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Taken from the Spirits and Given to the People: The Dance of the Panther Men in Côte d'Ivoire

Simon Larsson [1,*] and Syna Ouattara [2,3]

1   Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CRS), Department of Theology, Uppsala University, Uppsala 752 38, Sweden
2   Gothenburg Research Institute (GRI), School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg 405 30, Sweden; syna.ouattara@gu.se
3   Institut des Sciences Anthropologiques de Développement, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan 00225, Côte d'Ivoire
*   Correspondence: simon.larsson@gu.se

Abstract: The article explores the impact of tourism and commercialization on intangible cultural heritage, using the Boloye dance in Côte d'Ivoire as a case study. The dance, originally a secretive ritual performed by the Pɔrɔ society in the Sénoufo community, has transformed into a public cultural performance. The study explores how this cultural practice has been adapted to engage broader audiences without compromising its ritualistic and cultural integrity. This is carried out through fieldwork conducted in Korhogo, including participant observations, interviews with performers, and the analysis of social media content. The paper argues that the Boloye dance's resilience and continued vitality are due to its dynamic adaptation within cultural boundaries, allowing it to serve both as a community resource and a public spectacle. This is enabled through the Sénoufo flexible cultural framework, which allows for the negotiation of changes within spiritually sanctioned boundaries. The article concludes that tourism and the commercialization of cultural practices, in this case, do not compromise the authenticity of the practices or the cultural integrity of the people who perform them. The case study challenges a commonly expressed view in previous research that tourism necessarily erodes cultural authenticity, showing instead that cultural practices can evolve while retaining their significance. The paper contributes to a scholarly and public debate on the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage in the context of global tourism and economic development and change.

Keywords: sustainable heritage tourism; performing arts; African culture; intangible cultural heritage; West Africa

1. Introduction

Heritage preservation and tourism development are often considered interlinked [1]. Timothy writes that "UNESCO is the most salient worldwide brand for heritage places and is being tapped competitively by the majority of countries to help them 'brand' their heritage, so that it will receive broader international recognition and hopefully tourism" [2]. Simultaneously, tourism is recognized to have potential detrimental effects on cultural heritage and lived culture worldwide [3–6]. These potential negative outcomes caused by tourism include very concrete issues, such as damage to historical sites and visitors' disruptions of traditional rituals. An influx of visitors can also contribute to the commercialization of cultural practices, diluting their authenticity and contributing to them losing their original significance to the performers and people listening or participating in these practices. The existing research literature provides us with several examples of such cases from throughout the world [3,5,6]. Tourism has, in fact, been described as a "plague", destroying "people, culture, heritage, [and] environment" [7].

Promoting tourism despite these possible detrimental effects on cultural heritage is sometimes motivated by the fact that it can stimulate local economies through an influx of visitors and create business opportunities and jobs [3,8,9]. Balancing these effects requires careful planning and sustainable practices to ensure cultural heritage is both preserved and respected [10]. This relationship between tourism and cultural heritage preservation is not only seen as a trade-off where the promotion of either one negatively impacts the other. An interest in local customs among visitors is also understood to potentially foster a sense of pride and an ethos of preserving cultural sites and traditions [11]. Tourism, it is argued, can also promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, enhancing global awareness of diverse cultures [12].

This article discusses how tourism and commercialization influence intangible culture exemplified by a ritual performance in Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. The paper studies and discusses how the Boloye dance (or the dance of the panther men) has been transformed from a closed community practice to a widely recognized cultural art form performed in spaces outside its indigenous confines, such as theaters, festivals, and public events. It shows how this is performed without compromising the cultural integrity and the locally situated meaning of the intangible cultural heritage and argues that this wider spread of dance has, in fact, revitalized the dance as a cultural practice. On a more generic level, it demonstrates that cultural expressions need not be static to continue to serve a vital function for societies. Or as the British–Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has it: "[c]ultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead" [13].

This paper contributes to the scholarly debate on the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage preservation by inquiring into the contemporary practice of the dance of the panther men. It provides an example of how intangible heritage can be used as a community resource without compromising the integrity of cultural practices. It shows how this is facilitated by a differentiation of the sacred and the profane aspects of the ritual. It demonstrates that the long-established tradition of negotiating cultural expression in the community consulting the spiritual realm through divination creates a possibility of changing cultural practices without compromising the fundamental community beliefs and intellectual traditions. Also, the paper shows how the mythology of the Boloye dance provides intellectual and discursive recourses [14] to facilitate these changes through negotiations. On a more general level, the paper also contributes to a scholarly debate on the social, political, and spatial implications of theater and performances [15].

