DANCING FOR GOD OR THE DEVIL: PENTECOSTAL DISCOURSE ON POPULAR DANCE IN KINSHASA

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ABSTRACT
This article studies the dance poetics and politics of Christians in contemporary Kinshasa. For Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa), dance is one of the most important technologies to get in touch with an invisible Other, the divine or the occult. In sermons, and other modes of instruction, spiritual leaders inform their followers about the morality of songs and dances. These discourses reflect pentecostal thought, and trace back the purity of specific body movements to the choreography's source of inspiration. As the specific movements of so-called sacred dances borrow from a wide array of cultural worlds, ranging from traditional ritual dances and popular urban dance to biblical tales, the religious leaders state that not just the body movements, but also the space where people dance and the accompanying songs, define the Christian or pagan identity of the dancer. Therefore, both the reflections upon dance movements and the dance events within these churches will be discussed as moments in the construction of a Christian community.

Introduction

During pentecostal rituals in Kinshasa, the religious community performs a variety of dances that mediate between them and the invisible. This dancing, underscored by singing, is an integral part of the worshipping and communication with the divine. Those who are not dancing are encouraged by assistants of the spiritual leader to engage in the dance and to express themselves thus as members of the community. The goal of the dance, although not always realized, is to enter into trance, a heavily charged bodily and spiritual state which is manifested by being overwhelmed by emotions and losing all control of the body. Falling on the ground and losing consciousness seems to be mostly done by women (young and old) and children, and is the ultimate surrender to a higher spiritual power. Pasteurs, and other spiritual leaders or persons known to be imbued with the divine, touch their heads, and
enter into dialogue with the spirit(s) that inhabit(s) the body of the person in trance. It is believed that, in these moments, the Christians are purified, as they are filled with the Holy Spirit (in Lingala *Molimo Mosantu*). Sometimes, however, the spirit inhabiting the body identifies itself as a bad spirit (*Li. molimo mabe*), and then an exorcizing ritual is performed. Often, the body of the victim makes snake-like movements, and assistance is needed to control this possessed body. Female onlookers bind the legs of the women with cloth, to make sure that their modesty is protected during these moments of ‘being in the spirit’ or ‘being purified’. This article will not focus upon these trance-like experiences, but on the dances as such and the religious-social discourse that accompanies the dances that eventually may lead to trance. The dances that will be discussed can be interpreted as dramatizations of Kinois pentecostals’ aesthetic criteria, collective expressions of power, and individual locutions of identity.

Kaeppler, one of the founders of the anthropology of dance, wrote that ‘an adequate description of a culture should place the same emphasis on dance as that given it by the members of that society’ (cited in Royce 2002: 14). Doing research in Kinshasa is impossible without investigating the current dances, or the discussions about choreographers, the different meanings and sources of inspiration of the dances. These are all discussed in private spaces of compounds, in the spoken and written press (see White 2004), as well as in the semi-private spaces of the churches in the city. The stories that these dances express and spawn deserve study. These embodied narratives, often unexplored by researchers, lie at the heart of Kinshasa’s identity, and they are an important ingredient of the city’s oral culture. For Christian Kinois, there is a profound difference between secular and religious dances, although they may share the same choreographies. The complexity of approaching dance resides in the dialectics between choreography and political considerations (cf. Turney 1999). Poetics and politics meet in the dance. Furthermore, the findings for dance in Kinshasa’s pentecostal-charismatic milieu reiterate what Jules-Rosette (1975) has noted for songs amongst the Bapostolo communities in Central Africa: no dance can be danced without some spiritual significance. Indeed, the body is belief (cf. Kapferer & Hobart 2005: 13). This article investigates the distinction between these sacred (*Li. mabino ya Nzambe*) and so-called profane dances (*Li. mabino mabe*), and the discourse of the spiritual leaders and fundamentalist Christians about these dances. My goal is to shed light upon the role of dance in born-again Christians’ strategies of inclusion and exclusion, since the data suggest that so-called
artistic performances are at the very center of the negotiations of collective and personal identities. Discourse of the Pasteurs and the symbolical performances by the ‘newborn’ Christians can be examined as the social activities of ‘the production of a community’ in Appadurai’s sense (1996). Moreover, the aesthetic evaluations made by the born-again Christians upon Kinshasa’s dances reveal intra-group distinctions that question the unity of the group of Christians.

On a more abstract level, this article intends to contribute to the recent research on popular culture of the African continent, such as translations of the pentecostal message and the construction of a ‘new-born Christian identity’ (Meyer 1999, Marshall-Fratani & Corten 2001, Englund 2004).

The dance idiom is integrated into the political and symbolical system. Kinois people use dance to assert themselves, to mark boundaries and to grow spiritually. Kinshasa’s field of dance is vast, continuously re-inventing itself and ever-expanding. Although Christians make clear distinctions between ‘worldly’ and ‘Christian’ dances, the specific movements and lyrics and the accompanying sounds display much more fuzziness as these fields seem to nourish each other constantly. One important feature in this regard is the constant borrowing of religious discourse in the so-called worldly songs, which opens up spaces of mockery and irony in Kinshasa’s popular culture. Furthermore, the traditional dances of the diverging ethnic groups in the Congo, who all have their specific dancing style, inspire the choreographers of urban worldly dances who state in public interviews on television that their sources of inspiration come from all kinds of worlds. The result is that Kinshasa’s dances are palimpsests of diverging local and global cultural impetuses, just like the city itself in a way. The dances enacted by Kinois become much more than hybrid performances that reveal the grounded presence of different realities—although they are hardly experienced as distinguishable. The pentecostal leaders however try to re-establish order and purify the multiple realms that are united in these dances.

