

# In Step with the Times

*Mapiko Masquerades of Mozambique*



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## INTRODUCTION

# Rhythms of Change

Namakule leka aikele Marikano	If in Namakule stayed the Americans
Vilambo uti vyapanda	In all countries abroad
Ikandyumanga ishipa yashimapiko	Mapiko's fame would expand
Tundamanyia mavetu	We tell you, my friends
Wetu tundiwika	We have arrived
Amunatulole liu lyankondo	Don't look askance at us
Wetu tuvamapiko	We are mapiko people

—NMA/Nshesho/Namakule/2004

1. ON THE threshold of the third millennium, an elderly rice cultivator from the northern Mozambican district of Muidumbe focused his creative energies on matters of masquerading and endeavored to think something new. He sought inspiration in the past. He recalled the time in his youth when he had seen a contest between the masters Nampyopyo and Shumu, which had dragged on for days. He could still picture the *Germans* taking their hats off to salute, *Smoke's* huge head puffing white fumes, the *Prostitutes* with their smooth pregnant bellies, the heavy *Buffalo* pissing and charging; he could still hear the drums moaning, the horns blowing, and the songs calling the masks' names. Throughout his lifetime, he had seen the ancestral masks being ceaselessly reinvented. Shumu, Nampyopyo, and the other old masters had died, together with their characters; a new generation had cultivated aesthetic abstraction and athletic perfection; the national liberation struggle had brought realism, unity, and political watchwords; the demise of socialism had left behind disorderly tattered beasts roaming the villages thirsty for money. Drums had come; drums had gone. Time and again, youths and elders alike had shaken

off the old and tried out the new. Time and again, called by the blast of antelope horns, dancers had gathered under the leafy roof of the mango trees, warmed up their drums on crackling burning straw, intoned songs of defiance, and challenged their rivals with tricks and styles. What would the new millennium bring about? The elder sat in the large veranda of the house that he had built on the main road of the communal village, looked at an old tire lying in the courtyard crammed with work materials, and smiled.

2. This study is a microhistory of mapiko masquerades of the northern Mozambican Makonde. It reconstructs in great detail the transformations of a single tradition over a relatively short period of time (ca. 1920–2010), exploring its changing aesthetics and practice, the thought and personalities of its protagonists, and its relevance as an idiom of collective consciousness.

*Mapiko* masks are carved in wild kapok (*ntene*)—a tropical wood that is soft to the knife when wet and featherlight when dry—in such a way as to resemble a head.<sup>1</sup> They are worn like a helmet, covering the head to the nape. The dancer watches through the mask’s mouth and inclines the head downward to give the illusion that its half-closed eyes gaze and flicker (fig. 1). Painted in natural colors—ochre, gray, brown, yellow, silver, and black—they represent human, animal, or fantastic figures, both men and women, Makonde and not. Their aesthetics is marked by a double inclination to naturalistic perfection and grotesque exaggeration: here embodying the elegant features of a beautiful woman or a hieratic elder; there indulging in protruding eyes, large ears, bumpy foreheads, or menacing teeth. This “grotesque head” allure might account for mapiko’s rather modest fortune on the international tribal commodity market, for, as an amateur collector in Mozambique once remarked, “Who wants to put a dead man’s head on their dining room table?”<sup>2</sup>

But mapiko were not meant to be appreciated as still objects. The word itself covers a different semantic spectrum than the English *mask*.<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, it is linked to the verb *kupika*, alluding to the transformation of a sorcerer into a magical beast. The plural form *mapiko* refers to the dance of masks, which occurs to the rhythm of drums and songs; the singular *lipiko*, to the dancer-spirit, once his body is completely covered in a costume of which the wooden headpiece is



FIGURE 1. Playing with a *ling'anyamu* mask (Rui Assubuji, *Matambalale*, 2009)

but a part. The name *mapiko* applies to various forms of masquerading, some of which do not even involve a headpiece. Masks-as-objects, when still and not dancing, are referred to as “heads” (*myuti*); when their figurative power is to be stressed, as “faces” (*ding’ope*). Both are euphemisms of the initiated, for mapiko are covered by secrecy (*shipii*) and deserve respect (*ishima*): women and children can see them only on the dance-field. *Mapiko* goes together with action verbs, such as *kupanga* (preparing, arranging, organizing—referring to the dressing of the masked dancer and metonymically to the whole performance), *kuvina* (dancing), *kwomba* (drumming), *kwimba* (singing), *kutamba* (partying, animation), and *kupikita* (playing)—a verb that mapiko people (*vamapiko*) use to describe all of the above.<sup>4</sup> There is no mask without drums and songs, and the masks themselves appeal to the senses: above all, their dance must be pleasurable (*ing’oma kunogwa*).

