

# Bomas of Kenya: local dances put to the test of the national stage

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# MAMBO!

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**BOMAS OF KENYA :  
LOCAL DANCES PUT TO THE TEST OF THE NATIONAL STAGE**

**Kahithe Kiiru**

## Introduction

Anthropology of art, more specifically anthropology of musical and choreographic practices, has long focused its attention on forms and performances labelled as “authentic”. A large number of studies have considered as obvious the distinction between “authentic” dances (traditional, tribal, original) and “tourist” dances (folk or commercial). Targeting urban and foreign audiences, dances presented in the shows of Bomas of Kenya (BoK) were thus seen as synonymous with aesthetic loss and simplified staged products which reflect commercial or political choices. Overcoming the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which was at the basis of the opposition between authentic and non-authentic, has led to a shift of focus in current research. Progressively more research is indeed focused on music and dance practices as experienced by the actors in the contemporary context of their creation and execution.

This study of the dance repertoire of Bomas of Kenya adheres to such a non-binary conception of cultural practices and follows a dynamist approach to choreographic knowledge: it takes into account the historical and social evolution of “traditional” dance in Kenya, and is committed to observe, in the field, the choices and actions that lay behind a particular choreographic repertoire. My attention has been caught particularly by the process of transposition of local practices onto a national stage. The example of *isukuti* dance from western Kenya will illustrate staging processes observed in the Bomas repertoire.

## The appellation challenge: Cultural dances of Kenya

In the 1960s and 1970s, the newly independent African nation states embarked on the project of creating a folk repertoire that would reflect national dance and music forms.<sup>1</sup> The dance repertoire in the focus of our research was designed in such a specific context in Kenya. Established in 1971, in the midst of national construction, BoK was designed as the premier institution for the preservation and management of cultural resources and knowledge, with the aim to preserve Kenyan cultural values perceived as “authentic” and present them “in (their) pure form”.<sup>2</sup> In 1973, this initial cultural centre and museum was complemented with the organisation of performances by a resident troupe of musicians and dancers, and with it came the extension of the mission of preserving and managing cultural resources to music and dance traditions of the country.

This enquiry into the progressive formation of the national dance repertoire of BoK reveals a highly dynamic conception of the idea of preservation and heritage, expressed in an equally variable vocabulary. My interlocutors, some of which have been members of BoK since its foundation, describe BoK dances by alternately resorting to terms like *traditional*, *folk*, *tribal* or *indigenous*. The term we finally opted for in the context of this research, namely *cultu-*

<sup>1</sup> S. Andrieu, 2007, “La mise en spectacle de l’identité nationale. Une analyse des politiques culturelles au Burkina Faso”, *Journal des anthropologues*, Hors-série, p. 89-103 ; F. Castaldi, 2006, *Choreographies of African Identities, Négritude, Dance and the National Ballet of Senegal*, Riversdale, University of California Press ; E. Djebbari, 2011, “Musiques, patrimoine, identité : Le Ballet National du Mali”, in M. Desroches, C. Pichette et G. Smith (éd.), *Territoires musicaux mis en scène*, Montréal, Presses Universitaires de Montréal.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from the official presentation of the centre, source: <http://www.bomasofkenya.co.ke/>

*ral dances* or *ngoma za kitamaduni*<sup>3</sup> is the term used, among others, by T.O. Bwire, the head of the Bomas of Kenya troupe.<sup>4</sup> According to him, the term “culture” is preferable to that of “tradition” as it comprises the idea of dynamics and evolution. In his view, tradition is a fixed residue of the past, while culture is constantly fashioned by change.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the repertoire of cultural dances gradually built since the 1970s, continues to evolve following the dynamic logic consistent with its nature and its stated mission.

By the term *cultural dances* we designate dances certified by a national public authority, constituent of a set of practices with a heritage oriented mission. The aspect of public recognition leads to their inclusion in a national repertoire, represented here by the BoK troupe. A second important aspect concerns the claim of their particular link with the past: the quest for authenticity is the leitmotif of these heritage ventures. However, these dances do not respond nowadays to their initial objectives, but rather to new national goals. Taken out of their usual ritual and/or festive performance context, these dance elements face the challenges of reformulation in the context of theatrical performance. The cumulative process of transforming the original dance vocabulary leads without exception to staging and creation of a dance product – an original scenic piece.

### The stage challenge

The presence of an audience compels authors of a traditional dance transposition to make changes to its space and time configurations. These are now designed to sustain the spectator’s attention<sup>6</sup>: a spatial separation between active performers and “passive” audience is set up<sup>7</sup>; dance space is reduced and a “stage front”<sup>8</sup> is established; the number of dancers is reduced; the duration of the performance is shortened; musicians and dancers are dissociated; variations in terms of dancers’ configurations and stage trajectories are introduced.