The discussion will focus upon the dance movements and the dance events. It is important that the same formalized movement sequences, in which human bodies are used or manipulated in time and space, may be considered differently when performed in different settings (Kaepler 1986: 92). Following Ranger (1975) and James (2000), I will discuss the dances not for their own sake, but in reference to the ‘non-dance arena’, i.e., everyday life and social organization. I borrow the term ‘non-dance’ from James (2000) who has opened up Gell’s initial
notion of ‘non-dance’ (1985). Whereas Gell sought differences between body behavior in dances and the world of non-dance (like work, movement, sexuality), James understands the ‘non-dance arena’ as the wider milieu of historical change, and the dance as a kind of collective commentary in body-language upon this larger world (James 2000: 141).

After an introductory section on Christianity and Pentecostalism in Kinshasa, I will expand on the distribution of the sacred dances and canvass the spiritual demarcations made by pentecostals. These boundaries, which create several categories of people and influence the personal memory work, also color the social evaluations of the musician, singer, choreographer and dancer. The article will end with a discussion of several religious dances and their meanings as they were conveyed to me by pentecostals.

**Kinshasa and Pentecostal Christianity**

The data of this article were gathered during fieldwork in Kinshasa between 2003 and 2005. As I worked closely with a theatre company (Cinarc) that produces serials on a weekly basis in order to evangelize the city, I was drawn into the world of the pentecostals. Because of the fuzziness in the field of delineating certain types of church as evangelical, messianic, pentecostal, charismatic, and so on, I decided to follow my informants, and use ‘pentecostal’ and ‘Christian’ as synonyms to indicate the most widespread form of Christianity in Kinshasa. The dances and ideology discussed below are shared by all types of Protestant, Catholic and other Christian churches, because, like other African cities, Kinshasa’s religious culture is heavily influenced by a new global brand of Pentecostalism (Meyer 2004). Again, as in other African societies, the distinction between so-called independent churches and pentecostal-charismatic churches is difficult to maintain in Kinshasa where the latter are increasingly dominating both the public sphere and the major religious practices (cf. Meyer 2004: 450-453). Nevertheless, I will attempt to give a short overview of the religious landscape in the city before I turn to discussion of the sacred dances.

Kinshasa, a city that counts over seven million inhabitants, displays under a superficial heterogeneity of religious activity a major legacy of Protestantism. The city sprang out of the colonial encounter and was very soon Christianized. This Christianization was most visible in the public sphere, where for example radio and later television were monopolized by Belgian Catholic missionaries. Rather early in the postcolonial period, other Christian traditions became major competitors for the
Congolese souls. Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on personal salvation in Christ, is said to have entered Kinshasa in 1967, when a French Pasteur began to organize healing sessions and performed miracles on Pont Kasa-Vubu. According to Ndaywel è Nziem (1993-29-30), a local pentecostal group, Nzambe Malamu (Lingala for ‘the Good God’), originated a year after this manifestation. Fabian (1994: 260) situates a ‘charismatic revival’ in the Congo a decade later (from the mid-1970s up to 1986). At that moment, African Catholics turned to Protestant or more syncretic churches, and an international charismatic wave transformed Roman Catholic rituals. Furthermore, the local intellectual, political and financial elite was very much charmed by the Gospel International that infiltrated Kinshasa’s groups of the Lions’ Club and the Rotary Club (Ndaywel è Nziem 1993: 30). During the eighties, new religious groupings inspired by Pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal, not all of which belonged institutionally to the mainstream religions, were created. My informants told me that Mobutu forbade these new religious revitalizations not belonging to Protestant or Catholic or Kimbanguist movements, thus obliging their followers to operate underground. Many churches that originated during the nineties, immediately after Mobutu’s weakening grip on national politics (as early as 1991), emerged out of these local prayer groups that attended during weekends at Catholic or Protestant rituals, but that assembled on weekdays in private homes to read and teach the Bible, and to perform healing sessions and exorcism rituals. They derived their rituals, practices and ideology from Pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal, although they were led by local spiritual leaders who created their communities after having received prophetic visions or calls from God. At the turn of the millennium, many of these young Christian churches grouped themselves in a platform called Eglises de Réveil du Congo (ERC), of which the Combat Spirituel headed by Maman Olangi (CFMCI) is probably the best known. By 2002, these churches were recognized as an official religion by the Congolese state (next to Catholicism, Protestantism, Kimbanguism, Islam). The young Christians with whom I worked were born during the seventies and eighties, and thus were immersed in a public culture that gradually became more and more charismatic, i.e., emphasized the private and bodily experience of the Holy Spirit.

The popularity of the young pentecostal-charismatic churches has in a more general way been explained as the expression of a collective disappointment in Mobutu’s promises of his authenticity campaign, or more abstractly, as the manifestation of a ‘malcontent’ with modernity (Fabian 1994, Devisch 1996, De Boeck 2004). Today, a wide variety
of Christian churches operate in Kinshasa. Ranging from so-called ‘syncretic’ churches that prefer to go back to ‘traditional’ and indigenous expressions of Christianity (for example Ngunzism, Kimbanguism)9 to pentecostal churches that embrace globalization and modernity, Kinois are thus offered multiple discourses and spiritual leaders that instruct their followers on how to receive health, happiness and wealth.10 Despite the vast array of vernacular expressions of Christianity, my informants hopped easily from one church to another, searching for spiritual growth and assistance in their personal quest for money, marriage partners and realms of belonging. The main discourse professed by all these churches is that death is omnipresent, and the world is in the grip of evil. In this vein, De Boeck speaks about the ‘apocalyptic interlude’ (De Boeck 2004 and 2005):

Life for most in Kinshasa situates itself in this interlude in which Satan fully reigns. For some others, the world has arrived at the end of the thousand year day of judgment and thus at the moment in which Satan is briefly released again. Thus, the popular understanding of the Apocalypse very much centers on the crack of doom and the omnipotent presence of Evil, thereby contributing to the rapid demonization of everyday life in Kinshasa (De Boeck 2004: 98).

