Embodying the nation:
The production of sameness and difference in national-day parades

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Abstract
National-day parades constitute a common format of embodying the nation. Composed of numerous distinct bodies of persons with individual characteristics (being short or tall) and multilayered societal roles (being a nurse, a father etc.), parades primarily evoke an image of sameness, while they also display differences. Focusing on the preparation of the Burkinabè national-day parades, this paper explores practices of disciplining bodies and making them appear similar and/or different. We ask how national-day parades mirror and produce images of the nation and how they treat differences like sex, ethnic belonging and occupation. The paper highlights that performances of the nation, as produced through civilian parades, are co-productions of all actors involved. Moreover, the focus on the rehearsals reveals that they generate a group experience for both organisers and participants, arguing that parades should not only be understood as ephemeral events, but as social interactions creating group experiences that have lasting impact.

Keywords
parades, Burkina Faso, national days, nation, difference, performativity

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Introduction

The masks do not march like all the others, but that is what the parade is about [. . .]. The masks would not march normally to the rhythm of the music, they would spoil the rhythm. They would create differences [. . .]. If they marched normally, their participation would not be a problem at all. But they dance. [. . .] The parade is belligerent, people march to the rhythm of military music, etc. We do not permit any delegation to spoil that.

When in 2014, Burkina Faso’s national-day celebration was held in the region Boucle du Mouhoun, the regional and national parade commissions debated whether ‘the masks’, a prominent symbol of the region, could participate in the civil part of the national-day parade. The regional parade commission chairman’s remarks about ‘the masks’, quoted above, refer to dancers who wear wooden masks and costumes made of leaves or fibre and who usually perform during local rituals or mask festivals. What disqualified the masks from participating in the civilian parade was, in his eyes, their way of moving. They do not parade like all the other delegations, but ‘create differences’, he argued, pointing to the importance of the uniform lockstep as a constitutive element of the parade and, more generally, to the image of sameness or uniformity that the parade is aimed to evoke.

The staging of sameness and differences, but only specific ones, is an essential aim of national-day parades. Parades are composed of numerous distinct bodies of persons with different individual characteristics (such as being short or tall) as well as multi-layered societal roles (like being a woman or a man, a member of an ethnic group, a nurse, a father, etc.). How do the organisers produce, on the one hand, the image of sameness in order to stage national unity while, on the other hand, featuring certain differences in order to represent an organised national body with its multiple components? This paper focuses on the preparation of the civilian contingents during the rehearsals for the Burkinabé national-day parade. It is interested in the practices of disciplining bodies and making them similar and/or different, and in analysing how these practices create national-day parades that both mirror and produce images of a united nation and specific intra-national differences. While our analysis focuses on the organisers’ practices and techniques of shaping the participants’ bodies, we also examine the participants’ capacities to take an active role in the production process and the actual performance on Independence Day.

Parades constitute a common format of national-day celebrations, which are ‘sites and arenas for the performance of nationhood’ (Roy, 2007: 66) and aim at ‘integrating a heterogeneous population into a people’ (Lentz, 2013a: 208). Whereas in everyday life, belonging to the nation is usually taken for granted, and less relevant than intra-national categories of belonging and differences (like age, gender, class or ethnic belonging), national-day celebrations stage being
a member of the nation as the primary category of belonging. In the context of international events, such as the Olympic Games or United Nations Summits, national belonging becomes visible through the distinction from other nations. The latter’s absence in national-day celebrations (apart from international guests of honour) requires other means to make the nation visible, by showing how it relates to internal ‘others’ (Alonso, 1994: 390–1) such as ethnic or religious groups, or to internal differences such as gender, age or profession. The organisation and performance of national-day parades, composed of numerous distinct persons marching side by side, is an important means to do so. Our paper argues that performing the nation through parades is based, on the one hand, on making individual differences invisible or rendering them irrelevant, subordinate to the shared national identity. On the other hand, the organisers select and accentuate certain differences to display the different components that constitute the nation, offering the various members of the national community points of reference to identify with.

Since national-day parades are state-organised performances of the nation, we are particularly interested in the preparation process and the organisers’ practices and techniques. While parades may convey different ‘national imaginaries’ (Askew, 2002: 273), their underlying techniques are similar. The practices that we analyse with regard to the Burkinabè national-day parade and the rehearsal process are therefore likely to appear in other parades, too. At the same time, the Burkinabè national-day parade is a particularly revealing example, because unlike many other parades it comprises contingents of civilians required to march in military lockstep. This makes the process of transforming individuals into members of uniform contingents all the more remarkable. In contrast to military parades, the organisation of civilian parades needs more explicit effort at organising individual bodies into disciplined marching contingents, particularly if the organisers insist on everyone marching in lockstep, as in the Burkinabè case. Observing how civilians are prepared for a military-style parade thus allows examining basic practices of disciplining bodies that would be taken for granted in purely military parades. Looking at the parade rehearsals of the civilian contingents, we ask: What principles guide the preparation and the arrangement of the participants? How do the organisers discipline the participants’ bodies? By what means do they create an image of sameness? And, how do they deal with individual differences among the participants? We also examine the participants’ capacity to take an active role, and show that the performance is not a strictly top-down implementation, but a co-production of organisers and participants. Moreover, we examine how the months-long training generates a group experience for both the organisers and the participants. We argue that parades not only produce an image of purported sameness, but actually create an experience that all involved actors share.

This paper is divided into three sections. First, we briefly discuss how our paper adds to the existing literature on parades. Then, we provide information on the overall design of the Burkinabè national-day parade, as well as on the organisers and participants. The main part of the paper focuses on the preparation of the
parade by discussing three practices applied during the rehearsals to discipline the participants’ bodies: the arranging, the choreographing, and the dressing of bodies. Finally, we examine the rehearsals as a site of encounter, showing that the rehearsals not only produce an image of sameness, but actually create commonality and a group experience which all involved actors share.

