

‘Cool play’: emotionality in dance as a resource in Senegalese urban women’s associations

Hélène Neveu Kringelbach

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In Wolof-speaking Senegal, *àndal ak sa sago*, ‘stay cold-blooded’ or ‘control yourself’, is a common phrase thrown at someone whose emotions seem to be slipping out of control. This is a society in which emotional restraint is closely associated with a high social and moral status. Popular events such as *sabar* dances, however, provide a unique space in which respectable women may enact a wider range of emotions than in everyday life. Men, by contrast, risk being classified as homosexual, mad people or lower-status praise-singers (Griots in French, or *gèwël* in Wolof) if they allow themselves to dance as expressively as some women do.

In this paper, I suggest that Dakarais¹ women, therefore, have appropriated the dance circle as a space in which men are excluded from female sociality. This is where ‘women’s business’ (*aféeru jigéen*) takes place. As it becomes more difficult for male household heads to fulfil their ‘traditional’ role as breadwinners, in practice women’s associations and similar mechanisms of solidarity, all facilitated by the dance events, quietly undermine the socio-economic power of a growing proportion of Dakarais men. These developments are bound to affect gender relations in urban Senegal, but for now, most women seem to choose the route of outward compliance with their roles of good wives and good mothers. Yet the dance events they have come to dominate provide them with the emotional resources necessary to work out the tensions between dominant discourses on gender roles, ‘caste’ and class hierarchies, and a contradictory everyday practice.

In their introduction to *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 1) argue that “the most productive analytical approach to the cross-cultural study of emotion is to examine discourses on emotion and emotional discourses as social practices within diverse ethnographic contexts”. Over the past three decades or so, the anthropological study of emotion has placed a great deal of emphasis on verbal language. In their effort to disentangle the topic from the dominance of psychology and psychiatry, social scientists have argued that emotion should be studied as the outcome of sociological processes rather than as physiologically bounded phenomena. Emotion, they argued, is mediated by and constructed through language. Within the broader framework of European philosophical history, their work went against the conception held since the seventeenth century, that emotions were involuntary, non-cognitive perturbations human beings must learn to transcend (Harré 1986b). Over time however, an exclusively language-focused approach has appeared to be problematic. Along with a growing interest in the body in the social sciences, it has now become obvious that “what can be said in language does not fully match all that is going on in life”

(James 2003: 92). Rather than being exclusively concerned with discourse, in this paper I draw on ethnography of a Senegalese genre of performance, the *sabar*, to argue that bodily activities may help uncover aspects of the social elaboration of emotion that would remain hidden in the study of verbal language alone.

An important issue social studies of performance have addressed is that of whether bodily performance is akin to emotional expression, or whether emotions are generated by bodily activities and changing bodily states. Does moving in rhythm with others have the power to generate specific emotions, as argued early on by Durkheim (1912)? So far there has been no definite answer to this question, but the contribution such disciplines as psychology and neuroscience may provide fresh insights. Rather than attempting to contribute to the debate with inappropriate tools, I argue for the role that the cross-cultural study of dance should play in illuminating the relationship between body and emotion. More specifically, I argue that part of the success of *sabar* performances lies in the intense stimulation of the senses that takes place amongst participants. The altered states these sensual experiences generate are very much the product of socialization from an early age. Thus the smells, colours, fabric textures, sounds and rhythms people respond to, are largely specific to Senegambia. Meanwhile these experiences are powerful enough to help momentarily invert the verbalised norms related to the display of emotions.

Before delving further into the subject, it might be useful to interrogate notions like 'emotions', 'feelings' or 'sentiments', which often escape the full grasp of verbal language. The social sciences have often made little distinction between these different concepts. The social constructionist school has sought to define itself in opposition to the experimental sciences, arguing that there was no single substance that might be isolated as emotion, but rather "the ordering, selecting and interpreting work upon which our acts of management of fragments of life depend" (Harré 1986a: 4). Apart from being fairly obscure, such definitions tend to reduce the world of emotions to an exclusively cognitive or linguistic domain. Alternatively, social scientists have made a distinction between "emotion, defined as private feelings that are usually not culturally motivated or socially articulated, and sentiment, defined as socially articulated symbols and behavioral expectations" (Lutz & White 1986: 409). The main concern with such dichotomies has been to distance the cultural study of emotion from earlier psychological approaches. In recent years however, anthropologists have increasingly recognised that insights might be gained from the experimental disciplines (see Leavitt 1996). Without borrowing from these fields, I attempt to promote a holistic view of emotion by purposefully using a single term to designate both the subjective experience of emotion and its social significance.

The human seriousness of dance

Whereas recent approaches have become more diverse, early studies involving the emotional dimension of dance can be broadly divided into two strands. The first

approach was heavily influenced by a strong version of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, with the reason/emotion divide as a corollary. There, dance was viewed as a 'primitive' form of expression pertaining to the domain of emotion. The second approach interpreted community-wide dances as the 'safety valve' necessary to resolve latent conflicts, and thus maintain social order. Although rephrased in less evolutionary terms, both approaches remain common in the scholarly study of dance.

According to the first approach, so-called 'primitive' peoples were assumed to dance more than people from more sophisticated societies, because their lives were led by emotion rather than by reason. In a tautological argument well described by Castaldi (2000), the importance of dance in the social life of many African societies was thus used as evidence that Africans were indeed more 'primitive' than Europeans. Poet and first President of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor has been much criticised for "internalizing and even legitimizing the denigration implicit in the colonial and imperial enterprise" (Harney 2004: 41), in particular when he stated that "European reason [was] analytic and Negro reason intuitive" (Senghor 1964: 203). It is therefore no coincidence that Senghor also regarded dance as the most 'African' form of expression. Obviously, this school of thought is problematic in that it takes the reason/emotion dichotomy for granted, thereby failing to acknowledge its historical roots in European philosophy. Through a deceptive shortcut, dance is relegated to the domain of the irrational, but the case for its irrationality is never made. In this paper, I attempt to demystify the notion that dance is a purely emotional activity; on the contrary, I argue, dance may well be one of the human activities in which the inseparable nature of reason and emotion becomes most evident.

