

# Trading Virtue for Virtuosity

## The Artistry of Kinshasa's Concert Danseuses

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all photos by the author

**K**inshasa, capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is known throughout Africa and internationally for its virtuosic musicians and dancers. Internationally famous bands such as Werrason, Koffi Olomide, and Fali Ipupa frequently pack stadiums across both Europe and Africa. This popular dance music—characterized by drum polyrhythm, electronic keyboards, layered electric guitar riffs, and harmonized vocals—is usually referred to in Congo as “musique moderne,” or in most of sub-Saharan Africa as “musica franca.” Popular bands are large (sometimes including more than twenty members) and are composed of male singers, musicians, dancers, and vocal animators known as *atalakus* (see White 1999).

Women, save for a few exceptions, are limited to being dancers (*danseuses*) and occupy the lowest rung in the popular band's hierarchy. Despite *danseuses* being the lowest paid band members, their dance performance is vital to live concerts in Kinshasa, as it helps attract a paying audience—one that demands a spectacle. Moreover, despite the popularity of concert dancing, *danseuses* are considered by many Kinshasans (as residents of Kinshasa are known) as women of loose morals. Herein lies another paradox, as dancing in Kinshasa is ubiquitous and considered integral to a woman's femininity. As such, popular dance reveals a politics of appropriateness which is context dependent (Heath 1994).

Up until now, scholarship has by and large privileged young men and the roles they play as producers and consumers of popular culture in Congo. Further, literature addressing Congo's music industry, namely its musicians and singers, has largely ignored the world of female dancers, in particular *danseuses*. However, women are undeniably public participants in the production of popular culture, and that's no less true of Congo

today, where women set dance trends that resonate worldwide. Popular dance, therefore, reveals a context in which women hold a visible, albeit largely unacknowledged, role as culture creators.

One of the ways these trends are being set on a world stage is through the Internet, in particular on YouTube. Around the world, you can access YouTube videos of dance steps from Kinshasa, as well as videos of *danseuse*'s recent performances (see sidebar, p. 51). There is a sense in which Kinshasa's concert dancers have become important cultural gatekeepers for Congolese living abroad who wish to keep abreast of the latest dance trends (Braun 2012).

Some, like Cuisse de Poulet (a *danseuse* stage name that literally translates as “Chicken Thigh”), are aware of how far their influence has reached:

We *danseuses* are stars in Europe. We represent Kinshasa. Kinshasans living in *poto* [abroad] watch us dance because they miss Kinshasa. We make them feel at home again. People know my name and they study the way I move. Some girls try to do what I do, and copy my flavor. When I have children one day they will know that their mother was famous.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the widespread exportation of this dance music culture, Congolese nonetheless maintain a complex relationship with it. Even though choreography popularized by *danseuses* is mimicked by the general public (both at home and, increasingly, abroad) they are nonetheless regarded as “non-virtuous” women who publicly transgress accepted notions of femininity. Most Kinshasans are divided between condemning popular dance music as morally corrupt or celebrating it as being an important part of the country's cultural patrimony. As such, popular dance is part of an ongoing dialogue, confrontation, and contestation with the country's gendered hierarchies.



1 Two of Werrason's main *danseuses*. Cuisse de Poulet on the left.

Urban spaces in Kinshasa, such as the concert stage (White 2008), represent new performative contexts where power and morality are drawn into play. This article focuses on some of the ways in which female concert dancers' virtuosity both reflects and subverts ideas of propriety and accepted notions of femininity and impacts conceptions of "high" and "low" art.

Specifically, I discuss the *danseuse's* solo—a designated segment within popular concerts wherein dancers are given a few minutes to break free from the group choreography to dance alone on stage. During her solo, the *danseuse* demonstrates her virtuosity. Here, she becomes a highly visible artistic agent and asserts her individuality before a large audience. Even if only for this brief moment, the *danseuse* becomes a star. If she is lucky, people in Kinshasa will remember her name, and her celebrity status might even last for years to come. In this way, the emergence of the modern star system in Kinshasa represents an alternative means for social mobility outside the realm of more conventional employment.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in Kinshasa between 2009 and 2012. I worked closely with *danseuses* in six bands. Three of these groups were local, and three were internationally famous. Most of the *danseuses* with whom I worked were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two.

#### MUSCLE MEMORY MUSEUM

A band's hit songs are often accompanied by a specific choreography, and songs often become popular because of an associated dance craze. Showcased in music videos and at concerts, dance steps catch on like wildfire among Kinshasans, who then perform the same dance steps in nightclubs, at weddings, funeral parties, and other social events. A historically important aspect of social life in Kinshasa, dance continues to bring people together both during important occasions, as well in the context of daily life.