As a corrective to the colonial-era overemphasis on masks as objects—the ultimate collectible signifier of African primitiveness—this study focuses less on carving and more on performance: on the dancing, drumming, singing, and partying that bring the masks to life, as well as on the shifting regimes of ritual practice that regulate their local usages. While following the play of masks, we heed Fredric Jameson’s categorical imperative: “Always historicize!”<sup>5</sup>

3. In the past fifty years, the performative approach has brought a host of new insights to the study of African masquerade, dance, and ritual. Extending the metaphor of theater to objects previously understood as magico-religious was the most effective strategy to unmake the legacy of colonial primitivism. Rituals, dances, and masquerades were shown to be sophisticated expressive idioms, arenas for power and identity negotiations, institutions that mold gendered and cultured subjectivities, and sites of knowledge production.<sup>6</sup> Their logic was revealed to be analogous to that of performative activities in industrialized societies, from face-to-face interaction to politics. Concurrently, the vocabulary shaped in the analysis of “primitive” ritual—such as *liminality*, *passage*, and *segmentarity*—was used to gain an understanding of a variety of phenomena across times and spaces. The performative approach also paved the way for the study of historicity. Exploring the nooks and crannies of ritual practice and aesthetics, performance scholars were led to acknowledge change, even when they did not thematize historicity per se.

The breakthrough in the historical study of African dance came with Terence Ranger's *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*, an unassuming book that endeavored to apply the methodological lessons of European popular culture research in an African context.<sup>7</sup> Ranger reconstructed with unprecedented rigor and unmatched wealth of detail the historical trajectory of the militaristic Beni *ngoma*; furthermore, he argued that popular culture offers important insights into underclass collective experience. The latter lesson was absorbed better than the former. Somewhat paradoxically, Ranger's work inspired a host of anthropological studies on African popular culture, which focused on urban artistic production and its political significance with a presentist approach. In 1978, Johannes Fabian heralded the "loud and colorful bursts of creativity in music, oral lore, and the visual arts [. . .] pioneered by the urban masses" and "carried by the masses in contrast to both modern elitist and traditional 'tribal' culture."<sup>8</sup> These urban art forms were considered expressions of underclass consciousness, which, following a classic Marxist teleology, was seen as emerging with urbanization and detribalization.<sup>9</sup> The anthropological scholarship on popular culture thus gave new currency to old primitivist ideas about the apolitical stasis of rural African societies, reproducing the dichotomies—urban/rural, modern/traditional, detribalized/tribal, worker/peasant—that were at the heart of the colonial world:

Traditional arts [. . .] belong primarily to the rural-based, predominantly oral peasant cultures inherited, with continuous modifications, from the pre-colonial era. Popular arts by contrast are essentially modern and urban-oriented and represent a new culture. [. . .] The newness felt to be characteristic of popular arts is not merely the result of the gradual internal changes always taking place in indigenous cultures, neither is it an involuntary effect of the blanket impact of foreign rule. The syncretism of the popular arts is actively and selectively sought.<sup>10</sup>

Under the influence of performance and popular culture studies, the field of African art history revised its paradigms, overcoming the legacy of primitivism and producing sophisticated histories of changing forms.<sup>11</sup> The best example of this new scholarship is Zoë Strother's *Inventing Masks*, which provides a meticulous analysis of the dynamics of invention in Pende masquerades.<sup>12</sup> Original and pathbreaking as it is, this work still lingers on the threshold of historicity. While it

individualizes the process of invention, restoring the faces and intentionality of mask creators, it largely relies on the ethnic subject (“the Pende mind”) that Sidney Kasfir so deftly critiqued.<sup>13</sup> The question of historical consciousness is left to the final pages, leaving the reader wanting to know more about the ways in which Congolese political upheavals played out in the domain of masquerading.<sup>14</sup>

A tendency common to both popular culture and African art studies is to locate the spark of change in the colonial encounter. This is partly dictated by the quasi-total absence of sources on the precolonial period, especially on ephemeral matters of song and dance. But it also stems from an unquestioned assumption, the old idea that cultural change in Africa must be prompted by secularization or reaction to conquest.

