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Modern Practices of Traditional Dance in Cameroon: The Influences of Colonization and Globalization

Khalilah Lushiku

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Modern Practices of Traditional Dance in Cameroon:

The Influences of Colonization and Globalization

Presented By

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Wesleyan University
French Studies and Psychology

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Edward. I’m doing this because you can’t.

Acknowledgements
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Thank you to Ornella and her family, for arriving like angels and taking me in for the duration of ISP. I do not know how I would have been able to conduct the bulk of my research without you. Thank you also for the food, accompaniment to late rehearsals, and the clothes.

Thank you to the Ballet Universitaire de Yaoundé 1 for allowing me to dance with you and learn from you.

Thank you to Serge and Nathalie for your care and guidance throughout this experience.

Thank you Gari, for being your wonderful, beautiful, supportive self across the globe, and for always having a message or article ready for me on the rare occasion that I was able to access internet.

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Introduction

The study was originally one of the changing practices of traditional dance in Cameroon, and the causes behind the shift from purposeful dances with relevance to everyday life, to dances primarily meant for entertainment and exposition. What emerged was the somewhat ironic realization that the current manifestations of traditional dance
cannot be separated from a discussion of modernity and Cameroon’s socio-cultural development.

The changing practices of traditional dance in Cameroon compose a smaller piece of the larger puzzle of the ways in which Cameroonian culture is forced to adapt itself to the external influences of the times, while still attempting to hold onto its roots. Globalization has flooded Cameroon with cultural imports from neighboring nations, predominately from the West. This comes at the heels of colonization, during which period the ruling powers of Germany, then France and England demolished many of Cameroon’s cultural institutions, including dance. Colonization and globalization have left the general Cameroonian public less inclined to continue in purely traditional practices, favoring mélange of cultures if not the wholehearted adoption of Western habits. Because of this, tradition has largely been relegated to the villages, while any outside manifestations of tradition have been mutated and pushed into the exhibitory sphere. This is something not unique to Cameroon; Alphonse Tiéru has noted this phenomenon in his work *Dooplé: loi éternelle de la danse africaine*, in regard to many African countries that have been impacted by globalization. Yet as Cameroon is “Africa in miniature”¹, due to its composition of over 250 ethnic groups, it is an ideal country to study the effects of the permeation and imposition of Western and foreign cultures on indigenous cultures.

Despite external influences, Cameroonians have recognized the importance of maintaining their own cultures. Many have chosen to keep their cultures alive through the continuation of traditional dances. There are societies in the West, North, and Northwest that have refused to change any parts of their traditions. Then there are groups in cities

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that have changed their practices. In the faster pace of modern society, there is less time and no schools with curriculum devoted to dancing; thus children are less likely to grow up knowing the dances of their cultures. Instead, cultural festivals and civil dance troupes or clubs are used to fill this void. This shift from an instinctive, natural act of dancing to one of science and performance calls into question the extent to how purely traditional these dances can be. Indeed, many of today’s traditional dances contain traces of modernity. Nevertheless, the persistence of the existence of the dances, in whichever form they may appear, is most important to their practitioners.

Research Questions

Research was conducted, guided by the following questions:

1. How have the practices of traditional dance changed after colonization?

2. Is the practice of traditional dancing in Cameroon an obligation or a choice?

The third, added within the first week of research is:
3. Can one see the effects of globalization in today’s practice of traditional dances?

**Hypotheses**

The corresponding hypotheses for the research questions were:

1. After colonization, the practice of traditional dances became more exhibitory, for show, than for their original purposes.
2. While the learning of traditional dancing in Cameroon is an obligation, the continued practice of it outside of spectacles is a choice.
3. One can see the effects of globalization in the diverging practices of traditional dances in cities, most directly affected by globalization, from those of villages, which are more removed from globalization’s influences.

**Definition of Key Terms**

It is important to understand the key terms involved in the topic of research, first by their dictionary definitions, and then as they are understood in the Cameroonian context.

**Traditional dance** is defined scientifically as *a long-established or inherited successive group of rhythmical steps or bodily motions, or both, usually executed to*
Informants elaborated this definition in connection with the patrimony of Cameroonian cultures, François Bingono Bingono saying that traditional dance:

"Est le véhicule qui transport de génération en génération la danse qui vient du patrimoine."

Fokumlah Burnley further emphasized the fact that traditional dances differ from, though are often wrongly given the classification in place of, cultural dances, which are dances used to recognize or represent a certain group of people. According to Burnley, traditional dances are a subset of cultural dances that come from the repeated behaviors of a certain aspect of society.

Colonization is scientifically defined as the process of a group of people who leave their native country to form in a new land a settlement subject to, or connected with the parent nation. The colonization to which this research refers is the process by which the Germans, followed by the French and the English, settled Cameroon and established control over the already organized ethnic societies of the country.

Influence is defined as the capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force on or produce effects on the actions, behavior, opinions, etc., of others, and the process of producing these effects.

A practice is a repeated performance or systematic exercise for the purpose of acquiring skill or proficiency; and modern is defined as of or pertaining to present and recent time; not ancient or remote.
Globalization is defined in the dictionary as a system of worldwide integration and development. This suggests a somewhat equal exchange between cultures and organizations; yet a problem that will be highlighted by this research is the largely one-directional flow of outside influences into Cameroon. Indeed, Nyamnjoh refers to globalization as the transnationalization of a very national voice, the universal triumph of a supremely local and parochial set of images and values.

Methodology

The research was conducted in Yaoundé, where my advisor lives and coordinates dances with the Ballet Universitaire de Yaoundé 1. In fact, my primary way of gathering information on the present practices of traditional dance was through participatory observation at the rehearsals of the traditional section of the ballet, which meets three times a week for three hours. The dancers, and people associated with the ballet, became the target population due to their modern form of participation in the continuation of tradition: dancing as an after-school club and class activity. Integration into the club was

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8 Dictionary.com
9 Nyamnjoh, Francis B. “Globalization, Boundaries, and Livelihoods: Perspectives on Africa.”
challenging at first, due to the rapidly spoken French and unanticipated extreme difficulty of the dancing. It was not until after I had shown signs of improvement, and seriously exhibited my commitment to learning the dances and appreciating the culture that people began to warm to my presence. I had thought that I would survey the dancers in the ballet to discover their individual motivations for dancing, and the way they viewed the purpose of traditional dancing in Cameroonian society. However, due to the pressure I felt from the limited amount of time allotted to research, and due also to the sociability of some dancers, I found myself with a number of personal interviews before my survey questions had been approved by or even shown to my advisor. Because of this, it was decided to abandon the survey for the dancers.

