Safeguarding dance, body archives and living traditions: exploring the Bamoun *kpalùm* traditional dance

Mirelle Flore Chamba Nana*

Abstract

Current discussions about dance history and studies focus on various forms of archiving, including the body, which is viewed as a repository of knowledge. This article explores dance history from the point of view of safeguarding and documenting dance, with specific attention being paid to traditional dances. It reflects on the challenges related to dancing bodies as archives and the living traditions in *kpalùm*, a traditional dance performed among the Bamoun people of Cameroon. The concept of 'body as archive' is examined by drawing on the work of Lepecki and also on that of other scholars, such as Manning's 'anarchive' and Taylor's 'repertoire'. This text explores the concept of the body as a living archive and its relevance to the preservation of traditional dance. It adopts a constructivist qualitative approach and highlights the ways in which the bodies of *kpalùm* dancers move beyond the constraints of traditional dance as a fixed and unchanging practice. The author delves into the embodied knowledge present in *kpalùm* dance revival and re-enactment and discusses the way dancers and choreographers bring a dance's past to life, emphasising the relationship between past, present and future in re-enactment and dance preservation. The research indicates that *kpalùm* dancers embody a living archive of tradition, evoking past experiences, transmitting knowledge and memory, and anticipating future experiences through imagination. Each gesture is a new occurrence. Amid the seemingly overwhelming forces of urbanisation and globalisation, the dancers grapple with issues of identity and authenticity.

Keywords: Bamoun *kpalùm* dance, traditional dance, safeguarding, body (an)archive, re-enactment, transformation, repertoire

* Senior Lecturer, Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dschang, Foumban, Cameroon. Email: aretouyapmirellemail.com ORCID: http://orcid.org/009-0008-79123295

1.   Introduction

In her work on 'Culture, religion and freedom of religion or belief', Mariam Rawan Abdulla[1] recognises that societies have sought historically to preserve their cultural heritage for various reasons, such as education, historical research, and the desire to strengthen a sense of identity. She also acknowledges UNESCO's efforts to improve cultural heritage policies through the use of standardised archival records and activities, including charters and recommendations. Unfortunately, traditional African dances are nevertheless falling into disuse due to a lack of implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which includes dance. Although the African participants in this convention acknowledged that the factors which sustained ICH in the past are now absent, they have been slow to embrace new perspectives on dance bodies as archives. Although some researchers, such as Nicholls[2] and Bhola,[3] believe that modernity and its apparatus are increasingly threatening traditional dances, I disagree. As Andre Lepecki[4] expresses it, tradition is constantly changing and becoming something new.

The present study contends that modernity does not necessarily have a negative impact on traditional dances. Instead, re-enacted forms of these dances in contemporary times can serve as tools for cultural sustainability and sources of indigenous knowledge. This argument supports the recommendation of the 2003 UNESCO convention on ICH, which emphasises the importance of revitalising traditional cultures as a response to the lingering effects of colonialism. My argument is that studying dancing bodies as living archives and traditions can reintegrate traditional dances into modern lives and lead to their being shared with members of the global community, at the same time demonstrating the cultural context in which these dances have been re-enacted.

This position is based on Michel Foucault's[5] *Archaeology of Knowledge*, which has had a significant impact on the field of dance studies. Foucault presents a radical view of the archive as a general

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1   MR Abdulla 'Culture, religion, and freedom of religion or belief' (2018) 16(4) *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 102–115.
2   R Nicholls 'African dance: Transition and continuity' in Welsh Asante (ed) *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* (Africa World Press 1996) 15.
3   HS Bhola 'Reclaiming old heritage for proclaiming future history: The knowledge for development debate in African context' (2002) 49(3) *Africa Today* 44–68 (Indiana University Press).
4   A Lepecki 'The body as archive: Will to re-enact and the afterlives of dances' (2010) 42(2) *Dance Research Journal* 28–48.
5   M Foucault *Archeology of Knowledge* 2 ed (Routledge 2002).

system of the formation and transformation of statements.[6] He shifted the conceptualisation of the archive from being viewed as an object or an institution to recognising its performative and relational nature. This shift has opened up the possibility of considering the body as an archive, which is particularly relevant to dance preservation, especially in Africa, where oral traditions are still prevalent.

For example, Cameroon has established a system to preserve and archive ICH, including traditional dances. One of the first steps taken in 1968 was to inventorise and promote local traditional dances, which led to the publication of *Cameroonian Dances* in 1971. This collection briefly describes some Cameroonian dances. Nevertheless, the book does not provide any information about the traditional dances of the Bamoun people, except for Table 1[7] in this book, which lists the Bamoun Group Mbasié among the traditional dance groups of the Cameroon National Ensemble.

The Ministry of Arts and Culture has launched a programme named '181' to conserve Cameroonian art and culture. The programme aims to reconstitute collective memory through flagship projects such as inventory-making, documentation and archiving, in addition to fostering transmission. However, the preservation of traditional dances faces challenges due to a lack of trained specialists. Opposing ideas exist regarding the authenticity of current forms compared to the original traditional forms, which are difficult to trace. Successful data-collection in some Cameroonian regions, such as the southern, eastern and central regions, has resulted in the identification and documentation of more than two hundred ICH elements. This action could have greatly benefitted the Bamoun community in the west region.