The data for this article derive from young churches, of which most belong to the ERC. Although many of these churches use various denominational names, we can call them pentecostal because of their emphasis upon Jesus as one’s personal saviour; they profess the idea of salvation and forgiveness; full membership demands the water baptism ritual; and it is said that a ‘real Christian’ should display a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Influenced by the Charismatic movement, these churches insist on spiritual gifts (gifts of healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy, etc.) that Christians receive from God. In sum, they encourage trance and ‘falling in the spirit’ (Li. kokweya na molimo) for the individual to get in touch with the Holy Spirit, whilst exorcism and anti-witchcraft rituals reflect the urge of these movements to purify the body and the community.

My young informants called themselves from time to time pentecôtistes and charismatiques, but above all they claimed to be bakristu (Fr. des chrétiens, Christians). For them, being a Christian stands in particular in opposition to being Catholic. In contrast to Catholic churches, where babies are baptized a few weeks or months after birth, a ‘Christian’ has to choose Jesus as a conscious man/woman, and must have received a ‘calling’ or an awakening.

As in other African cities, adolescents in particular turn towards these pentecostal-charismatic movements, and become converted (cf. De Boeck
& Honwana 2005: 1). According to Fabian (2004: 370) these churches are very appealing to youngsters because of their emphasis upon an ‘equal distribution’ of spiritual gifts. Even youngsters can gain power and authority when endowed with special powers. Secondly, the singing and drumming, which play a major part in these churches’ rituals, attract the young (ibid.).

Religious popular culture in Kinshasa thrives on sensory experiences of the divine and on visual representations of the hidden dimensions of reality. The dance performances in these pentecostal-charismatic churches are not only some of the main technologies for creating a religious self, but they also reveal the most important themes of Kinshasa’s Christian culture.

Dancing politics

The troupe of young actors I worked with are associated with a young church, CEMMS\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Eglise Montaigne Sainte} (Holy Mountain Church), headed by Pasteur Gervais, a young Muyombe man in his mid-thirties. He created his own church after a call he had received from God: In 1995, I was an active member in the church \textit{La Résurrection}.\textsuperscript{12} One day, I saw a VHS tape of a South Korean prophet, named Paulo Ngisho. He spoke about many things, but the main message of this video-taped sermon was ‘How to develop your communion with the Holy Spirit’. This tape has revolutionized my life. It put fire in me. I was really touched by this program, and I started praying during two days. I fasted in order to receive God’s message in a more clear way. There, God asked me to work for Him.\textsuperscript{13}

One year later, he led his first prayer group, and after a few years his church was born. The Church of the Holy Mountain is rather young (created in 1999), and is still expanding, but is representative of the religious renewal and expansion that the city today witnesses. The main church of this particular religious community is located on the Rue des Foids Lourds (Kingabwa neighborhood in the community of Limete) that follows the rail tracks at the far west of the city and connects the community of Matete with the city center. At one side of the street, the rail track is faced by an ever-changing landscape of markets, the logistic base of the Monuc, the neighborhood of Kingabwa (a zone in the community of Limete), and large industrial compounds of foreign cargo companies all bordering on the entrance to the city center. Kingabwa is a rather impoverished area of Limete and for that reason the Pasteur, who was born and raised in the community of Lemba, sought to implant his church in this zone. ‘Here, many souls need to
be rescued', he states. In 2003, there were already two sub-churches in the neighborhoods of the main church, in Kingabwa Yaounde and Kingabwa Mombele. These ‘cellules’ are led by young Christians who follow biblical courses to become bato ya Nzambe (spiritual leaders, literally ‘men of God’).

The church also has its own orchestra, called Les Lévites, whose musicians travel between the sub-churches. The instruments and the orchestra occupy a central place in the church. Without exception, they are placed next to the chairs of the Pasteur and his wife, who are sitting in front of the community. As in most other Kinois Christian churches, this orchestra has electrical apparatus like guitars and microphones. If the most urgent material for the proper functioning of the church is purchased, then mostly the newly collected money is spent to rent or buy musical equipment, because ‘Africans cannot adore Jesus without singing and dancing’, as Pasteur Gervais claimed. When lacking electricity or the modern equipment to accompany the songs and the dances, then a tam tam—mostly Kongo drums—or audio-tapes are used.

The activities in Église Montaigne Sainte are strictly regulated: on Sunday mornings there are two religious services (8.00-11.00 and 11.00-14.00), at which the Pasteur preaches. On Mondays and Tuesdays, the sick are healed, whereas on Wednesday afternoons (16.00-18.00), the women of the church (Les Femmes de Flamme) gather to receive spiritual instructions from Maman Pasteur, the Pasteur’s spouse. On Thursdays (15.00-18.00), there is a special praying session called jeudi-shock where ‘intercesseurs’14 are accompanied by other newborn Christians to ‘pray on command’. During these sessions, spiritual leaders and voluntary members of the religious community pray for the wishes, worries and requests of others who seek spiritual assistance. On Fridays again, there are special healing sessions, and on Saturday afternoons the young of the church meet and are instructed by other young but ardent Christians. All the above-mentioned rituals follow the same structure. There is first a session of praying and singing, which can take up to one hour. Then, the core business of the gathering starts (either healing, or sexual instructions, or spiritual and educational lessons, or the sermons), to be concluded by a singing and praying session that can last for some time too. Often, the sermons or praying sessions are interrupted by singing and dancing intermezzos. French, Lingala, or other vernacular languages (especially Ciluba and Kikongo) are used to praise God’s glory, accompanied by hand-clapping, or dancing, varying from calm to wilder motions. Sometimes the ambiance heightens where dances are performed.
Not all churches put equal stress on dancing. The main church of Montaigne Sainte did not dance so much, nor was it a center of cultural creativity. This is not to say that the members of the church were not acquainted with the dances that were created and performed in other churches. In absence of their Pasteur, when Maman Pasteur or young spiritual leaders guided the rituals, one could observe a hesitant increase in singing and dancing activity. Notwithstanding the Pasteur’s reluctance to let ‘ambiance’ enter the sacred compound, all the believers were familiar with various religious dances, since people hop easily from one church to another, and these dances are shown on televised religious cults or on video clips of Christian singers. Newborn Christians attend meetings with fellow Christians from other churches in all kinds of ritual without encountering problems on a social or religious level. The same goes for the Cinarc actors who functioned as my primary informants. They also attended other churches, went to burial rituals (Li. matanga) guided by other spiritual pentecostal leaders, and watched numerous religious video clips. During prayer rituals outside the formal church context, or in their maquis, they often would dance some of the dances that will be discussed later. Furthermore, they ‘invented’ their own dances to glorify God and spread them through their television serials and cultural performances in the churches.

