

## Moving Shadows of Casamance: Performance and Regionalism in Senegal

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Stuck at the end of the Cape Verde Peninsula, its sprawling neighbourhoods built tightly with concrete houses, Dakar, the capital of Senegal, feels like a place in transit. People and buildings alike seem to be in perpetual movement. But there is one form of movement that begins in the late afternoon, as the sound of drumming ripples through the city: it is the movement of dance troupes rehearsing in cultural centres,<sup>1</sup> schoolyards, on the flat roofs of houses and on the beach. Dancing or drumming with a troupe is a hugely popular activity, and in 2002 veteran theatre leader Mademba Diop estimated that there were at least 300 dance troupes in Senegal at any given moment.<sup>2</sup> Most groups are located in Dakar as well as in the coastal tourist resorts and in the Casamance, the verdant region south of the Gambia. With an average size of fifteen to twenty members per troupe, several thousand people are performing or have done so at some point in their lives.

Several genres of performance exist side by side, and sometimes overlap. There are contemporary dance companies as well as popular dance, hiphop or Bollywood dance groups. But for historical reasons which I outline below, the most popular genre is the one locally called *ballets traditionnels*. I call this genre ‘neo-traditional’ so as to reflect the nature of what is essentially a modern phenomenon, albeit one that is concerned with local histories. As Peter Mark has suggested, what distinguishes these artistic dances from the practices which inspired them is that they are divorced from ‘local social and political structures and with the religious ritual that undergirded precolonial society’ (Mark 1994: 570). In these ‘ballets’, dance, music and theatre are mixed in flamboyant recreations of local culture. Neo-traditional performance also overlaps with the music videos that constitute the main marketing tool of the Senegalese music industry.

By virtue of its history, the genre is also caught up in national and regional political agendas. In this chapter I suggest that dance and musical performance offer privileged insights into the making of political subjectivities ‘from below’. To do this,

I focus on the Dakarois troupes which identify themselves with the Casamance. A linguistically, culturally and religiously diverse region, the Casamance has known an armed separatist conflict since 1990, but the idea of an independent Casamance dates back to the colonial period (Lambert 1998). It is widely regarded, therefore, as the most important threat to the integrity of Senegal, a nation drawn up from colonial boundaries. Jola speakers are the most numerous in the Lower Casamance, but other parts of the region are shared more equally between Jola, Mandinka and Fulani speakers as well as smaller groups like the Manjaco and Balanta. All groups straddle the borders of neighbouring countries as well: the Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Guinea. The Casamance is therefore one of the regions where colonial boundaries have been most acutely felt.

Drawing on fieldwork carried out in Dakar between 2002 and 2011, I attempt to explore the political significance of neo-traditional performance in Senegal. More specifically, I examine the ways in which an art form that was codified for purposes of nation building was appropriated by minority groups, particularly by Jola speakers from the Lower Casamance. The first Casamançais troupes were established by associations of migrants in Dakar in the 1950s. Their to-and-fro movement between Dakar and the Casamance contributed to the articulation of a regional cultural consciousness, and in this sense the troupes have been entangled in Casamance separatism from the outset.

### **Dance and the Performance of Ethnicity**

This chapter builds on the idea that dance is a particularly effective form of ‘cultural performance’ (Parkin, Caplan and Fisher 1996). The notion of ‘cultural performance’ was inspired by Abner Cohen’s idea of a dialectical relationship between power and symbolism. In his work on Hausa ethnicity in Ibadan, Cohen (1969) argued that the Hausa had massively converted to the Tijaaniyya brotherhood in order to preserve the moral unity that was essential to the survival of their economic interests in long-distance trade. He later extended this work to performance, particularly in his diachronic study of the Notting Hill Carnival (Cohen 1993), in which he argued that the artistic and the political could not be separated from each other. Parkin elaborated on Cohen’s ideas, pointing to the ‘metaphorical capacity for cultural performance to say things sideways’ as that which wins people’s adherence in a much stronger way than propositional arguments do (Parkin 1996: xxxiii). This metaphorical quality means that performance is capable of encapsulating a multiplicity of messages. When performance is made to embody national or regional identities, this is particularly salient because it is flexible enough to accommodate changes in those identities. For example, as I suggest later, the fact that Casamançais associations in Dakar express their distinctiveness through dance is not necessarily because people from the region dance more or better than others, but because this enables them to celebrate their distinctiveness while including elements of the dominant Wolof culture without having to openly acknowledge this.

Is there, then, anything about dance that distinguishes it from other forms of performance? In Senegambia, performance usually includes elements from music,

dance, theatre and praise oratory, and whether there is a clear semantic distinction between them depends on the context. In Wolof, the word *sabar* is an overarching term for a genre which includes a participatory type of event, a repertoire of rhythms, a dancing style and an ensemble of drums. But dance is almost always central to performance, and participants talk about the dance itself as something that has the power to make one lose control of oneself. I suggest that this is because dance is intensely pleasurable to performers and audiences alike. The pleasurable dimension of dance is evident in the chapters by Skinner, Lüdtke and Theodossopoulos in this volume, and I have written elsewhere about emotionality in Senegalese women's dances (Neveu Kringelbach 2007). From my own experience as both a participant and an observer, I became convinced that dancing generates a particularly intense version of what Parkin (1985), referring to performance more generally, calls the 'moving together' of reason, emotion and the body.