The Bamoun people reside in the Noun Division of the Republic of Cameroon, with their cultural showpiece being Foumban, the headquarters of the Bamoun Kingdom and a symbol of traditional civilisation in the country. Traditional dances play a central role in cultural practices, serving as a means of re-enacting the history, culture and social and political life of the people. Although the dances of the Bamoun community are significant regarding cultural knowledge and artistic traditions, they have not received much scholarly attention: only a few researchers have focused exclusively on the musical component of these dances. For instance, Ankermann's pioneering research on Cameroonian music in 1910 mentioned the existence of

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6   Foucault (n 5) 130.
7   *Cameroonian Dances* (1971) 126.

Bamoun court music in 1909.[8] However, the study mentions music only briefly and does not discuss dance at all. Nevertheless, other scholars, including Linjuom,[9] and Moungandé and Fifen,[10] have also made noteworthy contributions to the literature on Bamoun culture and music. Despite this neglect of dance, it cannot be assumed that the Bamoun people did not develop a rich dance heritage that could have attracted academic interest.

The transience of dance, as perceived by Western culture, may have hindered scholars in attempting to produce any literature on Bamoun dance heritage. Unfortunately, colonisation largely destroyed this form of knowledge production, history, identity and memory, along with many other African traditional dances, due to foreign religious influences. But this situation raises the question of the necessity of safeguarding and archiving dance systems. Official archives, such as audiovisual records and books, are valuable sources of knowledge and historical foundations. They enable historians to restore facts and make history. However, these forms of archive are specific to Western cultures. In Africa, despite the introduction of standardised archival forms, oral transmission remains an efficient means of preserving living traditions such as dances; the transmission of living traditions is perpetuated through non-verbal means, specifically through the dancing bodies. The *kpalùm*, like many African dances, has been passed down through the generations and remains an important cultural practice in the Bamoun Kingdom.

Previously known as *Baya*, the *kpalùm* is a traditional dance that originated in Bafia, located in the Mbam and Inoubou Division of Cameroon. Early expressions of the Baya, which later evolved into the *kpalùm*, were identified in the Bamoun community during the seventeenth reign of King Njoya,[11] specifically in the localities of Massagam and later Foumban. Njibam was the main village of the promoters. Traders involved in interregional trade between 1852 and 1884 introduced it there. According to Tita Tegbet,[12] one of the early promoters of *kpalùm* in Njibam, the dance was introduced to Foumban

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[8] B Ankermann 'Bericht über eine ethnographische Forschungsreise ins Grasland von Kamerun' (1910) 42 *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 288–312.

[9] Issofa Linjuom *L'oralité dans l'Afrique modern: Le cas du chant populaire kpalùm chez les Bamoun* (unpublished Diplôme d'Etude Approfondies thesis, University of Yaounde I 2004).

[10] I Moungandé & O Fifen 'De l'expression identitaire à l'esthétique de la world music: Une lecture critique du bijâ et du kpwalum chez les bamoun' in Augustin Emmanuel Ebongue & Paul Fonkoua (eds) *La Chanson camerounaise: Langue(s) et Style(s)* (LINCOM 2020) 149–163.

[11] Linjuom (n 9) 35.

[12] Linjuom (n 9) 38.

by Maloum Salifou Fouakwato as a form of night entertainment for young men.

Today, *kpalùm* is a traditional dance performed by the Bamouns at weddings, enthronements, socio-political events, corporate events and for leisure. The dance has also become popular as a result of urbanisation and globalisation and is now also enjoyed by people of non-Bamoun origin, the use of social media having made it easier for dance trends to spread. The means of dissemination include music videos, how-to tutorials on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, and hashtagged dance challenges. It is now common to see young people dancing *kpalùm* at nightclubs and concerts, both domestically and internationally. Musicians and DJs create songs and beats with *kpalùm* rhythm, while dancers introduce new steps borrowed from other popular and urban African dances.

Therefore, I emphasise that *kpalùm* dancing bodies are metaphors that represent not only a dance of the past but also living archives that safeguard and perpetuate a tradition in a globalised world. It is important to note that these bodies hold valuable knowledge and themselves serve as archival material. This article accordingly examines the concept of the body as a living archive in dialogue with the work of Lepecki.[13] Moreover, it investigates the ways in which *kpalùm* dancing bodies are embedded in a metaphor, drawing on considerations from Manning's[14] 'anarchive' and Taylor's[15] concept in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. It demonstrates how this understanding contributes to safeguarding the *kpalùm* traditional dance.

2.   Body archives: a conceptual framework

Preserving African traditional dances is a continuing challenge for archivists. Oke[16] argues that the time-based nature of dance poses a challenge. Furthermore, potential users of a dance archive may struggle to understand which aspects of a performed dance can be saved or preserved. Therefore, current discussions in dance research and studies focus on various forms of archiving, including the human body, which is viewed as a repository of knowledge.

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[13]   Linjuom (n 9).

[14]   Erin Manning 'Anarchiving', available at http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/anarchiving/ [Accessed 10 August 2023].

[15]   Manning (n 14).

[16]   A Oke 'Keeping time in dance archives: Moving towards the phenomenological archive space' (2017) 38(2) *The Journal of the Archives and Records Association* 197–211, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1274255 [Accessed 15 August 2023].