Some churches are known for devoting much time to dancing; they are called ‘des églises chaudes’ (hot churches) or even baeglises ya ngwasuma because of the ngwasuma (ambiance) which is shared during these dances. Not surprisingly, these churches are very well attended. A few churches are known for creating new dances and new shouts (mirroring the urban dance practices). From this center of creativity, the movements and cries are gradually adopted by other pentecostal and charismatic churches. The churches where the gravity of performance creativity resides are Armée de Victoire, led by Pasteur Kutinho, Eglise Amen led by Mutombo and Armée de l’Eternel, a church headed by Sony Kafuta. These three churches have well-known orchestras and choreographers that invent new movements and cries. The private television channels of these religious communities (RTMV—Radio Télé Message de Vie, AmenTV and RTAE—Radio Télé Armée de l’Éternel) broadcast the latest innovations in the religious dance scene. Because most of these religious singers and musicians have a ‘pagan past’ and were educated by skilled masters in urban and traditional dances, one is not surprised to find a continuity in style patterns. The smaller religious communities also create their own dances, but these choreographies often do not leave the local prayer group. Although the ultimate leadership of the
orchestras belongs to the Pasteur, the atalaku guides the songs and the dances during the rituals. This figure of the atalaku originated rather recently in urban dance music where he, in contrast to the singers, dominates the second, faster, dancing part of Congo’s popular urban songs: he throws ‘shouts’ that instruct the audience to perform specific dances that are often short sequences of repetitive movements. As will be clarified further, the atalaku, analyzed by White (2004) as a trickster, has only recently entered religious worship in the churches. In order to understand the politics of dance within Kinshasa’s pentecostal community, it is necessary to explain the basic spiritual grid that underlies all interpretations of behavior in the world of dance and non-dance.

Christians dancing in two worlds

According to Kinshasa’s pentecostals, the universe consists of the realm of God (Li. Nzambe), the divine world, or heaven (Li. Lola or bokonzi ya likolo), where God and his angels (Li. baanzela), and the spirits of the good ancestors (Li. bakoko) reside. The world itself, mokili, is perceived as consisting of a material reality (Li. mabele, nse) which human beings can perceive with their senses, and an invisible part. This invisible dimension of the world, le monde des ténèbres, the second world or the ‘ninth planet’, is an exact copy of the material world and is headed by Sataana. Both worlds are interlinked, since the second world ‘works on’ the first. The dance mabele eningana likolo efungwama (may the earth tremble and the heaven open up) expresses the dualistic universe and imitates the emotions during trance when the human enters the realm of the divine invisible. The dancers extend both upper arms in front of the shoulders and bring them down to the pelvis. There, they rock their arms and lift them gradually to the chest.

Nobody has ever seen or heard or felt God. God sent his son, Jesus, to the earth. He was the only human incarnation of God. As Jesus sacrificed his blood for the Christian community and left the world, the Christians direct their prayers towards the Holy Spirit who is the only possible manifestation of God in the world. Until the day that Jesus returns to earth, the Holy Spirit is the medium through which God heals and sends messages to humans. People believe that God wants only good things for his people. Those who have chosen his path can always ask him favors, and can lean on him and he will help them through the Holy Spirit. The Devil is accompanied by demons (Li. zabolo) and sirens (Fr. déesse, reine, Li. mamivata, nzambe ya mwasi), bad and impure spirits (Li. sg. molomo mabe). Those demons and sirens are
spirits who live in the invisible realm of the world. However, to accomplish their mission for the Devil, they seek contact with humans, or they use the spirits of humans who have sought contact with them. In order to obtain money, wealth, a good job, a lover, a child, or to fulfill other material desires, one can take recourse to féticheurs, who are conniving with the impure spirits. These bad entities take the spirits of the human beings, and give them a double life in the immaterial realm of reality. This life takes place during the night, and is a reversal of their life during daytime.

When an atalaku in church shouts omoni masumu? (do you see the sins?), the Christians jump with both legs replying ‘osautez’ (you have to jump). The atalaku goes on to say omoni Jesu, oyambi ye (if you see Jesus, accept him) and people continue to jump. This dance expresses in a bodily manner that the sin is grounded in the earth, but that Jesus is above this.

The Christians perceive the earth as the battleground for a spiritual competition between God and the Devil. The discourse often borrows from a military vocabulary: Christians see themselves as soldiers fighting for their leader. Non-baptized Christians are called basoda sans tenu (soldiers without uniform) or basoda sans armes (soldiers without weapons). The idiom of the war inspired the dance nzela nzulu (the way to heaven) which resembles a military march: the dancers bring their body upright, move with their arms next to their bodies and lift their knees as soldiers do in a military parade. More than any other dance sequence, nzela nzulu literally embodies the general discourse on the spiritual battle, and the imagination of Christians as soldiers.

The dual conception of the world is reflected in a complex notion of the human being. Man consists of a material, visible, tangible part, the body (Li. nzoto) and of an invisible part, the spirit (Li. molimo). The spirit is the most important part, since it links the individual with the overarching invisible realms that govern both the material and the immaterial. According to pentecostal belief, Moto asalami na elili ya Nzambe, God made man and woman in his image, which results in the belief that humans are the reflection of God. He gave them life by blowing wind into their bodies. Kinois perceive their body as a house in which the spirit resides. ‘Your body is the temple of God’ it says (Li. nzoto eza ndako ya Nzambe). People have to open their body to invite God. The problem is that the same opening of the body might allow bad spirits to enter. Therefore, Christians are warned over and over not ‘to open a door’ for the Devil (Li. kofungola porte), because that is the way in which spirits (both good and bad) enter. Only those who are closely
in touch with the divine have a sanctified mouth, and a body replete with the divine power. The spirit and body of the ungodly are governed by the flesh. A person who lives with God (kotambola na nzambé) is guided by his spirit.