A similar point is made by Askew (2002) in her study of musical performance and nation building in Tanzania. She argues that nation building only happens when nationalist ideologies are reappropriated 'from below', and that musical performance is one of the most important means Tanzanians have used to explore and imagine nationhood. Her study echoes Cohen's work when she reflects on the malleability of performance: 'the very tenuousness of performance, its susceptibility to modification, unrehearsed action, unanticipated response, and the contingencies of everyday life – renders it a powerful social force' (Askew 2002: 5). She also refers to the idea that music works because it is pleasurable: 'Musical performance, as one easily identifiable and highly emotive element of cultural practice ... constituted an integral component in Tanzania's cultural policy from its inception' (Askew 2002: 13–14). Her study is remarkable in the way in which it uses music and dance to draw out the complexity of nation building. In Senegal too, dance was mobilized to help create a colonial, and later national culture.

### From Colonial School Theatre to Parisian Cabaret

Although Senegambia has rich performing traditions by virtue of the existence of hereditary categories of specialist performers, the *griots*, it was the promotion of theatre in the colonial school system that set modern theatre in motion. At the centre of this was the Ecole Normale William Ponty,<sup>3</sup> set up by the French authorities in Gorée in 1915 to train indigenous schoolteachers and colonial administrators. It was moved to Sébikotane, east of Dakar, in 1938, and students from all over French West Africa were sent to be trained there.

In 1935 the new director, Charles Béart, introduced 'school theatre' to the Ponty curriculum. The students were asked to write plays with the explicit aim of illustrating their 'native' traditions. The idea was to encourage them to preserve a connection with local cultures and with rural life in particular (Béart 1937). While these students epitomized the successful *évolués*,<sup>4</sup> there was indeed a fear that they might lose touch with the populations they would have to teach or administer on behalf of the French. The Ponty plays were a landmark in the emergence of modern theatre in West Africa (see Jezequel 1999), but they also betrayed the ambiguity of

the colonial regime: whilst being controlled and sometimes censured by the French staff (Mbaye 2004), they also provided the students with opportunities to express anti-colonial sentiments by staging the lives of heroes of anti-colonial resistance. *Bigolo*, for example, was written and staged by Ponty student Assane Seck (Foucher 2002), who later became a prominent Senegalese politician. After being demobilized from the French army at the end of the Second World War, Seck studied in Paris where he re-staged *Bigolo* with a troupe of African students (Senghor 2004).

The Ponty plays were interspersed with musical interludes and short choreographic pieces perceived as innocuous folklore by the colonial administration. But one student, Guinean poet Fodéba Keita, was to transform this youth theatre into live national 'heritage'. After leaving Ponty, he went back to Guinea to teach but soon made his way to Paris, where he became part of the flamboyant cohort of Francophone students around Léopold Sédar Senghor, Alioune Diop and the emerging Negritude movement. Assane Seck, poet David Diop, actor Maurice Sonar Senghor (Léopold's nephew), actress Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, dancer-actors Féral Benga and Habib Benglia also gravitated around the movement and discussed ways of embodying Negritude ideas on stage. It was there that Keita set up his first dance troupe, *Les Ballets Africains de Fodéba Keita*. The Ballets Africains toured Western and Central Europe, performed at the Théâtre de l'Etoile in 1953 and the Théâtre des Champs Elysées (Sonar Senghor 2004), the most prestigious Parisian venues at the time, and toured major American cities. The repertoire featured dances from across West Africa with 'special emphasis on the Mandinka folklore of Guinea and Casamance' (Kaba 1976: 202). But the Ballets Africains also had a distinctly Parisian flavour. When reviewing their opening show in New York, dance critic John Martin remarked that although the dancing and drumming were unmistakably 'ethnic', the flamboyant ladies' costumes were 'indubitably authentic as well as being Folies Bergères' (Martin 1959).

Following Guinea's independence in 1958, the group was renamed Ballets Africains de la République de Guinée and toured the world as the nation's 'cultural ambassadors'. Keita was appointed Interior Minister in Sékou Touré's first government, and although Touré later turned against him,<sup>5</sup> Guinea's early cultural policy was Keita's creation. Despite the growing rivalry between Sékou Touré and Léopold Sédar Senghor over political leadership in the region, the artists in their entourage knew each other well from the Parisian years. Maurice Sonar Senghor had collaborated on Keita's first shows in Paris, and there was therefore direct continuity between the Ballets Africains and the creation of the National Ballet of Senegal in 1961.

### A Nationalist Project

In Senegal, as in other newly independent African states in the 1960s, governing elites needed to gather very diverse populations around the idea of the nation. In order to construct a stable working state, they needed people to feel a sense of belonging and 'imagine' the new political entity they were now part of (Anderson 1983). One of the major projects to that effect was the creation of the National

Theatre, which consisted of the National Ballet, the National Drama Troupe and the Traditional Instrumental Ensemble. The Daniel Sorano Theatre, a modern building opened in 1965 in the heart of Dakar's administrative centre, would later house the three troupes. Sonar Senghor, who had returned to Senegal in the twilight years of the colonial regime, was appointed director. By then the Ballets Africains had already performed in Dakar twice, in 1956 and 1957, and the future President Senghor had been sufficiently impressed to write a long commentary on the second show.<sup>6</sup> In the rivalry between Sédar Senghor and Touré, the Senegalese National Ballet was designed to outshine the Ballets Africains.

