

## CENTERING AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE PRINCIPLES IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE

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### **Abstract**

This article interferes with the problems posed by contemporary dance paradigms rooted in dominant Western epistemologies as illustrative of a persistent ethnocentric and narrow discourse that portrays imperialist ambitions and related exclusionary practice, which triggers skepticism amongst Africans. Alternatively, it suggests that contemporary dance be conceptualized as a cosmopolitan dance form influenced by a variety of geocultural dance styles, amongst which African traditional dances, as a perspective for circumventing and decentering this domination. Grounded in qualitative research supported by Fanon's postcolonial cosmopolitanism, the paper models what colonial contradiction reading might offer, showing how once trash and outlawed African traditional dance principles were transposed into contemporary dance. Results show the destabilization of Africans to connect with contemporary dance is rooted in Western hegemony that disempowered African traditional dances during colonization. However, the integration of these traditional dance principles confirms African presence in contemporary dance and more importantly challenges the dominant Western epistemology. As such, from colonialism to cosmopolitanism, both African and Western cultures are interconnected in the fashioning of contemporary dance. The presence of heterogeneous dance aesthetics in contemporary dance establishes a flexible counter-discourse of this practice which owes its legacy to the global human community with which it shares a history entrenched in cosmopolitanism. Thus, a sense of belonging is important to engage Africans in the canon, and the fact that the characteristics of contemporary dance are also embedded in African traditional dances could strengthen communities, distance Africans from the many quarrels linked to this denomination, and push them to dig more into the richness of African dances to question the new Africa and join the new cosmopolitan project of cultural globalization.

**Key words:** contemporary dance; African traditional dances; postcolonial cosmopolitanism; decolonization; aesthetics

**Introduction**

'I am a citizen of the world (Kosmopolitês).' This famous saying of Diogenes of Sinope (C. 412 B.C.E) founder of the Cynic philosophy is shared in the political, social, cultural, philosophical, and artistic discourse of Western, world traditions and cultures. Cosmopolitanism is generally associated with the idea that 'all humanity should belong to a single community which transcends other forms of allegiance, [...]' (Binnie, et al., 2009: 307); and is specifically characterized by 'a position of openness and or tolerance towards the ideas and values of distinct others.' (Huon, 2015: 41) However, colonialism is perhaps one of its contradictory manifestations though it was an essential element of modernity notably in the domains of arts, literature, film, and dance. Modernist and avant-garde artists put to profit the discovery of other cultures as a cosmopolitan perspective in their aesthetic and creative process. As such, dance witnessed a tremendous development in the early twentieth century, and gave cosmopolitanism another advantage: dancers and choreographers conceptualized dance as a space that embraces freedom, and goes beyond the limits of the human body, space, expressions, and feelings. This philosophy is highlighted in cosmopolitanism.

Currently, due to substantial concerns about the increasing impact of globalization, wars, and crisis; cosmopolitanism is undeniably an 'object of research and reflection across a very wide range of disciplines' (Delanty, 2012:1). One of such discipline is culture; and a field where cosmopolitanism is noticeable is dance studies. For instance, scholars have addressed it in the framework of racialized discourse in rapport with the performance of salsa. This is the case with Chang (2020), Boulila (2017), and Pine (2015) who respectively acknowledged salsa to be cosmopolitan though they articulate its corporeal and racial implications in the context of globalization divergently.

Since the twentieth century, the world has been witnessing a revolutionary process and contemporary dance is one of its

manifestations. Just like cosmopolitanism, contemporary dance is a concept that has provoked much controversy. Undoubtedly, this expression is central in dance historical developments as countries around the globe experiment with it differently. Though there are many conceptions of the term “contemporary dance” there is no accurate agreement about its definition. The choreographer Moriah Evans says it is a ‘functional catch-all’ phrase used fairly indiscriminately, meaning many things to different dance communities worldwide.

Nonetheless, the general definition given by *Le Moal (1999: 705-706)* in *Dictionnaire de la Danse* reads thus: ‘Contemporary dance is a genre of dance performance that developed during the mid-twentieth century and has since grown to become one of the dominant genres for formally trained dancers throughout the world, with particularly strong popularity in the U.S. and Europe.’ This definition is problematic at two levels. First, it is debatable to circumscribe contemporary dance in terms of time ‘mid-twentieth century’ though the word “contemporary” itself has to do with time. Secondly, the dominant spatial location ‘U.S. and Europe’ is narrow-minded, and limiting and reveals a hierarchical order that comes with the geocultural organization reality. As it is always informed through the frame of borrowed knowledge from classical, modern, and jazz styles (*Scheff et al., 2010: 87*), contemporary dance outside a Western context often seems outdated (*Barba, 2019*).

Though contemporary dance has a historical landmark, the idea is still being developed. Locating this dance form in a specific time and place produces dominant discourses that exclude others (*Ivina, 2004*). It also puts to the fore a sentiment of superiority rooted in Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. *Kwan (2017)* reticence about the use of the term “contemporary” alongside other forms of dance depicts the idea of Western epistemological domination in the binary high/low; superior/inferior, of contemporary dance. She claims that:

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Placing multiple uses of the term “contemporary” alongside one another can provide insight into the ways that “high art” dance, popular dance, and non-western dance are increasingly wrapped up with each other and, at the same time, the ways that their separations reveal our artistic, cultural, and political prejudices, as well as the forces of the market. (Kwan, 2017: 38)

In most scholarships, the embodied knowledge of contemporary dance is highlighted through this hierarchy as it addresses the post-racial discourse that is fixed within the context of contemporary dance appropriation by non-western communities. (DeFrantz, 2004; Dixon, 1990) Scholars must entangle this quintessence while cultivating consciousness of multiple and equal influences.

