

Exploring territory and co-presence in contemporary choreography in the works of some Cameroonian dance artists

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Abstract: The relationship between territory and dance has recently emerged as a topic of interest, driven by the advent of novel possibilities and challenges associated with territorial habitation. This has prompted choreographers to address the issue of co-presence in their work. While some choreographers continue to create works for the theatre, it is now common practice for others to work outside the traditional theatre. In their creative works, whether on a theatre stage or in other settings, Bouba Landrille Tchouda, André Takou Saa and Merlin Nyakam employ a range of gestural and movement techniques to explore the concept of territory. The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which these artists inhabit a territory and the relationships they establish between dancers and the territory(ies). This qualitative interpretive investigation is informed by a narrative and scoping review of dance and spatial/territorial theories, as well as the perspectives of choreographers on their engagement with dance and territory. The findings demonstrate how choreographers portray the embodiment of dancers and territories through physical, sensory, and historical memories, thereby creating spaces for aesthetic, and political discussions, from the realm of life to imagined and administered territories. The choreographers utilise the dancers to create deformations in the choreographic form and to take up the territories, whether in public spaces or in theatres, with a view to sharing their physical memories and experiences. This work presents a novel configuration of bodies, places, and crises, while simultaneously advancing both aesthetic and political considerations. It provides a new perspective on dance studies in Cameroon and has the potential to inspire innovative practices and experiences, challenging established values and perceptions of dance as an art form.

Keywords: Body movements, Cameroon, Contemporary choreography, Physical and sensory memories, Territory and co-presence

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in academic discourse towards an examination of the interrelationship between territory and dance performance. The concept of territory has prompted choreographers to consider the question of co-presence in a given territory. The practice of dance involves a daily engagement with the concept of territory. This encompasses the malleable Marley surfaces present in numerous ballet and contemporary dance studios, the distinctive floor textures of specific training or company studios, and in many instances, non-theatrical and non-studio spaces. The practice of what is sometimes referred to as “site-bound dance” has a long and distinguished history in the Western theatrical tradition (Gerecke 2016; 2019; 2021). This research is situated within a context where discourse on contemporary dance in Cameroon is scarce but increasingly prevalent. In light of the challenges presented by the theatre, choreographers are investigating alternative methods of bodily positioning in space. In recent times, many dance artists have begun to work outside the traditional theatre, for example in public spaces such as streets and squares. This study aims to examine how three contemporary dance artists, Bouba Landrille Tchouda,

André Takou Saa and Merlin Nyakam, use the dancers' bodies and creative gestures to inhabit a territory and the relationships they build between these dancers and the territory(ies).

2. Literature review

In the context of discussion pertaining to territory, geography, architecture, and the position of the body in space, these concepts frequently arise. However, dance is distinctive in that it exists exclusively in space, and thus should be examined through the lens of terrestrial space, or geography. Céline Torrent (2015) provides a summary of this idea and emphasises the significance of comprehending the relationship between dance and geography. Since the work of Gillian Rosen (1993), Anne Volvey (2000), and François Staszack (2008), who have problematised the gendered body from a feminist epistemology, the relationship between dance and geography has been subjected to further examination. The aforementioned authors have concentrated on the concept of the "spatial body" and have highlighted the interconnection between the two. Dance and territory/space are inextricably linked, as defined by Roger Brunet (Brunet, 2005). In accordance with Brunet's definition, the term "geographical" is synonymous with "spatial" and "territorial", denoting a quality pertaining to space. It can thus be argued that the term "choreography" inherently includes this spatial dimension.

The relationship between choreography, space, and the body has long been a focal point for practitioners engaged in movement-based practices. Scholarly research has examined the embodied intricacies of dance in relation to territory. Marie-Noëlle Chamoux (2004), Andrée Grau and Georgiana Wierre-Gorre (2006), and Ola Söderström and Philippe Saire (2015) have conducted comparative analyses of Western and non-Western dance forms with the objective of elucidating the ways in which humans move in space. This discovery of territories through a variety of dance practices is further explored in the online journal *Géographie et Culture*, edited by Raibaud (2015), which identifies potential areas of research for a geography of dance. One of the journal's special issues examines the interrelationship between dance and the formation of political identity, the dissemination and fusion of dances within an increasingly globalised context, the construction of geographical concepts, and the connections between dance practices and territoriality. The authors of this special issue, a *Geography of dance*, namely Élina Djibari (2015), Dalie Giroux (2015), Nicolas Canova and Magali Chatelain (2015), and Céline Torent (2015), shed light on these various aspects. Torrent's analysis of the ways in which dance both shapes and is influenced by space through the medium of choreography is a particularly pertinent contribution to this field of enquiry. The author employs the concepts of 'geopoetics' as postulated by Kenneth White and Michel Deguy, as well as the ideas of Collot (Collot, 2004).

Torrent analyses the performances of "Retouramon", a contemporary dance company directed by Fabrice Guillot. The study demonstrates that the analysed performances create an urban geography that reflects a geopoetic basis of existence. In contrast, Djibari examines the themes of mobility and territorial dynamics in Mali through the lens of the national ballet. The author makes a significant contribution to the construction of Mali's national identity by presenting a repertoire of traditional dances, despite the inherent challenges associated with them. Also, Giroux emphasises the author's perspective by effectively demonstrating the impact of the powwow, a ceremonial and ritual practice among the indigenous peoples of Eastern Canada. The study illustrates how this dance serves to reinforce the cultural unity and continued presence of Native Americans on the North American continent, both in terms of cultural identity and political influence. In contrast with the aforementioned perspectives, Canova and Chatelain (2015) adopt an alternative stance on the concept of "flaunting national identity". They examine the impact of economic and cultural globalisation on Cuban salsa and flamenco, including their popularisation and promotion of tourism. The authors investigate the impact of this phenomenon on a range of territories, from the micro-geographical scale of dance practice

spaces to the international macro-geographical space. The concept of cultural hybridization, as described by Pieterse (2004), is highlighted.