These conceptions of the body resonate with a stringent body politic that is not only promulgated in the sermons, but also in the pentecostal genres such as public testimonies by witches, or in television serials. In these religious genres, attention often is centred on dance, which is in Kinshasa a very popular mode of manipulating the body. As soon as children can stand upright, their caregivers oblige them to imitate the dance movements shown on television. Living rooms, the open spaces in compounds and the streets are often transformed into temporal dance halls, guided by sound blasters or television sets that diffuse captivating sounds and images of complex body movements. In the following, I offer a short description of Pasteur Gervais’s instructions, focusing upon his discourse on dance.18

In the weekly sermon on Sunday morning, Pasteur Gervais confirms to his followers that their destiny in heaven (Li. lola) depends upon their own merits (Li. baweures na yo). He tells them that they will arrive either in heaven or in hell (Li. lifelo)—a destiny which only they choose, not God or the Devil. He goes on to indicate that those who danced the night before to the music of Bawerra19 are likely to go to hell. ‘Bawerra’ is a generic noun he uses often, like Bako or BaJBMpiana. These nouns are based upon the artistic names of Kinshasa’s most popular leaders of urban dance music orchestras. At this moment in the sermon, the spiritual leader (Li. moto ya Nzambe) abandons the French language and continues in Lingala, leaving the translator (Li. mobongoli), who simultaneously interprets the sermons, puzzled. Pasteur Gervais raises his voice as he starts to denounce the songs and dances of these musicians since they are mosa na Satani, accomplishments of the Devil. The Christian community that follows this sermon is highly amused when Pasteur Gervais imitates some of the current urban dances.20 Whilst performing some parts of the dance nzoto ya maman engi (a dance created by the orchestra of Felix Wazekwa) that expresses the delight of the female body, the Pasteur shakes his pelvis and brings his hands to his thighs in the same way that Kinois see on the video clips shown on television. It seems to be a role reversal: the Pasteur is dancing Wazekwa! The amusement is very soon followed by a dramatic outburst on the devilish bonds these musicians have established with God’s rival. Pasteur Gervais shouts in the microphone that Bawerra bandami na milimo mabe. Soki obina dance ya bango, il faut oyeba, okoouvrer porte mpo diable. Akuentee. (These musicians are possessed by demons. If you perform their dances, you should know that you are opening a door for the Devil. He will enter.) The sermon goes on for an hour like this, whilst dwelling upon his contacts with fellow spiritual leaders in Germany, speaking about the miracles he has performed during a recent mission in Gabon, and announcing the collects of money.

This short description of a sermon can be safely regarded as representative for all sermons. Every Sunday morning the Pasteur refers to these ‘worldly musicians’ in his instructions (Li. mateya). He constantly
declares to his followers that there are two kinds of music: bazembo ya mokili (worldly music) and bazembo ya Nzambe (religious music), the first being profane and the second being sacred music. Kinois’ interpretation of ‘profane’ and ‘sacred’ differs from the definition given by Eliade (1959). For Eliade profanity refers to a secular world where no Other divine entity is recognized. Its counterpart, the sacred, refers to a specific experience of the universe as wholly ‘soaked’ in the belief of a mystical, spiritual Other, be it a divine or an occult Other. Today, Kinshasa’s pentecostals use the concept of ‘profane’ for ‘non-believers, non-Christians’, suspected of cooperating with the Devil. Examples of profane persons are traditional healers, their clients, those who do not accept Jesus Christ, and those who are identified as witches. Christians are those who batambola na Jesus, walk with Jesus. They have accepted the power of Jesus, who has sacrificed himself for humanity. Only then can one conquer evil, sickness and distress. Dance and music establish a clear-cut boundary between Christians (Li. bakristu) and pagans (Li. bapaien), between real Christians (Li. bakristu ya solo) and false Christians (Li. bakristu ya nsuni—literally ‘Christians of the flesh’). In Kinshasa’s religious popular culture, this distinction is maintained in powerful ways.

Getting inspired and performing: risky business

Artists, singers, musicians and choreographers are thus located somewhere on the spiritual map outlined by pentecostal leaders. Creating, that is, the act of ‘making’ and ‘conceptualizing’ new dances, songs is not believed to derive from an internal capacity of the individual, but is governed by the invisible. Supernatural power and guidance are the basis of all craftsmanship. It is commonly accepted that the dream (Li. ndoto) is one of the main vehicles for artists to receive inspiration. Depending upon the message transmitted and the popularity of the songs and dances amongst the urbanites, artists are considered to work either with the Devil or with God.

Mostly, it is said that artists ‘see’ the problems of the world (bazomona makambo yo molili). This ‘seeing’, however, is believed to be ‘seeing in the occult invisible’, thus equating the artist with the traditional healer (Li. ngango) and the witch (Li. ndoki). Christian artists, on the other hand, claim to receive their inspiration during praying sessions that are directed towards God, or during dreams that, as they are Christians, are inspired by God. They are opposed to those artists whose work and success is assumed to derive from dark bonds with the occult. Pentecostals make a clear distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ artists,
those whose message is divine and others whose message aids the Devil in destroying Kinshasa and the lives of people. Through his close contact with God, a Christian artist knows what people want to learn. Through him, God reveals.21 This secret knowledge imbues the artist with charismatic power and includes him in the same category of authority as the Pasteur.

