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BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT: THE AFFIRMATION OF DELINQUENT IDENTITY THROUGH “SYMPA” DANCE AMONG TEENAGERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE CALLED “MICROBES” IN ABIDJAN

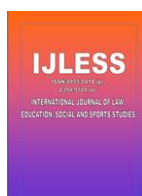
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ABSTRACT

The “Sympa” dance is the major entertainment for teenagers and young people designated as “*microbes*” in Abidjan. It frequently ends in looting and stabbings. The present study then examines these delinquent behaviors developed during the “Sympa” dance. This was a qualitative study with an exploratory aim carried out with 20 actors of the “Sympa” dance, mainly male, and aged 12 to 22 years old. It took place in the municipalities of Abobo and Attécoubé, from April 19 to May 18, 2022. They were divided into 05 dancers, 05 organizers, 05 singers and 05 drummers. Data collection was done through a semi-structured interview. The results obtained, interpreted in the light of Hebdige's theory of analysis of subcultures [18], indicate that the “Sympa” dance, which is a popular dance of rejoicing, was, beyond entertainment, an important financial investment, and a means of affirming their delinquent identity. These results argue in favor of greater social mobilization around this dance.

Keywords: Entertainment, “Sympa” dance, affirmation, delinquent identity, adolescents and young “*microbes*”, Abidjan.

INTRODUCTION

Dancing is a very old activity [1]. Considered as the first born of the arts [2], it designates the art of moving the human body according to a certain rhythm. Originally, it had exclusively religious purposes [3]. It exists in all cultures and today comes in several styles which make its uses plural. Indeed, dance is used as a ritual [3], an art, entertainment [4], an instrument of socialization [5], a sport [6-7], a profession [8], a communication system [9], and a therapeutic support tool [10]. It can be spontaneous or organized, practiced alone, in couples or in groups depending on the style [4].

In Africa, dance is an integral part of social life where it is practiced in all happy or unhappy events [11]. It does not exclude any social category in the sense that it is a human need [12]. Thus, specific groups such as marginalized people, delinquents and criminals are not exempt.

In Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire for example, the "*Sympa*" dance is the major entertainment for adolescents and young people operating in criminal gangs and commonly referred to as "*microbes*" or "*viruses*". It is mainly practiced in the municipalities of the North of Abidjan. The "*microbes*" are children, adolescents and young people who live in antisocial gangs, plunder, attack, terrorize and sometimes kill their victims, almost always under the influence of psychoactive substances, and using all kinds of weapons. The most numerous of which are bladed weapons. One of their main characteristics is their readiness to use violence against others and against other gangs as a means of subsistence and self-affirmation [13]. The phenomenon of "*microbes*" is in short, a criminal gang phenomenon [14], which has transformed the landscape of juvenile crime in Abidjan [15]. Started in the commune of Abobo, it quickly spread to all the others communes of the city of Abidjan and large cities in the country with the main characteristic being violence [16].

While dancing is generally presented as an activity for relaxation and prevention of delinquency, "*Sympa*", on the contrary, is a channel for expressing delinquency. Indeed, it almost always ends in a bloodbath with looting and stabbing, subjects present. It causes so much fear that it is banned in certain municipalities in the city of Abidjan, such as Attécoubé. Despite this ban, it continues to be practiced regularly. However, few studies have been devoted to dance in general in the social sciences [9], and particularly to delinquent acts during dance in marginal groups. Indeed, previous studies carried out on the phenomenon of "*microbes*" have been interested in the explanation of their criminality, their background and their mode of operation, but have very little addressed the question of their leisure activities [14; 16; 17].

The quest for a better understanding of delinquent behavior during the "*Sympa*" dance led us to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What profile do the practitioners of the "*Sympa*" dance present?
- What is the "*Sympa*" dance concretely? And why this delinquent acting out during this dance? In other words, what do these delinquent acts mean in a fun and relaxing activity like dancing for these adolescents and young people who engage in it?