The paper proceeds by providing an overview of the scholarly debate on tourism and cultural heritage that will further position this paper in an ongoing intellectual debate on tourism and cultural heritage. After that, a description of this ritual practice's place and cultural context is provided, including a description of the Pɔrɔ society of which the Boloye dance is a part. The paper goes on to describe the performance in question as observed by the authors of this paper and described by the performers. After that, additional voice is given to the performers to describe the origin story of the dance and its cultural use and significance. The section that follows discusses the process of making the performance available to the public and how this is carried out and negotiated in the context of the performance. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of this case study on the debate on tourism and its relation to cultural heritage.

2. Materials and Methods

The article is based on fieldwork and the observation of the dance performance of the Boloye dance in the village of Waraniéné, located 4 km southwest of Korhogo, in June and July 2024, including interviews with the performers. As will be discussed in depth in the paper, this particular dance is only performed by a limited number of Fodonon villages (Fodonon is a subgroup of the Sénoufo people). The people interviewed for this paper were all part of one of the prominent performing groups of the Boloye dance,

where all the participants were initiated into a secret society. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to cluster the information relevant to the argument of this paper. Given that the performance is exclusive to a relatively small group of people who emphasize continuity and tradition in the performance, we expected a significant degree of homogeneity among the performers, which was also reflected in the interviews. If not stated otherwise, all information in the result section comes from the authors' interviews with performers and musicians conducted by the authors in Côte d'Ivoire between June and July 2024; some additional information has been obtained through WhatsApp correspondence with the informants originally interviewed.

Interviews have also been conducted with other members of Pɔrɔ societies in the region to comprehend the cultural significance of dance in the secret societies and to gain comparative knowledge of other rituals. In addition, the paper analyzes publicly available Ivoirian Facebook groups, where images of this particular dance are posted by the general public in Côte d'Ivoire. The study selected the five most significant Ivorian Facebook groups (based on the number of members) that were accessible using the search function. The authors searched through all the posts made during the last five years, adding up to some 2000 posts, identifying the posts that depicted or described the Boloye dance. These posts and the associated comments are used both to provide evidence for the popularity of the dance and to convey the public sentiment towards these performances.

The questions guiding the interviews and the inquiry more generally have been concerned with the dance's history and cultural significance when performed privately in rituals and publicly as entertainment. A particular focus has been on the transformation of the practice when it is transferred from being performed exclusively in a sacred domain to being performed also in the public sphere and its consequences for the cultural practice in question. The Boloye dance is analyzed in relation to the broader cultural practices of which it is a part, in particular the Pɔrɔ societies of Côte d'Ivoire. The knowledge of the Pɔrɔ society and of Ivorian culture is informed by the conducted interviews of the 2024 fieldwork and the extensive previous studies in the region by the paper's second author [16–18]. The paper's second author is fluent in all the relevant local languages and has been initiated into a Pɔrɔ society as a part of the research for his doctoral thesis.

3. The Scholarly Debate on Tourism, Sustainability, and Cultural Heritage

The previous research literature has studied and discussed the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism. Timothy [19] argues that "heritage tourism is one of the most salient forms of tourism today" He writes that "between 50 and 80 percent of all domestic and international travel involves some element of culture such as visiting museums and historical sites, enjoying music and arts, or being immersed in the living culture of a destination" [19]. In much of this research literature, heritage is seen as a resource for attracting tourists. The research literature discusses how the built environment and other forms of culture can be utilized to promote tourism and also how the "heritagization of non-traditional heritage spaces" can serve a similar purpose [19]. Timothy recognizes that tourists are becoming increasingly demanding in terms of cultural experience and authenticity. Aligned with this trend, cultural heritage is frequently used in place branding [20,21]. Inspired by the work of Richards [22], we have a broad understanding of cultural tourism, encompassing traveling that is motivated by learning about other cultural traits which could include artistic expressions or distinct ways of living and thinking.

We will now be taking a step back from discussing research on the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism to discuss the social science research literature on tourism more broadly. It is not an exaggeration to say that tourism is a considerable research topic in social science. A search on Scopus with the search string "tourism" in the title, abstract, or keywords returned some 170 thousand hits by the end of October 2024. In much of this research, tourism is considered a crucial economic resource, especially in developing regions around the globe. A survey article from 1998 [9] summarizing previous studies recognized tourism as an essential economic resource in the developing world in the face

of declining terms of trade for agricultural products and high levels of protection against manufactured goods.

This review article argues that previous studies show that tourism contributes to economic development by providing foreign currency, generating income, and creating employment opportunities. This perspective is aligned with other articles showing that economic benefits for local communities from tourism include revenue and employment opportunities and that the influx of tourists often leads to the development of infrastructure, such as roads, airports, and hotels, which can improve the quality of life for residents. Sinclair recognizes that developing countries generally make this analysis and increasingly invest in tourism infrastructure, like airports and hotels, driven by the growing demand for international tourism [9]. Sinclair's article also recognizes the potential inflationary effects of tourism as well as the challenges to optimizing returns from tourism in developing countries. This means that inflation and increased prices can make goods and services inaccessible to parts of the local community. The article also briefly mentions the potential negative environmental impact of tourism.