The average Kinshasans knows a vast repertoire of popular dances, and in the same way that pop songs of a certain era become the soundtrack to people's lives, dance steps can also act as a sort of time capsule. Old dance choreography conjures up memories of the past, carrying with it a sense of nostalgia, especially when people get together to dance these older steps. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear someone say something like: "when I dance the *kwassa kwassa*, it makes me think of the time I went to a nightclub with my very first boyfriend." Or, "When people dance *kisanola*, it reminds me of the war at that time in the east of the country."

As history is often embodied, dance has the potential to trigger strong experiences of moments in time in cases where language fails to do so. As Isadora Duncan once proclaimed, "If I could say it, I would not have to dance it." Many dance scholars, notably Susan Leigh Foster, theorize about the ways in which dance practices can articulate feelings and memories that perhaps would not otherwise be expressed: "Choreography therefore serves as a useful intervention into discussions of materiality and body by focusing on the unspoken" (1998:5).

Further, Foster deftly describes the way in which dance has a potential to unlock memory:

Dancers frequently refer to muscle memory as the capacity for memories to be stored in and evoked by movement and musculature. Sometimes these memories are personal and psychological. At other times, memories insinuated into muscle reference cultural and historical experiences of people (Foster 2010:122)

In this way, popular dance is a kind of muscle memory museum—a kinetic popular history. Further, popular urban dance can be understood as a historical continuum in which "dancing of memories, structures, relationships, and signal events [were] meant to make or reinforce expedient histories" (Roberts 2013:96).

## FROM THE VERNACULAR TO THE VIRTUOSIC

Karen Barber, an influential voice in the field of African popular arts, describes popular culture as straddling and dissolving distinctions between “traditional” and “elite,” “indigenous” and “Western” in inspiration (Barber 1997:2). However, an essentialized Western view of the arts tends to classify cultural products into high and low categories anyhow. The recognition of a cultural product for its artistic merit often has much to do with its perceived authenticity or roots in what people perceive as “tradition.” This classification of the arts into “high” and “low” may not be expressed verbally and may not even be conscious. But the fact that certain cultural products are given attention within academia, while others are not, indicates that they are privileged over other forms. Academics and African elites, especially those affiliated with cultural agencies like UNESCO, support African ballet and contemporary dance because these formal dance genres are perceived as extensions of “tradition” and are therefore considered to be somehow more authentic.

If we look at dance as a language, popular dance would be the vernacular. And it is perhaps the last of the arts to be recognized within both academia and the art world as a valid subject of study or legitimate art form. However, even if we were to subscribe to the logic of dividing art into high and low forms based on authenticity and “tradition,” we would nevertheless have to acknowledge the artistic merit of popular dance. Popular dance in Kinshasa is a synthesis of old and new motifs and is therefore inextricably linked to dance practices from different ethnic groups. As for “authenticity,” popular dance is both produced and consumed by *Kinois en masse*. As Barber writes, “much of what is consumed by the people, the masses in Africa is also produced by them, according to small-scale methods of the modern informal sector” (1997:4).

Popular dance is not a blank slate inscribed with the hegemonic imprint of mass-mediated popular culture. Instead it is a

palimpsest, consciously embodying the past and the present, and mediating cultural influences of different times and contexts.

To add a familiar dimension to stage performances, concert choreographers find inspiration for lyrics and dance in the streets and at nightclubs, churches, and funerals (White 1999:12). In this way, concert dancing is exemplary of continual innovation, inventive borrowing, and intertextuality. Dance’s aesthetics overlap in disparate contexts, such as wakes and concerts, blurring the lines between the sacred and the profane. Dance movements performed at *matanga*, or wakes, can lend themselves as inspiration to concert choreography and vice versa. In this way, they exist in a dialectical relationship.

Maggie, a university student, recounted how she learned many of the dance movements in her repertoire by attending wakes. There, she took cues from the older women in her family, learning how to move as they did: “I did a lot of practicing at *matanga* [laughs], and I now consider myself a pretty good dancer. Now, because I’m older, I love going to nightclubs to dance. Actually, there are many dances I used to do in the *matanga* that I now do in nightclubs.”

The hybrid nature of popular dance in Kinshasa, one in which “high” and “low,” “old” and “new” dance together, becomes an ambiguous zone where morality is in constant motion, changing with each context. Popular dance forms, which are ever-expanding local expressions, are rich both in terms of aesthetic qualities as well as in what they reveal about Kinshasan society.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPECTACLE

The state of the music industry in Congo is such that, due to a lack of piracy laws as well as an audience with limited purchasing power, musicians do not profit from music sales in the form of cassettes or CDs. As such, a popular band’s economic success hinges on their live performances. Since stage shows are a crucial element of a band’s longevity, much attention and effort is paid



2 A typical concert in which males and female performers are separated on stage.

to ensuring that these public spectacles attract a wide audience. One key factor within a concert's winning formula is the presence of attractive young *danseuses*. Popular bands employ these dancers to perform in music videos and live shows, providing a visual complement to song lyrics. Since the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of popular bands using female dancers to add to the spectacle on stage. *Danseuses* perform during a select number of songs and usually appear only after the second half of the song, called the *seben* or *chaufé*, when the music gets especially lively (White 2008:114).

