

**Joyful Resonances:
Spirituality and Civic Engagement in the Music of
the Congolese Diaspora**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Eugenio Giorgianni, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

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Abstract

The research explores musical expressions of spirituality and political discourses produced by diasporic Congolese popular music makers through a participatory audiovisual ethnography. The main research fields are the following: elaboration of a Congolese musical nationalism in London underground jazz and African music scene; and the weekly performance of the music-based Congolese Catholic liturgy by the Bondeko parish choir in Rome, Italy. The common thread among these experiences is the idea of joy as a Central African mode of social and political action connecting human bodies to other entities through collective music-induced sensory ecstasy. The fluid nature of this ritual nexus links social reproduction to contact with the empowering, legitimating dead, configuring otherness (cultural, spiritual, and digital) as a source of vital energy. Thanks to the inclusive nature of music rites, Congolese musicians negotiate their position through new creative encounters, fostering processes of transculturation. The scenic display of Africanness spectacularises the diasporic joyful nexus without losing its ritual efficacy, while at the same time attracting other social and musical actors into the creative nexus. By renewing and pluralising the contact with their ancestors, these diasporic actors creatively face dramatic postcolonial challenges, and make a critique of their society in increasingly digitalised transnational Congolese public opinion by projecting their desires, longings, and frustrations onto the image of a redeemed Congo. The camera becomes an element of inclusion in music making and an intensifier of fieldwork relationships and emotions through the creation of collaborative music video clips with the musicians. Collaborative research practice and bodily involvement in music making through the camera give space for rethinking ethnomusicological practices through nonverbal forms of fieldwork interactions and more inclusive modes of academic communication.

Chapter one. Introduction

Seke Bien

Saturday 23 January 2016. I go to Mulele's place – a room in a warehouse in Manor House, North-East London – to shoot the video clip of his brand new song *Seke Bien*. When I enter the room, very smoky and packed with people, Mulele is still adding the vocal lines to the track. Coco Gabana, a Congolese artist featuring in *Seke Bien*, is singing into a studio microphone, while Mulele is recording through his laptop. Inside the room, there are another two Congolese friends, and Tanya, who is going to dance in the video.

Once the recording session has ended, we start setting up the room for the filming. We put some twenty big candles in a large circle, sticking them to the floor with some melted wax. Mulele puts a Congolese wooden mask right outside the circle of candles and places a wooden stick, a shell necklace, a little harp, and a small drum inside the circle, all close to the centre, together with his headstock-less guitar. Then, while I am setting up the camera and lights, he helps Tanya to get ready for the video, fastening a line of shells on her forehead and a straw skirt on her waist.

Tanya – quite surprised and amused – tries to ascertain what is going on. She is a Londoner of African Caribbean origin, and she does not have any insight into Congolese culture (apart from the fact that Mulele is a friend of hers). She had been asked a couple of days ago to feature in the video, and she accepted enthusiastically, even if she is quite concerned about how to dance to Congolese music.

“No worries, do it your way” Mulele reassures her, “Just listen to the music, and improvise. Look: we Congolese dance like that.” He shows her a sample of how to dance to his song, moving legs and waists, slightly bending the knees. “But you can do whatever you want.”

“Cause I know a bit of Senegalese dance, and I was thinking of doing a bit of that...”

“That's fine!” Mulele agrees, “It is an open thing, put whatever you like. More fire!”

“Am I supposed to use these things you put on the floor?” She refers to the stick, harp, and the rest of the paraphernalia Mulele had spread around on the floor.

“The thing is, music is power.” Mulele stops helping her with her makeup, and looks at her seriously “and the power comes out of the spirits, the spirits of our ancestors. And you, as a woman, you are powerful, and this power is magic. This is a bit of the idea of the song. The candles, and the mask there, are the magic. This is like the house of the *fétiche*, the *juju*. So, you are gonna be inside the circle of candles, and you are evocating the spirits of the ancestors, to put the power in the guitar.”

“Oh, wow! How can I do that?”

“You dance as you know, and then you create the atmosphere, you create the vibes, you create the fire!”

Tanya laughs. Then, she starts moving around the objects inside the circle; when she moves her arms, the several metallic bracelets that she is wearing clink together. Mulele steps back to watch the whole scenography: “Yes! More fire!”

We do the first take, with Tanya enacting the evocation of the spirits of the ancestors to the rhythm of the song. We are all quite satisfied with the result: Mulele and his friends keep on exclaiming ‘*Seke Bien!*’ (the track’s title, literally ‘it’s all right’, in the Lingala vernacular of Kinshasa)¹ approvingly, laughing every time someone shouts that sentence, which has become the motto of the day. During the break, Mulele has an idea for the next shot:

“Now, I have to enter the circle, in a trance. The dance is about trance, all the ritual means the trance.”

I film the first attempt, but the dynamics of the scene do not persuade any of the people involved. One of Mulele’s Congolese friends starts explaining to Tanya how to beckon Mulele inside the circle: “The

¹The use of the phrase in Kinshasa appears to be quite recent, as many mature speakers are not familiar with it. Well-known musicians Didier Lacoste consecrated the popularity of the expression with his song *Seke Bien* and Congolese star Koffi Olomide inserted the phrase in the lyrics of his hit song *Selfie*; both songs were released in 2015, a few months before Mulele recorded his *Seke Bien* track.

way you are doing is good; but before calling him, what I should do is something like this, to the guitar...” he waves his arms in the direction of the floor, as if to concentrate the energy towards the guitar.

“Ah ok, so I take the guitar and give it to Mulele...”

“No, first you put your power in the guitar, your magical power: you put it there, after you start to call him now. So: guitar, guitar...” the man moves his hands to the guitar on the floor. “After you do this...” he looks at the roof and shakes his arms, so as to evocate the spirits – and then you start to call Mulele.

After a few other takes, we have a long break during which we start watching the footage all together. Mulele’s friends are enthusiastic: they laugh watching themselves on the screen, keeping on saying ‘*Seke Bien!*’ all the time. Tanya looks at me, whispering: “I can’t stand this word anymore! Why do they keep on saying that?”

1.1 Presentation

This thesis is about spirituality and civic engagement through popular music within the Congolese diaspora. The study is conducted through a multi-sited audiovisual ethnography in the Congolese music scenes in London and Rome, Italy.

I chose to introduce my thesis with this vignette from an early field diary page for it brings into play several crucial aspects of the entire work. The account describes the first occasion I experimented with collaborative music video making as a research methodology while sharing the camera, the direction, and the performing space with Mulele Matondo Afrika, a key protagonist of this research. The scene in the warehouse manifests the deep entanglement between Congolese popular music forms and the concern with the spiritual world, plus the continual interactions between the two spheres in terms of inspiration, evocation, possession, celebration, and representation. By focusing on performance, this work privileges the sensorial aspects of music making, involvement of the body and the emotions, and the role of the objects in musical ecosystems.

The research explores musical expressions of spirituality, observing how conceptions of the human-divine relationship shape the research subjects' creativity, performance dynamics and social networks. This entanglement of the spiritual and the sensorial through music configures a crucial concern of this work: joy – a physical emotion and its performance – as a mode of social and political action connecting Central Africa and its diaspora to other cultures and places. The joyful re-enactment of a possession rite in Manor House – involving Congolese musicians, their African ancestors, and their London artistic friends – highlights the imaginative power of Africa and the dialogue conducted about it between various social actors.

The vignette shows all these elements in action together on a stage in North London, connected in an ecosystem of moving bodies, living spirits, objects and places. The empty rooms of this post-industrial urban setting epitomise the creative and conflictive spaces of the Congolese diaspora in Europe, wherein transnational subjects dream with, invent, claim, perform, and negotiate their multiple identities. There, amidst the constraints and opportunities of these transnational scenarios, the performances of cultural identities become political acts, and despite the compromises and ambiguities, practices of resistance.

The main research terrain here is the unstable field of encounters and clashes gravitating around the performances of Congolese music makers. The aim is to explore the link between music making and some of the international cultural agents intervening in Congolese society – namely, Congolese migrants living outside Africa and religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church operating with Congolese citizens living in Italy. The relevance of these actors for the thesis depends on the use of music as a means of exercising public opinion within the Congolese social network in both Africa and the diaspora.

Audiovisual collaboration with the research protagonists positions me, a complete outsider to the Congolese community, inside this force field of cultural contacts. The present work is conceived in

continuity with the dialogic processes of fieldwork, as a means to make sense of my involvement in the research through critical analysis.

In this chapter I present the main focuses of the research, the research protagonists, and the methodological choices. I introduce the principal aspects of the observed music forms, and the continuities and discrepancies between them, as part of a performative cultural mode that I define, paraphrasing Trapido (2015), as the joyful nexus.

In section 1.2, I describe the joyful nexus (1.2.1) in its historical processes of (re)definition, movement, and transformation in Central African and the diaspora, focusing my attention on the nodes of Transatlantic connections – the slave trade (1.2.2) and XX-XXI century migrations (1.2.6, 1.2.7) –, and colonial (1.2.3, 1.2.4) and postcolonial (1.2.5) reconfiguration in Congolese territories.

Section 1.3 presents the research protagonists of both London and Italian fieldwork sections underlining the dynamics that connect their musical experiences through the thesis. The section introduces the topic of ancestors as instrumental to critical positioning within the joyful nexus and to performances of Africanness in the diaspora, linking the musical elaboration of longing for home to the current political centrality of diasporic actors in the supra-local network of Congolese societies.

Section 1.4 illustrates the thesis research method, based on the experiment of collaborative ethnographic music video clips. I conceive the use of the camera as an intensifier of fieldwork sensation and relationships, an important element of reciprocity with the research protagonists, and a mode of fieldwork thinking and acting that privileges the body and collaborative commitment. Ethnographic filmmaking approaches the joyful nexus as a social drama, focusing on the body and the imaginary, the conflicts and the context. Music video clips, a prominent vehicle of transnational circulation of popular music (1.4.1), provide a rich setting for investigating non-verbal aspects of music production and the creative networks of diasporic music. By engaging in collaborative music video making with the research protagonists (1.4.2) I propose a radically collaborative method (1.4.3)

whose aim is creative rather than representative (1.4.4) and whose outcomes are mutually beneficial for all research protagonists.

1.2 Joyful resonances

A strand that runs throughout the thesis and makes a connection between the different locations, projects and protagonists, is the idea of joy, materialised in music as a mode of social and political action, a spiritual experience of connection with the otherworld, and a collective bodily drama of identity making and cultural transformations.

In the context of Congolese music making, the word ‘joy’ refers to more than an emotional state. It brings about a whole ritual nexus wherein vital and social energies are gathered, shared, claimed and disputed by individuals and groups through contact with otherworldly entities. Joy approximately translates the music-driven bodily overexcitement – ranging from trance-like states and semi-controlled frenzy to calmer forms of delight – experienced by the participants in the rite².

The semantic field we are looking at through the word ‘joy’ is rather unfamiliar; in fact, the homonymy may be misleading. In the present work, joy is seldom synonymous with happiness; often, it is a more extreme feeling, resembling Poststructuralists’ *jouissance*, on the edge between bliss and self-destruction. This bittersweet joy³ encompassing the feeling of death and the most exuberant vitality has its roots in the pre-colonial Lower Congo⁴ region and has maintained its

² I use the term ‘rite’ in accordance with Turner (1986) to signify collective religious gatherings, popular music gigs, as well as individual music making; in all the research contexts, the cultural significance of music activities expresses social ties and overpasses commercial and entertainment purposes regardless of the whereabouts.

³ Congolese director Mweze Ngangura dedicated his film *Kin Kiese* (1982) to “the bittersweet joys of the beautiful Kinshasa,” as the film subheading tells (*Les joies douces-amères de Kinshasa-la-Belle*). *Kiese*, alternative spelling for *kiese*, is a kiKongo word used in Kinshasa common language. MacGaffey (1991: 7) reports the traditional use of the term within Kongo ritual context translating it as “madness” rather than “happiness”.

⁴ Lower Congo is the region between the Congo river mouth at the Atlantic coast and the Pool Malebo, the latter be the location of the two Congolese capitals, Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Historically, this area has been the centre of the kingdoms of Kongo and Loango, and the cradle of the baKongo and several other ethnic groups who inhabit present-day Kinshasa, where most of the research protagonists are rooted.

cultural centrality throughout the stormy modern history of its population, pulsing in many contemporary creative forms and most notably in popular music.

The protagonists of this research frequently refer to joy and its Italian equivalent *gioia* to describe the music they do, across contexts as different as the Congolese Catholic parish in Rome and the experimental jazz scene in London. They use this feeling as a metonymy of the entire social and emotional event, focusing on the subjective experience of the musical rite, stressing the alteration produced by music in human bodies. Nonetheless, the significance of joy largely varies depending on the Congolese diasporic contexts, the social actors involved, and the musical experiences. The word itself is an umbrella translation of a cluster of terms – among which: the French *joie* and its plural *joies*, and less literally, the concept of *ambiance*; the kiKongo *kiese* or *kiesse*; the Lingala *esengo* and its plural *bisengo* – which have come into use within the Congolese cultural network through many overlapping and colliding historical and cultural itineraries.

We are not looking at a single idea of joy; the aforementioned original nexus underwent transformations detonating into multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings, some of which I address below. Nonetheless, during my research I have come across many unexpected connections, cross-references, and semantic reverberations between the various musical uses of joy, which articulate a dense discourse of spirituality and civic engagement across diasporic spaces of Congolese cultures. The present study explores these joyful resonances as a remarkable narration of the postcolonial Congolese diaspora, reflecting on conflicts and contradictions while focusing on the dynamics of resistance facing structural injustices and historical inequalities – what Mbembe (2015) defines as “the practice of joy before death”.

1.2.1 Kongo musical rites and the empowering other

The modern cultural and political dynamics connecting Congolese social groups through music and joy have taken shape across the last

six centuries of exchanges, predations and resistances between Central African people⁵ and the other actors in the Atlantic arena. Trapido (2015, 2016, 2017) and MacGaffey (1991, 2000, 2002) outline the pre-colonial ritual dimension of music and power within the anthropological paradigms of the region, wherein life conditions are considered to be the result of unseen forces operating from the world of the dead (MacGaffey 2002: 19). Human groups – and most notably, their rulers (chiefs, elders, politicians, big men) – achieve and maintain *kindoki*, the mystical charisma presiding over social relations, by means of the ritual contact with the otherworld.

In this context, music assumes a paramount role, as it enables communication with the dead through possession of spirits and makes the presence of the spirits visible “when everybody is carried away, having a good time” (ibid: 12). Musical instruments are “voices of the dead” (MacGaffey 2000: 88), powerful objects inhabited and shot through by vivifying energies. Music is the language in which the worlds communicate. It is the code that celebrates and produces the transformation of life through the passage of cosmic energies.

Besides exploring the permeability between life and death, daylight realm and nocturnal sphere, musical rites were also connecting symbolic sets. Imported goods like alcohol, fabrics, shell money, and gunpowder were often ritually associated with legitimating supernatural powers (Trapido 2016). The symbolic and economic reproduction of social life in Central Africa opens up the cultural codes, includes foreign elements, and projects the human communities outward. The mysterious, the obscure, the stranger – in Mbembe’s paraphrasing of Lacan: the Other – are inside the definition of the group. Humans operate on multiple plans through continuous explorations, interferences, and switching.

⁵ I prefer here a loose demonym rather than a specific ethnonym like “the baKongo”, for similar contemporary ethnic demarcations between Congolese people are partially the product of colonial history and do not necessarily reflect pre-colonial local identities (MacGaffey 2000: 1). Moreover, the discussed dynamics are historically relevant to a wider geographical area than the Kongo borders (ibid; and Trapido 2015).

Such a philosophy stresses connections and transformations rather than identities: human and non-human bodies, spirits, objects, and natural elements are all part of the same dynamic web. The spirits of the ancestors and the joy of celebrating their coming are the same thing, as are chiefs and their objects of power⁶. Contact with otherness is a potential source of power, rather than a threat to one's own identity. The joyful nexus ensures access to the empowering and legitimating spirits (ancestors and natural forces) but also gains vital energies from other human products (bodies, symbols, artifacts) and more recently, from digital devices – as I discuss in chapter four. This tendency to cultural extroversion lays the foundations for modern Congolese music forms in both Central Africa and the diaspora. A relevant part of my research observation has been dedicated to musical creations, collaborative inventive practices, and inclusive discourses generated by the openness of Congolese musical actors to this idea of the empowering other⁷. The research protagonists' willingness to include outsider actors in their cultural productions motivates and allows the choice of collaborative filmmaking as a research method, as discussed below in section 1.4.

Beyond the scope of this thesis, I consider the idea of the empowering other and the observation of its creative results as a fundamental contribution to the post-ontological turn and postcolonial discourses beyond the idea of identity. In particular, the idea of the empowering other echoes Mbembe's (2014, 2019: 163-177)

⁶ This statement is based on kiKongo homonymies: the term *kiese* expresses both trance-induced madness and festive happiness, and MacGaffey (2000: 1) stresses the conceptual analogy between chiefs and *minkisi* in traditional Kongo culture as both are ritual mediators of power for the entire social group.

⁷ My thoughts on the empowering other are due to Henry Stobart's work (2006, 2011, 2016, 2017) on music making and spirit beings in Central-Southern Andes. Stobart's analysis of *sirinu* as a cross-cultural concept and its related music practices of mystical inspiration, seasonal cycles, ritual sacrifices and communicative gateway between different groups are a crucial benchmark for my observation of the musical use of *bakoko* ("ancestors") in Congolese diaspora. My contribution to Stobart's suggestion of a transcendent empowering other is to expand this idea to human and digital empowering otherness in Congolese diasporic music making.

Also, Stobart's intense collaborative music video making with Gregorio Mamani Villacorta is a fundamental methodological reference for the use of music video clips as both a collaborative fieldwork practice and privileged context to observe the unfolding of music-related political, social and economic strategies.

considerations on Afrofuturism as an alternative mode of cultural action to oppressive necropolitics. Refusing fixed identities, Afrofuturism embraces “*the cosmic condition*, the stage of reconciliation between the human, the animal, the vegetal, the organic, the mineral, and all the other forces of the living, be they solar, nocturnal, or astral.” Such an inclusive disposition is present in the joyful nexus as celebrated by baKongo people in pre-colonial times and by their heirs on the three Atlantic shores. Unlike Mbembe and other Afrofuturist scholars (Dery 1994, Reddell 2013) who stress the reification experienced by enslaved African people as the emotional, cultural and sensorial background originating Afrofuturistic anti-identity stances – and consequently trace the historical origins of these stances back to the American colonies and the encounter with European cultures –, this work proposes the idea of the empowering other as an original Central African cultural practice with a strong transcultural tension that African people have widely exploited in the diaspora, as I show in the following section.

Trapido (2016) includes this pre-colonial connective cultural attitude in what he calls “the human mode of production”, where the person is the locus of social wealth, which is accumulated and distributed through tactile relationships. According to Trapido (2015), this mode of production has never been fully replaced by capitalism in the region, and every crisis in modern Congolese history since the slave trade – including the economic collapse of the late twentieth century – has escalated the ritual aspects of this bodily nexus, prominently mediated by popular music forms.

A cultural institution that testifies both the persistence and the transformations over history of a ritual nexus between music, ecstasy, empowering dead, and social capital in the Congo is the *matanga*, the elaborate funeral wake. The eminent relevance of funerals as loci of musical, economic, and political production in traditional Kongo society (MacGaffey 2002, 2008) underwent deep transformations under colonial rule, due to the strong opposition of the Belgian regime and the missionaries to local forms of social support irreducible to capitalistic logic (Biaya 1996: 349, Trapido 2015). *Matanga* absorbed the

environmental changes maintaining cultural centrality, and in contemporary Kinshasa it continues to represent a crucial node of cultural innovation and music experiments (White 1999: 165-166; Pype 2015).

Some of the fundamental elements of my research are already evident in these traces of an original ritual connection between music, social power, and the underworld, in a *longue durée* continuity between pre-colonial Central Africa and contemporary Congolese social groups: the importance of music as a spiritual medium; the capability of musical rites to absorb historical transformation and elements from other cultures; the crucial relevance of bodily and ecstatic aspects of the music experience, especially concerning contact with the divine; and the fundamental role of music as a mode of social thought and action. In the latter regard, the role of music rites in the discussed context needs more specifics.

1.2.2 Slave revolts: the political shift of joy

In Central African political tradition, music and the associated power of the ancestors have often been connected to coercive forms of authority. Local oligarchies were restricting youth access to eldership⁸ through a constant stream of ritual payments, the failure to meet such payments resulting in bondage (MacGaffey 2008; Trapido 2015). The ritual introduction of foreign goods in Lower Congo confirmed the internal set of relations, helping the elites in “acquiring rights over people via control of social reproduction” (Trapido 2016).

At the interface between capitalism and human modes of production, the unbridled, sanguinary⁹, potlatch-like aspects of the rituals exacerbated. The conglomeration of debt linked to the ritual

⁸ Trapido (2015) points out that age and relative seniority are forms of conceptualising social structure and power hierarchies in Central Africa, hence they must not be intended literally as demographic data.

⁹ In several pre-colonial Kongo rituals, primarily in *matanga*, slaves were killed by poisoning, strangling, or thrown live into their master’s grave (MacGaffey 2008: 57; Trapido 2016). The sensorial liminality between life and death, revitalisation and social destruction in traditional forms of music-driven, trance-like joy was palpable beyond conceptualisation.

“system of the ancestors” (Mbembe 2017: 118) became more expensive and violent, fomenting war, fuelling the slave trade, and accelerating the political and economic decline of the region (Thornton 1986). But if the joyful ritual nexus facilitated Central Africa’s violent insertion into a global system, its forced translation to the other Atlantic shore by means of the slave trade activated another possibility, also present in this political tradition: that of joy as a form of dis-alienation and critical commentary on the violent positioning of African people within the world. This thesis is largely dedicated to the exploration of the dis-alienating dimension of musical joy in the Congolese diaspora, both in spiritual and political terms.

Kongolese¹⁰ people had given a strong impulse to various slave revolts in America. For instance, the Stono Rebellion in 1739 in South Carolina was set going and led by a small group of slaves from the Kingdom of Kongo, who displayed their communication and guerrilla strategies through a music ritual. After seizing a firearm store, the rebels “set to dancing¹¹, singing and beating drums” (Thornton 1991: 1101-1102) to gather other fugitives from the surrounding plantations, and then unleashed a formidable offensive on local plantation owners while trying to reach Spanish Florida.

The political and cultural connection between music and Kongo-fuelled slave revolts in the New World can be observed in its complexity through the famous example of the Haitian Revolution. On the eve of the insurrection, Central African people made up more than half the slave population in some districts of Hispaniola, and their involvement in the revolutionary movements and militias was so significant that French agents and plantation owners used “Congos” as a synonymous with insurgents (Thornton 1993: 185). Kongo self-liberated slaves had a

¹⁰ I use the adjective Kongolese in accordance with Thornton (1986: 9) to refer to the inhabitants of *Kongo dya Ntotila*, the Kingdom of Kongo; although here I am not pointing at strict national limits, but rather indicating the Central African provenance of the slaves, and stressing the political and cultural reference to the Kongo kingdom.

¹¹ Besides constituting an integral element of the ritual nexus connecting music, euphoria, and the ancestors’ vitalising forces, dance was a fundamental part of Kongo military training (see Thornton 1991: 1112).

fundamental locus of revolutionary planning and support network in their nation-based “dances and assemblies” (ibid: 208).

The revolutionary influence of Kongo symbols expanded through the slave network, so that leaders of other African provenance were given kiKongo nicknames (ibid: 185). In a letter that Kongolese guerrilla leader Macaya wrote to the French republican commissioners, he swore allegiance to three kings, the first of whom being “The King of Kongo, master of all the blacks” (ibid: 181). As in the Stono case, Macaya claimed his freedom adopting the vocabulary of Kongo Christianity, a syncretic experience I discuss below in chapters five and six.

The agglutinating and subversive power of Kongolese culture in the context of Caribbean slave plantations was evident in a kiKongo chant that became a revolutionary anthem in Haiti (ibid: 210-214). The song was an invocation to *Mbumba*, the rainbow or snake spirit, a symbol of fertility, peace and harmony connected to collective rituals of reciprocity and to a long political tradition of decentralising and ‘democratising’ political power in the Kingdom of Kongo¹². In the song, the snake spirit was asked to magically protect the singer from blacks and whites alike: the musical ritual reactivated Kongolese political culture and mystic symbols in the oppressive context of American plantations, leading to revolutionary action against the French slave owners, but also the mulatto overseers and the new black political leaders who restored forced labour right after the regime change.

The push for a grass-roots control of political power, aroused by the *mbumba* song and expressed in Kongo foundation stories of the king as blacksmith, coexisted in Kongo revolutionary leaders’ discourses and actions with the myth of the king as a conqueror and centralising and powerful warrior (ibid: 190-208). Central African political experience provided insurgent slaves with a cultural background to coordinate brutal violence against their slave masters

¹² MacGaffey (2016: 169-170) questions Thornton’s vision of the song and denies its revolutionary meaning. Yet, the important role of Central Africans in diasporic communities (ibid: 179) and the use of ritual *minkisi* as a form of resistance and transcultural contacts and alliances for Caribbean slaves (ibid: 172) allow me to keep the example.

and sophisticated plans of social balancing in view of the nascent black republic, according to the circumstances and the receivers of the political message. The strategic ductility and cultural suitability of Central African ideas in the tumultuous context of Caribbean slave society led Thornton (ibid: 186) to affirm that Kongo had been a source of revolutionary ideas for Haiti as much as France was.

The ritual connection between music, spiritual forces and human empowerment survived the slave ships and maintained its inclusive dimension across the Atlantic, where Kongolesse people negotiated new social bonds, interpreted new environments, and faced new dramatic challenges through their music, dance and spiritual knowledge. The same ritual nexus, instrumental to conservative local elites, that was degenerating into wild forms of potlatch in Central Africa, was capable to combine with other European and African cultural experiences in America, resulting in powerful moments of self-liberation.

Macaya's allegiance to "the King of Kongo, master of all the blacks" already delineates the Pan-African political dimension of Kongo cultural references in the Americas, and the capability of Central African actors to negotiate alliances with different interlocutors around familiar powerful symbols in the diaspora. Yet, Macaya declares himself subject to the kings¹³ of France and Spain too, respectively on his father and mother's sides: Kongo self-definition escapes identity borders and creates webs, rejecting the modern idea of race as the representation of utmost difference (Gilroy 1993: 37-38; Mbembe 2017: 45-46) even in the brutally racialised plantation context. Joy, music, the ecstatic foundation of social agreements, and the spiritual – both traditional and christian¹⁴ – mediation of human powers, are fundamental elements of this inclusive, fluid, transformational Central African thinking and acting mode. The slave diaspora ignites the contesting energies of this

¹³ On the meaning of monarchic references in slave revolts and the debate about African slaves' political horizon being backward or forward-looking, see Thornton 1993: 181-183.

¹⁴ The semantic opposition between the two concepts is poor, but I cannot find any term other than 'traditional' to refer to pre-Christian spiritual systems of belief in Central Africa. To mitigate the hierarchic opposition between the terms, I decided to write 'christian' with a lowercase letter c.

paradigm, which sets a strong political, cultural, and military critique of modernity while introducing other forms of selfhood in the Transatlantic space.

Music becomes even more relevant in the configuration of (post)colonial and diasporic forms of Central African social and cultural (re)production if we consider that the Haitian revolution was an isolated episode of slave self-liberation from European domination. Excepting *quilombos* and maroon communities, African slaves were denied all freedom in the rest of the American continent. Gilroy (1993: 56-57) identifies art, especially music and dance, as “a substitute for the formal political freedom” allowed by plantation owners to keep the slaves quiet. In his view, slaves were forced to squeeze all their political cultures into art, and thus “the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life” (ibid) is a result of their resilience. A central concern of this thesis is to propose an adjustment to Gilroy’s view, pointing at joy as an original Central African cultural dimension encompassing music, spirituality, social dynamics and political theories (both conservative and revolutionary) into an ecstatic bodily nexus – and consequently, to introduce joy as an interpretative category to approach Black Atlantic musics. This joyful cultural dimension has resisted the annihilating processes of slavery and colonialism through music and other bodily performances (Mbembe 2019: 75-76) and lies at the heart of the musical traditions and countercultures of the Black Atlantic. The exuberant civic, spiritual, and political relevance of African American music forms is not just an imposition of the colonial plantation system upon the slaves, nor is the capability of African American musics to intermingle with other experiences and constantly transform into new cultural creations only an outcome of the de-personalisation of African human beings. Both cultural features were already present in Sub-Saharan Africa, travelled across the Atlantic together with their original social actors, and were inserted into the Atlantic space radically and permanently reshaping modern selfhoods, contemporary arts, and cultural exchanges across the world.

This thesis suggests that despite being compatible, and often associated with artistic and political forms of diasporic Black identity and nationalism, the premises of the joyful dimension lie in a connective attitude that defies identities, contaminates the other and the self, establishes webs rather than groups. And this inclusive dimension is eminently active in the music creations of African diaspora: it is the *fluidarity* of the soundmachines, the “bodily pleasure” of the groove, the everchanging musical genius rejecting all definitions and fixed identities, including blackness (Eshun 1998: -003). This political, spiritual tradition of music making connects the living to the dead, the UK to the US, the Caribbean to Europe to Africa, operating “through intervals, gaps, breaks” (ibid). By exploring some of these gaps and breaks, this work discusses practices of contemporary Congolese diasporic music that elaborate new connections and conflicts through the aforementioned joyful nexus. Besides the specific ethnomusicological interest, I consider these case studies to be of great relevance for the general ongoing cultural debate for they point to other paths out of the impasse of identity and race in the present context of exploitative globalization and rampant necropolitics.

1.2.3 Dancing cosmopolitanism

Besides the slave trade, other violent processes interweaving transatlantic spaces during the modern era impacted the joyful nexus also in its original environment in Central Africa, radically transforming modes, spaces and semantics of the connection between music, euphoria, social order, and the supernatural. The increasing pressure of European states – mainly Portuguese and Dutch before the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, French and Belgian later – progressively divested local authorities and elites of economic and political control, until colonial institutions deposed Central African kingdoms and established full control over the territory. Ritual and social spaces adapted to the aggressive insertion of foreign codes, one of whose extraordinary innovations was the foundation of the two Congolese

capital cities (Brazzaville and Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville¹⁵) on the two shores of the Pool Malebo on the eve of the colonial era.

A crucial passage in the shaping of the contemporary musical forms of the joyful nexus has been the boisterous urbanisation of the Lower Congo region since the 1930s. In the early years of urban life¹⁶, street parties were occasions for migrant African workers to gather on festive days with their group of provenance, reaffirming and redefining their identities by performing their social rites in the new colonial space (Gondola 1999a: 97). As Congolese cities progressed from temporary work camps for male labour forces to crucial demographic, economic and cultural centres, traditional ritual forms started reshaping accordingly. In colonial urban spaces, the ecstatic connection between social and mystical forces was reconfigured in the party – *l'ambiance*, the performance of eminence of the new social protagonists, humans or not: bars, modern music, colonial subjects and free women (ibid: 101).

Colonial cities are transcultural hubs: people from various ethnic provenances shared a new space planned, ruled, and occupied by colonial forces where every position and significance had to be renegotiated and may constantly shift. The oppressive, segregated, yet contested spaces and times of Kinshasa and Brazzaville marked the onset of many original cultural creations that contributed to overturning colonial rules and flowed into postcolonial Congo. Among these, the emergence of a new, shared repertoire of music forms in dialogue with international trends – in other words, the birth of Congolese music – immediately assumed a paramount importance, crucially contributing to the definition of the ideas and spaces of Congolese nation and nationalism (cf. Bokamba 2008).

¹⁵ The first capital of Leopold II's Congo Free State was Vivi, then Boma from 1886 until 1929, when Leopoldville became the capital city of the Belgian Congo and its population started to steeply increase.

¹⁶ Brazzaville was founded in 1880 by Pietro Savorgnan di Brazzà on behalf of the French colonial empire upon a baTeke settlement. Leopoldville was colonised one year later as a trading post and named after the Belgian king.

Women are among the protagonists of these radical transformations. At the end of the 1930s colonial urban spaces opened to women, hosting many young girls cast out by their ethnic groups. These women, severed from the traditional forms of social reproduction, acquired a new human capital in the supermasculinised colonial city as *bandumba*, free women (Gondola 1999a; Biaya 1996). Consequently, music shifted its social role: rather than accompanying *matanga* and ethnic-based street gatherings, the musicians' main task in the city became to make women and (male) colonial elites dance. The historical origins of Congolese music as it is generally understood today lie in the shift from traditional gatherings to couple dances between the 1930s and the 1940s: this passage marked the birth of *la musique moderne* or rumba, as opposed to *la musique traditionnelle* or *folklore* (White 2015: 282).

Since its rooting in the colonial city, music production in Congo has always interwoven with the desire, performance, and achievement of a supranational dimension for both players and listeners. The birth of Congolese popular music – intended as supra-ethnic music productions integrated into large-scale social and commercial networks (White 2008: 14) – received a strong impetus from the G. V. Series, a series of 10-inch 78 rpm records of Afro-Cuban *son* launched in 1933 by the Gramophone Company (later EMI) and distributed between the 1930s and 1940s in Western and Central Africa (White 2002: 668-671). The first orchestras of the Pool Malebo arranged the new festive soundscape having African Caribbean dance genres like rumba, cha cha cha, samba, and calypso as its fundamental reference. Music modes absorbed foreign codes and performed them in the social rite through new sonorities, sound technologies, and ritual settings. African Caribbean music was consumed by the burgeoning population of Belgian Congo's new capital city, Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), as a means to feel part of “a world of cosmopolitanism” through more pleasurable models than colonial European references (ibid: 663-668). Musicians adopted international instruments and assembled in bands (*orchestres*) performing on bar stages at weekends. The

commodification of popular music accompanied its digital reproduction: the record industry and public radios spread this dance music to the rest of the colonial space and beyond, boosting the cultural prestige of the modern, urban joyful nexus (Biaya 1996: 349).

The colonial time saw the musical escalation of the idea of the empowering other. The permanent craving for the new and foreign – in music as well as in fashion and other general aspects of popular culture – led Balandier to talk about a uniquely Congolese *passion moderniste* (ibid: 680-681). It is a yearning for being actively part of the international circulation of goods and thoughts, breaking free from the local confines and material limitations. It is a product of (post)colonial subalternity and uneven balance of cultural power; at the same time it challenges all those aspects, and allows social and spatial mobility in an otherwise stationary scenario (White 2008: 24). The rapid fetishisation of Cuban vinyl records by Congolese urban dwellers introduced music reproduction technologies and artifacts into the ritual nexus, expanding the joyful experience through the digital dimension and enlarging the influence of the new musical forms.

By embracing cosmopolitanism as a theoretical framework for diaspora musical phenomena, this thesis allows the subjects of the research to exceed the role of informants, recognising them as actors of their own life stories and their representations through the ethnographic encounter (Latour 2005: 11). “Cosmopolitanism is not something that happens to people, it is something that people do” (White 2002: 681). Xenophilia, cross-cultural attitudes, and the frequent use of decorative exotic elements (ibid: 679-680) in order to fulfil the audience’s desire of otherness in music, intrinsic features in Congolese popular music since its modern beginning in colonial time, provide musicians with an eclectic creative apparatus whose potential for a transcultural impact is probably fully accomplished in diasporic circulation.

1.2.4 The city of joy

Despite all this, colonial subjects' musical rites were no longer presiding over social and political powers, as colonial authorities had taken control of them. Amputated from its traditional ritual nexus, music was reduced to a socially unproductive activity, and as such, it was the only tolerated public expression of "indigenous people", as in many other colonial spaces across the world (Mbembe 2019: 5). Festive expenditures, still an essential ritual element expressing the wealth-in-people principle (Trapido 2016), did not mirror social status any more; displayed comforts and other visual signs of social dominance became increasingly ephemeral. Although this process allowed some sort of mobility in social prestige by enlarging access to the collective drama of the joyful nexus, it partially separated musical rites from social reproduction. Rather than manifesting the acquisition of vital energies, the celebration of joy became a cultural value per se, a hedonistic ideal of cosmopolitanism to be attained at all costs, even dissipation and delinquency (Biaya 1996: 346-359).

