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Reframing Gender Complementarity: Dance and Women's Empowerment in Post-Genocide Rwanda

By Carine Plancke¹

Abstract

Post-genocide politics in Rwanda aim to construct a new, modern and developed nation. Gender equality is one of the issues highlighted to this end. However, in order to defend current reforms, politicians and feminist lobbyists generally refer to women's traditional position as wives and mothers, embedded in the sacred value attributed to fertility. This article explores Rwandan dance to examine the evolution of views on feminine specificity and gender complementarity within the socio-political context of the promotion of gender equality. Through examining a government-supported youth troupe, founded by Tutsi returnee students, and contrasting it with a female drum troupe, which brings together mostly uneducated, middle-aged Rwandan-born women, the article interrogates the widely held view of a linear evolution from tradition, gender complementarity and women's subordination to modernity, gender equality and women's emancipation. Instead, it explores the degree to which divergent views on feminine difference in Rwanda foster women's empowerment.

Keywords: Gender equality, Femininity, Women's empowerment, Tradition, Performance, Post-genocide Rwanda.

Introduction

Since it took power by putting an end to the genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Front has endeavored to construct a new nation, based on unity and aiming for steadily growing socio-economic development. In order to realise this project, gender has been singled out as a crucial component. Concrete measures have entailed education for all and a policy of positive discrimination in favour of women, both of which have yielded significant results. Nowadays girls outnumber boys in primary school, women hold positions previously reserved for men, and—thanks to a gender quota system, Rwanda has become the first country in the world with a female majority in a national legislative chamber (Bauer and Burnet 2013). Notwithstanding the strong support the RPF has earned for its pro-woman policies, many scholars remain skeptical about its wider outcomes. When assessing the impact of the high number of women in parliament, beyond the statement that it changes the collective cultural imagination of what is possible for women (Burnet 2012b, 382; Coffé 2012), scholars have generally come to the conclusion that the position of ordinary women has not changed as much as would have been hoped. Besides governmental factors, such as the state's authoritarian nature (Burnet 2012b, 363; Hogg 2009; Longman 2006, 147) and the underlying economic rationale for its efforts to include women in socio-economic life

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(Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1119ff), enduring patriarchal views have been put forward as an explanation for the state's failure to transform women's lives fundamentally. According to Marie Berry (2015, 3), "profound impediments to women's equality are deeply entrenched and appear unlikely to dissipate any time soon." Social expectations continue to be determined by "a traditional patriarchal model of household relations," which entails a long-standing conflation of women's adulthood with marriage and motherhood (Berry 2015, 11).

This explanation for the difficulties in implementing gender equality in Rwanda highlights the persistence of views on gender difference that deny women the same rights and autonomy as men. It supposes a linear transition from tradition and views on gender complementarity, which hold that men and women have distinct masculine and feminine qualities and/or even distinct roles complementing each other, to modernity and views on gender equality, which emphasize equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of gender. It further presumes that this transition corresponds with an evolution from women's oppression to women's empowerment. In this article, mindful of Lila Abu-Lughod's (1998, vii) suspicion about the way "modernity is so easily equated with the progress, emancipation and empowerment of women," I interrogate this unilateral view, which uses a clear-cut opposition between tradition/modernity and complementarity/equality and considers the substitution of the former terms with the latter as a main parameter for progress and women's empowerment. Over the last few decades, social scientists as well as feminist and postcolonial scholars have challenged the concept of a singular Modernity, born in the West and exported to the rest of the world. Instead, the plural form "modernities" is increasingly being adopted (Eisenstadt 2000)—including for the African context (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Deutsch et al. 2002), in order to highlight the multiple ways in which groups and movements reappropriate and redefine the discourse of modernity in their own terms. According to Sandra Harding (2008, 222), modernity must always be sutured into local material, social, political and cultural contexts. This radically challenges the dominant view—which is very present in development narratives—that lack of progress is a consequence of the persistence of pre-modern conditions and practices (Harding 2008, 175). Harding (2008, 203) even maintains that "modernity" necessarily reproduces "tradition" as its opposite and, hence, depends on it for its own success. This accounts for the way many societies around the world have been able to develop their own forms of modernity within cultural beliefs and practices regarded as tradition. This is also the case for gender views. Hodgson (2001, 7) mentions in this regard how the ideology of gender complementarity has been a premise for the development of other forms of modernity than the Western one. In line with this view, in this article I investigate the entanglement of views on gender equality and gender complementarity not as a failed entry into Modernity, but as an integral feature of a local form of modernity in its current expression whose potential to empower² women has to be investigated and not automatically dismissed.