Twenty spectators were polled, and others were casually spoken to, at a Festi-Bikutsi event, to establish some understanding of the way in which the Cameroonian public views traditional dancing, and its relevance to modern society. After a chance encounter with a man named Souleman in the l’Institut Français library, it became apparent that every Cameroonian has either information or a helpful opinion to add to the subject of dancing and traditional culture, even if the opinion is that a project studying such a subject is a waste of time. It was not surprising to find that each person polled at a traditional dance festival believed that traditional dances are important for Cameroon to keep hold of. The majority of informants said that the dances valorize the culture, and could name dances that are not performed at festivals. However, not everyone polled actually practiced traditional dances themselves. Twenty percent said they preferred to watch, and found the idea laughable.

Background information and context of the situation came from books, articles, and anthropologists. Though many of the people talked with mixed opinions with the way
they explained Cameroon’s cultural history in regard to the effects of colonization, the same basic points emerged from each story, which made it easy to see the truth in what people were saying. Their points were also backed up by the secondary sources. The opinions themselves were helpful in demonstrating the diverging reactions of Cameroonians to the influences of modernity, especially when contrasting the opinions of older and younger people. Much in the same way that polling the general Cameroonian public was helpful in creating a base understanding of the situation of traditional dances in modern society, comparing the information of those who grew up under colonization’s influence with that of those who grew up in the age of globalization and modernity allowed for better understanding of globalization’s impact on the current valorization of tradition in Cameroon.

Also spoken to, were teachers of dance. These informants were hardest to get hold of. To get information from two teachers at the National Institution of Youth and Sports, it was necessary to visit three times, as the first two visits entailed setting up appointments, handing over questionnaires, and then scheduling further appointments. It was important to interview teachers, who would be versed in a range of dance styles, and would understand most academically the changes that have occurred in the practices of traditional dances over time. Additionally, through monitoring the dance level and genre interests of their students, as well as funding and attention paid to traditional dances, teachers would have good ideas of the ways in which traditional dances fit into Cameroon’s society today.

All formal interviews were recorded on my phone with the permission of the informants, who were told that their words would be used in a paper and presentation on the current practices of traditional dance in Cameroonian society, and the influences of
this through colonization and globalization. Questionnaires were provided to informants who wished to know what they would be asked in advance, so that people would not be put into compromising situations with their words. All informants were over the age of eighteen, and able to legally provide consent to have their information used. A fourteen-year-old had initially been considered to take part in an interview, but getting parental consent was too difficult and this was dropped.

The vast majority of my data was qualitative, and much of it was repetitive. It was easy to pull common themes from the interviews of informants, beyond those established from the research questions. On my coding spreadsheet, I sorted information under the categories of: Dance Motivations; Background/Purposes; Costumes, Then and Now; Inseparability of Traditional Dance and Music; Traditional Cultural Outlets in Modern Society; Purpose of Traditional Dances; Changes in Dance Practices; Tradition Remaining in Village; Globalization’s Influences; Colonization’s Impacts; Things to Remain Constant; Obligation or Choice, and New Cameroonian Culture. Using a sociological lens to study all the information, I then condensed it into the six sections that compose this paper.

There were more male informants than female informants, and it is unclear to what extent this has impacted the research. It was first harder to find professional women who could give background information on the subject, and the few who were identified were harder to contact and maintain for interviews. It is likely that because the researcher is an American girl, men would be more willing to agree to give information when meeting in person. Yet even when setting up interviews over the phone, men were more often available to speak.
1. Dances at Their Origin

Understanding the Cultures of ‘Africa in Miniature’

Of the over 250 Cameroonian ethnicities divided into ten regions, four cultural zones have emerged from which one can begin to understand dances. There are the Fang-Beti of the East, Central, and Southern Cameroons; Grassfields of the West;
Sawa of the Littoral and Southwest; and the territories of the North.\textsuperscript{10} These zones encompass similar cultures, with similar modes of dress.\textsuperscript{11} Their dances are also comparable, but even had they been different, the costumes worn to perform them are alike enough that it is from these four cultural zones that dances are pulled when Cameroonians wish to represent their traditions\textsuperscript{12}.

Dance is one of the three elements understood to correspond with music:

\textit{La danse, la chante, et la parole poétique}.

The three are not to be separated from each other, as they cannot truly be understood independently. Dancers are in continual communication with instrumentalists, particularly the drummers. The songs that accompany the dances are used to transmit messages, and add to the dances’ meanings as well as their entertainment. This is why certain emphasis is placed on the \textit{poetic} nature of the lyrics; it is important for each song to have carefully chosen words, as they will theoretically be used throughout time to connect generations with important ideas.

Defined Roles of Dances

Cameroon has no traditional dances that are meaningless; each was created with a specific purpose. As the Director of Spectacles at the Ministry of Culture says,

\textsuperscript{10} Achanyang Atabong Jarvis, Interview 17 November 2014.
\textsuperscript{11} Jean-Louis Tamba II. Informal Interview 6 December 2014.
\textsuperscript{12} Technical Director I to the Minister of Culture, Informal Interview 3 November 2014.
\textsuperscript{13} François Bingono Bingono, Interview 18 November, 2014. Translation: Dancing, singing, and poetic lyrics
La danse Africaine est située dans un contexte.\textsuperscript{14}

Each cultural situation, in each domain of society, should have a corresponding dance. In the everyday domain exist dances for births; deaths, including funerals and deuils\textsuperscript{15*}; marriages; and war. Even within these genres exist different dances, depending on the circumstances of each event. Birth dances vary with the number of children born, with special dances for twin mothers, and others for single boys.\textsuperscript{16} Dances for deaths also vary, depending on the extent to which the deceased lived his life.\textsuperscript{17} There are practical dances, used to communicate messages between groups, or between levels of social class, which can be viewed in the palaces of Bamoun. As described by a Dr. Fai Tangem, \textit{The Fon [chief] comes and people sing and dance, and within their songs, they are expressing their worries. They can say, “Oh, we do not have enough food to eat; oh there is no water,” all in the context of the song. And he will find a moment to sing his own song, as a way of response to these people.}\textsuperscript{18} Here, the dance with its corresponding song allows for the existence of a dialogue that otherwise would be difficult to occur.