Aside from being important to the spectacle, and therefore to the economic success of a band, the role of the *danseuse* goes beyond ornament. *Danseuses* demonstrate a level of artistry that is not shared by the average Kinois. Since *danseuses* devote their days to mastering choreography, they attain significantly more dancing ability than most women in Kinshasa. As one young Kinois schoolgirl told me, "The *danseuses* on television dance really well because they were born with talent. Some are not so good, but they are for sure better than your average Kinois. I know they must work very hard and practice a lot."

Werrason, one of Kinshasa's most popular bands, hosts a weekly show in which band rehearsals take the form of a kind of informal concert open to the public. Many people tune into the show specifically to see the *danseuses* perform the latest dances. Young girls stand in front of their televisions, mimicking the *danseuses'* movements, committing them to memory. And mothers hover over their daughters, coaching them and playfully reprimanding them for missed steps.

During concerts, it is commonplace to see spectators filming the show with cameras and cellphones. Images of *danseuses* circulate on people's phones—their virtuosic displays captured on video to be appreciated later by people who missed the concert. Even further, people can continue to gaze at and admire *danseuses* as their dancing makes its way into a virtual space, their image transmitted through the tiny screens on people's phones. The widespread access to technology, especially cellphones, has led to new conceptions of visibility, in particular female visibility.

During some concerts, especially in the summer months [dry season], when many Kinois living in *poto*, come to Kinshasa on vacation, I see so many little blue screens in the audience. They are filming the show. I love seeing so many phones in the air because I know that so many more people will see my performance. My dancing will be saved on people's cellphones, and people will watch me over and over again.

#### CHOREOGRAPHING GENDER

While the performance space of the street or the concert stage merits attention, the aesthetics of movement within dance is equally important. But in discussing this, some clarification is needed as to what popular dance in Kinshasa means. There is no real catch-all term for popular dance, and as such, it is referred to locally in terms of dance steps, rather than genres.

*Ndombolo* is a style of dance that is foundational to Congolese popular urban dancing because it emerged at a time when popular bands were innovating their stage shows to include large troupes of dancers (see sidebar, clips 3–4). This cornerstone of Congo's popular dances stems from the bent knee posture which is a characteristic of African dance throughout the

### LINKS TO YOUTUBE CLIPS (CLICKABLE IN ELECTRONIC EDITION)

Werrason *danseuses* in concert:

1) Werrason - danseuses + spectacles: zamba zamba janvier 2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4yQSSHHW1E>

2) Congo - Werrason - Dancing Girls in Mayi Ya Sika

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dGow8eYMNA&index=90&list=FLi-Y6rmiiM1xjcq3DJ2EsNw>

*Ndombolo* style dance:

3) AFRICA DANCE (ndombolo) PEPE KALLE carnaval

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM4-cr3TbQA>

4) Josepha in Kinshasa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI dzUs-2lRo&list=UUi-Y6rmiiM1xjcq3DJ2EsNw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSYAqhRypZ4>

Men's versus women's choreographies:

5) Koffi Olomide et le Quartier Latin dans Affaire d'Etat

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEuEEIAeLh4>

*Mutuashi* in church:

6) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM96GJuZSFY>

*Mutuashi* in concert:

7) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCRLRFNikNw>

continent (Dagan 1997). The "natural bend" in a dancer's posture permits a wide range of movement, particularly in the waist and hip regions of the body. Elbows are kept close to the body, and dancers often shrug their shoulders with their heads tilted on one side. Characterized by moving one's pelvis in a circular motion, occasionally thrusting the hips with the help of deeply bent knees, *ndombolo* has become widespread not only across the DRC, but across the rest of Africa as well. In fact, many Africans refer to Congolese popular music in general as *ndombolo*.

While the origins of this dance are unknown, there is an urban mythology surrounding it. Some Kinois say that it was created to mimic the way Kabila, the president who overthrew Mobutu, walked as he limped into the country from the forested eastern region. The older generation (over the age of forty) say that *ndombolo* imitates the movements of apes. Still others insist that the word *ndombolo* is derived from a slang term for marijuana, which they claim makes one's body go wild with movement (Pyper 2006:311). Whatever the origins, it is a seminal dance that has given way to other popular dance moves.

During concerts, men and women perform separately; they most often dance in separate groupings on stage, and rarely do they perform side by side. But when they do, there is no bodily contact whatsoever. This is part of a historical and long-standing

African dance aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> All choreographers, without exception, are male, creating the dance routines for both the women and men in the band.