Concretely, this article deals with traditional Rwandan dance, which is one of the foremost domains in which gender identity is shaped in Rwanda. Qualities deemed feminine or masculine are clearly conveyed in dance performances and give a vivid sense of the Rwandan conceptualization of gender complementarity as it is linked to men and women's social positions. Hence, examining these kinetic practices as they are currently evolving highlights both continuity

² So as not to induce a bias linked to the prevalence of liberal feminist views, which have a tendency to highlight individual autonomy and freedom (*cf.* Mahmood 2005, 13), I adopt black feminist Patricia Hill Collins' (1990, 105ff) relational definition of empowerment as the power of self-sufficiency, self-definition and self-valuation whereby the self does not rely on increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others, but is found in the context of family and community, in connection with others.

and change in views of gender difference and the impact of the governmental ideology of gender equality. Since this article is concerned in particular with the way female identity is shaped in dance, I will look at *umushagiriro*, the women's royal dance that prototypically displays femininity from the Rwandan point of view. The study is anthropological and is based on my participation as a white, female amateur dancer in rehearsals and a number of performances of the Paris-based troupe *Mpore* over five years (2008–2013) and during seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rwanda (2011–2013). This fieldwork was comprised of observation of and participation in the dance troupes *Inganzo Ngari* and, to a lesser extent, *Inyamibwa*, observation of other initiatives such as the female drum troupe *Ingoma Nsyha*, and interviews with leaders and members of these troupes, as well as with singers and dancers trained before the genocide and with government officials charged with cultural affairs.

In order to provide a sense of recent evolutions in the *umushagiriro* dance, I will compare the version developed by *Inganzo Ngari* with the one performed by *Mpore*. *Mpore* is a diaspora troupe composed and led by Tutsi refugees who create pieces that correspond closely to what they have learned from the previous generation (Plancke 2013). *Inganzo Ngari*, meanwhile, is a Kigali-based troupe of young dancers, which unites members of the three populations of the country, Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, and endeavours to re-dynamize dance as an embodiment of the new Rwanda, (Plancke 2017). These troupes' different backgrounds and positions allow one to witness transformations in current performances of *umushagiriro*, notably with regard to views on femininity. Subsequently, I will discuss the country's first female drum troupe, *Ingoma Nshya*,³ which was created with the aim of forwarding gender equality and empowering ordinary Rwandan women—both Tutsi widows and Hutu wives of imprisoned perpetrators—stricken by the consequences of the genocide. By appropriating what had traditionally been an exclusively male activity and enriching it with dance and qualities deemed feminine, *Ingoma Nshya* provides another window, from a different social perspective, into the coexistence of notions of gender equality and gender difference.

The overall merit of this article is to offer, paraphrasing Sandra Harding (2008), a view “from below” which enables an understanding of the diverse ways Rwandan women embody, shape and negotiate female identity through artistic practice by articulating local elements of tradition and modernity. The article's detailed analysis of dance practices, and of their implications for the lives and gendered subjectivity of the women involved, challenges the prevailing narrative, which simplistically equates the refusal of tradition, the adoption of Western Modernity and women's empowerment. This narrative rests on a Western (neo)colonial “us/other” binary (Mohanty 1984, 337; Spivak 1988, 280ff) and still resonates in much feminist accounts of gender transformations in the Global South (Harding 2008, 3). As a consequence of this challenge, the idea of gender complementarity, put in the presumed oppressive box of tradition, is reframed and no longer presented in clear-cut opposition to gender equality.

The Resilience of Gender Complementarity Views

Government officials and feminist scholars alike consider the search for gender equality to be a recent phenomenon in Rwanda. In writings by female anthropologists such as Danielle de Lame and Villa Jefremovas, the position of women in pre-genocide Rwanda is described as one of silent subordination within a patriarchal system based on “gender and hierarchy complementarity”

³ Since I did not participate in rehearsals of *Ingoma Nsyha* (due to my lack of training in drumming and my research project's focus on dance), my data on this troupe are less extensive compared with those on the dance troupes.