The new spatiotemporal coordinates of the joyful nexus were also the result of colonial limitations. The division between work and leisure times marked the violent introduction of industrial time in Central Africa – where social events had previously had control over time schedules – confining festive events to the weekend. The work/party border became a matter of continuous confrontation between colonial authorities and African citizens, mostly at individual level: to take the first ferry after work to party all weekend in Brazzaville, and then to come back to work on Monday with the first available trip was a typical resilience strategy of young African workers in colonial Kinshasa (Gondola 1999a: 97).

The shift from the street to the bar is also a confinement, due to increasing police control over African urban spaces facing the escalating population, and to the moral stigma quickly attached to the new urban musical rites by colonial and traditional authorities. In the Central African tradition, the cultural spaces of recreation and public

activity had always been open spaces; taking shape as an indoor festive shrine, the bar responds to the commodification of traditional ritual forms, but also stands as an undisciplined place of counter-order (ibid: 98-99).

Joy turned from human production to escapism: Gondola (ibid) conveys the image of “the chained bodies that wiggle on the dance floors:” the ecstatic sensuousness of colonial party releases young African workers from harsh work conditions and the paternalistic discipline of their European masters. Beer was an inseparable companion of Kinshasa nightlife (Biaya 1996: 350) whose pivotal protagonist was – and still is – the *ndumba*, the free woman.

Female urban actors subverted traditional morality, accessing the ritual nexus of mystical possession, drunkenness, and dance (Gondola: ibid). Objectified by male power and excluded from legitimate marriage, they became nonetheless the symbolic centre of the *ambiance*, entirely shaped around the display and desire for female bodies. Women’s acquired social relevance was performed and celebrated in music: Congolese popular singers and songwriters, although mostly male, frequently assume a female point of view, singing in the first person as a woman in love, using higher voices, presenting social critiques on behalf of women (Trapido 2017: 178-180). Through *ambiance*, women conquered an influential, yet subordinate and ambiguous cultural position that led some *bandumba* to become opinion leaders and crucial political actresses in postcolonial Congo (ibid).

The *ndumba* epitomises the scandalous aspects of the *ambiance* – the modern, lustful, decadent form of the joyful nexus. The ritual adaptations of musical possession reflected the fragmented moral horizon of colonised Central Africa: on one hand, Christian values permeated local morality, censoring the gory and sinister cultural aspects and moderating the bodily, ecstatic, exuberant elements of traditional rites. Collective and individual existence was and is still dominated by the otherworld (Pype 2006) and connecting with ancestral forces was still considered necessary to acquire earthly charisma (De Boek 2005). Yet, the forms of ritual joy started gravitating

around a more ambiguous cultural status. Music-driven madness was no longer universally accepted: *kiese* became an urban trait, often associated with the work of witches. Kinshasa, *Kin-kiese*, was also *Lipopo ya banganga*, the witches feast, the city of madness, criticised by missionaries and traditional authorities as a den of iniquity, celebrated by songs as *bisengo ya la joie*, “the joys of the joy”, the music shrine of bodily happiness, the eternal celebration of the joy of living where men addicted to *ambiance* expended all their resources until bankruptcy, physical exhaustion, or madness set in (Biaya 1996: 357). Joy maintained its cultural centrality in colonial urban spaces, while expanding its nocturnal traits.

On the other hand, urban spaces introduced exotic references, imposed foreign rules, inspired aggressive codes of behaviour, and offered new opportunities to the young and poor. Indigenous elites of *évolués* and wannabes assumed the *mindele*, white colonial administrators, as cultural models, shaping the ideal *ambianceur*¹⁷ as a cosmopolitan *bon vivant* devoted to nightlife, whatever the daily cost. *Ambianceurs* embraced the scandalous aspects of their nocturnal anti-order and performed their provocation to traditional culture, casting the old customs aside from the joyful nexus. The social drama of the joyful rite gave voice to the cultural conflicts in colonised Central Africa: the reproductive social chain was broken. The elders had no more power – that is, no more vital energies to distribute; so the young (the outcast women among them) questioned and bypassed their authority, seeking economic and cultural (both supernatural and aesthetic) resources through new ritual codes.

The endurance of Central African cultural institutions like the joyful nexus, although incapable of resolving the colonial (and postcolonial) drama, keeps the social actors together on the same stage. The ritual nexus does not dissolve; it assumes a polyphonic attitude, elaborating a multifaceted relationship with its traditional forms,

¹⁷ The French loan word *ambiance* underlines the relevance of colonial environment and cultural symbols in the development of this modern ritual nexus of joy, bodies, spirit being, social prestige, economic flows, and politics.

negotiating new tactile and imaginary bonds, absorbing new protagonists and languages, adapting to the harsh conditions of the colony, confronting and escaping reality at the same time. This connective, fluid cultural apparatus resists economic and political collapse, stretches its limits encompassing its own negation. The joyful nexus maintains its relevance, as an embodied mystical gate, or as a polemic reference. Social actors enter and/or abandon the ritual locus depending on their cultural references, political strategy, or simply the time of day.

The various perspectives on *ambiance* overlapped, rather than standing opposite. The duality Christian and traditional morality versus immoral parties and bar music must not be taken at face value: Congolese society embeds this contradiction and inhabits both sides of the story – even in the course of one day. Music eminently reproduces this cultural dynamics, articulating “a series of moral and aesthetic contradictions that lead to no moral resolution” (Trapido 2017: 180). Yet, this powerful cultural opposition created a crucial narration in the development of contemporary Congolese music forms: the pair of opposites *musique religieuse/musique profane* was established around the centrality, or the negation, of the modern joyful nexus. Discussing music performance in the Congolese Catholic diaspora in chapter five and six, I argue (in accordance with Pype 2005) that music-driven bodily experiences of divinity are a common trait of both Congolese Christian and popular music. It is the political discourse that discriminates secular from religious, even when music forms are the same (ibid: 297).

1.2.5 *Indépendance Cha Cha*

Kinshasa and Brazzaville bars, while consecrating urban hedonism and sensual escapism, became headquarters of opposition to colonial power and laboratories of African cultural inventiveness (Gondola 1999a: 105). Starting from these marginal, enclosed urban spaces, African people appropriated the everyday life of the colonial city, using ritual

languages incomprehensible to white people, politicising spaces and practices where colonial authorities saw nothing but exotic eccentricity and drunkenness. The joyful nexus and its new musical expressions became the anti-order, yet they were able to project the Central African space towards the postcolony, creating an autonomous African political arena and nurturing the personalities and discourses that led to the demonstrations in the 1950s (ibid; de Villers, Omasombo Tshonda 2004).

Before the 1930s, African parties introduced an element of popular, carnivalesque, spontaneous subversion into the colonised space, taking advantage of the horizontal level of the street. While recreating lost ethnic communities, street parties imagined a new possible society and set the pace for its realisation. Inside the bar, the egalitarian nature of colonial party did not fail; in fact, it acquired a universal scope. Festive euphoria overturned regional and social barriers – mainly by means of dance music – establishing new alliances regardless of ethnic groups. Although questioned in its morality and relegated to the nocturnal, the joyful nexus remained an essential source of power and daylight legitimacy for African people (ibid; Trapido 2017: 179-180).

Parties served as an alibi for many conversations and gatherings, among which the first political formations and discourses of the rising Congo (Trapido 2015). The new, commodified ritual forms were able to spread more readable political messages, “sung through popular music, displayed on the *pagnes* of the *ndumba* and masked by the joyful innocence that surrounds the party. Musicians become legislators” (Gondola 1999a: 107). The encounter between Patrice Lumumba and Joseph Kabasele exemplifies the pivotal role of bars in Congolese culture and politics: Lumumba, a beer sales representative, became the first elected prime minister of Congo campaigning from the back of Kabasele’s car. Joseph Kabasele, the leader of the band African Jazz, took part in the Round Table Conference in Brussels that declared Congolese independence in 1960. His famous song *Indépendance Cha Cha* represents both the musical celebration of the political

achievement and the cultural language that invented the very idea of postcolonial Congo (Trapido 2015; see also *Rumba in Kinshasa. Politics and music in the Congo*, a film scripted by Joe Trapido).

1.2.6 Political animation and the joy of the worlds

After independence, democratic enthusiasm was quickly and violently put to rest, and after a few years of political turbulence a military coup put general Mobutu in power. Music occupied a central role in postcolonial political projects and propaganda:¹⁸ the regime regularly co-opted the most popular bands for assemblies, rallies, and campaigns. *Authenticité*, or Zairianisation, was an operation of national identity shaping that led to ample renaming of places (i.e. the country as Zaire), people, and things. Important drives to *authenticité* state ideology were spectacularised mass daily music performances called *animation politique* (Trapido 2017: 42-44; White 2006) and the promotion of Congolese popular music on the Sub-Saharan market (Perullo 2008; Stewart 2003). Police repression, strong ties to the political regime, and consistent state funding limited musicians' critical space; as in post-war colonial city, musicians conveyed their occasional social critiques through double meanings and lyrical camouflage (cf. White 2008).

From the mid-1970s onwards, the structures of Congolese economy based on extraction of natural resources began to collapse without being replaced. Once again in Central African modern history, social reproduction was severely undermined: poverty escalated, wage labour disappeared, youth's opportunities of accessing social eldership essentially reduced to zero. Citizenry parcelled out to small social cells entirely depending on big men's revenues: political economy departed from capitalism and turned to pre-colonial dynamics of patronage, against the background of a productive breakdown (Trapido 2017: 20-27). Postcolonial *ambiance* culture reacted to the mutated social conditions emphasising its features of sensual escapism and its

¹⁸ For an extensive analysis of music and politics connection under Mobutu regime, see White 2008.

ephemeral ideal of cosmopolitan comfort (Biaya 1996: 349-350) while expanding its outward, looking nature.

The re-emergence of tactile social and economical webs around charismatic individuals entailed powerful bodily codes of social prestige. The appropriation and the festive display of European clothes by colonial 'boys' transformed into *la Sape*, a complex protocol of elegance shaped into a religion (Ayimpam, Tsambu 2015; Gondola 1999b) that permeated postcolonial *ambiance's* cultural values and codes of conduct. Expensive Italian and French designer labels entered the joyful nexus as adornments of the body of the *ambianceur* (the *sapeur*), heightening ritual expenses and catalysing symbolic and economic power (Trapido 2017: 54-60, 133-163). Party spaces and languages lose *stricto sensu* political ground and acquired new scandalous, immoral nuances. For many Congolese young men aspiring to high social statuses, dissipating folly became the only ritual strategy to overcome crisis and acquire prestige, however ephemeral.

Foreign sources of power went increasingly beyond the symbolic. Circulation of people and goods (foreign currency and clothes) between Kinshasa and *mikili*, the rich North (literally, Lingala for "the worlds") became the principal source of income for Congolese elites. Remittances from the Belgian, French and British diaspora – largely gathered through informal and shadow business (ibid) – assumed a crucial importance in the midst of national economic collapse and fuelled the joyful ritual escalation. To be returning from Europe enormously increased one's economic, sensual, and charismatic capital in Kinshasa. The central locus of the joyful nexus shifted up North, across the Atlantic Ocean. The *ambianceur* became a *mikiliste*.

Popular music was instrumental to these transformations. In the mid 1970s, *authenticité* was at its peak: popular *orchestres* had reintroduced traditional instruments and drew on *folklore* more systematically, musically supporting official nationalism and new ideas of African modernity rooted in tradition, however invented (ibid: 42-44). Only a few years after, popular musicians got radically absorbed in the new social configuration of *ambiance*. Popular hit songs were filled

with cloth designer and *mikiliste* patron names, whose love affairs, bohemian exploits, and adversities became important topics for lyrics. *Mabanga*, the practice of naming in songs, assumed a crucial role in the reproduction of the ritual nexus, for it provided vital income for musicians facing scarce state support and absent musical market, at the same time as it became a necessary ritual gateway for *mikilistes* to be known in Kinshasa and the diaspora via song circulation (Trapido 2017: 71-92).

Through music, the postcolonial conception of Congolese cosmopolitanism permeated popular culture. Concert stages were invaded by affluent *mikilistes* showering musicians with dollar bills in exchange for lyrical praise, and by European design clothes wrapping musicians and dancers' bodies. The *mikiliste* imaginary went beyond the joyful nexus and became a cultural commonplace: migration, both oneiric and physical, stands as the main source of power.

Audiovisual media became increasingly important in *mikiliste* communicative circuits. In particular, the distribution of Congolese music video clips filmed in Europe contributed to the transplant of European references into the popular urban imagination, together with migrants' embellished travel tales (Ayimpam, Tsambu 2015: 120). Media importance grew during the 1990s and 2000s in as much as physical mobility became more and more difficult: diaspora web TV and radios, concert and conference DVDs, social media and private YouTube channels are today the principal vehicles of information and imagery-shaping within Congolese *ambiance* including the diaspora, constituting an important arena for individual ritual performances and utterances (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020). The joyful nexus is partly digital.

1.2.7 *Les Combattants* and the silent nexus

In the last three decades, the flow of migrants fleeing Congo has increased due to the country's military conflicts, poverty and political

instability.¹⁹ Although the majority of these displaced people have ended up settling in other African countries, Europe and North America still represent the ideal destinations.

Mikilistes' status kept growing until the turn of the millennium, when increased security drastically reduced the opportunities to informally make easy money (Trapido 2017: 151-163). Quickly, the *mikiliste* form of the joyful nexus became less viable. The dream of *mikili* started to vanish, substituted by the (equally unachievable) mirage of successfully coming back home, to a redeemed Congo. Political engagement came back to the forefront of the public discourse, mainly in polemic with Kabila's regime. Various Congolese diasporic lobbies increasingly called international attention to the dramatic situation faced by the home country, mainly concerning the misconduct of the government facing endemic violence in the East. A group of *bana Londres* ("London children," referring to London-based *mikilistes*) started a series of violent attacks on Congolese diplomats, politicians and public figures close to Kabila's entourage visiting Europe. This movement, called *les combattants*, rapidly spread across the diaspora, especially among former *mikilistes* (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020).

Reduced cash flow limited relationship of patronage between diasporic elites and popular musicians, leading to major tension inside the joyful nexus. The *combattants* accused Congolese music stars of colluding with Kabila's regime and being indifferent to the country's disasters and misery, systematically boycotting their performances and directly threatening them when in Europe. In a strong symbolic inversion, the conversion of many *mikilistes* to *combattants* has recently produced the public silencing of the joyful nexus, manifesting an unprecedented crisis of the connection between music and the

¹⁹ In 1997, a coalition of rebel forces led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila and fuelled by Ugandan and Rwandan governments brought Mobutu's regime to an end. Since then, the eastern part of the country has been the theatre of a fierce conflict between a myriad of rebel formations, with terrible consequences for civilians in the area. Joseph Kabila, Laurent-Désiré's son, became the president of the DRC after his father's death. Congolese constitution denied him the right to run for a third term, virtually forcing him to resign by the end of 2016. Nonetheless, a complicated electoral census started, which delayed the elections and kept Kabila in power until December 2018, despite protests spreading all over the country.

collective body as a mode of political and social action for Central African people.

This massive shift of joyful social rites comes with other significant transformations of Congolese cultural modes, like the rise of racialised anti-Rwandan nationalism – widespread among the *combattants* – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the diaspora (ibid), which radically contradicts the idea of the empowering other. The extreme violence of postcolonial Congolese spaces, brutalised by war, genocides, mass rape, political unrest, epidemics, and hunger, appear to have fractured the vivifying connection between living and dead and challenged the ritual inclusion of the double, clouding the traditional cult of ancestors with the alienating experience of the Apocalypse (De Boeck 2005; White 2005). In this crisis of traditional cultural forms (all strongly interlinked with music) the language of Pentecostal-charismatic churches is deeply penetrating Congolese spiritual life, changing meanings and forms (Pype 2006; Trapido 2013).

Some of these recent transformations have crossed paths with the research protagonists in these pages; nonetheless, their exhaustive treatment is beyond the scope of this thesis. The Congolese artists who accompanied me in this research journey cultivate music practices on the edge of the joyful nexus, far away from Kinshasa bars and from the opulence of diasporic fraud syndicates' potlatches. The edges of the joyful nexus are the contact zone (cf. Pratt 1991), the region where Congolese diasporic music making encounters the other and engages with other musical experiences.

1.3 The research protagonists – places, people, ideas

Diaspora is overwhelmingly marking the experience of late modernity (Ramnarine 2007: 24). It can be understood as a plural, political human dimension that might lead to different ways of thinking – among many other things – about identity (ibid: 5-6). The capability of migrants to establish a network of homes, going beyond differences and navigating through scenarios of uneasiness, defines a supra-local – rather than

multi-local – living condition affecting millions of people, in which belonging is an everyday subjective practice (ibid: 9-10). Music is a fundamental mode to practise and enjoy diaspora, and an instrument to raise “complex questions about boundaries, identities and politics.” In listening to the sounds of people connected with multiple places and times, one becomes “aware of overlapping domains, of complex geographies and temporalities of belonging” (ibid: 12).

Exploring the innovative, unstable dimension of diasporic music calls for a “practice and process-orientated perspective” focusing on “what is actually going on” between the musical agents involved (Ramnarine 2007: 32). The creative openness of Congolese popular music, its complex relationship with politics, and the widespread network of Congolese diasporic communities across the globe constitute a changing, multi-sited scenario of continuous renegotiation, harsh conflicts and socio-cultural mobility which it is hard to reduce into a coherent paradigm. My choice is to “follow the actors”, participating in their musical activities, leaving to them “the task of defining and ordering the social” in which they live (Latour 2005: 12-23).

In this section I introduce the main actors of the present work, linking their music practices to the various streams and aspects of the joyful nexus. The focus of this research project is on the music makers: the ethnographic work is conducted together with Congolese musicians through their social, economic and communicative networks, with particular attention to the transnational dialogue they experience, perform, and trigger in their musical production. This thesis affords an ethnographic account– however partial – of the complex forms of the joyful nexus and of the rich experiences of cultural mixing and transforming through music that disseminate Congolese spaces across the Atlantic.

This ethnography is composed of two fieldworks: London, where my research gravitated around a Congolese artist called Mulele Matondo Afrika; and Rome, where I engaged with the musical activities of the Congolese Catholic parish and the Bondeko choir, collaborating

and hanging out with Congolese priests and music makers Don Pierre Kabongo and Don Cola Lubamba, Congolese choir director Angela Ndawuki Mayi, and Linda Samba, an Italian chorister and music maker of Congolese origins.

The first part of the thesis (chapters two, three, and four) is dedicated to my London fieldwork, whereas the second part (chapters five and six) discusses the ethnography in Rome. The choice of dividing the thesis into two subsections is due to different research environments and dynamics, slightly different methodological choices, and above all different music practices. For these reasons, research protagonists and settings are more extensively presented at the beginning of each part. Yet, the two sections do not constitute two separate researches at all. The two parts are entangled in a common narration: musical joy as a mode of social and political action in Congolese diaspora. The two case studies conveniently complement and contrast each other so as to convey the tensions inside the joyful nexus. Congolese diasporic music practices in Rome and in London are different enough yet tied together by analogous creative processes. Their conjoint observation sheds light on the fluidity of the joyful music mode and its capacity to stretch over different discourses and receiving environments.

All the research protagonists are marginal actors in the Congolese popular music scene. Although I consider them gifted musicians, it is fair to say that their music products and performances are consumed and enjoyed, both live and online, by audiences not exceeding several hundred people. But beyond the amount of followers, marginality is due to their position with respect to contemporary forms of the joyful nexus. The research protagonists' discourses and music practices express a negative moral judgment about mainstream Congolese musicians and their *mikiliste* and *sapeur* followers, although for different reasons. London-based Mulele Matondo Afrika blames Congolese music stars for their lack of political consciousness and reproaches exaggerated consumerism and xenophilia as both symptoms and causes of Congolese postcolonial crises and subjugation.

Mulele's stances are partly similar to the *combattants'* recriminations, although his musical outcomes and encounters are quite original. Christian music makers in Rome refuse the immorality of lustful, immoderate popular music rites and the constant sensualisation of human bodies, material goods, and alcoholic beverages visually and socially operated by famous musicians, whose influence on Congolese society they hold to be devilish. Like Mulele, they reckon that a redeemed Congo needs higher moral values and role models – their ideal values and models are incarnated in the Gospel and the earthly work of Catholic Church.

Despite their open rejection of mainstream music forms and their personal distance from declining *mikiliste* music rites, the joyful nexus remains the crucial mode of music action for every research participant. Mulele, Don Cola, Don Pierre, and the Bondeko choristers conceptualise and perform music as a connection between humans and spiritual beings expressed through joyful bodily engagement, whose collective celebration is vital for their social groups. Music conveys their social and political engagement to their communities – the temporary communities, the national/diasporic community, the imagined and desired community, the everyday and the festive community, and the digital community.

A main concern in the research protagonists' re-definition and critique of the joyful nexus – and consequently, a crucial reference for their musical activities in general – is invocation of ancestors (*bakoko/bonkoko*) seen in the overlapping senses of empowering spiritual mediators, African cultural heritage, and traditional values. Linking the powerful image of ancestors with nationalistic discourses, postcolonial ideas, and religious systems, the protagonists produce a wide range of musical outcomes, spiritual attitudes, political and cultural discourses. Ancestors are also an important element in the negotiation of diasporic roles and connections, either reactivating and re-imagining transatlantic African communities, or engaging with European environments while navigating wider international flows.

Both the joyful nexus and the reference to ancestors are central to the protagonists' diasporic performance of Africanness, which constitutes a terrain wherein Congolese diasporic music subjects elaborate social strategies, negotiate exchanges with other social bodies, gather understanding and sympathy on their issues, and manifest their agenda to the surrounding societies while at the same time exerting influence over the Congolese audiences. Music becomes a preferential cultural threshold wherein otherness is performed, accepted, absorbed and transformed. Congolese diasporic music practices and stages – concert spaces, but also sacred, digital, squatted, everyday life music stages – are a locus of transculturation both for diasporic and local actors. This work deals with the political and cultural circuit of Africanness, a multifaceted constellation of discourses and practices across the continents that I observe here in their overlapping with the joyful nexus in diasporic Congolese urban soundscapes. In particular, my thesis suggests that even in the presence of nationalistic and exclusivistic discourses, the observed joyful diasporic musical practices maintain the idea of the empowering other and enact an inclusive, open Africanness.

Another fundamental link between the observed practices is the desire of returning home in its actual political and emotional relevance within the Congolese diaspora (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020). Mulele Matondo Afrika composes music seeking to address a Congolese audience and imagining his way back to the Congo while making a living with the same music in the UK with gigs and CDs consumed by a British audience. Mulele performs and promotes his music also when he visits his hometown Kinshasa, where he collaborates with a band of local musicians. The protagonists of the Italian fieldwork section compose and perform music – both liturgical music and African Christian popular music – as part of their religious ministry, be they priests or churchgoers. They address the Congolese audience – both their diasporic community and in Africa – in their songs and performances, maintaining the Congo as the focus of their music making, although the production and consumption of their music relies

on European facilities. My research follows the creative strands of the dialogue between local and international music trends, paying attention to those aspects of the Congolese diaspora musical scene that are particularly linked to external sources of inspiration. Chapters five and six observe Congolese Christian music making as a particular Africa-centred discourse directed towards Congolese believers and Vatican hierarchies, unfolding the dialogic strategies and the sensorial apparatus of Congolese music liturgy.

The diasporic spaces, and the epoch of this research, constitute a privileged point of view to observe the political implications of Congolese music making due to the special circumstances that are under way. The turbulent process that led Félix Tshisekedi to win the contested 2018 general elections strongly involved diasporic actors and echoed the ongoing complex redefinition of ideas of home and return in Congolese cultures (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020). The impact of this movement of thoughts is leading to a debate within the Congolese music scene about the position of musicians towards power, and the place of music in society. As anticipated in section 1.2.7, diasporic urban spaces – especially London – are crucial to understand the new political transformations of the joyful nexus. In the motherland, the Catholic Church has taken a leading role within the opposition, clustering the Christian international public opinion around the request for democratic elections and a consequent peaceful power transition – which was achieved for the first time in the country’s history with the general elections held on 30 December 2018, despite the contestations of the election results. The Congolese Church being a pivotal locus of music production, the ecclesial political contestation is indeed passing through music. Rome, the headquarters of the main Christian institutions, offers an interesting point of view to engage with the political dimension of African Christian music. Both ethnographic research settings allow for a rich discussion of diasporic music practices as a way for Congolese people to express political critiques while actively engaging with the receiving social environments.

The digital dimension of the protagonists' music making is also an essential aspect of the research observation, engagement, and methods. In section 1.2.6 I have introduced the centrality of digital spaces in contemporary Congolese cultural dynamics, among which the joyful nexus. In particular, the transnational circulation of music largely passes through digital media, which are "reshaping overlapping national and global imaginaries and the changing nature of cosmopolitanism" (Shiple 2013: 363). Among them, the video clip assumes prominent importance. The recourse to video clips makes it possible for the diasporic artists to shape their message to target a Congolese audience, at the same time that it enables Congolese musicians to make their tunes circulate abroad. As I discuss in the next session, I adopt the methods of ethnomusicological filmmaking and participatory filmmaking aiming to create collaborative music video clips together with the musicians involved in the research project. The use of camera and film allows me to integrate the research into the production and diffusion of Congolese music in different contexts. By involving the musicians in the realisation of the visual texts that will support their tunes, I seek an integrated approach to the ecology of transnational Congolese popular music, including musical creation, sense-making through music, political impact, social positioning, economic networks, strategies of diffusion, dialogue with the audience, musicians' dreams and desires.

The present research is situated at the crossroad between these contradictory and turbulent flows, adopting collaboration as the principal strategy to navigate the chaos of the real. Although based on inequities of power, the ethnographic encounter appears to me as the only way to include the diasporic experience in the methodological elaboration – namely, to use ethnography to dislodge "essentialism and intolerance" and to "feel connected with people and places elsewhere" (Ramnarine 2007: 13-14, 22).

Exploring the different experiences of the research participants, the thesis presents the Central African joyful nexus as a large network of music-related cultural practices scattered on the three shores of the

Atlantic oceans, tied together by a minimum music-joy-bodies-otherworld-power definition. The joyful nexus is also a discourse, a heated debate on the past, present and future of African people featuring different actors and positions. Through my ethnographic engagement in this debate, I propose the joyful nexus as a postcolonial Congolese narration – as Mbembe (2002) says, an African mode of self-writing.

1.4 Methodology – filming n fieldwork

In this thesis, I used ethnographic filmmaking as a main research method. In accordance with audiovisual sensory scholars (Cox, Irving, Wright 2016; MacDougall 1998; Pink 2009; Stoller 1997) my focuses of investigation are the bodily, sensorial, and emotional forms of human understanding and engaging with the cosmos. In Congolese diasporic music making, non-written expressions are particularly relevant elements, not only for the many non-verbal aspects of music that require camera work to be explored (Blacking 1977; Feld 1976; Vignau 2013) but because of the centrality of bodies and senses in the joyful nexus.

I approach the collective performance of the joyful nexus as a social drama (Turner 1986) where conflicts and dialogical oppositions are crucial phenomena of social interaction. The attention to performance allows transformations and contradictions to be considered in the analysis of cultural forms, and dismisses geometrical and deterministic descriptions of reality (ibid). A dominant genre of performance in Congolese societies, popular music expresses both normative values and conterdiscourses (Conquergood 1991: 189) and makes visible the social impact of emotions and desires (Turner: ibid).

The analytical centrality of non-written performances sheds light on social spaces of public discussion for marginalised people, who often “do not have the privilege of explicitness” and direct communication (Conquergood ibid: 146-148). Performance studies challenge academic neutrality and place the researcher “betwixt and

between” the social ritual, as “a co-performer”, to “embody” the meanings of performing culture (ibid: 187). Such a call for a participatory approach and a bodily focus matches the nature of ethnographic visual media (Vignau 2013: 105-112). Using a medium that integrates visual and sonic aspects of music, I engage with the ecology (DeNora, Andsell 2017: 232) of the creative and cultural world of the musicians and their reference communities, sharing ideas and practices with them.

By combining audiovisual mediating technologies, a focus on performance, and a collaborative approach, this thesis puts into practice Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón’s (2019) call for “a politics of invention” in anthropology, that is, a creative fieldwork engagement aspiring to activate “new entities, new relations, new worlds” (ibid: 221) rather than confining reality to its representation. Congolese diasporic music making is an extraordinary fertile context for this approach in virtue of the cultural principle of the empowering other lying at the basis of the joyful nexus and *moderne* popular music, as I illustrate in sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.3. Thanks to these propitious conditions, I propose this thesis as an experiment in rethinking anthropological practice from the radical collaborative multimodal approach of ethnographic based music video clips.

The protagonists of this research enthusiastically accepted my offer of collaboration, including my camera and me in their creative networks and practices, and beyond, into their lives and social circuits. The camera accompanied me all through the research. It impacted my fieldwork identity more than my student status: I was the guy doing videos. The practice of collaborative filmmaking allowed me to share the research process with its protagonists, and helped me to overcome several impasses in my research. The practice of video collaboration supported me while navigating through the unexpected events that led me to reconfigure my research plan, abandoning the initial idea of conducting fieldwork in Congo and reshaping my project in the diaspora after the College advised against my fieldwork trip to the DRC in 2017 due to security reasons.

Audiovisual products are a fundamental element of contemporary popular music making. Hence, collaborating with musicians in production of music videos implies an important element of reciprocity whose ethical and methodological implications I discuss below. Yet, one of the main points of interest in applying collaborative video making to this research is the camera as a research mediator. The bodily commitment of using the camera while doing fieldwork, and the necessity to move in the space together with the performers to canalise the flows of creative energies into the lens, imply a shift from a verbal, question-based fieldwork approach to what Dziga Vertov (1922b: 17) called the kino-eye, “the sensory exploration of the world through film.” In my research experience, the camera proved to be an intensifier of many fieldwork aspects – relationships, emotions, sensations, and analyses.

Including technological machinery and creative processes in ethnomusicological research brings about an important reflexive aspect and establishes an intimate relationship with the musicians (Sjöberg 2006b: 9; Ranocchiaro 2015: 231). Rather than representing reality, collaborative filmmaking establishes a reciprocal dance between camera and humans (Feld 2003: 98). Beyond any creative and experimental interest, I reckon that such a research approach resonates with the artistic, multimodal endeavours (Leaha 2019) of Congolese diasporic music makers. Thus, collaborative video making provides both a favourable research fieldwork to explore the joyful nexus, and an appropriate language to engage with its diasporic creators. In fact, on several occasions audiovisual engagement allowed me to notice discrepancies between protagonists’ verbal discourses and music practices; and to some extent, my research role as a camera person led me to trust more the protagonists’ musical performances than their words, as I discuss in chapter four. The audiovisual medium that worked most intensely as an intensifier, as an element of reciprocal interest, and a non-verbal device of research involvement and understanding, was collaborative music video.

1.4.1 Music video clips in diasporic circulation

The collaborative music video clip was experimented with as a participatory method in ethnomusicological research by Henry Stobart, and included in films such as *Fabrik Funk* and *Golden Scars* by Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier and *Shooting Freetown* by Kieran Hanson. The few available bibliographic resources that analyse the use of participatory music video making (Boudreault-Fournier 2010; Ranocchiari 2015; Stobart 2011, 2016, 2017) report this collaborative practice as engaging and helpful for the musicians, due to the importance of video clips as promotional supports on digital music networks – especially in cosmopolitan circulation of African pop music between homeland and diaspora communities (Charry 2012; Shipley 2013: 369-370).

Music video clips are non-human actors with a strong impact on music making (Steingo 2015: 120) through their format, multimodality, and digital diffusion. The non-narrative structure of the video clip, "a hybrid between an advertising vehicle and postmodern video art" (Wollen 1986: 169) is appropriate to express musicians' non-verbal imagination and aesthetics, and stimulates the use of body language and dance as organic codes within a particular musical language. The multimodal nature of the video clip process places the present research in dialogue with an articulation of musical meanings that is wider than the mere sonic artefact.

In the Congo as everywhere else, digital music media are "reshaping overlapping national and global imaginaries and the changing nature of cosmopolitanism" (Shipley 2013: 363). The format of the video clip is particularly relevant in the mark of international popular music as both a promotional device and a vehicle of expression. Indeed, it occupies a special place in transnational societies marked by large-scale emigration such as the Congolese one, where music circulation between homeland and diaspora is widely digitised, and video clips convey important aesthetic values and visual components of music production. Music video clips have a very widespread diffusion in

the Kinshasa music industry (White 2012a: 728-729) and are largely used by diasporic artists to address the audience in their homeland, and vice versa by Congolese musicians to supply the diaspora and to intercept sponsors. As I discuss in section 1.2.6, music videos and other digital audiovisual media are crucial to current processes of performing, discussing, and re-shaping the joyful nexus within African and diasporic Congolese circuits, integrating joyful discourses into other transnational cultural flows and alighting the influence of diasporic actors on Congolese public discourses.

The making of the video clip gives a deep insight into the economic and social circuits where the work of the musician participants is located, integrating the researcher in a more intimate sphere, both human and professional (Baker 2011: 303-305; Ranocchiari 2015: 229). In the case of Congolese diasporic music making, the music video clip as a research fieldwork allowed me to observe and participate in dynamics of transculturation and sharing of knowledge between Congolese music makers and various creative actors, the common ground being the joyful nexus, and the array of imagery, desires and it elicits on both Congolese and others.

This thesis intends to contribute to the inclusion of collaborative music video making within the academic debate, following up on the panel “Music Video Clips as Participatory Research Tool in Ethnomusicology” presented at the second AIBR International Conference of Anthropology in Barcelona, Spain, on 9 September 2017.²⁰ The reasons for this are in epistemological, ethical, and political reflections concerning the fieldwork, as I discuss below.

1.4.2 Music video collaborations

I introduced myself to the research protagonists offering my collaboration on music video making. Thus this creative, collaborative

²⁰ The panel, co-chaired by Dario Ranocchiari and I, included papers presented by Kieran Hanson (the University of Manchester) and Yushi Yanohara (Kyoto University). Ranocchiari and I also presented papers on ethnographic based collaborative music videos at the 1st and 2nd symposium of the Audiovisual Ethnomusicology Study Group – a branch of the International Council for Traditional Music – in 2016 and 2018.

stance structured my position in the fieldwork, my relationships with the protagonists, and my perspective on the observed dynamics.

I made four video clips and other collaborative audiovisual pieces²¹ together with the protagonists of this research, structuring a large part of my fieldwork around discussion and production of video projects. The relevance of collaborative filmmaking varied between my two fieldwork sections: in London, as Mulele Matondo Afrika is a self-taught video maker himself and pays particular attention to the audiovisual side of music production and creativity, I had the opportunity to extend our collaboration to all the stages of audiovisual production, as I discuss in chapters two, three and four. In Rome, the music protagonists are less bothered by the audiovisual process and more concerned with the final outcome: that limited their involvement in the collaborative production, although they were very interested in having me shooting their video clip and discussing the specifics of it (chapters five and six).

During the research, no matter how deep into the audiovisual process the protagonists were, I systematically showed my footage to the Congolese musicians, eliciting information and discussions that unfailingly led me to a deeper understanding of the actions filmed (Baily 1988: 195) opening up new and unexpected sources of information, and directly involving the protagonists in the research planning. While enhancing the research, this reflexive use of film establishes a deeper mutual awareness between all fieldwork actors, dignifying the topic of the investigation and the people involved.