Choreography is heavily gendered and the average concert performance is laden with gender stereotypes. Among the most popular imagery reflected in men's dance choreographies are gestures depicting cellphones, laptops, cars, watches, Michael Jackson, businessmen, and American wrestlers (see sidebar, clip 5). Women, on the other hand, tend to mimic typically feminine activities, such as rocking a baby or tying a sarong around the waist. Wendy James reflects on the ways in which dance gestures such as these are marked by everyday movements:

The performative and experiential aspects of the various formal genres of patterned movement, ritual, marching, and dancing are not just a spill-over from the "ordinary" habitus, but derive their power partly by speaking against, resonating ironically with, this very base (2003:78–79).

While dance moves that imitate typical feminine activities may reinforce accepted gender roles, the *danseuses'* visible presence on stage, as well as the inclusion of aggressively sexual dance moves, complicates normative understandings of femininity.

Susan Leigh Foster expounds the potential within dance for the individual to perform their personal identity within the context of certain norms:

Choreography, the tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance, offers a social and historical analytic framework for the study of gender, whereas performance concentrates on the individual execution of such codes (1998:5).

One *danseuse* explained how, in the shift between choreographed dance moves and her own solo, she moves from dance steps that typify womanly activities to more aggressive ones, which more likely to be associated with men:

Before the *seben*, and before my solo, while we might all be dancing the rumba on stage in a line, we are very soft and sexy. But watch out. When I start my solo, I box, I throw punches sometimes. Or I gesture to the audience that I'm about to murder the stage by moving my hands across my neck like I'm cutting a throat. I think it's sexy to be the boss of the stage. I only started dancing this way after got more confident on stage. I would say maybe after my first year of dancing professionally.

Female dance choreography builds on older forms of dance, but recontextualizes them to make them new. These choreographies often incorporate what most Kinois understand as "traditional" dance movements from different ethnicities—as in the Luba ethnic group's *mutuashi*—with smooth, undulating, figure-eight hip movements as the focal point (see sidebar, clip 6). Concert dancers have adapted their foundational movements by building choreographies around this sensual gesticulation. *Danseuses* sometimes use elements of *mutuashi*, such as elegantly balancing an empty bottle on their head, to demonstrate their prowess (see sidebar, clip 7). This dance move is typically used in the context of wake parties, though it has also become part of the repertoire of many *danseuses*, who have transposed it to the concert performance space.

Some *danseuses* show off the balancing bottle move because

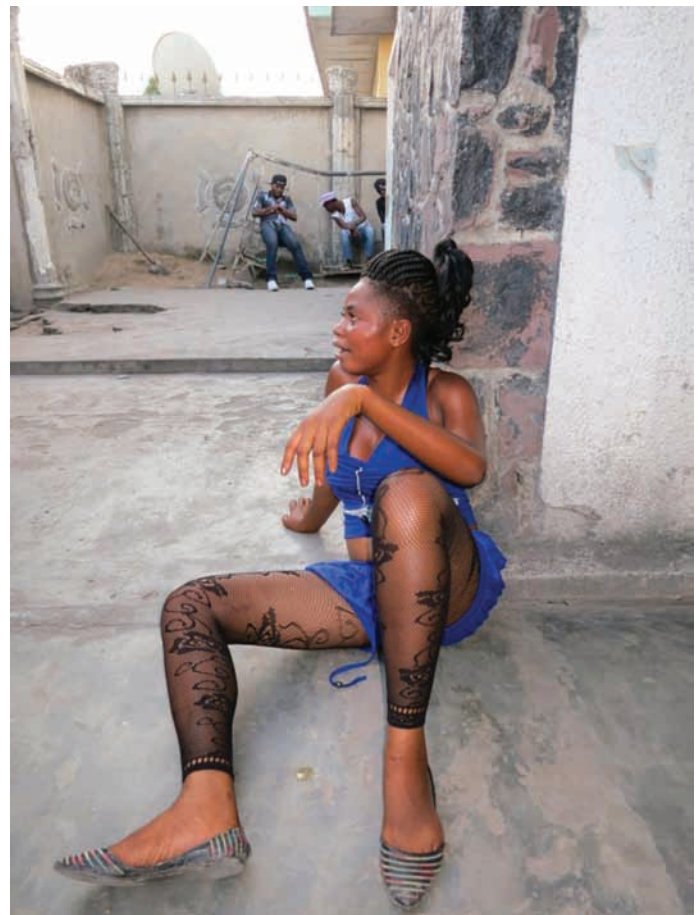
they are good at it. They are good at it sometimes because they used to work in the marketplace, maybe with their mothers. Market women are tough and can balance huge loads on their heads without letting anything fall. They have experience, so it's easier for them to balance a bottle, keeping everything still while they move their arms and their waists.

There is a sense in which choreographers exploit or hijack folklore dance like *mutuashi* for the purpose of entertaining a crowd. The erotic femininity that is vigorously performed in front of an audience has become a point of contention for many Kinois, particularly for some religious groups. The propriety of dancing is further problematized as *mutuashi* is sometimes even performed in church (Pype 2006).