Officially, the repertoire attempted to celebrate the diversity of the nation. But there was an implicit hierarchy between different ethnicities on the one hand, and between the urban and the rural on the other. Following the Ballets Africains, many of the dances were inspired by ceremonial practices from the Casamance, where new performers were recruited each year.<sup>7</sup> There was also an emphasis on rural life, and Wolof culture and urban life were hardly represented, as if there was no need to do so since it was assumed that they formed the core of the nation. But there was a double objective to be achieved with those at the 'margins': they had to be co-opted into the nationalist project, and they had to be imagined by Wolof speakers as forming part of the nation. But the creation of the National Theatre was the project of a group of literati steeped in French, especially Parisian, culture. Eriksen reminds us that 'the growth of bourgeois elite culture' is one of the characteristics of the development of European nationalisms (Eriksen 1993: 101). The same happened in Senegal, where initially at least, the construction of the Sorano Theatre was an attempt by the Senghor regime to develop a taste for theatre among the urban elite. Paying to sit on cushioned seats in an imposing air-conditioned room to watch performances was evidently not a form of entertainment that was designed for the masses. This was a space in which the elite could gather, elegantly dressed in suits and evening gowns, and in one gesture show off their taste for the high arts as well as their commitment to President Senghor's nationalist project. During the two decades that followed independence this seemed to work.

The resonance of this project with ordinary citizens is more difficult to assess. Sonar Senghor (2004) writes at length about the National Theatre's efforts to popularize its work by putting on performances in large workplaces and in Senegalese towns outside the capital, but his insistence on the effort required betrays the distance there was, at least initially, between the National Ballet and ordinary audiences. The Ballet did, however, foster the performing arts as an attractive profession for youths with the right skills. One did not need to be articulate in French to become a dancer or a musician, and therefore recruitment was not restricted to the educated elite. On the contrary, the traditional association between public performance and griot status in many parts of Senegambia meant that few dancers and musicians came from educated, middle class families.<sup>8</sup> Musicians and singers in particular came from griot families or from ethnic groups with no caste-like stratification such as the Jola. This was not always the case for the dancers, some of whom were recruited during Sonar Senghor's travels through the country. For them, in addition

to the pleasure of dancing, the troupe represented an exceptional opportunity to travel and acquire the highly desirable status of a *fonctionnaire*, a civil servant.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, national audiences only represented one side of the nation-building project. The other *raison d'être* of the National Ballet was to project President Senghor's political and intellectual power onto the world stage. To achieve this, the troupe was sent to perform around the world. The United States, in particular, remained Senegal's National Ballet's main destination until the late 1990s. Showcasing the cultural wealth of the Senegal-Guinea-Mali region was also President Senghor's way of establishing himself as a key African leader, a role for which he competed with the likes of Sékou Touré in Guinea, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. By contrast with their more openly political agendas, Senghor sought to impose his leadership in the idiom in which he had already established his legitimacy: the arts.

In official discourse, the work of the National Ballet was part of a project of revival and preservation of regional traditions. In practice, however, this was never a simple transposition of 'traditional' dance practices onto the stage. For one thing, those practices had never been static. For another, the choreography was the collaborative result of Sonar Senghor's theatrical ideas and the dances and movement styles his performers had grown up with. But this was not a work of historical recovery comparable to the invention of *Bharata Natyam* in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Meduri 2005). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Senegalese neo-traditional performance became increasingly codified, but it also became more popular as it was taken up by hundreds of people in youth theatre troupes and in the professional groups set up by former members of the National Ballet.

### Southern Resonance and Local Appropriation

Askew (2002) argues that there is a gap in the literature on nationalism concerning the way in which nationalist projects become reappropriated 'from below'. She reminds us that nation building is a mutual process of engagement between the state and its citizens. The way in which neo-traditional dance was taken up differently in various parts of Senegal is a good example of this process. For reasons I shall now outline, it was eventually in the Casamance and among Casamançais migrants in Dakar that neo-traditional dance found the strongest resonance.

The massive migration that took place from the Casamance to Dakar (especially from the Lower Casamance) in the 1960s and 1970s (see Lambert 2002; Foucher 2002), which followed a long history of seasonal mobility in Senegal's southern region, played a crucial role in this. Although census figures do not give a complete picture of the phenomenon, they are indicative of a rise. The 1955 census reported 5,338 migrants from the Lower Casamance settled in Dakar; by 1961, the number had already doubled to 10,350. By the next census of 1988, the reported number of permanent migrants from the Ziguinchor region (approximately corresponding to the Lower Casamance) had jumped to 52,886 (Foucher 2002: 41–44), out of a national population of 6.91 million at the time (ANSD 2010). As Casamançais

migrants established hometown associations stretching across Dakar and the Casamance, they also set up theatre troupes, both for recreation and as a way of maintaining a degree of distinctiveness from Wolof culture. In the 1960s already, the state newspaper *Dakar-Matin* regularly featured reviews of the shows presented by these troupes. This fed back into the Casamance, where popular theatre was already well established thanks to the introduction of school theatre in the 1940s.<sup>10</sup> One of the main dance troupes I have followed is a good example of this feedback process. Set up in Dakar in 1972 by migrants from Thionk Essyl in the Lower Casamance, *Bakalama*, which is the Jola name of the tree that produces fruits from which calabashes are made,<sup>11</sup> was initially set up as a theatre troupe to ‘keep the youths from Thionk Essyl occupied’, give them a space in which to have fun among themselves, and ‘prevent them from turning to drugs and banditry’ in the face of growing difficulty in finding employment (see fig. 7.1).<sup>12</sup> Hamer (1981), who did research in Thionk Essyl in 1978, found that 15 per cent of the population were engaged in seasonal migration and that 18 per cent were permanent migrants, with almost half of these settled in Dakar (cited in Foucher 2002: 50–51). Most of the women worked as house employees, which is consistent with informants saying that the first generation of women dancers worked as maids during the day and came to rehearsals in the evening.