I collected data on 46 dances that constitute the BoK repertoire, although eventually my analysis of the stage version of *cultural dances* produced by the troupe focused on four dances of different geographic and cultural origin. I proceeded with a study of the disposition of dancers and their trajectories and the identification of crucial dance movements in order to discern the choreographic structure behind each staging process. The description of the songs

and music that accompany the dances, as well as that of the costumes present on stage, was confronted with the available bibliographic sources.<sup>9</sup>

The observation of dance elements that provide the basis for scenic products of Bomas and the analysis of methods used in their staging, revealed one central concern – *creating the show*. In other words, these dances are for the most part monotonous and repetitive, once detached from their original context of execution (e.g. a rite, or a communal festivity), and difficult to adapt for the stage. What I call here “creating the show” consists of intensifying the spectacular effect of representation, with the objective of capturing and sustaining the attention of the audience. My main ambition was to understand how techniques and strategies of creating spectacle, implemented by different choreographers working with distinctly diverse dance elements, are moulded and formed.

### *Isukuti*: a processional dance

When attending repeatedly the dance show presented daily by the resident troupe of BoK, the Bomas Harambee Dancers, one can find that nine times out of ten the climax of the show is reached when a dance from western province of Kenya called *isukuti* is performed. After a series of about ten dances per representation, interrupted at halftime by a short pause, the spectator can perceive an upbeat percussion rhythm that approaches progressively and is accompanied by singing in Luhya language, before a group of four to six musicians/singers appears on stage. After a certain time of musical impregnation, a group of female dancers enters the stage while performing a vigorous dance step, pacing with their backs inclined forward. When the male dancers join them on stage, the energetic tone of the performance is additionally enhanced. The dance piece can last up to ten or twelve minutes before reaching the grand finale - the moment of salutations and applause from the audience..

Introduced in the 1970s, *isukuti* is what one might call a flagship dance of the company’s repertoire. According to the official BoK booklet, this dance originated from the Idakho and Isukha subgroups of the Luhya community, which places its origins in Kakamega County. With time, *isukuti* was exported to other Luhya communities, which makes it today representative of the entire ethnic group, as it is danced at communal festivities and public events of all kinds. Weddings, baptisms, funerals, bullfighting events, traditional wrestling and other festive occasions pulsate in the rhythm of *sukuti* drums, to which the local population skilfully executes characteristic movements of the *isukuti* genre, often moving in procession.

<sup>3</sup> This recurring Swahili term in the discourse would require an exegesis too long to introduce here.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Tedi Ojiambo Bwire has been the head choreographer of the troupe, the Production Manager, and also the head of research at the Bomas of Kenya Production Department since 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Information retrieved from the recording of an interview conducted with T.O. Bwire on September 12th 2011.

<sup>6</sup> M.P. Gibert, 2006, “Rester Israélien et redevenir Yéménite: Ethnographie des troupes de danse dites ‘ethniques’ (lehakot etniot) en Israël”, Colloque ‘Ethnographies du travail artistique’, Université de Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne-CNRS

<sup>7</sup> E.A. Dagan, 1997, *The Spirit’s Dance in Africa, Evolution, Transformation and Continuity in Sub-Saharan*, Montréal, Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Un “stage front” here means the intentional orientation of formations and patterns on stage towards the spectators (facing the audience), which does not match the communal spirit of performance of these dances in their original context.

<sup>9</sup> A. Darkwa, 1991, “Sengenya Dance Music: Its Instrumental Resources and Performance”, *African Music*, 7(1), International Library of African Music, p. 48-54 ; C.O. Nyakiti, 1997, “Seven Traditional Dances from Selected Ethnic Communities of Kenya”, in E.A. Dagan, *op.cit.* ; G. Senoga-Zake, 1986, *Folk Music of Kenya*, Nairobi, Uzima Press.

Recently, we witnessed the recognition of the importance accorded to this dance tradition in the country's cultural landscape on yet another institutional level. In early 2013, government services (chaired by the Department of Culture) crowned the research and promotion of *isukuti* music and dance genre, which they had begun in 2008, by nominating it with the UNESCO for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The file entitled "Isukuti dance of Isukha and Idakho communities of Western Kenya" awaits the UNESCO Committee's review at the end of 2014.



Bomas of Kenya performing *isukuti* (1970)

The *isukuti* scenic piece was produced by BoK at the very beginning of the constitution of their repertoire between 1971 and 1973. According to our key informants, the process of its staging was directed by an African American choreographer, Leslie Butler. This dance for women and men, regardless of age, is presented on stage in a configuration that highlights *homorhythm* (*homorythmie*) and *homokinesis* (*homokinésie*)<sup>10</sup>: the relationship between female and male dancers is of a complementary nature in that they follow the same rhythm, whether they dance in couples or in groups, but almost never do the same movements. However, this gestural unison (*unisson gestuel*)<sup>11</sup> does not imply total synchronisation of the dancers (which would introduce monotony).