Pentecostals are very rigid concerning the artists’ source of inspiration and they state that those who sing about human love, sexuality and violence are not inspired by God, but by the Devil. Moreover, the most successful artists in the city are often regarded as drawing their success from demonic activities (incest, sacrificing their relatives, etc.).22 Christian Kinois even claim that these artists signed pacts with the Devil, and have married demons. These discourses echo traditional approaches towards craftsmanship and artistry that locate creativity in a hidden supernatural realm (cf. d’Azevedo 1973). Christians maintain this thought that creativity does not reside within the individual, but within higher invisible realms, which is then interpreted within the apocalyptic experience. It is said, for example, that the three most successful atalaka of Werrason (WMMM) owe their success to a pact with the Devil. As rumor has it, they were buried in a coffin for three nights in N’Sele, at the outskirts of Kinshasa. A magician (Li. molaki) supposedly asked them to do this in order to receive success (wealth, money and popularity). The shout launched by Roi David, a young atalaka of Werrason, fungola marmite (open the pot) is interpreted as a reference to the witchcraft idiom of cannibalism in which witches cook the souls of their victims.23 Captivating dance movements or musical sequences of secular artists are often said to be ‘mystique’. This concept refers to ‘unaccountable’ events or experiences that must be linked to the monde des ténèbres. An example is the ‘worldly’ dance nkila moyrosso (often translated to me as ‘the big tail’),24 produced by the orchestra of Papa Wemba, which seems to force everybody to dance it—its captivation of the onlookers worries newborn Christians. This name of the dance refers to a man’s genitals and its movements express an orgasm: dancers are engaged in sensuous hip circling, bring their hands to the breasts/chest and distort the face in sexual delight.25 The dance is widely discussed and very popular among the young, but is despised by pentecostals and elders. This kind of overt eroticism and suggestive lyrics are the main reasons why pentecostals disparage urban ‘worldly’ dances, for words and motions are charged with spiritual power.

The inspirational source informs the performers of the dances and their audiences too. As the human body is the temple of God, all
performances have repercussions on a spiritual level. This conquest, when the dancer is possessed (Fr. envoûté, Li. être koloko) takes place in the world of the invisible, but has visible effects: not feeling at ease, failure in anything one undertakes, getting ill, etc. Therefore, pentecostal leaders warn their followers against the spiritual risks they take when dancing secular dances. Even watching video clips of songs of orchestras considered pagan is a dangerous activity. As a result, diehard Christians forbid their children or peers to watch similar music shows or video clips of Bawerra.

The seben in church

Only sacred dances, i.e., dances performed during rituals that glorify God or that seek God’s assistance, are spiritually safe. Having explained how pentecostals perceive the world and how dances and other performances in popular culture are influenced by the invisible, I will now turn to the dance activities within the church itself. What follows is not an exhaustive list of the dances in Kinshasa’s churches. I merely mention the dances that were most often performed in religious gatherings. All these dances create a joyful atmosphere of people dancing and moving together. Singing and dancing make up an important part of the worshipping practices of pentecostals. As I already mentioned, sermons (Li. pl. mateya), prayer gatherings (Li. sg. lisanga ya mabondeli) and other religious meetings always start with praying sessions that routinely lead to dancing moments. In between sermons, songs are sung and, depending on the moto (Fr. chaleur, Eng. the heat) of the moment, dance moments are introduced. The dances in the churches are performed by young and old, men and women. The rhythm, motions and content of the sacred songs and dances are structured in specific ways. The first part of the songs has a quiet rhythm, and the lyrics praise Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. The movements people make during this slower part normally do not go further than waving their right hands in the air (sometimes holding a handkerchief), while touching their heart with their left hand or moving calmly from left to right. It is stated that adoration should be directed to the divine, to entertain God, rather than the Christians themselves. At this point, some Pasteurs who feel reluctant to allow livelier dancing give their musicians small hints to break off the music, in order to continue with the instructions or the spiritual work. In other meetings, the rumba rhythm suddenly stops for a second and then picks up again at a faster pace, punctuated by percussion. This part is called the seben. According to Kinois’
popular memory this is a musical invention of the ‘worldly’ singer Tabu Ley Rochereau. For die-hard Christians, the entrance of the seben and thus the ngwasuma (ambiance) is perceived as evil, and diminishes the adoration of God. When discussing urban dance music, people refer to this moment of the song as ‘the orgiastic moment’, diffusing ngwasuma.

This musical and performative addition to the Christian rituals dates from the early 1990s. In that period, evangelization campaigns mushroomed in the city. To attract new followers, the spiritual leaders had to approach the flourishing popular culture from which they wanted to draw new members. As the seben came to church, some of the worldly dances made their appearance in the ritual spaces as well. The most striking example that I have come across is the sacralization of the ndombolo. Most Kinois—both the musicians and the audience—agree that Tutu Kaludji, the choreographer of JB Mpiana, brought the dance steps onto Kinshasa’s dance scene. Köfi Olomide, one of the main urban singers, is nevertheless called the ‘king of the ndombolo’. Bending the knees deeply whilst sensually circling the pelvis make up the basic movements of the ndombolo, which have later on been complemented by other choreographers with various hand movements, thus birthing new dance steps. This dance spread rapidly in other African countries and sometimes even met with state resistance. In Cameroon and various other African countries, the ndombolo was banned for being too erotic or even obscene. For Kinois, the dance refers either to the way a monkey walks, or is an imitation of the limping Kabila as he entered the city in 1997 after having chased away Mobutu. Still others say ndombolo is a Hindubi! word for herbal drugs that render one’s body control rather difficult. Sexual arousal that might stem from this dance is often laughed away by young Kinois, because, they say, ‘that is the way we, Congolese, dance’. These references to sexuality and drugs render the dance suspect amongst fundamentalist Christian milieus. However, the dance has also entered in the church, albeit masked: accompanying the same gestures by a sacred shout as élève tokeyembela ye tokamisa ye amen (Jesus, we will dance for him, we will praise him) obviously neutralizes the dance and even redirects it towards God.