**Why study parades, and how?**

There is a well-established scholarly tradition of studying the continuities and transformations of specific parading traditions from a historical perspective. A number of studies explore how parading formats and the images that they produce change over the course of time in relation to changing socio-political contexts. Other studies, taking a synchronic perspective, are interested in the parade’s social functions and explore what kind of social categories and relations parades produce. Interestingly, most of these studies focus on ethnicity, but rarely take – as we suggest, other categories of belonging or differences into account. Looking at July 4th parades in the US, for instance, Davis (1986) explores the relationship between parades and power, with particular interest in the delegations that do not parade. Her study feeds into a larger corpus of works that analyse parades as moments of negotiating and performing ‘national identity’, with a special focus on the question of how ethnic or cultural groups, particularly ‘minority groups’, are represented. While these studies focus on how aspects of power play into the selection of the delegations, our focus on the disciplining, and self-disciplining, of the participants’ bodies sheds light on more subtle dimensions of power, applied by the organisers on a micro level.

More generally, our focus on the rehearsals considerably broadens the understanding of parades. Most studies comprehend parades as a ‘symbolic matrix’ (Azaryahu, 2013: 90), ‘public dramas of social relations’ (Davis, 1986: 6), a ‘complex commentary’ (Marston, 1989: 255) or ‘public ceremonial language’ (Ryan, 1989: 151). They analyse parades as ‘texts’ that display how a nation sees itself or as cultural performances that showcase an official image of the society on display. They are less concerned with the potential of parades to actively produce certain images and categories of belonging. A few scholars, however, have looked at parades as performances, building on Victor Turner’s ‘anthropology of performance’ (1992: 24) – and it is this perspective which has been most fruitful for our own analysis. Paraphrasing Turner (1992: 49), Sebastian Jobs, for instance, argues that ‘the nation lives in so far as it is performed’ (2012: 27). His study of victory parades in New York City in the first half of the 20th century shows how these marches embodied abstract concepts like the nation-state and Americanism. By considering all the actors involved in the parades – organisers, soldiers, and spectators – Jobs highlights that meaning was created in the very moment of the performance, and insists that parade studies, like performance studies in general, ‘are about becoming rather than about being’ (2012: 27, emphasis in original).
Our paper develops this performative approach further by including a focus on the offstage production of the parade and the range of practices during rehearsals that make individual bodies embody the nation. Taking the rehearsals seriously enriches the study of parades in three ways. First, it exposes the practices that go into producing the image of uniformity that parades evoke at first sight. Looking at the rehearsals and planning reveals how sameness is choreographed, how organisers discipline bodies and make them appear similar and/or different, and how they manipulate individual bodies so that they come to embody the nation. Second, our approach encourages an understanding of parades as a co-production of organisers and participants. Our paper not only sheds light on the organisers’ techniques of disciplining, but also on the participants’ self-disciplining, the ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988), and their capacity to take an active role in the staging and performing of the nation that they are expected to embody. We show that parades are not produced only in a hierarchical relation between military organisers and participants, but are the result of the complex interplay of all who take part in them. Third, our ethnographic analysis of the production process highlights that parades not only produce an image of purported sameness, but actually create commonality and a joint experience that comprises many more dimensions than simply marching.

The ideas presented in this paper are based on several research stays that M.-C. Gabriel undertook in Burkina Faso between 2013 and 2016. She observed many parade rehearsals, assisted at numerous preparatory meetings of the organisers, conducted interviews with them, and documented informal conversations with parade participants during rehearsals and on Independence Day. While the approach through the military organisers, which granted access to preparatory meetings and rehearsals, is an essential strength of the long-term fieldwork, offering deep insights into the manifold dimensions of producing a parade, it necessarily implies certain restrictions. M.-C. Gabriel did not parade herself (which a strict participant observation would require), and the occasions for conversations with the participants were limited (for instance through the strict schedule of the rehearsals and the organisers’ presence). However, her frequent observation of the rehearsals offered M.-C. Gabriel deep insights into the production of the parade to the extent that she became part of the group experience that the rehearsals generated. Furthermore, M.-C. Gabriel’s research has been punctuated by an intense joint analysis, by all three authors of this paper, of the findings from parades in our two other case-study countries, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, and from small-scale fieldwork on national-day celebrations and military rituals in Europe (France and Germany). This comparative approach has greatly contributed to the ‘thickening’ of the Burkina Faso case that is the focus of this paper.

Burkina Faso’s Independence Day parade

The Burkinabè national day that commemorates the country’s independence gained from France in 1960 is celebrated with a huge parade of more than 5000
participants. ‘The parade is the highlight of the celebration’, stressed the chairman of the parade commission of the 2015 national organising committee (Comité national d’organisation du 11 décembre [CNO]) during a working session with his colleagues. While other events of the central celebration, concerts, sports competitions, and fireworks might be cancelled, the approximately two-and-a-half-hour-long parade constitutes its core element. This became particularly evident in 2014 and 2015, when the festive programme was cut back due to the national uprising in October 2014 and the attempted coup in September 2015. While many other elements of the celebration were cancelled, the organisers insisted that the parade be held. The parade is composed of four parts. The civilian contingents (défilé civil à pied) lead the parade, marching for approximately 45 minutes. They are followed by a flypast of aeroplanes (défilé aérien). Then, the military and paramilitary entities as well as the emergency services personnel march past (défilé militaire et paramilitaire à pied) for another 45 minutes. A motorcade (défilé motorisé), comprised of both military and civilian vehicles, lasting for about half an hour, finally closes the parade. There are three aspects that seem specific about the Burkinabé national-day parade, and that fundamentally shape its production: (1) the large participation of civilians, (2) the rotation principle, and (3) its organisation by the Burkinabé army.

1. The parade is for the most part comprised of civilians, including schoolchildren, students and market women, as well as representatives of civil-society organisations, such as sports clubs, youth associations and the like. All civilian participants are provided with the commemorative cloth and money for tailoring a uniform from it, as well as an allowance for refreshments after the parade. For many participants, these goods and payments are incentives for taking part in the parade, but more important to their motivation is curiosity about this new experience and pride in being part of a national event. The participation of civilians in such large numbers is a striking characteristic of the Burkinabé national-day parade.

2. Since 2007, the central national-day celebrations have rotated among the country’s regions. Introduced by the government of Blaise Compaoré in the context of its decentralisation policy, the so-called fête tournante aims at the economic and symbolic integration of the regions into the nation-state: economically, since the hosting regions receive generous state funds to overhaul their infrastructure, and symbolically, since the region temporally rises to the top of the national agenda. Taking place on a newly constructed street, the Axe du défilé, the parade is generally determined in a specific, linear way. At the same time, the changing venue of the parade implies variation. This becomes most obvious with regard to the participants, who are mostly recruited from within the hosting region. ‘The hosting region must feel the most involved’, the chairman of the CNO parade commission of 2013 explained. For the participants themselves, the fête tournante stimulates a certain sense of competition: Just as the region as a whole wishes to prove its capabilities of successfully staging the national day,
each participant is eager to give of his best. The very fact that throughout the
country, on a rotating basis, market women and schoolchildren are transformed
into performers that are almost as professional as the military is fundamental to
the performative power of the parade.

