

The evolution of popular music in the Third Republic of the Democratic Republic of Congo [1997-2018] - years of artistic sterility

A evolução da música popular na Terceira República da
República Democrática do Congo [1997-2018] - anos de
esterilidade artística

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The scrutiny of lyrics from various genres and styles of popular music in Africa reveals the level of attention and affection composers have given to their art as they capture in their lyrics or artifacts the essence of the social, economic and political climate in the daily life of their community. In the realm of music, these concerns are demonstrated by the high level of artistic productivity of their works in terms of form and content. Perusing my own contribution in this rubric in the popular music of Democratic Republic of Congo reveals that in times of peaceful atmosphere, composers of popular music continue with their productivity regardless of their political or religious affiliation. This urges one to concur with the statement that music reflects the reality of where it was composed, or simply, that music is the mirror of the cultural context of its composer.

The eighteen years that I have elected to call “The Period of Sterility”, is a period during which, due to the reign of terror systematically implanted by the Rwandese Hippolyte Kanambe Kazembere, aka Joseph Kabila Kabange, Raïs, China-Rambo, and his regime, there was a decrease in the production of popular music. Furthermore, I argue that during the same period, all infrastructures, social, educational, health-related, etc. in the country were abandoned to petrify. It can be asserted that the country and all its infrastructures were doomed to

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destruction, and the population was deeply ignored and abandoned by the leadership in a climate of fear. This era will be baptized in 2020 by President Tshisekedi of “Republic of the Untouchables”². In the field of urban music, specifically, composers became fearful of reprisals by the government, and shifted as the focus of their source of inspiration the ethnic traditional rhythms and dances. For a better understanding of this assertion, this article begins with a gradual description of the history of artistic productions of the popular music of DRC during the decades preceding the target period of sterility.

Background

Elsewhere, I outlined contextually the evolutionary continuum of the urban music in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from its socio-economic, demonstrating its genesis in the urban center of Kinshasa, and defining not only the urban context from which the music drew its signification, but also demonstrating the collaboration of musicians from neighboring nations in the definition process (MUKUNA, 1993). I have also revealed phenomena that affected the content of urban musical expression during the three decades of Mobutu Seseko’s tenure as President of the Second Republic - Zaire (1965-1997; MUKUNA, 1999). Specifically, in the article in which I discussed the first decade, I highlighted the negative effect brought about by the ramification of downfall of political and economic infrastructures on the social life of the country and pointed out the salvation documentation recorded in the bulk of lyrics of songs written during the entire period. One thing was made clear by the above contextual analysis scrutiny of musical productivity. In spite of their political affiliation with the government, composers remained productive documenting the situation of the country in the lyrics of their songs laden with sentiment of the quest for salvation from the miseries which permeated all facets of life, in the capital cities and rural areas alike. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja brilliantly outlines the contextual history of the transition from Zaire to the DRC in his article “From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” (NZONGOLA-NTALAJA, 1998a) in which he points out some of the ramifications for the downfall of Mobutu’s regime in the economy and social of the country.

According to Nzongola, Mobutu ruled the country as its new king, as the rightful owner of the country and its abundant resources. Continuing with his assessment of Mobutu’s presidency, Nzongola asserts that the demise of Mobutu was directly related to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that was also one of the defining moments of the shabby political situation in the Great Lakes region (NZONGOLA-NTALAJA, 1998a, p. 7). Finally, as Nzongola argues, the downfall of President Mobutu in 1997 was coupled with the failure to respect the sovereignty of the DRC by the liberating forces from Rwanda and Uganda. This failure gave rise to the Third Republic - the Democratic Republic of the Congo that lasted until the elections of November 2018.

² President Felix Tshisekedi Tshilombo address to the nation.