4. Against such emphasis on external influence and secularization, this study argues that the riveting changes that have characterized the twentieth-century history of mapiko sprang from a principle internal to this institution itself: ritual rivalry.

Many authors in different African contexts, including Ranger and Strother, have observed a relationship between dance rivalry and innovation. Only Kelly Askew has explicitly thematized it, arguing that in the context of East African dance, the one is tied to the other. “If one is to best one’s rival, the strategy proven most effective is to appropriate and incorporate something new, be it of local or foreign origin.”<sup>15</sup> Askew’s insight is very pertinent to the case of mapiko. From the outset of my fieldwork in the Makonde Plateau I was faced with both novelty and rivalry. Masks and other dances were proliferating at a fast pace, with styles unknown even to my guide and companion, Atanásio Nhussi, self-declaredly the best mapiko dancer in the country. Groups competed with boastful energy in state festivals and initiation rituals. The first mapiko song that I ever learned was a challenge cast in a mixture of Shimakonde and Kiswahili:

Lo’ mavetu amutamba	Look, my friends, you don’t party
Leo leo	Today, today
Matambalale lilongwe	Matambalale is the headquarters
Leo leo	Today, today <sup>16</sup>

This first impression would be confirmed by historical inquiry, which made manifest that both rivalry and innovation had been there since

time immemorial and that the one had stimulated the other in decisive ways. As it turned out, all inventions in the domain of mapiko were conceived as competitive challenges—generational, gendered, personal, or between groups bound by kin or locality. If rivalry is undoubtedly the motor that stimulated masquerading creativity, how should it be understood? I followed two complementary paths: one structural and the other historical.

From a structural point of view, one could register a homology between dance competition, on the one hand, and the rivalry between men and women that is the mainstay of Makonde puberty rituals, on the other. The work of Gregory Bateson was crucial in illuminating this connection. For Bateson, ritual competitive performance is generative of social difference—a process that he calls *schismogenesis*.<sup>17</sup> This idea can be fruitfully applied to both puberty rituals and dance competition, which throughout the period under consideration produced various forms of difference—gendered, generational, of kin, and of locality. Thus, rituals of passage and dance competition are shown to obey the same logic. This argument lays to rest the idea that creativity in ritual art emerges only with disenchantment, once it is divested of its sacredness and turned into secular spectacle. Quite on the contrary, the engine of innovation is to be located within ritual itself. Johan Huizinga and Mikhail Bakhtin also provided grounds for undoing the narrative of secularization and for demonstrating the deep affinity of ritual and dance competition. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga subsumes competition and ritual under the concept of play and observes that play “loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy.” For Huizinga, play takes two forms, the competitive and the representational; when they come together, play “becomes a contest for the best representation of something.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Bakhtin argues that the distinction between ritual and theater is a product of the bourgeois world and that they are both figures of the primordial carnivalesque.<sup>19</sup>

From a historical point of view, one had just to lift one’s eyes beyond the narrow confines of the Makonde Plateau, overcoming the “one tribe, one style” paradigm that has so strongly dominated African art history, and look to the East African landscape.<sup>20</sup> There, rivalry has been woven into the fabric of social life for centuries, in a variety of spaces and practices: provocations between moieties in Swahili towns, joking relationships between ethnic groups, rituals of passage and dance festivals. All these competitive institutions can be understood

as instances of schismogenesis—a task beyond the scope of the present study. *Mashindano* dance contests (from the Kiswahili verb *kushindana*, “to compete”) have been especially prominent on the Swahili coast and intensified after the ending of slavery.<sup>21</sup> Against this background, mapiko dance rivalry stands out in its rightful importance; moreover, it can be framed within a regional cultural history.<sup>22</sup>

The literature on East African dance competition puts a special emphasis on fashion. At least from the late nineteenth century, both coastal and upcountry dances have been swept by periodic waves of fashion—a phenomenon observed also in the domain of dress.<sup>23</sup> The same occurred in mapiko. Innovation was prompted by visionary and influential individuals, who pursued fame and victory over their rivals. The most successful of these inventions were copied by less imaginative contenders and congealed into established genres, which stayed in fashion for a period of time, until they were abandoned, transformed, or sometimes resurrected (*kutakatuwa*) by younger generations. Such genres thus came to be associated with the specific social groups that had embraced them, especially age groups. This is also a figure of schismogenesis: the collective identification with a specific genre is a form of producing social difference.

