

Adrienne Cohen, *Infinite Repertoire: On Dance and Urban Possibility in Postsocialist Guinea* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021). Pp. 190

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Over the years, many historians have examined the history of Guinea through colonial and ideological lenses, exploring the complexities of the end of French rule during the Cold War, and the roles played by emergent African nationalists, students, market women, artisans, and youth in the decolonization and independence struggle in Guinea. In doing so, a particular character has appeared consistently in the works written about the topic—Sekou Touré, a foremost African nationalist who led Guinea to independence and would become its first republican president. One of such works is Elizabeth Schmidts’s *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1968*, which dispels the conventional narrative that places Touré at the center of Guinea decolonization and instead contends that ordinary peoples’ influence pressure-cooked and reinforced Toure’s decolonial struggles. However, Adrienne Cohen’s book, *Infinite Repertoire: On Dance and Urban Possibility in Postsocialist Guinea*, is a departure from the recurrent scholarship on Guinea. It is an anthropological intervention on the state and art in Guinea that is rooted in ethnography and pictorial illustrations of dance. It enriches our understanding of aesthetics, socialism, neoliberalism, and urbanity in post-socialist Guinea. Beyond dance being a recreational art and political tool in Conakry, Cohen engages with the ways first republican Guinea under its first president, Sekou Touré, nationalized the art as statecraft through which state visions were propagated. In other words, the ballet (a dance troupe), as Cohen put it, was a symbol of Guinean independence through which the state disseminated pan-African ideals across the Atlantic. To this extent, the socialist regime in Guinea, through the instrumentality of the state, invested in and prioritized the ballet not only to promote Pan-Africanism and mobilize the people for nation-building but also for the dance genre to act as a form of empowerment and industry for the youth and revenue source for the state.

Central to the several themes explored in the book is the politics of memory and meaning. The author meticulously explores how the profound memory of the socialist republic’s commitment

to art is animated in the *djembe*-playing statue erected at the Conakry international airport, even though artists and different generations of Guineans have made sense of it differently. The statue evokes the memory of authoritarianism of the Touré's regime that later superintended over a state with rising "extraordinary repression and extrajudicial punishment" that saw many Guineans into exile abroad. In comparison with the postsocialist years, others interpreted it as the golden era where artists made fortune and decent living through the power of talent—dance, and state commitment, unlike the postsocialist regime where the state no longer officially prioritized ballet, and the genre of dance was left to private individuals and investors interested in the art.

Cohen's overall argument is that the differentials in the state's commitment toward ballet in Conakry during and after socialism do not suggest developmental failure. Instead, Conakry must be seen as a center where creativity (dance) was a form of power through which the people negotiated the state with the body as a consequential element of metaphysical, political, and social power. The nuance of the argument lies in the interpretation of dance as an adaptive element of urbanity through which the youth dancers in several ballets assert their agency through the boycott of events and programs to contest poor wages and emolument. This is because the postsocialist ballets casualized the services of young dancers and magnified older dancers who were deemed more ethical and skillful, neglecting how the younger practitioners preserve the values upheld by the socialist generation.

The book is divided into two parts with three chapters in each. They could have been more sequential as standalone chapters rather than grouped into parts. The first part addresses the various ways in which dance groups organized themselves amidst state abandonment and infrastructural decay. Here, Cohen engages the roles of private ballet directors whose roles included frequent training of dancers and apprentices in their ballets. Ballet directors also liaised and facilitated contracts with private companies to organize events where both young and old dancers displayed their skills and entertained the public. One of such events is the "Merveilles Festival of Peace and Dialogue," where politicians, artists, everyday Guineans, and nationals from elsewhere interacted. Ballet directors took advantage of such events to rekindle the pre-capitalist day's relationship between the

ballets and the state. The festival also presented politicians, such as Conde, the opportunity to sell their aspirations and programs to the people and mobilize support, while evoking the memory of socialist Guinea and its many commitments towards the ballet—an idea that suggests continuity of the socialist era.

Evidence provided as an illustration is Conde's regime's reinstatement of the socialist era festival popularly known as "Quinzaine Artistique" (p. 60). While its organization and goals were unclear due to a lack of national art infrastructure and poor incentives, unlike in socialist Guinea, the festival, however, presented artists with the opportunity to perform and display their skills and maintain access to the state. The first part of the book also explores the nexus between ballet's pedagogy and patriarchy in ways that explain how directors of private ballets monopolize and hoard knowledge, imposed fines and abuse artists within their ballets, and police women's bodies. It is to this extent, Cohen contends, that while the socialist state depended on creative freedom in ballet, post-socialist troupe directors depend on the moves made by young artists for ballet excitement.

The second part of the book consists of three chapters with an epilogue and acknowledgment. Here, Cohen analyzes several ways through which dancers invented dance techniques and dramatize their bodies to pass both positive and negative messages at ceremonies. Although ballets train dance practitioners in the art, ceremonies offer dancers opportunities to assert their agency and build reputations for themselves. Dancers seize the opportunity and use their skill in challenging elders' conception of social reality during public ceremonies like the "dundunba and sabar" and assert their youthfulness and power (p. 83). In this part also, Cohen deconstructs the notion of youth powerlessness in Africa and contends that in Conakry, dance offered new possibilities for the youth by "employing embodied signs as a resource." On language and meaning, it is impressive to see how Cohen integrated local proverbs and sayings in ways that help readers to meaningfully understand the complexity and dynamics of time, signs, dance, and art in Guinea.

In sum, Cohen has demonstrated that dance, beyond a thing of leisure, could also be a source of power through which the people could assert their agency and negotiate their power in a democracy. Students, teachers, and researchers of urban culture,

popular culture, history, and art history will find this original work most relevant in understanding the idea of change and continuity in postcolonial Guinea.

Note

¹ Elizabeth Schmidts, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1968*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007.