With his ethnography of the rituals of the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown (1922) was an early proponent of the second approach. He argued that music and dance played a functional role in bringing community members to a heightened state of shared emotional experience. In this view, the 'function' of dance is to regulate the feelings of the individual participants so that they conform to the collective interest. Writing a few years later on the Zande beer dance, the *ghere buda*, Evans-Pritchard (1928) criticized this radical form of functionalism, pointing out that Radcliffe-Brown had missed "the complexity of motives in the dance" (ibid.: 460) and the threat of chaos which inevitably followed the exacerbation of individualistic tendencies.

Turner's work on ritual (e.g. 1969), and later Cohen's writings on cultural performance (e.g. 1993) brought more substance to the interpretation of bodily performance as a potential site for either rebellion or the social control of dangerous emotions. At the other end of the spectrum, philosopher of the arts Susanne Langer (1953) challenged the idea that dance, as an art form, may involve genuine emotions. With classical ballet in mind, she argued that dance created a virtual rather than a real world of emotions. She acknowledged that this virtual world could be powerful enough to move audiences, but her reliance on a somewhat

artificial dichotomy between dance as art and as non-art undermined her argument. It has since become obvious that the relationship between different dance forms is a complex one, and that the real and the virtual cannot be easily differentiated (James 2003: 78).

Since the 1970s, a growing body of studies have attempted to shift the focus away from functional explanations, towards the phenomenology of performance. If few have focused on dance, these studies are nevertheless useful as they help illuminate the emotional power of performance². Schieffelin's work in particular, emphasises the emotional dimension of the performer-audience connection. He suggests that the Aristotelian divide between a "world of spectator which is real and a world conjured up by performers which is not" prevents us from fully grasping the relationship between performance and the "social construction of reality" (Schieffelin 1998: 200). In the Gisalo ceremony of the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, Schieffelin (1976) describes how performers sing with nostalgia about the landscapes the audience is emotionally attached to. People may be so moved by the performance that they end up burning the dancers with torches. It is not that the Kaluli are unable to conceive of the performance as a virtual world, it is rather that they take it as a provocation. The fusion of realities in the participants' experience, Schieffelin suggests, may be one of the ways in which performance accomplishes something unique. Similarly in the Senegalese *sabar*, the emotional intensity of the interaction amongst participants, with its extraordinarily competitive dimension and enacted sexual suggestiveness, may well work as a unique opportunity for many women to experience an alternative reality. In order to convey the extent to which urban dance events in Senegal challenge the appropriate ways in which one is expected to express emotion, I will now turn to the relationship between emotionality and status in Wolof society.

Emotionality and status in Wolof³ society

In today's Senegal, emotionality remains central in maintaining social hierarchies. Status is not only affected by such factors as age, gender, income or place of origin, but also by genealogy, which determines an individual's status within the hereditary ranks. Much as for the Haalpulaaren of the Fuuta Toro, 'traditional' stratification follows the lines of hereditary caste-like groups, or social ranks. The two main ranks are the *géér* majority⁴ and the minority *ñeeño*. Whereas the *géér* are undetermined in terms of occupation, the *ñeeño* are further divided into occupational categories of performers ('Griots') and artisans. Nowadays the practice of the trade associated with one's rank has become less relevant, and *ñeeño* status is primarily determined by genealogy⁵. Artisan categories include Blacksmiths (*tëgg*), Leatherworkers (*uude*), Woodworkers (*lawbe* or *seeñ*) or Weavers (*ràbb*)⁶. Here I focus on the Griot, traditionally a performer, genealogist/praise-singer, ritual specialist and social intermediary. Griots epitomise the *ñeeño* categories widely regarded by the *géér* as of a lower social and moral status⁷, but in private people

often acknowledge that Griots derive a significant power from their role in validating the status of others. Irvine (1990) gives an accurate description of the connection between rank and affectivity:

“Central to [the Wolof ideology of stratification] is the idea that people are inherently unequal, having different constitutions that govern their feelings and motivations and make them behave in different ways. These different behavioral dispositions incline their bearers to differing but complementary forms of action, whence arise the occupational specializations of the caste system. [...] One’s constitution – the biological, emotional, and moral qualities one derives from ancestral inheritance and from childhood experience – is the source of one’s *naw* ‘temperament’ or ‘capacity for emotionality’.” (Irvine 1990: 133)

In other words, a person’s status within Wolof stratification is very much associated with his or her ability for emotional display. Whereas the *gээр* are expected to speak, move and more generally act with *kersa*, a mix of restraint and deference to others, the Griots in particular are assumed to lack the capacity for restraint and to be overtly expansive and emotional. More generally, emotional restraint is positively valued as the manifestation of a higher moral status.

Expectations of restraint spill out into all aspects of everyday life, from speech to movement style, dancing skills, dress and other forms of bodily expression. *Waxu géwël* for example, the emphatic, rapid and metaphorical speech style of the Griots, is contrasted with the quieter and slower *waxu гээр*, the speech style of the *гээр*. When it comes to dancing, it is particularly for women that skills are taken to be differentiated: “Griot women are supposed [...] to be the best dancers, since high-caste women are ‘too stiff’ and ‘too ashamed’ to perform in the sexually suggestive manner deemed the most skilful” (Irvine 1990: 134). Yet during *sabar* parties, women of all ranks indulge in short sequences of suggestive dancing, without their status being necessarily affected by such behaviour. Non-Griot men past their teenage years, on the other hand, risk being classified as homosexuals (*goorjigéen*, literally ‘man-woman’), mad people or Griots if they allow themselves to dance in suggestive ways, with the exception of short sequences framed as a parody of women. The perception that suggestive, passionate dancing is the natural prerogative of Griots is not new⁸. According to older Dakarois informants, what is more recent, however, is the fact that *sabar* events have become the quasi-exclusive domain of women participants.

