Deliberations in Dance: Affecting Publics and the Politics of Ethnicity in Guinea's Nascent Democracy

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Abstract: Guinea's postindependence state (1958-84) discouraged ethnic identification in favor of national solidarity. In the decades since, ethnic groups have increasingly been mobilized as political interest groups in Guinea, a phenomenon that has been especially visible in recent multiparty elections. At the same time as ethnicity resurfaced as an explicit political force, young performing artists in Guinea's capital city Conakry were inventing genres of dance and urban ceremony that de-emphasize ethnicity as a marker of belonging. Cohen engages with an interdisciplinary literature on publics to describe how the aesthetic practices of non-elite African youth constitute a crucial form of political engagement.

Résumé: L'État de Guinée après l'indépendance (1958-84) a découragé l'identification ethnique au profit de la solidarité nationale. Au cours des décennies qui ont suivi, les groupes ethniques ont été de plus en plus mobilisés en tant que groupes d'intérêts politiques en Guinée, un phénomène qui a été particulièrement visible lors des récentes élections multipartites. En ce moment même où l'ethnicité refaisait surface en tant que force politique explicite, de jeunes artistes de la scène de Conakry, la capitale de la Guinée, inventaient des genres de danse et de cérémonie urbaine qui minimisaient l'accent sur l'ethnicité en tant que marqueur d'appartenance. Cohen s'engage dans une littérature interdisciplinaire du public pour décrire comment les pratiques esthétiques de la jeunesse africaine non élitiste constituent une forme cruciale d'engagement politique.

166

Resumo: O Estado pós-independente da Guiné (entre 1958 e 1984) desencorajou o identitarismo étnico em benefício da solidariedade nacional. Nas décadas posteriores, os grupos étnicos guineenses foram cada vez mais mobilizados enquanto grupos políticos de interesse, um fenómeno que se tornou especialmente evidente nas recentes eleições multipartidárias. Ao mesmo tempo que a etnicidade reemergia como força política explícita, em Conacri, capital da Guiné, jovens artistas performativos inventavam novos géneros de dança e de cerimonial urbano que retiravam a ênfase da etnicidade enquanto marca de pertença identitária. Cohen propõe uma leitura interdisciplinar sobre públicos, para descrever o modo como as práticas estéticas da juventude africana não elitista constituem uma forma muito importante de envolvimento político.

In the Republic of Guinea, dancers were key players in the construction of a postcolonial national imaginary in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the government sponsored cultural production as a means of generating pan-ethnic cohesion and identity. Dance in Guinea's capital city of Conakry today is far less connected to formal politics than it once was, yet it continues to be an important medium for circulating ideas to open-ended publics at a critical moment as the country turns toward democratic politics. This article examines Guinean dance as a public-forming practice from the postcolonial nationalist era until the present, focusing specifically on how performing artists engage the topic of ethnicity, which has long been a key issue in Guinean politics.

I use the term "public" to describe a social imaginary brought into being through the circulation of affecting material. A public is an "ongoing space of encounter" constituted through the reflexive circulation of verbal, textual, or embodied discourses across time and space (Warner 2002:62). During Guinea's First Republic following independence (1958–84), which I will also refer to as the "socialist period," President Ahmed Sékou Touré was an avid supporter of the performing arts. He praised dance, music, and theatre for their ability to address and performatively constitute a national public across a linguistically diverse and largely nonliterate population (Straker 2009:211–13). Under Touré's leadership, Guinea developed a country-wide system of dance troupes or "ballets" in which dancers and musicians performed folkloric versions of ethnic dances on stage. The ruling party—*Le Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (henceforth PDG)—advertised this staged dance (also referred to as "ballet") as an art form uniquely capable of bridging ethnic divides and emblematizing an egalitarian socialist nation aligned with a broader project of pan-African liberation (Hashachar 2018). Ballet production was organized and regulated through a four-tiered system of troupes,

beginning with the village or district level, up through Sectional, Federal, and National levels. There were thousands of troupes nationwide, and regular competitions enabled upward mobility for dancers into the selective Federal and National troupes.[1] Ballets showcased dances from different parts of the country in an effort to present a political ideal of ethnic unity through the juxtaposition of diverse practices on stage. This supported President Touré's political rhetoric of ethnic cooperation. Touré often spoke of tribalism or "ethnic particularism" as antithetical to the development of a viable Guinean nation-state. As he phrased it in a 1969 speech at the Palais du Peuple in Conakry: "With the advent of the Nation, the persistence of the tribal spirit becomes an anachronism, a reactionary manifestation, a retrograde, backward vision of social development" (Touré 1976:29).

After the end of socialism in Guinea, dance became largely decoupled from national politics, but the stage dance cultivated during the First Republic retained its popularity among urban youth working in private troupes and animating social ceremonies.[2] In the decades following the socialist period, ethnic groups have become increasingly mobilized as political interest groups in Guinea, a phenomenon that was especially visible in the first "free and fair" democratic race for the presidency in 2010, which echoed models of political organization that had been popular in the 1940s and early 1950s (Bah 2016:95). At a time when ethnicity has enjoyed a resurgence in multiparty politics, young Guinean artists have created numerous dance genres and forms of urban ceremony that de-emphasize ethnicity as a marker of belonging. Ethnic violence in Guinea (as elsewhere in Africa) is often traced in the media, and in some scholarship, to young underemployed men (Philipps 2013; Urdal 2004). However, Guinean artists represent a different youth perspective—one that counters the logic of coethnicity (ethnic sameness) as a foundational tenet of collective belonging. In this article I argue that young artists in Conakry cultivate genres of dance and ceremony that constitute an important form of public engagement in Guinea's nascent democracy.

