

THE ECONOMY OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE IN ITALY

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Abstract:

Over the past decade so-called African dance has become increasingly popular in Italy growing in tandem with local West African diasporic communities and the national concern over immigration. Although the circulation of African dance provides West Africans migrants with an important form of self-identification and subsistence, it often revolves around problematic discourses rooted on the myth and romance with the primitive. Constructing and capitalizing on the fetishization of black bodies, African dance mobilizes complex economies of desire that rest on an orientalist fascination with the Other. Whilst these economies reify racist stereotypes, they also enable significant communities of knowledge and interracial encounters.

Introduction

This project emerged out of my experience in the past twenty years training in West African dance in New York, Los Angeles and in different towns of central and northern Italy. My in-between location on two continents, north America and Europe, gave me the opportunity to observe the increased migration of West African dancers and musicians outside of Africa and to engage with some of the transnational networks that they build across Europe and the USA.¹ In the past fifteen years, I noticed how the recent spread and popularity of so-called ‘African’ dance was growing in tandem with local West African diasporic communities and the national concern over immigration, setting forth dynamics that simultaneously reified and unsettled categories of dance and stereotypes about race, dance, sexuality and citizenship.² Prompted by those initial observations, I started an ethnographic study and film documentary project about the growing West African artistic communities in northern and central Italy. In this paper, I will share some of the initial findings of my in-progress research project.

Roots and Routes of African Dance in Italy

African-based movement vocabularies were first introduced in Italy in the 1970s and 80s by Afro-American dancer Bob Curtis (1925-2009) and Italian dancer Katina Genero. Curtis, who studied traditional dance in Haiti and Cuba in the 1950s with the Katherine Dunham and modern dance with Martha Graham and José Limon, moved to Rome in the late 1970s. In Italy Curtis established his own school and company aiming at disseminating his own ‘afro-contemporary’ dance style.³ Following Curtis, Italian dancer Katina Genero, who first studied African dance in Paris in the early 1970s, started teaching and performing her own interpretation of what she calls ‘African expressive’ dance. Since the early 1980s, Genero and her brother Bruno, a djembe drummer, have been promoting African expressive

arts and cultures through teaching, performances and the organization of *FestivalAfro e Oltre*, an annual Afro-diasporic dance and music festival based in the city of Torino.⁴

With the growth of sub-Saharan migration to Italy in the 1990s the circulation of African dance has increased exponentially.⁵ The increased migration of African artists to Italy in the past two decades and their growing networks across EU countries led to the expansion of African dance outside the limits of concert dance circuits, which allowed it to carve a unique space in the Italian social and cultural landscape. Today West African dance often ‘animates’ summer festivals, local fairs and multiethnic events and ‘spices up’ the list of classes and workshops offered in gyms, dance studios and independent organizations. Festivals dedicated entirely to African arts and cultures have emerged, such as *FestivalAfro e Oltre* in Torino and the *Festival au Désert* in Florence, which focus primarily on performances of contemporary African expressions, as well as *Mama Africa*, *Afropean Meeting Festival*, and *Borom Kounda*, which are centered predominantly around workshops that promote the learning of traditional African dance and music in a communitarian life setting. By drawing dance students and audiences from around Italy and neighboring countries as well as West African artists residing in different parts of Europe, these festivals have become important hubs for the dissemination of African dance and act as important sites of reunion for West African dancers and musicians spread around Europe.

While the patterns of circulation of African dance during the 1980s revolved predominantly around the rarified scene of modern concert dance, African dance today predominantly follows the migrational patterns of African artists, whose geographical positioning in Italy is determined either by existing networks with co-nationals or else by the links they have with Italians interested in bringing African dance teachers in their areas. Furthermore, in contrast to other ‘world’ dance trends, which do not cross into the realm of

theater arts, African dance inhabits multiple circles and locales, crisscrossing the networks of social dance, mainstream fitness, and modern dance.