Unlike the first decade (1975-85) of the Second Republic, which was characterized by Mobutu's political activities and those of his regime as characterized by Nzongola above, the second and third decades were stigmatized further by the decadence of the political infrastructure. These conditions sent a series of negative waves of desperation that gradually culminated into the denouement of President Mobutu's thirty-two-year regime (May 20, 1965 through May 17, 1997). Nzongola writes, "Millions of people became destitute and fallen into a deplorable state of physical want, while many others were struggling to preserve themselves and their dependents from such a cruel fate" (NZONGOLA-NTALAJA, 1998a, p. 15) To make matters worse, a rebellion started in Katanga province came to be known as the "Yugoslavisation of Zaire". This insecurity to divide people and to implicate their followers in the act of ethnic cleansing was exploited politically leaving some of the country's regions in a state of fear. Thousand died in the ensuing violence and in the dangerous trek of nearly a million people to Eastern and Western Kasai (id., p. 16) The presidential elections of 2018 theoretically ended the Kanambe regime and gave rise to the present regime, under President Felix Antoine Tshilombo Tshisekedi, from the Socialist political party Union pour la Democratie et le Progres Social (UDPS). With the slogan of "Peuple d'Abord" (People First) as the driving force of change, the new regime encountered challenges in each and every aspect of the country's lawlessness infested with corruption. The new regime had to work hard to establish the respect for the law and put an end to the "Republic of the Untouchables".

A Period of Desperation

The last two decades of Mobutu's reign were a period of great hardship during which miseries were rampant and prominent in all aspects of social life. This was also a period of desperation, when the country and its population were caught in the midst of the political and economic power struggle, without relief. For the majority of the people in rural areas as well as in urban circles, the metropolitan centers, the quality of life declined drastically, creating a climate of uncertainty and insecurity (NZONGOLA-NTALAJA, 1998a, p. 16). This environment was ideal for a large number of demagogues and self-proclaimed preachers to recruit vulnerable masses of followers in order to gain or retain power (ibid.). This was a period when the population turned to the higher providence seeking deliverance from the suffering. In spite of all this, musically, composers continued to be productive documenting the prevailing conditions in the lyrics of their songs even by making use of metaphors in order to camouflage the intended message (cf. MUKUNA, 1999).

This prevailing chaotic situation was well reflected in the lyrics of songs composed during the last two decades of Mobutu's reign. In theater, comedians also found ways of helping the population cope with the effects of the deplorable condition, utilizing metaphorical mockery language. The population's desperate hope that was already engulfed in miseries became the driving force of inspiration for both comedians and musicians, who wrote the plays and composed the songs of motivation that invited the population to concentrate their energy where they

could receive comfort.³ Examination of the repertoire composed during this period reveals three categories of song lyrics, each of which reflected the composers' understanding of the extent to which miseries had already taken their toll on the population. In the first category, songs addressed the fact that the population became convinced of the power of prayer for deliverance. This awareness resulted in an increase in the number of song lyrics spiked with religious messages, and the number of actual sites for prayers. The second category of songs was dominated by lyrics in which the population was blaming itself for their own hardship. In this category, musicians explored the theme of forgiveness: "Sambela Nzambe alimbisa yo" (Pray to God for Forgiveness); "Mokili ekokufa masumu eleki, kasi kombo ya Nzambe ekotikala seko"⁴ (the world will end, there is too much sin, but the name of the Lord will remain forever). This shift for the quest of salvation through prayers began towards the end of the first decade, as a prelude to what was to come later.

The second song category was characterized by lyrics spiked with hidden messages that hinted at the pain that was then being felt (1980s) and called for stronger relations. There was a large number of songs that fell within this category, such as "Boya Ye!" (Ignore Him) & "Motu Akokufa" (Someone will die) by Tabu Ley, "Coeur Artificiel" (Artificial Heart) & "Eau Benite" (Holy Water) by Lutumba Simaro, and "Tres Impoli" (Very Impolite) by Luambo Makiadi, which reflected the reality of the moment and underlined the extent to which miseries had been affecting the population. This period also coincided with the dislocation of several bands and the exodus of musicians and bands to foreign countries in quest for survival.