It is an axiom of political theory that liberal democracy as a political form must involve some mechanism for public deliberation. Social scientists and historians have spilled much ink over the ideal nature of such a public sphere or spheres, and what their role in democracy should be. Jürgen Habermas's (1989 [1962]) idea of the "bourgeois public sphere" designated an arena of interaction in early modern Europe, distinct from both state and market, in which people would (ideally) bracket their differences and engage in rational deliberation about the common good. Much of the subsequent literature on public spheres deals with overtly political publics and "counterpublics" comprised of people who reflexively frame their own actions and debates as politically engaged (Crossley & Roberts 2004; Eley 1992; Fraser 1990; Ryan 1992). Other important work on the nature and function of publics suggests that the kind of deliberation critical to democratic formations need not be rational, language-based, or even "political" in the narrow sense of the term (Hirschkind 2006; Negt, Kluge, & Labanyi 1988 [1972]; Warner 2002). As

Michael Warner makes clear, publics may be generated through poetic, affecting, and embodied activity as much as through rational-critical dialogue (2002:88). Indeed, a narrow focus on rational debate often leads to an impoverished notion of publicity-as-persuasion instead of performance (Warner 2002:82). This point is critical if we are to take seriously the ways in which public deliberation (language-based or embodied) can be "performative," meaning that it participates in constructing the reality in which it circulates (Austin 1962). Attention to affecting public deliberation also makes it possible to conceptualize how actors occupying various different positions in a social hierarchy (for example, classed, gendered, or geronto-cratic) create and circulate ideas to extended publics. As Seyla Benhabib writes, "The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms" (1992:87). In contemporary Guinea, one such norm is the idea that ethnicity is a proxy both for identity and for political allegiance.

Nancy Fraser (1990) frames her well-known reformulation of the public sphere as an intervention into the question of "actually existing" (as opposed to ideal) democracy. As there is often a significant gap between theory and practice in political experience, ethnographic attention to how public delib-erations actually unfold is vital to understanding what democracy means in practice. In Guinea, internationally-overseen democratic elections were first held in 2010, but it was never clear that procedural democracy was accom-panied by more substantive shifts in governance (Amnesty International 2020; Vendrely 2020). Indeed, the elected leader, Alpha Condé, changed the constitution in 2020 to allow himself a third term; he was subsequently ousted on Sept 5, 2021, by a military junta accusing him of abusing the office. The junta claims to be facilitating a transitional government with the goal of returning to constitutional rule through elections.

During my ethnographic fieldwork in Conakry between 2010 and 2013, I spoke regularly with non-elite Guineans about democracy, and they shared a variety of interpretations. Many people questioned the legitimacy of the process, suggesting that elections are decided by powerful players either within Guinea or abroad. Others were simply not convinced that average people should choose their leaders in the first place, and claimed that such decisions are for God alone to make. There are many elements of democracy in Guinea that have yet to be ironed out, including to what extent ethnicity can or should play a role in politics. Without wading explicitly into debates about governance, performing artists in Conakry cultivate an aesthetic of non-ethnic alignment, projected to a public of practitioners and viewers. The urban-cosmopolitan aesthetic of belonging that these artists foster at once echoes socialist-era policy and positions Guinean youth as brokers of globally-circulating cultural capital. At a time when autochthony movements across the globe are intensely consequential in politics, it is especially important for

scholars to pay attention to the ways in which average people in emerging democracies grapple with questions of ethnicity and membership.

In the following sections, I first outline how ballet artists were tasked with representing ethnic harmony during the socialist period. Then I describe how ethnicity became increasingly politicized during the Second Republic under the reign of President Lansana Conté (1984–2008) and into an era of procedural democracy beginning in 2010. The second half of the article explores how contemporary artists in Conakry construct a vernacular embodied discourse that disavows ethnicity as a marker of belonging in favor of a cosmopolitan, urban identification. By paying attention to such embodied and affecting means of public deliberation, we gain crucial information about how people—and especially non-elite members of emerging democracies—grapple with key political issues outside the realm of formal politics.

This article is part of a larger ethnographic project about dance and political transformation in Guinea, and it rehashes some key information about Conakry dance that will be familiar to those who know my work. Elsewhere, I have examined political and generational transformations in Guinean dance (Cohen 2016, 2021b), and I have explored in ethnographic detail the ceremonies and forms of dance I propose in this article as examples of an aesthetic of ethnic erasure (Cohen 2016, 2019, 2021a). This article contributes to an interdisciplinary body of literature on publics and democratic deliberation by probing the intersection of ethnicity and politics through dance as a public-forming medium.

Ethnicity, Politics, and Performance During Guinea's First Republic

During Guinea's First Republic (also referred to as "The Revolution"), the PDG preached social leveling and ethnic unity. Though such ideals were unevenly practiced, they informed official policy in various realms of Guinean life. For example, state officials from one region were assigned to serve in another in order to facilitate inter-ethnic comprehension (Camara 2005:65). Within the realm of cultural expression, the government undermined traditional rules guiding who could perform song, dance, or music for audiences, and invoked a new professional category of "artiste" (always in French) to describe these cosmopolitan performers whose competencies were achieved, not ascribed by lineage as they once had been (Cohen 2021a:34). Though President Touré had a complex relationship with Maninka lineage bards (*griots*), who were both praised and vilified by the regime, downplaying traditional hierarchies was one facet of the party's tactic of appealing to youth, women, and the urban poor, all of whom had the least to gain from social structures of gerontocracy and social stratification (Schmidt 2005a, 2007:70).[3]

The PDG's approach to ethnicity signaled solidarity with anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalist movements across the continent. As Mike McGovern explains:

> Touré saw early on that the problem of ethnicity was not only an issue of interest groups that could potentially unseat him but also the legacy of the colonial distinction between citizens and subjects, or between universal and customary laws or practices. The impetus to regularize one national law paralleled the struggle to institute a national culture. (2013:188)