Bikutsi is another dance of communication, which evolved naturally from the conversations amongst Éwondowomen as they gathered water. Though men became included, first as instrumentalists and then as dancers, Bikutsi began as a purely feminine dance, and a platform for feminist issues. Women did not have a public space in society in which they were allowed to voice their thoughts, thus water-gathering time was their sole opportunity to voice feelings and frustrations with their lives. “Bikutsi” comes from

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Directeur des Spectacles, Interview 14 December, 2014. Translation: “African dance is situated in a context.”
\textsuperscript{15*} The mourning ceremonies that happen after deaths. A deuil is the time to express sorrow; the funeral comes much later, and celebrates the life of the deceased.
\textsuperscript{16} Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November, 2014.
\textsuperscript{17} Directeur des Spectacles. Interview 14 November, 2014.
\textsuperscript{18} Dr. Fai Donatus Tangem, Interview 21 November, 2014.
\end{flushright}
Éwondo “bia kut si”, meaning, “to stomp the ground”, and this is precisely what women did out of frustration when complaining about their daily trials. Consequently, as the dance came into being as a method through which women could express themselves to their communities, stomping feet strongly upon the ground became an especially important movement, as it allowed dancers to truly transmit their frustration for all to see.

Religion, Spirituality, and Mysticism

On a more spiritual level are the secret cult dances such as the Ngoum ba, Voma, and Nwarona, which were created to show reverence. These dances are mystical, and most are too profound to be understood by laymen. Communication again comes into practice, as it is not only important amongst the living, but also between the living and the dead. Traditional dances serve the purpose of connecting dancers with ancestors, who are believed to be direct links to God. As Bingono Bingono explains it:

*C'est la musique, le chante et la danse qu'on peut utiliser pour la communication avec un meurt. C'est avec la musique qu'on entre en communication avec les esprits. En Afrique, c'est avec la musique, le chante et la danse qu'on entre en communication avec Dieu.*

Certain traditional dances can then be understood as religious engagements. A whooping cry, sometimes occurring before and during dances, that is produced while rapidly hitting

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19 Ballet Universitaire, “Theme: BIKUTSI.”
21 Fokumlah Burnley Yaya. Informal Interview
22 Francois Bingono Bingono. Interview 18 November 2014. Translation: It’s the music, singing, and dancing one uses to communicate with the dead. It’s with music that one can enter into communication with the spirits. In Africa, it’s with music, singing and dancing that one can enter into communication with God.
the mouth with the hand, is supposed to call the attention of gods and ancestors. The act of dancing is one of communicating with wise ones of the past who will provide guidance for the present and future, while passing messages on to the divine.

It is important to take note of the fact that not all dances are supposed to be viewed. Certain chiefs have kept the dances of their villages within the villages, allowing them out either only after a heavy fine has been paid, or to pay respect at the funeral for a chief of a neighboring village. Even within villages, not every citizen is entitled to see each traditional dance. There are certain dances that can only be performed at night, and dances for mystical purposes that are said to be dangerous for ordinary viewers. Kristin Root talks about the Juju dances of the Northwest, which were said to cause sterilization for the women and death for the children who viewed them. That dances exist in Cameroon which are not for viewership emphasizes the importance and purpose of traditional dances, in a capacity beyond simple entertainment. Without spectator validation, one must have a strong motivation to continue their practice. Of the Juju dances, Root writes that they are sacred ritual dances...often of a seasonal nature, in the event of a natural disaster, such as drought, flooding, fires or epidemics. Cameroonian did not create the Juju dances for divertissement.

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23 Alphonse Tiéru, “Dooplé: loi éternelle de la danse africaine.”
25 Kristin Root. “Keeping the Tradition: Traditional Dance, Dancers, and Efforts to Maintain them in a Changin Africa.”
Dance to Facilitate Growth

There are also dances that are more ritualistic, performed as rites for comings of age. When boys and girls reached certain ages and began to develop, they were expected to dance to show they understood the rules of society. \(^{26}\) Correct performance of dances demonstrates the ability to accept a new position, from anything as common as simple adulthood to as important as chieftaincy. In the Bamiléké village of Batoufam, new chiefs are not allowed to take power without performing a series of dances. \(^{27}\) The dances, regardless of case, are illustrative of personal knowledge, responsibility, and capability.

One should note that a big part of tradition involves the continuation of societal values. Through the practice of traditions, and traditional dances, one is supposed to be reminded of the rules of society, and the expectations of personal comportment. This can be expressed in areas such as posture, where certain people will be more bent according to social status. In the Bottle Dance of the Grassfields, for instance, women dance bent more towards the ground to show respect to men. \(^{28}\) Certain dance gestures can also aid in teaching lessons. Pointing under one’s right eye, for example, is a gesture that reminds of the consequences coming for bad actions, and pointing directly at someone while dancing serves as a warning. \(^{29}\) As children grow up dancing, starting strapped onto their mother’s

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\(^{26}\) Souleman. Informal Interview 12 November 2014.

\(^{27}\) Paulle, 30 November 2014. Visit of the Batoufam Chefferie.

\(^{28}\) Fokumlay Burnley Yaya. SIT Lesson, 10 October 2014.

\(^{29}\) Alphonse Tiéru, “Dooplé: loi éternelle de la danse africaine.”
backs as babies\textsuperscript{30}, and then later in control of their own body movements, societal norms, expectations, and methods of guidance become increasingly ingrained in their systems.

\section*{2. Colonization’s Impact}

\subsection*{The Establishment of Foreign Authority}

Although first explored by the Portuguese in the 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries, Cameroon was initially colonized by Germany in 1884. After the First World War, control of Cameroon was taken from Germany and given to France and England by the League of Nations as a trust territory.\textsuperscript{31} The rule of the three colonial powers had profound effects on the evolution of Cameroon politically, economically, and socially. That the two official languages of Cameroon, French and English, come from none of Cameroon’s ethnic groups is a testament to this\textsuperscript{32}.