Songs with lyrics that dealt directly with the subject matter of miseries, dominated the third category. An excellent example of these is "Offela", in which the composer Lutumba Simaro approaches the reality from a lover's vantage point, pointing out that miseries were the cause of their separation (MUKUNA, 1994, p. 69-70). In "Andrada"⁵ Koffi Olomide suggests a prayer atmosphere by beginning the prelude with a chant reminiscent of the Gregorian. The entire subject matter developed in "Muzina" by Tabu Ley is also a prayer urging the population to pray to ease its pain. Even though it was composed on the eve of Mobutu's fall from power, the theme song "Wake Up" also carries a hidden message. In this song Olomide opens with a spoken line saying "Tozali ko vivre na system ya lifelo, veut dire, moto ezali kopela kasi tozali kozika te, ebende kutu ezali pete" (We are living in a system of hell, i.e., the fire is hot, even the iron is soft, but we are not burning). The composer is using the metaphor to declare that in of the unbearable condition, in which we have been submitted, we are still alive. To the authorities, this message can be interpreted as defiance (no matter what you do to us, we continue to survive; we can take whatever you are capable of dishing out). Ironically, this song was joyfully interpreted to the popular dance of the period called 'moto' (fire). In the song "Pardon" that the vocalist Madilu System calls his gospel, he expresses his refusal to suffer in these terms:

³ As I roamed through the streets of Kinshasa in 1994, the number of prayer meeting places, most of which were private homes, struck me.

⁴ A passage from "Mabele" by Lutumba Ndomanueno 'Simaro'.

⁵ Listen to Koffi Olomide 1995.

*Mama aboti ngai na mpasi
Ngai mwana na koli
Naboyi na kufa na mpasi*

*Mother gave birth to me in miseries
And now I grew up
I refuse to die in miseries*

Perhaps the theme of miseries in the urban music of the last decade [1985-1995] of the Second Republic reached its apogee with the song entitled “Golgotha”, interpreted by the female singer Tshala Mwana⁶. In this song the composer not only underlines the level of desperation provoked by miseries, but he seems to discourage from calling on God for deliverance. The composer’s message is a negative one. While the population feels forgotten, abandoned and betrayed by their God to whom they have been praying for deliverance from their miseries, they cannot see the long-awaited results. This feeling of ultimate desperation is cast within the frame of the Luba traditional proverb called *nsumwinu* to dramatize its message of miseries and abandonment:

*Bakenga ne nzala ne masama
Babikila Nzambi wabu wa basantu
Kuyi wandamuna, kuyi umona anyi.
Yopo wani udi peni*

*They suffer from hunger and illnesses
They call upon their God the holiness
You do not respond, you do not see
My God where are you?*

The most dramatic verse of this song is the reply the population received from a voice saying that they should not count too much on God who abandoned His own son Jesus to die on the cross on Golgotha.

*Ba bandamuna ne
Nzambi wa katangila
Pakadi Yezu mwanenda ukula moyi
Pa nkuruse mashi apweka,
Ne Golgotha*

*They were answered that
God looked on
As His son Jesus gave up the ghost
Blood gushing on the cross
Of Golgotha*

Gradually, as the end of his regime was drawing near, Mobutu regime introduced two of the most remarkable laws which the regime will be overtly challenged by the population, with impunity. These laws were relative to the use of Christian names and to the dress code. Although the latter law prohibited men to wear neck ties and females to wear dresses in public, this law was either challenged or flatly ignored without fear for reprisal from the government. This *laisse alle* will be short lived with the implantation of the new regime. This assertion is corroborated by the gradual censorship of the song written shortly before the arrival of the Rwandese army. To better comprehend what is being argued in this article, there is a need for a brief history of the capital city of Kinshasa.

⁶ Listen to Sonodisc CDS- 63707.

Kinshasa

In spite of the frequent name changes for the same geographic space that served as the site for the Independent State of Congo, during the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) and became the capital city of the country (COMHAIRE-SYLVAIN, 1950, p. 11), the name of Kinshasa was officially reinstated at the country's independence in 1960 and maintained to the present day. Since its inception, the city of Kinshasa has served as source of various inspiration to musicians who sang boasting different aspects of Kinshasa, a city that completed its first century on December 1, 1981. It is affectionately called in short as Kin and its population is known as Kinois. It is also proudly called as "Kin Malebo", for its geographic proximity to the Stanley Pool also known as Malebo Pool, the name probably derived from the palm tree species of the *borassus* family that dominated the landscape; "Kin la Belle" (Kinshasa the Beautiful), "Mpotoyindo" (Black Europe), for example, are names that address its physical beauty and the *joie de vivre* that were once identified with the city; but the name "Lipopo" was given to Kinshasa for the unique lifestyle full of challenges and surprises it presents to its population.