There is ongoing debate, both in Guinea and among academics, about how ethnically blind Touré's politics actually were in practice (Bah 1990; Kudamatsu 2009; Le Monde 2020; Rivière 1977). Touré and the PDG frequently denounced Fulbe people (who comprise the largest ethnic group in Guinea) as ethnic chauvinists who looked out for themselves to the detriment of the national good (McGovern 2017:56). This defamatory rhetoric escalated in the years following a 1970 coup attempt.[4] Ethnic Fulbe claim that Touré unfairly targeted them as a group (Bâ 1986), while others suggest that the many abuses of the regime were motivated by paranoia and an ideology of class war, not by ethnic resentments, and that Fulbe in contemporary Guinea have mobilized a narrative of ethnic suffering to justify an ethnic political platform in the present (Arieff & McGovern 2013:202–3, 221; Fioratta 2019). Whatever may have been the true incentives behind the violent excesses of the regime, which became more acute in the 1970s, Touré and the PDG also managed to cultivate a sense of national allegiance, even among the groups most aggrieved—namely various Forestier ethnic groups and Fulbe (Fioratta 2019:459). The regime utilized both anti-colonial and pro-religious narratives to appeal to common experiences of suffering in Guinea under colonial rule across ethnic identifications and to unite people through shared religious symbols (Bah 2016:296–97; Schmidt 2005b:993–95).

In the performing arts, the PDG cultivated an iconic display of national unity which was supposed to be both classless and not inflected by ethnic particularism. Ballet troupes created productions in which dances and rhythms representing the country's major ethnic groups converged on stage. This way of depicting the nation as a collection of harmonious ethnic groups through state-sponsored folklore was not unique to Guinea. Similar troupes were cultivated across the African continent as well as in diverse countries around the globe between the end of WWII and the 1980s (Braun 2019; Castaldi 2006; Edmondson 2007; Schauert 2015; Shay 2002; Skinner 2012; Taylor 2008; Wilcox 2018). Combining ostensibly "authentic" ethnic dances on stage was, of course, never a value-neutral act of showcasing a pre-formed reality by representing the local practices of a territory (Shay 2002:7). It was, rather, an aspirational political performance geared to create a cohesive national collective (Askew 2002).

Indeed, while the state touted ballet as a performance of ethnic inclusion, Fulbe people and instruments were always underrepresented in the national troupes and continue to be a minority in Conakry ballet. Some Fulbe claim that their group's exceptional piety kept them from performing, while others suggest that they were averse to Sékou Touré's politics, of which the ballets were an integral part. Guinea's music scene at the time was also not

ethnically inclusive, and the state-funded recording label Syliphone favored Malinke bands and rarely broadcast music of Fulbe regions (Counsel 2009:102). The party-state, while rhetorically celebrating ethnic unity, also engaged in an iconoclastic campaign of "demystification," aimed at eradicating the religions and masquerades of ethnic minorities, especially in the forest region in the country's southeast (Højbjerg 2006; McGovern 2013; Rivière 1977; Straker 2009). Demystification involved the destruction of masks and other powerful objects and the forced exposure of once-secret dances and rhythms. Many of those practices were subsequently appropriated by the ballet troupes, thereby performing the transfer of rural power to a centralized state. Needless to say, the notion of a nation blind to ethnic difference was not borne out in the cultural politics of the Touré era.

Ballet was part of a broader project the Guinean state referred to as "militant theater," in which dance, music, and dramaturgy were conscripted into the service of nation-building (Charry 2011; Straker 2007, 2009:87, 177). Ballet programs were supposed to celebrate the national collective over and above any ethnic allegiance, but the ballet model also condensed and essentialized ethnicity into a set of signs that acted as metonyms of ethnic groups. These signs, which were used frequently on stage to indicate the ethnic origin of each dance, included hairstyles, language (in songs), clothing styles, movements, and rhythmic patterns (Goerg 2011, on the naturalization of ethnicity through geographic partitioning). On stage, each ethnic dance was presented separately, conveying a billiard-ball model of unity in which ethnic groups existed separately, yet in harmony. There were many cosmopolitan elements of staged ballet during the socialist era that did not support such an essentialized notion of ethnicity, but the artists and playbills of the time rarely probed those elements. Performers trained during the Revolution, in interviews and conversations with me, tended to recall themselves as faithful translators of rural dance music into a stage format, and playbills for international tours during the socialist period often portrayed ballet as a window into African village life (Cohen 2021a:chapter four).

Despite this selective mode of narrating and recalling socialist-era ballet, the dance troupes of the First Republic crossed ethnic boundaries in multiple ways. For example, all ethnically-particular rhythms were transposed onto a set of Maninka drums (*djembe* for lead and accompaniment and a trilogy of bass drums: *dundun, sangban,* and *kenkeni),* and all ballet percussionists—regardless of provenance—were required to become proficient at playing those instruments. The central positioning of Maninka instruments elevated the president's own Maninka patrimony, but translating rhythms from one ethnic group onto the drums of another also worked against the representation of ethnic groups as essential and separate. The performers in Guinea's Federal and National dance companies came from various ethnic backgrounds, and all artists performed a diverse program of dances. So, while dances were separated on stage as ethnic specimens, the artists themselves were not. The final major element of ballet that undermined a fantasy of ethnically pure dances was the fact that ballet artists invented many new

movements to add to each ethnic dance in order to make them more exciting and stageworthy. In rural performance contexts, many dances had just a few key steps, and in the ballets, those moves were elaborated on and transformed to arrive at the repertoires that were presented on stage. Some movements were also used in multiple dances of different ethnic origins. Indeed, the prototype for Guinea's first national ballet, Les Ballets Africains de la République de Guinée, was a cosmopolitan troupe founded in Paris in 1952 by a Guinean national named Fodéba Keita. The original group, Les Ballets Africains de Keita Fodéba, was made up of artists from multiple ethnic backgrounds; the ensemble cultivated a culturally heterogenous aesthetic that was preoccupied with neither ethnic heritage nor authenticity (Cohen 2012:20).