While the aforementioned studies address the interrelationship between dance, identity, and territory, they do not explore the aesthetic implications of territorial influences on choreographic creation. The study of artistic processes in relation to territory in choreography, particularly in urban settings, has become an increasingly significant area of enquiry. Scholars posit that the preservation of the distinctive attributes and evolution of dance in relation to the diverse geographical areas in which it is performed is vital to the articulation of the creative potential of dancers and choreographers (Vasalou, 2019; Crawley & Cisneros, 2020; Guzzo, 2021; Gerecke et al., 2021; Inkinen, 2024).

Vasalou (2019) proposes the utilisation of choreography as a means of examining and contemplating urban public space. The author views this as a social construction and dynamic process, while critically analysing the hypermodern capitalist city. Vasalou identifies site-specific performances in urban public spaces that utilise choreographic techniques to challenge the problematic socio-spatial patterns of this hypermodern city. In their article, Crawley and Cisneros (2020) examine the interdisciplinary developments that have occurred in the field of choreography in the twenty-first century. A case study of Anton Mirto's "Scaffolding" (2019) is presented in order to illustrate this point. The study's primary focus is on the interrelationships between dance, architecture, place, and cultural heritage. The authors posit that choreography is a public bodily act, an artistic boundary-breaker, and a socio-political actor within the urban context. Crawley and Cisneros posit that the process of choreographing scaffolding is related to both the architectural space and the urban heritage in which it is situated. This process addresses a specific experience of temporality, history, and memory. Guzzo (2021) examines the relationship between art and community through cartographic writings and their experiments in an endangered territory of the city of Santos (São Paulo, Brazil). The author establishes a link between the concepts of the body, affect, aesthetics and politics, exploring the themes of territory, history and memory. Guzzo asserts that such experiences are meticulous and considerate of ethical concerns, and provide an expansion of the field of inventive practices and encounters in a territory, as well as a transformation of established values in colonialist cities.

Within the broader discussions on the relationship between dance and colonised territories, Gerecke et al. (2021) examine the intersections between dance and land, exploring the ways in which these two elements interact in a range of movement forms. The authors provide a platform for five contemporary dancers, who are resident choreographers in and around Vancouver, to articulate their connection to and experiences of the territory. Inkinen (2024) situates the nexus between territory and dance practices at the forefront of inquiry, offering a case study of a creative built environment with an emphasis on spatial theory. The author's investigation is centred on spatial theory and analyses creative locations such as the Dance House as a current focal point in the development of the "creative city" concept, from the perspective of the building itself, its surrounding context and the urban environment of Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. The author demonstrates how the architectural design of this dance house represents an enhancement of the urban lifestyle of the community.

This review illustrates the significance of these scholarships in the ongoing discourse on dance and territory. The subject is rich and varied, as evidenced by the perspectives of multiple authors. It is important to note, however, that the aforementioned works focus primarily on the relationship between dance and site-specific choreography, particularly in urban settings, and the ways in which these locations influence the embodiment of historical memory by dancing bodies. This study will examine the relationship between dance practices and territory as experienced by contemporary Cameroonian choreographers, both in urban settings and on traditional theatrical stages. The aim is to contribute to ongoing discussions about dance and territory.

In Cameroon, there is a growing interest in the relationship between dance and territory, as evidenced by the increasing number of choreographers who explore territory as a creative process. Nevertheless, there is a notable absence of academic discourse on this subject within the academic community. As Adom (2021: 3) notes in the context of Ghanaian visual artists, Cameroonian art scholars have the responsibility to prioritise the support of these dance artists, who are often overlooked, by engaging in “comprehensive biographical research into their lives and works.” It is imperative that Cameroonian scholars undertake “critical investigations and analyses of the philosophies, themes, and subject matter of their works of art.” In contrast to the approach taken by Djibari (2015), the objective of this study is not to challenge the concept of territory as it pertains to traditional Cameroonian dances performed by dance groups or the Cameroon National Ballet. Moreover, unlike the approach taken by Canova and Chaletain (2015), this study does not seek to illustrate the influence of Cameroonian dances on other territories, whether national or international. This text does not address the various geographical areas of contemporary dance in Cameroon and their different manifestations, both nationally and internationally, across trends and generations. In line with the findings of Gerecke et al. (2021), this study focuses on the distinctive manifestations of territorial practice that emerge in response to spatial and aesthetic configurations within the broader context of site-specificity. This is explored through the experiences of three contemporary dancers based in Cameroon and overseas. However, in opposition to the aforementioned study, this investigation is not confined to urban contexts. Instead, it combines the concept of territory as perceived by choreographers who have directed theatre productions with that of the city itself.

The principal aim of this study is to analyse the aesthetic significance of territory and movement in a selection of choreographic works, with a particular focus on the following question: To what extent do the choreographic dynamics of Tchouda, Takou Saa, and Nyakam relate to the theme of territorialization, and what kind of territory do they outline through their creative gestures? In other words, this inquiry seeks to understand the influence of territory on the creative process of choreography and the subsequent shaping of a specific territory. Consequently, the focus will be on the specific location where the dances are performed. In order to formulate the specific research questions, consideration is given to three fundamental spatial and territorial characteristics.

The first of these is the manner in which choreographers perceive the territory, whether it be a street, a building, or a stage, as an experiential space. We also question what interactions are suggested by the immediate spaces within the environment? It would be beneficial to ascertain which elements of the territory promote social interaction, creative interaction, and conflict. Furthermore, what image and message are conveyed by the manner in which choreographers explore the territory? The study demonstrates the significant role of territory in the works of Bouba Landrille Tchouda of the company Malaka, as evidenced by his piece titled “OCNI” (Objets Chorégraphiques Nouvellement Imaginés), created in 2011. Similarly, André Takou Saa of the company Mook, following his creations “Tsapla” (2010) and “The real season” (2014), also exemplifies this role. Additionally, Merlin Nyakam of the company Les Calebasses is a notable figure in this field, with his creations “Liberté d'expression” (2004) and “Le théorème de Neuneen” (2008). The objective is to examine the ways in which space is represented and described, with a particular focus on the relationships between individuals and groups and the territories they inhabit.