In order to cement their rule, it was necessary for colonial powers to replace many of Cameroon’s pre-existing institutions and customs. This was done largely through schooling, propaganda, and the literal destruction of objects. In schools, in addition to learning how to read and write in new languages,\textsuperscript{33} Cameroonians were taught European societal values and methods of learning. They were also told that their pre-colonial ways of life were barbaric and backward.\textsuperscript{34}Coming after the period of Enlightenment, Africa was still viewed as the Dark Continent.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{30} Idrissu Saaka, West African Dance I Lesson, 2013.
\textsuperscript{31} Jean-Germain Gros, “Cameroon in Synopsis.”
\textsuperscript{32} Mme. Mbeck. Interview 1 December 2014.
\textsuperscript{33} Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November 2014.
\textsuperscript{34} François Bingono Bingono. Interview 18 November 2014.
\end{flushright}
Objects, such as masks and structures created by artists, were destroyed because of their special importance in royal senses. As Raphäel Mouchangou explains,

*The power of the king in Africa, even now, [is] related to invisible things, of power of people who have gone...All those artifacts, created with wood, or iron, were where invisible powers are located. [The colonizers] started destroying all those artifacts, all those things that people believed in, because they wanted the population to stop being submitted [to their chiefs], and to believe that there is no power stronger [than that] coming from Germany.*

It was important for colonizers to destabilize chiefs, the main challenges to their power, in order for their authority to go unquestioned. Removing the loyalties of Cameroonians from their traditional rulers would in turn remove potential obstacles to the fulfillment of colonial objectives. With the exception of perhaps missionaries, the colonial masters did not establish rule in Cameroon for the benefit of the Cameroonian people. The Germans first entered to take resources and ameliorate their trade, and the French and English continued this when they in turn came into power. The resulting changes to Cameroon were made either to facilitate authority and rule, or to ease the lives of the European settlers who came to live in their new colony.

**Clothing**

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One change imposed by colonial missionaries, that affected dances as well as everyday life, was the emphasis placed on the necessity of clothing. The minimal clothing, or lack thereof in some cases, worn by Cameroonians was offensive to missionaries. Particularly after noting the number of mulatto children being born after colonizers observed female Littorale slaves dancing nude at night, missionary Emilie Sakerépouse became obsessed with covering Cameroonian bodies. She did this principally with large sacks, which were later turned by Cameroonian women into more fashionable dresses. It is in fact from the word “cover” that the word “kaba”, now associated with the same loose-fitting type of dress, was born. The introduction of clothing led to the use and trade of pagne, or printed fabric from which clothes can be made. So as not to completely forget the previously powerful nobility, certain pagne and clothing items and accessories were made by Cameroonians to correspond with certain ranks. In Douala, those Cameroonians who had privilege were the first to wear hats and coats. For the Bamiléké, only those associated with chiefs could wear large boubous made out of pagne printed in blue, white, and red. In their Tso

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38 Ballet Universitaire; “Theme: L’AMBASSI BE.”
40 Professor Noupa. 27 October 2014. SIT Lesson.
dance, warriors of the Bamiléké *Société Kuosi* would wear elaborate masks with long pieces in the front, which the Europeans called “Elephant Masks”. Thus colonial preferences began to influence traditional customs.

**Restriction of Demonic Dances**

Particularly tied to Christianity, colonial influence manifested itself in the debasement and association of traditional dances with sin. Coming from an Occidental mindset, this was not particularly hard to do. The lack of clothing that so offended missionaries was only emphasized with the vigorous movements of the entire body accompanying traditional dances. Movements of the pelvis, backside, and torso, rendered the dances particularly obscene. Missionaries refused to understand any religious significance in the debauchery they perceived, as the high importance given to ancestors before God did not fit with their ideas of proper worship. As Bingono Bingono, who is an Afro-centrist in addition to being an anthropologist states,

> Je ne prie le dieu d’Abraham, mais je prie Dieu.  

Unfortunately, not praying to the God of the colonizers was a sin, especially when the practices of ancestral worship interfered with those of Christianity. Dancing preoccupied people on Sundays, the missionaries’ church days, thus it became particularly important for the practice of dancing to be minimized, if not destroyed entirely. What the colonial powers settled for was promoting the dances that were more divertoisements, with costume changes and less ‘barbarism’, and discouraging those with messages and

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41 Michel Huet, “Danses d’Afrique”.
42 “Danses du Cameroun”
43 François Bingono Bingono, Interview 18 November 2014. Translation: I do not pray to the God of Abraham, but I pray to God.
44 François Bingono Bingono, Interview 18 November 2014.
discourse. In this way, certain dances were kept alive in changed states, colonial subjects could entertain colonizers, and dances with influential power were forced to disappear from the public sphere.

3. Globalization’s Influence

The Delicacy of an Ever-Present Outside Media Source

Perhaps the biggest influence of colonization came in its metamorphosis after Cameroon’s independence, where colonial powers maintained their holds on newly developing countries through the open markets of globalization. Regarding Cameroonian culture, *Ce que la colonisation a laissé, la mondialisation a terminé.* This is a strong claim to make, interesting in that it puts globalization into a more destructive position than colonization. In terms of brute force and physical manipulation, colonization was more damaging to Cameroon. However, globalization’s power comes in its subtleties, at least culturally.

When speaking of globalization, Raphäel Mouchangou says, *People sleep with MTV, watching Western ways of dancing. People wake up with it; people walk with American and European music, so it’s more powerful and present in the everyday life of young generations.* Rene Ayina, who is a director at Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) also bemoans the overwhelming presence of MTV, in addition to channels such as CANAL+, which shows French television programs and programs that are dubbed, and

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45 Dr. Tami. Interview 21 November 2014.
47 Interview 19 November 2014.
TRACE\textsuperscript{48}, another music video channel which focuses mainly on American music. There is a TRACE-Africa channel, to bring African artists some exposure. However, the most commonly seen artists on this channel are Davido, P-Square, and Flavour, all Nigerians; Fally Ipupa, from the Democratic Republic of Congo; and various Ivorian artists. Cameroonian have less screen presence on the popular channels in their own country than do the people even of their neighboring countries. This means that as Cameroonian youth begin to develop their cultural styles, it will be more natural for them to appropriate from the external sources they have grown up watching. The subtlety of globalization in this case is that people are not being forced to watch the channels that glorify non-Cameroonian cultures. These channels simply happen to have greater television presence, are more easily accessed, and have the funds to make their productions ones of higher quality, so ‘choosing’ to watch them and consequently being influenced by them will largely go unquestioned.