Despite the many cosmopolitan aspects of Guinean ballet over time, in contemporary Conakry, artists who performed during the Touré era tend to be preoccupied with loyalty to "original" rural forms, and they celebrate ethnic purity over cosmopolitanism. Indeed, one of the most common critiques that elderly Guinean artists trained during the socialist era level at younger artists trained in the 1990s and 2000s is that these younger artists disregard the boundaries between discrete rhythms and indiscriminately merge movements from one dance with those of another. Elders suggest that this disregard stems both from ignorance of the history of dance rhythms and from a defiant attitude toward their elders. I argue elsewhere that this is a mischaracterization of the current generation of artists, who are—on the whole—neither defiant nor ignorant (Cohen 2016, 2021b). Dancers of the younger generation are forging a new approach to ethnicity that is coherent across a variety of forms, and that differs significantly both from the logics of the nationalist past and from the logics undergirding contemporary politics in Guinea.

The Conté Era and After: The Politics of Ethnicity

When Touré died in 1984, a military colonel named Lansana Conté assumed power in a bloodless coup and remained head of state until his death in 2008. The Conté regime's official approach to ethnicity differed from that of the PDG (Sarró 2009:119), though some of the rhetoric about ethnically-inflected "plots" echoed the paranoid style of Touré's final decade in office. Conté's regime was, however, more blatantly and unapologetically aligned with his own Susu ethnic group (Schmidt 2005a:14; Engeler 2008). Elizabeth Schmidt explains that "Constant harangues on state-run radio and television warned the coastal population that there was a Malinke (or Peul) plot to take over the government. The government rightfully belonged to the Susu, the speakers argued, since the coast was their historic home, and other ethnic groups were allowed to live there at their sufferance" (2005a:13). Conté, responding to pressure from donors, introduced a facade of multiparty democracy in 1991, but the elections that took place during his tenure were

rigged to favor Conté, and political opponents were often arrested or imprisoned (McGovern 2017:143, 161).

This kind of ethnically-inflected politics continued and intensified after Conté's death in 2008. First, a military junta led by Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized power in a coup d'état in December 2008. The junta, which called itself the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD), was responsible for a massacre of unarmed protestors at an opposition rally in a stadium in Conakry on September 28, 2009. Over 150 people were killed and many more wounded and sexually assaulted in a horrible act of violence perpetrated by state military and associated militia. The victims were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but there were a disproportionate number of ethnic Fulbe at the rally (Human Rights Watch 2009:47), leading many Fulbe people to characterize the violence as ethnically targeted (Fioratta 2019:462). The junta was under close scrutiny from the international community following the incident, and Dadis Camara blamed the atrocities on his military. Camara was shortly thereafter shot by one of his own men and evacuated to Morocco to seek medical treatment; from there he traveled to Burkina Faso, where he remained. Junta member Sekouba Konaté led an interim government that enabled the country's first internationally-watched multi-party democratic elections in 2010.

The 2010 election was fraught with ethnic tensions. Political parties and figures became proxies for ethnic groups. The two largest ethnic groups in the country, Fulbe and Maninka, were represented by Cellou Dalein Diallo and Alpha Condé, respectively. Ethnic Fulbe embraced a logic of political turn-taking, arguing that since Touré had been Maninka, Conté had been Susu and Dadis Camara was Forestier, logically it was the Fulbe's "turn" to assume the presidency (McGovern 2017:66). Other groups finally rallied behind the Maninka candidate Alpha Condé in an effort to elect "Anyone but a Fulbe" (Arieff & McGovern 2013:217). Brigades of supporters held mobile rallies around Conakry and throughout the country, some of which turned violent, especially when one ethnic group's cavalcade entered a neighborhood or town mostly occupied by a rival ethnic group. Ethnic tensions became especially heated around this time, and as a fieldworker in Conakry immediately before the election, I heard more negative characterizations of entire ethnic groups than I had encountered before in the nearly four years I had spent in Conakry. I often heard Maninka and Susu non-artists say that if the Fulbe candidate won, they would leave the city. Some Maninka and Susu people circulated a rumor about a magical water called *Mayimboye* that had been brought to the capital by the military; they claimed that it would kill anyone of Fulbe descent who touched it but would spare others. I was living in a Maninka compound at the time, and I speak Susu and some Maninka, so I have always had more access to the subtle murmurs circulating among speakers of these languages in Conakry. Susanna Fioratta, who worked with Fulbe people in the Fouta Djallon around the same time, also noted that during the 2010 elections "flexible interpretations of political and ethnic repertoires hardened" (2019:460).

The Maninka candidate Alpha Condé won the 2010 elections, and ethnically charged tensions flared in Guinea and continued in the subsequent decade, especially surrounding legislative and presidential elections (Pletsch 2015; Barry 2018; Ghirardello & Benedikter 2020; Samb & Christensen 2018). In the lead-up to legislative elections in 2013, for example, Fulbe (sometimes called "Fulani") and Maninka (sometimes called "Malinké") conflicts continued. As journalist Nicole Gerber describes the situation:

> In the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013, mobs of either Malinké or Fulani youth would stop cars, demand the occupants speak, and if the wrong language was spoken, the result could vary from threats, to theft, to torched vehicles, to bodily harm. Gangs of Fulani youth would separate themselves from scheduled UFDG marches to throw stones and Molotov cocktails at the (predominantly Malinké) gendarmes, who would in turn respond with tear gas, water cannons, and occasionally bullets. In reaction, Malinké gangs of youth went into Madina market to loot and burn Fulani stalls and gendarmes entered Fulani homes, stealing cell phones and other valuables. Continuing the cycle, groups of Fulani youth burned at least two *gendarmeries*. Each time there are deaths, public funerals are held to honor the "martyrs," which can be foci of even further clashes (2013:2–3).