I had the chance to experiment with collaborative editing only with Mulele Matondo Afrika. The involvement of the research protagonist in the edit suite entailed negotiation of aesthetic and montage choices. Although it is a time and energy consuming

²¹ The thesis is accompanied by a selection of collaborative music videos and other audiovisual research films. The selected video clips are *Seke Bien* by Mulele Matondo Afrika and Mbonda Kamikaze; *360°* by Mulele Matondo Afrika and his band Kongo Dia Ntotila; *Sukola Ngai* by Cola Lubamba with Angela Ndawuki Mayi; *Udi Dibue* by Pierre Kabongo. The selection contains a promotional video realised for the Kongo Dia Ntotila band, and *Bondeko*, a fieldwork movie of a performance of the Bondeko choir in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

experience, collaborative editing is extremely fruitful as an investigation of music concepts and discourses; also, it is a privileged means to investigate commercial aims and strategies of distribution, which play an important role in shaping the musical contents (chapter two).

Although video clips were the focus of my research methodology, during the research I collected many hours of footage from concerts, rehearsals, mass celebrations and other performances. Some of this material has been uploaded online by the musicians via social networks, and almost all of it has been screened to them – and discussed with them. Filming music performances was a crucial research activity, decisively contributing to my understanding of the observed music rites.

When filming music, I have integrated from both observational and participatory filmmaking, in accordance with the work of several ethnomusicological filmmakers (Boudreault-Fournier 2010, Ranocchiaro 2015, Terada 2013, Vignau 2013, Von Rosen 1992). In particular, I adopted Baily's (2009: 59-62) idea of fieldwork movie: the camera is used as a research tool, and the edited film is the record of a journey, both physical and experimental. I consider the short film *Bondeko* as a fieldwork movie, covering one performance of the Bondeko choir with little editing and no extra-diegetic sources of information.

To adhere to a narration inherent to the filmed music event, and to restore the continuity of live perception to the video spectator (MacDougall 1995), I extensively applied the technique of the sequence shot: a long shot where the hand-held camera moves in space, filming different subjects in a single take. Long sequence takes are particularly appropriate for music performances as they allow one to film different aspects of musical practice, audience and performative context at a time, representing relationships within space. Sequence shots and pans are a way to film the whole body of the musicians, showing every source of sound in its context, including transitions between actions and feedback between ritual actors.

My choice of the fieldwork movie and my preference for sequence shots are instrumental to my aim to build an anthropology of the body through images and sounds, putting the music makers in a dialogue with the corporal response of the audience, and investigating the communication between performers and the environment in the music rite (Vignau 2013: 112).

Besides the collaborative products, the process of analysing fieldwork data was constantly supported by research footage – in fact, many of the descriptions I have included in this thesis come from an analysis of the images rather than from field notes and memories. Hence, the entire project has a strong collaborative and audiovisual rationale as well as a particular focus on performance.

1.4.3 Ethnographic music video clip and the politics of invention

If anyone watches the collaborative music video clips I made with the research protagonists without reading these pages, they will hardly notice any substantial difference from a commercial – or more likely, an amateur music video. The specific medium of the music video clip and its connection with globalised and commodified forms of music circulation is probably one of the reasons why this experimental method has encountered so little academic sympathy so far. I reckon that this disciplinary flaw is also the fulcrum of the radical collaborative approach entailed by ethnographic based music video clips.

I propose a minimal definition of ethnographic video clip as a creative research practice aiming to collaboratively produce – rather than represent – what happens in front of the lens. A music video is a dialogue between sounds and images and the creative actors involved in the project, whose outcomes depend entirely on the dynamics at play and the negotiations between the actors. The researcher abandons her academic comfort zone and enters a field of creative forces over which she exerts very little control. The final outcome – acquired through digital montage – is an audiovisual text that has to respond to the musicians' artistic agenda, practical needs, and communicative

strategies. Once finalised, the video clip maintains a digital life and intercepts a potentially unlimited network of consumers and discourses that largely exceeds academic circles. By retaining little control over process, production, and circulation of the video clip, the researcher accepts the challenge of multimodality and establishes a dialogue with other cultural modes, engaging in the production of a hybrid text – the music video clip – from which both the researcher and the musicians benefit.

Music video is an appropriate channel to evoke atmospheres and emotions rather than discourses, and to express aesthetic values and non-verbal imagination. While establishing the concepts, images and pace of the videos, the musicians display ways of interpreting and representing their music which are not explicit in their sonic products, nor can be easily expressed through ethnographic interviews or understood through standard participant observation. Music videos are a polyphony of messages on different communicative layers, not necessarily coherent with each other. By facilitating the musicians' access to these multiple levels of expression to combine with their music, the researcher both contribute to the musicians' empowerment (i.e. giving space to the use of body language and dance as organic codes, helping local artists to reach a wider audience, facilitating the cultural translation of a very diverse range of musical practices) and gain access to the huge non-verbal rationales involved in music making.

To enact and explore musicians' imaginary through the visual (and not only the auditory) layer means giving centrality to the collaborative process in filmmaking more than to the researcher-filmmaker authorship. The collaborative process is crucial in the use of video clips as a research tool. It is not the final product in itself which is (more) important, but the process of creating it. On one hand, the video production process (preproduction, shooting, postproduction and dissemination) constitutes, by itself, a very rich ethnographic context that allows a thick researcher-musicians-community interaction that strongly contributes to an internalised comprehension of music making. On the other hand, the proactive role of the research subjects in the

production of ethnographic knowledge reduces the power imbalance between researcher and 'researched', thus enriching the diversity of points of view on the analysed musical practices.

Of course, this kind of methodology has problems and ambiguities. They are mainly connected with the academic research being not only combined with, but based on the participation of the ethnographers in the creative process, and the participation of the research subjects in the ethnographic process.

As I talk about this methodology as a way to involve musicians and their reference communities in the research process, the different points of view, expectations and priorities of the researcher, the filmmaker, the musician and the community, make the research process even more complicated than usual. The internal perspective of the filmmaker/researcher makes her position in the field even more ambiguous. Nonetheless, this ambiguity can become more of an advantage than a handicap. In my London fieldwork, I worked with Mulele Matondo Afrika, a person uninterested in collaborating with someone who only wanted to write an ethnography about his music. However, he was very interested in collaborating with someone who had the skills to produce music videos with him. This fact radically contributed to defining my identity in the field and allowed me to negotiate my 'strange' role as a researcher, combining it with another - the 'filmmaker' - that Mulele considered more intimate, intelligible, and useful.

Another possible problem is that the collaborative role of the researcher can influence the musical practices in question, opening up problems of authenticity and intrusiveness. It is absolutely true: to stimulate (and co-direct) a fictionalized audiovisual production does influence the music practices. But this is exactly the point: I advocate considering this kind of methodology precisely because it stimulates a different kind of transcultural (Boudreault-Fournier 2010: 174) and multimodal transmission of knowledge. Jean Rouch (Feld 2003: 154) defines the presence of his camera as the "intolerable disorder that becomes a creative object." The non-prescriptive nature of music video

making shows the evolution of the fieldwork in a reflexive way, and prevents the research from proceeding “as if to find the right pieces of a jigsaw puzzle” (Terada 2013: 94). It diverges from ethnomusicological documentation for its creative purpose and for the entirely negotiable nature of the process.

1.4.4 Beyond Ethnofiction: music video clips as radical collaboration

The prominence of creativity in ethnographic filmmaking, and the focus on stimulating fieldwork relationships rather than representing reality (Ranocchiari 2015: 233) were crucial in Rouch’s idea of ethnofiction. Collaborative filmmaking opened up to the active contribution of the participants, exploring new means of revealing cultures beyond factual representation and scientific authority (Sjöberg 2006b: 7-8; Von Rosen 1992: 43-45). Ethnofiction films are partially or totally constituted by scenes where the subjects improvise fictional actions, showing their life experiences and dreams, free from the filmmaker’s direction. In this way, imaginative aspects of cultures can be shown through film, and participants are encouraged to express their ideas and to avoid the alienation of a distant filmic approach.

My idea of participatory music video transfers to a musical context Rouch’s practice of ethnofictional filmmaking. An example of the use of ethnofiction in a music video is *Seke Bien*, the video clip directed by Mulele Matondo Afrika and myself that I introduced in the opening vignette. While they were shooting the dancing parts of the clips, a musician came out with the idea of having an introductory, fiction-like vignette: in no time, the musicians recreated a *juju* house in a warehouse in inner city London, enacting a rite of possession aimed at empowering their music through the ancestors’ intercession. In order to realise the outstanding relevance of ritual references and the politics of ancestors in contemporary Congolese popular music, I accepted losing control over the process to leave room for the musicians’ creativity.

Yet, to transform the music video production using a strictly participatory process also constitutes an improvement on Rouch's ethnofiction practice, in the sense that the French ethnographer-filmmaker did not engage with his collaborators at every stage from preproduction to editing and dissemination. On the contrary, I suggest adapting techniques borrowed from participatory filmmaking and participative research to music video production, according to the situation. In this research I have experimented with other audiovisual forms like promo videos, concert footage and short music films, depending on fieldwork specificities and the subjects' needs. What I consider as the central point in collaborative music video making, rather than stylistic features or specific film techniques, is the creative drive in the use of camera and the radical collaborative commitment while doing fieldwork.

1.5 Thesis overview

This thesis articulates the analysis of spiritual and political discourses produced by Congolese music makers in two different locations: Rome, Italy, and London, the UK, through a participatory audiovisual ethnography.

The next chapter is dedicated to Mulele Matondo Afrika and depicts his diasporic experiences and network through our audiovisual collaboration. The chapter presents Mulele by discussing some of the main tropes of Congolese diasporic music making (see Trapido 2017): the myth of migration to the rich North; Kinshasa as an image of creative longing and fantastic planning; desires of circulation and dreams of returning home; musical nationalism and the *Combattants'* protesting silence. I discuss Mulele's idea of 'African conscious music', influenced by ideas of Pan-Africanism and the Black Atlantic. His performances display the inclusiveness of the diasporic joyful nexus as a node of distinct yet converging flows of xenophilia. Mulele's critical stance with regard to the *mikiliste* joyful nexus, his use of Africanness as a scenic strategy, and the centrality of the ancestors in his discourses

are analysed through the creative and reflexive interactions of every stage of collaborative research and filmmaking – in particular, the collaborative music video clip *Seke Bien*.

The third chapter analyses the performances of Mulele and his band Kongo Dia Ntotila in the various social stages of transcultural London, including a gig for the Congolese community, taking into account the changing scenic strategies depending on the band and the audience's agenda. I observe the gigs as the performance of social dramas (Turner 1986), a space where conflicts find their ritual expression and where the onset of new transcultural dimensions articulate their narratives. The joyful nexus is discussed as a powerful nonverbal mode of communication between transcultural groups, capable of conveying social critiques and politically empowering the participants through music-driven ecstasy.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the collaboration between Mulele and Bluesman Corey Harris and their elaboration of a postcolonial Afrocentric musical discourse. This ethnographic case study sheds light on inclusive and plural African diasporic spiritual senses, centred on the power of the ancestors, which emerge as a central epistemology as well as a modality for creative cultural interactions, also capable of including digital spaces and devices in the joyful nexus.

The fifth chapter introduces the Congolese Catholic community in Rome, Italy, discussing African Christianity through its history of clashes and encounters in the Congo basin, adopting the point of view of Mbembe's heretical genius to analyse the creative reinvention of African cultures through Christian symbols and images. The postcolonial experience of the African Theology of Inculturation is explored dialogically with one of its actors, the research protagonist Don Pierre Kabongo, through a collaborative music video and discussion of his idea of the rhythmic liturgy and original formulation of the joyful nexus as a means to conceive the divine harmony presiding over the cosmos in musical terms.

The sixth and last chapter explore the Congolese Catholic music liturgy as performed and lived by the diasporic community in Rome, observing how liturgical music becomes a locus of cultural encounter and negotiation of international politic flows while it also modifies the sonic space of Rome. Exploration of the Christian joyful nexus as a sensory liturgy through the thoughts and performances of Linda Samba, Angela Ndawuki Mayi, and Don Cola Lubamba sheds light on the creative re-appropriation of the Congolese cultural tradition and international relevance through a musical engagement with Christianity, maintaining the joyful nexus as a powerful Central African mode of social and political action.

Chapter two. Mulele. Ethnographic encounters through the lens

In this chapter, I present musician and video maker Mulele Matondo Afrika, the main protagonist of my fieldwork in London. I discuss the topics of journey and *mikili*, home and return, narcissism and disalienation with regards to Mulele's life and musical experiences. My reflections largely draw on Trapido's *Breaking Rocks* (2017) which constitutes a crucial reference and a critical counterpoint to my analysis of ethnographic findings within Congolese transnational music making.

In Mulele's case, the mythopoeia of the journey up North, a fundamental trope in Congolese tales of success – especially musical (ibid: 120-130) – intertwines with the circulation of postcolonial discourses of the Black Atlantic, resulting in an original use of the joyful nexus as a mode of musical and social action, and as a political discourse. Through his performances of 'African conscious music', Mulele makes a critique of Congolese society and an accusation against imperialism, at the same time as he creatively elaborates his longing for home and his fantasies of a successful return.

I discuss Mulele's idea of 'conscious music' as both a source of inspiration and a political commitment in relation to the 'politicisation' and radicalisation of the Congolese diaspora occurring since the turn of the millennium (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020). The 'conscious' turn in Mulele's artistic production happens at the crossroad of various cultural flows and environmental conditions, and expresses a particular, transcultural form of the joyful nexus operating on multidimensional fields of actions, towards a diffuse elaboration of belonging (Ramnarine 2007: 5-14).

Bonkoko, the ancestors, are the locus of Mulele's artistic inspiration as well as his political attacks: stressing the ritual element of the empowering, legitimating dead, Mulele contests the *mikiliste* joyful nexus as corrupted by Western influences, advocating a return to "the roots" of Congolese culture. Such cultural nationalism diverges from growing racialised hypernationalistic discourses in Congo and the diaspora (ibid) for it maintains Pan-African openness mediated by

transatlantic Rastafari discourses. This attitude – which Mulele defines as *Bonkokologie* or, in an outburst of artistic narcissism, *Matondologie*, that I illustrate further in chapter four – is eminently expressed in an inclusive musical nationalism that draws on Mulele’s musical journey in Congo and across Sub-Saharan Africa and is constantly vivified by diasporic encounters.

The production of the collaborative music video clip *Seke Bien* allowed me to explore the joyful nexus as a diasporic creative device, capable of intercepting other sensibilities, languages, and desires from the cross-cultural underground London art scene through the performance of an open Africanness. The creative outcomes of this particular form of the joyful nexus will be further discussed in chapters three and four.

The elaboration of performative strategies of African consciousness goes along with Mulele’s migratory journey to *mikili*: his musical commitment to Congo gets stronger as his musical practices take him further away. The case study of Mulele Matondo Afrika sheds light on peripheral yet powerful diasporic modes of action of the joyful nexus, and embodies the dramatic, extraordinary contradictions of Congolese popular music frantically gathering creative resources abroad while dreaming of Kinshasa as the ultimate stage (Trapido 2017: 233).

The last session of this chapter recounts a panel Mulele and I shared at a conference at SOAS. This awkward academic encounter reveals the political stances behind Mulele’s musical nationalism, challenging current forms of cultural representation and providing an opportunity to rethink the discipline through radical collaboration.

I approached Mulele during what was thought of as pre-fieldwork research, with the rationale of testing – and elaborating – the theoretical framework in the field, and experimenting with collaborative video making before the extensive Congolese fieldwork planned for my second Ph.D. year. Due to external circumstances, I have never conducted fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mulele remained as one of the protagonists of the project, just as

diasporic agencies and transcultural music have become the focuses of the research.

I met Mulele thanks to Prof Geoffrey Baker's advice. After sending a message to the Facebook profile of his Kongo Dia Ntotila band, and getting in touch with Birikiti, Mulele's partner and agent, I contacted Mulele directly and obtained a meeting with him. Meeting Mulele changed my perspective on the research, strengthening my confidence in recourse to collaborative methodologies and enriching this experience with an intense human relationship.

Mulele has become the catalyst of my research interests and experiments. His artistic dimension and critical thinking allowed me to easily explain my project, my objectives and my premises, and to establish a productive dialogue about my research questions, which partially coincide with his musical research. Mulele's academic formation, social network, and personal sensibility reduce the gap between academic terms and people's everyday life: somehow, Mulele constitutes the ideal subject of an ethnomusicological investigation (Baker 2011), which at times makes it difficult for me to adopt a critical distance. Besides, I feel sympathetic with his persona, share the same opinion on many topics, and deeply respect his work and activism. For these reasons, I can use my own vocabulary and mindset while spending time with Mulele, avoiding the harsh aspects of stress and schizophrenia often involved in fieldwork activities.

I am aware that such collaboration can jeopardise the accuracy of my scientific analysis, and that it will be hard to take a critical stand towards the research process and fieldwork relationship. Nevertheless, I consider collaboration with Mulele an inextricable element of my research, in terms of personal involvement and because of his position at the crossroad between the flows constituting the scope of the present project (the joyful nexus, cosmopolitanism and Congolese diaspora, music circulation, politics of Congolese music).

Mulele is a crucial subject of the present research in many ways. He collaborates in data collection and elaboration of outcomes, some of which he uses for his own purposes. He has incorporated himself in my

project not as a helper or a beneficiary, but rather considering my work useful to his own agenda, intertwining his paths with my research goals, being involved in my activities, and involving me in his own social network. On my part I express my solidarity with Mulele's political vision and agenda, and sincerely hope my research project could enhance the circulation of discourses aimed at shared spaces and social justice in Congolese society.

2.1 A voyage to *mikili* and conscious music: Mulele's life experiences

Mulele Matondo Afrika is a Congolese musician in his forties, with long dreadlocks usually collected in a multicolour turban. Matondo is actually the name of his maternal grandfather, which he picked up as his stage name at the beginning of his career. Mulele is the name of Pierre Mulele, a Congolese revolutionary leader who was minister of education in the first government of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo, and after Patrice Lumumba's death joined the Simba rebellion against imperialistic forces. 'Afrika' is his way to spell Africa, as "that 'c' is for colonialism, for which there is no longer a place in Afrika²²!"

Mulele was born in Kinshasa, in the Matete neighbourhood. His life is a jigsaw puzzle of experiences, countries and bands. As a kid, Mulele was hanging out in the streets of the capital city, where he started to play music as a game, with his friends, improvising instruments and concerts in the neighbourhood. He began his artistic career while he was still at school, composing music and arranging songs for other artists, until he joined a band originated of a branch of Zaiko Langa Langa, the famous *orchestre* where many of Congo's *troisième génération* most famous musicians first played, including Papa Wemba (White 2015: 288-290). They went on a very long tour across the country, travelling in a big van, spending days, or weeks, in every place, playing with local musicians, earning some money or just

²² Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (2010: 171) reports a similar discourse in North American and Caribbean Hip-Hop, referring to the fact that slaves supposedly used to write the phoneme /k/ with a *k* instead of a *c*. In a similarly vague way, Mulele refers to the absence of the letter *c* in original African alphabets.

receiving food and shelter. Through this tour, Mulele got to know deeply the Democratic Republic of the Congo, exploring the rich sound traditions of the Kasai region and meeting the baTwa, who impressed him a lot for their powerful culture and the harsh discrimination they have to suffer.

When he was fifteen years old, he went to Brazzaville, in the neighbouring Republic of the Congo, to continue his studies. Then he moved to Angola, and then to Zimbabwe and Zambia, where he was singing and playing bass guitar in locally famous bands like Lumumbashi Stars and New Stars Musica V.S.V.L. while he was still quite young. Congolese music is really appreciated in Southern African countries, and the musical market is way more flourishing there than in DRC. Mulele had the chance to tour with his band, playing in Malawi, Botswana, and South Africa. The producer was the son of a minister, and the band was contributing to dictator Robert Mugabe's propaganda, playing for his rallies and celebrations.

At the peak of his band's notoriety in Zimbabwe, he met a Congolese Rasta who told him about Bob Marley, and made him read Marcus Garvey's scripts. Mulele started to change his visions on things, and that led to the rupture with the rest of the band:

I realised we were rich doing music in another country because back home people are so poor they cannot afford to buy CDs or pay for a concert. I realised I had to use music in a positive way, instead of playing pop and supporting a dictator. My friends were like laughing at me: 'Why would you do that?' I felt like there was no space for me in Africa, I had to move forward. We went to Europe for a tour, and I told them 'I stay here, I won't come back'. So I did, and now I struggle to survive. It's hard when you decide to stay on the people's side: everything becomes harder. If I had to go back, I'd do things differently. When you get the chance, and you refuse it, then it's hard to get that chance again. Now I'm fighting for another chance. And I feel like I will have that chance, brother.

The diasporic space and contact with Black Atlantic discourses – namely, Rastafari – ignite a radical transformation, both ethical and artistic, in Mulele's music vision and personal journey. His idea of conscious music takes shape at the same time as his voyage to *mikili*. "Intensifying scarcity" in the Congo pushes Mulele to go and harness the power of the rich North (cf. Trapido 2017: 71-73) in order to succeed.

Mulele's narrative structure is comparable to the mythical pattern of Congolese potlatch migrants (ibid: 71-97) save for the reference to "the people's side." The idea of a public use of music substitutes – or more exactly, juxtaposes – the mirage of material success and sensuous prestige of the *mikiliste*. Mulele's autobiographic recount is unescapably a narrative plot (cf. Crapanzano 1977) and as such, must not be taken at face value. Yet, it introduces an element of great political relevance: the dream of a Congo redeemed from the diaspora, to which to return triumphantly (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020: 2).

Here, the narration of the empowering journey to the rich North does not rely on money and other material goods, but rather on an experiential process of achieving 'consciousness.' Yet, the source of this personal wealth is still the constellation of *mikili*, and the stage on which to perform the embodiment of success remains Kinshasa.

Mulele flew to Germany, then he passed through France and Belgium to finally reach the UK. "When I arrived in Europe, I was not as naïve as many people arriving straight out of their villages. I was used to all of that, as South Africa is exactly like England for some aspects." A common feature between Congolese who see themselves as well connected to European society, Mulele generally distances himself from Congolese 'community' and eschews some aspects of Congolese identity he considers as vulgar, naïf or ignorant (Trapido 2017: 91). In fact, the practice of abandoning an *orchestre* on the way back from a European tour, facing the harsh conditions of living in Europe without papers and cutting ties with Kinshasa music scene, is a common practice within rank-and-file musicians who dream of becoming *mikilistes* (ibid: 118-130). London is a very popular destination for *Kinois*, strongly connected to tales of easy money and music patronage (ibid: 142-144). Yet, once in the UK, Mulele began to explore a new music circuit, outside the usual Congolese networks

Having moved to London as the first place in UK, Mulele started playing in the music scene composed by migrant artist. One of the fundamental hubs of African and other so-called "world music" ecologies in London was Passing Clouds, a club and community-run

music venue in Richmond Road, Dalston (North London), celebrated as one of the best community centres for live music and grassroots creativity and activism in East London. After months of negotiation, protests and campaigns, Passing Clouds was definitively boarded up and its organisers evicted from the building on 16 August 2016 as the owners sold the property to developers to turn it into offices or flats²³. Mulele has often played there, and he used to pay frequent visits to the club; nonetheless, he is quite critical towards the music environment gravitating around the venue:

I already knew the music business, while these other musicians don't. Many African people arrive here as refugees, they cannot do nothing but play music to make a living. So, they just stay in their little niche here, and can be easily exploited by the organisers. There are so many African musicians spending their nights playing at Passing Clouds, and the organisers basically don't pay them. But they drink for free, fuck some girl, smoke some weed, and end up with 20-30 pounds more in their pocket. So they spend their life, week after week: I passed through this, but I decided to run away. You have to improve, to grow up, as a person and as a musician. Places like Passing Clouds are the grave of an African musician.

I thought I could become the manager of other artists, because I know how to deal with these things. But it's not easy, because people get scared: I'm too much for them. I know that as a musician you have to impress the audience: that's why I paint myself, also because it's our culture to paint the body to get the power from the ancestors. People thought that was controversial, because it was going beyond their simple shows, always in the same places, without any practice: just go and play. Now they copy me, using paint and African stuff on stage. But at the beginning, people were scared, like this was too much. Africans are shy, they are afraid of what they really are. They don't usually want to show off.

Mulele touches on the common trope of 'Europe as the grave of our musicians' (ibid: 82-84), an idea linked to Kinshasa-emotions-creativity-life versus Europe-money-technology-lifelessness; here, Mulele extends the trope to the marginal condition of African musicians in London and to the ephemerality of diasporic success. His strategy to tackle ghettoization, as I discuss in section 2.3, is to maintain a fluid position –in terms of both musical practices and fantastic strategies – between Kinshasa and Europe (cf. ibid).

²³ Nonetheless, the venue re-opened on January 2019 as The Jago, with a different management but in the very same building.

As he did when he quit the *orchestre* to stay in Europe, Mulele rejects the oppressive musical gatekeeping (ibid: 106-132) of London exploitative venue owners. Although I know too little about London world music circuits to express any opinion on the above statement, I have witnessed how Mulele extensively adopt the principle of musical self-entrepreneurship to avoid any alienation from his musical products and practices. For him, the sine qua non condition of playing music is self-empowerment.

Mulele sees the displaying of Africanness as an empowering stage strategy as well as a valid ritual technology. The power of the ancestors circulates in his body through the lines and dots of white paint on his skin, the diasporic stages not weakening the vital energies ritually gathered from the dead. The joyful nexus takes the form of a show and maintains its ritual force. Moreover, Mulele wears the ritual adornments of the joyful nexus on London stages as a sign of African pride to flaunt in order to overwhelm the narrow limits of 'exotic' music and to display the performative power of African musical nationalism.

Exasperated with the musical ecology of Passing Clouds – and probably struggling to make a living in town –, Mulele decided to leave London and refine his musical skills somewhere else. He went to Leeds conservatoire, where he studied jazz guitar with John Kelly. John was impressed by Congolese music and Mulele's style; so they started to play together and recorded.

Mulele had a daughter in Leeds, who is now fourteen years old. While staying there, he had another mind-blowing encounter with a Rasta, this time of Jamaican origins. For the second time in his recount of the migratory journey, Mulele went through a personal crisis. This time, it was not just an isolated encounter with the Rasta to push him towards an artistic re-invention, but rather the whole new social setting and public discourse of the receptive context:

I noticed that people got interested in me the most when I was talking about politics, explaining my views and experiences about Africa, Congo, and the reality of African people in the world. So I decided to put that in my music, also because I realised that here, if you as an African don't talk about these things, people think you are stupid, ignorant, or too

scared or corrupt to speak the truth. So I elaborated my style, to be able to play here, and to do something different from the other African bands.

This passage represents the climax in the backstory of Mulele's experiences in *mikili* – the main story being the success yet to come. The accomplishment of Mulele's journey to conscious music springs from European environmental conditions, through the mediation of diasporic Pan-African discourses. It is the audience, the people around him, who ask him to perform his real self on stage. The progression to an original style of conscious music playing is also a process of self-acknowledgement.

Mulele succeeded in his spiritual journey to *mikili*: he harnessed the vital resources of the rich North and elaborated his musical self, which was ready for the glorious return to Kinshasa (see section 2.3). The peculiarity of his journey lies in the dialogic nature of the process: the maturation of Mulele's project of personal empowerment passes through contact with London people, who become his main audience.

The joyful nexus overflows the limits of the Lingalophone audience, expanding the idea of the empowering other to foreign people as well as symbols, embracing the transculturalism of the mega-city. I discuss transcultural creative processes ignited by this form of the joyful nexus in sections 2.4 and 2.5 in relation to collaborative music video making, in chapter three concerning British audiences of Mulele's performances, and in chapter four regarding the musical dialogue with African American Rastafari and the Blues.

Having completed his music formation, Mulele moved back to London with his demo in 2012, and recorded his first solo album, 'Prophecy', which marks the definitive change towards 'conscious music'. In the meanwhile, Mulele enrolled in a BA in Music at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

John Kelly moved to London as well and together with Mulele founded a band called Kondo Dia Ntotila, currently one of Mulele's main musical projects. The band released an album called 'Seben Steps to Heaven' and plays regular gigs in several venues in London.

Compared with the few other Congolese musicians I have met in London, Mulele has a quite different agenda, primarily because he addresses local audiences. Plus, apart from very few close friends, Mulele's own personal life is quite disconnected from community life – in his version, mainly because of political reasons: it is difficult to trust a Congolese as everyone can be a spy or an informer; everyone can sell you and put your family in danger back in the home country. Whether such a hermeneutics of suspicion (Gilroy 1993: 71) is valid or not, Mulele's musical discourses resonate postcolonial thinking and critical stances of the Black Atlantic (see chapter four) that configure his life experiences in quite an original way.

Nonetheless, his political stances reflect and react to the current dynamics of *Bana Londres*, the Congolese community based in London, and the unprecedented and conflictual role music and silence are playing in the circulation of new Congolese political discourses. To depict my impressions about that, I have to step back to the beginning of my research, when I was targeting the British Congolese community events to explore the collective sense of music.

2.2 The way forward. Political engagement and silence in the Congolese diaspora

I started my research by addressing 'community' gatherings of London-based Congolese organizations whose purposes could be considered under the umbrella term of 'activism'. The event where I met *Maman* Charlotte was a conference held in Stratford, East London, on Saturday 24 October 2015, called "The Way Forward." The aim was to raise awareness (and funds) concerning the critical conditions of people living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

According to my experience with Congolese activism in London, the majority of the participants in every event are women, both among the organising activists and the audience. Although every age group is represented, there is generally a preponderance of young people.

Through several discourses of Congolese diaspora people, I perceived a strong, class-crossing public opinion stand in conflict with the political power embodied by the figure of President Joseph Kabila. Elections in DRC²⁴ were due in November 2016, but they were severely delayed. Everybody agreed on the president's will to delay the census process in order to avoid the consultation, as the democratic confirmation of the government in office seemed quite unlikely. My impression is that the president somehow works as a synecdoche referring to the whole "Congo illness" – as 'New African Woman' journalist Benedicte Kalombo defines it: the large majority of the population below poverty line; a permanent military conflict still afflicting the Eastern part of the country including mass rapes and continual massacres of civilians, without any control either by the Congolese Army or by the International community; the permanent pillaging of the country's natural riches by external agents like Great Lakes bordering countries and foreign multinationals.

The overall tone of these public speeches resounds with the "strident form of wounded nationalism" that Mbu-Mputu and Trapido (2020: 17) define as the dominant narrative in Congolese national life, yet without the *Combattants'* aggressivity. Without having substantial inside information on the *Combattants* movement, I suspect that one of the reasons of this difference in tone depends on different targets: the *Combattants'* display of "demonstrative rethoric and disciplinary violence" (ibid.) is instrumental to achieving space in hyper-aggressive transnational Congolese political forums. Events like "The Way Forward" target the intersections between NGOs, British charities, British-born Congolese, and the diaspora. Consequently, the vocabulary and imagery rest more on ethical principles than violence. I consider this a relevant element to analyse Mulele's discourses, as I reckon his strategy and direct target to be closer to "The Way Forward" audience than the *Combattant's*.

²⁴ Initialism for the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the outward rhetoric of the Congolese diaspora, I notice two big concepts recurring on almost every occasion, in both public meetings and private conversations:

- The privilege of living abroad, in terms of better life conditions (personally, socially and economically), particularly for the most vulnerable sections of Congolese society, namely women and youth, who are the principal victims of war, rapes, diseases, political violence and abuses;
- A sense of responsibility towards the Congo, which is eventually translated into the wish to intervene in Congolese society from abroad, in order to 'change it for the better'.

Charlotte and her fellow activists blame the general, shameful indifference of public opinion about such a terrible situation, presenting the Congolese issue as a self-evident global urgency. They do that from a Congolese point of view, that is, from the perspective of the victims, forced to leave their country; at the same time, they present themselves as the spokespersons of their people, the ones who can reach the international audience and talk on behalf of their voiceless brothers and sisters.

Nonetheless, Charlotte's network of intervention is mainly composed by British NGOs, whose headquarters are in London, collecting European and North Americans funds. The direct audience of her conferences is mainly composed by other Congo-based activists, but their aim is to attract the attention of institutions and the public in order to call for a strong intervention, both military and economic, of Western countries "to help" Congo. The dialogue with Charlotte shows me the fluid configuration of a multi-sited agency developing between two distant action fields, where to be rooted on one side is the key factor to conquer vital space in the other.

I was expecting music to play an important role in community activism gatherings, due to the capital importance of music in Congolese popular culture, and the crucial place music holds in "the diasporic imagination, having the capacity to interrogate social theory,

and raising complex questions about boundaries, identities and politics” (Ramnarine 2007: 12).

Curiously, there was very little music involved in those events: just interludes between speeches, to entertain the crowd while pausing the flow of speeches. The most relevant artistic performances – in terms of their contribution to the main narrative of the event, and the emotional impact on the audience – were pieces (spoken words, recital, a capella Soul singing) disconnected from any Congolese background. No Congolese music was played, not even from records.

Trying to find out the reason of this absence in my conversations with Congolese people in London, I heard of *les Combattants* (see section 1.2.7). I addressed the issue of music in the community during a conversation with *Maman Charlotte*:²⁵

- Charlotte, what do you listen, when there are community events?
- Definitely Congolese music. Now, I don't know many groups... The thing is that in community events, they don't want music, as it is disturbing. Doesn't make sense!
- Ah, so they want something more serious...
- But what is serious?! Music is part of our culture, we have given so many things to the world: music, sculpture, painting... But Congo is famous just because of war, rapes, massacres, and those have been the topics I have talked about all my life, but now I thought: what about the joy? We are a joyful people, and we have to show that. But they don't want that, as it distracts from the problems of Congo. So, Congolese musicians stay away from the community, as they could be beaten.
- Have the *Combattants* anything to do with that?
- Yes! You named it, *les Combattants*. Ah! They are stubborn, I disagree, I'm trying to make this thing change. Fally Ipupa²⁶ was about to come here, and they said: if he's coming, we are gonna boycott the gig and destroy everything. So they cancelled the show.
- Is that because many Congolese music stars support the government?
- They live there, in the Congo; they are forced to do so. And there are many musicians who stand for the country and criticise.
- Is any of the *Combattants* directly involved in music?
- Who? The *Combattants*, musicians? They hate music. No, that's nonsense.

The *Combattants'* symbolic and physical violence addresses the joyful nexus in its entirety. The omnipresence of death in the Congolese physical and imaginary territory (De Boeck 2005), the continuing economic collapse and the end of *mikili* as paradises for fraudsters (Trapido 2017) make social (re)production unthinkable. The contact

²⁵ Conversation held in Caffè Nero, The Cut, London, on 19 February 2016.

²⁶ Stage name of Faustin Ipupa N'simba, a famous Congolese pop star.

with the underworld seems no longer to be vitalising for the social body, reduced to a living dead state (cf. Mbembe 2019: 88-92).

The joyful nexus is not productive any more; the *Combattants*, until recently the masters of potlatch ceremonies, have turned sensual euphoria into hate and refuse to celebrate the rite any longer. The whole nation is the target of their boycott: political institutions are divested of authority; and music, the ritual language, is prohibited. The violent symbolic inversion of the protest expresses the dramatic reaction of a social group facing global necropolitics. In this scenario, Mulele's choice to pursue eclectic musical path outside the community seems the only feasible option for a Congolese making a living with music in London.

Mulele affirms that the Combattants prevent his music from banning for he is fighting their same fight to liberate the Congo. More than likely, the problem never came up, as Mulele is below the target of the Combattants, who boycott Congolese stars commuting between Kinshasa and the diaspora. Yet, Mulele's fluid narration is a relevant strategy to navigate between various social bodies, pursuing a musical career in UK while inscribing his artistic production within current transnational Congolese horizons.

2.3 Back to Africa. Fluid positioning to avoid ghettoization

Mulele consecrates most of his time to his music; consequently, he usually spends most of the day between his home and the studio, where he occasionally sleeps. Hence, people circulating in his life are mainly music people, plus some close Congolese friends who are usually introduced to me as "my cousin."