While some researchers, such as Hachimura,[17] have explored conventional methods such as video recording, photography and digital archiving to preserve dance, others, such as Baxmann[18] and Griffiths,[19] recognise the ability of dance to capture human thought and behaviour through the dancing body. They describe dance as a 'unique archive'.[20] According to Branstetter,[21] dance movements are experienced through the body in a spatio-temporal context. Consequently, the body's cultural memory cannot be considered static, architectonic, quantitative or encyclopedic. Works that have revisited the notion of the body as an archive provide the way to a greater understanding of the preservation of dance.

In this respect, Mauss[22] claims that all physical habits, movements and gestures are culturally entrenched and specific to each culture – which highlights the body as a reservoir of cultural forms. Mauss's argument is powerful because body techniques are not static; each time they are transmitted, they are reactivated, renewed and reincorporated, becoming the tools of archiving. According to his claim, dance is not only a body technique, but also an archiving process and a site of memory. The body has the power to affect other bodies kinesthetically and to preserve memories. Dance serves as a means of embodiment and transmission and also as a medium for representing, restaging and reviving memories over time.

Derrida,[23] who also follows Foucault's[24] perception of the archive within the dancing body, explains that the term 'archive' evokes memory, spontaneity, living experience or internal experience. He argues that memory and record are intertwined because 'there is no archive without a place of consignation'.[25] However, Taylor[26] contends that this connection is incomplete: archives consist of tangible items

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[17] K Hachimura *Digital Archiving of Dancing* (Ritsumeikan University 2006).

[18] I Baxmann 'The body as archive: On the difficult relationship between movement and history' in Sabine Gehm, Pirkko Husemann & Katharina von Wilcke (eds) *Knowledge in Motion. Perspectives Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance* (Transcript Verlag 2007) 39.

[19] Laura Elizabeth Griffiths *Dance and the Archival Body: Knowledge, Memory and Experience in Dance Revival Processes* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds 2014).

[20] Baxmann (n 18).

[21] G Branstetter 'Dance as a culture of knowledge: Body memory and the challenge of theoretical knowledge' in Gehm, Husemann & Von Wilcke (n 18) 37–48.

[22] M Mauss 'Techniques of the body' in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays by Marcel Mauss* transl B Brewster (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1979) 95–135.

[23] J Derrida *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press 1996).

[24] Derrida (n 23).

[25] Derrida (n 23) 11.

[26] Derrida (n 23) 9.

such as documents, buildings and bones, but the repertoire also includes ephemeral phenomena such as dance.

It is important to recognise that, when reading about dances from different cultures or viewing images of dancers in print, it can be easy to overlook the spiritual, sacred and social significance that these dances hold. Nonetheless, when they are presented in text or image form, the reader is limited to appreciating only the fixed movements without fully experiencing the emotions and information conveyed through the dance itself. It is important to remember that dance is a living art form deeply rooted in history and culture. African dances often serve as a means of storytelling, the stories being conveyed through the movements of the dancers. These movements form a living archive of tradition. Taylor's scholarship has enhanced our comprehension of the correlation between representation and performance, which has inspired Roach's[27] concept of 'genealogy'. Roach posits that performance does not vanish but rather it migrates and evolves across bodies, objects and continents.

Taylor's theory of repertoire distinguishes archives from repertoires: whereas archives remain unaltered, repertoires are subject to processes of transformation and change. She believes that while the stories or bones (archives) may remain the same, the storytelling (repertoire) about the bones can change. And she argues further that bodily practices should not be considered as archives in themselves but rather as a repertoire that distinguishes between material and immaterial elements. Although her point may bring to mind Craig's[28] archival ideas about memory as being a fixed repository, my argument emphasises the point that memory is rooted in the dancing bodies themselves, which are not fixed objects. Viewed in this way, dancing bodies are memories that are constructive and constantly changing.

Manning's[29] anarchive is also important to this research. She describes the anarchive as a collection of event traces that can be reactivated into a new event, continuing the creative process in each new iteration. Her conception stresses that a dance performance is based on previous archives, which can be both a record of another performance (eg, objects, costumes, pictures) and immaterial (eg, souvenirs, feeling, gestures). Therefore, drawing on this perspective, I examine what the *kpalùm* dancing bodies can offer as both memory and archive. This study demonstrates how *kpalùm* traditional dance

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[27]   J Roach *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press 2011) 96.

[28]   B Craig 'Selected themes in the literature on memory and their pertinence to archives' (2002) 65(2) *American Archivist* 276–289.

[29]   Manning (n 14); Craig (n 28).

performances serve not only as reminders of different archives, but also as performative and transformative experiences.

Following the ideas of these theorists, Lepecki[30] highlights the significance of dancing bodies in preserving and transmitting knowledge and memory. He suggests that the body can be viewed as an 'archive', storing corporeal documents and incorporated knowledge. The knowledge we possess is a combination of sensory, emotional and cognitive experiences that are conveyed through movements, gestures, patterns and rhythms. Lepecki's research delves into the concept of the 'body as archive' through re-enactment, which provides valuable insights into the ways in which a body can act as an archive.