Verbal language reinforces the positive perception attached to emotional restraint. Affect is often expressed in terms of fluidity, weight or heat: whereas the cool, the solid and the heavy are positively valued, the hot, the fluid and the lightweight have negative, or at least ambiguous, connotations. ‘To have a cool heart’, for example, is ‘to be happy’⁹. An excellent praise-oratory¹⁰ performance by a Griot is said to make the blood of his or her patron ‘boil’ or ‘run faster’, with the implication that it is impossible for the patron to control his or her emotions.

These observations, however, must be tempered. In practice, status is contextual and relative: people manipulate their speech style, vocabulary, movement style and behaviour according to the context and according to the type of relationship they intend to establish. It is therefore common to see *gээр* momentarily adopt the attitude of Griots in order to position themselves as 'clients' in a patron-client relationship. But it is particularly during dance events organised by women that the norms of restraint are visibly contested.

***Sabar* and women's associations**

Sabar is an overarching Wolof term used to designate all elements in *sabar* performance: the drums, the rhythms, the dances and the events themselves. *Sabar* drums are beaten with one hand and a stick, and a complete ensemble includes at least six different drums. The popular *tama*, the small 'talking drum' strapped over the player's shoulder, may also be used intermittently. The *tama* is said to have the power to make women dance in sexually suggestive ways, and is often described as an incarnation of the devil (*seytaan*). There is evidence that in a fairly recent past, *sabar* drums served a wide range of purposes, from inter-village communication to encouragement in warfare, in agricultural work or as musical support in the display of strength before wrestling competitions. But importantly, drumming remains the near-exclusive domain of men¹¹.

The dances themselves are performed in infinite variations and with much individual creativity. Nevertheless, many Dakarois are able to classify the dances that belong to the older repertoire – such as *ceebu jën*¹² (pronounce 'tiebudien'), *Baar Mbaye* or *kaolack* – and those which have been more recently revived or created in the ever-changing fashion of popular dances. The more fashionable dances are usually 'launched' by the latest music videos from Senegalese pop stars. They spread from the TV to the city's streets and nightclubs like fire. Some dances are known to be particularly suggestive. The *lëmbël* for example – also called 'electric fan dance' – consists in rolling the hips in tune with the rhythm, including accelerations and sudden stops, with bent knees and the back turned to the drummers. Other *sabar* dances are more aerial, with movements of the legs alternately thrown high into the air, one arm lifting a top or a skirt while the other performs a distinctive 'waving' movement in tune with the rhythm.

At first it would seem as if the choice of rhythm is in the hands of the musicians. But as Castaldi (2000) has explained, in its best moments the interaction between dancers and musicians follows a thrilling call-and-response pattern. The best dancers will challenge the lead drummer to play more complex, faster rhythms and if inspired, he will in turn respond by initiating new challenges. A lead drummer I knew compared the *sabar* interaction to a conversation, adding that he simply needed to 'look at the leg' of a good dancer to 'know what it [was] going to do next'.

Sabar events are so common in Dakar's highly populated districts that it often feels as if the city's pulse is beating to their rhythm. *Sabar* parties take on different

names depending on the time of the day; a *tannbeer*, for example, takes place in the evening, and at a *tannbeer* the dancing is expected to be more sexually suggestive than during an afternoon *sabar*. I have broadly identified three categories of events during which the genre is commonly performed: family ceremonies, the regular gatherings of women's associations, and the rallies organised by political parties or civic associations. Most women in Dakar belong to at least one, and often several associations of kin, friends, neighbours, or fellow members of a Sufi brotherhood¹³. Dance events in the context of political rallies have been discussed elsewhere (Heath 1990, 1994) and are beyond the scope of this paper, but they are structured in a very similar way as the more private events I am focusing on. *Sabar*-like parties advertised as *soirées sénégalaises* on the radio also take place in Dakar's many nightclubs; these tend to have a *mbalax*¹⁴ band with a lead singer performing, rather than a *sabar* ensemble. But the keenest organisers of *sabar* events remain the informal associations around which the social life of a great majority of 'Dakaraises' is structured. Some closely resemble the older age sets (*mbotaay*), and with the exception of the religious associations, most of them engage in dancing during their regular meetings¹⁵.

Many of these networks simultaneously serve as rotating credit associations or 'tontines' (*nat*). In Dakar the generic term *tur* is used to designate any association in which a fixed number of members take turn to organise the meetings, and therefore a tontine may also be designated as a *tur*, but not all *turs* involve a money-saving mechanism. These associations usually meet weekly, fortnightly or monthly. Although some are mixed, in practice few men feel welcome at the meetings, even when they contribute financially. Thus one of the family *turs* I came across in Dakar has 3 men out of a membership of 41, and although the men pay their contributions, none of them shows up to the meetings. Women in the group told me that the men would be 'ashamed' to take part in the dancing or be seen to watch openly. Indeed, whenever an association organises a dance in the privacy of a house, there is an implicit understanding that the household's men ought to leave or make themselves inconspicuous. Those who admitted having caught glimpses of *turs* said that they just happened to be there and were not supposed to know what was going on. They commented on their feigned ignorance in such terms as "even when we [men] are around, we must pretend we don't see anything".

Money usually plays an important role in these meetings, and it could be said that the dances and the atmosphere they establish facilitate the circulation of cash, a point also made by Castaldi (2000). Contributions must be the same every time for the rotation to be fair, and their level depends on the resources of the members. As a consequence, women's associations rarely break class boundaries. Contributions may range from 500 to 50,000 F CFA¹⁶, but most women save between 500 and 5,000 F CFA per week¹⁷. Those who save larger amounts often spend their payout on business activities rather than on household, ceremonial or health expenses, as many of the poorer women do. In some groups, the more 'business-minded' among the participants also use the meetings as opportunities to sell the goods they import

from neighbouring countries: jewellery from Morocco and Mauritania, fabrics from Mali, shoes, underwear or watches from the Gambia.

Apart from the small trade aspect, many 'Dakaroises' regard these associations as essential to develop their social networks, and thereby build up social capital. Maintaining a regular face-to-face contact enables them to mobilise kin and friends in times of crisis, and to gather help with the extravagant expenses generated by family ceremonies. The meetings also provide opportunities to discuss family conflicts, initiate marriage negotiations and impose the authority of older over younger women, often under the guise of 'correcting deviant behaviour'. Because the explicit purpose is entertainment and money-saving, anything else that might take place during these events remains hidden to outsiders, and in particular to men.