This dynamic between individual creation and genre, fueled by ritual rivalry, has been a constant in the history of mapiko. It drove the masquerade’s transformations through the “fast cycles” of Mozambique’s turbulent twentieth-century trajectory—from the ending of slavery and colonial occupation; to the great adventure of the revolutionary nationalism, whose epicenter was the Makonde Plateau; to the uncertain times of neoliberal postsocialism.<sup>24</sup> Ritual competition made mapiko attuned to these conjunctures, keeping it always, as the title of this book has it, in step with the times. The formula and the argument that sustains it are meant as a thorough refutation of the “denial of coevalness” that is the enduring legacy of colonial anthropology.<sup>25</sup>

5. At the same time, the emphasis on schismogenesis is intended as an intervention in the debate around tradition that has been at the heart of contemporary Mozambican historiography. The terms of this debate were cast in the language of revolutionary nationalism, the political option chosen by the country’s liberation movement and post-Independence single-party Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique). Inspired by

the ideology of the New Man, Frelimo held the cultures of the Mozambican peasantry as corrupted by “five hundred years of Portuguese colonialism” and embodying a “feudal traditional mentality,” which was to be radically transformed through mobilization and (re)education. Tradition should be purified of all residues of obscurantism, tribalism, and sexism and made into a new national culture. Such language exerted a powerful influence on a new generation of engaged historians, who studied the peasantry’s political behavior in terms of class consciousness and considered their traditions as a hindrance to social change.

A critique of this discourse came from the discipline of anthropology—more specifically, from the vitriolic pen of Christian Geffray, a student of Claude Meillassoux who had spent some time in the electrifying milieu of the Centro de Estudos Africanos at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane.<sup>26</sup> Trying to make sense of the civil war that was ravaging the country—and that the intelligentsia understood as “destabilization” and “armed bandity”—Geffray suggested that Frelimo’s antitraditionalism had created a deep disaffection in the Mozambican peasantry. The peasants who supported the *contras* movement Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana) did so in the name of the cultural institutions that, for better or for worse, had regulated their lives for centuries and that Frelimo had disparaged and tried to eradicate, especially chiefship.<sup>27</sup> Riding on this argument, historian Michel Cahen depicted Renamo as a protraditionalist “coalition of marginalities.”<sup>28</sup> Geffray’s argument also set the tone for a new anthropological scholarship that emerged after the demise of socialism—a disciplinary return of the repressed, if any. Following in his wake, anthropologists set to demonstrate the resilience of traditional authority and magic mentalities—the two targets of Frelimo’s repressive intervention—arguing that all attempts to govern rural Mozambicans would fail if policy makers did not become conversant in the peasants’ own enchanted interpretations of historical change.<sup>29</sup>

The polarization of this debate, which followed the Cold War’s fault lines, had three lasting consequences on the young field of Mozambican historiography.<sup>30</sup> The first was to foreground class and culture as the two main analytic categories, thus foreclosing the study of political identity along more complex lines.<sup>31</sup> The second was to produce a representation of the peasantry as a political other. For the revolutionaries, peasants had to be educated out of their mentalities; for the revisionists, they had to be understood in their cultural difference; both agreed that

they were somewhat estranged from the political processes of which they were supposed to be protagonists. The third consequence was to narrow the focus of cultural inquiry to matters of customary authority and supernatural belief, disregarding dance and other expressive forms. Social historians who carried out sophisticated studies of Mozambican dance as anticolonial resistance either did not explore the trajectory of these dances in the socialist age or touched on the topic in dismissive terms.<sup>32</sup> The ethnomusicological work on Mozambican dance by researchers of the Arquivo do Património Cultural (ARPAC) studiously evaded all political questions.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, no in-depth study has been carried out on Mozambican song and dance, which is the country's self-proclaimed foremost cultural heritage.<sup>34</sup> This is altogether more surprising given the rich literature on performance and politics in other countries in the region.<sup>35</sup>