Apart from playing with Kongo Dia Ntotila, Mulele pursues a solo career and has a band in Kinshasa. The different plans of his music practices compose a multi-sited network where, as in the case of Charlotte's diasporic activism, Mulele's double positioning between the UK and the DRC is supposed to generate a surplus value in both fields. Besides his artistic mastery, Mulele stimulates interest among British

audiences and media – in fact, he has given several interviews to newspapers and TV stations like BBC 6 (see section 3.4 on chapter three) and Arise News²⁷ – as a Congolese intellectual and activist engaged in Kinshasa society. On the other hand, Mulele fantasises about bringing his band to Kinshasa:

Having the band with me, I could easily convince the authorities in Kinshasa to organise a big concert in the stadium for us. That's what everybody from there who has watched our stuff on YouTube was telling me: my band is seriously good, people can't believe *mindele* ('white people' in Lingala) can play our music so well. But my musicians didn't want to come. They got scared; they say Kinshasa is dangerous.

As in many Congolese musical narrations, Kinshasa and Europe are the two opposite poles of several dichotomies (Trapido 2017: 82-84): Europe, peaceful and resourceful, yet saturated, contrasts dangerous, vibrant, spacious Kinshasa, “the absent object,” that catalyses diasporic Congolese musicians' desires, fantasies, inspiration, and planning. In Mulele's rethorical narcissism, his trump card to make it in Kinshasa is a half-*mundele* band playing Congolese music properly: this exotic strategy manifests the importance of the principle of the empowering other in Mulele's musical planning, as I discuss below.

We cannot know if such a strategy would succeed: Mulele invited other Kongo Dia Ntotila members to join him on his last trip to Kinshasa in 2014, but they refused. On that occasion, Mulele established a band in his native Matete neighbourhood gathering local musicians and released three tunes with companion video clips, naming the project 'Kinshasa singles'. Mulele also organised a one-day free music '*Festival de la Paix*' in Matete, thanks to the collaboration of other *Kinois* artists. The great many efforts to spend resources gathered in Europe (both money and humans) to make a name in Kinshasa, and the care to be identified as a proper *Kinois* despite being based in London, tell how intensely Mulele partakes in the Congolese musical reverie of Kinshasa as 'the' stage. The original element is the musical composition of a romantic, wounded nationalism seeking redemption from within.

²⁷ Interview with Charles Anigolu on 11 December 2014. The entire interview is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AllvKIDbVTg>.

Mulele writes the lyrics and composes the music for all his projects. The lyrics are mainly in Lingala; the topics are mainly connected with African experiences, specific to the Congolese context. Some songs, like *Bonkoko* (“Ancestors/traditions”), *Afrika ye ye* (“Africa is crying”) and *Biso Pasi* (“We the sufferer”) point at the corruption and great social inequality of the Congo, which cause suffering for the large majority of the people – *Bonkoko* blames Congolese politicians for not following the ‘way of the ancestors’. Other songs express more precise political references, always concerning the Congo. *Prophecy*, the first single released after Mulele’s conscious turn, addresses the interference of Rwanda in Congolese internal politics; the video clip²⁸, shot in a Congolese village in 2012, inserts a fiction sequence where Rwandan president Paul Kagame (played by a man in a suit) is chased and lynched by a group of angry Congolese villagers incited by Mulele. “That’s my prophecy: one day, not long time will pass, people will wake up and take over” Mulele comments on the video. The song clearly drawn on resurgent anti-Rwandan nationalism, a distinctive language of anti-Kabila discourses; yet, as I discuss in the last chapter session, racialised elements are kept out of Mulele’s nationalism in virtue of the Pan-African connection.

When I met Mulele in January 2016, he was about to complete two danceable tunes: *Afrique c’est chic* (“Africa is cool”), “a world pop collaboration” – in Birikiti and Mulele’s words – with Moroccan musician Simo Lagnawi; and *Seke Bien* (“It’s all right”) featuring London-based Congolese duo Mbonda Kamikaze. Mulele considers these two songs as a promotional step, a sort of gatekeeper to expand his market and audience base:

- These two songs are going to open our way to Africa, my brother, thanks to the video clips. Unlike the rest of my tunes, these two can easily pass on TV in Congo. This is what the government loves to give people: bullshit. – [I laugh, but he is very serious].
- So, you think of these songs in terms of strategy...
- Yes brother, this is strategy.
- I see! As a way to enter. And once we are inside...
- We mash ‘em down, bro.

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyToXCDimdg>

Like every other time I heard him talking about his return to Kinshasa, Mulele's eyes were sparkling, staring at a spot on the wall of the studio he was squatting at the time in North East London. The figures of his YouTube channel suggest that he has little following in Congo, yet, like many other Congolese diasporic artists in a similar situation (Trapido 2017), his confidence in a transnational relationship with Kinshasa music scene is unshakable.

Mulele directly addressed the issues of Kabila's government and election delay in a tune called *Election*. The video clip²⁹, similarly to *Prophecy*, shows Kabila keeping power at any cost, until Congolese military forces (played by men donning camouflage) resolve to kidnap and kill the president. Mulele hoped, and somehow expected, a similar scenario for the end of Kabila's regime.

You see Kabila? He's stupid, he removed all the most important figures in administration, media, economics... everywhere; he's not gonna last long. Mobutu, he was smart, he was a dictator, but smart; he knew politics, so he lasted for so long, and the situation was better than now. And above all, Congo was in peace.

Regardless of the historical accuracy of the comparison with Mobutu, Kabila is identified as the target, in accordance with the *Combattants* and the rest of nationalistic opposition (Mbu-Mputu, Trapido 2020: 8). In Mulele's opinion, Kabila was losing internal and international support due to the many failures of his leadership, and the army was the only institution that can actually stop political brutality in Congo. Mulele, Birikiti, and Congolese featuring singer Coco Gabana wear camouflage in the video clip of *Election*, as if they were spurring FARDC³⁰ to take their side. One of the local leaders of *les Combattants* acts in the fiction sequence. The footage shot in London was edited together with images from demonstrations against the government in Kinshasa and cell phone videos sent by acquaintances and other Congolese artists living abroad. The process of mastering the song and

²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57FRHQ3U2_4. The YouTube page contains the English translation of the lyrics as additional information to the video.

³⁰ Initialism for the Congolese Army (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*).

realising the video had been speeded up due to the urgency of the topic, as in DRC the political tension about the election schedule was rising.

The song *Beni* expresses solidarity with the victims of mass rapes and genocides in Kivu, at the same time as denouncing the complicit silence of politicians, the United Nations, global media, and Congolese celebrities. The video was shot by Mulele and myself in Windsor Great Park in Englefield Green, Surrey, 200 yards away from my house.

Mulele's vision of his own music is inspired by the work of musicians like Bob Marley and Nigerian afrobeat stars Fela Kuti and Lagbaja. Civil engagement and social denunciation are crucial aspects of his production. The question arises as to the consequences:

– Mulele, it should be dangerous to say these things in Congo...

– It is man, it is, but I don't give a shit. One day, in summer 2014, I was in my courtyard in Kinshasa playing *Afrika ye ye ye* with my band. The song says: Africa is rich, but we don't see this money, we just see fat politicians and rich cars passing by the street. The military men came to my house, as they heard something was happening. My sister was filming, so I have the footage (he shows me): they stepped in with the boss of the neighbourhood, and everyone froze. But we kept playing the music. They took a seat, and watched us playing, so at the end, they did nothing.

I want to say what's wrong in the Congo, I don't care if it's dangerous: I've seen too much in my life, fear is not part of me. I think fear should not exist in humans: if you have fear, then you can be very corrupt. In Africa, we are already dead: our bodies are living, but we are dead, we have no liberty. Who cares if they kill us?

I cannot be the one to tell whether it is safe or not for a Congolese person to openly express similar thoughts. It may be that Mulele's criticisms are vague enough to go unnoticed; yet, it is relevant that Mulele points at political freedom as a necessary condition for his artistic maturation as a conscious musician, and a crucial reason for his journey to *mikili*. As many Congolese musicians justify their need to go to Europe to use better recording facilities (Trapido 2017: 72-76), Mulele gives a rational reason for his migratory journey – a reason consistent with his persona as a politically engaged musician from a dictatorial country, which can arouse solidarity among European audiences. Beyond this specific reason, there is the trope of the empowering journey up North, and the idea of transnational mobility as

a factor of success and an instrument for political criticism and transformation.

Mulele's main target is the Congolese audience. He plays music in the language of Kinshasa, singing about what people experience there. Video clips and other digital supports – like MP3 files of his songs available for free download or with a free donation on Bandcamp – are so important for Mulele because they should be the principal channel to reach these people. It may seem paradoxical that his audience in London is quite detached from the Congolese community. Apart from his friends and relatives, very few Congolese people attend his shows. Thus, it is fascinating to see John Kelly from Liverpool and another French guitarist playing *sebene* over and over in Mulele's studio, while he establishes the rhythm beating a glass with a spoon, totally excited: "Nice! Now, *balancer, balancer*, you are balancing the music, good! We are now in Kinshasa! This kind of music is going to be extinct soon, but it was very on the edge in the '90s with Wenge Musica³¹. And we are playing it right here, in London!"

Although Mulele is extremely satisfied about the musicians he plays with and the projects he is currently involved in, Mulele still plans his trip back to Congo, as if all these years have been nothing but a mystical path of knowledge and experiences to fully realise his potential before to commit his talent to his motherland. Nostalgia for his country and the glorious beginning of his career, pragmatism, ideological engagement, optimism about the Congolese future, and cultural entrepreneurship are all factors converging to a (yet) imaginary project of reverse migration and a creative longing for home. Mulele looks to his own history as a preparation and a continuous rise towards consciousness and refinement of his expressive skills. As in the case of many British-born or British-based Congolese, the poverty of Congo, and the differences in potentials at the two ends of the Europe-Kinshasa opposition stimulate initiatives and planning from the diaspora.

³¹ A Congolese band active in Kinshasa between the 1980s and 1990s. Wenge Musica has forged famous solo artists like JB Mpiana and Werrason.

- I want to go back. In Africa there is everything, Africa is rich. Kinshasa is good, everything is cheap there, you can do things easily. It is a great city, with the best music scene of the world, a lot of interesting things going on, especially in the underground. I'll go with you this year; I feel we'll do big things, especially with the video. We have to go there with good equipment: I want to spend money on it. And then we run things. We can do everything, with better quality than everyone else. Congolese video clips look so amateur, people just care about looking as white as they can: you have this kind of issues in Africa. We'd have no competitors, man: it's crazy. We can go and film to the concerts, and make contracts with the bands to sell the DVDs³² and share the profits. We can do video clips, and then sell DVDs with four of them: we do copies ourselves, and we sell them, to avoid piracy. We can do everything: documentaries about Kin music life, about street kids, whatever: telling good stories, training young talents there, and getting good money. I can do gigs, and instead of charging one dollar at the entrance, people pay one dollar and get a copy of the DVD. And if we sell one million copies, that's one million dollars.

[I smile, but Mulele keeps serious:] - Really, man, everyone is going to buy a copy of our DVD, it's going to be in every house!

Mulele's ambition to return to Congo as a cultural entrepreneur is a multimedia project. Recourse to video is crucial for the innovative aspect of the project, as Mulele expects experience and technological facilities obtained living in the UK to be groundbreaking in Kinshasa. Desires, and emotions, play the main role in this plan, which is still far from being put into practice yet. Nonetheless, Mulele is in contact with Kinshasa's music scene, and keeps sending his inputs from abroad. He says that his song *Bonkoko* was played during the Kinshasa riots on January 2015; as there are no songs by Congolese stars addressing political issues in critical terms, protesters found *Bonkoko* lyrics suitable as a soundtrack to demonstrate against Kabila's will to remain in power. Mulele claims to be popular in Kinshasa, and influential in several ways: he argues that music celebrity Werrason named his album *Fleche Ingeta* (2015) plagiarising Mulele's single title and motto *Ingeta!*:

When you say *Ingeta* ['freedom'], that word gives you the power of our ancestors. That's why Werra uses it. Anyway, I can't go there and claim the title is mine: everybody'd think I want to become famous via having a quarrel with Werra. But many people in Kinshasa know the truth.

Whoever the inventor may be, *Ingeta* is a *Combattants'* cry, and most Congolese relate Werrason's 'theft' to them rather than to Mulele.

³² About VCDs, music and piracy in non-European countries, see Stobart 2017.

Nonetheless, the first line of Mulele's *Ingeta!* has become the title of a popular Congolese TV programme of journalistic investigation, *Tosengi bino mingi te* ('We don't ask you for much'), whose theme song is Mulele's tune. "Obviously, they didn't pay me a penny for it" Mulele says with a sneer. The video clip of *Ingeta!*³³ has reached more than 7,000 views on YouTube, which Mulele considers quite an achievement for a Congolese underground artist.

To better clarify the impact his music has in the Congo, Mulele played me an interview with him and his band on Congolese TV in 2014. As soon as the camera points at them, they all cross their forearms and say "*Ingeta!*" The programme is in Lingala and French, but Mulele explains every passage to me:

You see? The presenter says *ça va* to me, but I tell him *mbote* ['hello'] in Lingala. Now, what I'm telling him is that Congo is rich, culturally, we have so many languages, but we don't care, we use French, and we forget our origins. We always wait for *mindele* ['white people'] to do something, but this doesn't happen. We should defend ourselves, and our culture. You see his face? He's realising that, and now he says that it's a shame that Congolese artists don't say that. He's realizing that right now, live!

I'm astonished by the change in the presenter's face, and how the show was naturally flowing towards such unexpected results, without that much control:

- Man, something like that would never happen in Europe! It seems to me that Congolese TV is way less controlled.

- Yes Eugene, in Africa you have space, things can change. It's easy to go on TV, even national; here in UK, to appear on BBC is very difficult; in Congo it is not, they give you a chance, then it's up to the people to support you, if you do good, and become popular. That's Congo: through music you get to know all the most important people, easily. [We keep watching the programme] Now, you see, the presenter starts saying *Ingeta* all the time! Man, that day, it was crazy!

Then there comes a part where Mulele says that Islam and Christianity are ruining Africa, dividing people, while the wise choice for African countries should be to step back to the customs of the ancestors. The programme also broadcasts a video clip of *Prophecy*:

It is dangerous to show things like that in Congo. After the show, man, I was scared of being killed or kidnapped; but as I step out the building, a

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY0yc6le2jI>

soldier stopped me and invited me for a beer, saying me: 'you are the kind of artist we want to support!' I went home, and the day after a black Cadillac stopped in front of my house. A man wearing a suit got off and asked to people around where was the *Ingeta* musician. My mother told me 'Get out! Run!' but I stayed where I was, waiting at the doorstep. He told me 'come to the car', but I said 'you come'. So he did; he was a general *procurateur*, a very important person. He told me he loved the programme, although he hates television. He told me to be careful, as when you go on TV, it's easy to create enemies. He also told me to avoid cars, to use public transports, as they are safer apart from motorbikes, because the risk of me being killed exists. That was an intense day, man!

The interview on Congolese TV displays various important elements of Mulele's rhetorical repertoire, many of which are in common with other actors of Congolese diaspora: anti-Western and anti-Rwandan cultural nationalism, reference to the political prestige of the *Combattants'* opposition front through the cry *Ingeta!*. An interesting element, which I have never heard nor read about in current Congolese political debate, is the continuous reference to the ancestors and the culturally vivifying contact with the empowering African dead.

Mulele's non-racialised nationalism closely echoes more violent uses of the idea of *congolité* (Bokamba 2008), yet his creative use of Congo as a source of musical inspiration, his openness towards Pan-African connections, and his genuine commitment to the cause of his people make his cultural quest into an endeavour of personal and collective disalienation (cf. Fanon 2008: 174-180).

Digital circulation of media and music products is a fundamental way for Mulele to keep Africa at the centre of his creative processes and emotional sphere. Mulele continuously makes posts dedicated to Africa in his Facebook profile, sharing articles on the exploitation of African resources and people by foreign countries all through history, publishing videos of great African talents, and commenting on conspiracy theories webpages and blogs denouncing the New World Order.

Digital channels allow Mulele to transmit musical goods to his compatriots. Music video clips are the most important vehicles for this; hence Mulele is extremely interested in producing them and

supervising every aspect of them. Video clips of Mulele's songs³⁴ have a few thousand viewers on YouTube; it is very hard to realise to what impact it corresponds in Congolese society, where only an elite of wealthy citizens has access to the internet on a daily – or even weekly – basis. That makes video clips even more relevant, as one of the main media to spread music trends and crazes is still the television, with digital programmes and channels transmitted on a continental scale dedicated to Congolese music. Mulele considers TV shows and radio DJs as key figures in the distribution of his music:

When our video clips are ready, I will send them to Africa, and they are going to play that in clubs and TVs and radios. I have to put a bit of money on it, as nobody does anything for free in Africa: that's the way the thing goes. So you have to give something to the presenter of the show, as a gift, some 20 dollars, and he's going to play your tune on TV or radio. That means, it's going to be sponsored, to pass on national channels, and then in clubs, bars. I'll be cleverer: I'll give them more, to the good ones I know; so they are going to play my tracks once per month, or once per week, and everybody will know my song by the time I'll be there. I will talk not only to Congolese people; I want my tracks to be played in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and maybe Botswana. It would be good to participate in one of these African music competitions and awards; maybe not for winning, but being selected would be already good."

This additional proof of Mulele's continuous imaginative projection towards an absent Kinshasa and his fantasious digital promotional strategies leaves no doubt about Mulele's enthusiasm for my offer of collaborative music video making. In fact, this was the key of our collaboration, as well as our friendship.

2.4 The encounter and the idea of a music video

Saturday 23 January 2016. The meeting is at "New River Studios", Manor House, North East London. I struggle a bit to find the place, amid warehouses, abandoned blocks and factories. The studio is a huge building all covered in graffiti. The receptionist guides me to a recording room. Mulele is there, recording the drums: "Hi, nice to meet

³⁴ See Mulele Matondo Afrika channel on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/MuleleMatondoAfrika/videos>

you. Are you rushing? 'Cause I need the last five minutes to finish the track. Have a seat, man."

Mulele records the drums on his laptop through a little mixer, listening with his headphones. He does the snare drum and toms first, then bass drum, and cymbals at the end. "Are you recording all the track on your own?" I ask him. "Yes. No joke, man. I prefer to work on my own. Sometimes I like people playing for me, but when I have the concept of the song in my mind, I prefer to play all the instruments myself."

We leave the studio. Mulele brings me to his place in the next building. While he's opening a metal door in a shutter, a guy who is leaving the compound says hi to him. "Yes I man!" says Mulele, suddenly having an idea and asking the guy: "Ah! Man, would you mix one of my songs, please?" "Yes Mulele, no prob." While we enter, I say: "Man, this place is full of musicians!" "Yes, all creative people here man. It's a very good place to work, I won't leave it for no place." The inside of the building is a work in progress, but the walls are all painted with beautiful and elaborated graffiti. We walk through a corridor occupied by big lights, wires and building materials, into what seems to be an apartment under construction. Mulele opens the door of one room with his key, and enters his place: "Welcome to my house, feel free." The walls are full of posters of Bob Marley, Haile Selassie, Patrice Lumumba, photos of Mulele's children, an image of Pope John Paul II kneeled in front of a black Madonna with child, a Senegalese flag. There are a laptop, a big TV screen and a king size bed that occupies almost all the room. Clothes are piled up next to the door.

Mulele sits in front of the computer and starts downloading what he recorded in the studio, while talking with me. We start chatting about Congolese music: "It's the hottest music in the world! You know, they called me from Colombia because they want to do a feature with me. We really are all over the world. Ok, ask me what you want to know about Congolese music." I explain my project is a video research: his face changes: "Ah! So you are into videos!" He starts showing me his clips: footage of him and his band in Kinshasa, and material for video

clips of his songs shot in London. Mulele starts thinking we can do something together:

- Actually, Eugene, how busy are you? Because I was thinking of shooting a video clip tomorrow, for the song I'm recording today.
- It sounds great; yeah let's film tomorrow. We could go to some place of the Congolese community in London.
- That's not far away from here: it's Tottenham. But Fally, Koffi, Werrason³⁵ have already been there. I really like the warehouse where I live: it's a great place.

2.4 More fiyah! Enthusiastic collaborative video making

On our first meeting, Mulele already planned a shooting session for the next day. Taking part in music video production with musical authors opens up a lot of aspects of the musical environment to observation. By becoming a particle of music production, I was entitled to have my say in the creative debate, and the more I was proactive and curious about what was going on, the better my presence was accepted. As Ranocchiari (2015: 232) says, this implies getting away from epistemological worries, and just participating. Obviously, my presence impacted the outcomes, and it is now impossible to distinguish how the video clip would have been without my presence. Nonetheless, Mulele's strong personality and his awareness of academic and visual processes mitigate my concerns of jeopardising his work for my own purposes. Instead, our collaboration has been flowing smoothly ever since, progressively increasing in its intensity and effectiveness.

A common feature between Mulele's expectations and my visual research is the concept of images matching sounds. I adopt collaborative video making within the scope of ethnographic filmmaking; my camera style and cinematic approach are considerably influenced by ethnographic documentary – that is, entitling people and social contexts to represent themselves in front of the camera. For his part, Mulele's cultural performances are always “a direct critique [...] of the social life they grow out of, an evaluation of the way society handles history” (Turner 1986: 21-22). Mulele's music is artistic realism (ibid.),

³⁵ Fally Ipupa, Koffi Olomide, and Werrason are Congolese music celebrities.

staged, artificial, politically aimed as every performative genre is. When he talks about his music he often refers to “telling the truth” or “showing the reality of the people.” In the same way, images in his videos have to “mirror reality”, to show (and denounce) the selection of truth that inspired him. Visual text and sonic texture have to match with the content of the lyrics, so as to concentrate all the different layers of the “orchestration of media” that he performs into a single, consistent message of reflective consciousness (ibid: 23-24).

As a Congolese artist, this choice constitutes a strong aesthetic challenge. The large majority of mainstream Congolese video clips struggle to represent a dreamscape of wealth and swaggering despite the desolate poverty of the context, opting for interior and semi-interior spaces. On the contrary, Mulele uses images to adhere to people’s everyday life, refusing any fake decoration.

I had confirmation of Mulele’s conception of videography the first day we met. I was showing him the video clip I made in Goma with four local artists. The song, called “Amani Kila Siku”, features two rappers and R’n’B arrangement made by a local beatmaker. The video was shot in the streets of Goma and presents many interventions of street people. After watching the images, Mulele commented:

- I like the images but they don’t match with music. The images show people suffering, but the music is from the bourgeoisie, it reminds me of this stuff... [He selects a random video clip of 50 Cent, with luxurious cars and jewels.] What these guys in your video do, they copy the Western stereotype and music, while we have more than 260 dialects in our country. You can say the same things with our musical languages; you don’t need to take it from the outside. I don’t like rap, they use synthesizer, the sounds are not ours. So we lose the power of our music, of our culture. Congo is rich; every language has its own music.

- I know what you mean, although these guys are activists, they use rap to claim for justice...

- No, they are not activists. They are copying; they could say the same thing sticking on Congolese stuff. Look at it [he selects *Mazopo*³⁶, a video clip of Bebson de la rue]: this guy was a street kid, and his video shows the reality of people. To me, this is activism in music.

Mulele defines his music practices in terms of a strict creative nationalism, and links his ideas of videomaking to the mimesis between

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yaz1SsH8xcw>

images and depicted social reality, with no space for colonising aesthetics. Similar reflections accompanied the screening of “Le Jour d’Après” by Baloji during a shared panel of Mulele and myself at SOAS. Baloji’s song is a remake of classic independence anthem *Indépendance cha cha* by Joseph Kabasele; Baloji raps of the disasters of the Congolese independence era to the tune of the song written to celebrate the end of colonialism in 1960. The rapper and the other participants in the video dress as Congolese musicians in the 1960s, performing the song in the interior of a bar. During his speech, Mulele pointed at the aesthetics of the video:

That image is wrong, because it portrays Africa like we are rich. We have to tell the truth, don’t lie. We have to tell how we are living. There are imperialists in Africa: we have to show how devilish they have been to us. But for the rest of the music, I would agree.

To Mulele, “the truth” to be told is the poverty and deprivation of Africa; a reality which links up with colonial brutality and mismanagement, reflecting on the historical perspective and using shocking images to provoke reflexivity in both African and European audiences. Everything else in the lens of the camera could disturb and prove misleading.

The first video we filmed was *Seke Bien*³⁷, a dance song that was supposed to be a hook to attract a more commercial audience towards Mulele’s work. Although the video was ready in February, Mulele waited until 31 December 2016 before making it public. I suspect he wanted to link his music and public persona with the image of the rebel musician and activist fully engaged in the cause of Congolese protesters. Hence, the publication of more danceable, lighter material was not responding to his artistic agenda by then.

Seke Bien – the video clip I describe in the introductory vignette of Chapter one – was shot at Mulele’s home, a warehouse in construction in Manor House, London. To my surprise, the plot and the scenic design of the videoclip were reproducing a joyful rite. We arranged the set for the video in some of the several empty rooms in the

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxnx28Aiyqg&t=155s>

venue. The idea for the video was to enact a ritual of possession in a *juju* ('fetish') house in which magic priestesses evoke the energy of the *bonkoko* ('ancestors') to empower Mulele's guitar. The setting and the reference to the ritual recall common practices in urban Congo (cf. Trapido 2013):

This is very popular in Congo, to use magic; I mean, good magic, the power of the ancestors. And the houses where they do that are normal places, like this one where I'm living: that really reminds me of Kinshasa! It might be fiction, but everyone there would quickly understand what's going on in the video.

The priestesses in the video are two friends of Mulele's: one is Tanya, a Londoner of African Jamaican origins who plays the spiritual healer in the video, evocating the ancestors' power on Mulele and his guitar; the other is a Moroccan-French actress. The other female dancers are also Mulele's friends of various origins (Italian, English, mix-raced) convoked by him to feature in the video. None of them is personally related with Congo. Mulele says:

I called some twenty Congolese, but see how many of them turned out: none. African people, they are like that: you call them, they say 'yes', and then they don't show up; you can't rely on them. Now, I have invited people coming from everywhere. The idea is to express the power of woman, the magic of women, wherever they come from.

Hence, the two Congolese dancers in the video – the Mbonda Kamikaze duo who also sing in the song – took the lead in improvising choreographies, and showed the basic steps of Congolese dance to the other performers. Nonetheless, the making of the video was "an open thing", without either too strict references to Congolese rituals or a predominant dance style.

The joyful nexus is used as an open creative device, non-prescriptive and non-verbal, based on bodily communication. As I say in section 2.3, diasporic spectacularisation does not diminish ritual efficacy, yet it introduces new foreign elements (*mindele*) into the nexus, absorbing their vitalising energies. As in the case of Kongo Dia Ntotila's performances (see chapter three), the outcome is a transcultural artwork, whose African matrix is strongly interwoven with elements encountered in the British context. Again, the interaction between

artists and the performative environment is a crucial element of the creative process. In Mulele's vision, improvisation is the fundamental mode of interaction with the camera, for every actor of the audiovisual piece. The 'direction' is reduced to a constant feedback between the ones who hold the camera and the ones in front of the lens: pace, concept, actions, and sequences are built on the shoot; nothing but location and participants is determined in advance. At the end of one of the first shooting sessions, while we were commenting on the overall process, Mulele expressed to me his idea of directing: "That's what is that about: directing them, bearing with them, waiting for the occasion for them to express the best they can."

The process is a constant dialogue among all actors, where everyone can intervene in the performance at any time (Benjamin 1935/2008: 30). So, Mulele's Congolese friends explain to Tanya, the performer playing the priestess, how to beckon Mulele into the magic circle; European dancers include steps from West African and South American traditions in the midst of a re-enacted Congolese possession rite; Mulele shows the rudiments of African rumba steps to his female friends who will re-elaborate them one minute later in front of the camera, without any preparation. In my opinion, it does not correspond to an eclectic or melting pot-like aesthetic agenda; it is rather the product of an extemporaneous approach to the audiovisual – and to collaboration with other artists in general. Africa, and Congo, are the pretext that triggers this creative dialogue; but as in Mulele's live performances, such references are anti-regulatory. They rather constitute an invitation to join in: Mulele lets the dancers improvise and play with their imaginary Africas while performing, as he does with the audience in his concerts. Indeed, Mulele embraces shared approaches more intensely in the audiovisual process than in his music performances: while holding the camera, or acting in front of it, he allows the other participants to share the authorship and the direction of filming, without opposing resistance or pushing the process towards pre-defined goals. Therefore, once again, Mulele is an ideal companion for the present research project, based on collaborative film methods.

The openness and creative prolificacy of Mulele's approach to the production of the *Seke Bien* video clip gave birth to the initial sequence of the clip in an unexpected way. During a break in the shooting of the dance parts, featuring singer Coco Gabana said in French that it would have been a good idea to make the video clip longer by putting in a scene where Mulele enters the place of the *juju*. I said it was a great idea, to do a short film, like Michael Jackson's clips, with a short scene at the beginning. Mulele instantly agreed: "Good idea bro!" We started filming in the corridor, and the guys improvised the dialogue and the gestures: Coco had the idea of the zombie gatekeeper with his eyes rolled backwards and a hoodie on, holding a candle in his hands. Mulele taught his Moroccan-French friend two phrases in Lingala to say in the scene, and she repeated them until he was happy with the result. Mulele was very excited about it: "African people are gonna love to see white women speaking in Lingala!" I played little part in the scene, apart from saying 'ready' before recording, so they could start playing. The guys enjoyed the scene a lot, and asked me to do a reverse shot from the stairs to edit that together with the main shot.

The relevance of the spiritual meaning of the images in the video is diluted in the audiovisual flow, not separated as a 'sacred' aspect, but mediated by the bodies of the the participants according to ritual joyful modes. Mulele, a lay person, considers fetishes as a reference in the video to his original African culture rather than an object of cult; yet, the digital performance 'is' a joyful ritual that exerts Congolese to turn to the energetic sources of their ancestors.

The dissemination of visual references to the African spiritual universe through objects and decorations – as well as through editing choices and specific effects added in post-production – is one of the principal leitmotifs in the video. Mulele personally took care of their disposition, placing his personal objects – various souvenirs from the Congo like musical instruments, statues, masks, and ornaments – in the shooting set, and supervising the make-up of the dancers. As a visual contrast, Mulele used white paint for Tanya and himself, and black for light-skinned performers. I observed Mulele doing the make-up of one

of his friends, drawing a line of black spots along the profile of her eyes, in the middle of her forehead, and around her chin. “Is it some kind of voodoo that we are gonna do?” she asked, half threatened and half excited. “Yeah, exactly, it’s magic, the magic of music. And you, as a woman, give the power to my music,” Mulele responded while completing the operation.

Here, the idea of the empowering other matches other forms of xenophilia: the image of Africa ignites curiosities, sensuality, and desires of the guest participants in the rite. For some of them, as for Tanya, more complex identity issues and longing for home are at stake, recalling Black correspondences and musical dialogues across the Atlantic (see chapters three and four). The inclusion of partially unaware strangers does not propane the rite; rather, it corresponds to new vital energies for Congolese celebrants – in this case, Mulele – who will pour the resources they have gathered abroad into the Kinshasa social stage through digital consumption. Again, the joyful nexus is party digital: the web becomes an appropriate medium to experience the rite and to gain prestige through symbolic dispersal and display.

I realised the meaning of many elements in the setting of the room by listening to the conversations between Mulele and the dancers, who had to partake in such a complicated re-enactment without any previous knowledge of Congolese culture. It was easy to notice the big difference between the analytical questions of the dancers – which were the ones I would have asked, if I hadn’t been committed to my filming task – and the flexibility of Mulele’s conception about what we were doing.

- Why there are these candles? – Tanya refers to the candles we are disposing in a circle on the room floor. Mulele answers:

- You see, you are gonna dance inside the circle, the candles tell the audience this is something related with the power of the ancestors, and not about dance, party, and showing female bodies as a sexual object. This is very important, as women are not just sexual objects: sex is in nature, but women are more than that: so I want that to be clear in the video, I don’t want it to look sexy. Because Congolese music is sexy, is about moving the waist and hips, it’s all about sex.

- Ok, so no sexy moves?

- Well... you do your style: you are sexy, so it can be sexy as well.

- I'm confused: sexy, or not sexy?" she says, smiling amused and a bit embarrassed.
- Be natural, do not worry. Do your style. – Mulele shows her how people dance in Congo, moving legs and waists, slightly bending the knees.
- Oh, that's hard! And the rhythm is hard to follow! It's a very difficult music! – The dancer complains while she tries repeating Mulele's moves. He keeps encouraging her:
- No, you're doing right, perfect! Do it your way, it's good, you're great!

After a long session of shooting, Mulele unexpectedly told me: "Man, it's your turn! Take your shoes off, step in the circle, and you two dance together, just express yourself!" I started dancing with Mulele's friend to the rhythm of the song, both of us quite embarrassed. Mulele held the camera, and kept saying "Yes!" and some phrase in Lingala, of which I only understood the word *mindele* ("white people"). Afterwards, Mulele said: "Man, remember to add this part in the video when you edit, because I want you in the video, definitely!"

The definition of elements and style in the video is totally improvised, as is the acting of the people in front of the camera. I proposed Mulele to write a plan of shooting and discuss the structure of the video; he refused: "Man, I like to improvise. If we have to plan it before, I know it's not gonna work. We just go there, we work nice with the people, we are relaxed, and the inspiration will come. More *fiyah!*"

The cultural references to Congolese culture are not strict: none of the priestesses is of Congolese heritage, so their acting does not derive from having experienced similar rituals. In participatory video making, Mulele's creative nationalism dilute into a totally collaborative, open-ended process. The point is not to accurately recreate an environment or a ritual, but just to give the audience a clear idea. And the audience expected for the video is essentially situated in Central Africa. Performances in front of the camera are elaborated in analogy with Bakhtin's dialogism (1981), according to what the musicians expect the audience's response will be. While improvising in front of the camera for a video clip, these diasporic artists were confronting the masses of African audience, who ultimately give the decisive input to the performance (Benjamin 1935/2008: 33). Afterwards, the same

inputs and thoughts will determine the shape of the audiovisual piece in the edit suite.

Mulele “designs and imagines his work playing in the bars of Kinshasa” (Trapido 2017: 233) keeping in mind the taste of African viewers at the same time as trying to insert new elements that could impress them, like having European people dancing and acting in his Lingala songs. The attitude about the female body and the position of female dancers within the visual architecture shows Mulele’s unprejudiced, pragmatic approach to the video, in a balance between crowd-pleasing and stylistic consistency.

While I was not present, Mulele shot some footage with another friend of his who is a professional dancer. She prepared herself for the song before the shooting, and executed her choreography on camera. Mulele showed me the images, enthusiastic: “She’s perfect! She’s talented! Look at her boobs: man, people in Kinshasa are gonna love her. There will be people watching the clip again and again just to watch this bit! I know what people want in music, I was doing pop music myself when I was younger, so I can understand what people want when it comes to music.” He shows me another couple of clips of his friend with a big straw recipient in her hands: “That’s what women do in Africa; that was my idea to show her as an African woman.” I remember something on this line in Goma, during a fashion showcase.

While we were screening the footage together, Mulele spotted a clip where he was dancing with one of the performers, holding her from behind. The images of them dancing together clicked something in him:

Eh! This is very controversial. If you put these images, *isch!* I get low, my fans will be mad at me. This is commercial stuff: Koffi Olomide could do that, not me! You can’t do both in Congo: if you do conscious music like me, you can’t do these things. Well, you can use that in the editing if you want: touching is natural, but I have to be careful with that. You see, my friend’s boobs are all right in there: she’s beautiful, and she’s portrayed as an African woman, not as a sexy dancer, so we show her natural beauty but in a frame where they cannot blame me. Here, I don’t know...