Each of these names or expressions denotes explicit meaning to one generation and conjures up specific memories of affinity to other generations. This assertion is sustained by a collection of compositions written by different composers describing an aspect of the city of Kinshasa. Compositions ranged from "Potopoto Mboka Monene" (ca. 1960) by the mbira player from Brazzaville Antoine Mundanda to "Kinshasa" composed by the Congolese singer Jean-Bedel Mpiana (ca. 2008). The theme of "Kinshasa" was also composed by the Cameroonian musician Francis Bebey (1929-2001).

Whereas in his composition Mundanda compares Kinshasa with Potopoto, a popular city in Congo Brazzaville, and marvels at the beauty and the *joie de vivre* of Kinshasa, Jb Mpiana (b. Jean-Bedel MPIANA 1967) sings of the deplorable state in which the city of Kinshasa had been reduced about half a century later during the new regime. Perhaps the best summation of songs boasting about what the city of Kinshasa meant as a true metropolitan area to the continent of Africa is "Kinshasa", composed by the Cameroonian musician Francis Bebey (1929-2001) after his short visit to the city. He writes in one of the song verses, "If I would have to choose where to be born again, I would choose Kinshasa..." In a more recent composition, Jean-Bedel Mpiana (b. 1967) describes the present deplorable state of the city by reminding his listeners of the glorious phases Kinshasa was known for, going from being called Kin la Belle (Kinshasa the Beautiful) to becoming known today as Kin la Poubelle (Kinshasa the Trash Can).

Although the city of Kinshasa began to lose its beauty long before the end of the second decade of Mobutu's regime, the situation gradually worsened in parallel with other aspects of social infrastructure (MUKUNA, 1980; NZONGOLANTALAJA, 1998b). Because of the descriptive nature of this song, "Kinshasa" was shortly censored by the regime and prohibited even to be broadcast on the radio throughout the country. Jb Mpiana described Kinshasa with these terms:

*Parci, par là matanga
Parci, par la ba feti
Parci, par là ba fulu
Parci, par là ba wenze
Parci, par là bakangi motu
Yoka kuna bayibi
Parci, par là ba shegue
Parci, par là ba tiya motu bakata
Oyo lokola Sodoma
Oyo lokola Gomora, soucis!*

*Funeral wakes everywhere
Celebrations everywhere
Piles of trash everywhere
Market places everywhere
Everywhere someone' been arrested
Over there they've buggerized
Homeless youth everywhere
Delinquents everywhere
This is like Sodom
This is like Gomorah, worry!*

This composition and others about aspects of the city of Kinshasa began to flourish from the genesis period of the Congolese rumba (1939-1963) prior to the declaration of the country's independence in 1960. Several other composers contributed to this list with perspectives of what they held dear about the city of Kinshasa or what they lament about what the city of Kinshasa has become over the years. For the most part, the bulk of these songs not only boasted of the beauty, but also warned the population about the danger of falling victim to the hidden challenges beneath the city's beauty and *joie-de-vivre*.

Further observation of the repertoire composed during the Republic of Untouchables reveals yet another practice identified by the effect of a different kind of miseries affecting directly or indirectly local musicians. Among the Luba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo the practice of publicly singing/reciting an individual's name, his/her deeds and accomplishments, his/her family lineage, and all with which he/she constitutes a cosmos; all that bring meaning/significance to his/her life, is commonly known as '*ku tendelela*'. Often, in the traditional context, these are dignitaries and powerful people who have made valuable contributions to the community. When the name of an ill-behaved person in the community is called in a song, it is not to praise, but is rather a sort of social control aimed at exposing that person. Among the Luba ethnic group, parents address *Nyimbu ya Kusansula* (Songs of Praises) to their children (MUKUNA, 1980). This practice should not be confused with that called '*ku sengelela*' in which the objective is to appease, to calm, to cajole. Neither of these practices is unique to the Luba nor to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they can certainly also be found throughout Africa.