The featured artists hail from a multitude of backgrounds and career stages, each with a distinct and individual aesthetic approach. They integrate their personal histories into their work, thereby illustrating the manner in which they relate to the territory in question. Bouba Landrille Tchouda, a Cameroonian choreographer and performer, is a prominent figure within the French dance scene. He has developed a contemporary dance style that incorporates a variety of street dance techniques, including hip-hop, waacking, breaking, popping, capoeira, and African dances. Merlin Nyakam, based in France, employs a methodology that involves the fusion of disparate techniques and the engagement of the local community in the creative

process. His work is particularly notable for its incorporation of costumes and musical instruments. André Takou Saa is a seminal figure in the development of contemporary dance in Cameroon, with a particular focus on the fusion of dance, theatre and performance. His choreographic work investigates a range of themes, including colonial violence, immigration, gender, place, and displacement. Each artist develops a distinctive understanding of the relationship between dance, the body, and the surrounding environment.

These choreographers posit that the environment and territoriality are significant factors in the creation of their works. They transform the living space into a stage and the stage into territories, thereby challenging the dancers to negotiate the constraints of architectural and territorial boundaries. This co-presence is of great consequence to the dancers' development. Following an introduction to the conceptual framework and methodology employed in this study, an analysis will be presented of the function of the territories of life and imagination in the works under investigation. Subsequently, we will demonstrate how the medium of contemporary dance, when employed in a choreographic capacity, can be utilised as a platform for the creation of managed territories.

3. Conceptual framework

The concepts of "territory" and "co-presence" may initially appear to be contradictory. The term "territory" is used to describe a portion of land that has been occupied and developed by human groups in order to meet their specific needs. In their 1995 publication, Joël Bonnemaïson and Luc Cambrézy (1995: 1) discuss the concept of territory and state that: In non-industrial or traditional societies, the land is not so much appropriated as identified. The society and the land are inextricably linked, with the local group occupying a symbiotic relationship with its surrounding environment. The significance of symbols inscribed in the territory and the places that root them outweighs that of the territory's centres. This principle of identification elucidates the distinctive and profound bond that exists between humans and the land. The territory is not merely an asset; it is a living entity in its own right. The loss of territory is tantamount to disappearance, as it cannot be shared, sold, or bequeathed.

The term "appropriation" is used to describe both the areas of decision-making and organisation, as well as the strength of social representations. In the view of Henri Lefebvre (1991), the process of transforming a natural space to meet the needs and possibilities of a group represents a key aspect of this phenomenon. The concept is frequently employed by anthropologists to elucidate the actions of populations striving to secure access, control and utilisation of resources in a particular area. In his 1984 work, Ferrier defines territory as a product of a production process that involves organisational strategies and practices of domination and exclusion.

The concept of territory is defined in relation to the space of the Other, whereby co-presence signifies a connection between a minimum of two entities. The concept of "territory" may appear to be a limiting factor and incompatible with the notion of "co-presence", which suggests a space for interaction, exchange and crisis management. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that the concept of territory is incompatible with the presence of strangers. Conversely, a territory may also be inclusive, facilitating solidarity, fraternity and sociability. It is only when the boundaries and rules of a territory are disregarded that conflicts arise.

In their 1984 study, Armand Frémont and colleagues posit the existence of two dimensions of space: the living space and the lived space. The materialisation of space is characterised by the existence of two non-hierarchical levels of territory. The initial level of analysis concerns the physical space, which exists independently of all other factors. This concept encompasses the individual's routine activities within a specific geographical area, including occasional excursions to other territories. It represents the individual's experience, shaped by their own practices. As Di Méo (1991: 274) asserts, the social relations of production are constituted for each individual in the specific spatial context of their lived experience, encompassing their place of

residence, work, leisure activities, consumption of goods and services, and participation in familial and social life. Di Méo (1991: 287) posits that place shapes the material and social context of daily life, including routes, sensory experiences and local human contacts, as a direct expression of economic and material realities. Di Méo's (1991: 292) concept comprises three principal elements in relation to territoriality. Firstly, it defines an existential relation to the Earth, which may be termed 'geographicality'. Secondly, it identifies the 'real network of places practised and experienced by individuals in communities'. The third element is based on references that are represented on multiple levels and are more than an impeccable interlocking of territorial forms; they are also a reflection of the multifaceted nature of human experience. Derek's theory posits that territories are created in a context of co-presence, whereby they become symbolic places (Debarbieux, 1995) that represent appropriation, identification, demarcation, and development through significant places imbued with memory and shaped by culture and ideology.

Moreover, as defined by Raffestin (1982: 171), territoriality concerns the relations that a community and its members have with the outside world and/or otherness through intermediaries. This concept encompasses the ways in which people both produce and reproduce this space. This definition is consistent with Raffestin's (1977) earlier ideas on territoriality and Di Méo's (2000) subsequent elaborations. In this study, the term 'territorialisation' is used to describe the process of organising, managing, planning and spatially appropriating a territory by an individual or group. This research examines the proposition that the body encompasses space, a concept that is supported by a range of theoretical perspectives. In his 1991 book, *Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991: 162) posits that space is perceived, lived, and produced through the body. It is therefore crucial to comprehend space as a corporeal experience and practice. It examines how performers act as spatial actors, occupying both physical and imaginary spaces. This paper examines the interrelationship between dancers and choreographers and the spatial dimensions of their creative processes. The discussion encompasses a variety of elements, including steps, figures, categories, and objects.

In this study, the term "territory" is used to refer to a specific area within the choreographic space, which is the volume available for movement. The process of choreography entails the measurement of bodily movement in dance through the utilisation of a range of techniques and movements. In this analogy, the stage is regarded as a territory in which performers interact and coexist through a choreographic process. This process is referred to as "corporeal choreography" (Lepecki, 2012a). Choreography can be defined as the art of composing steps and regulating figures. The term is derived from the Greek words *khōros* (circle) and *graphe* (writing, representation). It is used to describe the representation of space through the movement of the body, particularly in circular dances and orchestral performances by the Greek theatre choir.