Sensuality and 'cool play'

To render a sense of a *sabar* as an intensely sensual experience, I find it useful to consider the preparation as an integral part of the event. There is an important collective component in the run-up to a dance event, when the organisers collect money for the musicians' fees (in the case of 'tontines' these are usually deducted from the payout), the rental of plastic chairs, lighting equipment, and increasingly, the fee for a photographer or video-maker. But the most important aspect of the preparation is individual: it has to do with transforming the body into a site of sensual excitement and an object of envy. A great deal of time, creativity and money may be devoted to this. In Dakar, dressing well (*sañse*) and grooming the body are indeed unavoidable means of maintaining status in the female world¹⁸.

When preparing for a dance event, many women will attempt to find money for a new outfit, hairstyle and the latest fashionable underwear, particularly if this is a wedding or a name-giving ceremony. In addition, married women are expected to dress more expensively than those younger and unmarried, as elegance may be looked upon as a reflection of a husband's status. Social expectations to look 'expensively dressed' are so high that I have often heard women comment on their anguish to be humiliated if they did not live up to the ideal of *sañse*. One woman in her early thirties confessed that she no longer went to the dances organised by her kinswomen because she could not cope with this pressure. Married women are expected to dress up in everyday life as well, and failure to do this may be condemned harshly by their peers. Friends and relatives may then, more or less intentionally, humiliate the woman concerned by offering her money to buy cosmetics and a few yards of cloth.

Preparations for a dance may also include an aggressive skin-bleaching treatment (*xeesal*¹⁹) to achieve the fair complexion many city-dwellers regard as attractive and as a sign of wealth, even though the *xeesal* is most widely practised in poorer neighbourhoods. A thick layer of make-up supplements the complexion. Beautifying is not always an individual affair however. In the afternoon preceding a

dance, those women who can afford it flock to hairdressers' and beauty parlours with friends and relatives. There, valuable hours are spent chatting, having the latest fashionable hairstyle done and make-up applied. An important element of dress is the underwear, which is particularly elaborate for dance events. The most important piece of underwear is the 'petit pagne' (*beeco*), a wrap-around skirt usually made of light cotton, either plain or with a netting forming fashionable patterns, and tied underneath the heavier 'pagne'. This is supplemented by several ranges of waist beads and for younger women, a thong in a fashionable design. In the privacy of the house, women carefully hang both underwear and waist beads over clay pots filled with ash and burning *curaay*, Senegalese women's 'secret' incense. The sensuality of this elaborate combination of elements resides in the fact that much is suggested rather than openly revealed: the slightest movement of the body gives off fragrant wafts, the waist beads can be heard in discreet *click-clicks* and the *beeco* can be glimpsed at during the dance.

Finally, the outer outfit, which may be a 'boubou', a 'taille basse'²⁰ or a camisole with a 'pagne', will be carefully designed to make a striking impression. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, any woman who could afford it would wear a European-style dress to go to a dance, the 1970s saw a revival of the 'Senegalese' styles. Status has now become embodied in expensive, heavily embroidered damask cloths and in the matching head scarves, jewellery, bags and shoes.

As Beatty (2005) pointed out, ethnographers are not well-equipped to grasp emotional practices outside the context of specific social encounters. Drawing on a year of fieldwork in Dakar between May 2002 and February 2004, I will therefore describe two scenes from *turs* organised by neighbourhood women in the districts of Fass and Fann Hock²¹. The third snap-shot is drawn from an event organised by a Bollywood dance association, which shares a similar structure with the *turs*. Bollywood dances, routinely called 'dances indoues' in Dakar, have been hugely popular in the suburban district of Pikine since the early 1970s or even the 1960s. Although most aficionados are women, Bollywood associations also include men. When not gathered for rehearsals or evening dances, members spend a great deal of time watching the latest Bollywood films in the local cinemas or from video cassettes.

A married women's 'tur' in Fass

It is late afternoon on a tiled rooftop in the populous district of Fass, and the drummers are late. As they make their way up, the hostess is already greeting the first wave of guests. She snaps at the musicians for being late, as usual. As they take seats on the rooftop and begin playing *sabar* rhythms, the space fills up until some fifty women, accompanied by a few toddlers and teenage girls, are seated on a circle of plastic chairs rented for the occasion. They all wear colourful outfits in the fashionable light green, yellow, pink and two-colour combinations. The mix of strong *curaay* fragrances combined with the display of shiny fabrics, glossy make-up and glittering jewels is

overwhelming. Small party bags and high heel mules match the outfits. Headscarves are tied according to the latest *jalgáti* ('bend the rules') or *uppukaay* ('fan') fashion. Although the women are friends or neighbours, they obviously appraise each other with a sharpness of the eye which leaves little doubt that this is a highly competitive affair.

Having warmed up the atmosphere with non-dance rhythms, the drummers slowly begin to play the rhythms that will initiate the dance. A young woman gets up, takes her shoes off and lifts her skirt up to the knee with one hand while stepping forward in rhythm; the other arm is waving back and forth in a continuous movement that seems to be carrying the upper body forward. One step opening the knee to one side, then to the other; the initial steps are meant to 'get into the rhythm' and attract the attention of the participants. The woman steps forward until she is a few steps away from the musicians, facing them; she jumps on the left foot while the right leg leaps forward and fends the air, landing on both feet at the same time. She jumps three more times, pushing the knees up, then pivots on the left leg, both arms folded and pointing upwards; finally she jumps on both feet to re-establish the balance, and starts again. She dances solo for half a minute and runs back to her chair, laughing heartily. Her friends laugh, congratulate her in high-pitched voices, and the atmosphere becomes increasingly electric. Gradually, more women get up and step into the central space, taking turns to dance solo or in pairs²², thus challenging each other playfully. Although this is a 'private' event, the open-air roof fills up with the sounds of loud drumming, laughing and chatting.