These questions led us to carry out the present study, which is part of Hebdige's theory of juvenile subcultures [18]. This theory is based on the postulate according to which youth subcultures are subversions of behavioral normality, which create in individuals the feeling of being left out of social standards, and the need to forge their own identity. They allow young people to negotiate an intermediate space between adult culture and that of the dominant ideology, offering young people a space to express an alternative identity.

It is based on the general hypothesis according to which the "*Sympa*" dance promotes the affirmation of delinquent identity among adolescents and young people known as "*microbes*" in Abidjan.

The objective pursued is to examine the delinquent behaviors developed during the "*Sympa*" dance.

I. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Type, duration and setting of the study

The present study was carried out following the qualitative methodological approach with exploratory purposes, in the period from April 19 to May 18, 2022, in Abobo and Attécoubé, two municipalities in the city of Abidjan, economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire. The choice of these two municipalities is justified by their geographical location to the north of the city of Abidjan where this approach to "*Sympa*" dance is practiced.

2. Presentation of the study sample

Our study sample was constituted using purposive sampling. In this regard, out of 120 adolescents and young people called "microbes" encountered during the study period in the communes of Abobo and Attécoubé with the support of resocialization teams, 20 who had admitted to being regular practitioners of the "Sympa" dance, and who had expressed their informed consent to participate in the study, were all included. In order to homogenize the study sample, we wanted it to be equal. As such, it was made up of 05 dancers, 05 organizers, 05 singers and 05 drummers.

Those who had never practiced or attended the "Sympa" dance and those who had not given their consent to take part in the study were not included.

3. Data collection instrument

Data collection during the present study was carried out by means of a semi-structured individual interview and was carried out by ourselves for an average duration of one hour, with each of the 20 respondents. It took place during the process of resocialization of adolescents and young people in conflict with the law piloted in Abidjan. This is a state resocialization program set up for adolescents and young people in conflict with the law, in order to fight against the phenomenon of "microbes" and secure the capital. This was put in place since the end of the mission responsible for the demobilization, disarmament, resocialization and reintegration (ADDR) of all ex-combatants of the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011, no retained in the army, with the exception of child soldiers. We have been associated with this program since 2019 as a resource people to ensure the psychosocial care of these adolescents and young people outside our institution. Only those who need longer psychiatric or psychological follow-up are referred there. We therefore took advantage of this program which has focal points in each commune of Abidjan for the recruitment of adolescents and young people to be resocialized, to carry out this study. Thus, we split into two teams of two participants, to conduct the interview using the interview guide previously designed, with each of the respondents, at our invitation, in quiet spaces set up for this purpose.

The interview guide was structured around three major points. The first point had focused on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the second on the description of the "Sympa" dance, and the third and last point on the delinquent taking action to put an end to this dance, as well as its meaning for these respondents.

Its objective was to examine the delinquent behaviors developed towards the end of this dance.

4. Analysis and interpretation of data

The data collected was subject to writing, transcription and categorical content analysis using Iramutek Software.

III. RESULTS

The results of the study revolve around three points, namely the presentation of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents to draw up their profile, the description of the « Sympa » dance, and that of the delinquent behaviors that are developed there, as well as their meaning for the respondents.

1. Sociodemographic characteristics

The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are recorded in the table below.

Table I : Sociodemographic caractéristiques of the respondents (n=20)

Variables	Characteristics	Effective	Frequency (%)
Age group	12-14 years old	04	20,00
	15-19 years old	13	65,00
	20-22 years old	03	15,00
Religion	Muslim	16	80,00
	Christian	04	20,00
Study level	Unschooler	06	30,00
	Primary	06	30,00
	Secondary	02	10,00
	Franco-Arab	06	30,00
	Non existent	02	10,00
Relationship with the family	Conflictual	18	90,00

Source : Field survey April 19 to May 18, 2022

On reading this table, the respondents were 20 and their age varied from 12 to 22 years with an average age of 15,5 years, and two-thirds being in the age group of 15-19 years. At the level of the religious, although not practicing, 16 out of the 20 had presented themselves as Muslim compared to 04 who claimed to be Christians. Regarding the level of studies, they had a low level of schooling. In this regard, 06 had never been to school, 06 others had attended some Franco-Arab schools, and the last 08 who had been, were all out of school early with only 02 who had reached the first cycle of secondary school. As for their relationship with the family, it was conflicting.