Besides, though the concept of contemporary dance is debated within decolonization scholarships, failure to address the cosmopolitan relationships that involve the demands posed by decolonization has triggered skepticism as well as disbelief regarding the acceptance of contemporary dance in Africa as a dance genre free from imperial agenda. This failure to address the cosmopolitan nature of contemporary dance requires a rethinking of contemporary dance conceptualization by re-centering differences through the particularities of contemporary dance interdependency rather than its generalities as a Western-born practice. Such reconsideration supposes admitting that contemporary dance is enriched and built upon non-Western corporeal experiences. In other words, questioning this predominance implies reaffirming that contemporary dance is the product of a variety of body techniques and aesthetics informed by the richness of dances of the world and through which any culture around the globe can depict its cultural essence. (Foster, 1986)

In this regard, I am attempting to show that contemporary dance that originated from Europe and the United States is a cosmopolitan dance that has been influenced by a variety of geocultural dance principles. African traditional dances are one of such dances. The problem arises

when the dominant Westernization of contemporary dance puts a veil on this influence. The implication of this position is not negligible. To concede that contemporary dance originated in the West would mean accepting that it is a specific kind of Western dance whose globalization entails a Western cultural alienated practice (Sörgel, 2011: 84) and that non-westerners like Africans are appropriating it (Bhabha, 1994). This pushes us to examine how a cosmopolitan study of contemporary dance can position African traditional dance principles and aesthetics in the early development of this dance to counterattack the above implication.

### **On the African presence in contemporary dance**

Questioning the presence of African traditional dances in contemporary dance is not new. Wajid-Ali (2016: 1-2) after watching Frosch's (2007) documentary film reveals:

The presence of African dance can be felt all over the world. Yet, how aware are we of its presence? While this film highlights the talents of selected artists, I couldn't help but wonder why I have heard of only one of them, U.S.-based Nora Chipaumarie. I happened to spot her picture in a small column in Dance Magazine once, and only once, which is surprising for a magazine that promotes artists from all over the world. I believe every corner of the world has been touched by African dance in some way, and yet, very little credit is given to the magnitude of African contribution to global culture. [...]

Her attitude suggests the necessity to redefine contemporary dance within the interconnection of cultures. Although significant research on contemporary dance decolonization has been made, the psychological impact of colonization on Africans remains a stumbling block. Researchers have in varied ways approved that African dance techniques can be traced in contemporary dance. One of such literature is Dixon-Gottschild's (1996) ground-breaking work. In this research, she asserts that the Africanist aesthetic has been "invisibilized" by the pervasive force of racism. The foregoing article is a continuation of this discourse. Although the idea of the discussion might look alike (i.e. the invisibility

of African traditional dance influences), contrary to her, who examined Africanist presence in American dance, using as an example George Balachine's Americanized style of ballet, I delineate African traditional dance principles, techniques and aesthetics to generate other considerations and show how these dances, which were contradicted by the colonizers, participated in building corporeal cosmopolitanism which is inherent in contemporary dance.

It has been noticed that scholarship on dance decolonization continues to address the colonial body and the white gaze through the lenses of contemporary dance as a Western alienated practice which non-western communities have appropriated (Bhabha, 1994) to narrate a shared and collective history that colonial amnesia suppressed to de-historicize colonized subjects (Dixon, 1990; Belghiti, 2012; Rani, 2018; Sörgel, 2020; DeFrantz, 2021). Contrarily, this study examines contemporary dance as a space where the body performs a transcultural experience as an embodiment of cosmopolitanism. I contend that contemporary dance cannot be the preserve of Westerners intended to be appropriated by others to tell a communal history inscribed in a Western policy of cosmopolitanism. Comparatively, I argue that since its creation, contemporary dance has been of cosmopolitan essence insofar as its particularity stems from the encounter of several diverse cultural dance experiences from all over the world. This position is to reorient and suggest that contemporary dance be conceptualized as a cosmopolitan dance form in essence as a perspective for circumventing and decentering Western epistemological domination. As such, the study seeks to show that, during colonization, Westerners appropriated African traditional dance techniques to create a contemporary dance that produces an enunciative presence of a cosmopolitan dance.

This article is qualitative research that is not aimed at tracing the history of contemporary dance in Africa. Rather, it critically examines how the presence of African traditional dance principles in contemporary dance is

one of the manifestations of contemporary dance cosmopolitanism. The methodological basis consisted of using secondary data to elaborate thematic analysis that supports the arguments addressed herein (Berg 2012). The investigation is backed by Fanon's understanding of decolonization and cosmopolitanism (Fanon, 1968). As such, I begin with a review of contemporary dance and Africa to expose researchers' reflections on this dance form within the continent. I continue to elaborate on Fanon's postcolonial cosmopolitanism and its implications in dance. Amongst the different contradictions Fanon outlined as far as colonialism is concerned, that which has to do with cultural brutality and dehumanizing is further examined in the dance context before showing how in revenge these contradictions later trapped the West in its Cultural Revolution process. From there, I outline the principles of African traditional dances that are rooted in contemporary dance to support the idea of its cosmopolitanism.

### **Africa and contemporary dance: an appraisal**

The term "Contemporary dance" was officially introduced in Africa in the 1990s through a vast campaign involving Western cosmopolitan objectives through cultural organizations and dance professional artists conjoint with the efforts of African choreographers and researchers who had studied abroad, bringing with them their background experience. Since contemporary dance is dominantly conceptualized as a Western construct based on Western frameworks in dance creation and discourse, its eventual practice in Africa sets a thrilling but controversial ground for artistic creation. While it is clear that Western influences have streamed into some African traditional dances, a form of contemporary dance has arisen out of the different positions taken by African dance artists in their search for a postcolonial Africa.

