Crude Metaphors

Hoarding the Porto Novo Night

Story and photographs
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Soukous is wailing from the sound system. The small crowd is being coaxed into a frenzy by the roiling percussions, tinny guitar and the insistent vocals. In the chaos of the scene, my eyes land on two men on the edge of the dancefloor really digging into the groove. Knees pop open and shut, hips flutter as their weight shifts from one foot to the other, sending their bodies left, right, left, right, to the beat.

Suddenly, one of them takes flight. One knee and then the other in a sort of wide-legged high step. He half lunges towards his friend before stopping short just as the music crescendos. They laugh and the other guy does his version of the same. They are locked in the call and response of one upmanship, oblivious to everything save each other and the music. Sweat runs down their faces and around their mouths, which are agape and upturned in joy.

It's around 2am and I'm on the banks of a lagoon in Porto Novo, Benin at a ***buvette***, an open-air café that turns into a dance club at night with the addition of a sound system and a few kerosene lamps. It's 1997 and I have been in Benin for a few months, brought over by an American NGO to teach in the local public schools. I am one year out of college in New York City where I majored in African American Literature and minored in going out to night clubs with my best girlfriends. So, the energy and sentiment of the scene are familiar even while the particulars were anything but.

Back in New York, nightclubs were where my girlfriends and I tried on womanhood for size. We dressed and acted a part that we were just coming to understand in its full power and pleasure. Whether pressing our bodies into strangers or boxing out space on the dance floor to share in the rapture of a favorite song, eyes bright, singing along with one arm aloft in praise of the rhythm.

Going out was a whole ritual that started with the pre-game prep. From putting on mood music as you got dressed, to the frantic calls back and forth to borrow clothes and sort out party options, guest lists and meet up times. But once we pushed past the heavy black out curtain between the street and the club, everything became fluid and right. The magic and tension of those nights came from the suspension of every concern other than what was unfolding inside that dark, hot, cramped box of giddy people and electrifying music. The fever dream lasted as long as we stayed inside, as long as the DJ gave us a reason to stay upright and stepping, as long as we believed that one more memory could be created.

When I arrived in Benin, I had few expectations of this new chapter of my life other than that it would involve going out. I asked the NGO to place me in the port city of Cotonou with this goal in mind. It is Benin's largest city, which I thought would increase the chances of it having vibrant nightlife. But in 1997, Cotonou could best be described as a large village masquerading as small city. It had a labyrinthine open-air market at its heart, a few paved roads and traffic lights, and, as I would soon learn, exactly one formal nightclub.

Within days of arriving, I found my going-out partner. I was sitting in the lobby of my temporary hotel and in comes a man demanding a little too loudly, a room, "with a bathroom *inside* the room." Feliciano was an Italian/Eritrean businessman who had a penchant for fancy leather footwear, suspect business deals and African women. He smoked Rothmans, holding the cigarette clamped way down in the V between his index and middle fingers, which he would wave around suggestively when he spoke. We connected over our love of dancing and Africa and our curiosity about this dusty, sweet city we found ourselves calling home.

About one month into my stay, he suggested we go dancing, which is how I first wound up at the one nightclub in Cotonou, New York New York. It was the sort of place that catered to the European and Lebanese entrepreneurs who came through Cotonou to set up export businesses at the port. The DJ played American and European hits from the 80s and 90s, the beer was imported and over-priced, and there was a roughly 25 to 1 female to male ratio. The ceiling was too low, as were the lights, I assumed, to mask details and deeds better left in the dark.

Nonetheless, I danced myself dizzy to songs I would have never left my seat for in New York. In truth, the entire experience felt slightly off in a similar way, a facsimile of something I loved but not the thing itself. Plus, as an African American woman, I was on the sidelines of the central drama, which played out between the club's main patrons: foreign men, and the Beninese and Nigerian women. Each side was wielding what they had to offer (money, wits, *l'exotique*) to get what they wanted (laid, saved, entertained). It was a neo-colonial dynamic orchestrated by the owners who levied a hefty cover charge that most locals couldn't afford and reserved free access to a certain profile of woman—local, pretty, shrewd. I was never once comped.

It was, of course, Feliciano's kind of club. And as it was the only club in Cotonou, we wound up going multiple times. But it never felt normal or good, which is why that night in Porto Novo stands out in memory. It was the first time I'd gone out at night in Benin where I felt the full spirit of the place. It was the same spirit I glimpsed in the banter between students at the end of the school day. Or in the throats of the market women calling to me – *Tatiiiiii* – as they held out perfect produce to lure me to their stalls. In the men suited in their vibrant *bomba* and the women wrapped in their *pagne*. Or in the sidewalk scenes taken in as I sped through the city on the backs of the *keke* motorcycle taxis.

That spirit was more alive not only in that *buvette*, but in Porto Novo more generally. That was the first thing I noticed when I went that weekend to visit, Lauren, another teacher on my program. Although the official capital, Porto Novo was even sleepier than Cotonou, choosing to hold more tightly to tradition and a humane pace. Many of the buildings were caked with the same deep earth-red soil that covered the ground, creating a striking, saturated scenery. This included Lauren's squat 3-room house in the city center where she had become known as *l'Américaine qui aime danser* because she had studied West African dance in Guinea and now in Benin. Two of her Beninese friends, Koudous and Ismael, knew the *buvette* circuit well and often indulged Lauren and her visitors in long evenings of beer and dancing.

And that is how I found myself in the depths of a Saturday night mesmerized by two men and their shared moment of abandon. The DJ played all the latest and greatest from Congolese groups like Extra Musica and Papa Wemba and the crowd rejoiced. Before we knew it, our little group was drawn to the middle of the dancefloor. It felt like hopping inside a supernova. The night air was pitch black and heavy with humidity, pressing down on the small gathering and, in a way, standing in for walls and a ceiling. Only air couldn't prevent light or sound or the energy emanating from our bodies from being gobbled up by the starry night sky. So, the crowd stuck close to the sanctuary demarcated by kerosene lights, speakers and the dancefloor. We partied on top of each other, hoarding the fever dream from the night and feeling free.