The analysis of mapiko in terms of schismogenesis does not merely demonstrate the potential of such a “traditional” institution to generate viable social identities across historical periods; it also highlights the various forms of political subjectivity, affiliation, and affect that emerged throughout the twentieth century in the social space under consideration. Each of the genres, analyzed in relation to a specific historical conjuncture, refers to specific configurations of political subjectivity. Methodologically, this reveals the productivity of looking at dance at a reduced scale. This is the fundamental lesson of micro-history: things are different when seen close-up.<sup>36</sup> Political identities mediated and expressed by mapiko genres are more complex and fragmented than the class or cultural subjects produced by the analysis of chiefship and witchcraft. They run along lines of generation, gender, and kin; they refer to specific social spaces; they are constituted through historically contingent projections and imaginations; sometimes, they are completely idiosyncratic. Dance conveys the complex affective matter of politics; microhistorical analysis brings to the fore its irregular fault lines.

The case of mapiko is especially productive in this respect. Because the Makonde Plateau was the cradle of anticolonial guerrilla and socialist revolution, mapiko aesthetics was permeated by political symbolism as none of the other song-and-dance Mozambican traditions were. Such aesthetics provides an invaluable entry point to explore questions of political subjectivity, from anticolonial rebellion to revolutionary passions, from gender frictions to postsocialism. The analysis of mapiko aesthetics

is especially revealing of the ways in which various social groups responded to the political interpellation into a new national-revolutionary subject—*tuvenentete* “we, the People”—during the liberation struggle and in the post-Independence period. The “frelimization” of mapiko reveals a collective investment in a socialist utopian subjectivity, which laid to rest the idea of an apolitical or estranged peasantry. At the same time, mapiko players used the symbols and aesthetics of socialism as weapons of competitive rivalry, to bolster specific local identities; in the process, the symbols were not necessarily subverted, but appropriated in a game with different stakes. The dynamics between these two poles—politics and play, identification and appropriation, conjuncture and *longue durée*—is what makes song-and-dance a productive terrain to apprehend matters of historical consciousness and subjectivity.

6. Excavating a microhistory of masquerading raised several methodological challenges. As often happens, beginnings were determined by chance. As I was about to initiate fieldwork, driven by a rather vague interest in the relationship between dance and nationhood, the Mozambican government launched a grand Second Festival of Popular Dance (2002) to celebrate a decade of peace. I let myself be sucked in, following the event as much as I could. The festival left me with a powerful impression of the kaleidoscopic richness of Mozambican dance, as well as of its imbrication in the state’s apparatus of classification and valorization. On the festival stage, dance groups were leveled into a homogeneous entity; instructed by officers of the Ministry of Culture, they acclaimed the Party and intoned platitudinous songs on prescribed themes. Popular dance was there to touch, yet remained elusive, materialized in the mask of a political spectacle that made it at once sensuous and silent. The choice to focus on a single tradition, rather than carrying out multisite fieldwork as I initially envisioned, was also a reaction to this populist appropriation and to the homologated discourse that it produced.<sup>37</sup> Delving into the historicity of one form, I reckoned, would be the best way to dig behind the pervasive politicization of popular dance in Mozambique and to understand the complexities of a whole field. I chose mapiko.

Already during the festival, I settled in the small district of Muidumbe, at the southeastern edge of the Makonde Plateau, the region’s epicenter of dance creativity. There, I had a house built for me on the

land of the local administrator; I experienced village routine; and I followed ritual and political events with some sense of being a local. Meanwhile, I travelled in the neighboring districts and villages to research local genres and to interview specific individuals, accompanied by two field assistants: Mario “Malyamungu” Matias, the son of a Frelimo guerrilla and a dancer of masks; and Evaristo “Angelina” Januário, a pupil in a local school. We hopped from village to village by foot and slept in borrowed huts, to have a more direct experience of life and landscape.