In the documentary film "Movement (R)Evolution Africa" directed by Joan Frosch (2007), Frosch reveals how African dance artists are involved in new forms of expression. He redefines existing definitions of African

artistry, unwraps colonial stereotypes, and discloses the presence of current African contemporary artists. Among the artists featured in the film are **Company Kongo Ba Téria** (Burkina Faso), **Faustin Linyekula and Studios Kabako** (Democratic Republic of Congo), **Company Rary** (Madagascar), **Sello Pesa** (South Africa), **Company Tchétché** (Côte d'Ivoire), **Company Raiz di Polon** (Cape Verde), **Company Jant Bi** (Senegal) and **Kota Yamazaki** (Japan), **Nora Chipaumire** (Zimbabwe), **Jawole Willa Jo Zollar** and members of **Urban Bush Women** (USA). The film has the credit of escalating Western audiences' knowledge about contemporary dance African artists and their respective creative processes. Challenging the idea that African dances exist only as a traditional form, Frosch presents African dances as relevant forms that are not time-frozen. He puts forth noticeable dance artists from different African countries who credibly claim that their movement should be conceptualized as contemporary dance because they are creating new works that speak of their current environment.

Salia Sanou (2008: 26) argues that 'it is the life of today that we are dancing', by suggesting the concept of creative dance in opposition to the problematic "African contemporary dance". To this end, Sörgel (2011) thinks that though Salia Sanou's 'choreographic quest that creates new epistemologies of creativity and freedom between tradition and (post)modernity [...] confirms Western hegemony to some extent, it undermines prevalent discourse of inferiority/superiority [...]' which unfortunately deprived Africans from considering themselves as part of the cosmopolitan agency rooted in contemporary dance.

Of course, Sieveking and Andrieu (2019 : 3) appropriately point out that most African dancers and choreographers:

Reject the racialized 'ethnic' labels "African contemporary dance" or "contemporary African dance". Moreover, reacting against critical voices who perceive contemporary choreography in Africa as a mere copy of Western dance styles if not as an imposition by French agencies for



“cultural cooperation”, they refuse to adopt pre-determined norms for defining the contemporary genre.

This is to say contemporary dance is yet to be embraced by Africans despite the presence of numerous dance companies that share the denomination and practice it (Becker 2008; Belting 2009). This might be because of permanent inferences of colonial educational policies that make them adopt an art form that expresses their cultural heritage without a full understanding (Rani 2018: 312). It can also be because ‘no sooner do they answer the call and claim their spot than the symbolic order brutally reminds them that they are not part of everyone.’ (Hage 2010: 122) This feeling is reinforced by the fact that to Africans, contemporary dance is a manifestation of the postcolony materialized by a culture of capitalist necropolitics where colonial modernity is expressive (Mbembe 2003; De Boeck and Plissart 2005).

Worst, it is believed that the persistent funding of contemporary dance companies by Western cultural institutes and organizations, and not by the national cultural policies, solidifies their exclusion and translates a cunning strategy to maintain a dominant Westernization of contemporary dance since the hand that gives is above the one that receives. This distrust is coupled with the fact that the term is mainly used in major dance hubs in the United States and Europe and the dominant contemporary dance paradigms are deeply rooted in references that put to the fore Western choreographers such as Merce Cunningham, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Maurice Berjart, Alwin Nikolais. Wajid-Ali (2016: 2) explains that:

Many mainstream media outlets in America tend to highlight accomplishments made by white, Caucasian, and/or European artists. Very few of these accolades are given to people of color. This quandary cannot be resolved in a single moment, since it is a difficult and complex question to grapple with: [...]

This domination is an expression of a structurally built, Western-centric mindset that veils the techniques and aesthetics that were inspired by African traditional dances.

Nonetheless, many dance scholars have put efforts to connect Africans to this dance by addressing how contemporary Black/African choreographers struggle to narrate the colonial body through the staging of a collective history (DeFrantz, 2021; Sörgel, 2020) which colonialism crushed to de-historicize colonized subjects and mutilate their cultures; and show how the white gaze paradigm has to an extent put weight on dancing bodies (Sörgel, 2011; Demerson, 2021). In a way, these authors concede that ‘The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally’ (Hooks, 1992:116). Despite ground-breaking works like those of Alphonse Tiérou (1992; 2001), Zab Maboungou (2014), and Germaine Acogny (1980), African audiences continue to find difficulties in associating with contemporary dance. (Rani, 2018: 311) Sörgel (2020:153) asserts that “artists from the African continent and across the diaspora who take on the global must negotiate the complexity of their subjectivity in an upfront encounter that attacks the power of white aesthetics in dance.” It is thus critical to discuss African dance aesthetics, not just as innate to the continent but as effective decolonial tools.

Following these determinations, Dixon (1990: 117) wondered if it were necessary that ‘the Black roots of a particular dance be reaffirmed publicly, [...]’ Earlier, Foucault (1969: 61) was indignant at the renewal of knowledge and said ‘We cannot talk about anything at any time.’ It is essential to renew knowledge as far as African dances and contemporary dance are concerned. It is a way of updating a ‘critical reflection that leads to action.’ (Freire, 1970: 123) It would be wrong to believe that racial bias and discrimination are old issues whereas they are intimately rooted in dance. Since the 2020 resurgence of The Movement for Black Lives (Buchanan, 2020), the topic has been updated and concepts like

Africanistic, afrocentricity, Afroliteracy, afro-pessimism, afro-futurism are gaining more space to specify that Blacks/Africans matters (Haitzinger, 2017; Dixon-Gottschild, 1996; Wilson, 2022).

Amplifying African presence in this genre is significant and necessary. Like any other sector, the dance community has its role in anti-racism, and anti-cosmopolitanism to do and *uninvisibilize* marginalized art aesthetics, and histories, and use dance to build a cosmopolitan world. While some contemporary discourses continue to reiterate stereotypical views on contemporary dance as a Western expression of colonial modernity and African dances as being tribal, primitive, sensual, and exotic, updating and paying attention to the presence of these dances in contemporary dance is a contribution to scholarships on dance cosmopolitan epistemology as strengthened by Sörgel (2011: 91) in her exploration of ‘transnationalism’ in Faustin Linyekula’s artistic and creative process. According to this author, the Congolese choreographer, Linyekula, ‘establishes a sense of communal belonging beyond national confines and thereby creates the possibility for a deterritorialized transnational politics to emerge.’