3. Whereas other civil parades, like the 4th of July parades in the United States,
resemble a carnival, the civilian contingents of the Burkinabé national-day
parade are trained to march in military lockstep. Accordingly, the organisation
of the civilian parade is assigned to the CNO parade commission and its coun-
terpart in the hosting region that forms part of the Comité regional d’organi-
sation du 11 décembre (CRO), whose members are all drawn from the
Burkinabé army. The training of the participants starts two months before
the national day and comprises two phases. In the first phase, the contingents
of the hosting region and the delegations from other regions rehearse separately
twice a week for about four hours in stadiums, school yards or military camps,
dependent on the local conditions. In the second phase, all the civilian and
military delegations come together in the hosting region and train in three
day-long group rehearsals at the actual parade venue; the last of these rehearsals
is even supervised by the chief of staff of the Burkinabé Armed Forces.

Producing a national-day parade

The President of Burkina Faso has entrusted the mission to me to organise a parade
for the national day. And you know if a military is entrusted with a mission, he will do
everything he can to accomplish his mission. He might die afterwards, but not before
[participants laughing]. […] Parading is not easy. Tomorrow you will feel your
muscles aching. If you cannot stand that, the first thing you do tomorrow morning
is to call your point focal and tell him you quit. I do not want you to wait with that
until the eve of Independence Day. I want neither to hear anyone saying on December
11 he is suffering from malaria. I want that after the parade, the President comes to
me and says: ‘Congratulations!’ But if he comes and says the parade was not nice,
I will send all of you to prison [participants laughing].16

These words by the chairman of the CNO parade commission, addressed to some
civilian contingents after a rehearsal for the national-day parade 2015, stress the
physical effort that parading requires. Though jokingly expressed, the chairman’s
address points out that physical fitness is a basic criterion for taking part in the
parade. This might be considered self-evident. However, the chairman’s exhorta-
tions remind us that bodies definitely matter and that the entire aesthetics of
parades is built on the performance of human bodies. Physical fitness alone, how-
ever, is not sufficient. Parades also require other preparations of the participants’
bodies, which we discuss in this section by taking a close look at the practices
applied during the parade rehearsals and at how participants respond to it,
highlighting that the rehearsals are productive events on their own right.
Arranging bodies

One characteristic of the Burkinabé civilian parade is that all delegations represent government ministries. Several women’s civil-society organisations, for example, represent the Ministère de la promotion de la femme et du genre, and sports clubs represent the Ministère des sports et des loisirs. The delegations are chosen by ministerial employees, so-called points focaux (contact officers), who assist the organisers in organisational matters, like communicating the dates and hours of the training sessions to the participants and checking the attendance list during rehearsals. According to the chairman of the 2013 CNO parade commission, the ministries choose contingents that they consider ‘the most representative’ or that show ‘great commitment’.17 Some ministries are represented by the same groups each year. Most ministries, however, are represented by varying institutions due to the celebrations’ rotation through the regions.

Sometimes ministries have difficulties finding associations to represent them. This may be either because there are not enough or too many volunteers to make a group that ought to comprise 33 persons (the general size of contingents). In the first case, delegations are either eliminated or filled by volunteers from elsewhere. In the latter case, the points focaux often choose a couple of persons from different associations, assembling them into one contingent. These measures sometimes tend to cause confusion among the participants. During one of the first rehearsals in the region Boucle du Mouhoun in 2014, the CRO parade commission struggled to sort the delegations, asking the participants to gather around soldiers who held up provisional signs reading abbreviations of ministries. However, many participants did not know which ministry they were assigned to. When asked for the institution that they represent, a women’s association, for example, said they were marching ‘for the women’. ‘That means you parade for the Ministère de la femme et du genre?’ the chairman’s assistant asked. They shrugged their shoulders.18 By Independence Day, however, these problems have been sorted out, and the parade presents an image of neat classification and correspondence. Each delegation holds up a sign reading the name of the institution with which it is associated (Figure 1); several delegations grouped to represent the same ministry are headed by standard-bearers with banners reading the name of the respective ministry, dividing the parade into ministerial sections (Figure 2).

This grouping into ministries that the organisers organise during the first rehearsals is a telling aspect of the production of the parade and the image of the nation that it intends to stage. Sorting the participants according to ministries integrates the civilian delegations into and subordinates them to the state apparatus, and thus embodies an imaginary of the nation closely bound to the state. National-day celebrations are generally directed by and for the state and are thus first and foremost state celebrations (Faurè, 1978: 386; Lentz, 2013a: 209; 2013b). The example of the Burkinabé civilian parade, however, allows us to take this argument further: the participants are, indeed, bodily incorporated into the state apparatus. Furthermore, the classification of the contingents into ministries is
Figure 1. A pupil’s delegation holding a sign reading the name of their institution; national-day parade 2016, Kaya. © Gabriel 2016.

Figure 2. Banner reading the name of a ministry; national-day parade 2016, Kaya. © Gabriel 2016.
an important means of evoking uniformity and managing differences. Staging the nation as a neatly structured mosaic composed of different but equivalent units, the ministerial structure represents the heterogeneity of the country’s numerous associations, clubs, etc., and at the same time highlights the status as workers and professionals as a feature which all participants share. By staging a variety of occupational fields, profession is accentuated and super-ordinated over any other individual differences or societal roles, transforming the participants’ bodies into representatives of particular structures and building bricks of ‘a workers’ nation’, which is a common metaphor in Burkinabè nationalist discourse. 19

The format of the parade entails that the delegations march past one after another in a certain order. The organisers have several criteria in fixing the sequence in which the ministries’ contingents appear in the parade. As a rule, the schoolchildren representing the Ministère de l’éducation nationale et de l’alphabétisation and the Ministère des enseignements secondaire et supérieur march at the head of the parade. This is mainly for pragmatic reasons. The children should not be exposed to the sun longer than necessary in order to prevent them from fainting, it is argued. As each celebration is dedicated to a specific theme assigned to one ministry, the contingents representing that ministry generally follow. The order of the subsequent ministries varies. Whereas in recent years the codified political order of priority of the ministries determined the structure of the parade, evoking an image of a corporatist nation, in 2016 the CNO parade commission altered this scheme, ordering the ministries alphabetically. 20 This rather abstract and mechanistic principle aimed to avoid frustration among groups marching for ‘lesser’ ministries (defined as such by the order of priority). It can be understood as an attempt to de-emphasise administrative hierarchies in the national imaginary.