Now, some 25 years after Sinclair's article, the relationship between tourism and economic development remains a prominent topic in the research literature [8,23–27]. Studies conducted in specific locations or regions generally argue for a significant correlation between the variable of economic growth and tourist development. Hafidh and Rashid [24], for example, say that in the case of Zanzibar, they can identify a significant positive correlation between tourist arrivals and economic development on the Tanzanian island. Meta-studies, however, call for caution in interpreting results and demonstrate that while such correlations generally can be identified, they are sensitive to the interaction of other variables [25].

While the relationship between economic development and tourism remains a salient topic in the research literature, an increasing number of studies point toward tourism's adverse ecological, social, and cultural effects. The research emphasis on the detrimental effects of tourism goes hand in hand with the contemporary political development where local inhabitants in several popular tourist destinations oppose the presence of tourists for its impact on the local community. Such perceived adverse effects include increased property prices, the overuse of local resources, and tourist behavior considered inappropriate in the context. Both scholars and public intellectuals have drawn attention to the possible perverted desires related to traveling, such as interest in sites of catastrophes, other people's suffering, and otherization [28–30].

The harmful effects of tourism on the environment are well documented in the research literature. According to Lenzen et al. [31], tourism accounts for approximately 8% of the global greenhouse gas emissions. In addition to contributing to global warming through the release of greenhouse gasses, tourism also exacerbates other environmental issues. Many of these environmental issues are local and a result of the construction of hotels, marinas, airports, and other tourist facilities. Gazta writes that the "pressures from tourism activities on biological resources and their diversity are enormous and includes: erosion and pollution from the construction of hiking trails, bridges in high mountains, camp sites, chalet and hotels" [32]. In addition to this, local consumption by tourists can contribute considerably to the overuse of agricultural land and water. These detrimental environmental impacts are considered problematic in themselves, but it is also recognized that the environmental impact is associated with a risk that "tourism development [. . .] gradually destroy environmental resources on which it depends" [32].

Tourism's environmental impact is interlinked with its social and cultural impact. Local environmental degradation can have a severe negative effect on local societies and cultural practices, including non-tangible cultural heritage. Local environmental impact might influence the ability to perform rituals, for example, through the loss of culturally important species of plants and animals. Environmental change and overexploitation might also affect sacred forests and other sights of large cultural significance. Tourism might also have a considerable impact on culture in ways that are not directly related to environmental

impact. A large influx of people might disrupt the ability to perform rituals or to practice services in mosques and churches [33,34], or they might destroy or alter artifacts of cultural importance. Tourist behavior might also be regarded as sacrilegious or blasphemous to religious practitioners. Further cultural elements can be commercialized to appeal to tourists, transforming sacred rituals, traditional crafts, or historical sites into mere products or spectacles and thus secularizing sacred spaces [35]. This often strips these elements of their original meaning and significance [35]. Tourism can, furthermore, perpetuate stereotypes about other people and cultures, where diverse and dynamic cultures are reduced to simplistic, often inaccurate, representations [36].

Gatza argues that "tourism has the potential to create beneficial effects on the environment by contributing to environmental protection and conservation. It is a way to raise awareness of environmental values, and it can serve as a tool to finance the protection of natural areas and increase their economic importance" [32]. As such, she recognizes the possibility for economic resources to be used in environmental protection and conservation and that it might increase the incentives for such efforts because of their value in increasing the attractiveness of these areas. It is also sometimes argued that tourism encourages the revitalization of cultural traditions and crafts as local artisans and performers find new audiences for their work. This can foster a renewed sense of pride and identity within the community as traditional practices are maintained and celebrated [19]. Timothy [19] argues that the financial benefits can be directed toward the conservation and restoration of historical sites, ensuring their preservation for future generations. He writes that "heritage stewards, including museum managers and archaeologists, realize that tourism provides an increasingly important justification for their discovery and conservation endeavours" [19]. This, however, is obviously not always the case. While cultural heritage might contribute to incomes, these revenues might not be spent on conservation efforts. It is not uncommon for politicians and civil servants to see tourist attractions and cultural heritage as an income for the government rather than seeing the resources from tourism as a resource for heritage preservation [37].

