



Choreographies of African Identities

Négritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal

by Francesca Castaldi

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reviewed by Héléne Neveu Kringelbach

Francesca Castaldi's book on the National Ballet of Senegal is close to the PhD dissertation she completed in 2000, which drew from the author's fieldwork in Dakar in 1996–97. Whereas much has changed in the Dakar professional scene since then, in many ways people's concerns remain the same. Castaldi was the first to publish an in-depth study of dance in Dakar, and hers is a very valuable contribution to a much neglected yet growing field.

The book is purposefully structured like a "polyrhythmic ensemble" and takes the reader meandering through locations in both Senegal and California, various urban sites (the theater, the street, the courtyard, and the nightclub), and social contexts. Structured along three main layers of analysis, the study is divided into eight chapters supported by an introduction and a conclusion. While the introduction discusses such theoretical issues as the positionality of the white researcher in Africa and choreographic writing, the conclusion reconsiders Senghor's Négritude ideology in the light of the urban "ballet" world. Overall, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which issues of gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion are renegotiated through dance.

A first layer discusses the performance of the National Ballet in North American theaters. Touring abroad represents a significant share of the troupe's life, and Castaldi attempts to deconstruct the cultural framework through which North American audiences interpret the performance. The first chapter resonates well

with her introductory discussion of the ways in which colonial representations of African dances were used as evidence of the "primitive" nature of Africans. In a tautological argument convincingly retraced here, nineteenth century European philosophy classified dance as an irrational, emotional, and "primitive" activity, and then went on to hold the importance of dance in much African sociality as evidence that Africans were indeed "primitive." Although this is a well-known story, it remains so strong in popular perceptions of dance in Africa that it is worth retelling. The chapter itself contains a beautifully crafted description of a National Ballet performance in California, but the author does not really achieve what she intends. By the end we have caught vivid glimpses of the stage, but the dances remain as opaque to the reader as they are to the novice spectator. For example, Castaldi mentions the presence of what she calls the "hay spirit," the Jola *koumpo*, but tells us that the performance does not yield any meaning to her. What she does well is to offer her own interpretation as to why the performance is bound to remain little more than an exotic moment for most North American spectators and to fail educating them about life in Senegal, given the lack of historical context in which it is presented. As a result, she argues, the spectator is left to interpret the performance through the lens of widespread stereotypes on African "tribalism." Castaldi obviously intended to convey the sense of detachment that might be experienced by a lay audience, but if such was the intention, it would have been illuminating to let the reader hear the voices of spectators other than Castaldi herself. She does not, after all, provide any evidence that the theatergoers around her are as naïve and unknowledgeable about Africa as she would have us believe. Also, her analysis might have been made richer by an engagement with the contents of the performance. After all, there is a literature on the social history of the *koumpo* (e.g. Mark 1992, De Jong 1999). Would it not have yielded new insights to juxtapose this literature with the "ethnography" the Ballet claims to be performing?

In a second layer of analysis running through the first three chapters, Castaldi attempts to interpret the work of the National Ballet in the light of the Senegalese nation-building project. The figure of the nation's first president is essential, not only because he initiated the creation of the National Ballet in 1961, but also because Senghor had a particular interest in dance. Castaldi's book makes important points about the ways in which the National Ballet performs and represents "Africa" on stage. For example, the program the Ballet performed worldwide for a decade, *Pangols*, is completely devoid of historical context, and cultural references to various ethnicities are thrown together without much consistency. This might not be a problem,

were it not for the fact that the Ballet purports to "educate" audiences about "traditional life" in Africa. Rather than educating the masses, Castaldi suggests, the performances help reinforce stereotypical views of a continent without a history, a culturally homogeneous place in which precolonial cultures had remained unchanged since times immemorial. Although the author does not make this explicit, the study resonates strongly with the abundant literature on "invented tradition" and the production of folklore as a resource in nation-building. But Castaldi's contribution is original because dance is not often mentioned in this literature.

The book is uneven in the third chapter's lengthy discussion of "Africanist discourse," which also forms part of the second layer of analysis. Castaldi draws heavily on Mudimbe's (1988, 1994) work on the "invention" of Africa to analyze three paradigms in Africanist scholarship: the "Order of the Same" (nineteenth century–1920s), the "Order of the Other" (1930s–early 1970s) and the "Third Dis/Order" (1970s–present). The author associates Senghor's Négritude and the sparse existing literature on African dances to the "Order of the Other." Juxtaposing Curt Sachs's 1937 *World History of the Dance* and Esther Dagan's 1997 edited volume, *The Spirit's Dance in Africa*, she argues that despite the sixty years that separate these writings, the same evolutionary perspective characteristic of the "Order of the Other" is implicit in both. Castaldi makes a good case to demonstrate this. The problem is that her analysis does not do much to help the reader understand the political and sociological role of the National Ballet. It does account for Senghor's romanticized view of both "tradition" and the modernization narrative. It also explains why the genre is an idealized representation of precolonial Senegambia. But these points were made earlier in the book, and in a more accessible manner.

One of the elements that work well in this second layer of analysis is Castaldi's juxtaposition of two identical performances, one in California and the other one at the National Ballet's home theater in Dakar. She makes subtle points about the different ways in which audiences respond depending on their cultural background, ethnicity, race, or class. She makes the best of her observations on the Senegalese audiences laughing during dramatic moments of the performance, which she contrasts with the seriousness displayed by the spectators in California. One such moment, for example, is a "hunter dance" in which a man goes to the bush, "is frightened by strange noises and spirits and drinks a potion to fortify himself" (p. 62). Whereas the same scene had appearing boring to her in California, in Dakar she finds herself laughing heartily with the audience. Writing from the self-reflexive perspective that runs through the book,

Castaldi realizes that her own frame of reference had led her to interpret the scene as an “authentic” representation of tradition, thus preventing her from seeing the “metaphorical, allegorical, or satirical” dimension that is obvious to the Senegalese audience.