Parade contingents vary in size. Delegations representing the country’s regions under the banner of the Ministère de l’administration territoriale comprise 20 participants, while all other contingents have 33 or 51 participants, 21 depending on the status and size of the ministries (measured by the number of their staff) and their ability to recruit participants. Contingent size is strictly administered, because it is important for the line-up of participants fixed in the organisational guidelines: a group of 51 participants should be organised into six rows, each with eight ‘elements’, and a triangle of three elements; a group of 33 participants should consist of three rows with ten elements each and a triangle in front; and contingents with 20 participants should be lined up into three rows with six elements each and two banner-carriers in front. 22 The strict line-up of the contingents, which takes much time during the first rehearsals, underpins the performance of a corporatist nation as a well-organised entity that is composed of and that functions through its components.

According to which criteria do organisers then fill the positions of the formation? The bodies of the two to three thousand civilian participants are very heterogeneous, and possess many different and similar characteristics that are partly stable (like sex and size) and partly variable (like hairstyle). Actually, height is the main
organisational principle which the organisers apply. During the rehearsals, soldiers line up the participants according to height, arranging them from shorter persons in the first rows to taller persons at the back (Figure 3), just as the guidelines demand:

Make all the participants of one contingent stand in rows according to height in one line. Pay attention that the order of height is strictly observed, starting with the shortest and progressing to the tallest. Each element is asked to wear the shoes that he or she intends wearing on the day of the parade in order to not mix up the order of height.23

Choosing height as a basic criterion for arranging the participants apparently satisfies the aesthetic demands of the parade.24 For specific tasks, however, the criterion of height may be suspended in favour of individual aptitude, as M.-C. Gabriel observed during the rehearsals. The three persons heading the contingent (the triangle), for instance, are chosen according to the quality of their marching. Similarly, individuals in other prominent spots (for instance, in the outer line that will directly pass the presidential stand) who do not march well are assigned to less visible places and replaced by someone who performs better than them. Altogether, however, the use of height as a basic structuring criterion contributes to the production of an overall image of similarity, rendering other bodily differences of the participants less visible. The category of sex, for instance, is absorbed and suspended through the sorting according to height, resulting in an irregular mixing of female and male participants.25 The basic arrangement of the participants according to height is fundamental in producing an image of order and sameness despite existing bodily differences. The lining-up of the participants according to height, which is also the

Figure 3. Participants are aligned according to height rehearsals for the national-day parade 2016, Ouagadougou. © Gabriel 2016.
general lining-up schema for military parades, is an essential means in the organisation of the parade that the organisers impose on the participants. There are no possibilities for the participants to alter this sorting; it is constantly controlled during the rehearsals. However, other aspects are controlled less strictly and leave more room for modifications. Dressing, for instance, allows the participants to display gender, as we shall see later on.

**Choreographing bodies**

Choreographing bodies

After all, the parade is a national parade [...]. We cannot permit that some people are joining at the last minute. [...] We want to present something respectable. [...] How many rehearsals have we already organised? Twelve rehearsals! We are sorry, but we have to be professional. [...] We do not accept to introduce a delegation at the last minute, which will ruin the parade. It is a national parade; it is for the national day!26

With these words the chairman of the CNO parade commission of 2014 explained why several delegations that wanted to join the parade at the last minute could no longer be included. The point focal who had made the request was frustrated by this decision and could not understand it. He expressed an opinion with which the organisers were often confronted: that parading was a simple task, since the participants ‘just have to walk’.27 ‘So why should it not be possible to integrate the delegation?’, he wondered. However, participants do not ‘just walk’, but are trained to do so in a specific way in numerous rehearsals. In this section, we take a closer look at the weeklong preparation to choreograph participants’ bodies.

The first thing that the participants are taught during rehearsals is to position themselves in the contingent. At the beginning of each rehearsal, the soldiers arrange the participants in a specific line-up by using the participants’ bodies as measurement (Figure 4). The distance between people is measured in arm’s length, and the distance to the advance-guard is fixed according to a set number of footsteps, making the participants’ bodies not only objects but also instruments of the choreography. In the words of one participant, ‘We learn how to align properly in rows with someone ahead of you, and others to your left and to your right. You have to keep these axes in sight’.28 By positioning the contingents according to the same formation, an overall image of orderliness and sameness is produced. The production of similarity is underpinned by teaching the participants a specific posture. A dozen times the soldiers make the participants switch between the positions ‘Attention!’ and ‘At ease!’, teaching them to put their feet together and their arms tightly to their sides on the first command and to widen the distance of their feet with their arms crossed behind their backs on the latter. The parade guidelines describe the ‘general posture for the parade’ as follows: ‘head high, the eyes fixed towards the horizon, chest out, feet together, the palm of their hands open, fingers close together’.29 In the words of one participant, ‘At the
beginning it is all about the “Attention!” This is the military term. In fact, it means how to stand properly. When you are lined up, you cannot just stand how you like. There is a specific way of standing, even when we are “at ease”.30 By making the participants practise the same posture, individual bodies are shaped in a way that makes them look more alike and embody not only discipline but also dignity and respectability.