Moving beyond tourism studies, cultural performances have also been studied in relation to their ability to promote sustainability. A prominent publication along this line is the book *Performing Sustainability in West Africa: Cultural Practices and Policies for Sustainable Development* [37]. The chapters of the edited volume argue from various case studies that cultural performances contribute to social cohesion and peacebuilding; "social and economic development"; "national solidarity"; preservation and conservation; economic development, peace, and effective communication; "significant changes in the lives of the affected people"; "non-violence"; "inclusion of discriminated groups"; "positive change"; "social change"; trauma management; and "financial literacy". As such, performances are recognized to have a role beyond entertainment and might serve important roles in society, while also potentially fostering exclusive tribalism and national chauvinism [38]. Aligned with this expansive view of the role of performance in society, Tetteh recognizes the "role of dance as a fundamental component of [African] society through which the evocation and invocation of cosmic entities translate into a spontaneous expression of a communal identity and shared experiences." [...] "dancer is not merely a performer, but rather the centre of the community's life, embodying and expressing their collective emotions and beliefs" [39]. As such, Tetteh argues that dance performance in some African contexts is not only an art form but integrated into everyday life and experiences—which is a perspective that this paper subscribes to.

4. Results

4.1. Setting the Scene

The village of Waraniéné is located 4 km southwest of Korhogo in the very north of Côte d'Ivoire. Driving from Abidjan, located at the coast, to Korhogo in the north, the tropical rain forest gradually changes into a savannah landscape (Figure 1). While being a part of Sub-Saharan Africa, the influence of northern Africa is clearly visible in the

region, through the music, the culture, and the occasional sandstorm that colors the sky brown and makes the air unbreathable. The influence of the north is also visible through Jihadist attacks from Boko Haram operating from Mali [40]. While these attacks are now less frequent, European governments and international organizations strongly discourage approaching the Malian border (especially the Comoé National Park) because of the high risk of kidnapping.

Figure 1. Map of Côte d'Ivoire (Source Google Maps).

The most prominent ethnic group of the region is the Sénoufo (the group does not refer to themselves by the French word Sénoufo but as *Senag* (singular) *Senₐbele* (plural)). The spoken language is primarily Sénoufo. French and Dioula/Jula are also widely spoken and frequently mixed with Sénoufo. According to legend, the town of Korhogo was founded by a Sénoufo chief in the 14th century, and it is still considered to be the capital of the Sénoufo people. The Sénoufo inhabit a broad region spanning several countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Ghana. The Sénoufo are divided into several subgroups, each with distinct cultural, linguistic, and geographical characteristics. Some of the main Sénoufo subgroups include Cebaara, Djimini, Fodonon, Kafibélé, Karaboro, Kpalaga, Minyanka, Nafana, Niarafole, and Tagbana. Sénoufo society is primarily dominated by farming, with the cultivation of cereals (maize, millet, and rice) and yams, as well as cash crops like peanuts, cotton, and cashews; they also raise livestock. A smaller segment of the population is engaged in various artisanal professions, including blacksmithing, metal founding, shoemaking, and wood sculpting [17]. The Fodonon (which is the subgroup that performs the Boloye) is one of the largest Sénoufo ethnolinguistic groups and primarily consists of farmers. They inhabit the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire and southern Mali. Like the other Sénoufo subgroups, the Fodonon have their own distinct cultural practices, linguistic variations, and social structures while sharing broader cultural and linguistic traits with the other Sénoufo groups.

The Pɔrɔ secret societies play a prominent role in the local community and in local politics. The concept of pɔrɔ does not have the exact same meaning among all Senufo. However, the term pɔrɔ designates something that cannot be discovered without initiation. Becoming a member of the Pɔrɔ society carries significant responsibilities. Initiates must follow its rules, uphold traditions, and serve as moral examples. They also pass on pɔrɔ knowledge, preserving Sénoufo cultural and spiritual practices for future generations. The initiation often takes place within a brotherhood and in a sacred grove [17]. Most of these brotherhoods are also often considered *associations of masks*, as they all possess musical instruments and masks. Each Pɔrɔ society is locally anchored and is associated with a particular set of traditions, masks, and dances. The appearances of the various local Pɔrɔ societies differ from one another [17]. However, being initiated into a local Pɔrɔ society in one village gives you respect outside your village of origin and access to the sacred groves of other villages as well. Becoming a member of the Pɔrɔ society requires apprenticeship

and initiation, but it is not necessarily based on ethnic origin. In an interview, a local businessman who had relocated to the Korhogo region told us that it was very difficult to get into the community without being initiated into the society [41]. Therefore, he had chosen to be initiated into the society as an adult. Rather than being marginalized by modernization, technology, and integration processes in a global capitalist economy, the Pɔrɔ remains a strong influence in many domains in the local societies.

Both Christianity and Islam have made a considerable impact in the region. Many mosques and churches are integrated with the cityscape. When it comes to the religious and ritual landscape, beliefs that can be described as traditional African continue to play a significant role—although changing and hybridizing with global influences and internal dynamics. Various individuals and families are the protectors of powerful fetishes (i.e., amulets) which are given sacrifices for protection and good fortune. Each town and village has an associated sacred grove (*Sinzanga*), and it is a place of prohibition for anyone who has not been initiated into a Pɔrɔ society. These groves have a strong cultural and spiritual significance, and secret rituals and sacrifices take place there. Furthermore, the sacred groves are crucial to the cultural heritage, acting as hubs for social and cultural continuity among the Sénoufo. As we will see, the performance of the Boloye dance cannot be separated from the cultural context, the Pɔrɔ societies, and the sacred groves of the region.