Since 2005, *Bakalama* has organized a small annual dance festival in Thionk Essyl during which the troupe not only performs but also holds training workshops, thus contributing to the feedback process. The festival is a moment of interaction highly valued by the troupe, whose members have told me how moved they had been to see ordinary women join in the dances during performances inspired by fertility rituals.

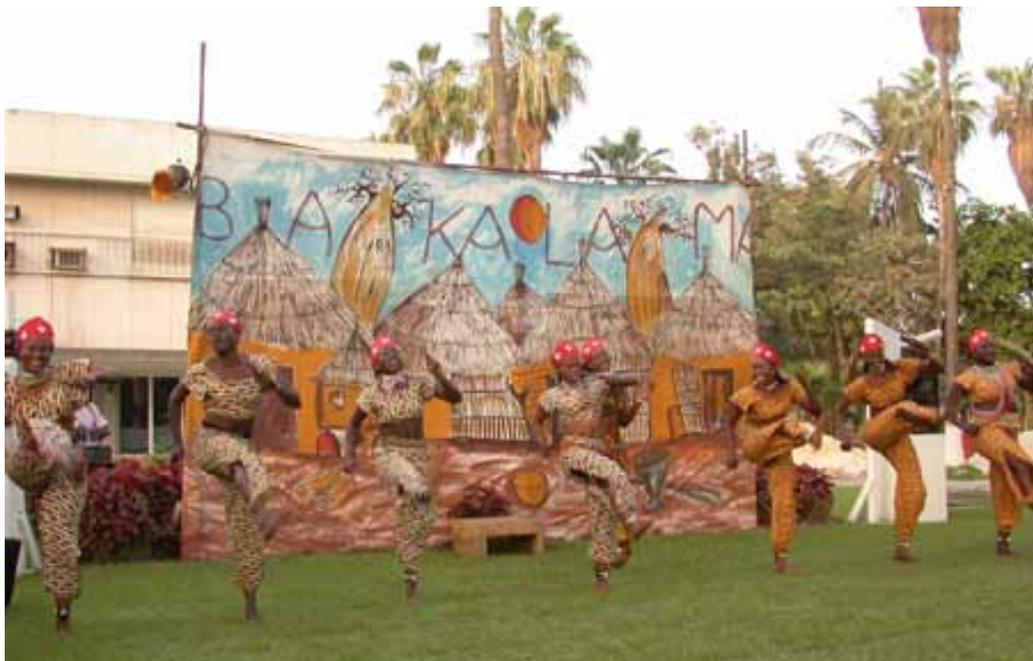


Figure 7.1 *Bakalama* women dancers performing in Dakar, April 2003.

After migration, the second factor in the emergence of these troupes was school theatre. Some of the troupes set up in Dakar were staging plays written by Casamançais literati, such as Saliou Sambou, a prominent Jola politician who was later to become the governor of Dakar. He wrote texts for Bakalama in the 1970s, some of which the troupe are still performing today, to his great pride. The fact that the plays staged in the Casamance included choreographed 'traditional' dances meant that young people learnt dances from each other, thereby bypassing earlier, longer trajectories of apprenticeship with their elders (Foucher 2002: 113). As a result of this, a double feedback process was taking place: on the one hand, the National Ballet and other troupes found it easiest to recruit performers from the Casamance because many were already familiar with 'traditional' choreography and modern theatre techniques. On the other hand, to-and-fro movement between Dakar and the Casamance meant that more troupes were being set up throughout the region, particularly in the rural Lower Casamance. It also happened that Germaine Acogny, the future leader of the pan-African Mudra Afrique dance school in Dakar, was posted as a sports teacher to a secondary school in Ziguinchor in the late 1960s, and it was there that she first taught dance.<sup>13</sup> She says it is there that she first learned some of the regional dances, and often refers to the influence of the Casamance in her work.

Like the Ponty plays, the Casamançais creations were meant to be both entertaining and educational, and included long choreographic sequences. There were also plays with an overt political message, such as Béla's explicitly anti-colonial *Death of Amilcar Cabral*.<sup>14</sup> But texts presented a problem: if performed in Jola they remained obscure to most Dakar audiences, and if performed in French they appeared elitist. As a result of this conundrum, many troupes gradually abandoned the textual elements to focus on dance. This way, the most distinctive Casamançais elements – the movement style, specific drums such as the *bougarabou* ensemble, accessories, rhythms and dress – could be kept without audiences feeling excluded. This also points to the emotive qualities of dance discussed earlier, as this type of performance found more resonance with audiences than the textual elements. The problem of language and the local audiences' taste for total spectacle, rather than just the textual, comes into focus in Sonar Senghor's memoirs. During one of the National Theatre's first tours of Senegal in the 1970s, he remembers the reaction of a spectator who complained loudly, in Wolof, that the first part of the show was a comedy in French: "Hey! You! When will you stop your grotesque squeaking? Nobody understands a thing. You are making fun of us. Come on, start the show!" (Senghor 2004: 167). Sonar Senghor suggests that this reflected the animosity of the audience towards spectacle that was too textual, too static and not in the least bit participatory. This had been, of course, the choice of a man used to the Parisian stage and the bourgeois veneer of the Dakar's theatres. Casamançais troupes, by contrast, were becoming equally comfortable in Dakar and in the rural Casamance thanks to their versatility. They were also helped by the state-led creation of an image of the Casamance as a bastion of traditionalism in the 1970s. The objective was to promote tourism in the region, and indeed some of the regional troupes found work in the