The interplay of authenticity, primitivism, exoticism, and sexuality

The economy of African dance that emerged in the late 1990s—one of concerts, classes, workshops, festivals and cultural trips to Africa—provides West African artists with a form of subsistence and, in some cases, an entry ticket into Italy. Furthermore, the popularity of African dance offers visibility and a form of self-identification to the growing West African diasporic communities in Italy. Equally important, African dance opens up spaces for interracial encounters in an otherwise difficult context for mixed-sociability, thus challenging racial, cultural, and geographical divides. However, the recent circulation of West African dance in Italy revolves around problematic discourses of tradition and authenticity, which are rooted on romanticized representations of the ‘primitive’ Other.

Pervasive concerns with the authenticity of African dance are linked to the history of racialized readings of African art that position ethnicity and race as fundamental units of analysis of African dance. Read through the lens of authenticity, African dance becomes exclusively associated with black bodies. The interview with Italian dancer and choreographer Cristina Bonati illustrates the operations of essentializing African dance through an association with essentialist notions of racial difference. Cristina explained that, as a dancer and manager of the Ivorian-Italian performance group *ShionKama*, she marketed the group to various venues. As she recounted, when negotiating with festival directors, she was often asked if the group was composed by all Africans. On a few occasions, upon discovering that the company also included Italian dancers and musicians, directors turned them down because of their 'non-authenticity' as ‘non-Africans.’⁶ Cristina’s analysis of her encounter with festival directors who seek all African troupes highlights how the value of

authenticity and tradition is attached not to African dance per se, but rather, to the African black body.

Alongside such process of racialization, African dance tends to be read through a particular vision of Africa and African identity that is involved in the construction of African dancers as 'primitive' Others. Dance and its preverbal nature are often associated with primitivism. The connection of dance with the non-verbal realm has been used to devalue it as a pre-discursive, irrational, and primitive form of expression. At the same time, Africa and African subjects have had long been associated with dance and primitivism (Castaldi 2006:1). These discourses were embraced and reinforced by most of the African dance students I talked to during my fieldwork.⁷ Some of them described the movement practice in terms of an extra-quotidian experience that they often referred to as a kind of trance or a form of self-expression. Paola, a participant of the *Afropean Meeting Festival*, explained how she experiences African dance as a movement practice that allows "a person's inner wildness to come out."⁸ While dance is generally understood in terms of inner self-expression, African dance is assumed as expressing a specific self that is conceived as 'wild' and 'unruly'. Understood in a binary opposition to western movement practices, African dance is seen as offering alternatives to the emptiness of mainstream dominant culture and the spiritually impoverished conditions of modern Western life-style.

Narrating her experience of a dance workshop in Mali, Irene, a participant of the *MamaAfrica* festival (2011), explains,

Back from Africa I realized that life here in Italy really brings us to a state of contraction... but when you go to Africa you feel that everything is possible: no social roles, no masks. You get to know the truest and most authentic part of yourself.⁹

Emotion here is evoked in contrast with control, reason and explanation. Binary structures that situate the rational, orderly, intellectual West in opposition to the world of African dance

are constructed through the association of the latter with emotion, spontaneity, and physical engagement. Despite the festival participants' awareness of the complexity of the world of African dance, primitiveness still remains a major descriptive concept which shapes the understanding of African dance and is often connected to tropes of exoticism, eroticism, and sexuality.