Nevertheless, the notion of choreography encompasses a multitude of elements beyond the mere conceptualisation and delineation of dance movements and steps. The term has a long history in the field of dance, with its earliest documented usage appearing in the 1589 publication *Orchesographie*, in which it was employed to describe the bureaucratic and state-controlled regulation of dancing. As Lepecki (2010: 16) asserts, choreography serves not only to discipline and organize movements, but also to discipline and organize bodies. In the 18th century, the concept of "choreography" or "chorégraphie" began to be used to describe the relationship between writing and movement, body and sign, paper and floor. From this point onwards, the term "chorégraphie" was established as a means of notating dances, confining them to the domain of theatre and serving the interests of the monarchy in the sixteenth century. The author delineates the design and construction of an imaginary setting for dance or choreography, which is specific, neutral, and privileged. As Lepecki (2006: 17) asserts, the kinetic project of modernity has become the very ontology of the contemporary era, and the advent of contemporary dance has effectively challenged the traditional notions of dance and space.

Contemporary dance artists from Cameroon, like their counterparts worldwide, are redefining the nature of choreography through experimentation with different spaces and body movements. This is linked to both urban and theatrical contexts. They put forth alternative methodologies for performance that privilege the art of dance itself in space, thereby shifting the focus away from image and representation. This article presents an analysis of the choreographic works of André Takou Saa, Merlin Nyakam, and Bouba Landry Tchouda. The analysis focuses on the positioning of the dancing body in the performance space and its interaction with the audience or other dancers, as directed by the choreographers. The works of these choreographers are worthy of study as they prompt a range of considerations pertaining to the concept of territoriality, as postulated by the aforementioned theorists. This article employs an interpretative qualitative method in order to gain insights from their works.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

In order to address the primary research question of this article, a comprehensive post-positivist epistemology was employed, as developed by Jill Green and Susan Stinson (1999) in their book, *Post-positivist Research in Dance*. As Green and Stinson (1999: 94) observe, post-positivist dance research offers a framework for grasping the strategies that respect the qualitative nature of dance. The objective of post-positivist research, as outlined by Green and Stinson (1999), is to interpret or understand a specific research context or topic. Subsequently, we adopted a comprehensive constructivist approach with the objective of gaining insight into the manner in which Cameroonian choreographers explore the notion of territory in their works. Methodologically, a comprehensive narrative review (Green et al., 2006) was employed to consolidate current knowledge in relation to the topic under investigation and highlight the main research question (Chukwuere, 2023: 38-39). This study aims to examine the choreographic dynamics of Tchouda, Takou Saa, and Nyakam in relation to the theme of territorialisation. In particular, it seeks to identify the type of territory depicted through their creative movements.

4.2. Data collection

The author employed a systematic search methodology in accordance with the recommendations set forth by Chukwuere (2023). This entailed the collation of secondary data on the subjects of dance and territory through the use of documentary research. This approach enabled us to gather information from a range of sources, including peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and online content. A comprehensive evaluation of the literature on dance, choreography, and territory was conducted using data discrimination (inclusion/exclusion) supported by the scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). This process facilitated the development of the framework for this study. The theoretical and conceptual framework was constructed using the data collected on the concepts of territory, territoriality, and choreography. Two distinct approaches to the concept of territory were identified. The first approach is related to the practice of 'residents' and 'actors' – the territory of life (Di Méo, 2000). The second approach is related to the creation and administration of these actors in a territory (Derek, 1994).

In addition to narrative and scoping reviews, we employed the use of direct observation. Derèze (1994) and Peretz (2004) advocate direct observation as a field practice, whereby the social behaviours of individuals and groups can be observed in their activity or residence spaces. However, our observation was limited to viewing the videos of the shows that comprise the corpus of this study. Moreover, the following works were observed: Bouba L.Tchouda's "OCNI" (*Objets Chorégraphiques Nouvellement Imaginés*), André Takou Saa's "Tsapla" and "The Real Season", as well as Merlin Nyakam's "Liberté d'expression" and "Le théorème de Neuneen". The choreographers furnished us with the requisite link and password, which enabled us to access the

aforementioned videos on the Dance Company website. Takou Saa furnished us with a USB key containing a video of his performance.

Nevertheless, observing the dance performances on site proved particularly challenging due to the limited selection of works and choreographers, including two who do not reside in Cameroon: Bouba Landrille Tchouda and Merlin Nyakam. Furthermore, all of the selected choreographic works were created and presented prior to the commencement of this research project. "OCNI" was created by Bouba in 2008 and the version we watched was performed in 2011, "Tsapla" was choreographed by Takou Saa in 2010, and "The Real Season" was choreographed in 2014. In 2004, Nyakam directed and performed "Liberté d'expression", and in 2008, he choreographed and danced "Le Théorème de Neuneen".

In order to gain insight into the choreographers' experiences with dance and the territory, interviews were conducted with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of their choreographic process. The choreographers and the authors engaged in a video call via the WhatsApp platform. An interview with Bouba Tchouda was conducted on 1 February 2024. The discussion encompassed his site-specific choreography in non-traditional theatrical settings and his interest in dancing in close proximity to urban environments. Besides, we examined the extent to which his practice is shaped by his surroundings, and how this influences his movement vocabulary and collaborative approach.

Additionally, Takou Saa and Nyakam were interviewed on 15 November and 27 November 2023, respectively, using the same methodology. The objective was to ascertain how their personal relationship with the stage correlates with the specific territories they conceptualised and constructed on stage through movements and modes of understanding that they embedded in a given location. Although the choreographers found it challenging to recall all the details of these works, they were able to provide insight into their choices of movements and how they reflect their relationship to the territory, as well as the physical and historical memories conveyed during their performance.

4.3. Data analysis

In order to understand the choreographers' and dancers' experiences and reflect on the meanings they ascribed to the dance, it was deemed necessary to adopt an interpretive approach (Green and Stinson, 1999: 113). The method proposed by Paillé and Muchielli (2012) was employed to identify and group themes derived from the collected data, in a manner that was independent of interpretive activity. It was observed how the choreographers/dancers interacted with the territory in a direct manner within the context of their performances.