hotels of Ziguinchor, Cap Skirring and even the Gambia. But this also fostered a self-consciousness and an interest in local performing traditions; in the 1980s Peter Mark (1994) noted that although the *semaine culturelle* in Mlomp and Thionk Essyl was designed to attract tourists, audiences were mostly local.

At present there are dozens of neo-traditional troupes in Dakar and its sprawling suburbs. Significant proportions of them perform dances from the Casamance, from which come the majority of performers. Their names are meant to evoke the cultural distinctiveness of the region by referring to places (*Les Tambours du Fouladou*, 'the drums of the Fouladou') or Casamançais cultural practices such as initiation (*Forêt Sacrée*, 'sacred grove'). In a discourse that seems modelled on that of the separatist movement, ethnicity is downplayed for the benefit of a broader Casamançais identity,<sup>15</sup> even when the group is an offshoot of a hometown association: dances from the various parts of the region are often included in the repertoire, thereby creating an illusion of regional unity. What comes across in these troupes is that Casamançais culture is the Wolof's 'other'.

Another important way in which they distinguish themselves is by consistently using the idiom of kinship in everyday relations. Many performers describe their troupe as 'a big family', and indeed it happens often that people marry within their dance troupe. Siblings, cousins and childhood friends are constantly encouraged to join, and the relatedness that is shaped by everyday dance interaction is constantly emphasized in conversations with outsiders.

In the case of Jola troupes, the egalitarian ethos that is widely regarded as a marker of Jola identity in Senegal is consciously cultivated. In a nation dominated by the highly stratified Wolof ethos, this is a mark of distinction which has been used both by the separatist movement and by the Senegalese state to explain Jola 'cultural difference',<sup>16</sup> and the performers are conscious of this. Although there is a hierarchy between performers on the basis of experience, within the same 'generation of experience' the strong egalitarian ethos is often reinforced by a childhood spent in the same neighbourhood. The core of Bakalama's founders, for example, lived in Fass, and a large number of its members have been to school together. In this example, the egalitarian ethos is put into practice via weekly meetings at the rehearsal space. Chairs are set up in a circle and meetings are conducted in Wolof to allow everyone to participate since not all performers are fluent Jola speakers, or even Jola. The latest performances are discussed to see how they can be improved, and new projects or problems are brought forward. Women's voices are equal to those of men, and seniority in the troupe is more meaningful than gender. A share of the income is set aside to pay younger apprentices while they are being trained and do not perform on a regular basis. Members who fall ill are sent to consult traditional practitioners in the Casamance, and the group takes care of some of their expenses. The group may even intervene in family conflicts on behalf of junior members. In other words, it is not only the people's attachment to Thionk Essyl and Jola identity that holds the troupe together, nor is it simply a matter of money. What matters, at least equally, is the troupe's capacity to act as a surrogate family, in particular by creating an atmosphere of togetherness and protecting those in need of care. If such

practices are necessary to retain members and maintain continuity in the repertoire, they also fit perfectly with the culturalist agenda. Discourse and practice reinforce each other in a constant feedback loop, and this is nowhere as visible as in what happens on stage.

### Stylized Jola Rituals

One of the main concerns of Senegal's National Ballet in its early days was to reclaim precolonial history. This was a widespread project throughout the continent and, as Askew (2002) reminds us, ministries of culture in newly independent African states were often put in charge of promoting versions of precolonial history that would fit well with the need to unify heterogeneous regions into nations. In French West Africa, the *évolués*, the literati educated in the colonial education system, set out to write histories of the precolonial past and of the rural present, often merging the two to create an impression of continuity. Inspirational sources ranged from their own experiences to regional storytelling traditions with plenty to offer, and included European plays and folk tales learned in French schools. These stories remain the backbone of the neo-traditional genre today, albeit with a gradual transformation to reflect more contemporary themes. There are also troupes that do not perform actual stories but rather a repertoire of dances and rhythms, which bring life to the weddings of the wealthy, major sports events, political rallies and official ceremonies.

Casamançais troupes in Dakar distinguish themselves through their emphasis on regional practices. Regional life – as it is imagined for the stage – draws on real life, but it also works by obliterating the elements that do not fit within the discourse of cultural distinctiveness. Jola troupes make a point of singing in Jola and occasionally in some of the other languages of Casamance but rarely ever in Wolof – despite the fact that some have introduced Wolof *sabar* rhythms into their repertoire. These songs often celebrate the historical feats of known Jola figures or comment on life in the rice fields. Life is always portrayed as rural, and rituals such as the Jola initiation, the *bukut*, are favoured over Christian or Muslim rituals. During a four-week training workshop I attended in Dakar in October 2002, one of the dances taught to the young performers was presented as that of the *kambaj*, or Jola initiates. We learned Jola songs, including one in honour of Ansumana Diatta, a Muslim cleric chosen by the French as canton chief in the Djougouttes in the early twentieth century (Mark 1976: 117–18, cited in Foucher 2002: 91). The training, led by an older Jola master, was followed by sessions in Wolof during which two drummers gave their account of the *bukut* process they had gone through. Naturally they did not reveal what took place during their three-week seclusion in the forest, but they circulated photos of themselves in full initiates' dress and handed out printed versions of their own accounts of the ceremony.