4.2. The Performance

As part of researching this paper, the two authors attended a performance of the Boloye dance (depicted in Figures 2–5). It was performed outdoors on the outskirts of Korhogo. Before the performance begins, the musicians who are going to play the boloye take a seat on a row of plastic chairs (Figure 2). The musicians are all dressed in matching costumes and hats designed for their public performances. The bolon is an instrument fashioned out of large calabashes using a single string, producing a melodic sound. The name of the instrument is "bolon" (singular), or "boloye" (plural) among the Sénoufo. As such, the name of the dance refers to these instruments made out of large calabashes with one string. In the description of the ritual, the word cora or kora is often used to describe the instrument; however, the cora has several strings while the bolon only has one.

A percussionist stands in front of the men seated in the plastic chairs, dressed in the same costume (Figure 2). This percussionist plays the shekere, which is a type of maraca made from a calabash covered by a net. The musicians start playing in a relatively slow 4/4 beat, gradually increasing the tempo of the music. A rather monotone singing by the musicians accompanies the boloye and shekere players. As the music starts, the children and women from the nearby houses begin dancing in front of the musicians. When the music intensifies, masked dancers appear from behind a building. The children and women dancing in front of the musicians are asked to move back to give room to the dancers.

A group of five dancers comes out from behind the house and takes a seat on the ground beside the musicians. Before taking their seats, the dancers kneel before the musicians, who are their elders in the secret Pɔrɔ society to which they all belong. Four of them are dressed in leopard-patterned costumes, wearing brown and black costumes with the spots of a leopard and masks with holes cut into them so the dancers can see. One of the dancers is dressed differently from the others. Instead of wearing the cotton cloth colored in leopard spots, this dancer is dressed in a black crocheted costume with red-dyed sisal fiber on the head, neck, hands, and feet (see Figure 4). In interviews with the performers, we were told that the leopard-patterned costumes are made by traditional cloth makers who weave cloth out of locally produced cotton. When purchased, the costumes are dyed and painted to be customized for each dancer.

After taking their seat, the Boloye dancers take turns to step forward to perform their dance. The masked dancers perform their dances one by one. Before starting the performance, the masked dancer again kneels before the dancers as a way for the younger dancers to show respect to the elders and ask them permission to perform. After this, the dancer starts his performance of a highly energetic, gymnastic set of maneuvers including

somersaults and high jumps to the rhythm of the music and song of the elders (Figure 5). The rhythm and the melody of the music changes slightly with each dancer. As the music and singing are related to each individual dancer, two Boloye dancers never perform at the same time but take turns in their performance. The songs' words are in an old dialect of Sénoufo. They retell the origin story of the Boloye dance. In the lyrics, they give thanks to the first man to discover the dance when it was performed by the spirits and the subsequent people who have been crucial historically in developing and performing this art form.

Figure 2. Musicians of the Pɔrɔ society. Photo: Simon Larsson.

Figure 3. The Boloye dancers waiting to perform. Photo: Simon Larsson.

Figure 4. One of the Boloye dancers is dressed differently. Photo: Simon Larsson.

Figure 5. The dance of the leopard man performed in Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire. Photo: Simon Larsson.

4.3. The Dance of the Panther Men in the Context of Myth and Ritual

So, what is this dance described above? The name of the dance is "Le Boloye" or "la danse des hommes panthers," which is the French name of the dance, translating to the *dance of the panther men* in English. This name, however, has not been made by the performers of the dance and is not used in the local context. The dance is performed by the Fodonon, who is a subgroup of the Sénoufo people. When asked about the origin of the dance, we were told by the performers that the first human who performed the dance was a farmer named Siélé. One day, this farmer went to visit his fields. Walking through the forest, he heard sounds of music and dancing from a distance. He walked in the direction of the sound and noticed that the *tugubele* (forest spirits) were playing music and dancing. He hid in the bushes to watch this marvelous dance. Although being very careful, he is eventually spotted by the spirits. Upon seeing him, the *tugubele* fled and left their instruments behind. Siélé picked up the instruments belonging to the spirits and returned with them to his village.