It is important that neither the music nor the body positions sacralize the dances, but the lyrics sung whilst performing certain body movements render the dance divine. Maloba ezokubulisa seben is said (the word renders the seben sacred). The seben is considered to be part of the praise and the louange (Li. bokembo) of God, because in it, God is worshipped and his good deeds are expressed. Especially in this part of the song, the ambiance becomes thick and less predictable, leading to a mass of
dancing bodies that perform together the same movements and rhythms. At this point, gaiety and sociability grow to a climax. The dances consist of a repetition of simple motions, which continue as long as the *atalaku* (animateur) shouts the cry guiding the choreographies. These shouts are followed by others that lead to new dances. There seems to be no specific sequencing of the dances but it all depends on improvisation, and the inspiration of the moment. When the music calms down, a sudden leap may bring the crowd into total ambiance again. This may go on for a considerable time, giving sometimes the *Pasteur*—often the only one not dancing, as he needs to show the ideal of bodily control (Fr. *maîtrise de soi*)—a hard time to bring the community back to the sermon. Using gentle hand-clapping or making subtle gestures, he begs the musicians to diminish the volume and cool down the rhythm of the music.

**Communitas**

In the first instance, these dances are metaphorical expressions for the Christian group and its boundaries in relation to the world. Newborn Christians’ dances express the social boundaries they set for the society and generate a sense of *communitas*. In the dance *kota na masua na nkolo* (enter into the boat of the lord) it is illustrated how real Christians lead a life totally separate from that of non-Christians. The head moves with a sudden motion to the right whilst the upper body is brought in the opposite direction. This motion is repeated a few times, whilst the upper body is constantly bending a little further forward. The dance refers to the biblical story of Noah’s Ark, when Noah rescued people from the flood. In the dance *tokolanda Jesu* (we will follow Jesus) the worshippers perform the polonaise. They make a long snake-like queue and put their arms upon the shoulders of the person in front of them. It expresses that they all follow the same leader, Jesus. The *Pasteur* usually does not enter this dance, instead it is the *atalaka* who leads the line. In the dance *mena nkolo mena nkolo kolemba te*, the shouter inspires the believers ‘to carry Jesus, carry Jesus, you will not be tired’. In the meantime the Christians bring both arms to the height of their left hip and then to their right shoulder as if taking a baby to the chest. This dance resembles traditional dances imitating a nursing mother. The dance *tolie tokangi etoli ye etoli ye bwaka ye* is a metaphor for healing the group and the individuals. The translation of the shout is ‘we have tied them, we shut them up, we throw them in the desert’, and it speaks about the bad spirits which religious leaders can tame. When discussing
this dance, two of my informants expressed their concern: ‘Can we really send the bad spirits to the deserts, since there are people living there?’ Their uneasiness expressed their belief that dances are not merely entertaining moments in the church, but have real, though invisible, consequences.

Receiving spiritual life

A second aspect of the sacred dances seems to be the key for understanding their popularity. In the first place, pentecostals dance to get in touch with the divine realm, and thus to integrate themselves within this spiritual divine world. Talking to God gives eternal life, it feeds the spirit, is said. Those who do not pray are believed to be spiritually dead. Echoing traditional Bantu beliefs, pentecostals state that God gives life through ‘blowing wind’ into the human body. There is an important distinction between the physical breath which keeps a body alive (Lì. mopepe), and a spiritual breath which gives life to the spirit (Lì. mopepe ya Nzambe). In that sense, everybody is born with a physical breath, but only the ones who accept Jesus, and therefore accept God, receive ‘bomoyi’ or mopepe ya Nzambe (the breath of God). Therefore, children who are not following Jesus’ path, or adult men and women who are not baptized, are considered to be ‘spiritually dead’. Libanda na Yesu bomoyi ezali te, outside of Jesus, there is no life.

It is said of pagans that their spirit walks on the earth: molimo na mupaganu etambola na mokili/na nse. They walk around, but are spiritually dead. Only accepting Jesus reconnects one with the divine source of life. Therefore, the pentecostal individual and community constantly need to be revitalized. Inspiring individuals and collectivities happens primarily through bodily actions that direct the spirit towards God. Through a bodily mediation, the soul makes contact with the divine, resulting in a kind of ‘embodied knowledge’ that is somatic and intuitive and informs about spiritual wisdom and moral behavior. Therefore, the rituals of the pentecostals heavily rely on the manipulation of the body to bring it in touch with a higher realm. Through praying and concentrating upon the Holy Ghost, pentecostals invite the divine into their personal body and get purified in soul and body (Lì. kopetwì).

Many dance movements reflect the power and energy received from God. One example is when the Pasteur shouts nguya, zwa, nguya, zwa (power, take it, power, take it) while bringing both arms next to his ears and moving them in front of his body as if throwing the vital flow. All believers stand up whilst they make the inverse movement, capturing
this vital flow, waving their arms towards their face. This dance expresses the privileged position of the Pasteur, who is seen as an intermediary between God and humans. It also dramatizes the wind-like character of this power. Another dance is called nguya ekiti nguya ekiti nguya ekiti (the spirit of God descended). People forcefully throw their arms open and clap their hands twice. Then, they throw their right foot forward and shake their hips. This is a very popular dance but not all Pasteurs or Christians approve of it, because it is said to be inspired by the worldly dance ‘zitutala zitutala maman yeba kentu bальная zitutala ye’ (this is Kikongo for ‘watch that girl how she moves her pelvis’).

Conclusion

The performances discussed above confirm that symbolic aesthetic structures ‘are not merely processes of representation, but formations that can powerfully intervene in situations radically organizing or reconstituting the conditions of experience’ (Kapferer and Hobart 2005: 14). The dances that I discussed establish a spiritual revitalization of the individual and of the community as a whole. The divine becomes incorporated through bodily movement patterns, instrumental music and sacred lyrics. In this process, the Christian is transformed. His spirit has left the worldly realm and is in close contact with the Holy Spirit. This transformation fortifies both in a mental and a physical way. Dances are thus also ‘social medicine’ (cf. Daniels 2003). Besides the movements, what seems to be of crucial importance is not the music, but the lyrics that accompany the sounds. It is believed that the lyrics connect the believer with the divine through a spiritual orientation that directs the mental concentration towards the ultimate Other. The two main thoughts expressed in these dances are the spiritual transmission of the life force and the social distinction of the Christian group from the non-Christians, from those that do not walk with God. Thus, dances seem not just to express this communitas in a metaphoric way, but also to create this communitas. The imagined Christian community becomes embodied in the dance that is led by sacred words. And, in the meantime, this group is constantly fed with ‘life’.