(De Lame 1999, 5). Only since the 1970s have certain women obtained the right to speak and use the power of the word by fulfilling modern functions (De Lame 1999, 6ff) or been able to gain independence through new economic opportunities (Jefremovas 1991). In the 1980s, women's involvement in civil society increased greatly and accelerated changes in their social and political positions (Longman 2006, 135). Most researchers consider the post-genocide period to be a context that has particularly favored the increase in Rwandan women's autonomy, as well as their entry into domains that were previously reserved for men (Baines 2005, 224; Burnet 2012b, 65ff; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1115). The huge loss of males during the genocide and the resulting increase in female-headed households forced women to assume new gender roles. Moreover, the intense problems that women had to deal with in the post-conflict period, ranging from poverty and destroyed or occupied houses to AIDS, propelled women's organizations to assume an important social role (Newbury and Baldwin 2000, 4; Baines 2005, 220). These women-centric associations gained a growing public influence, which they managed to translate into a certain degree of political power (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1116; Longman 2006, 138). The efforts undertaken by the current government with regard to gender equality, outlined in its gender policy, were built upon these changes (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1116).

Based on these elements, one could read in Rwanda's recent history a progression from traditional views of complementarity to modern views of equality. However, the gains made by the women's associations after the genocide were not posited in opposition to customary gender views. On the contrary, female lobbyists stressed how women and mothers were valued in pre-colonial Rwandan culture and couched their advocacy to male audiences in terms of family-oriented, "motherist" politics (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013, 1115; Magesa-Barthel 2015, 95, 127).⁴ In the 2003 constitution, gender complementarity is even mentioned alongside equality (art. 54). This discourse is possible because women enjoyed several significant avenues of power in pre-colonial Rwanda, notwithstanding its patriarchal basis. As in many African countries (Amadiume 1997, 104, 111ff), colonialism severely undermined women's social, economic and political power (Longman 2006, 134; Burnet 2012b, 149ff). Jennie Burnet even suggests that the generalized perception of females as inferior in post-colonial Rwanda may largely be a product of the colonial encounter. In explaining women's leadership positions in post-genocide reconciliation, she not only details the new roles available to women, but also highlights their customary role in Rwandan society as the primary social connection between nuclear family units and the community (Burnet 2012b, 7).

The structuring of gender roles in Rwandan society around a household division of labor, even while preserving male authority over family affairs, allowed women substantial autonomy in their roles as child bearers and food producers (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 8). Women could also hold powerful positions within the religious realm, serving as spirit mediums and priestesses in the Kubandwa and Nyabingi cults (Pauwels 1951; Berger 1981) or as traditional healers (Galabert 2012, 350ff). Although men occupied most political positions, women did have a considerable degree of influence. The wives of wealthy men—men who were often absent as they sought to demonstrate their allegiance to the king, had significant autonomy and took full control over internal affairs (Maquet 1954, 99; Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 8, 10). The most important female political figure in Rwanda, the Queen Mother, was a powerful entity in her own right at the king's

⁴ Consistent with prevailing views in African societies (Oyewumi 2016, 216) and Afro-American communities (Collins 1994, 47), these women associated motherhood with leadership and responsibility beyond white feminists' usual distinctions "between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as autonomy and identity growing from the collective" (Collins 1994, 47).

court. She co-ruled the nation with power and autonomy equal to that of her son, the king, and both were invested with sacred authority (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 12). Furthermore, it was not uncommon to find female chiefs who had inherited their leadership roles from their husbands or brothers (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 12). Rwandan politicians often refer to the existence of these chiefs and the Queen Mother as the foundation for today's level of women's political participation (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 6). Many also highlight that post-genocide initiatives, rather than an import of Western modernity, are revivals of positive indigenous traditions, repressed first by colonial customs and later by divisive ideologies that culminated in the genocide (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 17). The cultural belief that women naturally make peace and seek to resist and prevent violence is further regularly called upon to support women's political engagement (Hogg 2009). In this respect, stories of the widows of genocide victims working together with the wives of imprisoned perpetrators are commonly cited (Uwineza and Pearson 2009, 15ff).

***Umushagiro* Dance: A Sacred Expression of Rwandan Femininity**

In (pre-)colonial Rwanda, *umushagiro* was the dance that most typically expressed femininity. It was performed at the royal court by female dancers who belonged to the royal Tutsi lineages or were related to important chiefs close to the court. The dance was the female counterpart of the warrior dance performed by the *intore*, the male elite trained to defend the country. While the warrior dance was performed in front of the royal court, the female dance took place in an intimate context, inside the house (Nkulikiyinka 2002, 77). After independence, *umushagiro* continued to be performed, mainly by Tutsi refugees in Burundi during theatrical plays depicting life at the royal court. My description of this dance is based on what I learned from one of these refugees, who now lives in Paris and directs the troupe *Mpore*. It further relies on the work of Jean-Baptiste Nkulikiyinka, an eminent dance scholar and choreographer who was director of the National Ballet of Rwanda.