Disregarding the Rest to Keep Up with the West

Production quality does not necessarily correlate to program quality, but it does speak to the level of a country’s development. The worldwide obsession with development is fostered by globalization and its open markets. With the exception of China and certain other Asian countries, which have developed rapidly in recent years, it is the former colonial powers and America who are currently most developed and leading in world trade. Former colonies such as Cameroon are locked into neocolonial systems of debt that have them financing Western advancements while keeping them perpetually in retard. In

\textsuperscript{48} Rene Ayina. Interview 19 November 2014.
attempts to keep up with development, Cameroon has chosen to hold onto the teaching of colonization that the Western model is the correct one to follow. As Nyamnjoh writes,

*Modernity as hegemonic modes of social life and organization of European origin thus poses as a giant compressor determined to crush every other civilization in order to reduce them to the model of the industrialized, preying, and globalizing West.*

What this leads to is an extremely one-sided exchange, in which Cameroon imports much while exporting little. Part of this is due to the Cameroonian government’s inability to subsidize its producers, who are forced to sell their goods at higher prices and ultimately lose in sales, even within their own country, to cheaper Western goods. This phenomenon of unequal exchange can also be viewed in cultural exchange, with Cameroonians importing cultural products from the outside, while being able to export very little of their own culture.

This is particularly true regarding traditional dances. Because traditional dances have yet to be codified, or set to countable, 1-2-3-4, 5-6-7-8 beats, they are less easily understood. Should Cameroonians want their traditional dances to be learned outside of the country, it would be harder to teach them than other, already codified dances. It also makes it harder to teach traditional dances to Cameroonians, who have grown up with the more easily learned dances shown on television, who are used to being able to count rhythms, rather than listening to drums.

Nyamnjoh writes,

*Thanks to a life-long history of cultural alienation for African elites, to the ubiquity of Western educational institutions and epistemological traditions, and to the aggressive exportation of Western cultural products through the*

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50 Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November 2014.
Evidence of this can be seen in the inpouring and increasing practice of external dances in Cameroon. It can be observed at competitions such as Cameroon’s “Finale Nationale de la FECADANSA”, in which the first and shortest section of the competition is dedicated to “Cameroonian Dances” and has fewest participants. More of the program is dedicated to hip hop and breakdancing, and the largest portion to the “Classical Dances”, composed of Ballroom Dances, Latin American Dances, and dances such as Rock and Roll, which FECADANSA classifies as Modern Dances of Society. The fact that Cameroonians call these dances classic, when they are in no ways classic to Cameroon’s traditional history, illuminates the permeation of Western supremacy. The fact that at Finale Nationale, the majority of time, dancers, and expertise is dedicated to dances that neither come from nor uphold a sense of the culture of Cameroon is an indication of globalization’s extreme ability to shift a nation’s attention from itself to the outside.

4. Dances Today

Deviation from Tradition

Today, the three areas of traditional Cameroonian music are much changed in cities like Yaoundé, due mainly to external influences. To begin with, integrations of

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Western instruments, such as the guitar, interrupt the formerly existing ‘conversation’ between dancers and instrumentalists.

*Les instruments ne parlent plus; ils résonnent,* is the complaint of Bingono Bingono.\(^{52}\) Unfortunately, the silence of the instruments does not seem to be compensated by modern song lyrics, whose ‘obscenity’ is bemoaned by the Ministry of Culture’s Director of Spectacles\(^{53}\). There has been a large shift in song themes and dance moves towards hyper-sexuality. One can view this phenomenon in Bikutsi’s recent concentration on movements of the buttocks, which can also literally be seen in its more revealing costumes\(^{54}\). Changes such as these are blamed on Western media’s influences. It is ironic that the Occidental powers that once condemned Cameroonian traditional dances for being obscene and overly sexual in their eyes, could return and further corrupt traditional dances by actually rendering them obscene and overly sexual in the eyes of Cameroonians.

\(^{52}\) Interview 18 November 2014.

\(^{53}\) Interview 14 November 2014.

\(^{54}\) Thyra Brody, “Influences of Foreign Dances on Cameroonian Cultural Dances: The Case of Bikutsi”.

As can be seen in Bikutsi, the outfits for specific dances have changed beyond the simple transition to the use of pagne that was imposed by missionaries and colonial masters. Some costumes have become more elaborate, while others have become less formal. The Samale dance, for instance, was originally performed by Dschang warriors as they prepared for war, and then again to celebrate battle victories. This dance of esteem and might is now commonly practiced in jeans and t-shirts.\footnote{Ballet Universitaire, “Theme: Le SAMALE”}

The newly casual dress automatically detracts from the dance’s prestige. Jarvis notes that accessories for dances have also changed. Some of them, they dance with…towels, round their necks. I don’t believe that in pre-colonial times you had towels. Some of them, in those pre-colonial times, they used calabashes. But now, they will use bowls.\footnote{Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November 2014.} Remembering that traditional dances reflect the cultures of their practitioners, it is through the use of newer accessories such as these that one can see the ways in which modernity has impacted the everyday lives of Cameroonians.

In their theme on the Njang dance, after mentioning the changes it has seen in costume from simple leaves to elaborately accessorized clothes, changes in all

Even expositions with traditional attire show evidence of modernity’s influence. Dancers wear shorts under their costumes, and dance in sneakers. Inauguration of 6th Annual Arts and Crafts Exposition.
movements except posture, and changes in practice from specific reverence to performances of all occasions, members of the Ballet Universitaire de Yaoundé 1 asked, *Nos ancêtres seraient-ils contents de nous aujourd’hui?*\(^{57}\)

Another question to ask would be whether the ancestors who originally practiced traditional dances would even be able to recognize Cameroon’s traditional dances today. Ancestral recognition is actually important, traditionally, considering that one of the purposes of traditional dancing is supposed to be communication with the ancestors. If the dances become overly changed, communication will be theoretically impossible. This however does not seem to be a great concern of most modern practitioners, probably because of the narrow spaces into which modernity has forced the practice of traditional Cameroonian dance.