An important concern in Mulele’s music production is what Russian semiologists Bogatyrev and Jakobson (1929) defined as “preventive censure of the community.” Mulele has to move carefully

along the borders of ethnical and political positioning with respect to *mikiliste* forms of the joyful nexus. He is afraid of the rejection of his work by Congolese audiences, and even more, of being misunderstood and wrongly labelled as 'commercial'. This implies the presence of a code of visual references for music contents, in which one is not allowed to contaminate one register with the other.

Referring to my previous experience in Goma, RDC, I remember a rapper mentioning very similar examples. He is Black Man Bausi, very famous for his conscious lyrics and his politically militant approach to music. He criticizes Congolese music stars for promoting nothing but "the nakedness of women and the consumption of alcohol." Both elements, beyond being considered as essential to contemporary expressions of the joyful nexus, are essentially visual: "the nakedness of women" refers to Congolese commercial video clips objectifying female bodies as sexual objects; "the consumption of alcohol" is an allusion to the fact that many famous Congolese musicians are sponsored by brewery companies – one of the few actors of local music production (see White 2012a: 719) –, and several artists feature in popular TV and online beer advertisements. Black Man Bausi would never include similar visual references in a video of his; similarly, he would discard any video using such an aesthetic as 'commercial' in a pejorative sense.

In the message he sends to Kinshasa via digital spaces, Mulele expresses a nationalist social criticism within the semantic frame of the joyful nexus. Stressing the ritual power of the ancestors, Mulele praises Congolese traditional culture and rejects Western-oriented xenophilia of *mikiliste* forms of expression like *la Sape*. Unlike the *Combattants*, Mulele keeps the joyful nexus active, eliminating the unsustainable elements of mad dispersal and moderating the explosive, nocturnal aspects of anti-order assumed by Congolese social rites in colonial and postcolonial times.

By editing images of beautiful female bodies in the context of a diasporic African ritual, Mulele's plan is running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. His aim is to gain the sympathy of state TV, commercial programmes, and dance floors in Congo, at the same time

as challenging the unoriginal 'bling-bling' aesthetics of average Congolese dance videos by adding an original African rite as an element of pride and fashion.

The passage above requires some clarification. By reporting sketches of disjointed conversations about Mulele and myself, I could misrepresent Mulele as opportunist, sexist and male chauvinist, although such an impression clashes with my personal opinion and knowledge of him. Conversely, the relationship between Mulele and female dancers during the shooting was based on purely artistic and friendly terms, mutual respect and appreciation, and Mulele never pushed any participant towards explicitly provocative attitudes. The participants had the chance to watch the rushes and a complete draft of the editing version of the video, and no one raised any objections on the matter. By adding this section about Mulele's conception of the female body in video clips, my aim is to include a reflection on the visual vocabulary of Congolese popular music in the ethnographic report of my research. By navigating the code of current visual music production, Mulele wants to fit in the Congolese music market without losing his artistic specificity. Within this complex imaginary strategy, the video clip of *Seke Bien* occupies the interesting position of the Trojan horse.

2.4.1 Digital magic: collaborative video editing

Collaborative filmmaking is a learning process in which ideas and skills are constantly circulating among the participants. The technical aspects of it provide a very direct way to confront opinions and points of views while elaborating a common visual language of creativity and expression. In fact, the process of collaborative filmmaking implies a sensorial, practical effort to cross cultural boundaries, relying more on shared imaginary and common emotions than on linguistic communication; consequently, its nature is "basically transcultural" (Boudreault-Fournier 2010: 174). Given that cultural boundaries are also defined at the same time as they are crossed, as "we always realize who we are in relation to the other" (ibid), filmmaking involves the

participants in a common playground where all contribute to a cultural product, which will eventually be consumed by social bodies, having an impact on them. In this regard, collaborative filmmaking fits particularly well in diasporic art forms, where the artists are already pushed to express themselves recurring to the heterogeneous elements of the environment where they live. In my field experience, I approached a Congolese musician who was already collaborating with artists and camerapersons of various backgrounds and agendas, in the flamboyant context of the London underground music scene. For Mulele, taking part in my research project was one transcultural experience among others. Perhaps, the peculiarity of our collaboration lies in the intense reflexivity implied in ethnomusicological fieldwork, which will be discussed further on.

Camera work helped break the ice and established a dialogue based on practical issues rather than on abstract research questions. The constant screening of the rushes was crucial to agree on visual choices, and to enjoy together the first outcomes of the work: the latter aspect, in particular, contributed to spreading a relaxed and optimistic aura over the process. Screenings also elicited ideas and thoughts about the final outcome, including editing choices. While watching the rushes of the first day of shooting, Mulele had an idea for the beginning of the clip, which we adopted in the final cut:

The footage is so good! I would like you to start the montage with the clip of us lighting up the candles; then, go to the face of the zombie: bahm! as the magic is there. Then we enter into the scene. It would be nice to put some special effect, to express the power of magic, the power of our ancestors.

Observing Mulele's style of shooting and engaging with people through the camera lens, I learned his efficacious do-it-yourself attitude and his positive approach towards practical difficulties as well as the overall success of the project. Probably, the most interesting, intense, and energy-consuming part of the collaborative process was the editing. I edited part of the video clip by myself, and then I screened the first cut to Mulele, adjusting it according to his feedbacks. The collaborative process elicited Mulele's curiosity about my approach to

editing: he proposed we continue the editing together, as he wanted to practice his skills, which I happily accepted. The collaborative editing sessions were the decisive moment concerning editing choices, and a precious occasion to explore Mulele's aesthetics and conception of music.

The editing sessions usually lasted several hours, with Mulele and me in front of a 15-inch laptop screen discussing every photogram in the timeline, experimenting with all sort of solutions, continually changing ideas, passing through software crashes and data loss. As the author of the song, Mulele was extremely demanding in the edit suite, one of his major concerns being synchronisation between the editing pace of the images and the rhythmic pattern of the piece. The accomplishment of this expectation required additional work due to the complex rhythmic architecture of the track: "In Congolese music, every instrument plays its own rhythm. Drums are not expected to give the rhythm to the rest of the band: everyone has to keep his own rhythm. The intersection between all these rhythms creates the texture of the song." Mulele wanted to base the editing on the downbeats of the 4/4 main rhythmic structure of the song. I struggled to identify the downbeats, as the rhythmic guitar – which to me constitutes the most audible rhythmic line on the track – is played upbeat, contrarily to the drums. So, I asked Mulele to export an additional sound track increasing the volume at the time of the downbeats (mainly corresponding to the bass line and hi-hat). While editing, I used that soundtrack as a hint to the rhythmic structure, then deleting it before exporting the video. Anyway, Mulele's supervision was necessary for adjusting the video to his conception of rhythm and dance patterns.

Mulele continually corrected me, pointing out the mistakes on the timeline, and having me change the length of the clips until he was satisfied. Patience is a necessary complement of the process, as one has to comply with the artists' needs and desiderata when it comes to technological exactitude. He was pleased by my willingness in this regard, and at the same time he considered it necessary to be rigorous about the synchronisation, as "this is a fault of the majority of video

clips when musicians are not involved in the editing; we have to avoid it, absolutely.”

Mulele and I spent time to make the dance movements in the video adhere to the music, according to a criterion that Mulele and his partner Birikiti define “to be relaxed on the beat.” Basically, the dance movement has to come right after the beat, as if the movement of the body was originated by the beat itself. Consequently, dance movements do not have to exactly match the beat, but rather come with a bit of delay: “dancers have to be relaxed to the music.” This principle has many exceptions in our editing, for Mulele and I also used the images to underline some passages in the editing as well as in the song, matching body movements and beat so as to visually reproduce the stresses of the rhythmic structure. All the adjustments on the timeline were done without mathematically calculating the number of frames – which is usually my way of operating to guarantee consistency between editing and rhythm. Instead, Mulele prefers to watch the montage and listen to a passage over and over, until he shouts ‘stop!’ to me to point to the right cut. Once I have adjusted the length of the clip on the timeline according to his indication, we play it again, and Mulele scrutinises whether or not this is correct, and if necessary gives me further indications.

Although collaborative filmmaking always implies the co-authorship of all participants, sometimes I just executed Mulele’s indication, to allow his view to define the piece. My intervention was heavier in the definition of the editing pace and image choices, as I provided Mulele with a rough-cut of the whole video clips that we re-adapted together. Mulele’s changes were oriented to establishing a crescendo through dynamic images and rapid cuts towards the second part of the video, to guide the audience to the climax of the action: the magic operated on musical instruments and musicians.

Another element to convey the feeling of magic in the clip is recourse to grading, colour correction and special effects in post-production. Mulele repeatedly asked me how proficient I was with post-production software, as he really liked the idea of adding some basic

effects like smoke clouds to convey the idea of the magic happening in the rite. I asked my editor friend Chiara Costantino to work on the video clip and create simple smoky effects in the opening sequence of the clip, which she successfully did. Chiara also added a grading filter with a red texture to the main part of the clip. Mulele was very satisfied with Chiara's work: "This is fire! This is magic, this is what the song is about! It really looks like there is magic involved. Now, we are done for real. We are gonna get far, my brother!"

2.5 Other collaborative texts

I proposed that Mulele share a panel at the AfNet (Africa Research Student Network) conference at SOAS on Wednesday 25 May 2016. We agreed on presenting a panel called "The way back to consciousness: changes in the direction of Congolese music." The preparation of the panel was very confused. We did not have the time to prepare it together, so I wrote the abstract, read it to Mulele, and selected a couple of videos to show. Mulele dismissed one of Black Man Bausi's videos, as "it has just some dozen of viewers: this makes it not relevant. We want to talk about music which is relevant in changing the ideas of the country. Let's play one of Lopango ya Banka, a London based rap group. They are good friends of mine³⁸."

Once at SOAS I realised that every plan would have been subjected to improvisation, and that the only way to share this panel, or better, the only way to present something, was to interpret the moment. Once in the conference theatre, we heard a couple of panels. Mulele started to say: "There's no African people here. How can you represent Africa without Africans?" Plus, a paper of a scholar from US was presenting Rwanda in a good way. Mulele shook his head loudly several times during the presentation, expressing his anti-Rwandan nationalism out loud: "Rwanda is committing genocide in Congo, this American man is supporting such a crime. This is a shame: he's lucky

³⁸ One might say that Mulele is far from being relevant enough as to "changing the ideas of the country." I reckon Mulele wanted to be more in control of the speech, so dropped a video of an artist he did not know and selected a song of his friends instead.

there are no more Congolese in the room other than me, my people is dying because of Rwanda. It's not surprising the American government pays a scholarship to him: they are supporting Kagame, they are robbing the Congo."

At the break, while eating an apple, he told me he was not feeling comfortable: "I know this place: this is Babylon. Maybe I just have to leave, nothing relevant can be said in here." I told him we could leave if he wasn't well; to be honest, I was feeling the waves of anger and rage in him, and I decided not to tackle it, but rather to leave him with his thoughts, hoping that this rage could be channelled into the presentation.

After the break, it was the turn of our panel: ART. I introduced it, doing a brief review of how Congolese music is defined as detached from its social environment and absolutely incapable of criticism by media and academia, quoting Bob White's (2012a) article "Pour l'amour du pays" and the online journal *Jeune Africa*; then, I just passed the word to Mulele asking him whether he agreed or not with my statement. Mulele started:

I've been here for four years, I know academic media: they always try to take the piss of the African. Today, here is the meeting for the decolonisation of Africa, but there is no African to decolonise. For this answer, I'd say to Bob White: it's not true. We got the independence through the music. You can look at the revolution in Zimbabwe: chimurenga music. You can look at South Africa: amandla music. Always music partakes in the development of people. Music changed the direction when the British, the Western, get involved in the issues of the Congo. They don't want to lift up the people; it is like an agenda. They invested money, they created the culture of *authenticité* in the '70, when the state imposed to the musicians to play songs for the president, to glorify the president, and then that movement has carried on until today [cf. Trapido on *dédicaces*, 2017: 42-44]. But I think Congolese music is going back to the conscious, because we got poverty, we got war. So I'll try to tell you guys, scholars, you have to be careful. Someone like Bob White, I was here when he came, I was the one who challenged him, many things he said were wrong. Scholars, they go to Africa, spend six months, two months: how are you gonna know the culture in six months and then talk about these people?

People in the audience laughed; the organisers grinned quite nervously. I asked Mulele about Kinshasa music today, if there really is not any socially engaged music there:

I'm always in Kinshasa, there is conscious. But like I said to you, they threaten them, with state oppression. Some of us, we are lucky, we can live here, travel, going in places to play, and then bring money to sponsor. So, poverty and state are the main keys that force the youth to choose, because it's very expensive to go in the studio in Africa, so they prefer not to sing politics. If they sing politics, who is gonna sponsor them?

The first question of the Q&A was for Mulele: a black guy asked about the challenges of music as a mindset-changing element, and what has to be done. Mulele said:

I think the main challenge is: people like us, people like you, who come to Europe to study, we have to go back home and do something about that. That's the only solution we can do. Because if you don't do that, the ONGO... I don't even know their name, what they call them, NGO? They are gonna go for their interest, they have their own agenda. What was the agenda of the Europeans coming to Africa? I'm really sorry if I am offending anyone here. That's the thing we need to remember: by going again to the same people who came to enslave you, those people can free you? So, you, all of us we have the duty to do something. My duty is... even without money: I've got no money, sometimes I go to Africa helping, but sometimes I'm just sharing one bread with them; you know, I'm hungry too! I'm doing my best through music, I'm challenging the scholars of Europe. There is no African teacher teaching this music: this is the challenge. The religion in Africa is Europeans teaching religion in Africa. We need to challenge them, to make things happen.

The chair of the panel asked Mulele about Congolese music and Pan-Africanism:

Ok. This is something European they are still struggling with. They have to understand the Africans: Africans are one. The division of Africa has created confusion: that's why we are here today, because we are confused, we don't know what we are. Africans are one. I travelled through Africa: there is a similar culture in Ghana, in Congo, in Zimbabwe. We eat the same food, we have the same language. It's the "divide and conquer" rule, that's what makes Africa today who we are. So, African Congolese music has been the powerful centre of African music. It creates hits like *Independence cha cha*, it was the *hymne national* for all Africa, because we had the same agenda. But again, after the independence, that's when the problem has come. The politicians they were scared to use that music for the benefit of the people, because it's powerful, I can see that it's very powerful.

The panel was not the result of a previous written text. It was rather a public, improvised conversation about Congolese political music and academic discourses about it. Here, the word 'conversation' is improperly used, as the event was mainly aimed to elicit commentaries from Mulele, due to the concurrence of our interests. For

him, it was an opportunity to express his views in front of a public usually out of his reach; for me, it was a chance to experiment with performance as a form of scholarly representation (Conquergood 1991: 190). Probably, the panel could be better defined as an interview, where I played the role of the mediator by introducing the topic to an academic assembly and framing the questions, and Mulele provided the content of the communication. The outcome was a reflexive unpacking of a few academic tropes linked with Congolese music, presenting them from the point of view of an actor of this tradition.

I find Mulele's considerations about the politics of representation very interesting: his contestation of academic expertise in an academic arena is a strategy to claim the cultural copyright of African music as an instrument to empower his cultural agency. In this regard, the disagreement between Mulele's and Bob W. White's points of view does not have to be read literally as a clash of ideas or a correction of inaccurate ethnographic data; rather, it is created as a pretext for challenging the alleged neutrality of the scientific text and the political economy of knowledge (Conquergood 2002: 148). Mulele criticises the academic process of abstraction from reality; his contesting intervention creates a discontinuity in the expected flow of scientific communications during the conference, making the vital flow invade the ideological model. In Mulele's discourse, 'the Westerns' are blamed for imposing an ideological mode of conceiving Africa upon Africans themselves: this corresponds to a new, deeper form of mental colonialism based on the power of representation. The point, rather than correcting possible imprecisions in such a representation, is to denounce the process of cultural production and diffusion of this representation as an oppressive imposition, based on violent imbalances of power (Dattatreyan, Marrero-Guillamón 2019). Proclaiming that his duty is to come back home and "make things happen", Mulele adds moral and political nuances to his returning project: as an African person who has experience of the European system, he has to stand up for his people and use European's arms

against their own. Music representation appears to be a big battlefield in Mulele's agenda.

Although considering himself as a spokesperson of his people, Mulele is aware in his discourse of the big difference – defined as his 'luck'³⁹ – between his status and that of the large majority of his compatriots. Mulele's dual citizenship (Congolese and recently also British) allows him to move freely and to enjoy – at least, virtually – the opportunity of the Euro-American musical market. Hence, Mulele underlines the importance of solidarity and collaboration in his agenda – again, as in many world music discourses (White 2012b) the image of "sharing one's bread with them" iconically puts him as a bridge between Western resources and Congolese creativity and dramatic issues. Stage strategies and discourses in the academic arena share identical tropes and appeals.

We left SOAS after exchanging some email contacts and telephone numbers. Many people expressed their interest for Mulele's work and ideas after the panel. Once again, his talent as a Congolese intellectual helps him in opening up his way as a British musician.

We had to take a bus to go back to Mulele's place, and have some *fufu* for dinner. Mulele's Oyster card was empty, and I did not have any money in my debit card to lend him. But the paying button in the bus was broken, so that the driver made us a sign to just get on board. We looked each other smiling. Mulele said: "*Bonkoko*: this is the power of *Bonkoko*!"

2.6 Conclusions

The particular combination of Rasta discourses, Congolese nationalism, travelling around Sub-Saharan Africa, and diasporic political environment contribute to the specific use of the joyful nexus by Mulele Matondo Afrika. His idea of creative nationalism, although quite sharp when verbally expressed, shapes his musical practices around a pulsating image of Africa, serving as both a political statement of

³⁹ On the concept of *lupemba* ('luck') see Trapido 2017: 205-210; and White 2004.

postcolonial pride and a creative bait to other open sensibilities in transcultural London, becoming a practice of transcultural disalienation and a call for resistant Pan-Africanism.

His constant longing for home and dreaming of a successful return produces a continual flow of fantasies oriented towards Kinshasa, and a set of narcissistic, imaginative strategies concerning how to spend the symbolic wealth accumulated through his voyage to *mikili* into the frenzied social stage of Kinshasa. By participating in the making of a music videos, I could see the visual expression of these strategies: the unsophisticated, mimetic scenic design, the ritual evocation of the ancestors as a cultural element of national pride, the display of white bodies as the appropriation of the empowering other, the visualisation of the magical effects of ritual possession by the ancestors through digital postproduction technologies.

In the dramatic scenario of the *Combattants'* silent fight against Congolese institutions – among which, the joyful nexus – Mulele keeps performing the ritual connection between human bodies and empowering dead through ecstatic production and consumption of music, proposing it as the milestone to redeem and refound the Congo. Transformed into a diasporic show, the joyful nexus maintains its ritual energy and operates as an open creative device that navigates through multiple plans, negotiating new alliances, inventing new artistic forms, responding to other longings for home – namely, the African Caribbean diaspora in London – and other creative forms of xenophilia, which I discuss further in chapter three.

The experiments of the collaborative music video and the shared panel allowed me to join the digital fabrication of the joyful nexus and interact with the discourses gravitating around it. Collaborative video making transforms the fieldwork dynamics in a common creative effort wherein unplanned events, desires and improvised ideas elicit unexpected connections of sense. Every visual aspect of the video clip corresponds to an element in Mulele's complex audio visual strategy, dialogically composed according to his idea of the audience's expectations. The nonverbal, emotional texture of the video clip sheds

light on the personality of the diasporic artist, who composes his nostalgia and desires for a return with the cultural prestige of having reached *mikili*, the rich North, and mastering the arts of the white men. The audio visual representation is a privileged instrument to explore diasporic music as a multidimensional field of actions: the music video clip, a single musical text, expresses many concurrent significances directed to a variety of receivers from very different cultures, and still it makes sense for everyone.

Mulele appropriates the audio visual medium as a modality of self-writing, empowering himself via the control of his representations (Agawu 1995). In the same way, he refuses external definitions of his music, especially the idea of world music, a massive container for everything outside the 'western' norm. Our experiment of a shared panel at SOAS manifests the impossibility to collaborate with Mulele on the basis of the academic discourse: although to me my fieldwork practices seem in direct contact with the theoretical frame of the project and the scientific literature that I refer to, Mulele sees an insurmountable gap between the two plans, due to the very academic language and mindset. To him, the only way to properly express himself about his music is to get rid of any imposed representation and to decolonise the language of African music (cf. Ngũgĩ 1986). In the midst of the harsh Congolese political crisis, when silence is used by diasporic activists as the strongest language of contestation, Mulele's musical compositions are animated by an internal polyphony of different messages that still compose a coherent unit of sense, like the different rhythmic patterns played by the various musical instruments in *Seke Bien*. The film makes it possible to overcome linguistic limitations and to produce an open message wherein Mulele's artistic and political expressions and my research goals can coexist.

Mulele's particular artistic agenda finds its place within the network of multicultural creative London, wherein his African representation proves particularly appealing for a spectrum of social actors, as I will depict in the next chapter.

Chapter three. Sonic architecture. On and off stage dynamics, strategies and discourses in Mulele's performances

This chapter provides ethnographic descriptions of some of Mulele Matondo Afrika's live performances I attended during my fieldwork in London. The accounts are intended to compose an ethnographic portrait of Mulele's musical persona against the backdrop of different sociocultural and scenic settings, and provide details of my interactions with the musicians in the field.

To follow on from the previous chapter, the present one addresses the way Congolese diasporic performances spread a multifaceted message aiming at several targets, including the condemnation of international abuses on Congo, and the protest against the oppressive policies of the music market. In line with the idea of ritual performance as social drama (Turner 1986), the present chapter explores the new dynamics of transcultural London and its conflicting representations as staged by Mulele's band, focusing on the dissolution of the concept of cultural fixed identity. The semiotic strategies of Mulele's African music discourse are discussed with the work of postcolonial scholars, namely Afrofuturistic stances on Black identity, and Žižek's critique of multiculturalism. The research notes from *L'Armée Rouge's* gig provide a reference for the communicative strategies and social enjoyment of popular music in Congolese diasporic community, in order to put some of Mulele's stage strategies in a wider frame of cultural resonances.

The first account and the third one – respectively, the first and the last time I have seen Mulele performing live during my fieldwork – concern the Kongo Dia Ntotila band⁴⁰, Mulele's main musical project. The analysis of the differences between the two *mises-en-scène* sheds light on the transformations that have occurred in Mulele's musical project in terms of cultural perspectives, communicative strategies,

⁴⁰ The band is named after the kiKongo appellation of the ancient Kingdom of Kongo – only partially corresponding to the actual Democratic Republic of the Congo – a Bantu state that lasted from the XIV century to the beginning of the XX century.

career developments, imagery and artistic references all over the period of my research.

The second account describes Mulele's one-night collaboration with Aime Bongongo's London-based Congolese band *L'Armée Rouge*. The performance, more oriented towards a Congolese diasporic audience, displays a different interaction between the musicians and the crowd than Kongo Dia Ntotila's gigs. It constitutes the main example in this thesis of a musical experience produced and consumed by Congolese diasporic subjects outside a church. The juxtaposition of these three performances in the present chapter gives depth to the transcultural profile of Mulele's artistic project.

Coherently with the theoretical reference to the anthropology of performance, my ethnographic portrait of Mulele is based on dramatic acts such as live music performances rather than interviews or other text-like data. Live exhibitions are observed as acts of performative reflexivity (Turner 1986: 24), framing the interaction between all participants (the musicians, the audience, the venue and the leisure industry, and music as both a creative input and a trance-inducing stimulus) as a ritualised social drama. In the British diaspora, the joyful nexus functions as a mode of political empowerment and social critique operating through the participants' trance-like states. The intense sensory, emotional and bodily involvement produced by musical joy provides a non-verbal platform of ecstatic social engagement through which diverse actors formulate their discourses. Hence, Mulele's performances are staged social interactions revealing social models and challenges, desires and power unbalances, dominant views and counterdiscourses. Consequently, every act is seen in its dynamic of performing/producing social contestation at the same time as reabsorbing it in the norm (ibid: 80).

As cultural performances represent "the eye by which culture sees itself" (ibid: 24), my ethnographic research gives Mulele an additional eye to see himself and his music – first of all, because he has the opportunity to look at his performances by playing the footage I have filmed, some of it just with the purpose of providing Mulele with

images of band rehearsals in order to check everybody's performance and to get a better sense of the ensemble.

The camera is a fundamental reflexive tool in my research, for it directly generates relevant ethnographic data and establishes a permanent dialogue between the musicians and me. Footage has often elicited Mulele's memories, reflections, polemical stances, explanations and other musical thoughts. The dialogic, reflexive pleasure introduced by the camera in our relationship goes beyond getting direct feedback on the footage; most of the conversations we have are marked by Mulele's urge to define his projects, his views, his beliefs, and his musical expertise and live history to me. It is this instrumental, technical relationship that sustains our collaboration – and maybe our friendship too.

The camera, more than words, has been the way I could express myself and creatively engage with the musicians. Filmmaking is my fundamental contribution to Mulele's daily activities – as well as to his dreams and aspirations.

Through the camera, I have negotiated my position, my commitment, and my personality in the field. And performances have been the main theatre of this negotiation.

3.1 Composing an African sound scape in London

London, Saturday 30 July 2016. Mulele calls me at around 4 pm: "Hello *ciao, pronto!* [in Italian] the gig is at 8 pm at Rich Mix, you're on the entry list. I'll see you there, brother. More *fiyah!*"

It is going to be the first time I see Mulele playing live on stage. I will film the gig – that is why I am on the entry list. Birikiti, Mulele's partner and band manager, borrowed a good Sony video camera from a friend for me; otherwise, I'd have to film the event with my digital Canon EOS 1100D reflex camera: too poor quality to hope in some good footage from a night event without adequate lighting.

Mulele's band Kongo Dia Ntotila is going to back up the headline Congolese band Konono n. 1. Mulele told me about them and the gig

some months ago: “They do traditional funeral music, in Congo this is not party music at all. But European people, they don’t understand African music, so it sounds like electronic to them. Anyway, this gig with Konono n. 1 is gonna be good, I have to practise a lot with the band. It’s good for our promotion, as there will be a lot of people there, and Serious,⁴¹ they are very good organisers. Rich Mix is a good venue to play: the sound system is decent, and tickets are expensive. People go there to listen to the music; it’s not like Passing Clouds, where everybody is there to get pissed and nobody cares about the quality of the music.”

Mulele is usually very open about his material interests and career plans; yet, his perspective is political rather than opportunist. His artistic choices and career strategies are generally adopted on account of a broader social critique, wherein he ideally embodies the collective struggle for a more equitable position of African music and musicians in the British market and society. To Mulele, performing at a high-profile venue like Rich Mix constitutes a good career opportunity as well as a political achievement; that is why he is so excited about the gig.

I arrive at Rich Mix with my girlfriend Roberta, in time for the sound check. The venue is still empty apart from the band on stage: Mulele, quite nervous, wears coloured African clothes: baggy trousers with combined waistcoat and a three-coloured red, green, and gold turban to cover his dreadlocks. Birikiti⁴² holds on her arms their one-year old son Piankhi. The kid is staring at the band on stage, totally enchanted by the music he hears through protective headphones. The band is composed by Mulele Matondo on the bass, whistle and back vocals; John Kelly on the guitar; David Lessie (the only other Congolese of the band) on the drums and lead vocals; William Scott on the saxophone; and Mike Soper on the trumpet. After a few minutes, the band leaves the stage. I introduce Roberta to Mulele, very quickly; he

⁴¹ A London-based music production and event company specialised in Jazz and contemporary music.

⁴² The band manager and Mulele’s girlfriend.

approaches her very friendlily and kindly, asking how she is and if she needs anything. After greeting Roberta, Mulele moves towards me and asks very politely but clearly in a rush if I am sorted with everything, then disappears. I am ready for the show.

As soon as the technicians come on stage to check the microphones, I move towards the stage to get a good camera angle. The band comes onto the stage, and Mulele shouts to the microphone: “How you feeling? Are you ready? We are gonna take you out to Cameroon, because we are from Congo but you know we are Africans, so we don’t discriminate the music, we go all over the world, all Africa. Now we are going to Cameroon, let’s go!”

The first song is called “Kupe Dekale” (Coupé-Décalé is a dance music genre originating from Côte D’Ivoire). Mulele moves frantically on stage, underlining the bass line with his whistle. The rest of the band executes the music very calmly, with some interesting free jazz-like brass and guitar solos. The musicians are all disposed on a line apart from the drummer, who stays behind the others on a well-illuminated spot. Looking from the audience, Mulele is on the extreme right, John on the left, and the two brasses in the middle. As I realise after watching the footage, my attention is catalysed towards the right side of the show – the more dynamic one, due to Mulele’s exuberance, and his proximity with David on drums and lead voice.⁴³ Later, Roberta will confirm that Mulele is the main exciter of the crowd’s interest; she and the rest of the audience follow his movements on stage, laughing at his jokes, responding to his inputs. The other musicians stand on stage, skilfully executing their parts, yet they rarely intervene in the physical dynamics on stage. It is Mulele who calls them into the show, presenting them to the public, introducing their solos, eventually involving lead guitarist John in a few choreographies with himself. Mulele stands out as the stage architect, the sonic director of the band. As Roberta tells me:

“It is quite evident to me that it is *his* band. Also, the music; I’m not any African music savvy, but this music sounds clearly African to my ears.

⁴³ Mulele uploaded to his YouTube channel the clip corresponding to the exact length of the piece from the footage I shot: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9123t-7GNU>.

Definitely African; yet not quite according to classic clichés – like the prevalence percussions, or bongos. But it is groovy, and dancy; I love that. And so does the rest of the crowd: everybody is dancing to the music, following the flow of the gig, moving according to the changes in tempo. And they are happy: they want it, and Mulele is giving it to them the way they want it.⁴⁴

The crowd attending the gig is hard to define. There are people of a large variety of skin colours – though predominantly white –, young and less young. The attendees display different outfits, hairstyles, and body decorations; they do not manifest themselves as any specific community, neither do they compose a heterogeneous assembly. They rather look like an ordinarily variegated group of London dwellers gathered in a single chronotope by their common taste for African music – which is exactly what Kongo Dia Ntotila are providing them with.

Even though they are just the supporting act of the night, the band is putting a lot of effort into the show. They feel like this is an opportunity to grab, to show that they know how to animate the crowd, and to demonstrate that they are ready to put on their own show and “mash up the place.”⁴⁵

Kupe Dekale ends, and Mulele shouts his “More fiyah!” and then: “Tonight is very special, because I’m from Congo, so I grew up listening to the Konono music all my life; tonight Serious give us the chance to play together: to me it’s like a bonus. And plus, yesterday was my birthday, but we celebrate today. That’s why I’m crazy today: if I’m crazy, understand, it’s my birthday. Happy birthday to everyone who’s here, more fiyah! Ghana now.”

The second track is dominated by an interesting dialogue between John and Mulele: John plays virtuoso solos on the guitar while

⁴⁴ I am quoting from a conversation Roberta and I had more than two years after the gig. At the time I was organising the field notes into a chapter of the thesis. Nonetheless, I am using the simple present tense so as not to interrupt the narrative flow of the ethnographic report, as if Roberta was commenting the gig on the spot.

⁴⁵ A typical Jamaican Patwah expression corresponding to “take the place by storming.” I prefer the Jamaican expression over its standard English equivalent for the former is often adopted by Mulele, who used to spend time with the Caribbean Rasta community while living in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Mulele has incorporated several Jamaican expressions into his English as a sign of his sympathy for the principles of Rastafari philosophy, especially regarding the loathing for ‘Babylon’ – epitomised by British imperialism and its official language.

Mulele looks at him smiling and playing an interval of major second on the bass, emphasizing the note with an upper neighbour. After a psychedelic interlude, Mulele starts improvising on the microphone, while David responds. At the end of the song, Mulele announces: “Mike on the trumpet! I call him the philosopher. Will, the philosopher on the sax!”

The musicians display all their musical skills during their solos, and the crowd yells and clap enthusiastically. Roberta is amazed, and also somehow surprised at watching great European artists mastering African music and brilliantly dialoguing with Mulele and David. Their fixity on stage makes the audience focus even more on their musical skills.⁴⁶ The different attitudes of the various band members become a further element of interest in the show.

After presenting all the musicians, Mulele questions the audience directly: “Guys, if you like our band, we got the CDs for sell, if you wanna support the power of the people, you’re welcome to get the CD. Our next track... anyone knows about the blues here? If they ask you where the blues comes from, what are you gonna say?” Someone from the crowd (probably Birikiti) shouts: “Congo!” Mulele says “shh” to her while people laugh: “Some people say Mali, yeah? But now we are taking you deeper, to the roots of the blues, in Kasai.⁴⁷ So, it goes like this...”

The third song is a very dynamic composition. Towards the end of it, Mulele improvises a solo on his bass, accompanying the notes with his whistle, hitting the neck of the bass with his right hand. The crowd yells after the song; Mulele asks them: “How you feeling? I wanna hear you say: More fiyah! This is our last track: do you want more? Do you

⁴⁶ I am depicting Kongo Dia Ntotila as being essentially Mulele’s idea. It is worth mentioning here that when Mulele and I were discussing the script of the video clip for the tune *Faux Boss*, he was complaining about the disinterest of the rest of the band about more spectacular, performative aspects of music production – like acting on camera for a music video. Like the gig at Rich Mix, this little conflict shows how spectacularity is one of Mulele’s prerogatives within the band.

⁴⁷ A province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mulele likes to say that the common theory in Western musicology (cf. Kubik 1999) that the African origins of Blues have to be tracked down to Mali is wrong. To him, as Kasai music – specifically, *mutwashi* – is the only African music style largely implying dominant seventh chords, the generative nucleus of American Blues is clearly there.

want more? So now, we are going to Kinshasa, we are taking you to the capital city of the music.”

The fourth song is rich in *sebene*⁴⁸ and changes in the drum patterns. Afterwards, the fifth and last song is a bye-bye song. Mulele keeps jumping with his bass; after one minute, he stops the track to introduce the band to the audience again: “Slow down. Guys, you have to be proud of you, because this guy – pointing at John – is from Liverpool. Every time I got to Congo, when I play our CD, people ask me: who plays? So I say: he’s an Englishman, and everybody says: naah, you’re lying! So, tonight I got my friends here, my brothers from Congo, I want them to see: John, come!” Mulele makes him a sign and John starts playing his guitar in front of him. Then, Mulele puts his bass behind his head; John imitates him with the guitar, and keeps repeating Mulele’s dance moves: Mulele starts moving his leg, and then turns around, always playing his bass; so does John. After this short show, Mulele shouts out: “Big up John Kelly! Guys, look, turn out. We need your support: you know we are the rebels, we need your support to support our people. I wanna take them – pointing at the rest of the band – to Congo, but without you... I’m gonna present you the band: I’m gonna start with my brother on the drums, my young brother from Congo, David Lessie! (David’s solo) and then, we also have a young brother, as in every band: Mike Soper on the trumpet! Mike, give us a tune. (Then, while Mike is playing) Aah! Don’t make me cry, Mike! You are taking me back to Luambo Makiadi.”⁴⁹ While the crowd is yelling, David says: “Ladies and gentlemen, on bass, voice, an incredible dancer, from Congo Kinshasa: please put your hands up for Mulele Matondo!” Mulele puts the bass down and starts dancing and whistling, while the band plays. Then he bows to the audience: “Thanks people coming tonight. Say bye bye.” The music starts again for another minute, then all the components of the band bow while the crowd is yelling.

⁴⁸ The *sebene* is an instrumental bridge typical of Congolese popular music where the guitarist improvises around the main theme of the piece. The origins of *sebene* are in the 1940s, at the beginning of modern African Rumba.

⁴⁹ François Luambo Makiady, usually referred to as Franco, is one of the main figures in modern Congolese sound.