The group leader in charge of collecting the money from the participants and organising the lottery, the *yaayu mbotaay* (literally 'mother of the age-set'), sits in a corner and plots the names and amounts collected in her notebook as the women turn in their contributions²³. On of the high points of the evening, the lottery, will take place later: the names of the participants entitled to take their turn that week will be written down on small bits of paper, and a single name will be picked randomly from a small basket under the surveillance of the *yaayu mbotaay* and of three other women appointed for the occasion. It is of utmost importance that the 'ritual' be followed carefully so as to prevent cheating. As the name of the payout winner is announced, she lets out a loud cry, twirls and performs a few dance steps while her friends congratulate her.

Later in the evening, the energy level rises along with the sexual suggestiveness of the dances. Loud cheering resonates when the drummers initiate the rhythms associated with *Lawbe*²⁴ dances such as the *lëmbël*. With much laughter, the women encourage each other to be daring, to make generous use of the buttocks and to perform creative, sometimes acrobatic steps. In fact there is no evidence that the more provocative *sabar* dances were created by the *Lawbe*, but their reputation for sexual expertise makes the 'just-so' connection all too tempting. At this point there is much to-and-fro movement and brushing of fabrics. Chairs are taken and quickly left again. The few women who refuse to dance at least once are forced to pay a symbolic fine. Some walk across to their friends and playfully lift their skirt,

revealing their underwear, and in a few cases, the full extent of their female anatomy. “You know what we Senegalese women say”, a woman friend tells me, “the bigger, the better!” Others simply remove their outer skirt and go on dancing with bare legs showing through their *beeco*, some of which are made of plain white cotton covered with bawdy inscriptions – such as *Saf na*, ‘it is deliciously spicy’ – and erotic drawings. Most participants speak louder than usual, make wider gestures and their bodies feel stronger when we happen to brush against each other, as if they were ‘charged’ with a sudden flow of energy.

Meanwhile, the two *tama* players who had been playing alongside the *sabar* have started moving around the rooftop, acting as if they are aroused by the sight. They comment on the underwear; “It is Sotiba²⁵ that is teasing us”, one of them shouts. He literally grabs a woman wearing a painted *beeco*, and for a few seconds thrusts his hips at her. She laughs and plays along while all the women gather in a commotion to take a look. A few seconds later the game is over, and so is the *tur*. The drummers stop playing and most women disappear from the rooftop as quickly as they had arrived. Later, on the way out, I ask the musicians whether they had been genuinely aroused by the women, or just pretending. They simply smile and reply ambiguously that this is their job, and that they are ‘used to it’.

A neighbourhood ‘tannbeer’ in Fann Hock

Sabar events that take place in a closed-off portion of a street or small sandy alley have a different flavour. There, the boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’ space is deliberately kept fuzzy, as participants (mostly women) and on-lookers alike (including men and young boys) feign to ignore each other. As usual that evening in Fann Hock, the awareness of being watched by neighbours and family members did not prevent some of the girls from rivalling in creativity and sexual suggestiveness. Most were unmarried girls in their late teens to early twenties, and while the majority lived in the vicinity, a few had come from neighbouring districts so as not to be seen dancing by male family members.

Once again the climax of the evening is reached when the so-called *Lawbe* dances are performed. On the edge of the *sabar* circle, away from the main focus of attention and yet very visible, a plump young woman dressed in a ‘boubou’ stands in front of a group of her friends, turning her back to the centre of the circle and to the drummers. With agile movements of the hips and loose knees, she reveals a satin-like, shiny *beeco* to her grinning friends. She is wearing the obligatory five rows of waist beads but has given them a bawdy twist: a kind of bracelet is dangling from one the rows, moving in small circular movements in tune with her hips. As if to make the trick even more explicit, she lowers her hand in front of her, and follows the rotating movement of the bracelet with the index finger. She seems proud of her little trick, and she and her friends are obviously having a good laugh. No one around them seems to mind.

Not everybody is willing to dance however, and one of the organisers, striking in her pink damask *taay bas*, is walking around the circle holding a wooden stick which she uses to hit the legs of the recalcitrant girls. She is about ten years older than many of them. Occasionally, one or two young men in T-shirts, trousers and trainers throw themselves into the circle and perform a short *sabar* dance, accompanied by much laughter from the women. The men's dances look like parodies of the women's, as they exaggerate the hip movements, the athletic leaps with legs high in the air or the eyes rolling upwards in the manner of a trance, as the girls often do. Some blend in movements from the Wolof *kasag* dances performed during boys' circumcision ceremonies, grabbing their crotch and thrusting the hips forward. The more daring young girls respond and in turn parody the boys, grabbing their crotch too. But before long the cheering and clapping ceases, and there is a distinct feeling that the boys are no longer welcome.

Once the *tannbeer* is over, the participants quickly disperse into the nearby streets. Although the dancing has stopped, some of the girls still seemed 'charged' with the energy of the dancing. When two men who had been watching the dance pass by and make provocative comments, a couple of young girls respond by making scary faces and pretending to chase them. The men move on quickly and do not bother looking back.

A 'Hindu' evening in Pikine

In a school courtyard, white plastic chairs have been set up in a 'U' shape, and the open end is occupied by a disc jockey and his equipment. Songs from older and newer Bollywood films are already playing loudly as about sixty elegantly dressed women, some with babies and toddlers, take place on the chairs. The few men present are also dressed up for the occasion. Here the audience is even more numerous than the participants, and the aisles of the schoolyard are filled with on-lookers of all ages. They have come to watch 'les Indous', and the children's faces in particular are filled with the tension of expectation. The women who will be performing are easily distinguishable from the association members who will simply watch: whereas the latter sit motionless and dignified in their 'boubous', the former walk around the space and chat, dressed in tight-fitting, sparkling two-piece 'made in Pikine' imitations of Bollywood costumes. The performers' bodies are freshly bleached, and faces are covered with a distinctive Bollywood-style make-up. As the event begins, sequences performed by a single performer (man or woman), a woman/man duet or a chorus of girls follow each other to the sound of film songs. The dancers act out the love scenes and move the lips as if singing in Hindi. Although none of them speaks Hindi, the keenest dancers know the words by heart. By contrast with an ordinary *sabar*, these dances are choreographed and have been rehearsed beforehand.