Thus, the case in point is a postcolonial study that foregrounds the aesthetics of African traditional dances that are integrated into contemporary dance, eventually proving that these dances which were disapproved during colonization finally saw their valorization in contemporary dance and contributed to its cosmopolitan nature. Accordingly, on the one hand, African dancers and choreographers struggle to have a denomination that might alleviate Western hegemonic epistemology afflictions over contemporary dance. On the other hand, this struggle rather strengthens ‘partial cosmopolitanism’ as well as a ‘hard-core cosmopolitanism’ characterized by a frozen open-mindedness which might instead continue to pave the way for racialized discourses derailed by postcolonial cosmopolitanism.

**Decolonization, dance, and Fanon's postcolonial cosmopolitanism**

The issue of colonialism and cosmopolitanism has raised pertinent questions about the essence of these terms. If some scholars consider colonialism as a momentary eccentricity about current concern about cosmopolitanism, others see colonialism as a negative force working against it (Sluga and Horne, 2010; Gilroy, 2004). Critiques have been made on cosmopolitanism for spreading particular Western hegemonies, and the notion is gradually being re-examined and deeply updated by postcolonial theories. From 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Bhabha, 1992) passing through Appiah's (2006) 'rooted cosmopolitanism', and Appadurai's (2013) 'cosmopolitanism from below', contemporary postcolonial concerns of cosmopolitanism revolve around the conflicting nature of the concomitance of the local and the global as presented by Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. However, this 'resurgent cosmopolitanism' (Vadde, 2009: 524) has not succeeded in showing how though colonialism was an agency against cosmopolitanism it became reproductive of it, notably through artistic manifestations like dance. To this end, Frantz Fanon gives discernment.

'Any colonial study should integrate the phenomena of dance and possession' (Fanon 1968: 56). It is with these words that Fanon showed his interest in dance in postcolonial studies. There is no doubt, that a momentous postcolonial perspective of a dance of non-Western communities emphasizes race, gender, and sex of otherness. Unfortunately, these perspectives are more descriptive and consequently limited analytically and critically (Featherstone, 2005; Nava, 2007). Although established postcolonial theories evoked dance through the colonizer's hegemony and gaze (Said, 1978) or the silencing of the subaltern dancing bodies as other (Spivak, 1999); including Bhaba's (1994) description of the role dance plays in nation formation, Fanon's statement prompts us to 'begin again' (Said, 1975: 3) a different

investigation about decolonization issues from the viewpoint of dance cosmopolitanism.

Though Fanon's discussion on dance generates negative connotations and could be considered hostile, he thinks that 'dance deserves to be enlisted, alongside what he terms "combat literature", as a kind of "combat dance" in the continuing fight against racial discrimination and oppression.' (Hall, 2012: 286) This entails dance should enter into a transformative process that builds space for communal sharing, influences, and understanding of human contacts and exchanges. This idea is developed in Fanon's decolonization vision. Here are his core arguments:

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (Fanon, 1968: 36)

Fanon contends the necessity to turn towards the future rather than repeating the past. To him, decolonization is the creation of a new human being, resistant to the hierarchization of humanity into a racial or cultural "center". Today, more than ever, when the neoliberal capitalistic system is establishing barriers, reminiscent of what Fanon (36) named a [colonial] world divided into compartments", between people worldwide according to economic class, we need to embrace Fanon's vision of a one, indivisible humanity.

He claims that decolonization is embedded in transformation:

The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former values and shapes; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form or the content of

the people's culture. [...] This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others. (245-246)

This excerpt puts to the fore Fanon's perspective of postcolonial culture 'in the context of global concerns.' (Delanty and He, 2008: 324) as expressed in Delanty's (2009) 'critical cosmopolitanism' that specifies a self-transformation framed through encounters with others. In other words, a cosmopolitan responsiveness reproduces transformational practices that appreciate identity and culture as fluid concepts acknowledging that a globally connected world should create solutions to ameliorate the relationship between the self and others and enhance change within the broader scope of society. Authors like Duncan and Juncker (2004: 8) talked of transnationalism. According to them:

Transnationalism involves a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe. As people make transnational voyages and live lives of flexible citizenship in two or more cultures, they adhere to a new type of nationalism that creates an exclusionist discourse and builds 'the other' as conservative defenders of cruder territorial loyalties.

Fanon has developed a colonial production of cosmopolitanism that is detached from Eurocentric perspectives of the concept. If colonialism has been recognized as a non-standard initiative in the history of cosmopolitanism, Fanon discloses how this hegemonic enterprise contributed to a particular form of cosmopolitanism known as postcolonial cosmopolitanism. According to Go (2013: 208), this form of cosmopolitanism accentuates 'global citizenship and humanism but strives to remember rather than repress the history of modern empire. It seeks to negate colonialism's contradictions [...]

The conceptualization of contemporary dance as a cosmopolitan practice grounded upon Fanon's postcolonial cosmopolitan goal means accepting the integration of differences. Contemporary dance is the result of the contradictions yet the interconnectedness brought by colonization. It can

be defined as the fusion of the principles of tradition and modernity characterized by encounters, innovation, rejection, globalization, and rupture with radicalism. Despres (2012: 120) maintains: "Transgressions, breaks with past conventions, diversions, innovations, are part of a process of perpetual renewal of aesthetic codes and testing of the boundaries of choreographic art - which constitute henceforth the rule for the production of so-called contemporary works". As such, embodying postcolonial cosmopolitanism in this study can be understood as an initiative to engage in showing how the contradictions related to colonialism are developed in an idealized recognition of contemporary dance as being exempted from national prejudices because it is the manifestation of the embodiment of the coexistence of specific dancing cultures.