The present research builds upon the work of scholars such as Taylor, Manning and Lepecki and sets the foundation for the idea of the body as a living archive. The Bamoun *kpalùm* dance is used to demonstrate how dancing bodies challenge the idea of archives as permanent places. My study focuses particularly on how the dancing bodies serve as living archives to show the evolution of *kpalùm*. I stress that *kpalùm* dancing bodies are living archives that revive a dance from the past, transform it, transmit it and render it accessible. From this perspective, the concept of tradition – which is central to this work – is seen as fluid, constantly changing, and transformative.[31]

3.   Method: experiencing constructivist ethnography

To answer the main research question posed in this article, I employed the constructivist theory supported by Marshall and Rossman.[32] This paradigm argues that the reality of a particular social phenomenon is multiple and constructed: it is maintained that the investigator and respondent co-create understandings. Methodologically, constructivists recommend that researchers should study the phenomenon in the field where it occurs. Understanding the cultural practices and their meanings is fundamental to this approach and this study in particular. The constructivist method, similarly to naturalistic enquiry, favours a qualitative interpretive approach.

Because there is a scarcity of written works on *kpalùm*, my investigation began with field research on August 2023. During this research, I encountered divergent views on the origin of *kpalùm* in Foumban that arise from personal constructs. To resolve this dichotomy,

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[30] Craig (n 28); Lepecki (n 4).
[31] Lepecki (n 4) 40.
[32] C Marshall & G Rossman *Designing Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications 1989).

I have adopted Berger and Luckmann's[33] social construction of reality theory. This theory highlights the impact of society, culture and the social environment on the development of *kpalùm*; meaning is formed through social interactions, including those related to religion and culture. Williamson[34] explains that social constructionists believe that people create meaning collectively for their shared activities, therefore constructing reality socially.

In line with this perspective, I developed a close relationship with my informants, who were of Bamoun origin, and negotiated meanings and interpretations with them to create a shared understanding. The reason for my doing this is that *kpalùm* is their reality. To reconstruct this reality, I examined how the dancing bodies have functioned as living archives for preserving the dance. To collect data on *kpalùm* dancing bodies as living archives and tradition of the Bamoun society, I employed five methods or sources: archival records, digital ethnography, content analysis, focus groups and individual interviews. Each method or source contributed new information to the research data.

The archival records, including videos, were analysed using content analysis to evaluate the role of dancing bodies as archives in transmitting a living tradition. However, the analysis did not cover the dancers' lived experiences. Instead, the interviews aimed to elicit the participants' experiences in both one-on-one and group settings. Prior to the interviews, standardised questionnaires were administered to enable subsequent individual profiling of the responses and to serve as a stimulus during the focus group discussions. The questionnaire included fixed-choice and short open-ended questions about personal data and the respondents' relationship to *kpalùm*.

The resource informers about the Bamoun culture were then asked a number of semi-structured questions during individual interviews. The aim of these questions was to shed light on the history of *kpalùm*, gender roles in the dance, its function and how it has survived. A total of eight participants were involved, including Njoya Idrisou, Nji Gnambi Yaya, Njilou Abboubakar, Ntieche Mamouda, Ngoutane Aminatou (also known as Mina Rasta), Tenaguetya Chouaïbou (also known as Morino Mashot), Mouliom Abdou Roux and Aliou. For the focus group, I collected information from three prominent *kpalùm* traditional dance groups. These groups are known for their exceptional performances that showcase the concepts of preservation, re-enactment, transformation, revitalisation and the human body as a

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[33]   P Berger & T Luckmann *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Paperback 1967).

[34]   K Williamson *Research Methods for Students and Professionals*: *Information Management and Systems* 2 ed (Centre for Information Studies 2002) 30.

living archive. These groups were Kpalùm Mina Rasta, Kpalùm la Force Tranquille and Kpalùm International. Compared to the individual interviews, which used a semi-structured question protocol, the focus groups started with prompts that encouraged natural conversation. The discussion was then guided towards the main theme identified during the content analysis: the dancing bodies as living archives and tradition. This approach aligns with Greenbaum's[35] defined focus group questioning. As a result, I focus in this article on three topics that received strong reactions from the participants within this theme: (1) *kpalùm* dancing bodies in their typical environment; (2) the revolutionary *kpalùm* and the notion of body archives; and (3) the re-enacted *kpalùm* through a repertoire for its preservation.

As the group conversation moderator, I reframed the discussion to keep it focused on topics relevant to my study.[36] Despite being a non-Bamoun researcher, I live in Foumban and maintained an objective and balanced approach throughout the conversation. The respondents were asked about the origins of the dance and pioneer dancers, gender roles and whether the current performance differs from the original version of *kpalùm*. The survey also provided an opportunity for the respondents to express ideas on topics that were not fully developed during the individual sessions, in addition to raising questions about the ways in which dancers have revitalised and re-enacted *kpalùm* – Georgette Kala-Lobe, for instance, a well-known professional dancer and choreographer, played a significant role in revitalising *kpalùm*.

The focused and individual interviews were conducted to compare information and identify recurring themes or responses. All the informants agreed that *kpalùm*, in the form of *baya*, was introduced to Foumban thanks to traders who sold goods between Bafia and Foumban. It is unclear, though, when exactly the dance was imported into Foumban. In addition, they agreed that the way the dance is performed today has evolved considerably. It is recognised that the main recurring body movements in the original version of the dance are the hand claps and swaying the body from left to right. Other body movements are gradually introduced, some of which have become typical of the dance. Moreover, non-participatory observation was conducted, including short movement demonstrations, to supplement this information.