These characteristics make it possible to draw up the profile of the respondents. These are adolescents and young people, mainly male, who have low participation in religious activities, a low level of schooling and conflictual relationships with their families of origin.

2. Description of the « *Sympa* » dance

An imported nighttime folk dance

The “*Sympa*” has been described by the respondents as a popular dance of folkloric, nocturnal and mixed type. It has its origins in the wader dance practiced by the Haoussa people of Niger following a good hunt. As such, it is danced in groups following demonstrations of hunting techniques. This dance adopted in predominantly Muslim communities has been practiced for a long time. Its instruments require three large tom-toms, three square tom-toms, a harmonica, a rattle, a sound system, two microphones and two speakers.

The following remarks illustrate this:

SA, 12 years old dancer : “ *Sympa* there, it's the noutchis¹ dance. It's not danced in the morning, but in the evening around 5-6 p.m until around midnight. We dance in groups of three three lined up. The girls also dance. We do combat demonstrations, but without hitting each other.”

¹Noutchis :word in street slang meaning dealers

An innovative dance

Adolescents and young people called "microbes" brought innovations to the original "Sympa" dance. The practice of dancing is linked to the activity of smoking rooms according to the testimony below.

SA, 12 years old dancer: "The day when things are going well in the smokehouse there, and they are happy, that's when they decide to dance to get some fun".

These remarks reveal that the "Sympa" dance cannot be improvised and is practiced following programming by one or more associated organizers who wish to rejoice, following a better sale of illicit drugs which generated a significant financial gain at the smoking room. The decision on its programming is made from the smoking room, but requires prior agreement from the neighborhood youth president. This is a community leader appointed by election and recognized by the Ministry of the Interior. Its role is to participate in the local management of its community with regard to youth decisions or problems, under the supervision of official public administrators. His tasks are not paid.

The important innovation brought to the "Sympa" dance is reported by the following testimony.

KM, drummer, 18 years old: "Sympa there, it's even interesting, but it's the fact that it ends in 'gnaga there'² which means that in Attécoubé here, the mayor has banned that. Because even the police who come can do nothing. Several times the police fled to leave us. When you start typing quickly, it's time to fly and sting. So, if you don't have the strength, you have to flee at the same time. We drummers, because of that, we have our machetes under our drums, we specially hire a taxi which is parked next to us to pick us up with our money and our drums as soon as it's time to fly and prick prick there happens."

According to this testimony, the "Sympa" dance, which originally consisted of a demonstration of hunting techniques without any aggression, had the particularity of being innovated with adolescents and young people in conflict with the law. This innovation is that the celebration ends in chaos with looting and stabbing as soon as the drummers play the accelerated and heralding rhythm that only the initiated and regulars know. And more than once according to them, the police who came to restore order were unable to do so, in the sense that each participant prepared himself financially, physically, psychologically, technically and tactically before taking part.

3. Delinquent behaviors and meaning

3.1. Delinquent behaviors

These relate primarily to cases of theft, then to stabbings.

Flights

The disorder began with the thefts, as reported in the following comments:

YM, drummer, 16 years old: "when you mix everything, it's to first steal. We steal money, cell phones, watches and then we go off and sell them to old men".

Stabbing attacks

The stabbing attacks put an end to the chaos deliberately created after the looting according to the following testimony.

2 Gnaga: Word in street slang meaning fight

TN, organizer, 20 years old: "In "Sympa", we poke others with knives or machetes or bottles to say goodbye. It's part of the dance too".

The stabbing attacks which followed the looting marked the end of the dance. In short, the delinquent acts reported by the respondents were, on the one hand, cases of theft involving sums of money, cell phones and jewelry likely to be resold to fences after the dance, and on the other hand, stabbing attacks to separate.