The discussion of the politics of dance has focused on the movements of dance and on the discourse around urban dances as a means to celebrate God and erect powerful boundaries between fundamentalist Christians and others within the city. Through heated sermons on the role of secular dance movements and songs within the general spiritual
battle, the pentecostal leaders try to manage the private lives of their followers. Performing dances accompanied by religious shouts is an integral part of the spiritual work of pentecostals, whilst dancing to music of Bawerra is regarded as celebrating the Devil. Yet, when taking a closer look at the structure of the songs and some dance motions, it would be spurious to make clear-cut distinctions between secular and sacred dances. All the dances and the discourses surrounding them are only intelligible when taking into account the spiritual realities that are evoked through the combination of setting (bar/church) and lyrics (sexuality, human love, violence/God’s power and love).

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. I thank Filip De Boeck, Peter Grossman and the anonymous reviewer of the Journal of Religion in Africa for their help. I am also very grateful to the community of La Montaigne Sainte, its spiritual leaders, and the Cinarc actors, especially Ance Luzolo, who invited me to dance with them.

2. I prefer to write pentecostal and charismatic in lower case to distance Kinshasa’s pentecostal-charismatic Christianity from any historical movement. These adjectives denote a particular form of Christianity influenced by the historical (Neo-)Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, but, at least institutionally, the people I write about do not belong to them. They embrace the beliefs and practices of the [Neo-]Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, and therefore claim these names to identify themselves.


5. There are several mosques in Kinshasa, but most Muslims in the city are of foreign origin (Lebanese, West African, etc.). I encountered one young man who had ‘tried’ Islam in between diverging Christian churches. It was a step in his path for spiritual growth.

6. I use the concept Pentecostalism because my informants denominated themselves rather as des Pentecôtistes instead of des neo-Pentecôtistes. I am aware of the general use of Neo-Pentecostalism to indicate Pentecostalism as it re-originated in the United States during the sixties. Notwithstanding, I prefer to remain as close as possible to the local uses and denominations.

7. (in the community Kasa-Vubu), near the location of one of Kinshasa’s currently most important churches, L’Armée de l’Eternel (headed by General Sony Kafuta).

8. The charismatic movement or renewal originated within the main churches (Protestantism and Catholicism) during the 1950s in the USA, and transformed Christianity in Africa to a high degree. Influenced by Pentecostalism, it is rather difficult to make a clear distinction between these two derivations of Christianity. It is generally accepted
that these two movements differ on (a) the phenomenon of ‘speaking in tongues’ (rejected by most charismatics), and (b) in their origins.


10. The religious leaders instruct their followers also on political matters. As President Joseph Kabila recognized the pentecostal-charismatic churches organized in the Ligue des Églises de Réveil (ERC—this could be translated as the League of ‘Churches of the Awakening’) as institutions of an official religion (besides Catholicism, Kimbanguism, Protestantism and Islam), these leaders express during the sermons their appreciation for Joseph Kabila and his political party, PPRD. Other pentecostal-charismatic leaders of churches that are not affiliated with this platform denounce Kabila’s politics both in public as in their churches. The latter regularly meet with political resistance as for example Pasteur Kutinho, leader of the church Armée de Victoire. (This article was written before the 2006 elections.)

11. CEMMS is an abbreviation for Centre Evangélique et Missionnaire La Montagne Sainte.

12. The biggest independent Christian church in Lemba. It sprang out of a local prayer group, and was created immediately after Mobutu had left the country. The leader of this church is a member of the board of the ERC-platform.


14. Intercessors are ardent Christians who invest much time in helping the local praying community grow spiritually. Often, they perform organizational tasks during religious rituals, and pray for others during special sessions.

15. Each time the troupe would start the production of a new serial, they withdrew in maquis. This seclusion lasted normally two to three days and was used to fortify the actors’ spirits, as their dramatic work intended to reveal the works of the Devil. This maquis usually took place in so-called sacred spaces, mostly compounds of befriended Pasteurs or church compounds. The troupe was thus not confined to the settings of their own church.

16. The movement of jumping up and down seemed to be inspired by the Pende traditional dancing style.

17. Military dances have a long history in Africa. Cf. Ranger (1975) on the Beni-dance which is inspired by the military parade.

18. These data were gathered on March 7, 2004.

19. ‘Bawerra’ is a generic noun based upon the name of one of Kinshasa’s most popular urban singers, Werrason, leader of Wenge Musica Maison Mère (WMMM).

20. These dances are normally short (two to three minutes) sequences of a few limited basic body movements that are repeated a few times.

21. Csordas (1994) rationalizes the ‘mystical knowledge’ of charismatic persons and locates it within the habitus.

22. Kinois display the same attitude towards politicians, sportsmen and other successful leaders in society.

23. In the générique of the CD Alert Générale.

24. Obviously, the dance refers to a phallus. Lambio Lambio, perceived as the creator of this dance, told me that when a girl dances this dance she should express her astonishment about the shape of her lover’s penis.

25. According to Filip De Boeck, ndala stems from the Swahili word kulima (mountain) and then the dance would evocate breasts (personal communication, March 2006). This gives another interpretation to the dance—a masculine interpretation whilst my informant might have been biased by my female identity and then explained the dance from a female point of view.

26. Hindubll is the name of the slang language that is used today in Kinshasa, especially by young men. The name refers to the phenomenon of Billies that originated during colonial times and was influenced by a new model of masculinity that was introduced through cinema (cf. De Boeck 2004: 36-39).

28. Bill Clinton, atalaka for the orchestra Wenge Musica Maison Mère led by Werrason, used the same movement in one of his dances.

29. Cf. Turner (1982) who writes about the dialectic working of performing and learning, which gradually leads to a transformation.