In any communal gathering, music-event or event-music, for example, it is common for the performer to mention the name of an individual in his song or to play his instrument directly in front of someone in attendance. In essence, this is a form of publicly recognizing the individual or simply recognizing his/her presence at the gathering. One response the attending individual can give to recognize such a gesture is to express his/her thanks monetarily. Another acceptable response is for the individual to dance, especially when an instrument player performs directly in front of the individual. In the urban music of the Democratic Republic of the Congo this practice was carried out in club concerts and in studios, often as a way of thanking the individual for his/her patronage, i.e., attending the band's concerts, making donations, or simply becoming a friend of the band. It is also an occasion for the band to give free publicity to a corporation which has been supportive.

The Period of Sterility [1997-2018]

The Third Republic was marked by the downfall of the reign of Mubutu Sese Seko, coupled with the entrance of the Rwandese army of rebels into the country, on May 17, 1997. This army of Rwandese made its entrance into the Congo under the command of the Congolese Laurent Desire Kabila (LDK). After less than two years as the head of the country, LDK was assassinated and his so-called son Joseph Kabila was installed as the President of the country. During his reign, JK established fear through terror identified with the practice of arbitrary arrestation, corruption, imprisonment without trial, and murders throughout the nation, etc. All these conditions turned the country into a “Banana Republic”, where the rich and powerful were above the law and untouchables. The immediate result was a climate of fear that deprived the population of their freedom of speech and expression.

During the previous decades, in spite of the rampant misery, artists kept producing their work, complaining about the existing misery but continuing to be productive. In the domain of the arts, composers wrote some of the most meaningful songs lyrically and melodically. The content of some of these are transcribed and analyzed herein. It became daring to adventure outside of the imposed values in music, and the entire period of 18 years remained sterile.

Among cases that occurred during this period, the following sustains our sterility hypotheses. One of the most notorious cases worth describing here is that of Bopanu Babongo Jimmy, a comedian turned itinerant salesperson, who made his living and supported his family selling candies in the market. To attract the attention of his potential clientele, he improvised tunes with comic lyrics in Lingala as he moved through the market. He improvised both the song and dance to the self-accompaniment of a single tin-can rattle.

<i>Eh yaya</i>	<i>Eh yah yah!</i>
<i>Kozanga musala pasi</i>	<i>It is hard being jobless</i>
<i>Tata ya bana aliye biloko ya mbanda</i>	<i>This man has eaten his rival's food</i>
<i>En tout</i>	<i>In any</i>
<i>En tout cas!</i>	<i>In any case!</i>

Mr. Bopanu Babongo Jimmy composed two types of songs. In one he described the nature of relationships between male and female in a home with a prelude asking a question to the audience “Ba tata na ba mama, banani bakonda?” (Men and women who have lost weight?) Reply: “Ba tata” (Men); “Ba tata and ba mama banani baye minene?” (Men and women who have gained weight?) Reply “Ba mama.” (Women) This prelude like song is jokingly performed in call-and-response with the participation by the audience to introduce his interpretation of subtle reasons what each ethnic group has contributed to the actual problems of Kinshasa.

<i>Baye kovanda na Kini</i>	<i>They came to live in Kinshasa</i>
<i>Ba teki biteka teka</i>	<i>Did all kinds of business</i>
<i>Ba boti boti na tembe</i>	<i>Had children without control</i>
<i>Ba tondisi Kinshasa</i>	<i>Filled Kinshasa</i>
<i>Kinshasa ekomi molunge</i>	<i>Kinshasa became stuffy</i>
<i>BALU - BALUBA</i>	<i>BALU - BALUBA</i>
<i>EN TOUT - EN TOUT CAS!</i>	<i>IN ANY CASE!</i>