Most of the rehearsals are then spent instructing the participants how to march. ‘Teach the participants to step the left feet on the ground on the command “left, left”; to start marching with the left foot on the command “forward, march”; to march in lockstep on the command “one, two”; to swing the arms without waddling while in line with the shoulder of the person in front’, the guidelines explain.31 According to these instructions, the participants gradually learn to march, starting with a dry run on the spot, which is accompanied by the soldier’s command ‘left, left’, or ‘one, two’. Afterwards the participants practise starting to march synchronously. Only when the participants achieve a reasonably proper start do they begin to train marching across distances. In the course of time, the participants learn to march to military music, similar to the music played by the bands of the Gendarmerie and the Garde nationale on 11 December. The marching music is considered a means of facilitating the task of teaching the participants to march in lockstep – the chairman of the 2015 CNO parade commission ordered the instructors to make participants aware of the beat of the music, which would make them march to the rhythm ‘automatically’.32 One instructor of the national-day parade 2016 even provided music on his own initiative and at his own cost before the rehearsal schedule foresaw it being used in order to facilitate the

Figure 4. Children learn to measure distance through arm’s length; rehearsals for the national-day parade 2014, Dédougou. © Gabriel.
training. Afterwards, he encouraged participants: ‘You see, with music you do well. If it’s “One, two” it’s exhausting. But with the music it is okay’. Throughout the marching training, participants are constantly corrected. Soldiers marching next to the delegations scrutinise the participants’ performance and, if necessary, correct them. Sometimes they pick out individuals and make them practise on the spot. The participants are also corrected via debriefings. After each rehearsal, the parade commander gathers all the instructors and makes suggestions as to what aspects need to be improved. Often, the participants’ posture and the distance between the delegations are criticised, or their steps are considered ‘non-uniform’: ‘If you arrive in front of the presidential stand, and you do not march in lockstep, that’s not good, that’s ugly’, the chairman of the 2015 CNO parade commission admonished during a group rehearsal, adding, ‘Even if the whole delegation marches well and there is only one participant who spoils it, the delegation’s performance is spoiled’, pointing to the importance of individual performance for the overall group performance.

The participants are also trained to become self-critical observers, keeping a ‘chameleon eye’ – that is the term used in the guidelines – on the collective body of their unit, ensuring the maintenance of the formation and, if necessary, discreetly correcting it by adjusting the tempo, or whispering instructions to their neighbours. Thus, after a couple of trainings one can observe participants at the head of one delegation turning around to indicate who is not marching in line (Figure 5). One can also see participants asking soldiers for advice as how to correct themselves. ‘She is in a hurry, I want to slow her down, but then she is too narrow’, a participant taking part in the national-day parade 2016 explained his difficulty in regulating the formation. ‘You have to direct her by saying “One step to the right” or “A bit ahead”, and when it’s okay you say “It’s ok”’, a soldier advised him. The participants are asked to correct themselves discreetly. ‘If the two behind me correct me, they do so inconspicuously. Because if you talk too much, the camera man will zoom and see what that person is saying’, a participant explained, indicating that participants are also made aware of the media coverage of their performance. The self-correcting that the organisers teach the participants during the rehearsals suggests that the organisers depend on the participants’ self-disciplining for the parade’s success.

The organisers’ emphasis on teaching the participants to march in lockstep shows how much importance they attribute to the synchronic and harmonious movement of the bodies and the image of sameness and community that it evokes. ‘They really take great pains to teach them marching. That is evident. No one wants to ruin the parade’, one point focal, who observed the rehearsals, praised the instructors’ commitment. Teaching civilians who are unfamiliar with parading military lockstep is ‘a very, very difficult task’, one instructor explained, admitting that ‘it takes much time, it is tiring, we have suffered a lot’. He then added, ‘Well, it’s a sacrifice, but since it is for the nation . . . We do that so that they will not bring disgrace, because the disgrace will be ours’, pointing out that the participants’ performance on Independence Day is not only considered as a crucial
moment for the performing of the nation, but also regarding the army’s efforts in preparing it.  

**Dressing bodies**

The transformation that is probably most remarkable when comparing the participants during the rehearsals and on the actual performance during Independence Day is their clothing. Clothes are basic markers of differences, such as sex, class and religion. During the training, the participants wear everyday clothes like jeans, shorts, skirts, *pagne* (printed cloth), *boubous* (long, loose-fitting unisex garments), school uniforms, boots, sneakers and flip-flops of all colours. For the national-day parade, the varied clothing is exchanged for uniforms that project a fundamentally different image of the delegations. The importance that the organisers attribute to dressing becomes manifest in several aspects. First of all, there is a particular sub-commission of the CNO parade commission whose sole concern is the participants’ clothing. Furthermore, the uniforms are checked at the last rehearsal, and the day before the national day is entirely reserved for the cleaning of uniforms. Moreover, the commission regularly exhorts the *points focaux* to
ensure that their delegations will dress properly on the national day. However, as we shall see later on, in contrast to the arranging and choreographing of the participants’ bodies, dressing gives the participants some room for expressing certain categories of belonging and thereby for co-shaping the performance of differences and sameness.

The organisers allow three sorts of clothing in the parade. First, uniforms of institution or vocational fields, e.g. nurses wear nurses’ uniforms, and mine workers wear their protective suits (Figure 6). Second, the festive cloth that is produced each year and displays the national-day logo (Figure 7), which is given to

Figure 6. Trainees in scrubs; national-day parade 2013, Dori. © Gabriel.

Figure 7. Contingents dressed in the national-day cloth of 2013; national-day parade 2013, Dori. © Gabriel.
delegations who do not own a uniform (like students or market women). Finally, the delegations that represent the country’s regions are permitted to wear ‘traditional clothes’\(^{41}\) (Figure 8).

The instruction that each delegation is asked to wear uniform dress exemplifies that clothes are used to minimise differences in appearance between the participants of one delegation and to foster an image of corporate sameness (see also Allman, 2004; Röschenthaler, 2015: 628–30). The importance attributed to uniform dress became particularly evident in 2015, when the festive cloth could not be produced in time because of the attempted coup three months prior to the national day, and the organisers only recruited delegations that could provide their own uniform parade dress.\(^{42}\) Even on Independence Day it might happen that groups which do not appear in uniform (for whatever reason) are excluded just before the parade is set to begin. Thus, on the one hand, there is a basic dress code for delegations that can be summed up as ‘uniformity within each contingent’. On the other hand, heterogeneity (within the limits of the given guidelines) between the contingents is accepted. The variety of clothing and colours is also considered to be part of the parade’s aesthetic appeal. This is also the reason why organisers distribute the commemorative cloth, which is produced in several colours, with the order in which the cloth will appear in the parade in mind.