3.2. Meaning of the delinquent behaviors

Flights

The following testimonies shed some light:

SM, organizer, 22 years old: *“To organize “Sympa”, we can get together in a group because you have to spend a lot of money, between 150.000f and 250.000 f CFA, or between 229 and 381.6 Euros. We must pay the drummers, the singers, rent at least two tarpaulins and at least 70 chairs for all those who will come, buy water for them, because they will inevitably be thirsty, and “pay money” about singers and good dancers. That’s a lot of money for just having fun.”*

D.A., dancer, 15 years old: *“We dancers too, we each pay 2.000 f CFA to the singers to dance a piece, and 1.500 f for us to sing your name. When we no longer have money to continue dancing, we have sponsors who we ask and who pays for us. They also protect us at “gnaga” 2 time there, so we are not afraid to come and watch and dance “Sympa”.*

According to these testimonies, the “Sympa” dance requires a significant investment beforehand, which means that this show is not free and left just for entertainment. The weakest are therefore obliged to entrust their protection in exchange for money to stronger elders, who are also present at the edge of the dance floor. These elders can even grant them loans with interest if necessary. Reimbursement can be made in cash or in kind (in drug doses, courier or sale of drugs for the latter). Thus, each actor expects at the end of the “Sympa” dance, significant and immediate interest on the sum of money invested which earned them the opportunity to take part in it.

Stabbing attacks

The following testimonies shed some light:

DI, organizer, 22 years old: *“We prick prick so that there is respect between us, to test our fetishes. Many of us are not simple. We are prepared mystically to be stronger to attack. To prick with a knife or a piece of bottle is to measure the strength of each person. For example, there are people for whom anything iron cannot enter their body, unless it is a piece of bottle, because the marabouts have “beaten” them so much. So if you manage to prick someone like that oh, it’s because you are the most powerful yourself”.*

TD, dancer, 17 years old: *“ “Sympa” is not just dancing, it’s even settling scores. When we dance in Attécoubé there, other groups can leave their municipalities there like Abobo, Adjame to come and provoke. And then there’s pleasure in it too. Me, the part that I like even in “Sympa” is at the moment of prick-prick there, because I like watching the blood flow”.*

These testimonies report that stabbing is a guarantee of respect among peers, a demonstration of one’s bravery and power, both physical and mystical, and is also tinged with sadism.

In short, stealing and stabbing were a guarantee of respect among one’s peers, a demonstration of one’s bravery and power, both physical and mystical, while allowing significant financial gains.

II. DISCUSSION

A sociodemographic profile specific to “microbes”

Our results showed regarding the profile of the respondents, that they were mainly male, poorly educated with an age between 12 and 22 years and an average age of 15.5 years, claiming to be of the Muslims religion for the three-quarters of them, and maintaining conflicting relationships with

their families. Delinquent behavior is strongly associated with the male gender. In our social context, in fact, we note a predominance of boys, and the presence of girls is more discreet. This may be linked to the fact that it requires physical performance and a demonstration of strength which are favored by boys compared to girls who are constitutionally weaker. Indeed, demonstrating combat techniques requires good motor skills. In this regard, gender would be decisive in the practice of certain dances perceived as very physical [19]. Also, young age appeared to be an essential condition for using one's physical abilities to practice the "Sympa" dance. Indeed, most were in the period of adolescence, a critical period of human development, which encourages the search for new experiences and risky behavior including gratuitous violence exercised on children, innocent populations and members of rival groups by "microbes". The older ones generally remained retarded adolescents and were those who often sponsored violent behavior in groups.

Also at the educational level, more than half of the respondents had not attended formal school; and those who had access to it left early. Their situation of idleness linked to their early school leaving or non-schooling could also encourage their entry into delinquency and consequently, the development of delinquent behavior among them. Indeed, it has been shown that unemployment, which particularly affects young people without qualifications, has an impact on delinquency [20].