*Ba uti uti ba mboka
Baye kotonda na Kini
Ba nduki nduki bomengo
Ba tongi tongi ba imeuble
Ba telema na ba niveau
Mpo te batala voisin musuri
BASWA - BASWAHILI
EN TOUT - EN TOUT CAS!*

*They came from villages
To fill Kinshasa
They accumulated wealth
Built lot of buildings
They stand on the balcony
To admire beautiful neighbor
BASWA - BASWAHILI
IN ANY CASE!*

Bopanu Babongo Jimmy's career was becoming popular, sharing stages with popular bands, television appearances, and possible recording contracts, but soon his popularity became short lived in the Republic of Untouchables where the powerful made unilateral decisions that affected people's lives. Also known by his stage name of "En tout cas", Bopanu's fame was terminated by a local government official who alleged that Jimmy's genre of songs was offensive to the population and promoted tribalism. The popularity of Bopanu's song is measured by the refrain passage being quoted in "Ambiance Eyenga" by Zaiko Langa Langa and Jossart Nyoka Longo.

*Eee yaya
Kozanga mosala Pasi,
Tata ya bana aleyi biloko ya mbanda*

*Eh
Jobless condition is hard
The Old man ate his rival's food*

In Kinshasa, there was a period when married women carried their families fanatically through hard times with their retail business activities. The song "Mobali ya Bololo" composed (Karmapa) accounts of a jealous and mistreating husband, who left nothing to his wife in the morning for her to cook, and yet expects to eat well when he returns home in the evening.

*Okoko beta beta ngai pamba
Likambo nayebi te
Okoswanisa ngai na ba nzela
Ata kutu zuwa eluta yo
Okotika 500 franc na tongo
Napokwa okosenga soso
Menusier ozali kosalela zuwa
Ya ngai na ye eloko moko te*

*You bit me for nothing
Reason that I do not know
You fight with me on the way to the market
Even with jealousy
You left 500 francs in the morning
In the evening you expect to eat chicken
Carpenter you are holding grudges against
There is nothing between us*

*Na tongo otikaki 500 francs
Na pokwa oleyi soso
Motu ya ngana opasoli
Opasoli parabrise na ye
Ye motu abakisa ka
Otuna ata te?*

*You left 500 francs in the morning
In the evening you want to eat chicken
The gentleman
Whose wind-shill you destroyed
He is the one that increases the money
You don't even ask?*

The Culture of Poison

During the period of sterility, in addition to the random imprisonment and killing by the government, there was also the new practice of elimination by poisoning. The fear was now spread by the lack of trust between friends and even siblings. But, at the end of the Kanambe's regime in 2018, musician began to

regain their courage and use direct language in their songs to denounce this evil practice that was introduced in the country by the invading Rwandese. This subject matter is best denounced in 2019 by Jossart Nyoka Longo in “System ya Benda” and in “Sielumoka Ngwasuma”, interpreted by the Zaiko Langa Langa. In “Sielumoka Ngwasuma” the composer is warning those concerned to stop these bad practices:

Zaiko Langa Langa

*Awa tokoti awa
Oyo akoyiba moninga*

*Now we gather here
Is there stilling from each other*

*Aza te
Tokobina awa
Oyo akofinga moninga
Aza te*

*NONE!
We are dancing here
Is there insult for the other?
NONE!*

*Tokobima awa
Likambo ya poison*

*We are going out
Is there the practice of poison*

Eza te

NONE!

Summation

In summation, during the period of sterility, musicians became nonproductive. Afraid of reprisals from the government, and to keep their band employed, most band leaders resorted to their ethnic background for inspiration or simply interpreted traditional folklore on modern musical instruments. In this category there is the obvious traditional Mongo influence in the melody, rhythm in the song “Eloko Oyo” by Fally Ipupa and the performed movements of the dance. Another obvious example is in the rhythm and dance of the song “Zenga Luketu” by Noel Ngiamakanda (b. 1965), aka Werrason that exhibit the characteristics of music and dance from the Kikwit region. These songs not only avoid addressing overtly any social, political, or economic issues, for fear of reprisal, and sustain our original hypothesis that musicians become less productive under fear.

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