Kongo Dia Ntotila played for about 30 minutes in front of one hundred people or so. Konono no. 1 called Mulele and David, the two Congolese of the group, to join them on stage during their show for a quick dance with the band's front woman; as Mulele explained to me later on, this is a common way to show respect among Congolese musicians. After the gig, Mulele sold a few CDs, and someone asked the musicians to sign the purchased copy. The guys were very happy about their performance and people's reaction. Apparently, also Konono's manager showed his appreciation: "Their manager got crazy: he was expecting a shitty African band, as every African band in Europe. I gave him a few CDs, he told me he can do something. Man, my band is cool!" Mulele tells me.

.....

The concert was an imaginary journey through some of the great African music traditions – Congolese music, Ivorian Coupé-Décalé, Ghanaian Agbadza. Mulele's Pan-Africanism considers all of them to be part of the same culture, tradition, social body, insisting "that it all fits together by putting it together as one performance" (Turner 1986: 94). The gig was a passionate social drama, in which Mulele's reflexivity about the causes of African social damages produced an emotional, volitional response in the form of a musical architecture full of African references, performed in front of a largely British crowd, who were nonetheless taken on board a constructed identity whose elements are shared regardless of nationality – also because three-fifths of the band are white British. It is more than that: Mulele presents his version of African culture as authentic, un-mediated by biases related to market and colonialism, and proposes that the audience join him and his band, to partake in this free, united Africa, dancing, clapping their hands, emotionally supporting their mission, and obviously, buying their CDs.

In his show, Mulele linked every piece to a specific location in Africa; although Kongo Dia Ntotila music is by all means originally created and not 'traditional', a crossover between jazz and blues foundation, Congolese repertoire, and experimentalism of the band's

components produces a soundscape represented as other than Western music, although the United Kingdom is probably the ideal cradle for such music encounters. The gig at the Rich Mix is the performance of Mulele's constructed, creative music nationalism: a creative longing for home traditions that constantly transplants disparate musical elements onto a diasporic texture made up of transcultural encounters and Pan-African sentiments.

As Turner (1986: 139) says: "feeling and will, as well as thought, constitute the structures of culture." Kongo Dia Ntotila's performance puts together a temporary *communitas* around the idea of an African experience. There are a few Congolese, and other African migrants attending the events, witnessing their own 'true' cultural expression as a part of the foreign soundscape they live in, therefore being empowered as a legitimate part of the picture. There is the crown of African music lovers, who constitute the large majority of the participants, attracted by the transcultural experience of a powerful artistic performance coming from somewhere else. Africa is a relevant topic in the construction of several identities present in London panorama: Black British, migrants, composite ethnic identities, political activists, 'alternative' music lovers. All of them look for – or just occasionally enjoy – alternative narratives, creative counterdiscourses, different sonic orders; and Kongo Dia Ntotila sound like that. These different agendas share the claim for a multi-coloured cultural scape in the city, where different cultural phenomena coexist without losing their specificities.

Despite frequent nationalistic references, Mulele's musical work proceeds by attracting differences. Heterogeneous elements are juxtaposed, in the performance as in the crowd, with no need of a unifying narration. As for the *Seke Bien* music video, the glue between elements is the ritual dimension of the joyful nexus, which calls for the presence of the empowering other to function. Such an outward-looking mode of cultural production intercepts other forms of diasporic xenophilia and assembles Africa-desiring bodies (Black diaspora,

exotica lovers, hipsters, outsiders, sophisticates, experimenters) as ritual celebrants and consumers, in the audience and in the band.

Albeit displaying countercultural aesthetics and expressing solidarity to the oppressed, this discourse risks reinforcing the social boundaries and cultural stereotypes that it pretends to battle against. Žižek (1997: 44) identifies multiculturalism as the “ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism”; a contemporary, politically correct form of racism that “maintains a distance rendered possible by [its] privileged universal position” (ibid), reinforcing “boundaries and lineages” (Reddell 2013: 91). Kongo Dia Ntotila’s music and Mulele’s discourses on stage still maintain an ambiguous relationship with official multicultural discourses: they try to differentiate their sound and their aesthetic from general world music trends, yet they play with current African music images so as not to alienate the world music public.⁵⁰ Regarding Žižek’s critique, a specification needs to be added: Kongo Dia Ntotila’s multicultural discourse does not stem from a privileged position from which to keep its distance from the cultural other. Rather, it represents a cultural other within society. Even though the band does not necessarily challenge dominant narratives and norms about cultural positioning, it embodies a cultural otherness too close to be looked down upon, yet too resilient to be integrated. And their performances make this cultural entity even more real. Again, in Turner’s terms:

Cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living” (Turner 1986: 24).

In the case of Mulele’s performances, it is difficult to tell which ‘culture’ we are talking about, as his music echoes through different cultural dimensions. It may talk to groups of people sharing similar transcultural and diasporic experiences, or migrants identifying Congo as their nation of origins. Additionally, it may bond people from

⁵⁰ Ever since the gig at the Rich Mix, the band has developed a more complex and refined position on that matter, as I will discuss further.

different backgrounds over the same feeling of displacement, rebellion, discontent, or dissatisfaction towards “dominant views” on British society. Rather than a community, the audience constitutes a temporary *communitas* – “intrinsically dynamic, never quite being realised” (ibid: 75) – to which music provides the very *raison d’être*. To take part is not just a matter of listening; it is by all means an active, participatory experience, based on the communion of a new cognitive, bodily, imaginative African-based horizon between the participants.

Mulele’s gig offers this variegated crowd the possibility to actively add a part of Africanness into the existential dimension in London. Monolithic identities, cultural borders, and everything else is “put [...] into the subjunctive mood as well as the reflexive voice”; performances “dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and ‘play’ with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception” (ibid: 25). The continuous breaking of the fourth wall between stage and audience intensifies the sense of *communitas* among the participants: Mulele gives the audience an important role in the event, and even more, he summons the public to a higher cause. The reference to the here and now (“today we celebrate my birthday, so I’m getting crazy together with you”); and the acknowledgement of the presence of local elements in the construction of an African message (“an English guitarist plays in perfect Kinshasa style: you guys should be proud of yourselves, you can be African if you want”) lead to the final call to action: we, the rebels, need your support in supporting our people; buy our CD so that we can go to Congo and play our music to them. For the audience, the purchase of the musical product is not just an extension of the enjoyment of the show. It is a chance to actively partake in a ‘truly’ African, revolutionary project where music plays for social change in the Third World. Consumption is proposed as a gesture of solidarity (White 2012b: 196). Not only Mulele offers his consumers the possibility to identify with people and cultures who are radically different from them (ibid: 199); the very fact of enjoying the music of a rebel, exiled artist like him “demonstrates solidarity with [his] political cause” (ibid: 197).

The feelings of coming into contact with another culture and supporting a political cause just through attending a performance are among what White (ibid: 190-206) defines as the “essentialist strategies in the promotion and consumption” adopted by ‘world music’ labels. Despite his critical stance regarding world music policies, Mulele embraces very similar rhetoric in the self-promotion of his music, as he aims to a similar, partially overlapping middle-class European sensitivity, audience and market.

As emotions and volitions are strong components in the shaping of social play (Turner 1986: 80) and are often able to subvert rational cognition, especially in the realm of performance, the dancing engagement offered by Kongo Dia Ntotila is particularly appealing for young European music aficionados – who constitute the majority of the audience as well as of the band. A bar ritual since colonial Kinshasa, the joy of Congolese popular music operates as well in an East End venue. The continuity is particularly evident in the gig, as Konono play *matanga* music, the traditional accompaniment of funerals in the Lower Congo, when the dead talk through the musical instruments and take part in the libation by possessing the people present. Mulele feels crazy: his ritual madness testifies the presence of the ancestors in the venues, and guarantees the passage of vital energies to the social group. The great majority of the audience are most likely unaware of Central African traditions of joy as a social practice, yet the spectacular dimension of Mulele’s joyful nexus, the web of convergent xenophilia, and the band’s dialogic strategies activate the crowd’s sensory empowerment, transforming the gig into a nexus of embodied otherness. The greater the feeling of otherness, the more powerfully the sensory politics of joy operates. Migrants, Black Britons and diasporic Congolese largely experience the proximity with African issues and the multicultural texture of London society in more trivial, everyday contexts; there is no need of a reflexive performance for that.

Mulele’s sonic architecture – like many other aspects of his persona – is a subtle web between personal expression and claim of the right to represent his culture and people. His ironic attitude in

debunking commonplaces on Africa, and his instrumental appropriation of some of them, show a clever manner of navigating among the politically correct, tastes and orientations of local music market, blending pragmatism, engagement, and an ambitious, yet fantastic project of career enhancement between two continents. The limited numbers of Mulele's audience and sales do not take anything away from his cultural strategy, nor from his hope of transnational success.

3.1.1 The kino-eye on stage: reflexive pleasure and ritual enhancer

Mulele and Birikiti upload my footage on YouTube after some postproduction by Birikiti – namely, some titles with some nice font editing – and then post it on Facebook. Since the gig at Rich Mix, the band has increasingly used my footage to promote and communicate their music online by sharing it through popular digital social networks like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Being aware of what the band wanted to do with my footage, I filmed the gig pointing the camera lens at the stage from the audience's point of view, with a few shots of the public dancing or singing along. Hence, the perspective of promoting the band was my main rationale while filming, the audience being an additional element possibly giving the viewers of the video clips the sense of "being there" within the crowd. Nonetheless, soon after this experience of filming live performances, I realised utilitarianism is not the only relevant aspect in this audiovisual collaboration. In fact, most of the footage I filmed with Kongo Dia Ntotila has never been edited nor uploaded online.

Besides any archival purpose, the very presence of the camera introduces an element of reflexive pleasure within the fieldwork relationship. "I am kino-eye, kino-ear" (Vertov 1922b: 17); an audiovisual researcher recording a music performance, the camera is part of my body. Hence, it becomes part of the ritual paraphernalia of the performance. The camera is not a necessary element to establish the ritual, unlike the musical instruments of the band, the music venue,

the sound-system, and the alcohol poured by the bartenders. Thus, it potentiates the ritual, and makes it possible digitally to expand the performance beyond its spatiotemporal setting. In the same way, as a filmmaker I am not considered part of the band, yet I am more than welcome to attend and film.

Mulele's strategy on stage is the result of a constant personal experimentation matured through three decades of experience across Sub-Saharan African countries (Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa) and the UK. It is definitely an original music concept, though Mulele constantly quotes Congolese music practices as the source of his inspiration and scenic tricks.

The second ethnographic description is dedicated to Mulele's occasional involvement – with a lesser degree of authority over the sonic architecture – in a very different music project, with an audience more homogeneously pertaining to the Congolese diaspora in London. The comparison between the two cultural settings is useful to establish similarities and differences in the mood, perspectives, and rationale behind performances – in other words, to explore the transcultural texture of Mulele's music experience and *mise-en-scène*.

On a more personal note, the next ethnographic notes constitute my little Congolese fieldwork section in London. As naïve as it may sound, I was so excited to experience something similar – although on a very smaller scale and in a different context – to what I had been reading about live Congolese popular music in its own environment. This observation gave me something more than finding confirmations to academic literature and noticing original details: I came into contact with a cultural experience in which popular music has a radically different weight than in European recreational market; a performance that goes beyond entertainment, investing its social body more holistically. Marginal and frugal as the music show could have been, the cultural activities Congolese people were performing around and through music definitely overflow the European concept of leisure time. For sure, these people take music seriously.

3.2 Scenic xenophilia and stage sharing in the Congolese Diaspora

Friday 2 February 2018. Mulele is playing at a Congolese party tonight: “Brother, if you want to come and film it, it will be fun.” The way he tells me about the party is very different from usual. It is like he is mentioning something of interest for me rather than asking me to film his performances or rehearsals, as if he did not really care. I cannot wait to see Mulele performing with a Congolese band in front of a crowd of fellow Congolese people, so I immediately confirm I’ll join him. He tells me that everything will happen really late, as usual in Congolese social events.

I arrive at Mulele’s studio in Stoke Newington at around 9 o’clock, with my camera and tripod. A few other Congolese men are sitting in the room, smoking and talking in Lingala. Everyone is very elegantly dressed. All the musicians in the studio apart from Mulele and his brother are members of L’Armée Rouge, a London-based Congolese band lead by Aime Bongongo. No one pays attention to me after exchanging greetings. Every now and then, Mulele asks me “You’re right my brother?” Other than that, the conversation keeps flowing in Lingala among them. I have the impression that not all of them are fluent in English.

After a while, Aime gets a phone call after which they talk among each other loudly, occasionally laughing, for a couple of minutes to then come back to the previous conversation tone. A couple of minutes later, Mulele tells me: “The party is cancelled. You see? These people are totally unreliable.” The news produces no commotion within the musicians, who keep talking and smoking.

Apparently, the club owner has a specific licence that allows the venue to provide amplified live music to an audience only on specific days of the month – not today. Mulele says it’s a shame, people have travelled from Paris and Belgium to London specifically for the party and it makes no sense to cancel the event at such short notice. Neither Mulele nor anyone else seems too surprised to have heard the news, and nobody manifests any change in their plans for the night. Later on,

they get another phone call: it seems that the owner has changed his mind. The party is still on. Aime tries to get hold of the drummer – the only musician involved in tonight’s gig who is not in the studio – who tells them he has to DJ at a birthday bash tonight so he can’t make it to the club anymore. Aime will eventually call the drummer back another time during the evening, without succeeding in changing his mind. Both phone calls and other musicians’ reactions are very calm, and no one seems to lose their temper or get upset about these radical changes of plan. In the end, they decide to go to the venue, hoping that the drummer will join them there.

It is past midnight when we reach the Deuce Lounge in Barking, East London. Although the ad on Facebook said the party would start at 9 pm – and last until 5 am – the venue is almost empty (cf. Trapido 2017: 85-86); there are only a few single men eating and drinking at the small round tables. There is no proper stage; the musicians will stand in the middle of the dance floor, between the bar, the DJ station, and the toilet doors.

Shortly after we arrive, the DJs (DJ Bola No. 1, who is organising the event, and DJ Sere) start playing some records from a turntable close to the stage. The musicians start setting up the instruments while Aime, Christian Lema and the other singers go and get dressed up. There will be no drum set, as the drummer has not turned up in the end. A person from the organisation checks the microphone while one of the DJs sets the control desk. They spend several minutes trying and adjusting the sound, with endless “One-two, one two, check, check” sounding more and more distorted and disturbingly loud. They stop for a while, to then abruptly start again with the sound check while the other DJ is in the middle of mixing two tunes. This would go on for a while, until the two DJs eventually get into a quarrel, one of them leaving the venue upset, yelling at the rest of the organisers in Lingala.

It is past 1 am when the master of ceremony – the same person who was checking the microphones – announces in Lingala, English and French that the concert of “Aime Bongongo, *la voix qui caresse*” (‘the caressing voice’) is about to start. “*S’il vous plait, avec vous*

applaudissements, tobe tele maboko, some applause please for Aime Bongongo!" The crowd responds with a very lukewarm round of applause.

The musicians are still tuning their instruments while Aime, wearing an electric blue coat and a bizarre turban, takes the microphone in a sparkle of gold-like chains and metal buckles. A person complains to me that I am standing in front of him and he cannot enjoy the show he paid to watch. I apologise and find another spot to film, more towards the left of the band's frontline.

As soon as Mulele and Dior start playing a continuous rhythmic loop on their guitars, Aime starts singing the first song. Towards the middle of the first verse, a backing vocalist comes out of the toilet, reaches a microphone next to Aime and sings along with him, to find out that the microphone is off. While Aime is singing the chorus, in English: "Che Guevara-ie/ show me the way I can go," the vocalist asks Mulele to leave his guitar for a moment and help him out with his microphone, producing a howling sound from the speakers due to the microphone's feedback. Someone moans from the audience. Aime does not bat an eyelid, and goes on with the second verse, smiling. A man puts a 10-pound bill to Aime's forehead and goes through the musicians, slowly walking through the stage heading to the toilet. Aime puts the bill in his pocket and shouts out 'Patrick Sakombe' between two song lines. I have witnessed my first *libanga*, a pecuniary manifestation of a system "in which music, reputation and control of social reproduction are negotiated in an economy of prestige that links Europe and Kinshasa" (Trapido 2017: 1). Trapido reports Congolese patrons handling over more than a thousand pounds in a single *libanga* at a concert given by Congolese star Koffi Olomide in London in 2001 (ibid). Even though performed on a shoestring budget, the relevance of *mabanga* interactions between musicians and the audience are acknowledged and praised at the Congolese party in Barking.

Mulele starts a very long, rock-like solo on his Fender guitar; Aime yells, dances, and says something sounding Spanish; "*sentó del amor*." The song ends; a spectator moves towards the stage and takes

Aime's microphone, shouting out the organiser DJ Bola and talking to the audience. He is evidently drunk. The musicians keep tuning their guitars and nobody bothers the improvised singer until it is time for the next song.

This has a slower tempo and an upbeat Rumba melody. Mulele goes on a solo and Aime shouts again "*Sento del amor! Merci bien!*" The song keeps going in a quite improvised way, with long guitar solos accompanying dancing interludes, Aime introducing the musicians, and the vocalist introducing the first verse of the choir every now and then, making the rest of the singers to sing along with him or to counterpoint his deep voice timbre. When the song ends, Aime shouts: "*Gracias! Muito obrigado. Thank you very much! Merci beaucoup, on vous aime tous, tolingi bino mingi. We love you guys, we still love you. Thank you.*"

Like the master of ceremony introducing the night, Aime Bongongo continuously interchanges language when addressing the crowd. He thanks the audience in French, English, Lingala, Spanish, and even Portuguese. He frequently yells a Spanish quasi-nonsense; "*Sento del amor*" – literally, "I feel of the love" – with a passionately trembling voice evoking a sense of romantic feeling. The use of several languages could facilitate communication with a crowd not necessarily restricted to the Congolese community, at the same time as it recognises the predominance in the show of Lingala and French – the two culturally dominant languages in the Congolese context. The recourse to Portuguese may depend on the cultural proximity – especially in the context of diaspora – between central and lower Congo regions and northern Angola, and the possible presence of people of Angolan origins amongst the crowd. Yet, Aime's Spanish-sounding interjection "*Sento del amor*" does not correspond to any specific semantic content; instead, this element sheds light on an additional communicative layer of Aime's feigned multilingualism.

Spanish Caribbean music is a germinal influence of Congolese popular music. Since the arrival of African-Cuban *son* records in the Belgian Congo during the early 1930s, many Congolese musicians have introduced Spanish references in their songs: Jean Serge Essous and

Nino Malapet composed several tunes in a sort of Spanish mumbling for Brazzaville based bands like Rock-A-Mambo and Les Bantous de la Capitale – the indication “*Chanté en espagnol*” (‘sung in Spanish’) appears for some of these tunes in the sleeve notes of the 45 rpm records. Papa Wemba repeatedly utters “Amoroso, amoroso!” (‘lovingly’) in ‘La Vie est belle’. Aime Bongongo is adding his personal contribution to this creative line; by doing so, he reproduces the same linguistic process of appropriation of stranger lexemes regardless of the semantic context.

The expression “*Sento del amor*” evokes a cultural other, an emotional exoticism that the singer captures to adorn his performance, to infuse his sonic architecture with strange, fascinating echoes. Bongongo does not stand in front of a temporary *communitas* of young middle-class British music lovers, as Mulele did at Rich Mix. Instead, he is performing for the diaspora community he belongs to. As in a parody, Aime articulates foreign words to negotiate spaces and transnational powers through popular music, projecting the audience onto a soundscape that confirms/constructs a feeling of transcultural identity, that is: “the cosmopolitan quality [...] into which elements from diverse cultures, civilizations, ethnic groups or countries have been integrated, to such an extent that authenticity of origin may be lost” (Tsambu 2015: 53). Yet, this appropriation of the empowering other happens mainly on the symbolic level.

It is a very peculiar form of transculturalism, in which cultural exchanges between different cultural groups are not necessary – quite the opposite; the environment shows little proof of an established network of cultural exchanges with different groups of London dwellers. As Trapido (2017: 91) says, “the social efficacy of the external seems a product of its rarity [...] and the scarcity of connections from without.” There are only people of African origins in the bar apart for myself; and even the host and the singers express themselves in English on the microphone with some grammatical licence. Yet, this transnational, cross-cultural web of verbal signs is a fundamental part of the performance. It is a panoramic transculturalism, in which a

patchwork of visual and acoustic references are attracted into a Congolese discourse to satisfy a xenophilic attraction, a collective obsession for *mikili*, 'the worlds', the ensemble of countries that constitute the desirable, rich part of the planet to the *Kinois* (ibid: 49).

On stage, every reference to one of the desirable *mikili* – a couple of words in a European language; a piece of designer clothing; dollar or pound bills handled as *mabanga* – contributes to broadening the prestige of Aime's cosmopolitan music scape. These references do not spring from any particular cultural contact or dialogue; like signposts, they manifest the cosmopolitan environment in which the Congolese of the diaspora are dwelling. The performance reaffirms that *bana Londres* (Lingala for 'those of London': London-based Congolese migrants) stand at the centre of the world, awarding the resulting prestige and cultural capital to the community. The DJs, the organisers, the musicians, the audience: every participant in the social drama is a *mikiliste*, a cosmopolitan *bon vivant*, no matter how poor they are, how harsh their migratory project has been, how marginalised they are in British society.

Aime Bongongo's *mises-en-scène* may be quite unorganised and some musicians may sound rather amateurish. It does not matter: these music elements are negotiable details in the scenic architecture. The prestige of the singer and his voice, his and his fellows' impeccable outfits, his clever use of foreign verbal references are the basic ingredients for the success of the show – and the social rite. The cultural horizon of the discourse is a rhizomatous, plural *bricolage* in which all the participants are invited to contribute. As Tsambu (ibid) says, the *jouissance* behind Congolese xenophilia is to lose "the authenticity of origin": a sort of de-identified, poly-comprehensive cultural self. This perspective constitutes the main polemical target of Mulele's critique towards Congolese culture as well as one of Mulele's most effective stage strategies, as I will discuss further.

However, the decadence of the diasporic joyful nexus seems evident. Other than sporadic two-figure *mabanga*, the social body languishes with no stamina to share, nor wealth to disperse and display.

At the Deuce Lounge, nobody is dancing yet; everybody is sitting except from one person who is streaming the concert live on Facebook. If there really are *mikilistes* from Paris and Belgium in the audience – which I highly doubt – they could have had a bad journey.

Dior goes on the snare drum for the next song – as the drummer did not turn up, several band members alternate on the minimal drum kit over the concert. Aime sings alone, followed by short solos by both backing vocal singers – who execute their part with some uncertainty. The drunken spectator who has intervened during the previous song jumps on stage again, standing to the right of Aime, smiling and dancing. Aime asks him politely to leave the stage. The song continues, Aime shout out to some of the bystanders (Chanelle *la petite*, Joseph..., Jean-Marie...). The drunken man starts dancing next to Aime; the latter looks at his dance moves for a while, and then involves him on an improvised little choreography; the drunkard follows the steps perfectly, adding his own variations. He keeps talking in Aime's ear, being ignored. He eventually takes the microphone, shouting out to Patrick, the guy who did the previous *libanga*. Once the song ends, he leaves the stage.

As the next song – a slow Rumba with an off-beat rhythm guitar – starts off, a person enters the bars and moves directly towards the stage; Aime and Macha the vocalist warmly greets him, Aime hugs him while singing, Macha shakes his hand while both shout out his name and his nickname 'Piccadilly' – later, Mulele tells me he is a very successful gangster.

The performance podium is an extremely permeable space where the community performs itself. The composition of the band is fluid and mutable, and musicians do not hog the direction of the show. Aime, the band leader, is keen on sharing his authorship over the sonic and visual architecture of the performance with the rest of the musicians as well as with the public. Interferences from the audience are not considered as disturbing elements. The arrival of an important community member is greeted by the singer and is immediately incorporated into the performance: both the artists and 'Piccadilly'

honour each other in the social drama, reciprocally acknowledging their social capital within the community, reactivating – or just mimicking – the forms of music patronage that were quintessential in Congolese diasporic rites until very recently. The intrusion of an improvised performer from the public is not blocked by the musicians or by the club staff, as long as it contributes to the show. His drunken euphoria and agitated bodily exuberance, although somehow out of place, are virtually the only visible symptoms of the joyful nexus and the presence of the ancestors in the rite. ‘Piccadilly’ comes towards the stage with a bill in his hand; Aime improvises a variation of the lyrics to include his name in the song.

For the last song, Aime invites a dancer on stage; but right before the dancer comes in, the drunkard comes back, takes a microphone and places himself at the centre of the stage, in front of Aime. This time, Aime makes the song end and asks the guy to get off; he doesn’t want to, so Aime finally loses his temper and asks why the security is not taking care of the issue. Finally, the guy leaves. The music starts again; the dancer does his number, getting down low on his knees and dancing from there. Another singer from the audience is invited to take part in the show. The drunkard comes back and nobody bothers him. All the musicians are dancing, until someone turns the lights on and tells Aime the party is over, while the DJ plays some air horns. Aime concludes the show, giving thanks to everyone. The host shouts out to the promoter, tells everyone that the party goes on somewhere in East London and calls it a night.

It is almost dawn when we get back to Birikiti’s house and have some *fufu*. Mulele concludes the night with a few interesting comments:

My brother, every time I deal with Congolese people, I remember why I don’t usually work with them. These people are mad. The gig was very poor, the band doesn’t exist, nobody knows what they have to do. Totally unorganised. Congolese in London are like that: impossible to work with them. The good musicians are in Paris or Brussels. Congolese people are mental: the only thing they care about is to be dressed up, to have a Versace jacket. Also Aime Bongongo: he doesn’t care about the music. There were no songs in the show, he was just singing randomly! I was playing forever, just to entertain the people. Crazy. Everybody wanted to play, everybody wanted to be on stage; just to show off. I just

wasted my time: to play with these people is a waste of time. I am not like that, not part of it anymore. That's why I play with white guys in Kongo Dia Ntotila; to me, there is no black or white in music. In music, there's no colour. I have never chosen a musician because he is black; the only thing that matters to me is music, if they are good.

Besides expressing narcissistic detachment from a social body that Congolese people themselves perceive as being quite “low in the global family of nations” (Trapido 2017: 72), Mulele's social criticism aims beyond the artistic poorness of the performance. He contests the emptiness of a music performance that pleases the community with an image that does not correspond to what he sees. He blames his compatriots for performing something they are not, for dressing expensively and acting rich despite being wretched, for wasting all their money and resources to show a fake, ephemeral social prestige.

Yet, a similarly rhizomatous, changeable cultural horizon, and the idea of a permeable music performance wherein the audience is integrated into the sonic architecture, are at the foundation of Mulele's original music project. These are the trump cards he plays in the London music game – a game whose rules he is trying to change and expand, according to his needs.

The last chapter section illustrates another performance of Mulele's band Kongo Dia Ntotila, more than two years after the one at Rich Mix. The new necessities of the band, and their career expectations boosted by the signing of a three-album contract with Pussyfoot Records, have produced a few modifications in the setting of the show. These new elements are put into dialogue with Mulele's discourses and with a text written by one of Kongo Dia Ntotila's friends in response to the show. This overlapping of different texts is somehow justified by the ongoing, dialogic process of self-definition the band is going through, as a way to keep control over their project in spite of the external powerful agencies that are now involved in their music production and promotion – the recording label, radio chains and music journalists. The following section is my attempt to join in this conversation and to make my contribution to this thriving cross-cultural dialogue.

3.3 Getting there: new scenarios with the same audience

Friday 16 November 2018. Tonight, Kongo Dia Ntotila will be back at Jam in a Jar after a few months. The band will be live tomorrow at the Tim Robinson Show on BBC 6, yet Birikiti insisted on putting a gig the day before, to raise more attention to the band, and to maximise efforts. Kissangwa, the new Congolese drummer, came purposely from Switzerland; Dior Sakuba, Mulele's stepbrother and rhythm guitar, travelled from Manchester. Ngeya, Mulele's cousin and close friend, joined the line-up as a percussionist and additional backing vocalist. Kongo Dia Ntotila is now a 7-piece band: John '*la main blanche*' Kelly on lead guitar, Mike Soper on trumpet, Will 'the philosopher' Scott on sax alto, Mulele Matondo Afrika on bass, plus new entries Dior Sakuba, Kissangwa, and Ngeya.

It has been a while since the last Kongo Dia Ntotila gig. The last couple of months have been spent dealing with the new contract, with the text going back and forth between independent label Pussyfoot Records and Birikiti's email through continuous adjustments and negotiations. Now, the focus is on music only. The band has spent the last four days practicing, rehearsing every track on the set list during long sessions at Mulele's studio. Mulele asked me to film one of the practise sessions; he wants to have a second listen to Kissangwa's drumming and Ngeya's voice to then be able to advise them on the necessary adjustments to make. I asked him to also look at the footage in terms of filming choices and style and then give me some feedback, to figure out how he wants me to film at the gig.

- Mulele: It's good, but you have to go with the music. If there is a solo, you must film the solo.

- Me: You know, recently I like the idea of filming the reflection of a solo on the other musicians who are just keeping the rhythm. Like when you have a scene with two persons talking to each other and the camera is on who is listening: you have the voice of the other person on camera, plus the effects of the voice on the one who is listening.

- Mulele: Yeah, but only if you film the emotions on that face. Otherwise, it becomes too complicated to follow. Make it simple. If you are listening to a brass solo, and you don't see the musicians, you get confused. You have to film like you are doing an essay. You have the introduction, the first track; so you may film wide, all the band, and then move the camera closer – I am just making an example. Then you go closer, you take the solo, go with the music. Like an essay, you have to do a visual essay.

I had to insist to have Mulele's feedback on my filming. His style is to not interfere with any other person's activity relating to the band. I insisted, anyway, because I knew there is a lot at stake for Mulele in the next 24 hours. He feels luck is coming his way. He is about to have the opportunity he has been waiting for all these years in the UK, maybe for all his life.

3.3.1 Cosmic transculturalism and self-questioning on stage

Jam in a Jar; Haringay, North London, same day. The gig starts with a bit of a delay at around 9:45 pm. As soon as the music begins, people start filling the bar; after a couple of songs, the place is packed with an enthusiastic crowd. The band plays unedited versions of the new album's tracks, the players indulging in long instrumental bridges and interlocked improvisations – especially between Mulele's bass and John's lead guitar.

In spite of the 2-year gap, the gig has a similar structure and set list to the one KDN played at the Rich Mix; obviously, back then they were just the supporting act, playing for half an hour to warm up the crowd before Konono no. 1 took the stage; now, they are going to play over one and a half hours as the only act of the night. Nonetheless, the structure is the usual one: Kongo Dia Ntotila arranges the gig as an imaginary journey through several African countries (with one or two forays on the Caribbean). The structure of the trip is less relevant now than two years ago; the journey is less coherent, as there are a few consecutive stops in Congo, and a few songs do not correspond to any

country. Also, the spectrum of the journey goes beyond Africa; there is this double reference to outer space, to the Moon and Mars, linked to 360°, the album title track. The lesser degree of consistency in the use of the journey as a stage device corresponds to changes that are taking place in Kongo Dia Ntotila's perspectives. Like their scenic journey, the band is enlarging the scope of possibility, expanding the creative horizon, grappling with more complex ways of sense-making through music. The itinerary becomes uncertain, yet there is more at stake than just recalling a series of African music scapes. As an improvised semantic strategy, I think it has a totally different repercussion on the audience: what was a guided tour through African music is becoming a space exploration led by African music cosmonauts.

There is another radical difference between Jam in a Jar and the other venues where I have seen KDN performing: Jam in a Jar has no stage. There is no division between the band and the crowd. During the gig, Mulele will ask a spectator to pour him a glass of water; also, Mulele greets a friend of his coming in, and later on, he asks the same friend if he could borrow his flat cap to pass the hat around to the audience while the band is playing the last song. Mulele is close enough to me to literally push my camera towards the crowd when he wants me to film the people dancing and waving hands at the end of the show. While filming, I am being constantly pushed by people dancing; and constantly heads, hands and air of people from the crowd are unwillingly captured by my camera lens. Consequently, the participation of the crowd in the concert is more direct than it was in Rich Mix.

Halfway through the concert, Mulele directly consults the crowd:

Guys, I wanna ask you something. We have been signed now, but we are having a problem to describe our own music. Some people are lazy, they call us Afrobeat, but this sounds Afrobeat to you? So, I would like if you can write something about how you are gonna describe us, because, you know, we are living in the Babylon system where they wanna put people in boxes, so I don't want to be in that box, I want to be free, yes.

During the break, a girl who is talking to John asks me if it is possible to see the footage of the night and eventually have it. Her name is Georgina; we have a little chat, and then we move back in with the

musicians. The atmosphere of the second part of the concert is electrified; music flows on a faster, upbeat tempo. People dance and jump together with Mulele. Filming becomes more challenging; the general excitement enters the camera lens and feeds the band's solos and jamming.

The gig goes on until past 11 – it lasted around 1:45'. After having warmly said goodbye to several band friends and aficionados – and after Mulele had to repeatedly shout to his brother, who was enjoying the dancing to reggae music and the free drinks offered by the bar managers – we load all the instruments onto John and Ngeya's cars and return home.

The morning after, Georgina – the same girl who approached me at Jam in a Jar – posts on Kongo Dia Ntotila's Facebook wall a long review of the gig. She conceives the review as an answer to Mulele's request for a definition of their music coming from 'the people'. Georgina relates such a query to her background:

"They say we're Afrobeats!" Mulele shouts bemusedly into the crowd after the first song; "You tell us, what are we?!" I smile, because as a woman of British, Ghanaian and Trinidadian descent raised on these streets, on this island, I know this line of inquiry all too well.

Her answer goes through a more sensorial, dreamlike experience:

Thankfully however, that moment of self-conscious introspection is put aside, the fasten seatbelt sign flashes off, and we soar with Kongo Dia Ntotila at high altitude into a heady space of places visited and unvisited. I listen and I dream. I dream I am in Accra, Kinshasa, Free Town, Abidjan, New York, Kingston, Lagos, Dakar, Basse-Terre, Rio de Janeiro, Port of Spain. I dream I am in the Aitken Basin. I dream I'm in places I've never heard of.

Actually I am exactly where I want to be; I am transported and I am home.

It's not Afrobeats. It's many things. It's AfroJOY.

I spill my cocktail on the floor as I jump and wave with the crowd. I feel my heart sing with these people, my people. I offer libation to my ancestors, to the rivers of London, and - as promised to a friend earlier that day - to the transcended, transatlantic spirit of Grandmother Hopelin.

Brexit is forgotten. Borders are forgotten. Gravity, time and space is forgotten.

In Green Lanes, I feel the rhythm of the diaspora pulse strongly in my veins.

Georgina's reading of events is in full resonance with the elements of the joyful nexus. Music, ecstatic bodily and mind responses, dispersal of energetic flows, astral journeys, and the ancestors are the coordinates of Georgina's personal sense making of a social event, as well as the main elements of its sonic architecture. The heterogeneous actors of the collective rite do not share a common code of significances; communication passes through emotions and feelings. Rather than trying to trace a connection between Georgina's cultural background and Central African joyful traditions, this resonance sheds light on the power of the joyful nexus as a non-verbal mode of transcultural and displaced communication passing through the festive, the inclusive, the sensory, and of course the joyful.