Dancers wear a wide, ankle-length skirt taken in at the hips on both sides, a sleeveless top and a light veil worn around the upper body and attached at the left shoulder. A decorated ribbon is tied over the forehead and bells are attached at both ankles, tinkling at each step performed in unison. The name of the dance, *umushagiro*, is derived from the verb *gushagirira* which means "to dance while elegantly swinging the torso and the arms and while moving slowly in the space (without beating the floor with the feet)" (Nkulikiyinka 2002, 76).⁵ The dance is indeed performed at a slow tempo and is characterized by a sliding step, progressing alternately to the right and the left. The step is accompanied by a lateral swaying of the torso in the same direction as the feet while the lower body remains centered.⁶ Both arms are stretched out front at shoulder height, with two fingers of each hand holding the veil; they move to the same side as the torso, smoothly transitioning from a stretching position to a relaxed one with bent elbows and wrists. Simultaneously, the head moves sideways in the opposite direction from the torso. During the dance, the steps vary between full footsteps and moments of suspension on the balls of the feet. After a while, the veil is released, and the climax of the dance comes when the dancers step forward with both arms stretched upward to the back. In its slow, graceful movements, the dance is said to be aesthetically pleasing and to convey women's beauty; this is especially conveyed by the fluidity of the movement. When I was learning the dance, my teacher stressed this quality in the movement

⁵ All translations from French are mine.

⁶ In conversations with me dancers repeatedly distinguished their dance from Congolese dances by stating that they do not move the hips but solely the upper body.

of the torso, literally using the French term *fluidité*. Nkulikiyinka likewise states that when talking of this dance “one represents the fluid movements of the dancer, one sees her floating in the air, softly moving and making subtle waves in the wind” (Nkulikiyinka 2002, 77). *Gutemba*, a verb commonly used in dance trainings, literally means “to flow (when speaking of a liquid)” and refers to “the inclined movement” of the torso to the right and to the left (Nkulikiyinka 2002, 79).

According to Christopher Taylor (1992, 11ff), a dialectic of “flow” versus “blockage” undergirds symbolic thought in Rwanda. The option of flow takes social precedence over blockage; that is, flow is positively valued and blockage is considered negative. This ideal of flow receives concrete expression in the form of liquid gifts such as milk, honey, beer or sorghum porridge, realizing continuous patterns of exchange. Fertility, the ultimate value in Rwandan society, is linked to the orderly circulation of fluids, which ought to be neither excessive nor insufficient (Taylor 1992, 11). Women have an important place in this gift logic, which regulates Rwandan social order. Through marriage, women flow between patrilineages and guarantee offspring (De Lame 1999, 5). Cattle, as bride-wealth, are the medium that makes this flow possible (Taylor 1992, 28, 32, 138). On a cosmic level, the idea of flow is present in the notion of *Imaana*, which is nowadays generally translated as ‘God’ but literally refers to the fertilizing fluid, which primarily manifests as rain. Under the Rwandan monarchy, the king was a conduit for *Imaana* and it was his responsibility to control rainfall ritually (Taylor 1992, 12). In times of drought or famine, he was considered a blocking being and could be deposed or called upon to offer himself as a sacrificial victim (Taylor 2002, 153). Interestingly, his power to catalyze the descent of the transformative power of *Imaana* was only made possible by integrating the power of the feminine, as his appellation of “lactating male” suggests (Taylor 2002, 32, 172). Indeed, in the Rwandan view, women particularly embody fluidity in its life-giving, fertilizing dimension both through the production of maternal milk and the secretion of vaginal fluids. The expulsion of the latter, attained through stimulating the clitoris and labia by tapping them with the erect penis (Larsen 2010, 817; Fusaschi 2012), is seen as an essential part of the repertoire of pleasurable, socially desired intercourse in Rwandan culture. It is a precondition for the man to penetrate the woman and realise the needed mixture of female and male fluids (Taylor 1988, 1346; Larsen 2010, 817). The specific custom of elongating the labia minora, which starts before menstruation and can continue until marriage, is intended to make women able to secrete abundant vaginal secretions (Koster and Price 2008, 196; Larsen 2010, 817; Fusaschi 2012).