Sexuality discourses have consistently framed the production and consumption of dancing bodies. In the case of African dance, sexuality and eroticism are often mixed with and informed by colonial discourses about ethnicity, race, and gender (Fanon, 2008). Given the vexed history of the relationship between Africans and hyper-sexuality, it is not surprising that many people I talked to described West African dance as a sensual movement practice and went on to associate Africans to the supposed sensuality of their dances. These associations often spilled onto the African male bodies, viewed as inherently athletic and naturally disposed to rhythm and dance. The articulation of eroticism and racial difference in West African dance was expressed in the dialogues of two participants of the *Afropean Meeting Festival* (2010). Explaining what prompted her to learn West African dance, Marina recounted that during a trip abroad, she felt the sudden desire to dance, so upon her return home she started taking African dance classes and soon “fell in love with it [African dance].” Her friend Barbara, the youngest of the two and the more articulate, praised the integral relationship between dance and music and observed that “when the music *invades* the body of the dancer, the two are in symbiosis,” to which her friend Marina added that the “drumming in African dance can bring the dancer to a state of trance and *passion*” (my emphasis).¹⁰ By deploying descriptive terms that are closely associated to sexuality and desire, such as ‘the music invading the body,’ Barbara indirectly related African dance to eroticism whereas Marina explicitly linked it to primitivism and the ritualism of trance.¹¹

Conclusion

The circulation of West-African dance in Italy mobilizes complex economies of desire that simultaneously construct and capitalize on representations that exoticize and eroticize African male bodies. Ironically, this economy recycles and reworks the racialized discourses used to read Italians both with the nation-state and abroad in the 18th and 19th century. While choreographing a predictable performance of Orientalism that reproduces fixed gender and racial binary, this economy also engenders significant communities of knowledge and interracial bonds in an otherwise difficult context for mixed-sociability. Solidarity, hospitality, and inclusivity coexist with the reproduction of colonial racial imaginaries and the operations of exotification such as the ones described in this paper. Italian women's openness to African artists does not only translate into romantic relationships but also into collaborative efforts in promoting classes and performances as well as educational missions in public elementary and secondary schools. The collaborations and interracial bonds that African dance enables, if not directly challenging state racism and hegemonic concepts of Italian nationhood, bring to surface the tension between colonialist race and gender relations and the impending social changes brought about by immigration. In a context of increasing xenophobia, the complexity of these tensions provide an alternative narrative about Italian nationhood and networks across contemporary racial divides.

¹ In Italy, in particular, I witnessed the emergence of the first dance and drumming classes taught by West African artists in Florence (1996-97) and Trento (2006) and the formation of a number of local dance and music troupes that brought together Africans and Italian artists.

² Although problematic, I choose to use the general term 'African dance,' which lumps together diverse movement practices and traditions of an entire continent, because this is how the different West African dance styles are generally referred to by both African artists and Italian participants and audiences

³ As a matter of fact, my first encounter with African dance was through workshops that Bob Curtis and his company members taught in Italy in the 1980s.

⁴ First trained in experimental theater and contemporary dance, Katina Genero studied a variety of West African and African-derived dance forms in Paris in the early 1970s and later continued her studies in different West African countries (Genero Madrigal 1999, 9).

⁵ Unlike in the UK and France, immigration in Italy is a recent phenomenon. Italy was a country of outward migration up until the 1970s. The situation suddenly reverses by the 1990s, when Italy becomes a favorite destination for African migrants, who initially chose to migrate to Italy because the countries they had previously favored in continental Europe were increasingly closing borders (King and Black, 1997 and Lucht 2012).

⁶ Cristina Bonati, interview by the author, Firenze, Italy, 10 July 2010.

⁷ The name of the following interviewees have been changed. Although I use pseudonyms for the interviewees, the location and the festivals they attended are accurate.

⁸ Pseudonym. Interview with festival attendee (Afropean Meetig Festival), Rovigo, June 5, 2010.

⁹ Pseudonym. Interview with festival attendee (MamaAfrica Festival), Pontremoli, July 26, 2011.

¹⁰ Pseudonyms. Interview with festival attendees (Afropean Meetig Festival), Rovigo, June 5, 2010

¹¹ Barbara's argument recognized how the link between African dance and eroticism reveals very subtle dynamics, going beyond the movement and the content of the dances per se. As Castaldi suggests referring to the *sabar* dance of Senegal, eroticism includes the relationship between dancers and drummers, a relationship in which women dancers are not passive objects of desire but active subjects continuously engaging in kinetic virtuosos through which they both engage with and *tease* eroticism (Castaldi 2006:83).

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