On a religious level too, they claimed to be Muslim and Christian but were in reality non-practicing. This lack of commitment to their religious practices favored their entry into criminal gangs. Numerous previous studies have also established this link between religion and the perpetration of acts of violence among followers [21; 22; 23].

Likewise, rupture or conflicts with the family, the socialization environment par excellence, opened the way for them to freely access these criminal gangs.

On this aspect, our results corroborate those [17] who established the same sociodemographic profile among the "microbes" in his study. He painted them as vulnerable children and adolescents, whose ages were approximately between 10 and 20 years old in general, although he happened to notice younger and older people, victims of delicate family conditions, of precariousness, illiteracy and dropouts, often drug users, who formed themselves into armed gangs (machetes, knives, sickles, clubs and hammers), took over the street spontaneously and in impressive numbers to attack passers by very violently that they dispossessed their property.

Based on Hebdige's theory of subcultures [18], we can maintain that any particular culture is an assembly of its own inventions and borrowings from the dominant culture. Indeed the "Sympa" dance imported from Niger is not a creation of the adolescents and young people called "microbes" who practice it in their communes of the North of Abidjan. However, looting and stabbing are their own inventions. These deviant behaviors, being part of the ordinary behavior of these respondents, could only be expressed naturally on all occasions, and even in a pleasant and relaxing activity like dancing. They also reflected the inevitable porosity between the delinquent subculture and the dominant culture. Thus, the passage to delinquent action in the "Sympa" dance is only an assembly of its own inventions and borrowings from the dominant culture.

An imported popular dance of rejoicing

The "Sympa" dance is said to be a popular dance of rejoicing imported from Niger. It was practiced at night, following a good hunt through demonstrations of hunting techniques? It is therefore not a creation of adolescents and young people called "microbes". This dance has been practiced for centuries in Muslim communities who share the same religion as the Haoussa people from whom it was imported. Which explains why three-quarters of our respondents claimed to be Muslim. Among adolescents and young people known as "microbes" also, many original aspects of this dance have been preserved. For example, the popular, folkloric, mixed and collective character, as well as the

intention of rejoicing aimed at by the dance have been preserved. Regarding "microbes", however it is about rejoicing at a good sale of illicit drugs at the smokehouse instead of a good hunt. For them, drug trafficking appears to be a legitimate and noble professional activity that deserves to be celebrated when it has been successful.

The original time to practice the "Sympa" dance which is at night has also been preserved. The very physical way of dancing has also been preserved. This is what justifies the male predominance described in connection with this dance, although mixed. This strong male presence is in fact linked to the fact that the "Sympa" dance requires physical performance, specific motor skills, and a demonstration of strength which are favored by boys compared to girls who are constitutionally weaker. According to previous studies, gender is a determining factor in the practice of certain dances perceived as very physical [19; 24].

Also, young age appeared to be an essential condition for using one's physical abilities to practice the "Sympa" dance.

An innovative dance

Even if many original aspects of the "Sympa" dance have been preserved among the "microbes" who practice it in Abidjan. It must nevertheless be recognized that they have also brought important innovations to it which seem to fundamentally distort it. These innovations concerned, on the one hand, the theft of money, cell phones and jewelry, and on the other hand, stabbing attacks to put an end to the dance. The particularity of the dance among the respondents was in fact, this chaotic end manifested by the looting and stabbing attacks carried out by one on the other. This moment of chaos was always announced by an accelerated rhythm that the initiates knew. Each actor was aware and aware of this delinquent act, and seriously prepared for it on financial, physical, psychological, technical and tactical levels before coming to practice the "Sympa" dance, to the point of lynching and scaring away the police officers who came to maintain order [25]. It is moreover this chaotic end which encouraged the different actors to take part, in the sense that it was the ideal moment not only to withdraw the capital invested for the practice of dance, but also and above all, the interests who are associated with him through the looting. These lootings generally involved money and items such as cell phones and jewelry which were then offered to fences to obtain money. They in turn resold them to make a profit. The presence of sponsors and protector-financiers also attested to this, because the protection offered was never free. Indeed, adolescents and young people called "microbes" are unhealthily preoccupied with winning. It was this major motive which led most of them to join these criminal gangs. Thus, the organization of the "Sympa" dance had a financial aim and the thefts allowed practitioners not only to make money, but also and above all to demonstrate their financial power. They all come from modest families and thefts represent a way out of poverty. Driven by this desire for profit, they did not hesitate to defy authority and violate the ban on the practice of the "Sympa" dance by certain municipal authorities such as those of Attécoubé to continue practicing it at night, by confronting the police, poorly equipped to counter their excesses.