Multiparty democracy in Guinea was accompanied by the hardening of ethnic identities—a trend that is perhaps not surprising at a time when ethno-nationalist and otherwise nativist exclusionary movements were also gaining momentum across the globe. Peter Geschiere (2009) describes the quest for belonging and fixed identity through recourse to discourse about autochthony—the idea of being native, or "born from the soil"—as "the flip side" of globalization. In Guinea, performing artists are some of the most visible critics of such exclusionary stances, but they tend not to be invested in formal politics.

At the same time as ethnic partisanship flourished in Guinean politics, in Conakry's thriving dance community ethnicity was losing traction as a guiding concept. Young ballet practitioners developed approaches to dance that deny ethnicity a central role, in spite of the fact that their elderly teachers consider ethnic origins to be supremely important. Elders in the dance community think that young artists should learn the rural histories and ritual applications of each dance rhythm, and they believe that these histories should guide dancers as they make choices in solo performances about which movements to perform together in a single rhythm. Younger artists, by contrast, prioritize "time" or "feel" over ethnic origin when deciding which dance steps to combine in a solo performance. In the following sections, I describe how young artists have been articulating and circulating their position on ethnicity through talk about dance, through dance itself, and through the curation of urban dance ceremonies.

The Public Sphere of Conakry Dance

Publics are mediated by cultural forms (Warner 2002:54). In contemporary Conakry, the ethnic billiard ball model is still alive in ballet choreography, and most troupes continue to perform versions of ethnically specific dances, each marked by costumes, songs in the appropriate language, ethnically specific hairstyles, and sometimes masquerades from the region in question. There are exceptions to this, and some ballets incorporate new global influences, including Hip Hop and Euro-American modern dance, into their choreography. However, because most ballet troupes are directed by elders, staged choreography does not always reflect the preoccupations or preferences of young artists. It is for this reason that I focus in this article on solo performances at ceremonies—where elderly directors are not in charge—in order to describe some of the emerging logics embraced by postsocialist artists.

There are two social ceremonies in Conakry that are of particular importance to young artists: dundunba and sabar, which I have written about extensively elsewhere, but will outline here for unfamiliar readers (Cohen 2016, 2019, 2021a). Dancers and musicians who rehearse daily in ballets often spend afternoons at dundunba ceremonies and late evenings at sabars. Both of these ceremonies are what I call "cosmopolitan" ceremonies, meaning that they are urban creations involving ethnically heterogenous participants and aesthetics. There are also ethnically marked social ceremonies in Conakry that are organized and performed mostly by people of a particular ethnic group for prescribed occasions, and that feature dance steps widely recognized as ethnically particular. While dundunbas are typically organized to celebrate diverse occasions including marriages, circumcisions, baby namings, or homecomings, sabars are are usually performed for weddings. Dundunba and sabar ceremonies have become important sites for the invention and exchange of new ideas and dance forms among young ballet practitioners who train across the city, and they offer a glimpse of the uncensored vernacular of the younger generation. One of the guiding logics of this vernacular embodied discourse is a disavowal of ethnic identification.

The reception of dance and music performed at cosmopolitan ceremonies in Conakry is not limited to the bounded group of people attending each discrete performance. Dundunba and sabar ceremonies take place in open public spaces—typically in street intersections, open fields, or community centers. There are no clear rules for where these two ceremonies can or should be organized, but dundunbas are more common in neighborhoods where ballets rehearse—typically in ethnically mixed, non-elite neighborhoods. Sabars are more ubiquitous, and young ethnic Fulbe, who are underrepresented in Conakry ballet, often have sabars for their weddings, as do young people from other ethnic groups, regardless of class position.

The audience at dundunbas is made up of local artists and their friends, foreign students, local aficionados, and random passers-by. Sabars have a similarly open format where anyone may join in or observe, but while

dundunbas are typically organized by and for artists and their families, average people regularly organize and participate in sabars. Both ceremonies, however, circulate aesthetic and affecting material among an open-ended public audience of participants and onlookers.[5] Videos of dundunba and sabar events also circulate widely via social media.

In Guinea during the socialist period, staged ballet troupes participated in the construction of a national public much as print media did in other contexts (Anderson 1983). Social ceremonies in Conakry at that time were largely performative of ethnic social imaginaries—calling forth ethnic modes of belonging in a diverse capital city. Elderly artists I interviewed recalled how dundunba, for example, used to be a ceremony performed in the city mostly by and for members of the Maninka ethno-linguistic group. Sometimes ballet practitioners would host dundunbas and invite other practitioners in their troupe, but the ceremony was ethnically marked and did not invite stranger sociability the way it does today. In contemporary Conakry, if artists want to fête virtually any celebratory occasion, they throw a dundunba and invite other artists from several different ballets. While dundunbas were once more intimate gatherings, now they function to bring the broad community of urban ballet artists together in face-to-face interactions.

Guinean sabar—which names both a dance and the ceremony at which it is performed— also does not belong to any particular ethnic group in Conakry. Sabar hailed originally from Senegal, and it was imported to Conakry when resident Wolof Senegalese asked Guinean drummers to play for their celebrations, though the dance soon became wildly popular among Guineans. Both dundunbas and sabars are now events that organize a public of urban artists and observers, and that facilitate the circulation of a cosmopolitan repertoire of movements, rhythms, and logics governing solo performance in Guinean dance and percussion. I focus here on one particular logic circulated through both dundunba and sabar in Conakry—the logic of ethnic erasure.

Defying Ethnic Logics in Dundunba and Sabar Ceremonies

In a city-wide dance competition in 2011 hosted by an association of private dance and percussion troupes in Conakry called the AGDP (*Alliance Guinéenne Pour le Développement de la Danse et la Percussion)*, the popular dances dundunba and sabar were banned from the stage. After the event, I conducted an interview with the elderly directors of the AGDP, Djibril "Badjibi" Camara and Moussa "Celestin" Camara, who reported that they had made the decision to forbid sabar because it is "not Guinean," and to ban dundunba because youth are too fixated on this dance. Celestin went on to describe the logic behind point-deductions in their competitions: "The minute the jury notices sabar [in a performance], you lose a point. Because sabar isn't Guinean!" Both directors emphasized that mixing movements between ethnically-marked dances constituted another serious infraction. Celestin

explained, "When you have the Tiriba rhythm, but you don't dance Tiriba, it's not normal. Right? It's like if you said '1+1= 4!' It's not true!"