Returning from the forest, Siélé soon started a society to educate its members on the music and dance performances that he had learned from observing the spirits. This man gained an excellent reputation in the village because so few people had actually seen the spirits of the forest, although they are widely understood to exist. He recreated the melodies, the lyrics of the songs, the dance moves, and the design of the masks from his memory. In addition to using his memory, divination was used to consult the spiritual realm about details of the performance in order to make it resemble the performance by the spirits to the greatest extent possible. Initially, this dance was performed only by one village. The society in this village was soon approached by neighboring Fodonon villages,

who asked for permission to learn and perform the same dance. This was granted, and from that moment on, a few villages continued to perform the dance of the panther men, or the Boloye, which is the local name for the dance. These Fodonon villages are still the only ones that perform this music and dance. In the interview, we were told that all the musicians and dancers must be initiated into the Pɔrɔ society to be allowed to perform. The criterion for performing is, therefore, to belong to the Fodonon tribal community and to be initiated into the Pɔrɔ society. The families of these villages decide which individuals are trained to participate in the music and dance performances.

The interviewees told us that the Boloye is performed at the funerals of members of the Pɔrɔ society. As such, it is a funeral dance staged to celebrate the deceased's attainment of ancestor status. The performance at these funerals will be adjusted to honor the deceased society member with lyrics that honor the deceased member's name and deeds. Traditionally, the dance was exclusively performed in ritual contexts that were inaccessible to anyone who had not been initiated into the secret society. The exclusiveness of the Boloye dance in Côte d'Ivoire serves to protect and preserve cultural traditions, maintain spiritual sanctity, enforce social cohesion, and control the dissemination of sacred knowledge. The dance is still performed in a ritual context that is inaccessible to outsiders, but as shown, it is now also performed to a broader audience (how public performances differ from traditional performances will be discussed in the following section).

In the interview, the performers pointed out the cultural and ritual significance of the bolon instruments. The first phase of constructing the bolon is to make the handle (Figure 6). This handle is made by local blacksmiths using methods that pre-date the colonial era. As seen in Figure 6, the string is tied to the stick below the iron handle. The other end of the string is tied to a figurine attached to the goat skin covering the gourd (Figure 7). A local artist makes this figurine, and it depicts one of the spirits that initially performed the dance. The oldest bolon used at the performance is understood to be one of the original instruments obtained by the spirits. This bolon instrument is a fetish (i.e., a *katching* that requires regular sacrifices to offer protection). The *kaching* (sing.) is a *yasunga*, a 'material object charged with energy that is worshipped'. In other words, the *kaching* can be described as a fetish in Western terminology [17]. After a performance at a funeral, they must sacrifice a chicken to the fetish. This is visible through the chicken feathers attached to the gourd.

According to the interviewees, the entire Boloye performance, i.e., the musical performance, the dance, the singing, and the costumes, is an attempt to recreate the spirits' performance initially observed in the forest. Questions about the symbolic meaning of the various components of the dance are, therefore, not easily obtained through the interviews as the objective of the dance is to recreate it just as it was observed. Also, while the performance itself has a mythical origin, the performance does not in any straightforward way enact the narrative of a myth, precisely for the same reason—namely that the performance is an attempt to recreate the dance as it was performed by the spirits. This also shows that rituals are not always a re-enaction of a myth as is sometimes suggested by the textbook in cultural anthropology and religion studies [42]. This is not to say that the performance lacks meaning; quite to the contrary, the Boloye holds significant cultural and spiritual meaning within the community, creating social cohesion by linking the past to the present. This is something it shares with many dances of African origins [43]. Tetteh [39] demonstrates that the Zaouli dance of the Gouro communities in the Bouaflé department of Côte d'Ivoire has a similar origin story. In this case, a spirit named Zaouli took possession of a woman and performed a dance through her. The observers of her dance were astonished and inspired and understood the performance to be a tangible manifestation of the spirit world that could bring good fortune to the community [39].

Figure 6. The handle of the bolon is made by local blacksmiths. Photo: Simon Larsson.

Figure 7. The figurine attached to the bolon is a representation of the spirits first performing the dance. Photo: Simon Larsson.

4.4. Adaptation

Although the Boloye dance was traditionally performed only at the funerals of people who had been members of the Pɔrɔ society, it is now performed at various functions,

parties, and hotels to entertain tourists. Images and video clips of the performance are also frequently posted and shared on social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. The dance is highly regarded in the region and the masked dancers are depicted on artwork across Korhogo city and tourist leaflets in hotel lobbies. A brief overview of the Facebook groups that are committed to sharing posts from Côte d'Ivoire and Sénoufo culture tells us that the *dance of the panther men* is very popular. Images of the musicians and dancers are regularly shared in all these groups. The widespread use of social media platforms might also have contributed to popularizing the dance further. The shared images show performances at hotels, weddings, and other functions. The comment sections of these posts express admiration and ethnic pride in association with these posts. Posts of public performances of the Boloye dance receive comments such as "Never ask a Sénoufo to abandon his tradition". The Boloye dance is also used in Facebook posts promoting tourism to the region. As such, the dance has reached far beyond the confines of community celebrations, extending into spaces such as theaters, festivals, and other public events, as well as promoting tourism.