Furthermore, the illegal drug trade, when successful, was the basis for the organization of the "Sympa" dance. Most of the "microbes" were poly users. Under the influence of drugs, stabbing one's fellow human beings became a very commonplace act. Indeed, the cumulative and repeated use of drugs led them, on the one hand, into a daze which favored the perpetration of aggressive acts on others without feeling the slightest pity, and on the other hand, not to remember of these aggressive acts committed. These stabbing attacks thus allowed them to demonstrate their physical and mystical power in order to gain respect or fear, and to be imitated by others as models of identification. They also allowed them to satisfy their sadism by contemplating flowing human blood. In this regard, they engaged in multiple mystical-religious practices to reinforce their conviction of being invincible and to engaged in these hetero-aggressive behaviors.

The period of adolescence in which they were located also favored this delinquent act. Indeed, adolescence is a period of turbulence which encourages the search for new experiences and risky behaviors such as violation of prohibitions, defiance of authority, transgression of the law, confrontation with others and search for limits and meaning.

This is why the ban on the “*Sympa*” dance by certain municipal authorities such as those of Attécoubé, on the contrary increased its practice by them. Likewise, identity construction and sadomasochistic behavior are part of psychological processes during adolescence. In short, the “*Sympa*” dance, beyond the initially intended entertainment, served as a pretext for adolescents and young people in conflict with the law or “microbes”, to assert their delinquent identity.

On these aspects, our results corroborate those of previous works which indicate that dance can undergo inventions which are specific to dancers [26], that it includes symbols, meanings which function in a given time and place [9], that it reveals itself as a much more effective communication system than verbal language for expressing needs, desires or for masking an intention [9], and that it could sometimes lead to fear [27; 28; 29].

Our results are also similar to those of previous studies which report that entertainment among young people from disadvantaged suburbs, without breaking with the monotony of an existence experienced as uncertain, comes as if to legitimize ordinary ways of doing things [30], that the inspiration for violent crime among adolescents and young people “bugs” is taken in smoking rooms [17], because without drug use, taking action is not possible [31]; that their multiple mystical-religious practices constituted an important step in their preparation to engage in this trajectory towards violence with the objective of being strong and feared [32]; and that adolescence is a period of self-affirmation and risk-taking [33 ; 34].

Our results are again similar to those of previous works which reveal that competition for goods is largely responsible for violence among “microbes” that this violence represents for them a mark of bravery and a quest for prestige [17], that urban violence among young people is the translation of expectations, desires, demands, conflicts of excluded juvenile categories; deprived of socialization [9]; and that dance is a means of socialization [5].

Conclusion

The objective pursued by the present study was to examine the delinquent behaviors developed during the “*Sympa*” dance by adolescents and young people known as “microbes” in Abidjan. The research question she wanted to answer focused on the reasons and meaning of these delinquent acts in a pleasure and relaxation activity like dancing. The qualitative methodological approach with exploratory aims was used to conduct it. The results obtained indicate that the “*Sympa*” dance, beyond entertainment, represented through looting and stabbing, a channel of affirmation of the delinquent identity among these adolescents and young people called “microbes”. The small size of the study sample and the non-use of direct observation as a data collection instrument were major limitations of the study. This is why we suggest greater social mobilization around the “*Sympa*” dance and that reflection continue through other studies involving larger samples.

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