In her third and most voluminous layer of analysis, Castaldi examines dance performance from the point of view of its producers. She follows dancers and drummers through Dakar’s streets, courtyards, discotheques, and theaters. The fourth chapter in particular focuses on a hugely popular dance form, the *sabar*. Castaldi rightly suggests that both professional dancers and ordinary city-dwellers blend into the *sabar* circle, taking turns to dance with amazing skill in front of the drummers, who provide the only music and, in continuity with Wolof performing traditions, are almost always male. This is probably the most vivid part of the book. Castaldi provides a short but accurate description of how Dakar’s women mobilize various forms of association to cope with the deterioration of economic conditions. *Sabar* events belong to women’s favored form of sociality, and aside from the fun of the dances, they facilitate the circulation of money, which may then be used for ceremonial expenses or small-scale business projects.

The fourth chapter also includes an interesting section on the “Wolofization” of Dakar. Castaldi argues that the linguistic process by which the Wolof language has become the dominant vernacular in the capital, as indeed in much of urban Senegal, goes hand in hand with a process of cultural integration. This is by no means a new idea, but Castaldi’s contribution is original in that she interprets the popularity of the *sabar* genre as both a symptom and a factor of Wolofization. She does not lose sight of the limits of the process, however, as evident in the enduring existence of the Casamançais separatist movement. Through the prism of the *sabar*, the chapter also examines notions of female sexuality in a predominantly Muslim society. Looking at the suggestive interaction between female dancers and male drummers inside the closed-off dance circle, the author interrogates the apparent contradiction between the exuberant sexuality displayed by the women and the Muslim ethos of restraint that permeates other domains of their lives. For her, there is room for both in Dakarois Islam, and the gender separation evident in *sabar* is linked to the “economic separation of conjugal couples’ budgets” and the existence of a “dual gender system” in Wolof society (p. 89). The ethnography of a “soirée sénégalaise” in a Dakar discotheque successfully conveys the alternative displays of coolness, heated energy and eroticism one experiences in the city’s night clubs, and provides a very vivid closure to the chapter. Writing dance is no easy feat, and Castaldi

does it beautifully here.

On the other hand it remains unclear what she is trying to achieve with the fifth chapter, “Tales of Betrayal.” She describes fictive relationships between black men and black women, and between black men and white women, through which deception runs as an undercurrent. The fact that these relationships are described as fictive introduces a change of style that sits uneasily with the rest of the book. Are some elements of these tales autobiographical? The reader is left in the dark here, presumably because of the degree of intimacy displayed in some of the stories. But more problematic is the fact that by generalizing the fate of “Black Woman,” “Black Man,” and “White Woman” in sexual relationships, she reinforces the racial stereotypes she purports to challenge. Of course, for most people familiar with the region, these stories will ring true to some extent. So-called sex tourism does exist, as do rape, unfaithful men, and the art of seducing a white partner to use marriage as a visa for migration. But not all relationships between black men and white women operate on the mode of betrayal, if this is indeed the right term to use here. Where is the betrayal when both partners are looking for something they cannot find “at home,” whether sex, love, constant attention from the opposite sex, or a visa to the First World? More importantly, not all Senegalese men involved in such relationships are poor and illiterate, as Castaldi suggests. And where is “White Man” in this game of sex and love? What role does *he* play, if any?

Chapter 6 focuses on the circulation of dances on and off stage, and leads the reader into a welcome reimmersion into the main topic of the book. Castaldi provides an excellent description of the structure of the *sabar*. In particular, she illuminates the highly sophisticated interaction amongst the three main components of the genre, all linked through rhythmic patterns: dancing, orality, and drumming. She shows how drumming rhythms, for example, can be directly translated into sung phrases consisting of onomatopoeic sequences. We learn how a masterful dancer can inspire the lead drummer to create a new *bàkk*, or a personalized rhythm that will allow her to fully display her skills and creativity in solo performance. I have often observed this call-and-response interaction during *sabar* events in Dakar, and Castaldi describes it beautifully. She goes on to discuss the continuous inclusion of new choreographic variations into the repertory through popular music videos.

The seventh chapter contains a fascinating analysis of the everyday work of urban ballet performers and of their insertion in the city’s economy. The distinction Castaldi draws between the formal and the informal economy in the local dance world is somewhat artificial, however, as even the well-established ballets

are caught in a constant pendulum movement between both domains. No single dancer in Dakar lives entirely off the formal sector, and even those lucky enough to earn a wage on a regular basis must supplement it with occasional, informal jobs. Still, the author brushes an accurate portrait of the professional dance world in the city, with its elements of exploitation and disappointed expectations. She highlights the subtle ways in which dancers and choreographers simultaneously draw upon and differentiate their creations from popular dance practices. She does not mention the contemporary dance scene which has recently blossomed, but there is a good reason for this; when she did her fieldwork, the contemporary genre was only beginning to reemerge after the closure of the Mudra Afrique school in the early 1980s.

The final chapter provides fresh insights into the political economy of performance in Dakar’s tourist enclaves. This is an important part of the book. There is indeed a gaping hole when it comes to research into the materiality of people’s lives in the artistic circles of the continent, and Castaldi’s book begins to address this. What is missing, perhaps, is a historical perspective that goes beyond European scholarship on Africa and the Négritude ideology and actually looks at the genesis of the ballet genre. But the lack of historical research on West African forms of performance is a recurring problem, for which the author cannot be blamed. Her book is an important contribution to a much neglected field, and I would highly recommend it to any reader concerned with the significance of performance in social life and the circulation of the performing arts within and out of Africa.

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