**Differences in Practices: Cities versus Villages**

Where dance has changed, the practice of dances has certainly also changed. Divisions between the ways in which people come to know traditional dances, and the types of practices in which they participate, are telling of the extent to which globalization has impacted Cameroon. Today, tradition rests for the most part in the village. The villages in the Grand North, West, and Northwest especially have fundamentally sealed themselves from external influences, keeping their traditional dances intact.\(^{58}\) People who grow up in the village are nearly guaranteed to grow up with traditional dance as a part of life. The same cannot be said for those who grow up in cities, where globalization has a much more immediate presence in everyday culture.

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\(^{57}\) Ballet Universitaire, “Theme: Le NJANG.” Translation: Would our ancestors be happy with us today?

\(^{58}\) Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November 2014.
This was something I did not realize until, after talking with dancers at the University Ballet, I realized that the majority of them were novices to traditional dance. Even some of the best dancers in the ballet had only begun to learn traditional dance upon entering University. It is now unquestioned that children who grow up in cities will largely have to seek for and learn traditional dances, rather than simply coming into natural contact with them. The dances they will then learn will be inherently different, because they are being learned. As Moaboulou Cyriaque, the disciplinarian and one of the main instrumentalists for the University Ballet explained it,

*Ici en ville, on est oblige d'entrainement. Ici au ballet, on entraine trois fois par semaine, parce qu'il y a certaines personnes qui arrivent qui ne savent pas jouer. On montre doucement, doucement, doucement. Et ici, la danse c'est la danse scientifique...au village c'est naturellement.*

It is probably in part for this reason that instruments no longer ‘speak’. When dancers and instrumentalists alike are newly learning the language, the sort of instinctive communication connection between dance and music cannot exist. This makes it easier for new instruments, like the guitar, to enter the musical field; while they would have impeded communication for traditional dancers who grew up understanding drums and rhythms, they do not have the same effect on those newly learning to understand the correspondence between music and traditional dance.

The Necessary Science of a Newly Professional Dance

Jean-Louis Tamba II, the former technical director of Cameroon’s National Ballet, and the current technical director of Yaoundé’s University Ballet, also believes that

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59 Moaboulou Cyriaque. Interview 13 November 2014. Translation: Here in the cities, one is obliged to train. In the ballet, we train three times a week, because some people arrive without knowing how to play [the drums, or how to dance]. We show them slowly, slowly, slowly. And here, dancing is scientific...in the village, it comes naturally.
dancing is now a science. It is choreographed, and its proper execution requires the exact mimicry of taught movements, rather than the freedom and interpretation of movements previously known to the dancers. Perhaps it is because of this new rigidity that traditional dance in cities like Yaoundé is becoming increasingly associated with the performance sphere. When asked if they practiced traditional dances outside of rehearsals, members of the University Ballet immediately thought of dance competitions and fans clubs, which are only viewed in controlled public settings. Though each of the twenty people polled at Festi-Bikutsi believed traditional dances to be important, all were confused when asked if they practiced traditional dances themselves. Those who answered yes stipulated that they were not professionals, as if to qualify their responses as less legitimate. That some Cameroonians could laugh at the idea of ordinary people practicing traditional dances is indicative of how far the practice has shifted in the metropolitan sphere. It would appear that with the shift toward performances in the purpose of traditional dance, the validation for dancing now comes more from external than internal forces. One cannot simply dance without an audience, and if one is not yet a professional, one should not yet dance before others.

A Modern Niche for Traditional Dance

Dance has managed to keep itself relevant in Cameroon’s modern sphere, though not without State support. The Ministry of Culture is obliged to promote traditional dance through public performances, festivals, and competitions, as well as encouraging dance programs in schools. There is currently a traditional ballet at each of Cameroon’s

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60 Jean-Louis Tamba II, Interview 18 November 2014.
61 Jean-Louis Tamba II. Said in chastisement to dancers of Ballet Universitaire de Yaoundé 1, Rehearsal 11 November 2014.
Perhaps due to the lack of sound cultural infrastructure in Cameroon, there are not yet schools devoted specifically to dance. Neither has much research been done into the practices of traditional dance, or dancing at all. Instead, reports have been made concerning the benefits of dance. Dance in Cameroon is officially recognized as a useful practice for everyday life. It has great health benefits, physically, in that the movements require great exercise and endurance, and the repeated postures of traditional dances have been proven to correct certain physical malformations. With their community environments, traditional dances are also said to have psychological benefits, because they increase confidence by forcing people to become comfortable performing in front of groups. Indeed, these were some of the reasons cited by dancers at the University Ballet for their initial commencements with traditional dance training. Bodo in, who began dancing in 2009 and now takes over ballet trainings when the regular instructor is absent, began traditional dance as a sport to lose weight, before realizing how much he connected with it. Rodrique, who now contributes moves to the ballet’s choreography, began dancing traditionally two years ago to break out of his timidity. While these successes are great for the increased promotion of traditional dance in Cameroonian cities, their focuses on individual rather than community benefits, as well as personal motivation, detracts from the original purposes of the dances. Additionally, the fact that the government has had to intervene in the struggle to continue the practice of traditional dances inherently renders them less natural than they were at creation. The struggle itself

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62 Ntoungchi Armand, Interview 15 November 2014.
63 Michel Ongla, Interview 18 November 2014.
64 Mme. Mbeck, Interview 1 December 2014.
65 Mme. Menyengue, Interview 1 December 2014.
66 Kouete Bodo in, Interview 15 November 2014.
67 Kamgaindo Kom Rodrique, Interview 15 November 2014.
means that in Cameroon, the continuation of traditional dances through modernity will be more important than their preservation.