However, my investigation did not coincide with any of the participants' outings. Therefore, to compensate for this, these groups provided me with archival records such as pictures and videos that could support some of their information. These were supplemented

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[35] T Greenbaum *Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation* (Sage Publications 2000).

[36] R Krueger *Moderating Focus Groups* (Sage Publications 1998) 46.

with digital data collected online, including video clips downloaded from community networks, such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. This method was useful in helping me to understand how the dancing bodies re-enact traditional *kpalùm* dance, creating a repertoire and an urban expression of *kpalùm*.

Although research on the conservation of the Bamoun people's memory and heritage has increased significantly in the past decade, there is only one scientific publication that focuses on *kpalùm*. While Moungandé and Fifen published a research article, Linjuom's dissertation was submitted in fulfilment of a master's degree. Neither Moungandé and Fifen[37] nor Linjuom[38] offers a close reading of the dancing bodies as living archives and tradition for safeguarding this practice, as provided in this article.

4.   Understanding a living tradition: *Kpalùm* dance

Etymologically, the word *kpalùm* has two meanings. First in the traditional context, *kpalùm* is a compound word composed of 'kpa', which means 'activate' or 'exit', and 'lùm', which means giant fire. Therefore, it literally means 'activate a huge fire', as explained by Aboubakar.[39] According to him, it is a metaphorical saying that connotes 'going for hunting' or 'going out to look for a concubine or mistress'. In the past, men would use the excuse of going for *kpalùm* to play with their wives' vigilance. Tigbet Alassa, one of the pioneers of this dance in Njibam, later gave the name *kpalùm* to the dance. The primary individuals involved at the time were Tita Tigbet Alassa, Nji Moussa, Mbembareh Mama, Issa Ndimun and Mbetgtnji.

Linjuom[40] develops the second meaning further, providing a more contemporary explanation. He explains that 'kpalùm' is a word composed of 'kpa-lùm' meaning 'four' (kpa) and 'years' (lum) – 'periodicity established over four years'. According to Idrisou, Bamoun traders spent four years away from their community in Bafia. 'Kpalùm' commemorates the number of years spent by Bamoun merchants who went to sell kola-nuts in Bafia and worked in plantations. Back in their communities in the 1950s, Njoya[41] explains, this absence was celebrated through the term 'kpalùm', which symbolises their

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37   Krueger (n 36).
38   Krueger (n 36).
39   Aboubakar Njilou is a patriarch and a member of the Nfoutain village, one of the bases of the practice of *kpalùm* in Foumban. He is an elite and resourced person who danced *kpalùm* in its early establishment in the city of Foumban. He was interviewed on 11 August 2023.
40   Linjuom (n 9) 47.
41   Interview conducted on 2 August 2023.

strength and reinforces the idea that the Bamoun man is courageous and enduring.

During the interview, Aboubakar and Mamouda[42] elucidated that the dance known as *kpalùm* was established in Foumban during this period. They indicated that its aim was to provide Bamoun youths, particularly young men, with a dance practice suited to their generation. This allowed them to share their experiences, especially since they were not permitted to participate in war and sacred dances, which were reserved for elders. *Kpalùm* dance was a moment for them to celebrate the major achievements of their community and provided young people with the freedom to express themselves in public. Oral sources suggest that the dance has evolved into a mixed form, with both young men and young women performing either individually or as a couple. Children as young as four years old are now introduced to the dance.

Obtaining records on the traditional *kpalùm* dance has been challenging. Views on the appearance of the dance in its early days were divergent in the interviews conducted. However, the informants assert that its early manifestation was performed only with songs, claps and three instruments: a xylophone, a drum and a hand scrub to animate the show. Both Mamouda[43] and Aboubakar agree that movements or steps were only truly introduced when it was labelled as *kpalùm*:

> During its early years, the dance was performed in an open space and was intended for young men seeking freedom and a dance that embodied their energy and strength. The dancers formed a circle and took turns improvising their dance steps in the middle while the others drummed. This continued until every participant had demonstrated their skills. Historically, women were not allowed to participate in the dance and could only be spectators. In the past, if a woman was seen practising, she was referred to as a 'woman man' to indicate that she was not under the authority of a man. However, over time, women were occasionally introduced to stand beside and encourage their husbands while illuminating the dance space with a hurricane lamp, as the dance usually took place at night. From then on, women gradually began to integrate into the dance. [44]

The dance has undergone transformations from *baya* to *kpalùm* and is still practised in Foumban. However, according to oral sources, it has disappeared in Bafia, as indicated by Linjuom. Chinghom Alidou,

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[42] Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.
[43] Ntieche Mamouda is also a member of the Nfoutain community. He is also a history teacher and has witnessed the development of this dance since his childhood. He was interviewed on 11 August 2023.
[44] Words transcribed from Njilouh Aboubakar's explanation of the gender role in the *kpalùm* dance.