In a similarly selective way, work in the rice fields features often in choreography, but not peanut cultivation, despite the fact that peanut farming spread through the region in the 1920s and 1930s following the collapse of the rubber trade (Mark 1977). Remarkably, the Casamançais conflict is also conspicuously absent. Several performers told me that this was deliberate because one could never be sure which

side people were on. It also matters that in order to perform abroad, all troupes need the support of the Senegalese authorities. It is needed for local events too since the state owns the main performance spaces, technical equipment and the buses needed to carry people around the country. One manager told me that over the years he had spent hours in the corridors of the Ministry of Culture courting various officials and making his troupe valued for their professionalism and peaceful approach. As a result the troupe is often called upon to perform at official events, not only in the Casamance but also in Dakar and elsewhere in Senegal. It was even selected as one of the troupes representing Senegal at the thirtieth anniversary of the Libyan Revolution in 1999, and at the second Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 2009.

One of the flagship pieces Bakalama often performs both at home and abroad is *Kañaaalen*, which illustrates the ways in which elements from various sources are combined to create the illusion of a bounded, timeless Jola culture. In the Casamance, *kañaaalen* is a sorority of women who have undergone a long ritual process after failing to become pregnant, undergoing several abortions or losing young children. The decision to send a woman off to become an *añaalena*, an initiate, is taken by the village's female expert in protective rituals, the *ati eluñey* (Fassin 1987). For three to five years, the initiate is sent away to live in an adopted village. Her 'seclusion' there begins with a forest ceremony led by women in a procreative age from her village of origin. Following this, she is left to stay with an ordinary family in her new village where the ritual process involves daily humiliation by other women. Initiates are highly visible in village life as they must dress like fools and perform acts of buffoonery that would be completely inappropriate otherwise (Fassin 1987; Mark 1994). After resuming a normal life in her husband's village, an initiate continues to be expected to act as a buffoon during public ceremonies, and for those who do give birth subsequently, further sessions are required to maintain the efficacy of the ritual protection. *Kañaaalen* sororities have been formed in Dakar and other Senegalese cities where simplified versions of the ritual have been devised to accommodate urban life.

Bakalama's piece, which I first watched in 2003 in a 45-minute-long version, is inspired by these sororities. It features a succession of tableaux with male and female dancers performing separate choreographies led by drummers and a lead singer-dancer who plays the role of the *añaalena*. After a rhythmic opening played on Casamançais drums, the piece begins with a synchronized dance by six to eight men. They sing in Jola, each holding a fake *kajendo*, a tool used for wet rice cultivation. The dance suggests the rhythmic movement of this type of work, with ample forward-throwing gestures which have little to do with actual rice-farming techniques. They wear a sleeveless half-length tunic fastened at the sides with straps and matching loose trousers of printed cotton cloth. At the end of the sequence, women's voices rise from the back of the stage. The men stop, look at each other in surprise and run away from the women now entering the stage wearing half-length, shiny batik-printed *boubous* (loose robes with wide sleeves) and long matching wrap-around skirts. They sing in Jola and step in rhythm, doing small and perfectly

coordinated footwork, using both hands to hold the raffia baskets filled with rice plants they are carrying on their heads. Then, they simultaneously lower the baskets to the ground and start simulating the gestures involved in re-planting rice, still singing and stepping in rhythm, bodies bent over the ground.

The next scene introduces the main characters, a young man and a young woman. They fall in love, and their wedding stretches over a succession of tableaux featuring recognizable practices from the Casamance, but not exclusively Jola. One of the women following the bride carries the suitcase she will bring with her when she joins her husband's home. The 'suitcase' ritual is reported in the Wolof literature (see Diop 1985), and I have seen it performed at weddings in Dakar. The bride arrives surrounded by her kinswomen, her head completely covered by a richly embroidered cloth. But her happiness does not last: in the following tableaux, she is rejected by her husband because she has not yet become pregnant. She is scorned by everyone in the village, and once alone she prays, in French, for fertility. We understand from her monologue that her co-wife has children. The village women are seen gossiping and harassing her husband. Two of them ostensibly court him while the childless woman goes on to visit *kañaalen* priestesses in the forest. She submits herself to the ritual which is portrayed as a succession of joyful virtuoso dances. At this point, loud cries of enthusiasm rise from the audience. At long last she is healed, and the piece ends up with the whole village marvelling at the sight of her newborn baby.

Undoubtedly, *Kañaalen* is in many ways faithful to its claim of Jola-ness, particularly in the songs and the material culture of the piece. In some performances the skirts are made of the indigo-dyed cloth identical to the type every Jola woman had to possess from the 1930s onwards to be properly dressed during important ceremonies (Foucher 2002: 72–73). Despite their stylized design, the men's costumes bear a striking resemblance to military uniforms: loose red-and-blue trousers with a small raffia skirt on top for some, epaulettes and tall red, fringed hats. One is strongly reminded of the uniforms of the *gardes de cercle* colonial police. So, while the dances bear no traces of violence, the costumes reinforce the perception of the Jola as a warrior society.