**Losing Meaning**

It was a common belief amongst informants that traditional dances have not lost their importance, due to the fact that one can still see them at ceremonies such as weddings and births. The idea is that if Cameroonians themselves are choosing to maintain traditional dances at important times, they cannot have forgotten their value. It seems that the people making this argument may have begun to forget themselves the true purposes of the dances. While it’s true that there are certain dances for weddings and births, it is less likely that all the traditional dances performed at such events were created with those events in mind. Samale, originally danced around the fire at midnight, and created with the purpose of exciting warriors for battle; and Njang, the dance of gratitude for the serpent who brought peace to warring tribes, are both dances now most commonly seen at weddings. Bikutsi is another. Raphaël Mouchangou talked about how most modern weddings like to hire Bikutsi troupes for their receptions, and yet the dance began as a method for women to air their grievances with society.

What does it mean when Cameroonians dissociate dances from their purposes, for events amongst themselves? Weddings are generally not international spectacles, or events in which culture needs to be displayed; they are celebrations in which one can expect culture to be displayed naturally. Yet if the natural expression of Bikutsi appears

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68 Ballet Universitaire. “Theme: Le NJANG”.
69 Ballet Universitaire. “Theme: Le SAMALE”.
70 Interview 19 November 2014.
as a hired attracted at a wedding reception, this is evidence of cultural change. Even if the
dancers dance with their torsos and feet, rather than their buttocks, the change of
performance setting automatically renders the dance inauthentic. Now, instead of
continuing tradition to understand Cameroonian cultural values, tradition seems to be
held onto to valorize Cameroonian culture\textsuperscript{71}. The messages and meanings behind the
dances seem to be less important than the fact that the dances exist, at least in those
dances that are largely in public and international view.

5. Attitudes Toward Dancing and Tradition

Although the majority of people interviewed across ages said, of their own
accord, that the purpose of traditional dances in Cameroon is to valorize Cameroonian
culture, informants had different ideas of what this phrase means. Perhaps this stems
from the varied ideas of what the purpose of tradition itself is. For some, generally older
people such as François Bingono Bingono\textsuperscript{72}, and the Directeur des Spectacles\textsuperscript{73} at the
Ministry of Culture, traditional dances will not truly do their job unless they are
performed in exactly the same ways as they once were. This is of course likelier to mean
\textit{as they once were}, when the informants encountered and grew up with them, than \textit{as they
once were} at their creation. It is evident that all the traditional dances available to
mainstream viewership have evolved since colonization. Even in supposedly closed
regions, colonization birthed dances now hailed as traditional. Ambassi Be’s use of the

\textsuperscript{71} Ntoungchi Armand. Interview 15 November 2014.
\textsuperscript{72} François Bingono Bingono. Interview 18 November, 2014.
\textsuperscript{73} Interview 14 November 2014.
guitar came from Cuban influences\footnote{Ballet Universitaire, “Theme: L’AMBASSI BE”}, and its real popularity and even its name came from imitation of German colonial masters.\footnote{Achanyang Atabong Jarvis. Interview 17 November 2014.} Bottle Dance, native to the Grassfields region that is hailed as having sealed itself from colonial influences\footnote{Gildas Kouam, Interview 13 November 2014.}, was born from watching colonial masters entertain themselves at night\footnote{Fokumlah Burnley Yaya. SIT Dance Lesson 12 September 2014.}. Even the use of a bottle as its main instrument is not technically ‘traditional’, as bottles were brought over by the colonizers. However, both of these dances came to be traditional in their continued practice.

For younger informants such as the ballet dancers, so long as the dances are recognizable, it is their continued practice that is most important. Bingono Bingono himself said that so long as there are festivals, and the state and population continue to be interested, culture will never die.\footnote{François Bingono Bingono. Interview 18 November 2014.} Having the base movements of traditional dances exist in modern society can serve as a calling point to youth that they come from a rich, non-Western culture. Rene Ayina must recognize this as the more important of traditional dance’s two purposes, because after beginning Festi-Bikutsi with purely traditional instruments and dances, he allows modernity to seep into the performances, in forms such as the guitar.\footnote{Rene Ayina. Interview 19 November 2014.} Dr. Fai, despite coming from the village, fits into this mindset as well. He sees the practice of traditional dance as a way of recapturing…values, at the same time saying, those values, they were good at the time, but this is what they look like now. He understands and even agrees with some of the incorporation of Western instruments and styles into today’s practices, because accessories of culture must keep pace with the changing times. What is most important is what he calls the ability to capture and
integrate your sense of, your inclination to your roots, or for Cameroonians to remain cognizant of their heritage.

6. What Does This Mean for Cameroon?

Changes to Tradition: Are They Negative?

A somewhat encouraging thing is that no informants, even those most discouraged by the current state of Cameroon’s traditional dances, despair of their continuation. Somehow it is known that their practice will remain. Perhaps this is because of the Ministry of Culture, and the Cameroonian government’s continued efforts to promote the dances. Perhaps it is the knowledge that there are still-living traditionalists, who see it as their duty to preserve the habits of their ancestors. When asked if the practice of traditional dances was an obligation or a choice, Mme. Menyengue, a dance instructor at Cameroon’s National Institute of Youth and Sports, replied that it is an obligation for those in the government, and those with cultural power. For ordinary Cameroonian citizens, the decision to learn and uphold dances is a choice. This seems fitting with the other ideas that emerged from this research. In cities at least, dancing is no longer a necessary, integral aspect of Cameroonian life. It is still heavily present, and remains tied to Cameroonian culture, but one can choose to opt into or out of tradition as far as one likes, and this is largely what people have been doing.

Edward Said, the anthropologist, was against the idea that tradition necessarily had to be opposed to modernity, but believed instead that tradition can easily adapt itself

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80 Dr. Fai Donatus Tangem. Interview 21 November, 2014.
81 Interview 1 December 2014.
to continue within society. According to Said, the idea largely held about tradition as something unbending and cemented in the past was actually created by colonizers when imperialism began. The resulting juxtaposition between tradition and modernity as past and present colored the colonization and forceful Westernization of traditional societies as a logical course of action. If Said’s thinking is correct, then the people opposed to the changes in traditional dances today as a way of rejecting the West, are in fact still operating within colonial mindsets.