I would lie if I said that I followed a predefined methodology. I had absorbed enough Feyerabend as a philosophy undergraduate.<sup>38</sup> Mainly, I dived in for as long as I could.<sup>39</sup> In retrospect, I would describe my research method as based on the attempt to establish a virtuous circle between three endeavors: the aesthetic analysis of specific genres, the ethnography of ritual performances, and oral history. The first was positioned on recording and transcribing a massive amount of songs, listing dance styles, discussing aesthetics with mapiko players, and, of course, watching and filming performances.<sup>40</sup> The second consisted of the observation of many political events (national and local holidays, festivals, elections) and masculine and feminine initiation rituals, twice as a spectator (early 2002, late 2003) and once as an involved participant (2004–5).<sup>41</sup> The third amounted to interviews of two kinds: collective, with members of specific dance groups, which established a general overview of the history of genres; and individual, with persons identified as protagonists of the history of mapiko.

The virtuous circle between these three endeavors relied on embodied nature of the knowledge that I was pursuing. The more I understood the aesthetics of mapiko and its genres, the more I acquired the codes and language of performance, the more ritual and dance got under my skin, the more people responded to my inquiries with interest, detail, and precision. Interviews would be punctuated by fragments of performance that anchored memories into historical actuality. People played with their mouths rhythmical sequences related to dance styles (*vikuvo*) of long-dead genres or stood up to dance them.<sup>42</sup> Some descriptions were verbal-art performances in their own right. While in the early phases I kept song recording and interviewing separate, I later built interviews around recording sessions. In this way, songs functioned as mnemonic hooks to talk about masks, evoked recollections that in a normal life-story interview would remain buried, and provided cues for discussion of lyrics, music, and genre.

Audiovisual recordings gave me the opportunity of in-depth formal analysis. They also defined the field activities of my small research brigade. “The white who passes to take dances” (*njungu apita atwalanga ding’oma*) “and his crew” (*na vanemba vake*), thus we were called. The word *taking* has obvious overtones of vampirism, but film and sound actually helped to reconstitute part of what we were extracting.<sup>43</sup> In a later stage of fieldwork, I produced films (first in the form of tapes, then DVDs) for the groups that I worked with; and I provided the regional branch of Rádio Moçambique (RM) with a selection of music, which was put on the air. This was particularly appreciated by performers, as it boosted their renown and prestige; concurrently, it mitigated immaterial suspicions concerning my activities.<sup>44</sup>

The volatility of oral history is well known. One could imagine that the attempt to historicize the evanescent matter of song and dance, especially in a highly competitive context, would result in a kaleidoscope of incoherent versions or that memory would be significantly shaped by social position and power. Quite the contrary, the picture that emerged out of dozens of interviews was remarkably coherent. Aesthetic judgments varied dramatically; less so, facts. The old technique of cross-referencing was particularly useful. Dancers, singers, and carvers tended to boast about their own achievement, but when faced with conflicting versions—say, of histories of invention—they most often conceded and concurred. Second or third interviews with the same persons would produce new in-depth information, sometimes because people had been left to think about the questions that I had asked. Weaving this web of cross-verification, I repeatedly returned to a handful of elders who demonstrated deeper knowledge of and interest in matters of play—such as Mustafa, from whose perspective I have introduced *mapiko* in the first pages and whose personality and inventions will be revealed in the final ones.

Concentrating my efforts in establishing a virtuous circle among formal analysis, ethnography, and oral history, I resorted much less to written sources. A practical reason was the paucity of such sources, which are mostly silent about dance and song. Secondary literature and contemporary accounts offered a solid historical frame, as well as occasions for critical engagement—especially colonial-era ethnographical writings and Frelimo publications. The sound archives of Rádio Moçambique (Pemba and Maputo) and ARPAC were an invaluable source from which to reconstruct the aesthetics of postcolonial

mapiko. Most important, working from the ground up and relying on oral history was crucial to reconstructing a history of mapiko from the point of view of its players—a history of subjectivity more than anything else.