But how come a performance previously prohibited for the public to attend has become such a popular attraction for Ivorians and foreign visitors alike? We were told in the interviews that the Fodonon community realized that this dance could become popular with a wider audience. The introduction of the dance to the public was also promoted in the 1990s by the Ivorian Minister of Infrastructure, Transportation, and Tourism named Adama Coulibaly who was born in the Korhogo region. The process of bringing the performance to the public was not straightforward. The decision to share part of the performance with a wider audience had to be discussed and negotiated in the community, and the spirits needed to be consulted through divination. Eventually, the elders of the Pɔrɔ society agreed to allow the dance to be performed outside the sacred groves where it is traditionally performed. Not all sacred dances of the Pɔrɔ society have been made public in this way; during the field study, we also attended a pɔrɔ funeral where we were not allowed to stay to watch the dance because the first author was not initiated into the Pɔrɔ society. While it needed to be negotiated, the decision to perform the Boloye in public is widely accepted in the community.

That said, public performances cannot be conducted in any fashion. The Pɔrɔ society must discuss matters regarding the dance. In most matters, the spirits must also be consulted through divination. Although performed outside the traditional ritual context, the musicians and dancers must still be Fodonon initiated into the Pɔrɔ society. Also, only a part of the dance and music is performed in public, while much of the performance is reserved for its traditional ritual context. In the public performance, it is also not necessary to sacrifice a chicken to the fetish calabash—which is another adaptation to these new circumstances. Asking if the public performance has any ritual or religious significance to the performers, they reply that any performance with a ritual purpose must take place in the sacred groves. "The things concerned with the Pɔrɔ society stay in the sacred grove." The public performances are, thus, only for entertainment purposes. These performances, however, bring an income that among other things can be used to buy costumes and other equipment needed for the performance. This is especially important since they receive little or no support from the contemporary national government.

The way the ritual has been adapted needs to be situated in the regional cultural context and related to other characteristics of the Pɔrɔ societies and Sénoufo epistemology. The transformation and changes that we see in the Boloye dance are symptomatic of many ritual practices and prohibitions among the Sénoufo. While there are many taboos and prohibitions related to ritual practices, exceptions can be made to these prohibitions if this is negotiated with the spirits and adequate sacrifices are made.

We have observed other such cases in the region during fieldwork and in previous studies. For example, although there is a strict prohibition against entering the sacred groves for any person not initiated into the Pɔrɔ society, an outsider might be allowed in under certain circumstances. Such exceptions must be discussed by the elders of the society

and through communication with the spirits. Generally, the transgression of prohibitions must be compensated with sacrifices to the spirits. Such sacrifices might include the killing of a chicken or sheep or the pouring of an amount of traditional alcohol on the ground. Another similar example observed by the second author of this paper is a local tribal prohibition against cultivating onion that had been lifted after negotiations with the spirits. Various taboos shape the Senufo people's daily lives and cultural practices. For example, certain animals and foods are forbidden for particular individuals to consume, often determined by their kinship affiliation, social status, gender, or specific spiritual beliefs. Such restrictions demonstrate a profound respect for both the physical and spiritual realms. The possibility to negotiate these taboo restrictions during certain circumstances (as in the example with the lifted prohibition against cultivating onion) enables a dynamic in cultural expressions while still being culturally acceptable. Changes in cultural expressions are, therefore, not inherently disruptive to local beliefs and epistemology. In the case of the Boloye performance, the mythic origin of the dance also allows for negotiations about how it should be performed; this will be discussed more in the final discussion section.

5. Discussion

A common view in previous research discussions on tourism and cultural heritage is that tourism can have negative effects on living culture and cultural heritage [39]. The argument is that traditions might be exploited and watered down and lose their locally anchored cultural significance when they become a commodity for tourism promotion, when "[p]erformances that were once deeply rooted in community celebrations [...] become staged spectacles primarily catering to external audiences" [39], as Tetteh expresses it. In the case of the Boloye dance, the performers do not perceive a conflict between commercializing cultural heritage and preservation. The increasing popularity of the dance among the general public appears to have revitalized the Boloye as a cultural practice. This raises the question of what sets this case apart and what factors might explain why commercialization has not had a negative impact on the ritual as a cultural practice.