However, many for Kinois, if *mutuashi* were performed in a context other than on a concert stage, many would not have a problem with it. Further, many people say that if *danseuses* wore long *pagnes*, African printed cloth, their performances would be considered less sexually suggestive.

This further became apparent to me when I observed my Congolese girlfriend, Romance, dance *mutuashi* in church one evening. I had previously asked her if she enjoyed dancing *mutuashi*, whereupon she denied she did and reminded me that popular

3 A local *danseuse* waiting for a rehearsal to begin.





4 Cindy, a *danseuse*, wears a Jesus necklace. The majority of Kinshasa is Pentecostal Christian.

music and dancing was enjoyed only by “non-serious” women. However, one evening during a lively church service—one accompanied by a full musical band—I looked over to find Romance’s pelvis moving in sensuous circles, thrusting forward to accentuate the downbeat of the rhythm. I observed that several other women were dancing *mutuashi*, and I even witnessed several young men making *mayeno* gestures, a movement meant to represent young female’s breasts popularized by Papa Wemba’s popular band. Some of the dancing women approached the pulpit, one by one, to dance before the pastor (who happened to be a woman) only to be “sprayed” by the pastor with dollar bills, in the same way one would at a concert for a *danseuse* (see sidebar, clip 6).

After church, I playfully suggested to Romance that she was a better dancer than Werrason’s dancers. She laughed, and retorted,

Of course I KNOW how to dance *mutuashi*! I know all of the latest dances. But I dance in the name of Jesus whereas the *danseuses* you are hanging out with, dance for the devil. I can dance any way I want as long as people know it’s for Jesus and that it’s done in church.

Because *mutuashi* has been decontextualized, as popular concert performances now frame it in a “modern” way, it has created confusion in terms of acceptable displays of femininity. This very recontextualization is fraught with tensions about what is considered “appropriate” public performance. Despite the moral criticisms against it, concert dance performed by *danseuses* continues to serve as a benchmark for what skillful dancing looks like and is mimicked by people around the world.

One can draw parallels between Congolese concert dance and other African popular dance genres such as *mapouka*, a dance from Côte d’Ivoire with religious origins. *Mapouka* stirred up controversy which led to the government banning it from national Ivoirian television (Akindes 2002:100). Like many

other African popular dances, *mapouka* movements are focused below the waist, in particular on the buttocks. When a dance is decontextualized from its “traditional” function, it is reframed as sexual. With their public demonstrations of sexuality, Kinshasa’s *danseuses* are not alone in being perceived as a threat to morality. In the early 2000s, the Cameroonian government had placed bans on certain “indecent” dances such as the *zingue* and *mapouka*, in fear that public morality was being threatened. Despite the ban, cassette sales of this popular dance rhythm increased significantly (BBC News 2000).

In his provocative essay “Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds” (2005), Achille Mbembe constructs a theory of the embodiment of violence in Congolese dance by comparing the dancers to Bakhtin’s descriptions of the grotesque body. “All buttocks on stage turn toward the audience in a series of movements simultaneously semi-erotic and obscene [...] The dancers move as if penetrating and withdrawing, thrusting, as in an act of unbridled copulation. The end comes with the furious spasms of an imaginary ejaculation” (2007:88). This de-contextualized interpretation of Congolese popular dance fails to consider the genre itself as well as the regional dance aesthetics. Eric Gable perhaps says it best: “Are anthropologists complicit in creating what we might call an African bestiary as we write yet another article about witchcraft or cannibalism and the consumption of body parts or as we seem to strive for the same Rabelaisian pitch as Achille Mbembe?” (2002:576).

Mbembe omits any examination of the roots of Congolese popular dance. Instead he pathologizes concert dancers’ behavior rather than investigating the meaning and cultural context behind concert choreography. It is not enough to merely identify and describe the sexual elements within concert dancing without exploring the implications and significance of such gestures in terms of gender roles. As such, he both denies the agentive

space of the concert stage and the role that concert dancers play in shaping popular culture. Mbembe perpetuates and reinforces old hegemonic moral norms that were espoused by both colonials and Christian missionaries. Further, he propagates the idea that popular dance is a lewd public display, in contrast to more “acceptable” forms of African dance, such as African ballet, which is upheld as a formal art form.

### THE TRICKY MORALITY OF POPULAR DANCE

Scholarly representations of African women range from victim to heroine, depending on Western feminist waves of thought (Abu-Lughod 1990). I am not interested in painting a romantic portrait of Africa’s resilient women, nor do I strive to tell a tale of oppression. Instead, I present an analysis of the freedom (albeit a limited freedom) associated with positions of marginality, which can foster creative innovation. The position of the *danseuse* and her medium of expression have the potential both to maintain and change social relations.