7. The methodological challenges that I addressed indirectly in the field became outright theoretical problems in the phase of writing. How was I to project back in time the knowledge of contemporary performances that I acquired from fieldwork, without falling into anachronism—the historian’s capital sin? How would I harmonize in a single narrative the various voices and visions of mapiko players, doing justice to each individual without losing sight of collective dynamics? How should I connect the description of stylistic change to matters of historical consciousness? Could I historicize mapiko genres without falling into the pitfalls of historicism—without turning each of them into an allegory of a specific epoch?<sup>45</sup>

I was aware that all writing impasses conceal epistemological problems but also that epistemological problems find practical solutions only in writing.<sup>46</sup> Each of my difficulties boiled down to the same problem: the articulation of regions of the real that obey partially independent logics (the individual and the collective, form and consciousness, generic conventions and historical epoch). I found a solution in the writing technique pioneered within the microhistorical school that Jacques Revel dubbed “play of scales” (*jeux d’échelles*).<sup>47</sup> Instead of connecting different levels of analysis through an explicit apparatus of mediation, the microhistorians rely on sudden shifts of scale and perspective; in this way, the articulation occurs intuitively and without falling into reductionism. The micro can be juxtaposed to the macro, aesthetics read against the background of social change, without subsuming the one into the other.<sup>48</sup> From a textual point of view, play of scales is sustained by narrative parataxis—by the juxtaposition, rather than subordination, of the various elements of the plot. The articulation of the text in small numbered sections—which is a recurring feature of microhistorical writing and which I have adopted here—is geared to produce this paratactic effect.<sup>49</sup>

Following this principle, the historicity of mapiko genres is explored here in its multiple and contradictory aspects. Formal coherence is contrasted with the haphazard circumstances of invention,

ideology with practice, politicization with playfulness, epochal meaning with discordant interpretations, rhetoric with ambivalence, verbal bravado with lyrical obscurity. Each genre is analyzed in relation to the historical moment in which it was invented but also to deeper chronological sequences. Each genre thus emerges as a thick knot of temporal layers and historical experience, which can never be totalized but only traversed narratively. The technique of play of scales enabled me to articulate this complexity and to interrupt the task of historicizing when it is on the verge of turning into allegory.

Narrative parataxis and play of scales are also akin to the aesthetics of masquerading itself. Masked dancing cannot be experienced as a whole. If you stand near the drums, you will not be able to hear the singing. If you mingle with the singers, you will lose sight of the dancer's footwork. If you pay too much attention to the masked dancer, you will be so captivated as to forget all the rest. If you stand in the front line, you will perceive details: the breathing, the metal rattles, the mask itself. But only from above—say, from the perspective of a child sitting on the branch of a mango tree—can you apprehend the shape of the dance-field (fig. 2) and follow all the participants' movements. Polyrythm and syncopations inscribe disconnection among masquerade performers themselves. If you play in the drum orchestra or sing in the choir, you cannot watch the dancer, or you will fall out of rhythm.



FIGURE 2. The dance-field (*Rui Assubuji, Litamanda, 2009*)

Only the lead drummer dares watch the mask, bridging between the two domains; to do so, he must keep so concentrated as to lose connection with the rest. There is no possible unified way in which the whole can be kept together. A famous Igbo proverb makes of this aesthetic fragmentation an epistemological principle, which is a folk version of the microhistorian's play of scales: "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place."<sup>50</sup>

8. The most elusive challenge was indeed to put into words the sensuous beauty of masquerading, which for thirteen years sustained my passion. Many have tried; few have succeeded, even in part.<sup>51</sup> Lacking the skills for musicological or choreographic notation and finding impressionistic description always to fall short, I chose an indirect approach. I wove into the fabric of my text, sometimes surreptitiously, the voices of mapiko people talking about their art: descriptions, anecdotes, idioms, aesthetic judgments, critiques, boastings, and song lyrics that—stripped of music as they may be—still carry echoes of the dance-field. The reader interested in listening and watching mapiko more directly will find audiovisual material available on a dedicated website.<sup>52</sup>

But music and dance, with their broad range of kinesthetic associations—the smell of burning leaves on antelope hide, the sweaty thick heat, the sweetish fiery taste of cashew moonshine, the pushing and pulling—can also seep into text following less explicit paths. Achille Mbembe commented, on his own work, "A good reader of texts can hear the sounds of Congolese music late in the night behind many a chapter of *On the Postcolony*."<sup>53</sup> Writing each chapter of this book I have listened to the sounds of masks, over and over—so much that I hope you, reader, can hear them.

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