While elderly artists in Conakry consider the dance performed in Conakry—both on stage and in ceremonies—as ideally a direct recapitulation of village forms within the city, younger artists juxtapose movements and ideas across once-discrete rhythms. Celestin's analogy with simple math makes it clear that elderly artists tend to approach youthful experimentation as simply "wrong" (*wule*) because it defies the basic logic of national unity achieved through the display of ethnic billiards in dance. The intergenerational tensions surrounding dundunba and sabar in Conakry reveal how young artists are articulating an approach to ethnicity that is coherent neither with the socialist model of ethnic unity nor with the ethnic partisanship of Guinea's contemporary politics.

Dundunba

Dundunba was originally a Maninka dance and ceremony, and it continues to be performed regularly in Guinean Maninka villages, where it has long emblematized male power and virility. Ballet practitioners in Conakry therefore often describe dundunba in French as "the strong man's dance" (*la danse des hommes forts*), or in Susu simply as "power dance" (*sɛnbɛ fare*). Dundunba's urban manifestation, however, has diverged dramatically over the past several decades from its rural counterpart.

Dundunba in Conakry has become an ethnically inclusive ceremony that is central to the contemporary professional ballet scene. Its key dance steps, which were once reserved for male dancers (and continue to be in the countryside) are performed in Conakry by men, women, and gender non-conforming individuals alike.[6] As young artists mix movements between once-ethnic dance-rhythms in dundunba ceremonies, elders critique them for disregarding, or failing to take an interest in, the ethnically particular history of each dance. While elders believe that dances should be discrete units defined by their rural and socialist histories, younger artists embrace a more fluid logic by which movements belong together because of how they feel, not their shared history or ethnic background. This logic extends to steps that come from other parts of the world. Young dancers also interject moves from foreign dance traditions, including Euro-American modern dance and Hip Hop. They often draw from a variety of sources such as Bollywood and martial arts films, music videos, and dreams. Elders condemn the younger generation's mixing of different dances, claiming that such mélange threatens the integrity of the national imaginary. The younger generation aspires to a different kind of social imaginary—one that is urban and cosmopolitan in nature.

During the socialist period, the National ballets recruited artists through a literal siphoning of talented youth from the countryside, a practice that was terminated after 1984. As National ballet artists during the Touré era were themselves often rural-urban transplants, it is perhaps not surprising that they

often conceptualize ballet simply as an act of translating rural practices onto the stage. Once those rural dances were brought to the ballet, however, they were significantly altered to create programs that appealed to wide audiences, and Conakry's urban lexicon has since grown steadily further from its rural "origins" (Cohen 2021a:chapter four). Young dancers in Conakry today are often second- or third-generation urbanites with more practical knowledge of the city than of the villages where their extended family members may yet live. The economic orientation of postsocialist dancers in Conakry is also quite different from that of their socialist predecessors. While the socialist-era artists worked for the state, ballet artists now operate within a global capitalist economy. Socialist-era artists—and especially those who worked with the famous touring company Les Ballets Africains—were exposed to diverse cultural practices through their tours, cultural exchanges, and attendance at pan-African festivals. Despite such exposure, they were considered cultural diplomats, representing their nation through performance. Their loyalty was to that mission, and it influenced how they conceptualized their practice as a display of the richness of Guinea's cultural patrimony. Even when they describe how solo performances in urban ceremonies should be, socialist-era artists elaborate on themes of ethnic purity and Guinean cultural heritage.

Gigoteau

One of the most contentious dance practices performed at Conakry dundunba ceremonies is a type of personal improvisation called *gigoteau*, involving creative cultural citation, fast footwork, and sometimes humorous or rude gestures. Gigoteau is an example of a popular dance form that is not informed by ethnic frameworks of belonging, and it provokes intergenerational controversy among artists because it undermines the ethno-historical logics that guide which movements may be performed together (Cohen 2016). Gigoteau is not a set of movements with origin stories, but rather identifies an approach to creating distinctive solos by inventing or interweaving movements from diverse sources. A good gigoteau dancer could, for example, pull a gesture from a film or a dream and weave it creatively into a solo alongside codified dance steps. S/he could likewise add jumps, twirls, and lewd or insulting movements into the solo at will, demonstrating personal inventiveness and rhythmic competence. Shadow-boxing, butt-scratching, eye-rolling, and other comical and dramatic gestures may become part of a gigoteau performance. Elders often cite gigoteau as a prime example of the nonchalant attitude young people have taken toward reproducing ethnically coded dances. One elderly ballet director explained in an interview with me: "During our time there was no gigoteau. If you were in dundunba, you were in dundunba. If you were in kookoo, you were in kookoo. We danced the *real* stuff…. I don't know how to dance gigoteau. If I'm dancing, I do *dance*. But these days, young people—that's what's ruining their dance at dundunbas. Gigoteau is ruining young artists' dance!"

Elderly artists often describe gigoteau as either "not dance" or as a kind of dance that is diminishing what is truly "Guinean." A dancer named Momodouba Soumah, who spent years performing with Les Ballets Africains, responded thus to the question "what is gigoteau?":

> [It's] what our culture isn't. Becuase *our* dance, our *nation's* dance, our *home* dance, the dance *we* do, gigoteau isn't part of it. You see? Only now, we have taken others' cultures and made it our own. So, the kids just dance gigoteau anymore. But it's not our dance. When you take others' folklore, others' dance, you exit your own culture. (Interview, Conakry, 2013)

Many socialist-era artists echoed this sentiment, worrying that by not reproducing the logics of their elders, young dancers are forsaking their cultural heritage. "Lying dance" (*wule fare)* is another term critics use to describe gigoteau. While elderly artists want to preserve the ideals of nationalism by way of holding on to ethnic boundaries in dance, young artists prioritize distinguishing themselves within the context of a capitalist economy. Young dancers describe gigoteau as "mixed dance" that "draws the audience in" and demonstrates the "creative potential" of the dancer. As a drummer in his mid-twenties named Ballake Sissoko expressed it, "Gigoteau is those [personal] movements that you add…. Like if you are dancing Yankadi, everyone sees that you have done two Yankadi moves. But when you are done with those two moves, people have to see what you are capable of in your head, besides Yankadi."