As such, Fanon's postcolonial cosmopolitanism offers us a possibility of considering colonialism from a double perspective; first of all, as an agency against cosmopolitanism; and secondly as a generative of cosmopolitanism. One of the specificities of this perspective lies in the fact that the West saw in the "trash" [African traditional dances] the conditions of its regeneration' (Despres 2012: 121). In this sense, borrowing the metaphor of 'trash', we examine how African traditional dances formerly considered as 'trash', understood here as useless/savage, within colonial historical dynamics, negations, contradictions, and fissures, became one of the cornerstones of choreographic renewal entrenched in cosmopolitan thinking of contemporary dance. This implies elaborating a counter-discourse that distant contemporary dance decolonization from an inferior/superior perspective where African choreographers elaborate efforts to appropriate this genre.

**In the beginning, they were just 'trashes': incongruity**

The nostalgia of what African traditional dances were is still present in the hearts of Africans. As we have seen above, Africans are reluctant to

abide by contemporary dance because of Western dominant paradigms that surround it and Africans have constantly been interrupted by systems of oppression that continue to make them feel inferior. For example, Hegel (1956: 91-99) claimed that:

Africa is the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night. [...] For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. [...] What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical, underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of Mother Nature.

This citation describes how African dances were built on centuries of Western judgment and misunderstanding. In fact, because of a Eurocentric essentialist definition of what dance could be, colonizers considered African dances as primitive and imitative dances not intended to be observed by spectators, but to control animals, spirits, gods, and enemies (Martin, 1967: 78). African dances were thought to be void of any aesthetics and performed without conscious artistic considerations. These ethnocentric attitudes were symbolic violence perpetrated over the colonized that, despite themselves, could not challenge the colonizers and defend the technical and aesthetic values of these dances. Sir Rex, in (Asante, 2002: xv) writes:

[...] what are superior and what inferior, what is aesthetically acceptable, and what forbidden [...] Needless to say, in the world of colonizer-colonized the dance and all other artistic expressions of the overlord take precedence over those of the subjugated which have been frozen at the base of some rigid and arbitrary cultural pyramid.

The colonizers' oppression was nurtured for example by the belief that the use of dancing objects such as masks (Figure 1) and ponytails served to camouflage the lack of technique. For them, it was simply 'unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque irrelevant corners of the globe' (Trevor-Roper, 1963: 871).





*Figure 1: Dancers with masks in the shape of the head of a buffalo and a bird performing a warrior dance during the Nja festival, a traditional Bamoum festival, in the 1900s. © Marie-Pauline Thorbecke, January 1912, photographs of the Bamoum country, West African kingdom 1902-1915.*

Nevertheless, what the colonizers did not understand was that in Africa the language of masks goes beyond mere disguise. Indeed, in the execution of a dance, the dancer lends his body to the mask to give it life, and ‘testimony to man's respect for the Universe’ (Tiérou, 1989: 31). In other words, in traditional African dances, mime has no place.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, according to certain Western paradigms, the costume was an encumbrance that weighs down the virtuosity of the dancer's body; movement was broken by the materiality of the costumes and caused the dance to lose its aesthetics.

Indeed, African dance costumes were considered as camouflage, which disapproved of the ‘purity’ of the body in its most ‘natural’ form (Faure, 2000: 75). Paradoxically, the nude dance of the Fali women of the Bosoum tribe in Cameroon (Figure 2) which was the authentic expression of their culture was termed wild and considered a primitive manifestation of African culture.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Alphonse Tiérou (1989: 53) the spirit of the dance is the essential link for the dissemination of the dancer's message.



*Figure 2: Dance of the Leuru Benleng rite among the Fali of Bossoum Cameroon, 1940s. © Michel Huet (1994:96).*

Colonialism in a brutal way excluded traditional creativity and aesthetic epistemologies. It should be noted that this attitude was contrary to the cosmopolitan and civilizing mission colonizers claimed they were carrying. This contradiction was thus expressed through disrespect regarding what they called primitive dances. Fanon rightly expresses his disappointment through this relevant contradiction:

The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the natives mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him. [...] That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind [. . .] When I search for Man in the technique and style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man and an avalanche of murders. (Fanon, 1968: 312)

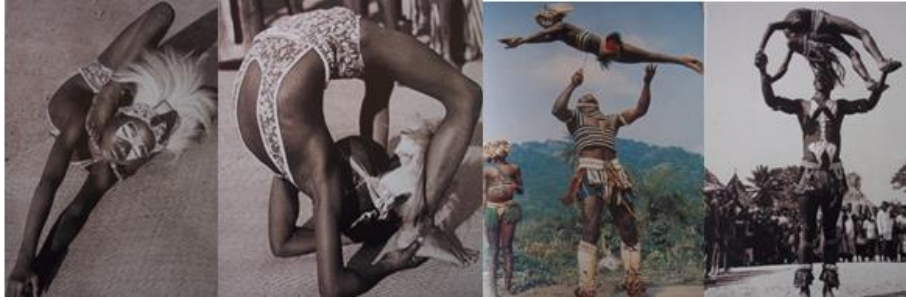
Nevertheless, following this standpoint, Fanon's position puts to light the saying 'Such is taken who thought he was taking.' This can be fully applied to the development of contemporary dance since during colonialism, while the colonizers wanted to play the most cunning

towards African traditional dances; they ended up being trapped. Though they considered African traditional dances to be 'trash', non-artistic, lack in aesthetics, they finally used the techniques of these dances to deconstruct their cherished classical and propose a modern and contemporary way of apprehending the dancing body and fine meaning in other forms of accouterments.

### **Endowing African traditional dances aesthetics**

As Gonye and Moyo (2015: 69) put it, African dance performances are not only an expression of cultural heritage but also a 'countercultural response to colonialism.' The desire to create, to imagine, comes after the traditional know-how of a people. Talking about American culture, Defrantz (2004: 22) argues that 'Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities.' And citing Fanon, Defrantz (35) writes 'the Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.' Indeed, would it be wrong to say that it was cunning to think that Africans had no notion of dance when the colonialists considered *entremets* dances as ballet? Prunières (1914) says apropos: 'The *entremets ballet* is a figurative dance, performed by costumed characters, accomplishing certain evolutions determined in advance and [...] punctuated by music.'