Two undeniable facts are that culture will change with time, and that tradition is tied to culture. If culture is meant to hold the values of society, and tradition is merely a long established or inherited cultural conduit, then perhaps tradition does not need to stay exactly the same, so long as societal values remain intact. This is not to say that were there suddenly to be no Cameroonians practicing traditional dances, it would not be problematic. However, the shift made in cities to practicing the traditional dances in their new modern sphere of sports and competition is not necessarily detrimental. That Cameroonians are willing to find creative ways to fit tradition into their busy schedules is promising, as it shows that even in metropolitan areas heavily influenced by globalization, Cameroonians still recognize the importance and values their own cultures hold. So long as people continue to take an interest in their ethnic identities, the danger of Cameroon turning into a McDonald-ized copy of the Occident is minimized. That Cameroonians are doing it of their own will, in spite of surreptitious external influences, is more encouraging.

83 Dictionary.com
When Burnley first talked about cultural dances, meant simply to identify a group of people, being different from traditional dances, it seemed to be a bad thing. However, traditions change. If it is most important for cultures and their values to continue, and for people to recognize that Cameroon holds many rich heritages, then perhaps it would not be so destructive if yet another tradition emerged: the practice of cultural dances. As an American and an outsider, however, this researcher is not in the correct position to make such a decision.

How have the practices of traditional dance changed after colonization?

My hypotheses were ultimately not completely correct, although after realizing the error in some of my thinking the first week, I was not surprised with the final results. The first hypothesis, that the practice of traditional dances became more for show than for original purposes after colonization, would have been true if I stipulated that the hypothesis applied specifically to cities, rather than assuming it meant the whole of Cameroon. In cities dances are unlikely to serve their original purposes. For the spectators who will only view them at festivals, competitions, funerals, and marriages, the dances exist more for exhibition. For the actual performers of the traditional dances, and those who practice without performing, the dances are also used for sport, healing, and the occasional recall to traditional culture.

Is the practice of traditional dancing in Cameroon an obligation or a choice?

As has been discovered, the learning of traditional dances in cities is not an obligation at all. The continued availability of spaces in which one is able to learn traditional dances has become an obligation of the Cameroonian government and those with vested interests.

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84 Fokumlah Burnley Yaya. Informal Interview 9 November 2014.
in the preservation of the dances. The actual learning of the dances is completely a choice, as is the option to upkeep their practice once they have been learned.

Can one see the effects of globalization in today’s practice of traditional dances?

My third hypothesis was the only one I find to be accurately supported by my research, and this is probably because it came into being after the first week of research, when I had more of an understanding about my subject. One can indeed see the effects of globalization in the diverging practices of traditional dances in cities, most directly affected by globalization, from those of villages, which are more removed from globalization’s influence.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to analyze the practice of traditional dances in modern Cameroonian society, to determine how its purposes have changed and what relations this has to the influences of colonization and globalization. When I began, I had very little understanding of traditional dances, beyond knowing that there was some meaning behind each movement, and that most people would probably be unable to tell me what those meanings were. Had the research been purely on the messages and purposes behind certain traditional dances, it would have been more fruitful to do this study in a village. Indeed, most of the people with whom I spoke, upon hearing the root of my research: traditional Cameroonian dances, told me I was studying in the wrong place. In a further study, it would be interesting to conduct research in the ‘closed’ regions of the
Grassfields or the North, to see how much more a part of quotidian life traditional dances are, what their purposes are understood to be, and to what extent they have remained unchanged. However, the fact that people could agree that Cameroon’s cities were the wrong places to study Cameroon’s traditional dances was intriguing. As cities, they are the places non-Cameroonian will be most exposed to, the easiest areas for foreigners to view Cameroonian culture. Yet also as cities, they are the places most exposed to non-Cameroonian culture, and the extent to which this foreign influence has eroded tradition was something I found worth exploring.

There is no doubt that traditional dances in Cameroon are no longer what they once were. Their widespread practice has shifted in terms of original purposes, and the reasons behind their current purposes highlights the extent to which Cameroon has been touched by globalization. In cities, metropolitan areas in higher contact with the outside world, the continued practice of traditional dance has become political, regardless of whether its practitioners are aware of this or not. The purpose of dance is not simply to entertain, but to valorize culture and prove that Cameroon has not lost itself. Dance can be viewed both as a source of reconnaissance for the people of Cameroon to their roots and their history, and as a proof to the outside world that the country of Cameroon holds value.

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Past ISPs


Resource Persons

Achanyang Atabong Jarvis – Formal Interview 17 November 2014
President of the Ballet Universitaire de Yaoundé 1; Masters in History

Directeur des Spectacles (Ministry of Culture) – Formal Interview 14 November 2014

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Fokumlah Burnley Yaya – Informal Interview
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Moaboulou Cyriaque – Formal Interview 13 November 2014
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Museum Curator at La Chefferie du Batoufam

Dr. Tami – Formal Interview 21 December 2014
Dance Professor at Université de Yaoundé 1

Dr. Fai Donatus Tangem – Formal Interview 21 December 2014
Dance Professor at Université de Yaoundé 1

Technical Director 1 (Ministry of Culture) – Informal Interview

APPENDICES

Interview Questions for Dancers:
1. Comment as-tu appris à danser ? (As-tu grandi avec la danse ?)
2. Quel est ton rôle avec le ballet ici ?
3. Quand as-tu commencé à danser avec le ballet ? (Pendant combien de temps)
4. Pourquoi as-tu décidé de joindre le ballet ?
5. Où, hors d’ici, peut-on danser comme ça ?
6. Pense-toi que les danses ici sont traditionnelles ?
7. Quelle est l’importance des danses traditionnelles ?
8. Est-ce qu’il y a une différence entre le tradition et la culture ?
9. A ton avis, quel est plus important à Yaoundé, et pour Cameroun : la pratique des danses (pour la culture) ou le préservation de la tradition ?

**Interview Questions for Academics:**

1. Est-ce que la pratique des danses traditionnelles a changé au Cameroun?
2. Quelles étaient les influences de la colonisation sur la culture Camerounaise ?
3. Aujourd’hui, quelle est l’importance des danses traditionnelles au Cameroun ?
4. Pensez-vous que la pratique des danses traditionnelles au Cameroun aujourd’hui est une obligation ou un choix ?