Concert dance provides young women with the possibility of income, travel, and celebrity, but not without a price. The *danseuse*’s stardom and her visibility come at the sake of her reputation. Kinshasa is overwhelmingly Pentecostal Christian, a factor that contributes to the discourse concerning accepted notions of femininity. Once a *danseuse* is hired by a band, she publicly transgresses both “traditional” and Christian notions of womanhood.<sup>3</sup>

A *danseuse* with Papa Wemba’s band candidly expressed her initial misgivings and current challenges regarding other people’s moral judgement of her as a *danseuse*:

My parents didn’t know about my involvement with the band. They knew I was always a very good dancer, but I kept it a secret. That’s why I didn’t want to tell my parents. I went to practices and they didn’t know. I was especially afraid to tell my father because I knew he wouldn’t like it. My mother too, but I think she would be more understanding. They eventually found out because they saw me dancing on television. I was so nervous. A neighbor girl told my sisters that they saw me on TV. But when my parents found out, they were proud of me. And then became supportive of my dancing. I also started making money from concerts. I would give them money for food and new pots and pans. When I brought home money, they started respecting me, but they really started respecting me once I began to travel to places like Angola on tour. I still go to church, but it’s a cool church where they don’t criticize me. But the people who attend the church talk about me behind my back and complain to the pastor about how I earn money. I had to change churches a few times because of all the gossiping. My mother’s friends also talk a lot. They think I’m sleeping with men all the time. But what people do not realize is that I work hard. They think I got to where I am because I slept with the entire band or something. Here in Kinshasa, people think that to become a *danseuse* you must go to bed with a musician in the band. And there are some girls who do this. But what I don’t like is that people think that the only way I earn money is by prostituting myself. But my mother doesn’t listen to them because she knows I get opportunities. People are just jealous, and they are hypocrites. They do worse things than dance. They are jealous because I get to travel and have opportunities that they don’t.

Cindy, a *danseuse* with Werrason, similarly expressed how the *danseuse* is largely perceived as non-serious, though she argues such assumptions can be hypocritical:



5 Fanny demonstrates her signature dance move.

Many people think that we, *danseuses*, are not serious. Fine, there are some girls who dance in bands who may not be serious, but many are. We want to be famous, we work hard. I know many girls who go to church and pray all the time, and they are prostitutes. In Kinshasa, you never know who is serious. People, when they get to know me, know I am serious because I share my money with my family and I have clean heart.

The hegemonic moral discourse in Kinshasa extols female virtue in terms of a woman’s mother- and wife-hood. Women who are associated with these qualities are considered “serious,” and “proper.” Dance, too, is an important part of femininity, and young women are often taught to dance by family members. Yet the concert *danseuse* has become an icon of the “non-virtuous” woman, in part because she performs before the gaze of a large audience. Visibility, therefore, plays an important role in conceptions of female propriety.

Some of the controversy surrounding the morality of popular concert dance can be historically traced back to colonial encounters with the Kongo, an ethnic group located in the lower Congo. For this ethnic group, dance movements often overlapped and overflowed between sacred and profane contexts (Covington-Ward 2007). That is not to say that there were no distinctions

between sacred and secular dances, though these distinctions were nebulous, as both categories of dance borrowed from one another. At present, it is difficult to discern the aesthetic differences between dancing done across different social contexts. Because popular dance is an amalgam of old and new, many dance practices associated with particular ethnic groups have become decontextualized. In addition, many people born in Kinshasa do not have any real connection to village life and they often do not maintain a strong allegiance to a particular ethnicity.<sup>4</sup>

The dance movements themselves are not what frame the context. Rather, it is the intention behind the dancing that matters. For example, whether the dancing is done “in the name of Jesus,” “to add *ambiance* to a party,” or “to capture men’s attention for monetary gain,” has a bearing on whether the dance will be perceived as moral or immoral. But people’s intentions can be ambiguous, or vary from moment to moment, which is why dancing has become a point of contention among many Kinois.

6 *Danseuse* learning new dance sequence from the band choreographer.



The three main genres of music in Kinshasa are “modern,” “traditional,” and “religious” (White 2008:31). To be sure, like dance, there is aesthetic mixing in the music itself (religious music in form is virtually identical to profane music). However, what moves music into one category or another is the lyrics.

Dancing in Kinshasa during social events, like birthday parties, funeral parties, and in the space of a nightclub, is often done in a kind of semicircle wherein people take turns entering the center, sharing the attention. However, concert dance has introduced a new division between performers and audience, whereby the audience gazes at the performers. This is not to say that the audience does not participate during concerts, but the relationship between performers and audience nevertheless introduces a new dynamic in the relationship between spectator and performer.

Once the gaze of an audience is introduced, there is a shift in how the dance is publicly perceived. Performing for money in flashy, European-inspired clothing with the intention of capturing an audience’s attention shapes the moral nature of the event. In other words, once a woman is paid to entertain on a public stage in front of an audience, the dance is framed as morally illicit.

