1.1. Summary of the context and overall objectives of the project

Only since the 1960s and generally through marginal voices has dance been reclaimed as a valid topic of anthropological enquiry. In the last few decades, the shift seen in anthropological theory from structure to process and from competence to performance has yielded greater interest in this subject, even among scholars with no formal training in the medium. Studies of dance performance have multiplied, with particular emphasis being placed on the link between dance and the development of nationalism and ethnicity. In our postcolonial and global world, nourishing the need for individuals and communities to construct their selves through identity claims, 'traditional' dance has become a strong symbol of regional or national belonging, as recent ethnographies of dance attest.

The project, at the intersection of dance studies and anthropology, has sought to further investigate this issue of the development of 'traditional' dance as a major vector shaping a national identity in a global context for the East African country of Rwanda. Because the 1994 genocide deeply divided this country's two main socio-political groups (i.e. Tutsi and Hutu) through a logic of lethal ethnic opposition, the affirmation of a national identity is especially urgent in light of the need to sidestep these ethnicizing tendencies. Dance performances have a prominent role in this regard. The last decade has witnessed a wholesale revival of traditional Rwandan dances, which has manifested itself in the proliferation, especially in urban zones, of dance troupes for young people. These troupes perform at diverse occasions, most prominently marriages and events sponsored by the government or directly government related, the latter case revealing the role of dance in representing Rwandan national identity. In the drive to reconstruct the country after the devastation of the genocide and to become a ‘modern’ nation, a movement of strong economic development and accelerated globalisation has been initiated, which all the more prompts the need for the Rwandan nation to affirm its cultural specificity.

The objective of the research was threefold: i) to study the contribution of contemporary dance performances in Rwanda to the socio-political aim of constructing a new, Rwandan nation and representing a national identity; ii) to detail the reconfiguration of the dance performances towards this aim; and iii) to evaluate the effects of this process on the dances themselves. The research therefore sought to highlight how the weight of identity concerns in the postcolonial world acts upon performances and their expressive potential.

1.2 Work performed from the beginning of the project to the end of the period covered by the report and main results achieved so far

In order to realize these objectives, an ethnographic fieldwork stay of seven months (2011-2013) has been carried out in Kigali with the dance troupe Inganzo Ngari, which nowadays is considered the best of its kind in Rwanda and regularly performs at
government functions. This research entailed observation, participation at the rehearsals and performances of the troupe and interviews with the troupe’s directors, choreographers and members, with artists from the previous generation and with government officials charged with cultural affairs. During the project, these ethnographic data were analysed in relation with the existing literature on Rwanda and with important contributions in the field of dance anthropology. Discussions were held during seminars and informal conversations with the dance anthropologists of CDR and with Professor Grau, the supervisor of the project. Provisional findings were presented at conferences, both within the field of Dance Studies, Anthropology and African Studies, and several articles were written and submitted to peer-reviewed journals.

The in-depth research of the dance troupe Inganzo Ngari has enabled to obtain a clear view on the transformations happening in Rwandan dance performances nowadays and to evaluate how, through these changes, dances contribute to the construction of a new national identity. In line with the governmental ideology of a unified nation, Inganzo Ngari has broadened the dance repertoire, by including dances from the northern and western provinces of Rwanda. By mixing these dances with ‘classical’ pieces from the centre of the country, their ethnic labelling and sociocultural background is neutralised. The representation of Rwandan identity is further enacted through a return to an idealized past. In its annual shows, the troupe integrates theatrical scenes on Rwandan life at the time of the pre-colonial kingdom. The resulting image of traditionalism is linked to an impression of modernity and progress by raising the rhythm, by introducing new movements such as fast turns and stylized postures, and by enhancing the performances’ visual and spectacular dimensions. Interviews with the choreographers of the troupe have revealed that the influence from other cultural forms, notably Chinese folkloric dances, accessed through television, internet and, for some, travel, has played a dominant role in improving the scenic qualities of Rwandan dances. The global acceleration of the dances, the assembling of parts of different dances and the introduction of postures, are also copied from television clips of pop singers where visual effects are sought through similar means. It is precisely through its capacity to ally traditional Rwandan forms with novel, transcultural elements that the troupe succeeds in embodying the image of a New Rwanda that while remaining anchored in its past has become a modern nation open to the processes of globalisation.

1.3 Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact (including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal implications of the project)

An innovative hypothesis has arisen out of the research with regard to the question why dance is currently a privileged medium for expressing national identity. Unlike other material symbols of belonging, dance is a bodily action. The dancing body is not only representational but also a lived body. The evolution of the troupe Inganzo Ngari highlights how this visual aspect of representation is particularly privileged in line with the sociopolitical aim of representing Rwandan identity. Meanwhile, the captivating effect of the dance form is also due to its power of taking one in a collective flow, resulting from mutual rhythmic adjustment. When asked questions on their dance experience, dancers regularly said that dancing gives them a joyful feeling of being taken in a collective movement. The highly original hypothesis that results from this research is that, besides other characteristics of dance mentioned by dance scholars, the duality between visual form and lived flow seems to explain its aptitude to represent national identity as fixed form in a perpetually changing world.

Beyond this academic point of interest, the research has also contributed to challenge simplified visions on African dance, on the Rwandan genocide and the envisaged solutions for the country. Among the Western public, there is generally a very stereotyped vision on traditional African dances. These dances are considered as natural, instinctive, spontaneous etc. Their elaborate and structured nature is minimised as well as their overwhelmingly diversity on the African continent. This study on Rwandan dances and its dissemination through publications and a website contributes to rectify this view. Another Western governed vision that has been challenged is the idea that dancing is an activity that is mainly aesthetic or meant for distraction. The link it has as an embedded social activity to wider sociocultural processes and the way dance is shaped by these processes and shapes them is generally neglected. This also means that the constructive power dance can have in (re)establishing a sense of community, as I have shown is the case in Rwanda, is overlooked. Especially in regard to Rwanda’s genocidal past, the acknowledgement of the constructive power of dance is interesting since it challenges common ideas.
about the needed future for this country. There is an overwhelmingly strong idea that the only way forward for Rwanda is the organization of judicial councils in order to do justice to the victims of the 1994 genocide. The underlying—very Western—idea is that everything needs to be outspoken in order to be dealt with. Rwandan culture, however, highly values discretion and the capacity of keeping secrets and unspoken truths in order to preserve social equilibrium. This study, by analysing the dance and the way it creates community in a way that is not based on the expression of possible conflict that hinders community making but rather creates links notwithstanding unspeakable tensions and pains, has shown the value of this cultural specific mode of functioning.

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