a member of the *Kpalùm* International group, explains that when *baya* adopted the name *kpalùm*, it began to incorporate more Bamoun cultural elements, such as fluid movements, hip gyrations, pelvic and buttock movements, and shoulder undulations and rotations. The original item was transformed into a new tool to adapt to socio-cultural and political events. According to the explanation, the dancers' bodies served as archives to reinforce a body practice system inherent in Bamoun culture. Tenaguetya Chouaïbou,[45] a member of the Kpalùm Mina Rasta group, has provided a list of *kpalùm* musical instruments (refer to Figure 1) and described the technical characteristics of what can be considered the revolutionary *kpalùm* dance.
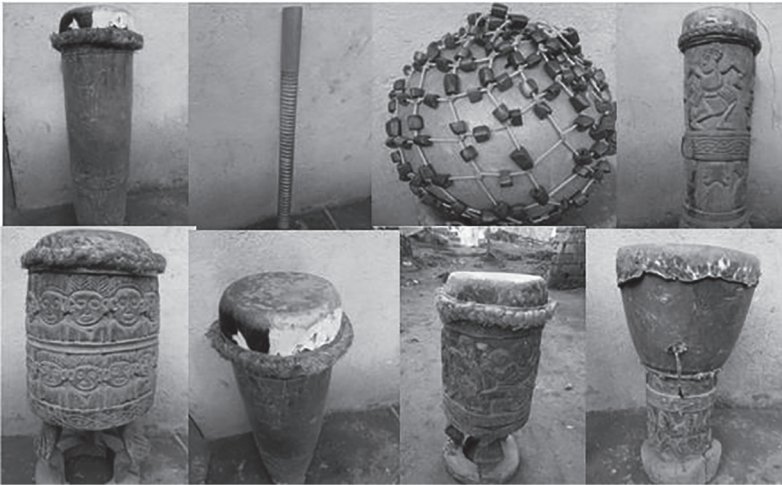

Figure 1:   An illustration of the principal traditional musical instruments used in *kpalùm* dance

Source: © The author

Tenaguetya Chouaïbou states that *kpalùm* is now accompanied by a traditional orchestra consisting of various musical instruments, including resonance boxes (membranophones) of varying sizes known locally as *fem, pon-ndem, mon-kumvem ndem-paré, kumvem* and *mô-fem*. High-pitched instruments are also used. The rhythmical movements are accompanied by musical instruments such as shakers, locally referred to as *nsha'a*, calabash rattles, calabashes stuffed with sand (*nkùôm*) and bamboo scrapers (*gbètgbet*) rubbed with bracelets or metal parts. These instruments are essential to making the slow yet energetic movements. The group typically consists of a soloist whose singing is answered by other members, accompanied by two or four dancers, including one or two female dancers.

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45   Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.

4.1   Preservation of *kpalùm* through the dancing body

The Bamoun's transformation of *baya* to *kpalùm* was a significant event. The dancers used their bodies to preserve the memory of their experience in the Bafia community, turning verbal statements into physical actions. This transformation primed the dance for further innovation, as dancing bodies act as a repository of corporeal documents and incorporated knowledge.

Burt[46] argues that contemporary performances are not original, but rather 'representations of re-presentations'. While some performances may provide insight into an 'original *kpalùm*' as it was performed earlier, an admitted original form of *kpalùm* dance can be observed only in social gatherings such as traditional marriages. The term 'original' is used here neutrally to emphasise the nature of the body archive, which goes beyond simply reproducing the past in its singular form. Burt's statement highlights the difficulty of preserving and transmitting dance in its original form. The dancers are presented as a system or zone where works are formed and transformed endlessly, like ghostly matters.[47] They 'unlock, release and actualise'[48] to re-enact the past, which cannot be fixed and represented in its original form.

For example, my informants provided two videos showing a group of people performing a *kpalùm* dance session in a house (see Figure 2). The participants stand in a circle and clap their hands to the accompaniment of traditional instruments. One dancer performs at a time, and as the dance progresses couples are formed. In another video, the performance features three main dancers (two boys and a young girl), who narrate a dating experience (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: A *kpalùm* dance performed during a traditional marriage
Source: © Tenaguetya Chouaïbou

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[46]   R Burt 'Representations of re-presentations: Reconstruction, restaging and originality' (1998) 14(2) *Dance Theatre Journal* 30–33.
[47]   Lepecki (n 4) 44.
[48]   Lepecki (n 4) 42.

In these videos, the connection between the steps and the drumming is fascinating. Although the dance is performed in a circle with dancers entering in a disorganised manner, there is clear communication between the dancing bodies and the rhythm of the instruments. The steps are synchronised with the beat and the feet and hips move in harmony with the music. The gestures range from individualistic to collective and are performed through couples. These dancing bodies repeat gestures that form the basis of the *kpalùm* dance, creating new variations as they re-enact past movements. A *kpalùm* dancer's body is more than just a moving aesthetic shape; it is marked by gender and culture, embodying memories and souvenirs. The example illustrates how, when engaged in the act of dancing, the body spontaneously creates movements and develops a distinctive body language that fosters communication between dancers. The dominant male role as expressed in the dance demonstrates the responsibility of the man to treat the female dancer as a valuable entity that necessitates care.

Figure 3:   The male dancers are competing to win the attention of the female dancer. One of them successfully seduces her and they dance together
Source: *© Nchare Ibrahim*

It is evident that the videos depict a transformation of the dance from its original open-space performance. Preserving and transmitting the originality of *kpalùm* is challenging from an ontological perspective because it is difficult to perform the very 'original' version of the dance. Nevertheless, the dance evolves and survives through the living archives of the dancing bodies that perpetuate this tradition. There have been notable changes in the spatiality and gender roles, for instance. Despite these changes, though, the dancers still perform previous enactments of the dance while contextualising it. The significance of this embodied tradition lies in its beauty and the power of its transmission. From a basic animation to a carefully crafted performance (see Figure 4), *kpalùm* dancers explore concepts of identity and 'authenticity' through revitalisation and actualisation, conveying various interpretations of body language. During the process of re-enactment, the *kpalùm* traditional dance becomes transformative, ever-changing and fluid as the perpetuation of the practice allows for 'inventiveness and creativity'.[49]

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[49]   Lepecki (n 4) 45.