Sartorial practices, which are a marker or indication of a dance’s context, can elicit moral condemnation. *Danseuses* commonly change out of the clothing they rehearse and perform in. One of Werrason’s more senior *danseuses* described to me a day when she returned home in her dance attire:

When I first started to dance for different concert bands, I was new to how things are done. I remember after my first day of dance practice, I stayed in the same clothes to take the bus back to my neighborhood. It was a big mistake. People on the bus stared at me and many made comments about how ugly and vulgar I looked. People in Kinshasa are not afraid to make strangers feel bad about themselves [laughs]. I even have one *danseuse* friend who had her eyebrow pierced, but after so many people on buses and in taxis told her she looked like a prostitute and not serious, she took it out. On the day people made comments about my clothing, I felt very bad about myself. But at the same time, very angry. I wanted to let them talk and not care, but I knew that I would never again return home in my dance clothes. Now, I bring my clothes to practice in my bag and change afterward. I also do this because we *danseuses*, as you can see, get very sweaty. Many girls know that it’s best to change, but when I see a younger, new *danseuse* who doesn’t change out of her clothes, I let her know that it’s not normal [*eza normal té*].

This ethnographic vignette inspires an analogy, suggested to me by a Kinois, in which we can understand different reactions to dance as related to context. Take, for instance, a woman on a bus. If the woman proclaims: “today, I’ve been dancing,” the responses will vary, depending on whether she is wearing funeral attire or a concert *danseuse*’s clothing. The issue here, of course, is not the clothing itself, but the context it indicates.

#### THE DANSEUSE AS ALCHEMIST

Solo dances or “shines” are demarcated spaces within the set choreography, where *danseuses* can showcase their creativity separate from the dance troupe. These are moments in which the *danseuse* can break free from the male-created, band-sanctioned choreography and shine alone.



Dancers rehearse solo choreography with the band's drummer to master changes in rhythm. In this way, there exists a dialogue between dancers and drummers. Contrary to Western dance pedagogy, where dancers are taught choreography by counting out the steps, Congolese dance is premised, not on memorizing the step count, but rather on listening to the drumming for cues. Although solo dances look improvised, each dancer skillfully crafts the overall structure of her solos in advance to highlight her particular talent. During the performance, the sequence of steps might vary as dancers will improvise depending on the drummer's rhythm. Conversely, drummers must be perceptive to a dancer's hints as to when she is ready for the passage beat. Pulling up one's pants or extending an arm in the air are common hints used by dancers. The drummer will punctuate the *danseuse's* movements with hits on the cymbals for each of her hip thrusts, emphasizing the spectacle and increasing the suspense of her solo. In one interview, Werrason's choreographer Maitre Mao explains the ways in which communication between drummers and *danseuses* is vital to a successful solo:

During a solo, *danseuses* and drummers have a special relationship because they listen and watch to each other. During this time, they must work together. That's when I know I'm training a good *danseuse*—when she can sense what the drummer is doing, and then let the drummer know what she's about to do. The solo is a bit little planned, and a lot improvised. Not all of my *danseuses* do this well and pay attention to the drummer. I try to teach them that it's the little things make their solo performance great. Of course, the new *danseuses* are learning, but the ones who already know this, I know were really made for the stage. This is what most of the *danseuses* dream of when they decide to join our band—dancing alone in front of a crowd and showing off their best moves.

There are many masterful solo dancers who move with subtlety and grace, as they wave their body parts and gyrate with fluid, boneless articulation. Artful dancers use the constraints of the genre to innovate new moves, which sometimes become their specialty or signature. Just before the drummer hits the cymbals, a *danseuse* might rush to the edge of the stage, jump in the air, or land in a split leg position, only to gracefully move back into her original upright position. All the while, she would maintain a cool and impassive expression on her face. The crowd would feverishly applaud the *danseuse's* flexibility and agility, and some might approach the stage to “spray” her forehead with dollars (for a discussion of “tipping” or “spraying,” see Askew 2002 and White 2008).

On one level, the dances performed by *danseuses* are designed to please a male audience. But it is during her solo session that a *danseuse's* virtuosic kinaesthetic movements both tease and resist visual objectification (Castaldi 2006). There are moments during their solos when *danseuses* perform beyond a simple demonstration of sensuous hip thrusts. There is something almost aggressive about their displays of sexuality. *Danseuses's* moves go beyond ordinary sensuality into the hypersexual. These movements signal to the men in the audience that they are “too much woman” to handle. One former *cheftaine*, or lead *danseuse*, of Koffi Olomide's band nostalgically reminisced about her dancing days, and the occasions when she performed her solos:

Sometimes, depending on the concert venue, like, if it's a smaller club, I would dance up to a man in the front of the audience and perform my solo in front of him. Kinosis love attention, especially men. So when I choose a man, they would enjoy it. I danced in front of him to show everyone how good I was, that I was the best. There were some moves that maybe embarrassed men. Like when I put my leg up in the front of him almost like if I were a dog. And I did this with no smile on my face—I remained serious. In my head I would think to myself “I'm a better dancer than every single person in this audience, and I'm the most desirable.”