Backing my opinion with D'Udine's (1921:7) definition of dance: 'Dance is the translation, through measured gestures, of feelings and human passions; it is the enhancement of physical beauty through attitudes and rhythmic movements; it is the arrangement of collective evolutions into decorative and harmonious figures.', it can be affirmed that Africans practiced thoughtful and organized dances before the colonizers. Besides, they had the knowledge and the capacity to use the human body to exteriorize a latent state about the natural laws governing gravity and rhythm in a reasoned aesthetic. The body in space and the awareness of rhythm are aesthetical dimensions that fasten African traditional dances. (Figure 3)



*Figure 3 : Acrobatic dance of Simbo, Côte d'Ivoire. © Michel Huet (1994: 60).*

Asante (2001:146) identifies seven African aesthetic senses. These include: “polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, holism, and repetition.” The body is the very instrument of dance which makes it possible to produce this aesthetic and find direct contact with nature. In traditional dances, the bodies occupy and draw space in various ways. Movement techniques and space occupations go from the *Sin* (line in single file) to gradually form the *Sahan* (circle) (Tiérou, 1989). In Figure 4, the dancers are displaced in “*Djiba in the sahan*”, meaning in a circle and looking towards the center.



*Figure 4: Matakam Women's harvest dance, Oudjila region, Cameroon, from left to right, before and After colonization. © Michel Huet (1994: 101)*



*Figure 5: Dance of the men of the rain clan, Samo, Burkina Faso, 1940s.  
© Michel Huet (1994: 57).*

In Figure 5, the *Plo*<sup>2</sup> is the dominant technique. The dancers, who are uniformly and richly dressed, stand side by side and perform in an arc-shaped line. Their direction corresponds to what Tiérou calls ‘*Djiba* in the *Plo*’ (Tiérou, 1989: 67), meaning in an arc and looking towards the interior of the arc. This spatial arrangement shows that African dances embodied coherent rhythmic properties that connected the dancer with the spectator. These rhythmic properties were expressed not only through the dancing steps but also through the various musical instruments that accompany the dance. (Figure 6)



*Figure 6: The wives of King Njoya performing a princely dance, accompanied by their harp during the Nja festival. © Rudolf Oldenburg,*

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<sup>2</sup> “The plo is a bow formed from a flexible rod of wood or bamboo. By extension, plo designates among the Oueon any figure that describes an arc. (Tiérou, 1989: 64).

*January 1912, photographs of the Bamoum country, West African kingdom 1902-1915.*



*Figure 7: Dance marking the exit of the La' kam in Batchigou. © Notue and Perrois (1984: 57).*

In addition, figure 7 illustrates the dance marking the exit from the *La'kam*<sup>3</sup> in Batchigou in Cameroon. It represents another technique of space direction, especially during sacred dances. It is the *Sin* which, according to Tiérou (1989), means “snake”. In this technique, the dancers are standing, in a single line, and executing the dancing steps on a straight or curved line like a snake. Contrary to Figure 5 above, where the dancers are in “Djiba in Plo”, in figure 7 the dancers are rather in “Djiba in Sin”. This explains, for example, the position of the dance master who is the head and leads the dancers. This technique is very symbolic insofar as it materializes the maturity of the initiated<sup>4</sup>.

By confining African traditional dances to a narrow and reductive framework, the colonizers did not give any information about these techniques. These essentialist observations created a break between the Western vision and the African vision of dance. However, things are changing through cultural recollection processes that shift long ideas about non-Western cultures not being commendable. Unfortunately, the

<sup>3</sup> The *La'kam* is a sacred place of initiation of the future king in the tribes of the Bamileke people to the various rites and mysteries that will accompany his authority.

<sup>4</sup> According to Tiérou's research, the “Sins” is a technique that was used by the great African military leaders for the practice of dance. ‘Its use presupposed that the soldiers had passed the stage of apprenticeship [...]’

role played by ethnocentric projects during the colonization of the African mindset has encouraged many cultural essentialists and observers to relegate contemporary dance to a post-colonial or neocolonial technology scheduled to achieve what they started. Nevertheless, what follows deflates this essentialist perspective. The development of Modern/Contemporary dance in the early and mid-twentieth century was the manifestation of dance cosmopolitanism born of the encounter of cultures.

**Towards dance cosmopolitanism: weaving African traditional dances into contemporary dance**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in their quest to “modernize” dance and free it from academic shackles, Western choreographers searched the origin of dance in its bestiality, its wild aspect, which paradoxically was evocative of what their peers considered as trash in the discovery African dances. The taste for exoticism which was highly shared was just a replica of their cosmopolitan experiences in their African colonies. Dance postures inspired by African traditional dances such as feet inward arched back, contracted pelvis, bowed head, bent knees, and painted bodies were progressively integrated into what became contemporary dance, conceived as a heightened, kinetic form of self-expression. Other revolutionary unconventional movements that were collected from African dances included the absence of fixed moves, quick oppositional moves, shifting alignments, expression of raw emotions, systematic breathing, body contact with the floor etc.

In the permanence of this heritage which is at the junctions of the roads of Europe, America, and Africa, dance icons like Isadora Duncan developed dance techniques based on free expression meanwhile, Martha Graham went deep into African-American culture to restore the use of drumming in dance. Similarly, Katherine Dunham developed a particular interest in traditional African dances. The connection between African traditional dances and contemporary dance forms staged the cosmopolitan nature

of dance as a space where divided origins and cultural heritage meet to construct bodies embedded in a global cultural context that relocates the racial logic of contemporary dance.