The making of sense passes through the dance and the 'heady' music of the band. Space and gravity are forgotten, together with time; the loss of habitual coordinates in Georgina's description of her musical experience suggests a separation from everyday reality, an altered state of consciousness, a dynamic process of trance (Herbert 2011: 207). Like in a dream, her 'trip' links places of origins with global hubs, the Earth with the Moon, the roots of the self with the unknown. The acknowledgement of her cultural background passes through the experience of the contact with the other at the same time as it prepares, imagines, re-shapes, fantasises about further experiential and cultural dimensions. The feeling of being rooted becomes dynamic; the various personal, historical streams are refracted through present experiences and projected into other potential selves. Discontinuities and frictions at the foundation of a transcultural, "denationalized imagination" (Mbembe 2017: 14) are dissolved in the flow of a familiar, sentimental narration. As personal micro-history seeps through epochs, continents, and ethnic clashes, sidereal distances and entrenched oppositions are turned into a spatiotemporal continuum. The fixity of Cartesian geometry is flexed: the body occupies many places simultaneously; stability and movement overlap in the same process of personal enfranchisement. Borders – together with inchoate Brexit and all other terrestrial burdens – are forgotten; the cocktail's spill amidst the

jostling crowd becomes a libation offered to her ancestors and the rivers of London alike. Georgina explores Guattari's "universes that had been unknown", exploring "diverse possibilities for recomposing her existential corporeality," resingularising herself (Reddell 2013: 98-99). The violence of embodied history (slave trade, colonial and postcolonial oppression, rise of xenophobia) is healed and recomposed in a more harmonious perception of the self; incongruities are reduced to an organised, meaningful pattern – just like the music pulse. It is "the rhythm of the diaspora" that resonates in Jam in a Jar and in Georgina's veins from Kongo Dia Ntotila's stage. As it used to be for Kongo warriors, spirit possession revitalises Georgina with knowledge from the otherworld and empowers her politically within her social space.

Beyond Georgina's brilliant musical metaphor, music seems to be a perfect performance of such a cultural feeling as well as providing the ideal conditions for people who share analogous experiences to coagulate into an emotional, short-lived community – "I feel my heart sing with this people, my people." The cultural performance puts into crisis current social identity kits and sketches a different design for living (Turner 1986: 24), acting as an agent of change in self-representations. Unlike other UK-born music genres – like jungle, garage, grime, dubstep, bass –, KDN do not represent the language of a new social space where groups of different backgrounds encounter/clash against each other. Kongo Dia Ntotila represent the individual effort of an African musician to conquer a shared space of creativity, visibility and representation together with other British musicians. The band does not celebrate or denounce any new social identity; it rather expresses the urge to overcome the current cognitive apparatus of social identifying and representing, without necessarily defining a new one. By doing so, Kongo Dia Ntotila echo similar urges harboured by many transcultural, rhizomatous individuals like Georgina, too heterogeneous to become a consistent social corpse, yet numerous enough to form a collective desire.

The gig is a holistic, intense personal experience, "a rare opportunity to feel almost wholly present." Georgina's mental trip goes

along – and beyond – the way the band has structured the concert. As usual, Mulele presents the show as a journey through several countries. Musical references to zouk, kalindula, agbadza, makossa, and reggae music are used to introduce the various songs as stops on a journey: “Now, we are gonna bring you to Kongo,” Mulele announces before executing Mutwashi; the next song will take the audience “to Zambia,” “to the Moon”, then “to Ethiopia,” then back “to Kinshasa, Kongo”, to Cameroon, and the Caribbean. The invocation of a planetary network of African places and sound waves – connecting the African continent to the transatlantic diaspora – establishes the gig as a chronotope of Africanness in the heart of London. Like Afrofuturism, Mulele displays a “radically spatialized (rather than temporal) [...] way of thinking and feeling one’s way through the world” (Reddell 2013: 91).⁵¹

Space is the prevalent dimension in the structure of the gig, both in terms of mobility and permanence. During Kongo Dia Ntotila’s performance, music travels through space, back and forth to Congo; and so does the crowd. Cross-references to geographic and cultural locations other than British (Sub-Saharan and African-Caribbean music styles, song lyrics in Lingala, colourful clothes and accessories worn by the Congolese components of the band, depiction of the gig as a journey through African countries and the Solar System) are as relevant as are contextual indications (album promotion, direct interactions with the public, staged choreographies, acknowledgment to the venue, mention of the specificity of John Kelly as the first white virtuoso Congolese music guitarist). The feeling of ‘being there’, close to the band and closer to unfamiliar situations at the same time, is a crucial aspect of the experience of the gig, due to specific spatial features and apparatus of the show.

⁵¹ The original quote refers to spatialised hybrid subjectivities. I prefer not to use the concept of hybridisation in relation to the KDN use of different African and African-Caribbean music styles. Although such a juxtaposition of different cultural elements may look like a cultural crossbreeding, Mulele generally refers to African music as a cultural unity; hence, the convergence of those music languages is a performative representation of a common African identity that is being fragmented by colonial and postcolonial external forces.

The emphasis on space, and the total freedom of moving through spaces, makes Kongo Dia Ntotila more of a spaceship than a time machine. And it is this psycho-geographic tool that empowers the diasporic subject, edging away from the obstacles of time intended as a linear hegemonic narration: the denial of any images of the African past (Dery 1994: 190-191); the forgotten African history, eradicated through slavery; the trauma of colonialism. To privilege a spatial articulation of thoughts over a temporal one is a recurrent feature in Mulele's argumentations. When discussing his Afrocentric theories, Mulele often upsets the chronological order of events. In his words, the ancient civilisation in Congo, proven by the discovery of a mathematical Ishango bone tool (believed to be more than 20,000 years old) is believed to have arisen from Egyptians moving southward to flee the Arab conquest (which started in the VII century AD) and establishing the foundation of *Kongo dya Ntotila*, the Kingdom of Kongo (whose origins, according to official historiography, date back to the XIV century AD). What would be considered as effects according to linear logic become the cause. The geographic reference is more important: the exodus of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation to Congo is proven through spatial reasons. Official historical narrations are not to be trusted. Space helps Mulele in his struggle to know the unknowable – that is, to know oneself:

“Knowing yourself as a black person – historically, spiritually, and culturally – is not something that's given to you, institutionally; it is an arduous journey that must be undertaken by the individual.” (Ibid: 210).

Such a spatialized subjectivity “reveals history to be contingent rather than teleological, always open to new interpretations, critical speculations and novel sensations” (Reddell 2013: 91). It makes Georgina – and the rest of the audience with her – enjoy and re-appropriate history by escaping every mark of social stigma, marginalisation and negative pre-determinism. A gig in London becomes an experiment with identities wherein one has the freedom to play with history, to enjoy what ones like and dismiss what one doesn't.

Georgina travels along and beyond Kongo Dia Ntotila's trajectories, adding other places to the list (probably selected from her memories or her desires) and gaining a more complex and satisfactory sense of belonging to London – the exhausting “Big Smoke.” Her trip is one among the many possible enjoyments of KDN sonic products, which are shaped as particularly open-ended experiences. Messages are not unidirectional, due to the cultural distance between mainly African language and music codes employed by the band, and largely European consumers of their live shows and CDs. Huge physical distance and limited access to digital spaces make difficult also for culturally closer Congolese audience to fully engage with the semiotic content of the musical messages. Consequently, such messages are part of a rather diluted, rizzomatous communication, inviting the audience to more sensorial, imaginary, creative layers of comprehension.

Kongo Dia Ntotila have several possible, co-existing interpretations. As a connection of Congolese musicians and British jazzmen, they acknowledge the continuous interchange and overlap between people of different social and cultural background as a fundamental element of cultural production in London. By doing so, they appeal to an audience of students, young professionals, and creative people from various backgrounds who constitute a major sector of the London leisure market. At the same time, their music feeds the insatiable craving for the exotic, the new, the unusual, the sophisticated, and of course the ‘authentic’, which are all important impulses for art consumption. The sense of cultural otherness joined with the intense physical participation incited by the performance also satisfy a desire of intense music listening and music-related altered states of consciousness, evident in Georgina's report of the night as well as in the crowd's frantic dance – and also in the large alcohol consumption during the gig. The reason why I consider Georgina's review of great interest – and I insist on taking her account at face value – is that it not only encompasses all the layers of understanding KDN as a cluster of cultural significances I had previously considered. It goes

beyond them, shedding light on a different point of view that corresponds to the band's mutating needs and strategies.

A crucial element of Kongo Dia Ntotila's performance as a creative strategy of transculturation is the hint of a cosmic imagery. At *Jam in a Jar*, Mulele inserts a stop by "the Moon and Mars", that he jokingly quotes as places of origins of Will (the sax player) for his cool attitude and his habit of looking up while performing his solos: "You know, in our band we have aliens as well, because one of my brothers lives in Mars, he only comes for practices! On the saxophone, Willow Scott, maestro!"

Also, Mulele usually presents the album title track '360°' as a trip to space for its more experimental, free jazz character. The reference to extraterrestrial destinations on the musical journey is acknowledged by Georgina, who dreams of being in the Aikten Basin, a crater on the far side of the Moon. We are probably quite far from Sun Ra's Afrocentric cosmogony or Juan Atkins' technologised multiple identities; nonetheless, Kongo Dia Ntotia propose their compositions as original creative experiences inspired by multiple (mainly African and African-American) musical languages. By counting sidereal allusions among the influences, Mulele displays an aesthetical strategy – adopted by Afrofuturism as well – aiming to deconstruct myths of identity, appropriation, and exploitation (cf. Raffa 2018: 139). Outer space releases Mulele from all constriction imposed from above and outside, setting him free to recompose, reinvent, and represent his musical persona, at the same time as he delivers Georgina from any residual alienation and provides her with additional energy in her exploration and invention of the unheard-of – that is, one of the main challenges in the life of a millennial.

There is no evidence that the rest of the audience share Georgina's experience. Many habitués of *Jam in a Jar* are white Europeans, yet they seem to enjoy "jazz-inflected Congolese music", dancing as much as Georgina does. Thus, diverse senses of enjoyment of music can be embodied in a similar bodily display. After all, popular music is a form of entertainment, and both leisure and live music

market in London largely rely on middle-class British and expatriate consumers. Kongo Dia Ntotila create an imaginary chronotope out of space and time, a dream about unknown places, about being taken by a foreign, exotic, mysterious rhythm and having a real experience of otherness; it is about taking part in something one did not even know existed. Sonic emotions experienced by the heterogeneous audience take place without any necessary direct link to their everyday lives and cultural environment; the band's music production does not represent any 'community' *sensu stricto*, neither does it depend on any precise message – despite the many political references present in the lyrics, these are composed almost entirely in Lingala, and consequently the vast majority of the audience in live performances have only a vague idea of the political content of this music. Nonetheless, Georgina's case shows how such performances can be perceived as of great cultural value, and this imagined, embodied Africanness is far from being just another exoticism or escapism. In a market where hybridity is commodified and consumed by a rather homogeneous dominant class who seek to reduce the complexity of contemporary cultural products – and producers – to easy classifications, Kongo Dia Ntotila constitute an experience of music transculturalism. As such, these musicians provide an adequate expression of such cultural phenomena and emotions, as well as translating that experience into sonic goods to be used by outside consumers.

The transcultural dimension of Kongo Dia Ntotila as both an artistic project and a – live and digital – performing act has multiple depth layers. Linguistic barriers and marketing strategies reduce all possible criticism directed towards British society to an intense sensorial experience of otherness. In other words, the band does not constitute a challenge to British society coming from within, but rather offers a ritualised experience of an expanded perception of one's identity, inherently alternative to monolithic nation-based European definition of the self. Such an alternative does not undermine the socioeconomic structure Kongo Dia Ntotila and us all are part of – let us say, capitalism. Like Žižek (1997: 46) says;

[...] since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism [...] today's critical theory [...] is doing the ultimate service to the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible.

Consequentially, Kongo Dia Ntotila do not stand in contrast to

[...] the contemporary 'politically correct' liberal attitude which perceives itself as surpassing the limitations of its ethnic identity ('citizen of the world' without anchors in any particular ethnic community), functions, *within its own society*, as a narrow elitist upper-middle-class circle clearly opposing itself to the majority of common people, despised for being caught in their narrow ethnic or community confines (Žižek 1997, 47).

Although "upper-middle-class" does not constitute the exclusive public of the act, it is definitely a big part of the targeted audience – whose relevance is increasing due to the band's shift towards more jazzy sonorities.

Žižek's evaluation remains valid, yet it does not encompass all aspects of contemporary social imagination – considering that today's critical theory is 20 years after Žižek's 'today'. Making capitalism invisible, is a matter of perspective. The intrinsically racist and exploitative nature of the current global order since the foundation of the Atlantic slave trade (Williams 1994) may remain invisible to neo-liberal sensibilities, yet its 'massive presence' rests on the shoulders of the Africans (Mbembe 2017). Mulele and his band actively engage with this aspect of their society; in fact, the struggle for reconfiguring African music within the European market and academia is a crucial part of their entire creative process. This struggle focuses on representation: Mulele and his comrades demand a wider acknowledgement of Congolese music culture's value, global historical influence, and actual marketability. Mulele wants to have more sales, more visibility, and more cultural capital. He wants to be seen as equal to his peer musicians, as creative and bond-free as 'standard' white European artists can claim to be. He has no musical identity to preserve; he is longing for the kind of "rootless void of universality" (Žižek 1997: 44) that constitutes the privilege of 'standard' European cultural creative people. One could see a similar position as politically disengaged,

individualistic, and essentially homogeneous to capitalistic rules. But it is the struggle of an African artist who sees how his production – and other African artists’ as well – is exploited by music venues, promoters, labels, and scholars while its creators languish in the lowest ranks of the cultural market. In this sense, Mulele’s struggle is a class struggle; and his fight against classifications like ethnic, exotic, traditional, and world music corresponds to a demand for universality. Music making is a cultural practice of continuous resistance at a personal and artist level, aimed at de-ghettoising himself, his people, his cultural codes, and his life history. Mulele wants his music to be alive, to flow with the challenges and inputs of the real, to break free of museums and other taxidermic forms whereby African music is displayed and traded.

On a representational level, Kongo Dia Ntotila’s de-colonising music practices – like other postcolonial cultural forms – perturb “the horizon of social imagination” with an attack on hegemonic culture that Žižek’s critique does not account for: a narration of the multiverse, the socially uncanny, the undefined, the mutant, non-Euclidean geometry. A sensorial narration, based on imagery rather than rhetoric; an implicit, embodied, nonverbal counterdiscourse (Conquergood 2002: 148) that provides the transcultural audience with a reflexive tool of empowerment. In today’s general absence of narratives and paradigms antagonist to capitalistic storytelling, this is something really revolutionary.

As an extra-linguistic utterance, this sonic tale is malleable and open to personal reshaping. Instantly, Georgina appropriates it and expands it through her transcultural past. It must sound rather differently to the rest of the audience, who do not share any African origins with Mulele and Georgina, but still enjoys the show. The structure of Kongo Dia Ntotila’s performances – today as two years ago – invites the public to engage with the African music referents through a kind of social and political solidarity, which constitutes an additional impulse to a deep, holistic participation in the show. It is a sort of semiotic, circular gear ‘support-consume-enjoy’. Through enjoyment, the subject embodies the transmission of a seamless stream of unstable

cultural vibrations which overflow the dominant dichotomy otherness/identity. This 'heady' – meaning 'affecting the senses greatly' – component of the music ritual conveys the transcultural power of the experience; as mentioned above, the depth to which such a transcultural message resonates in one depends on the subject's personal background; due to her African origins, Georgina embraces it to the fullest.

On a political level, there is another layer of complexity. Through substitutions and metonymies, the show produces a personal engagement between all participants and the ones who Frantz Fanon (1963) defined as "the wretched of the earth." The scenic device presents band leader Mulele as a standard-bearer of his people – the deprived, plagued Congolese people, exploited by the rest of the world, cursed by war and famine, oppressed by a corrupted political regime. From the podium, Mulele constantly advocates equality and justice in his country, where all human right is denied. By virtue of the virtual music trip, and through reference to various African dictators compared to Kinshasa despot Joseph Kabila, Congo becomes the whole of Africa, a continent. The gig, playing with a "politically correct liberal attitude" of the audience, works to convince the crowd that to enjoy the music and support the band is a contribution to the African cause per se. Hence, the whole performance is built up as what Žižek (1997: 50) considers as "the leftist political gesture par excellence":

[...] to question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no 'proper place' within it (say, illegal immigrants or the homeless in our societies).

Through asserting and identifying with the 'abject' it is possible to denounce "the neutral universality as false" (ibid). Since *Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism* has been written in 1997, this gesture has passed from questioning "the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom" – i.e. protesters against the 2001 G8 summit of world leaders in Genoa shouting "We Are All Clandestines" – to becoming a matter for innocuous state-sponsored memes for controlling mass anxiety and

fears facing global terror – the entire series of *'Je suis Charlie'*, *'Je suis Paris'*... The embodiment of abject universalities has probably lost some of its evocative power in 2018 Europe, but maybe it retains most of this power in a different scenario like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is there, rather than in London, that Kongo Dia Ntotila can offer a paradigm of radical social change. Mulele dedicates all his lyrical efforts to the cause of moving consciences, engaging with social problems and addressing political issues concerning Congolese people. Congo is where he belongs, in term of artistic inspiration, cultural vision, political mission, polemic targets, and ideal audience. The Congo is where Mulele sees his music and his future; all his musical projects have the Congo as a final destination. This element is somehow contradicting the whole transcultural perspective on Mulele Matondo Afrika's music. Nonetheless, it is principally an oneiric plan, a fantastic projection with little validation in his everyday life. On the other hand, it is impossible for the present work to investigate the outcome of Mulele's music and persona in his community of origin. Thus, transculturalism remains an interesting lens to explore Kongo Dia Ntotila sonic strategies.

The result of it is an open-ended, multifaceted yet consistent sonic experience. Multiform inspirations are incorporated into an original, homogeneous music texture, conceived by KDN as an autonomous language naturally springing from their artistic practices – thus, all band members abhor being defined as 'medley' or 'mashup', terms that evoke the sense of world music pastiche they are precisely trying to avoid. Allusions to other music styles (zouk, kalindula, agbadza, makossa, and reggae) are invocations rather than philological references, attractions rather than influences. The constant yet vague allusion to other sonic and land scapes deconstructs "traditional notions of race and nationality that privilege lines of influence, heredity and allegiance to Source" (Reddell 2013, 94). Instead of relying on preconceived taps, Kongo Dia Ntotila is a "collective instance emerging as self-referential existential Territory [...] whose subjectivity is measured in terms of the alterities contained within it" (ibid). "The

foreign", "the intrusive", are metabolised through the reference to a common African matrix which underpins most if not all international music trends. In Mulele's terms, Africa is *le berceau de l'humanité*, the cradle of human civilisation, the mother of all inventions. Every KDN music performance is a tribute to the boundless energy of African creativity, praised as the foundation of all music – both as primeval origin and constant source of inspiration and pillage for the music business. All music labels are proved wrong, as inaccurate divisions dictated by market forces and impostures: all music creations are re-elaborations, simplifications, copies, or just appropriations of African music forms. This musical Afrocentrism may sound reductionist, but is not exclusive to non-Black people: Africa becomes the quintessential human nature, regardless of skin colour. Hence, the audience, the white members of the band, and also the 'Western' music styles touched by KDN creations are included in the rite of renovation of African forces. When Mulele talks about his more jazz-inflected songs – especially the album title track 360° –, he insists his African roots powerfully resound in the music, enriching the structure with complicated poly-rhythms and frequent changes in pace and metre, rather than just providing a colourful backdrop to the same old domesticated European music: "This is how crossover, or 'fusion' should be."

KDN musical montage is made "by breaking the boundaries, cultural, disciplinary and otherwise, which appear to separate us and them" (Boon, 2006).⁵² The strange, "negotiated and appropriated through montage", is now de-alienated and becomes "a source of power and pleasure" (ibid) for all the participants in the gig/ritual.

Rather than reinforcing music boundaries and lineages – as multiculturalism does via World Music's apparatus – KDN creates a sonic device continuously absorbing the Outsider, therefore revealing other forms of cultural otherness as inherently subjective themselves, frustrating "the implied value of the Other" (Reddell 2013, 97). Thus,

⁵² Boon, Marcus (2006), "Sublime Frequencies' Ethnopsychedellic Montages", Electronic Book Review. <<http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/sublime-frequencies-ethnopsychedellic-montages/>> (accessed 26th November 2018).

the removal of the usual music boundaries produces some ground instability in the listener; it is the opposite of “the kind of smooth fusions that so much world music aspires to” (Boon: *ibid*). Rather, it is “a music of strange jumps, juxtapositions and alliances” that demands a bit more from the listener than just adhering to the rules of disengaged leisure sonic order (socialise, consume, get high, release stress and excess energies, enjoy virtual escapisms, be ready for back to work). However, Kongo Dia Ntotila are absorbed in many aspects of leisure music business. Their performances share the same stages; their records are on the same shelves, same social networks and digital music platforms as the rest of their colleagues, and are consumed as one more piece of exotica. Nonetheless, their music montage somehow subverts the usual order of things; they somehow constitute an exception, both for the analyst and the listener. Mulele and his musicians “share an interest in breaking through consensus reality, producing a direct transformation of consciousness, either in the listener or performer” (*ibid*).

I am not implying that KDN performances automatically induce altered states of consciousness in the audience; rather, I am suggesting that trance-like state of consciousness constitute an appropriate point of view to consider – and to experience – these performances. There is some evidence of that besides Georgina’s clear references. Kongo Dia Ntotila members themselves define their music on their dedicated Facebook page as “Kongo-Jazz / AfroJOY / Afrikan fusion grooves with a splash of jazz-psyche”, stressing the African provenance of their inspiration together with the emotional outcome of their performances rather than any musical element or etiquette. Joy, an ecstatic sensorial state and mode of social engagement in Central African political tradition, is at the very core of their musical vision, and the trope of Africa is invoked in this state. Additionally, they explicitly refer to psychedelia not as a music style subculture but as a sensorial state induced in the listener by their music: the reference is surely closer to trance states than to the hippie subculture.

During the gig, Mulele invokes ancestral forces together with great music figures of the past: “Let the spirit of the ancestors bless us, the spirit of the music. Franklin Boukaka, Fela Kuti, Bob Marley. Let’s jam!” Again, as in a trance-like state, Mulele refers to his original African spirituality as a means to include the audience in an African chronotope: the blessings are invoked on “us” – including the public – and the “spirit of the music” is condensed in 3 internationally recognised African stars whose mention may sound familiar to any ‘Black music’ connoisseur. Boukaka, Marley, and Kuti have been able to conquer markets while remaining faithful to their original musical ideas and their cultural beliefs, maintaining their political messages intact. To compress Afrobeat in a commodified music category vilifies Fela Kuti’s political complexity and reduces it into a harmless, standardised dance genre; this, though popular and easily marketable, is a reference Mulele definitely wants to escape. The main references of KDN music expand the borders of what is considered as Congolese or even African music, gaining international breadth, deconstructing any easy and preconceived understanding at the same time as presenting a sonic dimension that invites the crowd to join in and enjoy here and now.

Mulele’s view of his own music as a spontaneous, fluid/flowing creative process is epitomised in a spoken word-like interlude he improvised while playing a live version of “360°”:

Music. Jam. Sometimes you make it simple. Just enjoy the music. Don’t make it too much complication. [He raises the index finger of his right hand] Don’t play fusion; but let the fusion play you. When the fusion plays you, you are gonna understand, you are gonna go to flow, you are gonna go to the Moon, like this, to the Sun.

Such an expression of African music does not rely on ideas like tradition or authenticity. Georgina is not re-appropriating her Africanness through Kongo Dia Ntotila’s African flavour. Rather, she sees the band as the musical expression of her fluid, cosmopolitan (and poly-cosmic), transcultural self-perception. Mulele revives his own musical background by releasing it from its long-lasting international marginality and putting it into dialogue with renowned and rich music forms, pushing the limits of established Congolese popular music. His

claim for Congo's recognition passes through introducing Congolese music within international musical dialogues and exchanges. By doing so, he tends to soften the boundaries between the musical elements he is working with, underlining elements like the creative originality of the band, the spontaneity of their compositions, their improvised and impromptu approach to live exhibitions.

The diasporic ritual performed and consumed through music by the band and the audience alike makes sense against the backdrop of its social environment. Through her oneiric trip, Georgina re-connects with her deep (imagined, believed, remembered, embodied) roots as well as feeding her cosmopolitan desire for the exotic, the other. What is uncertain and unstable in terms of cultural identity becomes rich, manifold, open; a diasporic experience becomes really transcultural and, as such, the subject feels empowered towards the challenges and discrepancies of the contemporary.

3.4 AfroJOY: exotic originality

Mulele makes a political statement through his struggle to flee from 'the box' African music is restricted to in mainstream music market, music education, and academic categories. Posting a video of Kora Jazz Trio on Facebook (23 October 2018), Mulele summarises his view:

People seem to see Afrikan instruments as kind of limited to Afrikan traditions, and focus on the exotic side - like the tourist/traditional old ideas of these instruments... those familiar same old sounds, melodies, styles you've been hearing forever - in school if you're learning about it, at gigs if you like it live, on the records promoted by those tourist music magazines. Not many seem to try to evolve or develop these ideas much. BUT if you can understand the instrument in a mathematical, scientific way, there is no limit to what you can play, you can play the instrument to ANY style, any kind of music, any chord progressions, and it can fit easily. [...] People push yourselves! Diversify your thinking. Go beyond what we have all heard before. Innovate! MMA

Mulele's most immediate counterpart is the music market and its urge to squeeze bands, albums, and other music commodities into preconceived pigeonholes – in Kongo Dia Ntotila's case, the inescapable label of 'World Music' or, more recently, 'Afrobeat'. Since the band signed with Pussyfoot Records, his aspiration is to go beyond those

categories and the corresponding market niches, trying to reach a more general, international audience. The day after the gig, the band performed live at the Tim Robinson Show on BBC 6. When Tim Robinson asked Mulele about jazz and African influences, explicitly mentioning the “huge melting pot you’re doing”, Mulele answered:

[T]he way I understand this music, it’s like, we’re just jamming, we’re just playing, enjoying. Because we have simplicity; and the art side of it, as well. So, simplicity of this music is just to play. The art thing of it it’s like, to come up with these jazz harmony, like what they [the band] are coming up with, meeting with Congolese rhythmic. It’s just music.

John Kelly – invited by Mulele to step in the conversation – responded:

We try and keep it based in Congolese, what we feel... you know, this music. I think the jazz element is... we try not to force that in. And the Congolese guys here would say if something is not right, if it’s not satisfying their sensibilities, musically. So, if there’s an opening for it, it works; we’re not just kind of sticking it all together and hoping for the best.

Underneath the agreement between the two statements, there is a radical difference in positioning the music itself. John Kelly, a classically trained British guitarist, stresses respect for the Congolese foundation of the band and the sensibility of its Congolese members. Such respect for the identity of the Other, at the heart of multiculturalism, echoes what Žižek (1997: 44) would call “a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’.” The sonic continuum of the band is immediately fragmented by John’s words; Congolese elements are discretised, studied and ‘respected’, whereas academic jazz embodies the “kind of empty global position” of power from where to carefully study ‘local cultures’ (ibid). Clearly, there is a tension, a power imbalance between Western art music forms and the uncanny, fluid, and rather unknown – to a Western ear – Congolese music tradition. This inner tension probably corresponds to a difference of cultural points of views and artistic sensibilities inside the band. Nonetheless, this tension disappears in the common practice of creating joy via music. John, Mulele, and anyone else, if explicitly asked to define their music, might adhere to general clichés and common tropes. When they play together, partaking in the

transcultural rite of the joyful nexus, verbal formulations lose their meaning, as do cultural differences. That is probably the reason why I have never witnessed any explicit conflict in this regard, and even during John's interview, Mulele kept nodding and confirming any sentence by saying "Yes." It does not surprise me at all: Mulele, conscious of his relevant space in KDN creative dynamics, does not bother with definitions or over-theorising discussions about his music; as Reddell (2013: 93) states about Afrofuturists, he "evades or displaces questions of representation in favour of creating the future itself."

Mulele's antidote to the opposition above – wherein he would risk occupying the weaker position – is not to present his music as a specific music culture; but rather, as a spontaneous, singular product of different creativities getting together. He is willing to de-culturalise and de-construct all reference when presenting his music on a mainstream audience, in order to avoid all imbalance of multiculturalism and to join the "empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures" (Žižek: *ibid*). Talking to Tim Robinson, Mulele claims his music comes from nowhere. The dichotomy is broken by positioning on an unexpected place, out of space, in another dimension, away from an everlasting struggle between oppressors and oppressed, new and old colonialism, which it is impossible to overcome if directly faced.

At the same time, KDN still has to play the game by the rules dictated by the market, academia, music press, etc. KDN's Africanness has to be displayed in order to sell, to satisfy the consumers of this specific market: these references are also a necessary part of live shows, as people turning up at KDN gigs love it. On the other hand, Mulele can't wait to take the opportunity of addressing the general audience, and in this regard, a specific 'ethnic' orientation is a dead weight. The latest gig displays this inner contradiction, this creative schizophrenia, referring at the same time to both semantic sets – exoticism; and authoriality – that still coexist in KDN perspectives and goals.

Ethnomusicological attentions play a delicate role here. Although constituting an interesting source of visibility and cultural recognition, ethnographic questions and discourses are perceived by Mulele as a threat; he is concerned at the risk of falling into the category of the 'observed' – becoming subject to Eurocentric discourses and biases as in World Music representations. Now, how can one merge these two aspects? Being aware of his precarious position as an African artist within the music biz and academic representation, Mulele crafts his discourses very carefully, often in oppositional terms. Right now, he is more concerned about building an effective verbal strategy than expressing his views in what he feels to be the crucial juncture for his music career. Henceforth, his discourses are more relevant as the construction of a rhetoric to achieve his ultimate goal – the success of his music – than as a cultural manifestation per se. The subject is actively struggling to improve his social space: every cultural performance is the theatre – or rather, the ring – for a cultural conflict.

Mulele's positions are echoed in Georgina's piece: her review is a brief mythical, autobiographical account. Through the story, she embodies the crisis of presence in a mega-urban scenario, the performance of a collective healing ritual mediated by musical officiants, and the final solution to the initial crisis that allows her to reintegrate herself in the community. The tale covers the main narrative elements identified by Vladimir Propp: Georgina found herself in a situation of distress very common for London dwellers ("my eyelids droop despite themselves, despite myself – symptomatic of a 4-hour round trip commute on repeat. Big City Living.") The solution is unexpected and mediated by the helpers, the magical entities personified by Kongo Dia Ntotila. Through her mystical journey, Georgina is rewarded for her exertions with a large deal of enjoyment, and once she is back to reality, she feels fully reintegrated in the social environment ("Neighbours and strangers meet. Numbers exchanged and hands extended. I'm invited to an eviction party.") Hence, she could finally answer Mulele's question – which is her question, as well:

Walking home through the Ladder, waking up, I recall that initial question, and my answer is this:

You know exactly who you are.

You are Kongo Dia Ntotila. You can choose to qualify that with whatever addendum you choose. You are Kongo Dia Ntotila from North London, Liverpool, Congo, Switzerland, the Moon. And people will continue to define you in the manner that suits them at the time, I suppose. Just like the weather we are mutable, essentially. So to thine own self be true.

Again, all systemic violence and power imbalances implicit in Mulele's difficult quest for an autonomous self-representation are somehow diluted. The pressure for rigid identities imposed from above upon minorities in British society is taken for granted, and at the same time it is made irrelevant by the self-evidence of the fluid nature of cultures and people. Georgina does not contrast current identity policies and stereotypes; she just dissolves the argument. The search for identification cannot contribute to the notion of self. As Eshun (1998: 107) says; "To unify the self is to amputate the self." To "qualify", to define the origins of something, is always an arbitrary choice – that is, a political action.

Georgina cannot but endorse Kongo Dia Ntotila's proposal to define their music as AfroJOY. Coming from an original idea by Birikiti, the term recalls 'afrobeat' but inserts an emotional reference to distinguish the band and to underline the impact on the audience rather than the technicality of the music structure.

3.5 Conclusions

The three performances analysed in the present chapters compose a multifaceted picture of the joyful nexus in diasporic London. The main element in common between the three gigs is the representation of otherness, its embodiment by the musicians and its staged expression. Aime's Spanish ad-libs and multilingual greetings to a Congolese crowd; Kongo Dia Ntotila's experiential journey through the African musical hubs; and Willow's Martian origins are different strategies to transport the audience in a polyphonic, shimmering ritual space wherein their identities are pluralised, deconstructed, refracted and projected onto different, distant worlds. Congolese xenophilia and middle-class British

exoticism are the reflections of two dynamic social bodies, willing to produce (and consume) artistic representations that give them the sense of virtually unlimited freedom of movement. The shows enact both the anxiety and the desire of a travel with no return, celebrating the capability of the participants (both the audience and the music makers) to successfully navigate the transcultural network they live in.

Despite multiple differences, Mulele's stage strategies show some similarities with the diasporic setting of his gig with Aime Bongongo. The stage is not lived as an exclusive ritual space for the musicians, and they do not consider themselves as the only celebrants of the social rite. The audience is invited to partake of the ritual function, invested in the process of its own representation, asked for a contribution, and praised for its necessary help. Late at night in Barking, Congolese diasporic actors revive an improvised show in a time of crisis by pouring their vital energies on stage in the form of dollar bills and alcoholic exuberance. In the music venues of north-east London, the audience's participation is guided by Mulele's sonic architecture through basic choreographies and a continual dialogue; yet in both cases, the success of the performance is determined by the direct involvement of the public.

Mulele's interstellar journey composes an Afrocentric music discourse that goes beyond any specific cultural identity, celebrating human creativity. The political elaboration of such a discourse balances the needs of an emergent band in the underground London scene with the protest against market categories. The stage becomes a pulpit to chant down African dictators, invoking the power of the musical ancestors. The next chapter explores further the musical dimension of African ancestry and the discourses about Blackness in African diasporic music making.

Chapter four. The branch and the root: a musical dialogue about Africanness

This chapter explores the discourse around Africa and Blackness⁵³ as found in the musical dialogue between Mulele Matondo Afrika and African American bluesman Corey Harris. The discourse expands upon musical texts, interviews, and other performative practices produced in a three-day studio session, during which Mulele and Corey composed and recorded an entire collaborative album.

Mulele and Corey's music message is discussed together with the works of Achille Mbembe, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and other postcolonial analysts. This chapter adds to the present discussion about Blackness by ethnographically relating a formulation of Africanness through music processes. In particular, I engage with the idea and practices of Afrocentrism as a political and cultural paradigm for Corey and Mulele, exploring how a discourse based on cultural exclusivism (Eshun, 1999; Mbembe, 2017) can turn into an inclusive practice of music making.

My analysis is mainly directed to the universal, inclusive potential of the performative longing for Black cultural essentialism in Mulele and Corey's music practices. The dynamics of fieldwork interactions, mediated through filmmaking, reveal how this collective process goes beyond self-referentiality. Africa and Black people's repatriation become an open invitation: a political manifesto of resistance against capitalism and other contemporary Leviathans, a call to a different humanity. The encounter between Corey and Mulele reactivates the emancipatory potentials of the diasporic joyful nexus as performed by enslaved Africans across the Atlantic (see section 1.2.2). Their shared imagination of slavery is composed into a musical ideology of the downtrodden, through which they try to reconstruct the memory of a common, unknown story.

⁵³ I refer to 'Black' and 'Blackness' with a capital letter for they are used as ethnonyms in the Afrocentric discourses of Mulele and Corey Harris, as a metonymy of the African content (cf. Mbembe 2017: 31-32).

The social drama of music making embeds simultaneously exclusivism and rhizomatic identities; strict traditionalism and mythopoeia; the *mise-en-scène* of race war, and the formulation of an alternative, sustainable human habitat. Compared to the previous chapter, this example of African diasporic music making constitutes a more intimate discourse around Africa: where two different imageries collide together, generating an improvised African sonic scape from shared tropes, common hopes, and similar alienating experiences.

The African discourse is a multifaceted social drama, whose communicative layers range from creative openness to more selective contexts. Although the Afrocentric discourse as elaborated by Corey and Mulele has never assumed explicitly racist connotations, there is an undeniable cultural exclusivism intrinsic to the music project, which has been made clear in all the outgoing messages. From the song concepts to the conversations on camera, Facebook posts and live videos: every time Corey and Mulele composed a message, it exclusively addressed Black people about their Africanness. The process of composing coherent text-like messages about Africanness repelled my contribution as a fundamental incoherence, an element out of place, a cultural disturbance. Contrarily, my presence as a white European young academic was welcomed during the rest of the creative process, especially as I filmed during the entire event.