The staging strategy of *isukuti* dance draws upon the original context of its execution in order to create a dynamic universe of incessant movement. By its musical and dancing energy, *isukuti* is conceived as a sort of means of transport<sup>12</sup>, designed to encourage passers-by and spectators to join in the procession. The main feature of the processional character of this dance is based on the need to travel long distances, which explains the form of its essential dance steps (ex. *kususuma*/the trotting step).<sup>13</sup> For an *isukuti* cortege to be successful, the number of dancers must continuously increase throughout its course.<sup>14</sup> The choreographer seeks to create and maintain this visual and auditory sensation

with the help of two key instruments of progression: the spatially progressive entrance and exit of musicians and dancers on stage, and the gradual increase in the number of artists.

Both choreographic techniques aim at creating with the audience the impression that the dance piece on stage is just a sequence in a much longer performance. The scene is assumed to be one stop on the way of the dancing procession, which continues to trace its path even when the audience loses it from sight. Regarding the issue of absorption of the spectators into the procession, which is at the core of *isukuti*, and simultaneously the problem of separation between spectators and dancers in the context of stage representation, it is interesting to note that this dance is often scheduled at the end of the daily Bomas show, which precisely allows the dancers to invite the audience on stage and make them dance. This is a phenomenon specific of tourist destined shows, considered an important characteristic of living heritage.<sup>15</sup> These participatory episodes of the show offer the opportunity to contrast the gait of the dancers with that of the spectators, in a manner that emphasizes agility, musicality and flexibility of local dancers opposed to lack of the same in European or foreign spectators.

In order to transpose the dynamic nature of *isukuti* dance to the stage, the choreographer used several methods of adding fluidity to the dance piece: accumulation of a large number of spatial formations; choice of large amplitude steps that allow dancers to cut across space rapidly; progressive increase in the complexity and dynamics of the steps and movements performed; gradual acceleration of the rhythm of the music; choice of costumes (sisal skirts for women and leather fringe skirts for men, which emphasize the effect of continuous movement). In short, faced with a dynamic dance material, choreographer Leslie Butler mobilised several choreographic strategies and showed an important *feeling* for the use of stage space. Her project of staging and adding show value is judged successful and highly regarded by the company's members. Created in 1973, the dance piece is still displayed as the grand finale of the daily shows.

## Conclusion

According to my analysis of *isukuti* dance, as an illustrative example of BoK choreographic products, two key factors affect the staging processes: the first concerns the inherent qualities of the dance tradition itself, whereas the second depends on the choices and capacities of the person (or people) in charge of the staging process.

The prerequisite for establishing a specific choreographic choice is a certain degree of professional expertise and an ability to mobilise various staging techniques in order to translate or implement that choice. From this

<sup>15</sup> M. Desroches, M. H. Pichette, C. Dauphin et G. E. Smith, *op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> J.-M. Beaudet, 2001, "Le lien. Sur une danse des Wayãpi (Amazonie)", *Protée*, 29 (2), p. 59-66.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Nyakiti, *op.cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>13</sup> A. Kemoli, 1980, *Ethnomusicology. A Factor in The Preservation of Cultural Heritage*, paper presented at the 6th Ecarbica General Conference, Nairobi, p.39

<sup>14</sup> Nyakiti, *op.cit.*, p. 291.

point of view, if some dance pieces are marked by a conscious choreographic choice, others however betray the absence of choreographic intention. This deficit can be attributed to a lack of expertise and lack of knowledge on staging techniques, but can also hide political motives, in the broad sense of the word. On the scale of choreographic intention, the other extreme is represented by dance pieces that adopt wholly exogenous postures and staging techniques. In such cases, the choreographer is driven less by the search for “authentic” forms than by the aesthetic criteria of an international audience.

In an attempt at sorting different approaches to staging local dances proposed in the BoK repertoire, two trends emblematic of any heritage venture appear in constant tension – conservation and creation. While the staging of certain dances is based on a somewhat conservative perspective, others reveal more creative attitudes. The authors of stage dance products juggle, each in their own way, two different desires: to remain as faithful as possible to “the original”, and to take into account audience expectations and to please the spectators. Within the limits of folk dance style features, it is also the importance of a personal signature of the choreographer that evolves through time: “Therefore, what is presented to tourists is not a prospective authenticity of a specific music [and dance] culture, but the stage version of ONE unique authenticity, one of the dance group, and especially that of the choreographer”.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Bomas of Kenya performing *isukuti* (2010)

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