Examining this practice of labia elongation in more depth can help to better understand the cultural value of *umushagiriro* dance, since both focus on the link between femininity and fluidity. Labia elongation is deemed to enhance aesthetic attractiveness, but is also considered a rite of passage, a preparation readying a woman for marriage and conjugal sexual relations (Larsen 2010, 817–18). Labia elongation is not only necessary to fulfill a woman’s social function, but is a social practice in itself. It is most frequently practiced by a group of girls who assist each other (Koster and Price 2008, 197; Larsen 2010, 817). The frequent and ongoing contact between the girls engrains close interrelation and social connectedness in which trust, loyalty and solidarity are produced and the girl’s identity is shaped, channeled and defined (Koster and Price 2008, 194; Larsen 2010, 818). The groups stay together beyond the period of stretching and the bond between the girls often creates lifelong networks that they can draw upon (Larsen 2010, 819). According to Larsen’s study (2010, 819), girls in these labia elongation groups experienced a greater sense of belonging than girls who were not in these groups. They also expressed more feelings of self-worth and pride (Koster and Price 2008, 197; Larsen 2010, 823). Like this practice, the *umushagiriro* dance epitomizes notions of fluidity. The aim is to avoid abrupt movements, continuing the lateral

stretching of the upper body to one side even after the step signals the return to the opposite side. A fluid motion is also obtained by the sliding steps and vertical suspension that occur when dancers rise up on their toes and descend again, producing a smooth up-and-down movement. Moreover, in its link to fertility, the dance bears symbolic connotations to flow. The culminating point of the dance is when the dancers raise their arms imitating the long horns of the Ankole cows. This points to the function of women as objects of flow between lineages in marriage, which is marked by a gift of cows. Like the practice of labia elongation, *umushagiro* dance shapes female identity. The dance is always performed by a group of women who do the same choreography and perform similar movements. Constant awareness of one another is needed in order for the dancers to be mutually attuned and fluid and synchronous transitions are assured through a signal—the sound “èèè”—made by one of the dancers. The main feeling expressed in the dance, according to the dancers I talked with, is pride and self-esteem. I was told that while dancing *umushagiro*, a woman has to “eat/savour herself,” a metaphor for admiring herself. This self-esteem is linked to her female identity, just as it is in the practice of labia elongation.

The genocide caused a strong disturbance in the symbolic model of flow. The Tutsi as a group came to be perceived as “beings of obstruction” that had to be sacrificed (Taylor 2002, 139). Tutsi victims were emasculated and women’s breasts were cut off in order to reduce them to beings of obstruction unable to produce flow (Taylor 2002, 169). During colonialism, the image had been cultivated that Tutsi women were particularly beautiful, an idea that was diffused by the colonialists who preferred to use Tutsi women for their sexual needs (Taylor 2002, 140). The rape of Tutsi women during the genocide was encouraged as a way for ordinary Hutu to finally access these desired women, as well as a way to humiliate them (Burnet 2012b, 62). The very position of women as wives and mothers was attacked during the genocide as perpetrators targeted the normally privileged role of Rwandan women as mothers. In a particularly cruel act of desecralization, pregnant women were disemboweled and their fetuses cut out of their wombs (Burnet 2012b, 62). This perversion of a cultural logic, however, did not lead to a rejection of the cultural forms—such as dance, that gave expression to it. In interviews I conducted with members of the dance troupe *Inyamibwa*, founded by the Genocide Survivors Student Association (AERG) in Butare, the “goodness of culture” was very much stressed as a way to reclaim Rwandan identity and be proud of it. Specific royal artistic expressions were not abandoned after the genocide, but instead were revitalized with the return of the Tutsi diaspora. Even so, they lost their privileged, sacred aura and became part of the larger Rwandan dance repertoire alongside regional dances—which, since the latter contained Hutu expressions, were privileged under the Hutu-led Second Republic.

The Reconfiguration of Dance and Femininity in the New Rwanda

In post-genocide Rwanda, dance is a privileged means for embodying the new nation, which, as stated in the ambitious government plan Vision 2020, is imagined as a “modern, united and prosperous nation founded on the positive values of its culture” (Minecofin 2000: 12). The troupe *Inganzo Ngari*, founded in 2006, showcases this in an exemplary way (Plankce 2017). By incorporating both Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, the troupe embodies the ideal of a unified Rwandan identity. Moreover, it explicitly aims to show that tradition and modernity can coexist. Faced with people’s incomprehension regarding his choice to practise traditional dance whilst undertaking engineer studies, the president of the troupe explained in an interview that traditional dance is not irreconcilable with the modern life of an intellectual. Similarly, the vice-president advanced that

“culture can be a factor that develops people”. This reasoning explains why the troupe prefers to hire young students and why discipline is a quality judged to be more important than talent when recruiting and evaluating new dancers. With regard to the dance style, there is a continuous search for innovative choreographies and for a technical and visual improvement of the dance forms, an aspect which was qualified as “modern” by the troupe’s members and pointed at to distinguish their performances from those of the previous generation (Plancke 2016).