This article considers the intersection of two theoretical perspectives on the concept of territory. The research by Di Meo (1991) focused on the concept of everyday/living territories, while Derek (1994) proposed the notion of creative and administered territories. In order to identify the elements that represent the territory in these performances, an analysis of the videos was conducted. The research identified a number of different forms of territory, including those related to life, imagination, and administration. The interaction of the dancers within their designated area was analysed, with particular focus on the concept of co-presence and its enabling of communication with the environment and audience through the medium of the body, stage design and aesthetic elements. The concept of urban choreography, as introduced by sociologist and dance theorist Gabriele Klein (2017), is employed as a lens to highlight the work of Bouba Landrille Tchouda. Furthermore, the way in which Nyakam and Takou Saa manage the traditional theatre stage as an imagined and administered territory is examined. The configuration of materials on the stage and the dancers' movements are conceptualised as space syntax (Lefebvre, 1991).

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Territory of life and imagined territory in Tchouda and Nyakam works

The concept of living space or territory can be divided into two categories: the territory of life and the imagined/lived territory. The former category pertains to all locations that are typically visited by an individual or group, whereas the latter encompasses the localized frequentations, representations, and psychological values associated with these locations. In their work, Tchouda and Nyakam represent society through two modalities, thereby depicting the various physical and imagined spaces that people inhabit. This suggests that in order to truly live in a place, one must experience and transform it both physically and mentally. The choreographic works illustrate the ways in which dancers endeavour to imbue different spaces with meaning.

5.1.1. Territory of life: embodying territory and spectatorship

Immanuel Schipper (2014: 24) posits that urban spaces are shaped not only by city planners and architects, but also by the people who use them and the ways in which they do so. Tchouda's "OCNI" (Newly Imagined Choreographic Objects) (Figure 1) extends beyond the stage to encompass urban spaces, streets and buildings as sites of expression. This dance, which was originally created for an outdoor setting, features the collaboration of both professional and amateur dancers, resulting in a dynamic interplay of movement within the space. The audience is thus afforded the opportunity to construct their own perception of the space occupied by the performers. Figure 1 depicts a performance from the *Dedans-Dehors* festival in May 2011 at the Parvis de Château Rouge.



Figure 1: "OCNI" choreographed by Bouba Landrille Tchouda in 2011. © Fabrice Hernandez and Château Rouge.

In the course of the interview conducted via WhatsApp, Bouba Tchouda was questioned about his interest in producing dance performances in close proximity to specific sites and how his practice based on a particular place affects his movement vocabulary and approach to human socialisation. He responded,

I have always derived pleasure from dancing in outdoor settings. However, it was only in the last fifteen years that I began to perform my own work outside of the studio or theatre.¹ During my formative years, I was exposed to various forms of street dance, including hip-hop, break dancing, and other urban styles. I recall with great fondness the opportunity to engage in the practice of capoeira with Brazilian youth in the streets. I consider myself to be a person with a strong connection to the city and its associated culture. The movement vocabulary that I utilise is shaped by the environment in which I was raised. The act of creating and performing in this space allows me to engage with a more diverse range of human

experiences. The relationship between space and the self gives rise to a language of profound human sensation and experience. My image-making is inextricably linked to the territory, and the interdependence inherent in the process of creating images is both evident and gratifying.

The act of performing a dance in a public space encourages the audience to identify with the performers and creates a narrative within the same territory. "OCNI" can be regarded as an experience of being with people and places, facilitating the creation of spaces for aesthetic, ethical, and political constructions. This is consistent with Schipper's (2014: 21) perspective that art interventions in public urban spaces utilise aesthetic power to stimulate citizens' imagination and experience of space, thereby influencing their perceptions of and engagement with the city. In this choreographic work, Bouba employs the use of the human body to extend the boundaries of public space and to effect a transformation of the urban environment. Bouba's intervention establishes a provisional community by uniting individuals who have experienced the utilisation of their territory in an alternative manner. This communication addresses the manner in which individuals construct representations of the places they inhabit (Di Meo, 1991: 87). The performers' movements serve to reinforce this representation within a clearly defined and quantifiable space.

Tchouda's choreography examines the limitless mental space created by individuals through the processes of reasoning and imagination. The choreography is created with the intention of harmonising with the surrounding space and daily life, attuned to the vibrations of the landscape. The human body is able to take shape in space without being constrained by its surrounding environment. In this way, obstacles can become a source of creative inspiration. Tchouda's choreographic approach is grounded in the architectural principles of space. The movement experienced during land-based explorations differs from that generated in a studio setting. The body of the landscape is shaped by its variety of shapes, tones, and textures, which allows for the inherent rhythm of the site to be deciphered.

Consequently, Bouba Tchouda's choreography is integrated into the urban landscape, extending its lines of force and reflecting its features, including buildings, streets, social interactions, sounds, and rhythms. This approach of wandering through a space is proposed as a means of facilitating transformation and active engagement in theories that examine the correlation between space and social behaviour (Lefebvre, 1991; Lavrinec, 2012-2013). Tchouda challenges the fundamental premise of human existence on Earth, proposing the potential for alternative modes of living, even within the context of urban architecture. It is imperative that humans adapt to the constraints imposed by spatial limitations. The performance of dance offers a distinctive experience of the urban landscape, stimulating both physical and sensory memory. The performance is situated within a public space, thereby encouraging the audience to engage with the piece on a visceral level. The audience is invited to engage with the dance and the space, allowing them to interpret the performance through their own bodies. The performer establishes a parallel between the dancers' movements and the space they occupy, thereby assisting both the dancers and the spectators in differentiating between autonomy and dependence. In addition to the personal experience of the territory, there is also a communication between humans and the world they inhabit. Bouba Tchouda engages the audience physically in two distinct ways.

Primarily, the audience is encouraged to move around the dancers, and secondly, the visceral interpretation of the intense physicality of the dancers is facilitated. The spectators are encouraged to traverse the urban environment, negotiating narrow alleyways and traversing the bodies of the dancers positioned in the street. This results in a circuitous route that encompasses both the dance and the surrounding space. The capacity of the dancers to embody the movements within the territory results in a sharing of physical memory and experience with the audience. The dancers effectively engage the audience in a duet, thereby enabling a shared physical exploration of the city. To illustrate, in figure 1, the audience may envisage the sensation of climbing a fence, even if they have no prior experience of doing so. As the audience observes the dancers executing

challenging and risky movements, they may experience a tensing of their muscles and a stiffness of their posture. The audience is able to empathise with the physical exertion of the dancers while simultaneously observing their movements, which may evoke a corporeal memory or at the very least a sensation of one.