During these solos, the wildness that dominates the performance space can be interpreted as a demonstration of the unbridled female id. This “untamed” behavior is not considered conventional for women, and it gives us an idea of how different dances come to be seen as “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” There is a sense in which dancing that makes people uncomfortable is considered inappropriate, and the wild aggressiveness of a *danseuse's* solo does just that. Solos are therefore opportunities to publicly invert the sexual female image allotted to *danseuses* in such a way that subverts the male gaze. One *danseuse* described her solo, acknowledging its potential to intimidate men:

When I dance my solo, I can tell that men are scared of me. I've been accused of looking almost diabolical when I dance my solo. Like possessed. And maybe I am a bit, but I don't think it's a bad thing, like what some pastors think. It's like, during my solo I'm protected. I feel protected.

The movements originally designed to please male audiences are used against the very audiences they were intended for. In this way, the *danseuse* takes revenge on the forces that have created her. During these ephemeral moments, the *danseuse* becomes a kind of trickster, using the liminal space of the stage to go beyond normative notions of female virtue through a display of her own virtuosity.

The *danseuse*, particularly during her solo, can sometimes be regarded as a kind of contemporary trickster figure who meddles with ideal visions of femininity. “The trickster's fancy footwork teaches us care and patience in piecing together the evidence, and modesty in reaching conclusions” (Pelton 1984:24). Perhaps the *danseuse's* solo cautions us against being too fast or too rigid in creating our ideals of femininity. While she performs what is required of her—a docile sensuality to provide ornamentation for the band—during her solo, the *danseuse* assaults the social status quo with her hypersexuality, which has the potential to bring about new perspectives.

Solo sessions can be read as a representation of sexual transmutation or an attempt to transform sexual energy into creativity (Cooper 2005). During her solo, a *danseuse* manages to imbue common popular dance with her own artistry, and much of that artistry has to do with the wild energy of her performance, rather than with the dance moves themselves. Like an alchemist transmuting base metals to gold, the *danseuse* elevates common popular dance to an expression of virtuosity.

For the *danseuse*, her solo is a moment for expression or “moment of freedom” as Johannes Fabian would put it (1998). And while a *danseuse* occupies a low position within society and

within a band, it is through these moments that she ceases to be just a background dancer and becomes an artist and visible culture creator in her own right.

### DANCING THE PARADOX

Kinshasa's concert *danseuses*, so vital to the contemporary experience, are nonetheless marginalized figures in Kinshasa. Many young women in Kinshasa strive to master movements exhibited by *danseuses*. But even though many girls and women dream of performing on stage, *danseuses* continue to be treated as marginal members within both society and within their own bands.

Because "good" women do not perform on stage in front of a male gaze for money, there is a public perception that only women with questionable morals become *danseuses* in popular bands. There is a sense in which a *danseuse* sacrifices her membership in the dominant culture to help create a popular culture which everyone is welcome to enjoy. Further, as she is considered by society at large to be an immoral woman, and band members exploit her because she has no other economic opportunities, thus reflecting and reinforcing the gender imbalances within Kinshasa's society.

As discussed earlier, sexually suggestive dance movements for women are stylized versions of ethnic dances such as the Luba ethnic group's *mutuashi*. While movement and gestures may resemble or even be a direct replica of older folkloric dance practices, costumes worn on stage recontextualize the dance, provoking moral confusion. It can be said that the *danseuse* is a reminder of the strict gender norms and social behav-

ior in this society where "tradition" and "modernity" are not so clearly demarcated.

According to Bauman, performers are both admired and feared, "admired for their artistic skill and power [...] feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo" (1977:45). Indeed, concert dance offers women the potential to communicate their selfhoods through dance solos. These solos also enable the *danseuses* to become visible actors, which in itself upsets conventions of accepted female behavior within the public sphere. *Danseuses* embody a tension in that they reproduce notions of femininity as espoused by Kinshasa's patriarchal society while at the same time contradicting those notions in their dance solos. Dance choreography lays bare gender dynamics and social norms, as well as social paradoxes within public discourse.

Concerts are cultural sites for the creation and dissemination of symbols and ideologies which inform the lived realities of its performers. Popular dance in Africa merits more attention as it is a medium and context for expressing social mores, social relations, and in particular, the social position of young women.

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### Notes

1 All quotes are from field interviews conducted by the author between 2001–2012 in Kinshasa, DRC.

2 In Kinshasa, during slow ballads, rooted in classic Congolese rumba music, people in the audience (depending on how much space is available on the dance floor) partner up to dance together. Partner dancing speaks to a history of hybridity between Caribbean and Congolese musical genres, which accounts for the introduction of partner dancing in Congo in the late 1930s.

3 Biaya 1996 and Gondola 1997 examine several historical factors which contribute to the public perception that concert dance is inappropriate mode of employment for women.

4 Because of the increase in ethnic intermixing, many young people often have parents from different ethnicities.

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