Inganzo has taken significant measures regarding gender equality. In addition to the fact that it engages educated women, remunerates all dancers according to merit and has both a male and a female choreographer who in principle have equal decision-making power over their choreographies, the troupe has also created new mixed-gender presentation pieces that typify its new, spectacular dance style. Nevertheless, the troupe still performs the typically female dance *umushagiro*. In contrast to the mixed-gender pieces, a slow tempo and distinctive lateral swaying are emphasized in this dance. Notwithstanding this contrast, visibility and uniformity are just as apparent in *umushagiro* as in other dances. A comparison with the diaspora troupe *Mpore* highlights this change. While—as I have learned during rehearsals, *Mpore*’s choreographer stresses the search for fluidity without determining the exact shape of the resulting movement, *Inganzo*’s choreographer tries to realise a perfectly delineated form among all dancers. Rather than the swaying of the torso, the choreography focuses on the shape of the body, especially the curving of the hip that results from the sideways bending of the torso. *Umushagiro* is now also performed with the pelvis tilted backward, which further enhances the female body shape. This entails a significant departure from previous aesthetics. Indeed, Nkulikiyinka notes with regard to *umushagiro* dancing: “The posterior is on the same vertical axis as the legs and the torso, the dancer avoids at all prices to lift the buttocks backwards” (Nkulikiyinka 2002, 79). The visibility of the dance is further stressed by the brightness of the costumes, heavy makeup and tight-fitting tops. When transitioning from one movement to the next, a visual cue is used—the lead dancer makes a bigger movement instead of an auditory one. With regard to the dance’s expressivity, beauty remains essential; however, it seems to have shifted from an idea of fluidity and elegance in movement toward one that focuses on the body shape created through movement. Like most young women in Kigali, *Inganzo*’s dancers are heavily influenced by mass media and the images they diffuse, which portray an idea of femininity as sexual attractiveness. Changes in current dancing among youth troupes lean toward the realisation of this kind of female identity.⁷

However, movements from the feminine Rwandan dance style—as exemplified in the royal dance *umushagiro*—are also performed nowadays without this shift toward sexual objectification. One instance of this can be found in a notable initiative in post-genocide Rwanda: the creation of *Ingoma Nshya*, its first female drum troupe, in 2002. Traditionally, drumming was a powerful symbol of sacred royalty and exclusively reserved for men (Maquet 1954, 147). Therefore, the creation of a female drum ensemble was a highly innovative and even transgressive gesture. While it was applauded by both Rwandan youth and the government as an expression of the country’s resilience, artists trained in the pre-genocide period expressed to me their discomfort with the idea of women drumming. The initiative for the troupe came from the director of the University Centre for Arts in Butare, a woman who had studied in France and had a strong awareness of gender equality issues, which she managed to bring in connection with traditional instances of defiance

⁷ Interestingly, the practice of labia elongation has also been reconfigured and reinterpreted in line with global ideas of sexual liberation and woman’s use of their seductive power (Fusaschi 2018: 115ff). These changes are linked to an idea of modernity. Michela Fusaschi cites one woman who spoke of *gukuna* as a possibility for “modern young women” (Fusaschi 2018: 117).

of female roles. She decided to organise a series of drum workshops for women only. After several years of weekly rehearsal with a professional drummer, the troupe was officially launched in 2004 during a festival that included a playful reversal of gender roles: men did the cooking, while women constituted a football team. Since then, the troupe has become very famous, touring throughout Europe and internationally. At the time of the interview, the founder was planning a drum-play featuring the female warrior Ndabaga, a famous example of gender transgression in Rwandan history. Interestingly, the female drummers did not simply copy the traditional male drumming, but also made innovations, a feature much stressed by the founder in an interview I held with her. One of these striking novelties was the introduction of dance movements and choreography inspired by Rwandan dances, which exhibited their fluid movements. In this way, according to *Ingoma Nshya*'s founder, women brought elegance and lightness to the drumming; this introduction of specific feminine features is what explains the troupe's success in her view. In testimonies they wrote for a booklet edited by the University Centre for Arts (Gakire Katese 2009), several members of the troupe who had become widows also emphasised that their drums had become their husbands or children now, reasserting views on gender complementarity and their roles as wives or mothers.