In the current generation of Conakry performers, gigoteau indexes a dancer's ability to think outside the box, to market oneself to audiences, and to bring personal experience to bear on the practice of dancing. Importantly for my argument here, this key marker of virtuosity is untethered from ethnic logics of belonging.

Sabar

Sabar ceremonies have also contributed—albeit somewhat differently—to an aesthetic of ethnic erasure in Conakry. Guinean Sabar is loosely based on a Senegalese, and ethnically Wolof, dance genre with its own complex social history (for ethnographically detailed accounts of Senegalese sabar, see Castaldi 2006; Neveu-Kringelbach 2013; Tang 2007). Despite its foreign origins, sabar has gained exceptional popularity for wedding parties among artists and non-artists alike in Conakry. Sabar only became popular in Guinea after the socialist period, and it has become a sign of contrast with the "local" cultural practices so celebrated during the First Republic (Cohen 2019:727).

Unlike dundunbas, where artists dance and non-artists mostly just observe, average people of all ethnic backgrounds in the city host and participate in sabars. As one young Susu man named Sekou Fofana explained it to me, "Nowadays, no woman would stand for having her wedding without a

sabar!" A young Fulbe man named Boubacar Barry similarly explained that Fulbe women who were raised in Conakry have come to expect sabar as part of their wedding ceremonies. The average urbanite, regardless of class position, is aware that sabar is not historically from the territory that is now Guinea and that it is not linked to any of the ethnic groups in the country. The act of hosting a sabar party metapragmatically stipulates a non-ethnic form of interaction to commemorate one of the most momentous rites of passage in people's lives—marriage.

There is a generational debate among artists—similar to the debate about gigoteau—about the relevance of sabar. Elders, like Badjibi and Celestin quoted above, say that sabar is foreign and therefore has no place in ballet programs, and they lament the fact that young people spend so much time animating and attending sabar parties. Some artists trained during the socialist period simply told me not to ask them questions about sabar because "it is not ours" (*mu gbe m'a ra),* or they recalled that Sékou Touré had been opposed to sabar because it did not celebrate the nation. In these conversations, older artists made it clear that their notion of national unity is expressed through a collection of ethnically particular dances, and sabar does not fit within that rubric.

Gigoteau and sabar both defy the logic of ethnic reification that has become so ingrained in Guinean politics. Gigoteau ignores the boundaries between discrete ethnic dances and between that which is "Guinean" and that which is "foreign," instead privileging individual inventiveness and citationality. Sabar doesn't scramble ethnic boundaries, but instead it is bracketed from "local" cultural forms (including dundunba, which becomes a shifter in this context—it is local to sabar's foreign, even though it is not ethnically marked vis-à-vis the city's ethnic ceremonies). This bracketing of the foreign reinforces the logic of national, pan-ethnic identity espoused by most socialist-era artists. However, the fact that sabars are now the ceremony of choice for many young brides suggests that the "foreign" has become thoroughly enmeshed into the fabric of urban sociality (see Cohen 2019 for more detail on Guinean sabar).

Publics, as Michael Warner contends, are "constituted through mere attention" (2002:60). As embodied discourses of ethnic erasure circulate through dance in Conakry, people pay attention in different ways. Practitioners themselves engage in direct intergenerational debates about dance and ethnicity. Average people who are not professional dancers often experience the discourse in a number of more indirect ways: by choosing a sabar for their weddings; by participating in producing movements that do not articulate ethnic identity; or simply by observing dancers who interweave ethnically marked movements at a dundunba. In the context of Conakry dance ceremonies, joint attention is a semiotic event that creates an affecting public of practitioners, passers-by, observers, and lay participants.

Every dundunba or sabar is attended by hundreds of people, some of whom were invited and others of whom simply stop to observe. While non-artist observers do not discuss the nuance of particular dances or their

histories, many non-artists I questioned described vaguely how dance "attracts" (French: *attirer*) them when they watch it, even if they do not venture to participate. Others noted that ballet troupes and street ceremonies are especially appealing to young urbanites who were born in the city and whose aesthetic preferences are less informed by ethnic background than are the preferences of people from villages. Some passers-by disapprove of dance ceremonies, either because they think dancing is not condoned by Islam or because they consider some of the dancing to be lewd. Non-artists who do not approve tend not to stop, and hence do not participate in the public dance projects. Elderly artists who disapprove of certain youthful practices, however, *do* watch and participate in constructing the aesthetic by providing a narrative about ethnic purity against which the younger generation pushes back, albeit not verbally. Young dancers, for example, will not tell their elders directly that the ethnic origin of a dance should not be the central organizing factor of urban performance, but they often perform that position through the ceremonies they embrace and the combination of movements in their solos.

Conclusion: Public Potentials

In Guinea's emerging and halting democracy, what role do affecting practices play in constituting publics and shaping political subjectivities? It is, of course, not inevitable that the logics and ideas circulated outward from the sites of Conakry's cosmopolitan ceremonies would reach the level of an overwhelming and unified public opinion. It is also not certain that the affecting logics present in dance or other popular media translate into voting behavior or political deliberation. However, the case of affecting publicity I have outlined in this article is instructive on a number of levels: First, it shows that we must not presuppose ethnicity to be the most salient identity for African citizens, even in places where political parties have clear ethnic allegiances. In addition, it offers a perspective on how non-ethnic logics of belonging may be generated and circulated outside the realm of formal politics. Finally, it presents a case for investigating the role of affect and aesthetics in constituting publics in any democracy, and therefore for conceptualizing democracies not as ideal-typical systems but as works in progress.