Similarly, the calabash the main character takes with her into the forest carries the fringe of hanging beads characteristic of the decorated calabash carried by an *añaalena*. In some scenes the women clap small wooden sticks against each other in a polyrhythmic beat characteristic of the Lower Casamance. The movement style is emblematic of Jola dances: both legs alternate in a rapid and powerful stomp, feet flat, with the knees bent and the body leaning forward at a 45-degree angle. The arms are held away from the body and, in contrast with the Wolof *sabar*, they are never higher than the shoulders. The energy emanating from this movement appears directed towards the ground, as opposed to the aerial style of the *sabar*. However, whereas in Casamance these dances are often performed for hours at a time, on stage they are shortened and choreographed to avoid being too repetitive. Common to the neo-traditional genre throughout Senegal is the way in which rhythms are accelerated to impress local audiences with the virtuosity of the performers. Velocity embodies youth, strength and skill, and is highly valued by performers as a mark

of distinction from non-professionals. But in the case of Casamançais troupes, the movement style, rhythms and velocity are fairly close to real-life events, such as weddings and initiation ceremonies. As a result, non-professional audiences often join in with great pleasure during non-choreographed sessions designed to be participatory.

At a different level, backstage the troupe maintains its engagement with Thionk Essyl, but in a different way from the previous generation. Whereas the parents transferred most of the troupe's profits back to Thionk Essyl for various development projects, this income is now needed by the performers, their families and for the upkeep of the company. A share is given towards education projects and the central mosque in Thionk Essyl, an important gesture in a troupe in which most members define themselves as practising Muslims.

### The Shadows of Mutual Engagement

Aside from the consciously displayed Jola elements, however, these troupes quietly engage with Wolof culture and the symbols of the Senegalese nation. This is in marked contrast with what Peter Mark observed in Thionk Essyl in the late 1980s, and is probably due, in part, to the fact that this was a different generation of performers. Whereas members of the older generation were migrants, the current generation grew up in Dakar. One of the most visually striking aspects is the use of the Senegalese flag in outfits and drums (see fig. 7.2). Bakalama's MySpace webpage now features photos of the performers on tour in Spain, carrying a Senegalese flag



Figure 7.2 Bakalama musicians performing in Dakar, April 2003.

with them.<sup>17</sup> This is in part due to the influence of football as Casamançais youths in Dakar are often keen supporters of their national team. Furthermore, a significant number of performers have been football players at some point and, for them, the flag is a symbol of success in football before being a symbol of the nation.

The introduction of Wolof rhythms and popular dances is another aspect of this flag-waving practice. A few years ago, Bakalama developed a Wolof *sabar* programme when a Haalpulaar drummer trained in various styles joined the group. This enabled the group to widen the range of events it was able to perform at. One of the Jola women dancers has even made a solid reputation for herself as a *sabar* teacher, and she has taught as far afield as the United States. Closer to home, the leader of a Jola troupe in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar, told me that he had let his young performers introduce Wolof popular dances into their shows so that the youths would have something familiar to relate to. This mixing does not happen by accident. Rather, it is the ability to modulate the balance of Jola and national elements depending on the audience and the location which has ensured the success of troupes like Bakalama both at home and abroad. But there is more to this mixing of elements than mere artistic strategy: it also points to and facilitates a degree of integration of younger generations of Casamançais people in Wolof-dominated urban culture. Within this negotiated space, attachment to Jola and wider Casamançais identity, and to a locality of origin, remains essential as a cultural resource which can be drawn upon, especially in the context of a drawn-out conflict in which Jola identity is being constantly redefined.

There is, finally, a less visible transformation that is taking place: transnational migration and the development of an African dance scene in Europe, in which Senegambian performers are heavily implicated. In Bakalama's case, a growing number of touring opportunities have resulted in a high turnover of performers, with half of the troupe settling for longer periods in various European countries. The previous generation travelled to Japan and France in the 1970s and 1980s, but they came back because they had family commitments and secure jobs as civil servants. For the current generation, however, travel or migration is often a necessary step towards securing a decent living. Women performers are now as mobile as the men, and they increasingly travel on their own, sometimes with the support of male family members. Although Senegalese performers are generally very mobile, the mobility of women on their own seems to be more significant in Jola troupes than in others. This exhibits a striking continuity with the way in which the circular migration of young women became generalized in Lower Casamance from the 1950s onwards, a phenomenon which has been described extensively in the literature on the region (see Hamer 1981; Linares 1992; Lambert 1999; Foucher 2002). Like the men who had left earlier, the women maintain links with their former troupe, often contributing financially to its activities and even regrouping for common performances in Europe.

In the various countries in which they reside, the more successful performers teach African dance or West African drumming to European aficionados in dance studios, community centres and, increasingly, in schools and summer camps. So,

teaching and performing dances and rhythms from all over Senegal is another way in which Casamance performers use the resources of the wider nation. While abroad, the performers plug themselves into existing networks of Senegalese artists and local chapters of the Senegalese Muslim brotherhoods. Casamançais performers, therefore, at once use and contribute to the transnational resources of the wider nation. This mutual engagement shows a degree of accommodation between the Casamance and the Wolof-speaking mainstream which does not always appear in Casamançais separatist discourse.