On several occasions, one young woman in her early twenties comes forward and starts twirling, abandoning herself to the pleasure of the dance. Each time she is grabbed forcefully and forced back into her chair. By the fourth time she is violently pushed back, and several association members

admonish her loudly for interrupting the sequences. One of the men, a very keen and effeminate dancer, is so aggressive that it looks as if he is going to hit her. Eventually, she bursts into tears and runs out of the courtyard while the evening goes on as if nothing had happened. One of the two male informants with whom I have arrived comments the incident: "Her husband doesn't want her to dance. Besides, she doesn't dance very well, and it isn't even good for her. Every time she dances, she gets a headache." In a contemptuous tone, he also adds that the male dancer who shooed her away, like many male members of the association, is a *goorjigéen*. Later, another Pikinois describes the 'Hindu' circles as prostitution networks, making widely uninformed and derogatory comments such as "Don't you see? All these women are divorced, they are prostitutes!"

With these snap-shots I have attempted to convey a sense of the heated atmosphere that is characteristic of many dance events in Dakar. These dances convey a sense of 'cool play' in that they are obviously playful, but they only become significant against the everyday backdrop of 'coolness'. Following dance events, women often gossip about each other's looks and skills as dancers, but no one ever comments on how it *feels* to dance. Asking people directly about it never elicited anything but evasive responses, not only because emotions are rarely discussed in this social context, but also because verbal language almost always comes short when it comes to expressing their complexity. How are we, then, to interpret what is going on during events in which women are obviously more sensual and 'emotional' than they ever allow themselves to be elsewhere?

Emotionality as a resource

As Beatty (2005) has argued, we cannot simply assume that we know what counts as 'emotion' in a different cultural setting. Despite feeling a great deal of empathy with the women I watched and danced with in Dakar, I am not in a position to make claims about the authenticity of people's emotions as expressed in this peculiar mix of sensuality and competitiveness displayed during the dances. Nevertheless it seems fair to say that dance events provide an opportunity for many Dakarois women in particular to enact a wider range of emotions than usual, or at least to enact them in a less restrained manner. Intuitively, it would seem that positive sentiments come through in the dances, such as 'strength', 'sexual confidence', 'togetherness' and 'playfulness', but also the more complex sentiments of 'jealousy' and 'fear' of gossip and social exclusion. Coming back to the questions raised at the beginning of this paper, there are two issues I find worth addressing in conclusion. Firstly, to what extent do the dances help generate altered emotional states? And secondly, why do many women choose to momentarily transgress the norms of restraint attached to their status?

As suggested earlier, the issue of whether it is the dancing that generates out-of-the-ordinary displays of emotion or whether people dance because they are in a

particular emotional state, is not an easy one to answer through analysis of ethnography. The fact that dance events are the only social moments during which many Dakarais behave in such expansive ways points towards the first option. This must be qualified however, because people's emotional display is not spontaneous, and does not happen haphazardly as soon as they step into the dance circle. What takes place is still a highly codified inversion of the restraint displayed in most 'ordinary' situations. For example, many informants of both sexes associate the dances with moments for young women to enact a flourishing sexuality in which they are able to pursue selfish pleasure, and no longer be available as mere sexual objects. The suggestiveness of some of the dances, the bawdy jokes and gestures, the way women 'toy' with the male drummers and the sensory set-up of the events are all part of this enactment. But rarely do people allow themselves to display sentiments of anger or sadness, for example, and when they do, they are quickly excluded. Thus, even when the usual norms seem to be suspended, a different set of 'rules' still prevails.

Emotionality is also highly dependent on the context, and particularly on who is watching the dances; it is obvious, therefore, that these are 'cultural performances', and not just individualised emotional states, even though the sensory stimulation of individual participants does shape what goes on. Women do not dress, behave or perform in the same way whether the event takes place in the intimate setting of the house or in a closed off portion of the street. There, participants remain very much aware of being watched, even though everyone feigns to ignore this. Also, not just any kind of dancing causes people to become 'charged' with extraordinary emotional energy; new dance styles and rhythms people are not used to, produce a different effect altogether. This is evident among the professional dance troupes I spent much time with in Dakar. There people happily use breaks during training to re-create 'miniature' *sabars* in which they perform in very similar ways as during events in their neighbourhoods. As soon as they revert back to choreographed movements however, their attitude changes dramatically. They become more restrained, less playful and the female dancers, in particular, seem to fall back into an attitude of submission to the dance master. I would therefore argue that it is only when a dance style has been repeated over and over again, thus 'growing into' the body, that we are able to reach this 'moving together' of reason, emotion and body (Parkin 1985) characteristic of altered emotional states. With the *sabar* many women seem to reach an altered emotional state – albeit not to the degree of a 'trance' – but this is in part because the *sabar* is part of their 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1972). In short, it is very likely that the dances described in this paper contribute to generating altered emotional states, but this only happens in prescribed, almost ritualised, social contexts where the scene is set for participants to re-live the sensory experiences they have been socialised into.

Finally, there is the question of why so many women choose to transgress the norms of *kersa* so explicit in everyday discourse. Following Deborah Heath's (1994) argument that some women's lack of restraint works as a 'foil' allowing their

husbands or male relatives to maintain their reputation, one might argue that the dances ultimately serve to maintain the status quo of gender and 'caste' stratification. But I find it important to take people's experience into account, and few Dakarais seem to experience the social relations they are involved in as 'maintaining the status quo'. The responses one gets when asking women why they dance the way they do, vary a great deal depending on the individual and on who is listening. In front of men, middle- to upper-class women, in particular, tend to deny taking part in *sabars* altogether, particularly in front of older family members. Some married women over the age of 35-40 confess that they used to have fun dancing but that they have become too old to do so, thereby implying that it is no longer appropriate, even shameful (*rus*), for them to dance in public. Although some of those who deny dancing indeed refrain from doing so – in some cases for fear of exposing their lack of dancing skills! – others simply wish to conceal that they fully participate in the suggestive dancing that takes place during *turs*. I have come across women who claimed to have witnessed dances without ever taking part; yet in a number of these cases, I knew for certain that they occasionally joined in.