5.1.2. Imagined territory: living in a narrowed space

In the examples of "OCNI" (see Figure 1) and Merlin Nyakam's "Le théorème de Neuneen" (see Figure 2), the choreographers establish a hut as a predetermined, essential and limited space in which the dancers can experience co-presence by "slipping and sinking". These two choreographers transform the rhetoric of confined space into a territory of exchange and sharing. Nyakam puts forth the following proposition:

The dancers' bodies have proved an invaluable tool for questioning, examining and interrogating the nuances of different territories. In the context of intense globalisation, it is particularly challenging to live in a confined space. The objective was to prompt each dancer to consider the dehumanisation of social connections by placing them in individual situations. However, I approach these challenges as a global citizen, questioning how one can survive in a limited space and envisage a positive outcome. Consequently, in "Le theorem de Neuneen", an attempt is made to envisage an optimal territory transcending individual identities and constrained environments. The aim is to demonstrate that in the context of a globalised world, it is possible for individuals to construct their own ideal social and spatial structures without resorting to dehumanising practices.

To achieve this, Nyakam employs a physical and sensory technique of contact dance that compels the dancers to attune to each other's bodies. By assuming control of the space, the dancers become one with the territory, engaging in a dynamic interplay with the earth, drawing energy from it. Each gesture is imbued with a specific meaning; however, it is the interplay between the feet - heel and toes - upon the stage and the arms that particularly captivates the audience.



Figure 2: "Le théorème de Neuneen". Chorégraphie by Merlin Nyakam. © Xavier Wurmser.

It is evident that both Tchouda and Nyakam construct an idealised territory in the form of a hut, evoking two spaces that respond to Bachelard's argument (1957). The hut, like Bachelard's house, is conceived as a vertical and concentrated entity, and requires a certain degree of awareness of its centrality. The two dimensions are present in both works, albeit in contrasting ways. The performers simultaneously evince a defiance of gravity, rising towards the sky while simultaneously anchoring themselves to the ground. This impressive utilisation of the ascending-descending axis (earth-sky) symbolises the ideal territory and the "image of the hut". Furthermore, the huts symbolise a place of meditation and mystery, where man's fears are rationalised, leading to liberation towards the sky, as described by Bachelard in Chapters I and II. Similarly, Nyakam's artwork, entitled "Liberté d'expression" (Figure 3), establishes a spatial concept through the delineation of a topological

space. This constitutes an alternative representation of territory. In a manner analogous to a political or legal territory, this topological space is contingent upon human habitation. In this sense, the capacity for movement is a fundamental aspect of experiencing freedom within a given territory and avoiding the constant sensation of being confined. In "Liberté d'expression", Nyakam correctly situates this by conceptualising the body as a territory that moves within other territories (Figure 3).



Figure 3: "Liberté d'expression", choreographed by Merlin Nyakam. © Julien Delmotte 2006.

The figure 3 above illustrates how Nyakam challenges the concept of territory in performance, demonstrating how it is shaped and reshaped by movement and volume. This is analogous to the manner in which globalisation is reshaping and, to some extent, deforming territories – physical, mental and geographical – and creating interactions among them. Nyakam articulates this process of territorial reshaping and deformation through the manipulation of costumes, transforming the fabric into a graphic spatial element within the dramaturgical composition of the dancers. Merlin Nyakam acknowledges that when one encounters a physical territory, one does so with one's own body, which in itself constitutes a territory. This body is imbued with one's cultural identity, manner of speaking, dietary habits, and language. It is intriguing to consider the potential of the dancer's body to freely explore the multifaceted dimensions of physical territories traversed and experienced. These dimensions, in turn, shape our perspectives on the world and inform our lived experiences.

This is particularly apparent in scenes where the dancers are situated within the context of space, with the dynamic interplay of waves symbolising the pursuit of freedom within society. The diverse applications of costume challenge the conventional representation of the body and its boundaries within a given space. The selection of shape and colour serves to emphasise, connect or separate different parts of the body from other territories. To illustrate, a flowing dress that is wide and long can offer a multiplicity of interpretations of the choreography. It functions as a conduit for kinaesthetic expression and a platform for projection, enabling the individual to express themselves freely and without trepidation. The costume functions as a conduit through which individuals may project themselves into a given territory. Furthermore, it could be argued that Nyakam is questioning the proliferation of mobility and telecommunication tools in contemporary society due to globalisation. This raises the question of whether this is an example of how the proliferation of media ubiquity is affecting the production of our societies. At the present time, we observe a separation between the fragmented living territories of individuals and their more unified representations of territoriality (Di Meo, 1991). However, to provide a comprehensive account of the multifaceted ways in which humans engage with and relate to territory, it is essential to extend beyond this singular experience.

5.2. Choreographic art as theatre for the production of administered territories in Takou Saa's creations

In the context of theatrical performance, choreographic art is employed to delineate distinct administrative territories, as exemplified in Takou Saa's oeuvre. The term "administered territories" is used to describe the divisions of the performance space created by the choreographer, which result in the production of multiple delimited areas of varying size and configuration. However, these divisions can be reductive and conflicting due to the multiplication of roles, which are sometimes contradictory, that performers can assume in a given territory. Takou Saa's creations, "The Real Season" (Figure 4) and "Tsapla" (Figure 5), adopt a distinctive approach. Such works offer spatial forms and inventions that reflect the presence of a culture or an individual, rather than utilising the territory as a mere stage. Takou Saa's territoriality demonstrates how the African landscape has been rendered comprehensible to Westerners, particularly through practices of domination. The choreographer is particularly interested in the interaction between bodies in confined spaces.