The three distinct forms of dress (uniforms, cloths and traditional clothes) each highlight distinct categories of belonging. By dressing in professional clothes, the delegations stress the role that they occupy in society; their dressed bodies declare, ‘we are nurses’, ‘we are sportsmen’, and so forth. The wearing of professional

![Figure 8. Delegation in 'traditional' clothes; national-day parade 2013, Dori. © Gabriel.](image-url)
clothes foregrounds profession as main social identification, which unites the members of the respective category despite all other differences, highlighting the well-established image of Burkina Faso as a nation of workers (Haberecht, 2017: 39–41; 66–9). The national-day cloth also contributes to the performance of similarity, but in a different way, namely by emphasising the participation in the event and membership in the festive community. Whether participants are male or female, Mossi or Peulh, Muslim or Christian, student or market woman, wearing the national-day cloth downplays all these differences and highlights the sense of sameness and community generated through the commemorative event itself. The wearing of traditional clothes, finally, exhibits ethnic and regional diversity while also domesticating it. Since contingents dressed in ethnic-folkloristic clothes march under banners of the country’s regions, such as ‘Northern Region’ and so forth, ethnic-regional diversity is subordinated to the administrative units of the nation-state. Ethnicity, potentially competing with nationality, is thus performed as controlled social belonging that does not challenge the nation-state, but rather confirms it (Lentz, 2017).

Looking closely at the participants’ bodies, one can also see that some delegations use props or accessories to complete their dress. These usually underscore the category of belonging presented through dress. Thus, troops representing vocational categories use props from their respective occupational fields (nurses have stethoscopes hanging around their necks; dairy farmers carry calabashes, etc.). In some cases, however, the prop items represent markers of distinction of other categories, revealing that participants have some room in designing the performance. For example, the women of a delegation may decide to wrap cloth around their hips or heads in a fashion that is associated with a specific ethnic group (Figure 9). Individuals, too, can mark ethnic or religious belonging by accessorising their dress with a specific cloth or jewellery. During several national-day parades one could, for instance, spot women wearing headscarves, indicating their Muslim identity (Figure 10). One can also observe differences in hairstyle. Generally, men wear short hair, whereas women draw from a vast spectrum of hairstyles like cornrows, braids or wigs. Especially when a delegation opts for unisex clothing for men and women, hair becomes the main marker of distinction. While some women opt for uniform hair styles within their delegation (Figure 11), others display individual hairstyles (Figure 12). In short, accessories and hairstyle constitute an important means for the participants of performing gender, individuality and ethnic belonging. By leaving the decision whether they wish to perform these differences up to the participants themselves, the organisers delegate part of the orchestration to them. Thus, while the options for clothing are limited and restricted, accessories and props allow the stressing of certain categories of belonging, either underpinning the affiliation represented through dress, or crosscutting it, and thereby underpinning or crosscutting the organisers’ orchestration.

Dress and the choice of accessories is thus, to a certain extent, beyond the organisers’ control. An incident that the chairman of the CNO parade commission 2015 reported made that particularly clear. On the morning of 11 December 2015, one
delegation wore simple white t-shirts, but two women had t-shirts reading ‘Non au référendum’ on the back, which had been produced the year before in the context of a debate about a constitutional amendment that finally provoked a national uprising, forcing President Blaise Compaoré, to step down. ‘How could they wear
these t-shirts on the national day?” the chairman asked. However, he only saw the shirts when the women were already marching. ‘What could I do about it?’, he asked when reporting the incident, stressing that no matter how strict the organisers planned the parade, there is always a risk of deviation in participants’ behaviour on 11 December. Performing the nation through the parade is thus not to be comprehended as a product of top-down implementation, but as the outcome of a complex field of interdependency co-directed by both organisers and participants.

**Figure 11.** Girls with cowrie shells in their hair; national-day parade 2013, Dori. © Gabriel.

**Figure 12.** Female participants with individual hairstyles; national-day parade 2013, Dori. © Gabriel.

**actising and parading as shared experience**

So far, we have looked at the practices of disciplining bodies and making them similar and/or different by sorting, choreographing, and dressing them. Reducing the rehearsals to these practices, however, does not grasp the production of the parade in its entirety. For the participants and organisers the preparation of the parade is much more than learning/teaching placing one foot in front of the other and moving uniformly to the rhythm of the music. In this section, we discuss how
participants and organisers experience the weeklong rehearsals and the performance on Independence Day, arguing that these moments generate a shared experience for all the actors involved. Since parades, like any performance, run the risk of failure (in terms of deviations from the organisers’ planning) and largely depend on the cooperation and self-discipline of all actors involved, the sense of community generated through the rehearsals constitutes another important ‘ingredient’ for the realisation of the parade.

First of all, participants and organisers share the experience of training as physical exhaustion. During a dozen rehearsals under the sun and in clouds of dust dispersed by hundreds of feet stamping the ground, during hours of training that make everyone sweat, with some fainting and others crying, every participant and military instructor physically feels his/her involvement. The three group rehearsals preceding the national day, usually lasting from 6 am to 3 pm or longer, are considered to be particularly demanding physically. The contingents from other regions that have travelled to the hosting region often feel especially exhausted, not least because their food and housing are improvised. Staying almost a week in the hosting region, what many participants initially considered an adventure often turns out to be an experience marked by deprivation. In meetings with the organisers, the points focaux regularly bring up issues of frustration suffered by the participants. However, the organisers, too, suffer similar privations; and although they consider themselves to be more used to low standards than the civilian participants, they, too, feel the lack of sleep, among other challenges. Knowing that both participants and organisers invest great efforts and that they experience the same hardships creates a certain sense of community and commitment between them. In 2016, for instance, several delegations complained about their poor accommodations and threatened to quit. However, when they learned that even the chairman of the CNO parade commission lacked running water in the place where he stayed, they spread the news while encouraging each other to stick it out. In turn, when in November 2015 the interim government informed the CNO that it was thinking about cancelling the national-day parade out of security concerns, the chairman of the CNO parade commission spoke out for the participants, announcing that he would make them parade anyway, be that in the military camp that he commanded. They had invested great efforts that deserved to be honoured, he argued. Thus, although the rehearsals are based on the distinction between civilian trainees and military instructors, they also create a sort of team spirit and mutual commitment that seems fundamental for the realisation of the parade.

