for the people to be themselves, to celebrate a self-referential centre of their own and to turn their back on spectators’ (*ibid.*: 151ff.)—that explain why this dance form persists in changing contexts.

CONCLUSION

My observation that Punu people perceive *ikoku* dancing through the emotional experience it entails suggested that I might approach it as an emotive institution—as a socially organized activity that facilitates and creates culturally meaningful forms of emotion within which understanding of self as well as social identities and relations are enacted. A study of the inner dynamics of the dance revealed how the event evolves in a regulated succession of dance phases, enabling a proud affirmation of the self in relation to the other and so creating a communal joy. An analysis of metaphorical associations unfolding in the dance patterns and movements, and in the idiom used to refer to these and to the dancing in general, further laid bare a connection between dancing and the fecundating sexual act, on the one hand, and between dancing and collective pool fishing on the other hand, so disclosing an overall link between the dance universe and the life-bearing water spirit universe. This joining of sexual differentiation and maternal containment has been shown to support basic structures of Punu rural society where the conjugal relations based on gender complementarity tensionally co-exist with matrilineal belonging. The joy of dancing appeared to be constitutive of these realities, and also to be constituted itself throughout its different contexts as joy for dawning fertility. Finally, it has been shown how actual changes in the contexts of *ikoku* dancing, while reducing the resonance with notions of gender complementarity and with spirit beliefs, maintain its bodily structures and its emotive quality as a community-binding event of rejoicing for shared well-being.

This article may thus claim to have shown the usefulness of broadening the concept of emotive institution to include a bodily activity, such as dancing. It also contributes to the exploration of notions of gender, sexuality and fertility that have proved to be central in African cultures (Jacobson-Widding and van Beek 1990; Moore, Sanders and Kaare 1999) by developing how these notions are put into motion in a bodily way without the need for the construction of

an articulated all-embracing model (Moore 1999: 5–6). It corroborates the idea put forward by Henrietta Moore (*ibid.*: 19–20) that it is the fact of reproduction that accounts for the focus both on gender and on fertility in many African societies. It also supports her suggestion that this focus on reproduction introduces the centrality of the maternal, not as something purely female in terms of a fixed dualistic categorization, but as containing both genders, as a kind of encapsulation of division in unity. Above all, it brings to the fore the emotional dimension as integral to the constitutive enactment of culturally shared meanings and the corresponding social realities, and it points to the adaptive capacity of this kind of emotional performance to move from one context to another.

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ABSTRACT

Among the Punu of Congo-Brazzaville *ikoku* dancing is perceived through the concept of joy. In line with the privileging of the emotional experience, this article intends to consider the dance as an emotive institution—that is, a socially organized activity that creates culturally meaningful forms of emotion within which an understanding of self, as well as social identities and relations, are shaped. In *ikoku*, a succession of dance sessions, embarked on with shame-banishing pride and performed individually or as a couple, awakens a shared joy. Through the dance patterns and idiom, this joyful dancing is connected to the fecundating sexual encounter and to the activity of fishing, linking the dance world to the life-bearing water spirit world. The joining of sexual differentiation and maternal containment that in this way is enacted and deeply experienced by the participants—if the event succeeds in awakening joy—supports basic structures of Punu rural society characterized by the tension between conjugal relations based on a patri-virilocal principle and matriclanic belonging. The emphasis that our analysis places on the dance form itself, and on the shared joy in dawning fertility it evokes, also proves to be fruitful in understanding how *ikoku* dancing persists in changing contexts—and even in urban ones.

RÉSUMÉ

Chez les Punu du Congo-Brazzaville, la danse *ikoku* est perçue à travers le concept de joie. Cadrant avec le privilège d'expérience émotionnelle qu'offre la danse, cet article entend considérer la danse comme une institution émouvante, autrement dit une activité socialement organisée qui crée des formes d'émotions culturellement significatives dans lesquelles se modèlent une compréhension du soi, ainsi que des identités et des relations sociales. Dans l'*ikoku*, on s'adonne seul ou en couple, sans complexe, à des séances de danse successives qui éveillent une joie partagée. À travers les schémas et l'idiome de la danse, cette danse joyeuse est liée à la relation sexuelle fécondante et à l'activité de pêche, reliant le monde de la danse au monde des esprits de l'eau porteuse de vie. L'alliage de différenciation sexuelle

et de confinement maternel que les participants interprètent et ressentent profondément ce faisant, à condition que l'événement parvienne à éveiller la joie, soutient les structures de base de la société rurale punu caractérisée par la tension entre relations conjugales basées sur un principe patrivirilocal et appartenance matriclanique. L'accent mis par l'analyse sur la forme de danse elle-même, et sur la joie partagée de la fertilité naissante qu'elle évoque, s'avère également utile pour comprendre la persistance de la danse *ikoku* dans des contextes changeants, même urbains.