Figure 4:   A series of pictures of the *kpalùm* dance performed by the group Kpalùm
                  Mina Rasta of Nfetain

Source: © Tenaguetya Chouaïbou

The illustrations in Figure 4 depict *kpalùm* dancers showcasing innovative techniques for performing this traditional dance. These include acrobatic movements such as tumbling, feats rolling and somersaults. It is worth noting that the concept of the 'woman man', previously mentioned, is reinterpreted here in a different light. In this modern performance, the character is perceived as being a woman who exudes authority, strength and the capacity to create imaginative body language. The combination of modern attire with traditional Bamoun dance costumes demonstrates how *kpalùm* is evolving to meet the demands of a modern audience. The musical instruments are inscribed with images of Bamoun strength and wealth, providing a historical archive of the region's cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the illustrations below illustrate how *kpalùm* dancing bodies serve as archives in various contexts. For example, whereas Figure 5 depicts a commercial interaction between a vendor and a customer, Figure 6 portrays the typical transformation of *kpalùm* from rural to urban settings. The dancers in Figure 5 serve as archives, actualising one of the original contexts of the performance of *kpalùm*, a dance performed by traders.

Figure 5:   A series of screenshots of a TikTok video of a sequence of the *kpalùm* dance in a market.

Source: Donald [@50donald] Il voulait fuir mais je l'ai rattrapper [video]. TikTok

The illustration supports the view that *kpalùm* body archives are performative as they activate the potential for future events. The dancing bodies transmit cultural knowledge and memory and provide an impulse for future experiences, both in the imagination and in concrete performances. This is shared through various social media platforms. Figure 6 features *kpalùm* in a non-traditional context, with the dancers' costumes revealing the introduction of new elements. The video presents urban movements inspired by the Congolese *kwassakwassa*, which involves the crossing and swinging of the legs, which is not typical of the *kpalùm* dance.

Figure 6:   A group of urban dancers performing a TikTok 'Bamoun challenge'.

Source: Biba Armand [@ biba_armand] (9 September 2022) Bamoun challenge [video]. TikTok

4.2 'AYùe': from the anarchive of *kpalùm* to a repertoire

Taylor[50] argues that the repertoire encompasses non-verbal practices, including dance, which have historically preserved communal identity and memory but were not previously considered valid forms of knowledge. She believes that practising these forms constitutes preservation in itself, which reinforces the notion within the study of dance history that revival is a valuable method for the preservation of dance. If the dancing bodies of *kpalùm* can provide knowledge, then the concept of repertoire can offer another way of reinventing *kpalùm* dance performance. This is because, as previously mentioned, conventional 'written' records are lacking.

This section describes the anarchive process undertaken by Georgette Kala-Lobé, a renowned dancer and choreographer of Cameroonian origin who has been naturalised as French, to create a repertoire for the *kpalùm* dance titled 'AYùe' in 2016. 'AYùe' means 'thank you' in shubamum, the Bamoun language. The work exemplifies the body as a living archive for preserving the *kpalùm* dance. She is involved in what De Laet describes as the process of 'regeneration, submediality, and embodied memory'.[51] Thus, her dance performance supports the notion that performance is a vital way of conveying social knowledge, cultural memory, and identities, with embodiment being central to this transmission.

The term 'AYùé' is significant as it represents the essence of the Bamoun people and expresses gratitude towards Georgette Kala-Lobé for her contribution to the organisation of the *kpalùm* dance. According to an excerpt on Kala-Lobé's website, Adamou Ndam Nyoya, the former mayor of the Foumban council, had previously described the dance as disorderly when performed by different dancing groups.[52] However, Kala-Lobé was able to bring order to it. Therefore, the mayor used the expression 'THANK YOU AYÙÉ!' to acknowledge her efforts. However, Georgette's approach aims to create a gateway between the West and Africa, making body language accessible while preserving the dance. This approach is believed to bring about universal harmony. Georgette justifies her process in these terms:

> This meeting between the West and Africa gateway aims to establish a choreographic centre, similar to Pina Bausch's African Wuppertal, for the preservation of traditional dances. Cameroon's dance heritage

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50   D Taylor *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press 2002) 18.

51   T De Laet 'The anarchive of contemporary dance' in *The Routledge Companion to Dance Studies* (Routledge 2019) 178, available at https://www.routledgehandbooks. com/doi/10.4324/9781315306551 [Accessed 23 September 2023].

52   'Georgette Kala-Lobé, chorégraphe, danseuse, corps écrivain', available at https://georgettekalalobe.com/bio/ [Accessed 20 August 2023].

is a cultural treasure on the African continent, and this project seeks to bring it into a new contemporary era.[53]

During the creation of her choreography, Kala-Lobé collaborated with *kpalùm* dancers. She incorporated their knowledge of movement into her own practice, reflecting the tension between the knowledge inherent in traditional dance practices and that which is transferred – a common occurrence in dance revival and re-enactment. Figure 7 shows Georgette Kala-Lobé staging the closing of the cultural festival and rehearsing 'the Bamoun opera *AYùé*'.