One significant reason is that the dance is still practiced in the ritual context from which it originates, which is inaccessible to outsiders. The public performances do not necessarily influence the way it is practiced within its communal and ritual context. As such, cultural integrity is upheld, although the ritual in parts is shared with outsiders. Therefore, the dance can maintain its meaning and internal situated dynamics of continuity and change. To put it in scholarly terminology, making the dance available to a broader audience does not turn the performance into a mere commodity that can freely be exchanged for money detached from its cultural context (as Marcel Mauss describes the capitalist exchange, Mauss [44]). The way the Boloye today is performed in exchange for money does, in fact, have similarities to how Mauss describes pre-capitalist modern exchanges. Mauss talks about the *hau* (the force binding the receiver and giver) of objects in pre-modern societies to contrast pre-modern forms of exchange to capitalist exchange. According to Mauss, the hau of goods meant that they could not just be exchanged for money or other goods as they were too firmly separated from the sphere of what was considered exchangeable. The examples Mauss uses to exemplify this are not cases where objects under no circumstances could change hands, but cases where exchanges need to be negotiated; for example, he refers to the ancient Roman tradition of flogging a family horse before it could be sold [44]. This description fits rather well with the way the Boyole dance has been commodified. That is, it has been made into an object of exchange in the regard that it can be performed for an exchange of goods or money, but under strict regulations. The way the ritual is commodified needs to be negotiated with the spirits and in the community.

Another important reason is the basic Sénoufo understanding, i.e., that cultural phenomena such as a ritual or a prohibition can be changed through negotiation with the spiritual realm provides a capacity to adjust cultural expressions without compromising the fundamental worldview or the cultural integrity of the people. Furthermore, we argue that the origin story of the Boloye and the way it is interpreted opens it to continuous changes

that do not compromise the cultural integrity of the intangible cultural heritage. The origin story of the farmer who initially spotted the spirits performing the dance is associated with an imperative to try to maintain the way the dance was originally performed by the spirits. That is, authenticity is strongly emphasized and there is an expressed desire to perform the dance and music in the exact same way as it was performed by the spirits observed by their ancestor. However, the use of divination to *remember* how the dance was originally performed means that the performance continually changes while maintaining the claim to authenticity, i.e., a claim to perform it exactly as did the spirits. As such, the Boloye origin narrative constitutes what literary scholar Hofmeyr refers to as an *intellectual resource* [14]. That is, it serves as a discursive enabler (i.e., a way of imagining and explaining a certain way of doing things) of changes in cultural practices without compromising their authenticity. Although continuously changing, it enables the practitioners to claim its authenticity, i.e., an attempt to be more like the dance as it was originally performed by the spirits.

To summarize the argument, the reasons for the ritual's resilience (the ability to change and still retain its vitality) in the face of the commercialization, digitalization, and globalization are the following: (i) the ritual remains protected by certain local traditional regulations about how and by whom it can be performed (i.e., it can change but within boundaries that are set by the community); (ii) the dance is still performed in its original cultural context that is inaccessible to outsiders, which means that part of the dance is not exposed to outsider and can have its internal development and dynamics; (iii) a tradition of accepting and negotiating changes in cultural expressions through negotiations and consultancy with the spirits means that changes are not necessary disruptive to the culture; (iv) the ritual's origin story allows for alteration and changes without compromising the claims to authenticity; and (v) the popularity of the performance gives status and a sense of pride to the individual performers and encourages young people to do the initiation rites into the secret Pɔrɔ societies.

When performed at public functions and shared on social media, the dance necessarily changes, but to once again refer to Kwame Anthony Appiah, this does not have to be a sign of the disintegration of culture, because "[c]ultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead" [13].

6. Conclusions

The paper has described the Boloye dance performance in contemporary Korhogo in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The study has contributed an ethnographically grounded description of the cultural practice in question through participant observations and interviews with the performers. Although mentioned in the previous research literature [45,46], the Boloye dance and the surrounding cultural practices have not been described in the previous research literature, and online accounts of the dance stemming from blog posts and other web pages are mostly faulty. As such, this article contributes to the research literature by describing and analyzing the Boloye as a cultural practice. The main purpose of this paper, however, has been to study and analyze the transformation of the ritual when it started to be performed outside the confined spaces of the sacred groves and made available to a bigger audience and marketed for tourism and entertainment. As the paper has shown, the traditional practice of the Boloye dance has undergone significant transformations as the dance has extended far beyond community rituals to contemporary performance spaces like theaters, festivals, and public events. The title "Taken from the spirits and given to the people" refers to both the mythology of how the dance was initially obtained from the realm of the spirits and how it has been made available to the public [47]. While several previous studies from other geographical locations have pointed to tourism's potential erosion of cultural authenticity and the challenges it poses to the long-term sustainability of any tradition, this case study provided an example of commercialization without a superficial representation of culture where the profound significance and context of traditions are lost. Rather, it provides a case study of a cultural practice that has remained vital

although being made available to a wider audience. It has demonstrated how this resilience is situated in local cultural practices and the possibility to negotiate change without losing cultural significance. This is not meant to offer a template that can be used in all cases as some of these success factors might be very difficult to establish in any tourist destination. However, it does provide some general insights into how to balance tradition and change in tourist promotion.

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