The rehearsals also generate shared moments of joy and excitement. During and after the rehearsals one can spot instructors and participants chatting, joking with each other, and teasing each other. The experience of togetherness that the partaking in the parade generates becomes particularly evident on the morning of Independence Day, when the participants are lined-up on the parade route, eagerly waiting to step onto the scene. In spite of all the suffering endured during the rehearsals, there is no sign of exhaustion or frustration on Independence Day. On the contrary, the participants exude excitement, enjoyment, pride and pleasant anticipation, mingled with
some nervousness. One participant, who had taken part in the parade several times, recapitulated the atmosphere among the waiting participants as follows:

Some are afraid, some panic, and most are tired. On 11 December (‘Jour J’) we have to get up very early, at four o’clock we are already awake, but the ceremony will only start at nine o’clock. Thus, we are already tired, and, of course, we will suffer from thirst . . . Moreover, thousands of people will be looking at us. It might go well, just as it might go badly. There are so many questions in your head like, ‘Will I march to the rhythm when we arrive in front of the presidential stand?’

While waiting, they chat excitedly with one another, they dance and sing, and they take pictures with each other, with their point focal, and with the bypassing soldiers whom they know from the rehearsals (Figure 13). The points focaux and military instructors often stay with the participants until the protocol requires that they take their seats or until they are obliged to carry out other duties, motivating them, making them practise marching one last time, and providing them with sugar cubes and water. One instructor of the Independence Day parade 2016, who during the parade would play in one of the military bands, emphasised that a certain bond

Figure 13. A delegation taking pictures with the Vice-Chair of the CNO parade commission of 2016 on the morning of Independence Day 2016, Kaya. © Gabriel.
had formed between him and ‘his’ participants in the course of the rehearsals when he insisted on seeing ‘his’ participants before taking on his responsibilities as musician. ‘They want to see me, they say they want me to be there with them, and no one else’, he said with a smile on his face.49 One participant taking part in the parade of the same year expressed the sense of community as a cooperation: ‘As a saying goes: “If someone washes your back, it is up to you to wash your face”’. Thus, the organisers have played their role, and now it is up to us to play our part.50

After hours of waiting, the ceremony finally begins. Altogether, the parade lasts for about two-and-a-half hours. Yet, the actual marching of each delegation past the stands only lasts a few minutes. While they march by all eyes (and all smartphones) are on the participants, as are the journalists’ photo and video cameras. Marching past the president, state officials, journalists, and family and friends is the crucial moment. The spectators may comment on the delegations’ performances by remaining silent, giggling (rare) or applauding, the latter often being the case when the primary school pupils march by. Sometimes individuals are granted extra applause, such as, for instance, a woman participating in the national-day parade 2016 who was cheered because she was not bothered at all that the cloth placed on her shoulder had fallen, and she proudly continued marching. In short, the actual time spent marching might be comparatively short, but it is a crucial moment in the overall parading experience, deciding over the success of the performance of individual bodies, of single entities, and of the parade as a whole.

Having passed the presidential dais, the experience of partaking in the national-day parade is not yet over. As a rule, after parading the participants are provided with soft drinks and a special ‘upgraded’ dinner ‘to make them feel that it’s Independence Day’.51 This festive dinner is also considered part of the group experience. ‘Our aim is to celebrate together, and celebrating together means eating together’, the 2015 chairman of the CNO parade commission stressed.52 Afterwards, the participants and organisers disperse. Some join the activities of the festive programme; others gather in bars to have a beer, or just fall into bed. The next day, the delegations that came from regions other than the hosting region travel back home, taking an experience with them that comprises much more than just marching.

Preparing the parade thus generates a shared experience that comprises many other dimensions than learning/teaching how to march. The rehearsals are actually events in their own right, taking place in an atmosphere that is, on the one hand, marked by work, professionalism, discipline, exhaustion and the distinction of military instructors and civilian trainees; on the other hand, it is punctuated by informal conversations, familiarity, joking, and making friends. Particularly the actual performance on Independence Day is a crucial moment that all actors involved confront with eagerness and nervousness, and also after the parade the actors share the excitement and relief when it is finally over and done. The rehearsals and the actual performance on Independence Day thus are not only about disciplining bodies but also about these shared experiences generating a sense of
community. Parades and the rehearsals that precede them apparently not only produce the appearance of sameness and uniformity but actually create an experience that all involved actors share and that overcome, to a certain extent, even the distinction between military instructors and civilian trainees.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored practices of disciplining bodies and making them appear similar and/or different by looking at the production process of the civil part of Burkina Faso’s national-day parade, shedding light on how such parades and the rehearsals that precede them mirror and produce images of the nation and of intra-national differences. Looking at the arranging, choreographing and dressing of the participants, we have analysed how these practices on the one hand produce an image of similarity, while on the other hand also leaving room for displaying differences. Within the overall image of sameness, mainly evoked through the arranging and choreographing of the participants’ bodies, the organisers highlight certain differences, while suppressing or overlooking others. The degree to which differences are actively encouraged or accepted being performed obviously varies according to their disruptive potential with regard to national belonging. Above all, the specific organisation of the civilian parade highlights profession: The civilians represent distinct occupational fields grouped under the banner of ministries, staging the nation as one that is active and progressive. Ethnicity, on the other hand, which potentially competes with or disrupts national belonging, is largely confined to displays of cultural diversity organised along the nation-state’s internal administrative boundaries. The performing of gender and religious belief is less regulated by the organisers, and it is left up to the participants themselves to decide on whether they wish to display these differences or not. Taken together, the handling of the participants’ bodies during rehearsals is a means of controlling heterogeneity and reducing it to a manageable degree by displaying some differences while covering or subordinating others. The central tool of ‘doing the nation’ in national-day parades is thus the consciously planned evocation of differences that are then stratified and re-imagined as lower-level internal variations.

Our performative, praxeological approach, with its specific focus on the rehearsals and not only on the performance as such, enriches studies on the performing of the nation and on parades in particular by making the production process the focus of interest. Taking into account both the organisers and the participants, our paper has highlighted that performances of the nation as produced through civilian parades are co-productions of all actors involved. The staging of the parade is not a simple ‘top-down’ process – although the power to enforce certain norms and standards is unevenly distributed – but a process of interdependency and interaction, setting parades at the intersection of military training and participants’ agency. Finally, our ethnographic analysis of the rehearsals has offered insights into what else they create beyond parading persons. We have argued
that the rehearsals not only produce marchers performing during a short-lived spectacle, but also a long-term experience shared by all actors involved, encouraging an understanding of parades not only as ephemeral events but as social interactions that also have lasting impacts.