Today, more than ever, ethnocentric and essentialist discourse on African dances and contemporary dance are revised and updated. Allen (1970: 58) claimed some years ago:

The African heritage has adapted and survives, despite the hostile and alienating environment. Many Africans, however, feel that although it has survived, this heritage has been exposed to such harsh constraints that it is mutilated and that, on the culturally barren soil of the Americas, it has been diverted from its true meaning and of its scope. On the other hand, it may be that this durability is of essential importance, which suggests that this force, this virulent intensity of the African [aesthetic] which has survived the crossing of the Atlantic can also serve to shatter the gloomy haze of growing technology that threatens to crush the human spirit.

In 2010, Emmanuel Sérafini<sup>5</sup> asked: ‘Has the heart of choreographic creation shifted to the African continent?’ Without any fear of contradiction, there is evidence that ever since Africa has been the inspiring box of creativity. Kofi Koko in an interview granted to Marlowe More underlines the place of African dances in the expression of contemporary dance. He says: ‘In my research, I saw Charles Moore, who worked with Katherine Dunham [...]. He had a solo dance that impressed me so much [...]. It was very incredible and touched me a lot; because he was [he] used Nigerian influences in contemporary dance.’

Leeb (2013: 18) affirms that Africa ‘figured as a residuum for undisguised creativity, as topos of desire or as the beginning of art.’ From this point of view, Africa is a ‘reservoir of otherness for Western art and culture’ (Amselle, 2005: 42), in the sense that recourse to Africa constitutes a particularly effective spring in tensioning borders and Western aesthetic

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<sup>5</sup> Director of the 32nd edition of the Hivernales d'Avignon, renowned contemporary dance festival



standards. Table 1 below illustrates principles of African traditional dances that are embodied in contemporary dance.

**Table 1: Traditional African dance principles exploited in contemporary dance**

N°	Principles	African traditional dances	Contemporary dance
1	<i>A dance in connection with the community and everyday life</i>	Dance in Africa is part of everyday life. All the activities of human life are punctuated by dance. The work in the fields, the women who pound the millet, those who rock their children, all these activities are rhythmic. It is an expression of dancing together, of exchange; and opens to integration and individuality about others.	Contemporary dance is inspired by everyday movement to express the desires and misfortunes of men. Contemporary dance develops a sense of community, of the group. Dancers learn to reach out to others and give ways to others.
2	<i>A dance of communication</i>	African dances are strongly rooted in oral tradition. They are a source of communication between people and their environment and give rise to the evocation of emotions, beliefs, and practices of the community. The dances require a real investment, an initiation that leads to self-knowledge.	One of the aims of contemporary dance is to convey a message through the body. Different emotions that drive humans are explored to create the dramaturgy. The factors of the body, of flow play an important role in it.

3	<i>A costume and mask dance to reveal the power of interiority</i>	African traditional dances have spectacular costumes whose primary purpose is to accompany the execution of the movements. The costume plays a role that goes beyond the decoration, and the protection of the body. Its aesthetic function extends as well to the level of its functionality as an actor in the performance. The masks play an important role during dance presentations. They facilitate communication with community spirits and nature.	One of the first manifestations of modern dancers' break with classical dance was the rejection of tutus. Isadora Duncan is recognized for her draped costumes and revolutionized the wearing of costumes in dance performances.
4	<i>A polycentric dance</i>	In African dances, the relationship to the body is very singular. The dancer's body is not seen as a single center of movement. On the contrary, there is whole-body engagement and coordination which is divided into several segments of movements about each part of the body, which can evolve	Contemporary dance has relied heavily on this very interesting aspect which is specific to traditional African dances. Contemporary dance tends to use the whole-body during performance and movement emphasizes the use of gravity, momentum, moving on and off balance,

		independently on a variety of rhythms inside the same music. The practice of isolating the different parts of the body in the performance of a dance is inherent in African traditional dances. In the execution of a musical suite, the pelvis can perform a movement in a rhythm other than that of the shoulders, the head, or the feet.	and suspension.
5	<i>A dance of heterogeneous corporealities</i>	In Africa unlike the West, the body of the dancer is not constrained to certain physical requirements as is the case of classical dancers whose bodies, very slender, are shaped for the press. All types of body morphology can dance: whether short, tall, fat or thin, young or old, anyone who wants to dance can do it without embarrassment. It is a liberating dance that gives space to all who want to express themselves.	In contemporary dance, new bodies have taken over the premises. The body becomes more and more a game in the practice of bodily expressions. The body is a language, a means of liberation, a necessary condition for its identity. No more taboos for dancing bodies.
6	<i>A dance about the</i>	If elevation has	Unlike classical

	<i>ground/ earth/floor</i>	strongly characterized classical dance in the West, in Africa it is quite the opposite. There is the search for balance towards the ground/earth, direct contact, and gravity. The body finds basic pulsation through the connection of the body to the ground, the body is rooted and the movement takes shape.	dancers always ready with slippers, contemporary dancers like traditional African dancers dance barefoot most of the time to connect to the earth. Similarly, unlike classical dance which seeks elevation, contact with the floor is one of the essential characteristics of contemporary dance. Dancers often have contact with the floor and make use of all levels- low, medium, and high.
7	<i>A free and self-relationship dance</i>	In African dances, free expression plays an important role; this is particularly true during rehearsal and improvisation sequences during a dance performance. It is a pleasure that consolidates and develops the body image; it restores to the dancer the availability, mobility, ease, and fluidity of his body. Improvisation facilitates the dancer's access to a new	One of the creative techniques used by many contemporary dance choreographers is improvisation. This technique leads the dancers to feel free and to express themselves without constraint. It is then a question of accessing a free body. it constitutes an approach that leads the dancer to the depths of himself, to the depths of his being, to the

		dimension. Rhythmic movements are repeated at length and chanted. Repetition leads to enthusiasm and sometimes even trance. The dancer, who repeats his movements, feels their strength grow is aware of his vitality, and pushes the limits of his body.	discovery of his latent qualities, and blossoming of his personality.
8	<i>A rhythmic and polyrhythmic dance</i>	Dance strives to offer man the great reconciliation of head and body, of thought and instinct, through the liberation of gesture and abandonment of rhythm. Traditional African dances are rhythmic. They are generally accompanied by significant percussion, without forcefully totally dependent on them. On the one hand, there is a frequent use of polyrhythmic. Asante (2001:146) says: "Polyrhythm goes beyond having multiple instruments harmonize. The human body must complement such	Pearl Primus understood the role of percussion in dance and this is how she granted an important place to the percussionists who led the dance and the dancers in her choreographic pieces: <i>The Negro Speaks of River</i> (1943) and <i>Wedding</i> (1944-1960). However, around the 1970s, the American choreographer Merce Cunningham seized the opportunity to dance without the accompaniment of ambient music. He concludes that the dance can be performed without background music. Today, he is cited as