Those who admit to dancing rarely make the suggestive nature of their dancing explicit; rather, they speak in understated terms about 'having fun' amongst women, sometimes adding that the dances are the only time during which women are able to genuinely let off steam. There is obviously a genuine element of relief from the obligations of everyday life in the playfulness of these events. But I also want to suggest that there are two important dimensions which are rarely verbalised: rivalry and competition for status in the women's world on the one hand, and a complementary aspect of solidarity on the other hand.

Female rivalry is central to many social relations in Dakar. It is likely that this has long been the case in a polygamous society like the Muslim Senegalese. In Dakar, polygamy remains alive and well, with 40% of women having lived in a polygamous union by the age of 40 (Adjamagbo, Antoine and Dial 2004). In addition, the depressed economic climate since the 1980s has rendered the competition for men with a stable income even fiercer. The complex sentiments this generates are rarely verbalised because this would be regarded as selfishness and as a lack of emotional control. Yet many women enjoy enacting the competitive dimension of their lives, and having a space in which to compete seems to help some build confidence in their ability to be independent from the tutelage of a husband or a father. Skilled and suggestive dancing allows some women to show themselves amongst their peers as sexually desirable to men, entertaining, and above all as socially active. Indeed, not only must one be socially active to keep up with the ever-changing fashion of popular dances, but also, the amount and style of dancing performed at a given event is an indication of the organiser's status among her peers. If she is well-liked and respected among her friends, people will dance a great deal more at her *tur* than if she is not. In Dakar, being able to display social status in this way forms an essential part of an on-going competition which far exceeds the concern of finding a suitable partner. Social status amongst one's peers

is so crucial that it is not always clear whether women actually compete for men, or whether men are simply pawns in women's competition for social recognition.

Unsurprisingly, solidarity is a more explicitly acknowledged value in Wolof social life. But dominant discourses emphasize solidarity amongst kin, rather than amongst women peers. Yet the sensuality and emotionality expressed in the dance events reinforces a *de facto* exclusion of men. This was not always the case: according to older informants who grew up in Dakar, in the past young men routinely took part in the dances. Nowadays however, once on their own women are able to go about 'women's business' (*aféeru jigéen*). Whereas 'women's business' used to refer to the sexual education of young girls, or sharing secrets on intimate matters and the best ways to 'tie'²⁶ a husband, the time women spend with their peers is increasingly devoted to 'business' in the real sense of the term. Indeed, urban women's associations have multiplied since the early 1980s, and while the men-dominated formal sector of the economy is sinking into crisis²⁷, they compete with the local chapters of religious movements, youth movements, 'sports and culture' groups, migrants' associations, professional organizations and trading communities, to harness the economic resources provided by the development sector among others (Dahou 2004). In addition, a growing number of women coach each other in how to engage in independent business activities: small-scale trade, catering, tailoring, hairdressing and for fishermen families, the transformation of fishing products are among the most common choices.

For this, 'tontine' meetings and *turs* have become the most widely used spaces to meet, save money and provide each other with both moral and material support. This does not mean, of course, that all women succeed in compensating for their husband's or father's decreasing capacity to provide for their families on a stable basis, but the success of a few is enough to entertain the hopes of many others. The networks facilitated by the dance events also form a formidable social capital on which Dakarois women are able to draw in times of need. This is not to say that they all seek to gnaw at men's economic power. Amongst the many married women I knew in Dakar, most were either working or looking for jobs, and although many were keen to retain some degree of financial independence, none ever phrased this in oppositional terms towards her husband's role as the main provider for the family. Rather, they either found themselves obliged to supplement their husband's income to cope with household- and healthcare expenses, or wished to earn money to support their own relatives and spend on ceremonial expenses²⁸. In a significant number of cases, what had started as a supplementary activity ended up making a more stable contribution to the household than the husband's income. Alcoholism and various health problems are rampant amongst husbands in average 14 years older than their wives (Adjamagbo et al. 2004), and often unemployed.

But if more and more women find themselves having to overtake the role of breadwinner, this is bound to affect the moral authority (*kilifteef*) of male household heads as well as gender roles in the wider society. Meanwhile, *sabars* and similar urban dance events play an important role in these developments because they are

among the few spaces from where women have managed to exclude men, even though they still need the tacit agreement of men to participate in or organise the dances. When agreement fails, as was the case with the young woman at the 'Hindu' event, women too find themselves excluded. In addition, because the dances allow for an ambiguous mix of 'genuine' and 'enacted' emotionality, and because much of what goes on is never put into words, they are a particularly appropriate medium through which the class, 'caste', age and gender hierarchies which tend to dominate in everyday life can be quietly played with. Although I have argued elsewhere (Neveu Kringelbach 2005) that this is part of a wider process of change in gender relations in urban Senegal, more time-depth will be needed to evaluate the extent to which such re-negotiation will extend further into other domains of social life.

It should also be said, as a final note, that many of the tensions and dilemmas urban Senegalese society is faced with are being crystallised around the dances. An increasing number of city dwellers of both sexes describe them as both a symptom and a cause of the moral decline of Senegalese society. The mass media are a widely used tribune for this²⁹. This is not new of course, and indeed much 'popular culture' in twentieth century Senegal has developed in a constant tension with the religious, political and economic elites. Meanwhile, without a word being uttered, the circle is re-formed and the dance goes on in Dakar's 'quartiers'.

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¹ For reasons of convenience, I use the French term for an inhabitant of Dakar: 'Dakarois' (fem. 'Dakaroise').

² The term 'performance' is used here in the sense of "particular 'symbolic' or 'aesthetic' activities" (Schieffelin 1998: 195). It is not, therefore, in Goffman's (1959) sense of the performativity of everyday life.