5.2.1. Takou Saa's exploration of borders

In the course of the interview, Takou Saa observed that he is well versed in the geographical boundaries that have been established by historical memories, shaped by the legacy of colonialism, and their impact on the continent of Africa as a whole. He posits that these man-made boundaries have resulted in the division of Africa. This conviction has significantly informed his creation of "The Real Season," wherein he employs movement to examine the concepts of borders and territory. During the colonial period, European countries established borders in a manner that disregarded existing geographical and cultural divisions, resulting in a number of challenges, including conflict and the hindrance of coexistence. This comprehension gives rise to an awareness of the existence of borders.



Figure 4: Screen shots of the video of the performance "The real season" at the French Institute in Cameroon-Yaounde. © André Takou Saa, November 2014.

Figure 4 displays screenshots from the video recording of the performance titled "The Real Season," which was choreographed by André Takou Saa in 2014. In this choreographic work, the artist employs the body in space to elucidate the repercussions of colonialism on contemporary territories and the limitations it has imposed. The performance's primary focus is on the concept of transience, and the physical weight of the body is presented as an unquestionable reality. Takou Saa's approach to territory is illustrative of the re-embrace of Marxism in the mid-20th century, which opened the way for several social movements against discriminatory practices. He devises complex movements that are shaped by the effects of gravity, enabling the bodies to fall, crawl and walk. As Asamoah et al. (2024: 20) argue in their analysis of "Monni Adam's 'African visual art from an art historical perspective'", Takou Saa presents a critique of pro-capitalist theories, ideologies, cultures, and other systems that perpetuate exploitation, oppression, and inequality. This choreographer is thus interested in the role of dance in social transformation, particularly in terms of the implementation and sustenance of political ideas.

The series of figures above illustrates the challenges confronting contemporary African societies, including territorial disputes, armed conflict, and gender and social class inequalities that have their roots in colonialism. Similarly, the choreographer's proposal aligns with Rolnik's (2017) concept of establishing transient relational territories that foster intermittent collective synergies. Such territories provide reciprocal shelter, thereby facilitating the elaboration of trauma resulting from the perverse operation of the colonial-capitalistic regime. The choreography suggests that conflicts may arise from the coexistence of different groups in a shared territory. In this work, Takou Saa examines the concept of territoriality by providing concrete examples of the ways in which political and ideological forms of social relations impact individual experiences within a living space. The author's perspective on territory and co-presence is informed by the political and cultural context of Africa, with a particular focus on Cameroon as a colonised territory. In order to address the challenges of co-presence, the utilisation of movement and gestures is employed.

Takou Saa initiates the performance by confining the dancers to a smaller space, thereby compelling them to navigate a restricted area. The restricted space necessitates intermittent movement on the part of the dancers, who are thus afforded the opportunity to perform acrobatics and falls, which serve as slides that repeatedly return them to the ground. The precise execution of falling and landing movements is essential for the successful completion of the various movements on a floor that is less than two metres wide and approximately one and a half metres long. The dancers in this area frequently espouse conflicting perspectives and are motivated by a desire for autonomy. In this constrained environment, the dancers exhibit a persistent tension between their physical bodies and the spatial boundaries of their movement.

The choreographic process of Takou Saa is founded upon the principles of shared dissent, as opposed to the tenets of consensus or cohesion (Otte and Gielen, 2019). He engages the dancers on stage to challenge the prevailing logic, facilitate alternative pathways, and reframe values. Takou Saa's choreography represents his political commitment and institutional transgression as a form of deformation of the common field and experience. The stage design implies that territories established according to the logic of colonialism were designed to impede interactions and exchanges. Furthermore, even when such interactions do occur, they are susceptible to becoming hostile and objectifying. This perspective is reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000), which depicts how the colonial structure reduces subjects to objects through the infliction of violence upon both humans and non-humans. The performance of the dancers on stage evokes the colonial encounter and calls for a reinvention of the colonised. To prevent any distortion, the dancers embody the concept of the "Möbius strip" (Rolnik, 2017) and create new movements and performances through their bodies, thereby inhabiting the territory. This is achieved by making themselves available for encounters and enforcing cuts in the scenery, which enables the escape from the established logic of the understanding of colonial territorialisation as a humanist act, as paraphrased from Césaire (2000: 52). Takou Saa deliberately eschews the designation of a particular location, thereby fostering a sense of universal identification with the performance. The concept of appropriation through the seizure of stage space, presented here alongside the processes of domination symbolised by territorial confinement, can be compared to the findings of Gregory's study (Gregory, 1994).

5.2.2. Spatial strategies as new challenges

In line with Gregory's (1994) conceptualisation of spatial territory, Takou Saa underscores the dispossession of African societies through 'spatial strategies' that entail cultural invasion. This is illustrated by the sticks in figure 5, which not only restrict the dancer's movements but also delineate the territorial boundaries within which he must perform. Similarly, Takou Saa is interested in the novel spatial configurations imposed by Westerners. He illustrates how colonial "enframing" establishes a discernible hierarchy within the territorial order. The choreographer's role is to plan and organise the stage in a way that modifies the way in which the

dancers think and act while living in these territories. The transformations are discernible at all levels of observation, most notably through the variation of imbalances. Takou Saa's perspective on imbalance demonstrates how the ongoing conflict and crisis among people sharing the same territory is exacerbated by the interplay between geography and Western influence. This emphasises the interconnectivity between colonial initiatives, spatial construction, and diverse manifestations of power (Gregory, 1994: 168). In "Tsapla" (see Figure 5), the dancer is confronted with a scenography of obstacles, including sticks suspended above their head, creating the impression that the sky is falling upon them. The sticks have a ghostly quality, and the dancer attempts to maintain an objective relationship with them, despite their determination to discard them.