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Notes

1. Interview with the chairman of the parade commission of the regional organising committee (Comité regional d’organisation de la fête nationale du 11 décembre/CRO) of 2014, 28 October 2014. This and other quotations from documents and interviews have been translated from French by the authors.
2. For a general discussion of the concept of difference and sameness, see Hirschauer (2017).
between 1871 and 1914; Azaryahu (2013) explores the changing role of military parades held on the Israeli national day; Müller (2008) analyses German military parades in the light of historical changes.

5. An exception is Marston (2002), who, by exploring the discussions about whether delegations of homosexuals might participate in the Irish national-day parades, discusses the role of sexual identity in parades.

6. See, for instance, Marston (1989); Schultz (1994); Fabre, Heideking and Dreisbach (2001); De Maaker (2013); and Leal (2014).

7. This is the sense in which the concept of cultural performance was developed by Milton Singer (1991); see also Fischer-Lichte and Roselt (2001: 247). Clifford Geertz’s (1972) analysis of the Balinese cock fight as an expression of masculinity is one example of studies in this vein. For an African example, see Apter (2005).

8. See, for example, a number of studies on parades during and after the French Revolution that served to both display and produce Frenchness in France (see Ozouf, 1976; Hunt, 2004) and in the colonies (N’Guessan and Spåth, 2016).

9. There are further important aspects of the parades that cannot be discussed with sufficient detail in this paper, such as the organisation of space, both on a macro and a micro level (on this aspect, see Gabriel et al., 2016; and N’Guessan et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is worthwhile analysing the music that is played during the parade (see Hoffmann, 2003; Schramm, 2008), and the way the media covers the parade (see e.g. Hölscher, 2009; Kuever, 2012).

10. See Surak (2012) on a similar perspective on the making and maintaining of nations.

11. There are simultaneous celebrations in the country’s regions (N’Guessan et al., 2017); in this paper, however, we focus on the parade of the central celebration marked by the presence of the head of state.

12. For more information on how the events influenced the national day in 2014, see Gabriel (2016).

13. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the history of the Burkinabé national-day parade that has led to its present format. For a detailed historical analysis of Burkina Faso’s national day, see Haberecht (2017: 55–130).

14. Having the parade on a square is an alternative. The central Ghanaian Independence Day parade, for example, is held on Independence Square in Accra, built in 1961 explicitly for hosting major national ceremonies, which predetermines the marching in a distinct manner. The decision whether to parade on a street or on a square seems largely inspired by the festive traditions of the former colonisers (see Gabriel et al., 2016: 110–17).

15. Interview, 30 November 2013. The recruitment in the hosting region is also considered a financial and pragmatic advantage, reducing the cost for transport, accommodation, and catering.


17. Interview, 30 November 2013.

18. Notes taken during rehearsals in Dédougou, 8 November 2014.

19. On the creation of that narrative during the colonial era and its adaptation after independence, see Haberecht (2017: 39–41; 66–69).

20. Interview with the chairman of the CNO parade commission of 2016, 28 November 2016.

21. Guidelines for rehearsal supervisors, formulated by the CNO parade commission, 2012. These numbers do not include replacements.
24. The positioning according to height seems a nearly universal organisational principle for ceremonial parades. In the German guard of honour, the Wachbataillon, for example, height is a common organisational principle, too (interview with a protocol officer at the Ministry of Defence, Berlin, 29 September 2016).
25. An exception is the troops representing the country’s regions, which generally position female participants at the front of the contingent and male participants at the back – the performance of gender thus seems to be considered as more ‘adequate’ for the delegations representing the regions than for those representing socio-professional groups.
26. Notes taken during the joint session of the national and regional organising committees, 3 December 2014.
27. The vice-chairman of the CNO parade commission of 2014 often used these words to complain about commonly held but inadequate understandings of the parade.
28. Conversation with a participant during a rehearsal at Ouagadougou, 26 November 2015.
30. Interview with a participant, 21 November 2016.
32. Notes taken during a debriefing session of the CNO parade commission, 7 December 2015.
33. Notes taken during a rehearsal at Ouagadougou, 24 November 2016.
34. Notes taken during a debriefing session of the CNO parade commission, 7 December 2015.
35. The paper says: ‘Teach the participants to use the “eye of the chameleon”, that means having a view towards the front and the sides without turning the head and to whisper to one another in the rows to correct the position of their row or the general posture’ (Guidelines for rehearsal supervisors, formulated by the CNO parade commission, 2012).
37. Interview with a participant, 21 November 2016.
38. Conversation with a point focal during a rehearsal at Ouagadougou, 24 November 2016.
40. See, for example, Röschenthaler (2015) on especially printed commemorative or festive cloth; Hendrickson (1996) on clothing as a marker of ethnicity, modernity, gender and profession; see also more generally Andrewes (2005) on dress as cultural tool; and Allman (2004) on the expression of political leanings through clothing.
41. We use this term to refer to stylised clothes that are predominantly worn during ceremonies and cultural festivals and contain markers associated with distinct regions or ethnic groups.
42. Yet, not all types of uniform are readily accepted. When several telecommunications companies offered to provide numerous delegations with t-shirts displaying the companies’ logos, the CNO heatedly debated whether this would give private enterprises too
much visibility compared to the state (notes taken during a meeting of the CNO, 21 November 2015). Similar debates were observed and analysed by Lauren Adrover (2015) in her research on festival dress worn by followers of Ghanaian chiefs.

43. Names of two ethnic groups.
44. Conversation, 14 December 2015.
45. Conversation, 14 December 2015.
46. In general, delegations from other regions stay in school classrooms cleared for the occasion.
47. The government’s concern resulted from an attempted coup in September 2015, which caused great insecurity, as well as from the forthcoming presidential elections in December 2015, which demanded the employment of all security forces.
48. Interview with a participant during a rehearsal at Ouagadougou, 21 November 2016.
50. Conversation with a participant, conducted by a research assistant, 11 December 2016.
51. The CNO parade commission instructed the regional commission in charge of providing food to the participants to make sure the dinner on 11 December was special.
52. Notes taken during a meeting of the CNO parade commission, 8 December 2015.

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