³ Here the term 'Wolof' refers to people who identify themselves with the Wolof ethnic group – 44% of the Senegalese in the early 1990s, up from 36% in 1970 (Swigart 1992: 80) – and whose first language at home is Wolof. According to Swigart (ibid.), as much as 71% of the population spoke Wolof as first or second language in the early 1990s. This is an indication of the increasing dominance of Wolof as a *lingua franca*, which also goes hand in hand with a significant degree of 'Wolofisation' of Senegalese culture, especially in cities. In practice ethnic boundaries in contemporary Senegal are fuzzy, and Wolof self-identification could best be described as "a process, one which relates to a range of subjects: urbanisation, migration, religion, statehood" (Cruise O'Brien 1998: 27).

⁴ Diop (1981) estimates the *géér* and similar higher ranks throughout the region to make up some 80% of the population.

⁵ Patri- or matrilineage may be equally invoked to classify an individual. Although status classification is partly contextual, the child of a *géér-ñeeño* union is likely to be considered as a *ñeeño*, a reason often invoked by *géér* families to prevent such marriages.

⁶ I was inspired by Dilley (e.g. 2004) to use capital letters for social categories; this indicates that the status associated with the category transcends the occupation itself.

⁷ Key works on caste-like models of stratification in Senegambia include Silla (1966), Wane (1969), Irvine (1974, 1989, 1990), Diop (1981), Wright (1989), Tamari (1997) and Dilley (e.g. 1999, 2000, 2004).

⁸ In his *Esquisses*, missionary Abbé Boilat commented on this in terms which obviously reflected the *géér* view: "Dance is the art at which they [the wives of the Griots] excel the most [...] It is from the Griottes that young girls learn these lascivious postures they are so good at performing in their dances" (Boilat 1853: 313-314, translated from French).

⁹ In Wolof '*sama xol dafa sedd*', i.e. 'my heart is cool' means 'I am happy' or 'content'.

¹⁰ Following Irvine (1989), I often use "praise-oratory" rather than "praise-singing" as Griot performance is not characterised by singing as much as it is by emphatic speech.

¹¹ Senegal's famous Master Drummer, Doudou Ndiaye Rose, has taught his daughters to play the *sabar* drums but this remains an exception, and the *Rosettes* perform during concerts rather than *sabar* parties.

¹² Some of my informants in their mid-forties reported that the *ceebu jën* had not changed since their childhood and Acogny (1994) mentions that it was already known in 1928. *Ceebu jën* is also the name of a common Senegalese dish of fish and rice. The *ceebu jën* rhythm, which is extremely fast and demanding for the dancers, may be executed with sticks beaten on the bottom of a metallic dish turned upside-down.

¹³ Senegal is an overwhelmingly Muslim nation, and most Senegalese Muslims belong to one of the four main Sufi brotherhoods, or *tariqa*: the Muridiyya, the Tijaaniyya, the Qaddiriyya and the Laayenes.

¹⁴ *Mbalax* originally designated a series of *sabar* rhythms, but Senegalese singer Youssou Ndour coined the name to designate the urban music genre he helped popularize in the 1970s-1980s. *Mbalax*, the most popular music in much of urban Senegal today, mixes *sabar* rhythms with influences from funk, pop music, Cuban styles or even reggae.

¹⁵ The same women may dance during meetings with friends but refrain from dancing in their local religious association, or *daa'ira*. Women's *daa'ira* have been flourishing in the past two decades, particularly in Senegalese cities (see for example Evers Rosander 1997, Mbow 1997).

¹⁶ The F CFA, or 'Franc de la Communauté Financière d'Afrique' (XOF), is the common currency used in the former French colonies of West Africa, with the exception of Guinea Conakry, and in Guinea Bissau. Formerly linked to the French Franc, since 1999 it has been linked to the Euro through a fixed exchange rate: 1 € = 655,957 F CFA.

¹⁷ These amounts should be held against statistics (both official and empirical) on average incomes in Dakar. The World Bank (2006) estimated the average income per capita at \$710 in 2005 (approximately 28,500 F CFA per month) for Senegal as a whole. Informal sources estimate that the figure should be doubled for Dakar, with great variations in the different parts of the capital.

¹⁸ For fascinating studies of *sañse*, see Heath (1992) and Mustafa (2002).

¹⁹ From the Wolof word *xees*, 'to have a fair skin'.

²⁰ A 'taille basse' (*taay bas*) is a two-piece outfit which includes a long skirt and a tight-fitted top. Although perceived as traditional, the style was inspired by European dress and became popular in the 1930s (Rabine 2002). An important element in Senegalese outfits is the matching head scarf tied in various fashionable ways, the *musoor*.

²¹ During fieldwork I attended *turs* and other dance events where *sabar* was performed in Fann Hock, Fass, Pikine and Dalifort.

²² There are three common patterns in *sabar* dancing, always facing the musicians or facing each other: solo, in a pair, or usually towards the end of the event, a group of participants dancing simultaneously and competing for audience attention.

²³ In this case a fixed amount of 1,500 F CFA was collected every other week.

²⁴ The *Lawbe* are an endogamous category of Woodworkers. The women are perceived as experts in sexual matters, and market vendors of waist beads, *beeco*, *curaay* or potency enhancers are assumed to be *Lawbe*.

²⁵ Sotiba, with its large factory in the outskirts of Dakar, is the main industrial manufacturer of fabrics and clothing items in Senegal.

²⁶ The Wolof verb *takk* means both 'to marry' and 'to tie'; in addition, in colloquial Wolof it refers to the magic practices some women resort to in order to keep their husband.

²⁷ The waged sector of the economy in which men had been taught to place their hopes has shrunk to the extent that it does not absorb more than 10% of employment in Dakar (Chidzero 1996, quoted in Rabine 2002)

²⁸ The obligatory gift exchange between in-laws during weddings and name-giving ceremonies often involves staggering amounts when held against local income levels.

²⁹ For example, according to several informants, former President Senghor deemed 'indecent' and banned a popular dance, the *arwatam*, from public performance in 1972. Also see the ban on public *sabar* performance which is regularly decreed in Dakar and other cities during years when the rainy season is late (Heath 1994, Sud Quotidien 08.08.2002). In addition, the hundreds of *mbalax* music videos in which some of the more suggestive popular dances are performed, are copiously attacked for their 'indecenty'.