### The Power of Dance and Musical Performance over Discourse

It is no coincidence that dance and musical performance are so often mobilized to help shape local, ethnic and national identities. This is because they are flexible enough to quickly accommodate inevitable changes in the content of these identities. What better forum to display Jola and broader Casamançais identities than the urban dance troupes that have become so popular with local audiences? Casamançais troupes in Dakar have gradually acquired the capacity to embody culturalist, localist and nationalist agendas depending on the context of the performance simply by modulating elements in dances, rhythms, instruments, songs and material culture.

Ironically, it was the Senegalese state that made all this possible. Casamançais migrants in Dakar have skilfully appropriated the very traditionalist discourse that the state had used to maintain the southern region in a position of inferiority in the national imaginary. These migrants knew the discourse as many were civil servants themselves. One may even ask whether this was a conscious strategy or whether this reappropriation happened because they had absorbed state discourse so well? Foucher's (2002) work on the Casamançais literati would support the latter option. This reappropriation was put into practice in the conscious recreation of folklore for the stage, thus representing Casamançais cultures as old (thereby justifying claims of autochthony), noble, tolerant and egalitarian – in other words, the nation's golden repositories of 'culture'. This is significant in a country in which 'culture' had been almost exclusively associated with the *Quatre Communes*, the four centres of old French presence in northern Senegal (Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque and Saint-Louis).

With time, and the renewal of generations, however, the culturalist agenda is discreetly giving way to more pragmatic agendas. The role of neo-traditional performance in shaping a regional identity remains strong but, whereas it used to be central alongside the recreational dimension, it is now enmeshed with the need to earn a decent living. This livelihood/profession/professional practice requires travelling and maintaining networks abroad in order to gain access to global artistic and educational circuits. The previous generation had a different outlook upon their practice as they held fairly secure jobs as civil servants. The young adults of today, by contrast, cannot afford to simply 'do' politics or recreation. The secure jobs their elders held are no longer available and, with the previous generation now retired, whole families are relying on the ability of younger artists to negotiate lucrative opportunities for themselves. These can take different forms, from four-star hotels and regional dance festivals to schools, summer camps, universities and even

businesses in Europe and elsewhere. Dance, it would seem, succeeded in promoting a form of national culture, but one much more fragmented and unpredictable than Senghor and his nephew ever envisaged.

## Notes

1. Dakar and the other major Senegalese cities have a network of state-owned ‘cultural centres’ modelled on the former colonial *centres culturels* aimed at promoting French language and culture. Most were built between the 1950s and 1970s.
2. See ‘Réflexions sur la danse au Sénégal: la danse traditionnelle comme moteur de création’, *Le Soleil*, 10 October 2002, p.x.
3. I am grateful to Vincent Foucher for drawing my attention to the importance of the William Ponty plays in the genealogy of Senegalese theatre.
4. The term *évolués* designated African individuals who were literate, educated in the French system, wore European clothes and displayed conspicuously modern lifestyles.
5. Touré had Keita executed at Camp Boiro, a military jail, in 1969.
6. The commentary appeared in *L’Unité Africaine*, 5 August 1959. This was the magazine of the Senegalese Socialist Party, published from 1959 to 1984. It is reproduced in Senghor (2004: 64–67).
7. Interview with Bouly Sonko, National Ballet director, Dakar, January 2004.
8. In Wolof, Haalpulaar and Mandinka society, griots, or praise singers, belong to the hereditary men-of-skill categories in the traditional status ranking. Griot is a French term for traditional performer or praise singer that cuts across ethnic boundaries, hence its use here. Men-of-skill (artisans and griots) generally have an ambiguous status in these societies, but they are also powerful in significant ways. For a discussion of the association between performing skills and griot status in Senegambia, see, e.g., Irvine (1989), Wright (1989) and Panzacchi (1994).
9. Interviews with former National Ballet dancers, Dakar, January 2004 and January 2009.
10. Foucher writes on the spread of school theatre in rural Lower Casamance: ‘School theatre progressively became a defining feature of educated elites throughout West Africa: in every city which hosted a sufficiently large number of educated men, theatrical groups were set up. In Lower Casamance, because of mass schooling, theatre was to have a particularly strong impact ... During the 1950s and 1960s, most villages of lower Casamance had their own theatrical companies, which performed during the summer holidays’ (Foucher 2002: 111).
11. Some of the troupe members explained that this was a tree with far-reaching roots, and that the name Bakalama was therefore meant to symbolize a strong attachment to their place of origin (Thionk Essyl) in spite of migration. This is, however, a contested version of the name’s significance. Saliou Sambou told me that the name had initially referred in a joking way to one of the troupe’s first musicians, who used to carry a small calabash with him.
12. Interview with four Bakalama members, Dakar, June 2007.
13. See the film *Mudra Afrique*, dir. A. Waksman (1980), 56 min.
14. See ‘La “Mort d’Amilcar Cabral” par la troupe Béla’, *Le Soleil*, 17 February 1977, p.3.
15. On the framing of the separatist discourse as regionalist rather than ethnic, see Faye (1994) and Lambert (1998).
16. Foucher (2002) shows how the culturalist argument, which emphasizes the distinctiveness of Jola culture, has been appropriated by both sides of the conflict.

17. See <http://www.myspace.com/bakalama>. Retrieved 1st September 2009.

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