		<p>rhythm.”</p> <p>On the other, they can also be performed, conversely to what many ethnologists have claimed, without ambient music because the rhythm comes from within and is enough to drive the execution of the movements. The Maasai dances of Kenya, for example, are not entirely accompanied by musical instruments.</p>	<p>the one who made dance independent of music. Most trendy contemporary choreographic creations explore this track.</p>
<p>9</p>	<p><i>A dance of space investment</i></p>	<p>Traditional African dances are generally performed in the open air in communication with the elements of nature. Rural architecture and the forest are explored in the execution of movements. Similarly, the various spaces such as the street and the market are often taken over by dancers on the eve of major commemorations and festivals. Traditional African dances are noted for their remarkable <i>in situ</i> performances. The space is fragmented, diversified, used for</p>	<p>Since theatres are no longer enough for dancers to express themselves; the outdoor space is now invested in dancing. New choreographic forms of space investment that are experienced in current trends in contemporary dance include <i>dance Insitu</i>, <i>flash-mobs</i>, <i>environmental dance</i>, etc. Urban architecture has become a source of inspiration, and gardens and markets have become places of bodily expression.</p>

		symbolism, importance is given to the relationship to the earth.	
10	<i>An interracial and interactive dance</i>	To talk about traditional African dance is also to take a look at the interpenetration of different forms of art; sculpture, painting, and singing are almost inseparable from dancing in Africa. The interactivity between the performers and the public is a reality. The audience of traditional African dances participates in the dance; it is not a passive audience whose only role is to applaud at the end of the show.	Contemporary dance lies in the fact that it finds in African dances the conditions for its regeneration. The aesthetics of mixed art, of the art of encounter, is what best characterizes the choreographic creation of the hour. Today more than ever, choreographers are negotiating space between the dancers and the spectators through experiences like immersive performances.
11	<i>A dance of contraction</i>	Contraction is an important principle in African dances. This is the principle of using different body parts in opposition to one another. For example, pulling one's sternum downwards while bending the knees. This is an important element that helps give texture and	Contraction and release have become a major technique in contemporary dance. Most often, it is associated by Western scholars with Martha Graham without any reference to African dances. Nowadays, most choreographers use this technique to

		emotion to the movement of the dancer.	transform ordinary or everyday movements into amazing dance moves.
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From the above table 1, there is no doubt that contemporary dance cosmopolitanism is evident, it is the interconnection of body experiences of nations worldwide to create a transcultural community interwoven by a set of specified bodily cultural epistemologies. The interconnectedness between African traditional dances and contemporary dance is the manifestation of a cosmopolitan practice bound by a set of common cultural expressions. Contemporary dance becomes a space of renewal and enrichment not specific to chauvinistic epistemology. It is a space connected at the same time to self-identity and togetherness, a space in which body expressions are the displays of a set of dialogically interrelated identities, techniques, and aesthetics in the context of a globalized society (Levy, Peiperl, and Jonsen, 2016).

**Conclusion**

This inquiry identified the problems posed by hegemonic contemporary dance paradigms entrenched in Western epistemologies as demonstrative of insistent ethnocentric discourse that continues to reinscribe colonialist determinations and ontologically exclusionary practices that have caused doubt amongst Africans. It argued that contemporary dance should be conceptualized as a cosmopolitan dance form influenced by a variety of geocultural dance styles amongst which African traditional dances as a perspective for avoiding and decentering the West hegemonic discourse. In line with Fanon’s postcolonial cosmopolitan framing of transformational humanity, my purpose was to show how once outlawed African traditional dances were transposed in contemporary dance to



decenter Western domination over contemporary dance conceptualization and sustain its cosmopolitan nature.

It was thus proved that While Western hegemony that participated in disempowering African traditional dances during colonization destabilized Africans from connecting to contemporary dance; the integration of these traditional dance principles confirms African presence in contemporary dance and more importantly challenges the dominant Western epistemology of this practice. As such, from colonialism to cosmopolitanism, both African and Western cultures are interconnected in the fashioning of contemporary dance. Contrary to the dominant discourses that contribute to sharing a Eurocentric cosmopolitan idea that Africans are appropriating contemporary dance, Westerners first appropriated African traditional dance values as innovative elements that were integrated into contemporary dance.

In this way, it can be concluded that because contemporary dance was developed out of the cosmopolitan yet capitalist turmoil of colonialism, it is a dynamic and living dance form created out of cultural exchanges, and shares much of the complex and multiethnic history that characterizes it. There is no reason why the frontiers of the dance need to be delineated in an exclusionary way. As such, contemporary dance cosmopolitanism can be understood as a practice unfettered by the boundaries of existing political communities and does not owe its legacy to any particular nation but to a more global community of all human beings. It is an open and democratic practice that surpasses both body and national boundaries. If today there is a global spread of contemporary dance, this entails acknowledging a more interesting and constructive vision that dismantles a dominant Westernization and favors its practice through a discourse that materializes its cosmopolitan nature illustrated by the cultural cross-pollination that characterizes it. A sense of belonging is important to engage Africans in the canon, and the fact that the characteristics of contemporary dance are rooted in African

traditional dances could strengthen communities, distance Africans from the many quarrels linked to this denomination, and push them to dig more in the richness of African dances to question the new Africa and join the *new* cosmopolitan project of cultural globalization.

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