Figure 7:   Georgette Kala-Lobé rehearsing 'the Bamoun opera *AYùé*' in Foumban, Cameroon, 2017
Source: © Georgette Kala-Lobé

To re-enact the *kpalùm* dance, Kala-Lobé combined traditional dance techniques with other forms, aiming to balance the transmission of the traditional repertoire with the incorporation of other creative forms. She engaged in a 'Laboratory of Memory' to preserve the memory of *kpalùm* dancers. Her approach can be termed 'Anarchive-cycle',[54] one in which she adopts a process of reformulation,[55] making adjustments or additions as necessary. The process is significant because the 'original' *kpalùm* is continuously revitalised and the dancer's body serves as an archival instrument. Similarly to a document, the dancer provides a means to pass on the choreographic material to future generations. '*AYùé*' functions as a repertoire, preserving the history, memory and knowledge of Bamoun culture. The dancer's body is not merely an archive that conserves something that would otherwise be lost.

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[53]   Ibid.
[54]   According to De Laet (n 51) 178: 'The anarchive-cycle [...] created by the German artist twin deufert&plischke foregrounds the anarchival principle of regeneration, asking to what extent choreographers can archive their work without archiving it in the traditional sense of the term.'
[55]   T Plischke 'Secondhand' in Kattrin Deufert, Sandra Noeth & Thomas Plischke (eds) *Monstrum: A Book on Reportable Portraits* (Gemeinschaftspraxis 2009) 54–81.

Instead, it generates something new, leading to fresh transmission and creating innovative forms of *kpalùm*.

Figure 8 shows Kala-Lobe's choreography accompanied by traditional *kpalùm* dance music played by the group Kpalùm Palais, projected onto a wall screen. The performance begins with a video of a traditional *kpalùm* orchestra, enhanced with special effects to emphasise the significance of the past and its relevance in the present. Following this, a young man performs traditional *kpalùm* steps on stage. Kala-Lobé later joins him, moving towards him in a curved pathway that demonstrates a gradual and controlled release of tension, in contrast to the energetic movements of the male dancer. The male dancer then takes the lead and the two perform a series of turns together. Both dancers later increase the pace of their movements with dynamic *kpalùm* steps, creating a circular illusion in space. They eventually return to a slow resolution of tension at the end.

Figure 8:　　Screenshots of *AYùé*. Choreography by Georgette Kala-Lobé
Source: https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/QgrcJHsBsbdZbQhChrRMgjVVJVnLTzPSCVl?projector=1

Kala-Lobé immerses both the viewers and herself in the memory of *kpalùm*. She articulates that 'the past is in the present' through dance. As a writer and a living archive, the choreographer perpetuates a living tradition through *AYùé*, which showcases the heart and soul of Bamoun culture. Her body embodies cultural identity and connects the viewer to her deep humanity. Kala-Lobé uses a combination of body techniques to elevate *kpalùm* dance to a new level as a form of theatre dance. At the closing ceremony of the Foumban cultural festival, Adamou Ndam Njoya[56] praised her for integrating African and Cameroonian songs and dance steps into the performance:

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[56]　　A Ndam Njoya 'Y**ù**e de Georgette Kala-Lob**é** à Foumban (Cameroun), 2016' in Kala-Lob**é** Dance Company, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7-rzQX09rI [Accessed 20 August 2023].

When watching *Kpalùm* Palais dance, one can observe powerful gestures with intense and large movements. This performance demonstrates the connection between human intelligence, subtlety, and depth with the world, highlighting our shared sensations despite varying intensities based on context and environment. The performance highlights the connection between human intelligence and the world, revealing our shared sensations despite varying intensities based on context and environment. The choreographer effectively conveyed this message.

4. Conclusion

This article discussed *kpalùm*, a traditional dance of the Bamoun people in Cameroon. It explored how *kpalùm* dancers embody a living archive that brings the dance of the past to life. The article examines the evolution of *kpalùm* and aligns it with Lepecki's theory of re-enactment, Manning's anarchive, and Taylor's repertoire. The aim was to unlock, release, and actualise the dance of the past through the living archives of *kpalùm* dancers. By considering these scholars' perspectives, it is clear that tradition is constantly evolving, transformative and fluid. The study emphasised how the body archive can be used to embrace change rather than being viewed as a failure to reconstruct an original piece. Adopting this viewpoint contributes to the process of preserving traditional dance through its ongoing revitalisation.

Although the traditional version of *kpalùm* has been modified, modern forms of the dance have given it a new lease on life. The dancers are conscious of the impact of modernity, which has led to adjustments to the quality and execution of the movements. This has resulted in what I call a 'new urban *kpalùm* dance'. Today, technology and social media have greatly influenced the popularity of the *kpalùm* dance. Each version of *kpalùm* has a structured format, but the movement content is adapted to suit the performers' cultural, spatial and temporal realities. The combination of traditional and modern movements gives *kpalùm* an innovative touch, creating space for cultural integration. However, it is important to note that some traditional elements may be lost while others persist and are adapted to evolving environments. The dance incorporates elements of Bamoun culture and heritage, contributing to the strengthening of their cultural identity. In this, it plays a central role in the cultural development of Bamoun society.

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