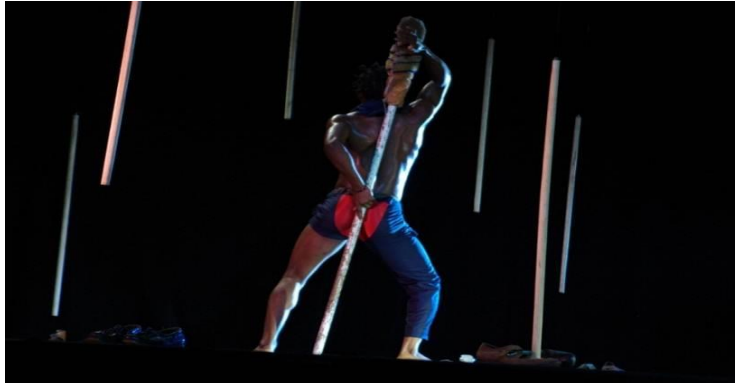


Figure 5: "Tsapla" at the French Institute in Cameroon-Yaounde. © André Takou Saa, 2010.

The focus on aerial borders as a means of articulating identity is a defining feature of Takou Saa's work. The dancer engages in discourse with the audience, sharing anecdotes from his life and eliciting a sense of shared experience and belonging. The performances establish intriguing links between aerial and terrestrial realms, underscoring the choreographer's emphasis on spatial exploration. The dancer must adapt to the specific conditions of the territory in question, even if the circumstances diverge from his initial expectations.

5.3. Discussion

The article examines the interrelationship between dance/choreography and territory, with a particular focus on the experimental approaches of choreographers. It is based on a qualitative analysis. The article examines the intersections between theories of territory, dance, and choreography, and considers how choreographers' explorations of territory can enhance the interconnections between the body, emotions, aesthetics, and politics. The analysis illustrates how contemporary choreographers actualise the concepts of territory and co-presence in their creations. The text delineates three levels of territory: a physical territory, an imagined or experienced territory (as evidenced by the Bouba and Nyakam phenomenon), and a territory of management and administration (as exemplified by Takou Saa). As Raffestin (1977: 129) posits, "territory is the prison that men give themselves." However, this concept can be reframed to create a more liberating and socially engaging environment. The portrayal of territoriality by the choreographers is evident in the multidimensionality of the human experience.

The approaches of Nyakam, Tchouda, and Takou Saa to the concept of territory are, nevertheless, convergent at the level of aesthetics. This prompts the audience to consider the distinction between dreams and reality through the various forms of territory presented. The ascending-descending axis is employed to illustrate that those who aspire to inhabit a vast territory must also be prepared to reside in a modest one (Bachelard, 1957: 30).

The dancers' movements towards the sky can be interpreted as representing the large, while their movements towards the ground can be seen to represent the small. This indicates that the concept of territory within the context of these artists' dance structures shifts from an intimate to a referential perspective. A comparison of Nyakam's two aforementioned works reveals that in "Le théorème de Neuneen", the dancers

occupy the space, whereas in “Liberté d'expression”, they shape and mould it through their movements and costumes, thereby emulating the actions of architects creating the contours and dimensions of the space. Similarly, in Tchouda’s urban choreography, the spatial project is taking shape gradually, with the construction of the body that occupies it and the embodiment of the choreographic solution to the issue of co-presence among the dancers and between the dancers and the viewers.

In contrast to Nyakam and Tchouda, who create works that occupy more space, Takou Saa focuses on reduction, the use of space, and sharing territory. These choreographers demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the dance space, encompassing a range of approaches from large-scale performances that occupy the entire stage, as exemplified by Nyakam and Tchouda, to small-scale dances that are constrained to specific areas, as observed in Takou Saa's work. In “Tsapla”, for instance, Takou Saa places emphasis on the aerial border, whereas in “The Real Season”, the focus is more on the terrestrial. The various choreographic works feature performers moving in a clearly delineated ring with visible boundaries. The works of Nyakam, Tchouda and Takou Saa collectively prompt reflection on the contemporary phenomenon of territorial identification and the enduring paradox of territorial conflict, a defining feature of the 21st century.

6. The contribution and implications of the study

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of dance studies by providing new insights into the relationship between dance, choreography, and territory as experienced by Cameroonian born dance artists. The study updates the discourse on the interaction between dance and non-traditional theatre stages, while also addressing the dearth of knowledge on contemporary dance in Cameroon. It analyses the aesthetic depth of Cameroonian choreographers' experiences with territory and explores postcolonial discourse on the historical memory of colonised countries and the artistic representation of the deformation and confinement of territories. Furthermore, the study provides new insights into the relationship between dance and postcolonial studies. We illustrate how dance can enrich both the aesthetic and political dimensions of discourse beyond the theatre. This is done by generating kinaesthetic experiences for audiences and enabling them to explore alternative ways of living in a given territory. This work presents a novel configuration of bodies, places, and crises, while simultaneously advancing both aesthetic and political considerations. It provides a new perspective on dance studies in Cameroon and has the potential to inspire innovative practices and experiences, challenging established values and perceptions of dance as an art form.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the experiences of Bouba Landrille Tchouda, André Takou Saa and Merlin Nyakam with regard to territory through the medium of choreography. A review of the literature revealed that the relationship between territory and dance is a complex one. This research demonstrates how the choreographers concentrate on the construction of territory, examining the relationship between territory and human adaptation to space. This qualitative interpretive investigation was based on a narrative and scoping review of dance and spatial/territorial theories, and is also informed by the perspectives of choreographers on their engagement with dance and territory.

The study illustrated how choreographers represent the embodiment of dancers and territories through physical, sensory, and historical memories. This engenders a forum for aesthetic, ethical, and political debate, encompassing the realms of life and the imagined and administered territories. Dancers utilise their bodies to create choreographic deformations and inhabit territories, whether in public spaces or theatres, in order to share their physical memories and experiences. Such choreographic works may be regarded as a call for the transformation of geographical space and its associated practices, including those pertaining to mobility. Such choreographic works are created with the intention of inhabiting territories, based on the articulated presence

between a group of dancers who occupy either public spaces or the theatre. The researcher elucidated the crisis caused by co-presence, which results in identity issues due to the different spatial and mental dimensions available (simple, shifted, and highly confused). In order to discuss this crisis in an objective manner, it is essential to restructure the various levels of territorial organisation, define the concept of living space and align it with the corresponding lived space. Such restructuring should occur at multiple scales, extending beyond the conventional definitions of these domains and intersecting with all areas of the arts.

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