Much of the research in political science and political sociology about ethnicity and politics in West Africa treats ethnicity as a "cleavage" that may be undermined by other more or equally salient "cleavages" such as religion, class, language, or region (e.g., Dunning & Harrison 2010; Posner 2017). In this article, I treat ethnicity not as a cleavage or pre-formed "identity," or even as a mutable resource or ongoing construct (as is common in anthropology), but rather as a logic of belonging constituted in part through publicity.[7] In order to understand how and why people come to consider certain logics of belonging more salient than others, it is important to attend to a variety of communicative practices beyond language or rational debate. Dundunba

and sabar ceremonies draw people together around dance forms that deny ethnicity organizational freight, creating a public around the possibility of a non-ethnic mode of collective being. By curating and performing in dundunba and sabar ceremonies, young artists intervene in the logic of ethnic hardening that pervades much of Guinean political life.

This material provokes broad questions about the relationship between affecting publics and the active practice of political subject formation. Before people are subjects with political affiliations and voting tendencies, they are feeling subjects. Affect can and does outweigh rational deliberation in the most established of democracies, a fact that has become viscerally clear in countries where far right groups are on the rise, often tapping into hateful forms of effervescence. Despite the affect that drives political behavior, it is still rare for political analysts (save philosophers) to treat affect and aesthetics as much more than political epiphenomena. There are rich possibilities for future research in determining how the publics generated through popular youth practices relate to emerging political subjectivities (cf. Bergère 2020; Bernstein 2013; Shipley 2015; Winegar 2016). How do public feelings circulated through aesthetic practices find their way into the political process, or how are they bracketed? The political scientist Daniel Posner proposes a method for studying social attachments that "strips them of their affect" by focusing on rational calculations people make about the potential size of political coalitions (2017:2004). I am interested in just the opposite, in how to pay close attention to the role of affect, embodiment, and joint attention in the process of determining which issues and logics of belonging become salient to average people.

In his work on mass mediation, William Mazzarella describes the concept of "public affect" as "the sense of 'liveness' and emergent potential that arises in the chronic gap between the sensuous resonances of mass-mediated images and the competing ways in which they get partially harnessed to social and political projects of value" (2013:40). Mazzarella is describing a potential that has long been fundamental to the notion of publics, from Habermas to Warner and others. For Habermas, it is in public deliberation that the firmament of a democratic society is established. Warner describes publics as "poetic," meaning that the discourses or performances that address publics "must characterize the world in which [they] attempt to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address" (2002:81). By investigating publics created through affecting and aesthetic practices and linking them back to the question of how democracy actually exists, I tap into this basic idea of publics as reservoirs of potential. These reservoirs contain glimpses of what kind of concrete (if not always livable) shape the world around us can take.

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Notes

[1] District Committees during the Touré era numbered in the thousands, and there were around 200 Sections and 30 to 40 Federations (see Rivière 1977:97; PDG-RDA n.d.:88).

[2] After Touré died in 1984, the state pullled back from the performing arts, and the nationwide system of training ballets disappeared, leaving just two national groups intact. Artists founded their own private companies in the capital which now serve to train young artists in Conakry. While the two national ballets (Les Ballets Africains and Ballet Djoliba) are still called on to perform at official events and during election campaigns, the connection between ballet and formal politics is far less extensive and structured than it was during the Touré era. The bulk of dance activity in the capital takes place in scores of private ballets, which receive no compensation from the government, and in social ceremonies animated by artists trained in those private troupes (see Cohen 2021a: chapter 2).

³ Griots were recruited in the early years of the revolution to help build the national cultural industry as symbols of Africa's noble heritage (Counsel 2009:70, 84). In the late 1960s and 1970s, Touré increasingly vilified these bards as antirevolutionary, condemning them as examples of backwardness, social hierarchy, and ethnic chauvinism (Dave 2019:86-87).

⁴ In November 1970, there was an attempted coup in Guinea led by the Portuguese and including Guinean exiles who opposed Touré. This invasion became known as "L'agression portugaise" and marked a period of increased surveillance and political violence in Guinea (Arieff 2009:335–36). Touré accused many people and groups of plotting against his government, and in 1976, former secretary-general of the OAU Diallo Telli was arrested as the leader of an alleged plot to assassinate the president that Touré called "the Fulbe plot" (le complot Peul) (Arieff & McGovern 2013:201; Kake 1987:158).

⁵ The word "aesthetic" in its original Greek sense means related to sensory perception, and I use the term to refer to the organization and perception/uptake of visual, sonic, and kinetic material. Aesthetic practices have affecting consequences—they are aesthetic precisely because people reflect on how they are sensed and felt. I therefore use the terms "affecting" and "aesthetic" together to describe how dance operates in social life.

⁶ Homophobia is widespread in Conakry, but gender nonconforming individuals are widely accepted in the dance scene, though they do not openly discuss their sexual preferences. Indeed, crossing traditional gendered boundaries in the aesthetics of dance is often celebrated in Conakry ballet, as when a man can adopt the "softness" (bɔrɔxɔɛ) typically associated with women, or when a woman can perform "stiffness" (kankatanyi) or strength like a man (see Cohen 2021a: chapter 4).

⁷ There is a long history in Africanist anthropology especially of investigating ethnicity not as a reified identity, but rather as a resource to be mobilized (See, e.g.: Amselle 1998 [1990]; Bayart 1989, 2005; Sarró 2009:57; Southall 1970; Wilmsen & McCallister 1996). Scholars in diverse fields also counter the idea of ethnicity as primordial identity by approaching ethnicity as an ongoing process of social construction (e.g. Berman, Eyoh, & Kymlicka 2004).