Diverging Trajectories Towards Women's Empowerment

As *Ingoma Nshya* shows, access to traditional art practices has been democratized in contemporary Rwanda. Drumming is no longer exclusive to men; furthermore, it has also shed its royal privilege. Likewise, *umushagiro* has become open to all women. However, new and implicit restrictions linked to age have been introduced. This is especially apparent in successful troupes like *Inganzo*. Upholding the view that youth is an essential component of female beauty, women very often quit the troupe when they marry and/or become mothers. This contrasts with the diaspora troupe *Mpore*, in which the choreographer, who began performing in the 1980s, still dances today; several members of *Mpore* are mothers and over the age of 35 but continue to dance. This reconfiguration of femininity in Rwandan youth troupes seems to adhere to ideals conveyed by mass media and is part of the commodification of dance that is readily observable in post-genocide Rwanda. Market logic is apparent in the case of *Inganzo Ngari*, which functions with the goal of high-quality performance in order to satisfy those who invite its members to dance (and, hence, pay them). As is evident on a global scale, women not only take part in the widespread commodity economy but are also objects of it (Hartsock 2004). Taking into account Rwandan women's traditional role of circulating between lineages, a shift seems to have taken place from women being ultimate gifts to ultimate commodities. Indeed, under the Second Republic (1973–1994), De Lame noted a shift “from a paradigm of circulation within a religio-political whole toward a paradigm of accumulation of knowledge, money and commodities by individuals” (De Lame 1999, 4). This change has only intensified in recent times due to a rapid acceleration of socio-economic development, mainly in urban areas. With regard to women, the impact of the market economy can be seen in a large increase in transactional sex (Burnet 2012a; Berry 2015). While the gifts to women implied in transactional sex may suggest a resemblance to bride-wealth, an important difference concerns the fact that the value of the woman, as expressed by the gift, no longer refers to the linking of lineages through her sexuality and fertility, but to her sexual value in itself. The sacred value invested in fertility is hereby dismantled. According to Burnet, bride-wealth itself has changed in meaning and has become “much more like a market exchange than a

sacred bond between two lineages” (Burnet 2012a, 103). This change supports the shifting view of femininity as it is expressed in *umushagiri* dance and further shaped by it.

In evaluating women’s empowerment in Rwanda today, Berry (2015, 15) suggests that transactional sex creates a new form of gender inequality and subordination that is paradoxically linked to the government’s progressive gender policies. Instead of dropping out of school and abandoning the high educational aspirations fostered by these policies, many girls see no other option but to adopt “sugar daddies”—older men who willingly pay for their school fees or other costs in exchange for sex. These men are also used to obtain symbols of modernity for girls, which are part of a specific outlook that includes plaited hair, makeup and modern clothes and which demand a large financial investment.⁸ Through these same beauty means, the female dancers of *Inganzo Ngari* attempt to convey the image of modern, attractive women. In the *umushagiri* dance, femininity as sexiness is cultivated alongside dances that emphasise sexual equality. This is not as surprising when one takes into consideration the impact of global images in which a focus on gender equality goes hand in hand with an increasingly sexual objectification of the female body. Although this trend toward sexualization is generally considered unproblematic as long as it emanates from women’s agency, the alleged empowering potential of this trend is also severely questioned by feminist scholars (Gill and Donaghue 2013).

Compared to *Inganzo*, *Ingoma Nshya* has taken another trajectory towards women’s empowerment, articulating differently local and transnational gender views in line with its different background. The women who attended the first drum workshops had lived through the genocide and, as genocide widows or wives of perpetrators, had suffered greatly because of it. Drumming gave a new purpose to their lives, helping many of them to move out of isolation and take charge of their families. In this respect, rather than being an expansion of the governmental policy with regard to the new Rwanda, as is the case for *Inganzo Ngari*, this initiative is closer to those taken by the women’s associations in order to deal with the consequences of the genocide. When I interviewed the founder of *Ingoma Nshya*, she openly addressed the issue of diversity among the troupe’s members. She explained that she prohibited participants in the workshop not from stating their so-called ethnic identity, but from talking about their past in order to create a space free from conflict, shared by all and therefore amenable to reconciliation. Reconciliation here is not an abstract vision but surfaced out of their lived reality. Testimonies given by the troupe’s drummers (Gakire Katese 2009) attest to the healing potential of this initiative; they described how they had found a new feeling of togetherness and solidarity based on the social role of Rwandan women. As one woman explained:

“Here in Rwanda, we rightfully say that woman is the heart of the household. I think she is also the driving force of a country. And women who gather for a common activity, in this case the drum, always means a little bit more solidarity, complicity and union, since one cannot play the drum with someone one has a problem with. The drum accelerates the reconciliation process between us, since we are ready to do everything to play the drum.” (Gakire Katese 2009, 11)

Feminine specificity, as it manifests in this initiative alongside a search for gender equality, therefore pertains not only to the quality of elegance brought about by the drumming, but also to

⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has similarly argued, in the case of Bedouin women, that although women may desire and embrace aspects of modernity (such as cosmetics or alternative clothing styles) as a way to defy dominant gender ideals, they make themselves subject to the new forms of power that accompany and inform modernist projects.

the community-binding potential of sharing among women. In this sense, it gives renewed expression to the value of fluidity as an all-encompassing female capacity that underscores the social role and impact of women in post-genocide Rwanda.

Conclusion

Post-genocide politics in Rwanda are driven by the state's project to construct a new, unified, modern and developed nation. In line with international discourses on progress, gender equality is one of the issues forwarded to this end. However, politicians and feminist lobbyists generally refer to women's traditional social position as wives and mothers and to the power of important figures in pre-colonial Rwanda—such as the Queen Mother and wives of influential chiefs—to support current reforms. This observation questions the widely held view of a linear evolution from tradition, gender complementarity and women's subordination to modernity, gender equality and women's empowerment. This article has explored Rwandan dance—one of the domains that typically expresses gender identity, to examine the evolution of views on feminine specificity within the socio-political context of the promotion of gender equality.

Inganzo Ngari, a Kigali-based youth dance troupe created by Tutsi returnee students and championed by the government, was examined to see how the image of the new, modern Rwanda is embodied in dance and how gender is reconfigured therein. While newly introduced mixed-gender pieces, evocative of dynamic modernity, materialise recent views on gender equality, feminine difference remains enacted in the prototypical female dance *umushagiriro*. However, this difference is clearly being reconfigured. Rather than cultivating beauty as fluidity in its links to fertility and women's community-binding role through marriage, the focus is placed on a "sexy" appearance in line with globally circulating media images and the increasing commodification of social life, particularly for women. A comparison with the female drum troupe *Ingoma Nshya* allowed this reconfiguration of female identity, as presented in global media, to be contrasted with one more attuned to local views, articulating in innovative ways the currently prevailing norm of gender equality within both historical instances of gender reversal and long-standing notions of female specificity. As a female appropriation of traditionally male drumming, *Ingoma Nshya* was created in pursuit of gender equality. Nevertheless, the troupe's founder succeeded in forming a link with traditional examples of women adopting men's roles; furthermore, she introduced dance and choreography that convey feminine elegance and beauty in traditionally Rwandan terms. Assembling uneducated, Rwandan-born, middle-aged women, both genocide widows and wives of perpetrators, the initiative was also seen as an attempt at post-genocide reconciliation, relying on women's unifying role in the household and close community. In this respect, the drum troupe is related to women's grassroots associations, which used similar views on gender complementarity in order to change women's position in the aftermath of the genocide. Interestingly, these associations have been credited by critical feminist scholars (Baines 2005; Burnet 2012b; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013) as having a greater impact on transformations in women's position and cooperation among women across differences than the current state policies on gender and national unity. The latter are considered as a façade meant primarily to attract donor money in a way not unlike *Inganzo*, which particularly succeeds in presenting a new and highly marketable image of the modern Rwanda.

Hence, rather than highlighting the difficulties in implementing views on gender equality in the Rwandan context (Berry 2015), this article interrogates the very idea that the adoption of transnational views on gender equality in disregard of traditional gender complementarity views

are necessarily the best way to guarantee women's empowerment. In doing so, it calls attention to certain disempowering effects of the adoption of Western, globalised views in which gender equality goes along with the increasing sexualisation and commodification of women. Above all, it calls for local expressions of women's specificity and strength to be sufficiently taken into account when used in support of the current search for gender equality as part of societal modernization.

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