A performative character permeates the entire texture of the studio session. The intensity of the project dissolves ordinary time and space partitions: the event and its representation overlap. The performative “threshold between secular living and sacred living” (Turner 1986: 25) expands until the separation fades out, and the ritual places of performance infringe upon the artists’ everydayness. The joyful nexus overflows the limits of the stage: the musicians’ bodies and everything/everyone at their disposal enter into a creative trance and are turned into musical instruments (the voices of the empowering dead), including the camera and its operator. The pivotal role of the camera within contemporary creative human dynamics – and of course my long-lasting collaboration and friendship with Mulele Matondo

Afrika – translates to my full inclusion in the elaboration of Afrocentric music discourses and artefacts.

The presence of the camera is absolutely crucial in this fieldwork episode. I am invited to join in and I am present through all the process, essentially as a camera operator. The camera becomes an instrument of music making; every other function – to disseminate information, tease the audience, promote commercial music goods – is subordinated to the here and now of the creative process. Footage is used as an instant sound archive, to record an intuition, to recall a riff played a few minutes earlier or the night before. Mulele, the main architect in the process, stops me filming to have a clip played; to ask me how is it going; to move the microphones in the recording room, or just to put the camera down and share a meal with the musicians. The camera works as an intensifier rather than a witness, dialoguing with Mulele alone in the studio when everybody has left, capturing his scattered, repetitive movements in front of the microphone, his body a divining rod to the ancestors' energies and other midnight presences. As always, the camera increases the dialectical reflexivity of performance, exposing the performers to their image, revealing one's self through the mirror of social acting.

The following sections will present Mulele and Corey's dialogue as an articulation of thoughts and music performances related to a wider frame of postcolonial thinking about Africa. It must be said that to present their discourse in such a fashion – through a written text – has little to do with the way this dialogue was displayed, performed, and inhabited by Corey and Mulele during my ethnographic survey. As I will explain below, this musical encounter developed across different communicative layers, some of which were exclusively dedicated to African representations and speakers. Thus, my participation in the process, although always warmly welcomed by the music protagonists, has been sometimes limited to witnessing – and recording – dense exchanges of messages that I neither composed, nor were they shaped to be received by me. The rationale for this chapter is to engage with as many layers as possible of Mulele and Corey's musical encounter,

drawing intelligible connections through the many aspects they have taken for granted in their dialogue.

4.1. Conscious Black men

Mulele and Corey had had very little personal contact before this project took place. They met only once, briefly, having shared the stage at London's Jazz Café in 2014. Yet, they were no strangers. Since their first conversation on the tube from the airport to East London, Corey and Mulele have approached each other with familiarity, although they rarely talked about personal details. Before even meeting, they were already connected by intense flows of information, involved in a common discourse that concerns them personally and goes beyond: the global discourse about Africa carried out by the Africans themselves across the centuries and the continents.

Mulele and Corey's music dialogue springs from a reciprocal magnetism (cf. Hauke 2004: 105). They have always been present in each other's arguments – if not personally, as actors of reciprocally fundamental cultural engines. An African musician, Mulele embodies the cultural capital Corey considers as the roots of his own artistic language: the nucleus where to research his real self. Vice versa, Corey is a prominent contemporary representative of the Delta blues, one of the most praised outcomes of the African diaspora, which Mulele claims to be a direct filiation of a Congolese music style. Both of them want to be part of the other's story and to pull the other in theirs, in order to legitimate themselves and to pursue their personal enquiries. They are aware of their reciprocal involvement in the discourse: somehow, they both can see themselves mirrored in the other.

Mulele and Corey position themselves likewise within the social drama of African discourse, although through different life journeys and in very different contexts: they both play the role of conscious Black men. This is an airy yet very tangible, multilayered concept: a social credit that goes beyond a practical role in the community, or any specific personal merit deriving from public actions. It is a more

complex sensory emanation, an aura of credibility, a charismatic magnetism that may go generally unnoticed or even repulse an average member of mainstream society, but that is definitely intercepted by a minority tuned in to the African frequencies. This minority is a portion of Black people and, to a way lesser extent, non-Black people who are nonetheless fond of the idea of Africanness and critical towards the principles of capitalism and Eurocentrism. For some of them, the African issue is so inextricably entangled with themselves that the appearance of a conscious Black man in the cityscape has to be explicitly welcomed. I have often witnessed random strangers of African origins greeting Mulele in public spaces, silently establishing eye contact, the head respectfully nodding, exchanging salutations in low voice: "Greetings," "Bless," "Yes I," "Yes, my brother." Quick street interactions, people expressing admiration to Mulele while going their own ways; signs of an implicit African discourse, in which speakers embody their utterances and communicate with each other without the need for texts. Rastafari performs a pivotal role in this discourse: sonic expressions; vocabulary; life principles; imagery, and looks of the African-Caribbean movement constitute an urban identity that African resisters have to relate to. Mulele, although disapproving various aspects of Rastafari as a cultural movement and not considering himself a Rasta *sensu stricto* anymore, is nonetheless broadly identified as such by the Congolese community and other Black people in London, Kinshasa and all along the steps of his life journey. He generally accepts such a definition, which bestows an aura of integrity and creativity – as well as bohemian extravagance, social nonconformity, and radicalism – leaving subtler specifications for a closer circle of friends.

Once, when I witnessed a black bus driver letting Mulele get in without checking his Oyster card and exchanging with him a silent greeting through the partition, I asked Mulele why very different people were so sympathetic without even knowing him. Mulele: "It's respect. They see the way I wear simple clothes, African style, the turban, the dreadlocks... they see that I don't do it for fashion, that I am real." The African discourse is a semiotic web stretching out on London's – as well

as many other cities' – transcultural urban environment. The narrow group of people who animate this minority discourse are also the only ones capable of fully decrypting its messages.

The discourse is a cause: redemption; the pursuit of dignity and public recognition; self-acceptance and pride are at stake, at a collective as well as personal level. As the present chapter will show, it is not a simple matter: it is painful, extenuating, and it implies both an inner and exterior conflict. It is a fight, and Mulele is on the frontline: every trait of his person expresses the embodiment of the discourse. An upholder of the cause, his body emanates a message of African pride, capable of uplifting the receivers.

On a more personal level, this charisma is the catalyst of a little community of family members and friends who esteem Mulele's personality and artistic prowess to the point of spontaneously devoting a significant quota of their resources to support Mulele's activities, the main reward being to partake in his life and endeavours. To some extent, even considering my ambiguous position as a researcher, I see myself as part of this little community.

The group of people gathering around Mulele, his studio, and his partner Birikiti's flat is composed by a few close friends of Congolese origins: Samba, who has lived in the studio for quite a long time; Ngeya, Mulele's cousin and friend, who sometimes accompanies Kongo Dia Ntotila as backing vocal and percussionist, and Sakuba Dior, Mulele's brother, based in Manchester, who has recently joined Kongo Dia Ntotila as rhythmic guitar. Several other friends and acquaintances occasionally join in. Beyond being a great musician, Mulele is considered a wise man, and his artistic activities are worthy of the deepest respect. When Mulele and I went to fetch Corey at the airport, Ngeya drove us from Manor House station to the studio where Samba was waiting for us. As usual, Samba was interested in my camera and asked me what could be an important improvement for the quality of my videos; I told him I need a better camera lens. Samba said:

As soon as I get a job, the first money I'll earn will go to one of these. I wanna buy a good gear and give it to you and Mulele; you know how to

use it, and you can do big things with it. He can't work, he's so busy doing his great music, so he needs someone to work and support him.

Regardless of the eventual implementation of Samba's intent, Mulele's music is considered as an important contribution in the lives of the people around him. It is also a source of social prestige, artistic enhancement and spiritual power, and an ethical endeavour to support. The moral stature and charisma spread by Mulele's music goes beyond ethnic identity: in order to make the album with Corey Harris, Mulele has mobilised many non-black friends who have given their help, assisting him with the logistics; catering the studio sessions; babysitting Piankhi; singing backing vocals recording and mixing the album – even contributing to the expenses. Of course, helping a friend is a human instinct that does not have to be explained by the present study; nonetheless, the enthusiasm that people around Mulele display for his cultural creations – both music and discourses – must be taken into account when considering the generative power of the idea of Africanness and its inclusiveness when socially performed through music practices.

4.2. Digital Organicity

Mulele discusses the idea of the project with Corey in person only once, briefly, on the journey from the airport to the studio in East London: "So, it's kind of a new thing to me: without writing anything, we just go to the studio and then... vibes!" "Yes!" "And we come out with... whatever we come out with," "Organic!" "Organic!"

The choice of approaching the project as an instant-album entirely created and recorded on the spot is coherent with Mulele's usual creative methods. If Kongo Dia Ntotila stage performances are scrupulously prepared in advance and thoroughly rehearsed, music creation generally avoids any planning. In our audio visual collaborations, Mulele improvises the performative structure directly in front of the camera, giving more value to the generative power of intuition than scripts.

Corey embraces this approach; his jestful description of the album concept as ‘organic’ fits the aesthetic choices that will shape the entire process and brings up the principles of livity: the Rastafari way of living. Livity holistically embraces spirit, body and mind, turning every human action into a gesture of liberation and vitality, connecting people to the natural sources of energy both in social practices and the environment. Language is lived, “with tangible physical presence and impact through the vibrations each word makes” (Sobers 2016: 61). In Iyaric⁵⁴, the alienating oppression of imposed colonial English is eliminated by replacing negative sounds with I-words (unity: Inity; understand: overstand or Iyastand), glorifying the human subjectivity of Rasta people in every utterance, re-building an autonomous, black identity (ibid; and Simpson 1985: 288-289). Ital (‘vital’) food is fresh, organic, vegetarian; animals and chemicals are excluded from the diet. Combing, shaving, using chemicals to arrange hair or for skincare are avoided: Rasta let the hair naturally grow into dreadlocks, rejecting every adulteration and constraint.

Rastafari has been a crucial encounter in Mulele’s journey to cultural awareness in his personal and artistic maturation. His own system of thoughts – that he defines *Matondologie* or, sometimes, *Bonkokologie* – embraces many Rasta norms and practices, yet with a personal and more secular inflection. Hence, Mulele and Corey’s horizons significantly overlap, which results in them understanding each other and spontaneously agreeing on the creative modality.

Organicity assumes here an epistemological significance: music derives from living organisms, its creation being a bodily process. The organic nature pertains to the process of this occurrence more than its material inputs and outputs: in fact, the organism making music is partly technological, its physiology is substantially digital. Music comes into being from the interaction between the gear and human bodies socially processing sounds and other vibrations; ideas; longings; Ital

⁵⁴ Also referred to as Wordsound, Iyaric is the language created and used by Rastafari members. The name Iyaric is formed by Iya (Jamaican phonetical representation of ‘higher’) and Amharic, the language spoken by Haile Selassie I, last emperor of Ethiopia, worshipped as God incarnate by Rasta people.

food; caffeine; memories; cannabinoids; friendly and love feelings; embodied racism, and marginality. Mechanical agencies and intangible presences intertwine: the spirits of the ancestors circulate through the creative intuitions of the musicians, their fingers and strings, throats and microphones, as well as through cables and headphone wires, appearing as pixels on the computer screen. The principle of the empowering other embraces technology (cf. Trapido 2017: 81) involving digital artifacts in the joyful nexus – not as a sign of wealth, but as an empowering extension of human bodies, and as such, shot through by ancestral energies. The vital fluid permeates transistors and organs, making no distinction between them. African diasporic music making celebrates what Achille Mbembe (2017: 117) indicates as “one of the fundamental pillars” of the African “metaphysics of life” over the centuries: “The communion between human beings, on one hand, and objects, nature, and indivisible forces on the other.”

The artists and all the other participants are absorbed into an African chronotope in central East London through a process of continuous displacement and replacement. The ancestors’ spirits start circulating in the recording room, talking through guitar strings, membranes, and the musicians’ mouths. Food preparation, marijuana smoking, studio décor, visitors, and the filmmaking: everything flows into music making. Such a diffuse, comprehensive creative process reveals the artists’ embodiment of personal inquiries, cultural identities, conflicts, ambiguities, and practices of resistance reflected in musical creations.

The musical dialogue between Corey and Mulele comes out seamlessly, with the musical instruments and machinery as body parts. Mulele insists on this aspect when talking about the project:

Nothing is planned, nothing is like: sit down and write... I didn’t send him [to Corey] any song. We didn’t prepare the songs: it just came up from the vibe we brought together, from the fire. We just came out with something very serious. We have different styles, so it’s like, something is out of us, something is between us too, something we are familiar with; but we didn’t play anyone’s music: I didn’t impose him, he didn’t impose me, we just jam and come up, it’s the project.

Music styles and contents accumulate, fuse into each other, overlap, generate something unknown to its own generators: a stream of sound waves mightily flowing in between and out of the musicians, the lusty energy of their encounter as the onset of a fire. The process has a clear analogue vocation, despite his many digital organs: music does not need to be pondered upon, carefully planned, discretised into manipulable particles, and heavily treated in order to be properly packaged. The spontaneity of the musical compositions reflects the effort to dialogically express the unadulterated selves of the two artists, Mulele and Corey, as human resonators representing their people – Black people, the Africans. Also, such a holistic concept of music making matches the project’s severe time constraints that make it necessary to skip the usual production steps in order to turn a 3-day collaboration into a consistent musical discourse, that is, a full album.

The paradigm of simplicity reduces the impact of technical paraphernalia during all the creative process (composition/improvisation, recording, mixing). The whole setting is thought to make the creativity flow: to adhere to it, to catch it in its full intensity. The two cold rooms of a run-down studio become the ideal environment for a music body without organs, with extremely permeable borders between sound sources and receivers, devices and operators, performance and ordinary time, life and its representation.

The recording apparatus is carefully disposed to capture – and to reproduce in the final product through mixing – the spatio-temporal dimensions of music creation; devices and strategies are displayed according to the temporary needs and inspirations of the creative environment. Mulele and Corey overlap their voices and languages, improvising and recording the lyrics of the track *History* on the spot; on every song, they record their main guitar lines together, sharing acoustic and visual fields. Polyrythms are created by a 4-piece orchestra of percussions playing together, the audio tracks interlocking, the possibility for audio editing reduced to a minimum. The recording room enters its digital audio reproduction: Julian places the microphones as for a ‘live’ recording, handling sound reflections,

purposely catching diegetic sound sources like Corey's foot tapping on the carpet.

This unmediated attitude diffusely permeates all the 3-day studio session and the following mixing activities, sometimes overcoming technical precautions: Dior interrupts a brilliant take entering the recording room to ask something to Mulele, the latter calmly answering to his brother and then continuing to play, the track still rolling, Julian dismayingly staring at the scene behind the glass. A few times Julian has to stop a recording session to reset the microphones because I have stepped on a wire while filming, or because Mulele has hit a jack or loosed a cable in one of his furious improvised solos, his body and guitar shook by waves of hasty finger movements over the strings and frets. This is not to be interpreted as amateurism: the protagonists' high commitment and expertise allow professional standards in a short time. Despite material deficiencies – DIY soundproofing, precarious wiring, limited electric power available, no running water, makeshift toilet and kitchen facilities, no heater, no internet – it is rather a stylistic choice, with both ethical and artistic reasons.

Mulele and Corey are well aware of their skills and consider severely simple digitisation as the ideal treatment to display their musical mastery. In the mixing room, Mulele questions Julian's tendency to add reverbs and distortions when mixing:

- Julian, you know, I'm a kind of guitarist who likes to play not really with a lot of distortions or things like that... Because I use my fingers' effects, I have different techniques, so if you put the effects like all these amps here, it loses that. You like a lot of effects and plugins!
- Mh... The right amount.
- It's good when people are not playing good. You use it to cover, as a trick.

All unnecessary digital intervention is seen as detrimental, as it would diminish the "tension", the complexity and the "revolution" inside the music. Accordingly, environmental creative stimuli – the "vibes" – are considered more important than the technicality. Beyond manners and good social management, the human dimension of the

process is the focus of Mulele's attention: he encourages creative dynamics and sociability, stopping everyone's activities to eat meals together twice a day, letting all participants contribute to the process according to their biorhythm – excepting himself, who barely has slept a few hours in 4 days, totally absorbed in the endeavour of completing the scheme. The project is a 3-day musical feast, with Mulele as the main celebrant dispensing a massive amount of stamina, displaying impressive creative wealth, sharing musical goods, wasting hours and hours of sleep in front of his micro-community in an incessant sensory excitement fuelled by marihuana and spirit beings circulating through his body.

Besides the aforementioned ritual forms of the joyful nexus, the project calls for an all-embracing personal commitment of the main participants. Music creation sprouts with an aura of immediate personal urgency, historical necessity and collective significance. The human process of creation, the dialogue between Mulele and Corey, must just take place: it will speak for itself, resounding with the voices of hundreds of millions of others. The day of Corey's arrival, late at night after a long jam, they express to each other this shared feeling:

- Mulele: We need to make something, 'cause this contact... our contact between African,
- Corey: Yes,
- The mother and the child,
- Yes of course. Branch and the root,
- Yes. So they meet, they have something to say. A bit deeper.
- Mh-mh.
- We don't need to think, we don't need to shout to them, we just need to say.
- Of course.
- Because sometimes if you speak in this way, people understand.
- Yeah man. It's time for something like this.
- It's already happening. *Bonkoko!* - They pound their fists, chortling. Mulele brings both Corey's fists to his head, the latter concluding "Bless it," his hands staying on Mulele's forefront.

They are in full agreement: the best way to shape their music dialogue is to "make it simple", as "natural" as their exigency to get together. Spontaneity is the key to express themselves, as well as to reach the audience. There is no need for special effects to attract attention: they can feel the history flowing through their shared

thoughts, both in term of healing long-term traumas and engaging with weighty current topics.

4.3. Ancestral Oneness

I have been impressed by Mulele's capability to complete such an ambitious project with so little help, composing what sounds to me like an amazing album. I express to him my admiration on our way back after we left Corey at the airport, at the end of this intense recording experience: "Man, I'm really impressed. You had Corey coming here, you did a great album in 3 days; and all of that with no money! That's magic!" Mulele bursts out laughing, shrugs his shoulders and calmly says: "*Bonkoko*, my brother. That's *bonkoko*. The power of *bonkoko*." Through one of the most recurring words in Mulele's lexicon, the answer presents an essential element in his conception of music and music making, as well as the joyful nexus' main engine: the ancestors.

Bonkoko – also spelled as *Bokoko* – is a Lingala term translated into English by a few online Lingala-English dictionaries and translators as 'tradition', 'genealogy', 'culture', or 'history'⁵⁵. Mulele argues that the term has no direct English translation and applies it to quite a variety of referents and verbal contexts beyond the former definitions: as an interjection referring to something righteous or truly African in his songs or when speaking; to greet a family member or close friend; to thank or to give his blessing to someone, even after sneezing. Sometimes, he refers to *bonkoko* as "the ancestors;" yet when he means his predecessors in their historical, corporeal presence, he uses the term *bakoko*, 'the elders'⁵⁶ – more often *bakoko na biso*, 'our elders.' Mulele explains the meaning of *bonkoko* as "the spirits of the ancestors;" however, 'spirit' as an ethereal entity is not what the word

⁵⁵ See <https://dic.lingala.be/en/bokoko> and <https://glosbe.com/ln/en/bonkoko>.

⁵⁶ The term means 'grandparents', 'ancestors'; and 'grandchildren', 'descendant'. As it is the case for *lobi* (meaning 'yesterday' or 'tomorrow' according to the context) and *lobi kuna* ('the day before yesterday' or 'the day after tomorrow') in Lingala, a point and its inversion with respect to a given temporal position – the present, us, the subjectivity of the speaker – are referred with the same word.

alludes to. I have wrongly mentioned *bonkoko* once as something we do not see; Mulele has corrected me immediately:

- No, I'm here! I'm one of them, ancestors. I'm the child of the grand-grandchildren of the grand-grandchildren of someone: that's the ancestors. So, as long as I'm alive, I'm the ancestors! I can say the ancestors, *bonkoko*, it's me!
- So, ancestors are not dead people...
- They can never die, because I'm the continuation of the ancestors, so how can they die? They cannot die. I'm the ancestors.

The ancestors' spirits are at the same time a substantial component of Mulele's inner nature, and an embodied plural otherness interacting with the self. *Bonkoko* represent a particular state of consciousness, a spiritual path one must follow, a source of spacetime curvature wherein the ego is multiplied and connected through the experiences of the antecedents to other epochs and places, to other sensorial sources of knowledge. Mulele does not use the term in reference to direct lineage, family or local memories; rarely, in his discourses, are they identifiable with a specific shape, a singular spiritual identity. *Bonkoko* are rather a collective body expanding through African people, their history and diaspora. Tradition, as opposed to progress by the Enlightenment, does not convey any of these senses; *bonkoko* are the everlasting power of the origins, the living flow of culture, the multiple self.

The idea of *bonkoko* bears a close likeness to "the most enriching concept in the Rastafarian vocabulary: 'I and I'" (Cashmore 2013b: 6). I and I – also spelled I-an-I, or InI – is a collective we that combines you and me replacing separation and objectification with a communality of active subjectivities. I and I is also singular, the cosmic Rasta: it conveys the spirituality and physicality at once, the constant presence of the living god in every human being. I and I is oneness: it expresses the connection between all people, their common divine nature (Cashmore 2013a: 428; Simpson 1985: 289). It releases Rasta from all type of slavery and puts the people always in an actor position: "No person has any privilege or power over another: all are equal in 'human truths and rights'" (Cashmore: *ibid*). I and I is sameness-in-difference (Sobers 2016: 62); it expresses the we-spirit, the noosphere, and represents the

collective consciousness of Rasta people (Huhtala 2015: 12). Jah Rastafari, the divine source of vital and collective energy, is ever-living and cannot but emanate justice: “He lives in I and I. Selassie-I is living because I’m living, both physically and spiritually. [...] Rasta knows the truth because he lives in I and I constantly” (Kebede, Shriver, Knottnerus 2000: 329). Like Mulele and his ancestors, Rasta cannot die: physical death is celebrated as a cosmic transition of the human into an ancestor, still part of I and I.

Both *bonkoko* and the I-phrase display relational identities, the subject a multitude. Both concepts empower the self and connect it to other beings and forces of life, celebrating the embodied holiness of all earthly creatures, bringing everydayness to a divine plane. Rasta oneness and Mulele’s ancestors are also techniques of resistance in a hostile society: cultural heritage and cosmology entail a conflictive political ethos, eliciting consciousness and vital energies against the white-skinned oppressors. These discourses are strongly African-based, yet they are formulated in the Diaspora; Africanness is embodied as well as longed for – hindered, not fully accomplished; like Kinshasa’s stages for Mulele, the image of Africa stands for the artists of its Diaspora as the absent object of desire, the source of inspiration, and the mythical destination of an imaginary glorious return journey.

Corey, who joined Rastafari growing up in the United States, rejoices in encountering an African creative cultural practice like Mulele’s sonic architecture; yet, their meeting is also a mourning for something they have lost and for the historic curse they share. Embracing their African essence is somehow acknowledging their perpetual minority status: “[Both Blackness and Africa] are fated to be not common nouns, or even proper nouns, but rather mere indicators of an absence of achievements” (Mbembe 2017: 12). The incompleteness of these senses of belonging opens up to inclusion: rather than a race, Africa is a comfort zone and a manifesto. These African diasporic practices express a principle of universal solidarity, and can be applied to all humankind – and, eventually, they are.

Corey and Mulele easily catch on to each other's spirit scape, enjoying their rediscovered correspondences, exchanging mottos. By simply uttering their powerful words, the music makers enter a mystical spacetime, transferring their actions to a ritual dimension, connecting their music messages to an ancient discourse about themselves. The afternoon of the second day in the studio, during a pause between recording sessions, Mulele takes his tablet to shoot a Facebook live video. Corey is by his side, giving a salute on camera as soon as the tablet starts recording:

- Corey to the camera: Blessed love. Thanks for life and the life giver Selassie Jaaah! Rastafari. Africa in the house, yo!
- Mulele: Bless, bless, in the studio. Yes I. I and I.
- Actually located in Stoke Newington, London, coming with some vibes, the Congo, the blues, the roots. The ancestors in the building. Coming with some messages for I and I, for the people 'round the world. Denouncing those that need denouncing, bigging up those that need bigging up. Always thinking about the children, just reasoning what's to bless with. So, musical energy here, in the studio. We can't be bowed, we can't be stopped, because we doing this until we drop! Selassie Jah!
- Rastafari! *Bonkoko!* Power!

The organic connection with the ancestors is not an idyllic sentiment, though. Once "remembrance is activated through dance and music, or disguise, trance, and possession", all the negative emotions driven by collective memory circulate through the body. The African survivors feel "the memory of death, the tragedy of war" on their bodies, suffering the same injuries and mutilations again and again (Mbembe 2017: 121-122). When Mulele goes through the history of Belgian colonisation of Congo in his storytelling, the narrative tense switches to the first person plural of the simple present: it is 'us', *biso*, who are put in shackles 'now', enslaved in our own land, amputated, squeezed into boats and sent overseas. Samba exclaims "Ah!" his face taking on a disgusted expression. European rubber exploiters are cutting the hands and arms of Mulele and the audience of his Congolese friends together with their ancestors'. In *Feel Like Going Home* by Martin Scorsese, the first episode of the documentary series *The Blues*, Corey – the film's protagonist and narrator – says: "To know yourself, you have to know the past." The African past is inhabited by horrific ghosts that Mulele and Corey

cannot but face in their shared reverse journey as well as in their everyday music making.

Mulele and Corey's reciprocal identification passes through the common experience of embodied racism. Many album tracks are dedicated to denouncing global racism as a direct life threat for Black people. Racism, here, is described pretty much in Foucault's terms, as the foundation of biopower, the state's control over the bodies, the division of the population into groups, some of them having the right to live, whereas some others can be put to death. The musical encounter retraces the modern history of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) of which Black people have been one of the main targets – probably, its favourite experimental field: the slave ship, the plantation, the colony, the ghetto. African diasporic music contests the romance of democracy, the rational self-government of Euro-American societies, pointing at the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence as the norm of the political space in which we live. Mulele and Corey mirror each other in the feeling of the tactile, sensorial technologies of destruction stuck to their bodies. Their improvised dialogue echoes the postcolonial struggle, singing the many young black males dead in the custody of US and UK police, along with the mourning of the millions of victims of war machines in balkanised Congo. More than a claim for participation, Mulele and Corey perform the more intense drama of the struggle for life, the resistance to de-humanisation: "It's hunting season, yo / and Black folks are always in season."⁵⁷

In the emotional, corporeal context of the fight against the deadly oppression, the value of *bonkoko* as a strategy of resistance must be remarked upon. Ancestors are another African diasporic subversion of the sovereignty over life and death. At the very end of his musical fatigue, late at night on the last day in the studio, Mulele pauses before the last recording take, his inner feelings emerging, talking to the camera and to me behind it:

Eugene, *bokoko, bokoko! Bonkoko*. You know, a child who understand the spirit of the ancestors is not gonna suffer. Everything he does, the

⁵⁷ Quote from one of the album's tracks.

ancestors are gonna put one plus; I cry sometimes, when I see things in this way: you wanna give up. I come up with something, what I'm singing, that makes me tear myself. It's like: I'm in Europe when I should be in Africa, but I can't be in Africa because... the level of corruption, the level of injustice, the level of... but then you hear a voice telling you: no no no no, don't give up! Go up, that's just lazy. Go on your ancestors. I don't understand why in Congo there's no election. You know, we have presidents staying there for longer, 37 years: man, come on! That's kingdom! – he chortles –. Ok, let's go. Double me, and then we sleep. Last time: This is the ancestor way: done in one single take! I never get tired. Samba, if you tired, let me know, eh? Because I have super-body, like Fela [Kuti]. Old man, but stay long!

The spirit(s) of the ancestors constitute a self-discipline, orientating their “children” in the chaos. They do not guarantee any afterlife justice, neither they offer any divine compensation for earthly pains. *Bonkoko* become a practice to navigate through disaster; rather than reintegrating into the crisis of presence, they teach how to cope with it, how to embrace it. A cultural device for historic awareness, the ancestors emancipate Mulele's social performances from self-victimisation and provide him with endless supply. I realised that, when discussing with Mulele the track called *Over 400 years ago* whose lyrics depict Africa seeing his children taken away in chains. I cannot help perceiving the scene with an aura of pietism, but Mulele corrects me:

- Me: The topic of the song is really sad...
- Mulele: It's not sad: it's the story. You say 'sad'; it happens! The story happens. Holocaust isn't sad: it's story. You should not neglect it. I think that one of our weaknesses... Africans, we are very weak, in the sense that we neglect our history, we try to move on but we don't want to look at our past, so that's why we are struggling. But I think, if we look at our past, we can sort out our difference.

Musically, *bonkoko* are the main creative agency of the entire process: they inspire thoughts and compositions, suggest useful solutions and expedients, constantly instil energy into Mulele and the other musicians. It is them that Mulele strongly relies upon, to realise the project: “It's just: let's go in the studio, the ancestors are gonna inspire us, we are gonna do something.” The joyful nexus works as a device for music making: the ancestors get Mulele into a trance and speak through his body and his musical instruments. Media do not matter: ancestor-driven euphoria can be digitised into music tracks and consumed remotely by unknown people without losing its ritual force.

What matters is the flow of vital energies, the connections and transformations of these energies rather than their objectification: marijuana 'is' the ancestors, the spirits and the mystical joy they produce are the same thing.

Mulele and Corey record their rhythmic guitar lines for *Dongolomiso* in one single take after a brief chat about the cultural and architectonic prodigies ancient African civilisations have accomplished. Putting the guitar down, Mulele comments on the take he just recorded: "I think this is the water spirit. It comes... we mention the ancestors' history and it inspires us to play without a mistake!" Corey: "True. True-true-true." "We just called them, and they come with us."

The ancestors' presence in the studio is constantly remarked upon, especially on occasions of outstanding musical achievements. *Bonkoko* manifest themselves more intensely at night, through the smoke coiling up a marijuana cigarette, visiting Mulele while making his music, their music, accompanying his effort. At the end of the first day in the studio, after an exhausting recording session, only Mulele is still up completing his vocal lines for *Over 400 years* with me filming him. Listening to the recording between two ad-libs takes, he addresses me directly looking on camera with a smile:

Everyone is gone. It's midnight: midnight is the time when the spirits of the ancestors circulate. If you are doing something, they will visit you better. So, marijuana it's kind of the spirits. It takes you to a different world. It connects you to a higher level; that's why they don't want us to smoke it! They want us to drink, so we can lose our conscience.

Bonkoko are a supernatural double. They are visible in the features of their descendants, yet they are beyond our world. Their power emanates from another one of Mbembe's (2017: 117) "pillars" of African metaphysics of life: "the belief in the division of the world between the visible and the occult. The division granted supremacy to the invisible world, the secret origin of all sovereignty. It turned human beings into the puppets of forces beyond their comprehension." Mulele surrenders to extra-human forces, turns himself into a receptor, lets them operate. *Bonkoko* are the music makers; they are the most reliable source of knowledge, the purveyors of personal and historic awareness,

the energy boosters. Music inspiration; self and collective awareness; historic truth, and vital energies all come from the other world: the unseen.

This connection to 'a different world' and a 'higher level' of awareness proceeds through the reverse of common sense: night, dreams, are the realm of heightened wakefulness; 'getting high' literally elevated one's consciousness, as opposed to intoxicating one. Such a reverse reality expresses the conflictive dimension of Mulele's values system, as well as the premises of his musical dialogue with Corey: the circuit of connection with the ancestors liberates and constitutes an act of resistance against external hostile powers exercising an oppressive control on human consciences. The centrality of conscience reveals the moral calibre of the project and establishes its social importance: like a shaman from remote, Mulele re-asserts his freedom and self-awareness through the joyful nexus together with Corey and their common ancestors, digitally communicating the liberation to their 'community' via the musical artefacts they have 'found' across the journey. Music is mainly an instrument of liberation for both music makers and their audience, here ideally extended – but not limited – to all African people, albeit basically getting as far as the album circulation.

The ancestors' coming and going is an inner movement; the switch between layers of reality corresponds to different states of the artist's consciousness. It is essentially an individual dynamic, wherein Mulele is accompanied by non-human and non-corporeal actors – the ancestors' spirits and cannabis psychoactive compounds – in the process of activating extra-ordinary resources within himself. Struggling to engage with such contemporary, personal practice of creative mind alteration, I was addressing it using the inappropriate terms of traditional trance discourses:

- Me: So when you invoke them, you are basically talking to yourself...
- Mulele: I don't invoke them: I empower them. I empower myself to open the spirit, yeah. So I empower myself to do things. Yeah. You know, we spent 3 days in the studio; without the power of them [*bonkoko*], we cannot come out with 8 tracks finished! We just need mixing. So, really, without that motivation inside it could not happen.

Bonkoko do not have to travel across worlds to join Mulele. They emanate from his intimate self; through this emanation, the spirit opens up, connecting to other entities by conveying other signs – basically, musical signs. Mulele multiplies, sharing his musical authorship with a polyphony of other selves: the ancestors’ spirits are perceived as authors “of a fully weighted ideological conception” of their own, not as instrumental to Mulele’s “finalizing artistic vision.” The power of the ancestors “destroys the monologic plane” of single authorship and calls forth the audience’s “unmediated response (Bakhtin 1984: 5). Identity becomes a plurality of consciousnesses (ibid), melts in a flow of relations, liberating creative forces by listening to the voices of the inhabited past. Such a diffuse musical agency resounds other creative experiences of the African diaspora, outlining a common rhizomatic mode of positioning within postcolonial Anthropocene:

The self doesn't split up or multiply into heteronyms. Rather, the self no longer amputates itself down to a single part but instead asserts that I is a crowd, that the human is a population of processes. Multiple personality is no syndrome or disorder but a relaxation, a giving into rather than a fighting against the brain as a *society* of mind. The brain is a society of mind with no one driving. (Eshun 1998: 026-027)

Bonkoko modify the reality according to the needs of those who embody them. Their inflowing heals the pain of the traumas of slavery and colonisation, physically experienced by Corey and Mulele in their journey backwards through history. The presence of the ancestors reconnects them to Africa, turns the alienating diasporic space into a familiar place, mends “the broken fragments of the psyche” (ibid). *Bonkoko* generate the African chronotope in which the project takes place.

4.4. Over 400 years ago

Africa is an open discourse, a trope to interminably explore and constantly re-discuss. The music dialogue between Mulele and Corey is entirely about it. Africa is the field in which they measure their similarities and negotiate their cultural exchange. It is an easy negotiation between them: both of them are in search of an inclusive,

rhizomatous African narrative that can count both of them as shoots of the same stem: to find it, they cannot but dig under the ground. Basically, their encounter can be conveyed as the dialogical invention – in the etymological sense of the word, from the Latin *invēnīo* “I find, discover, or come upon” – of their ancient, hidden, common roots. These roots are searched, found, and re-enacted through music – embodied musical culture, dialogic musical arguments, musical performances; it is entirely a musical discourse.

“This, this, this is a journey into the mind of a nation in denial” Corey says in a spoken-word freestyle over Mulele’s guitar riff. Both of them are seeking a denied historical dimension: the former struggles to entrench his African American cultural identity to a solid background without referring to slavery and other experiences of marginality within White Anglo-Saxon Protestant-based US society; Mulele fights for public recognition of the great cultural value of his Congolese music language and heritage, and strives to break the silence surrounding the tragedies lived by Congolese people. The search for one’s own past and claim for present representation flow into a common dialogical effort to crack the collective conundrum of Black people and to oppose the oppressive forces that produced it.

Logic argumentations do not exhaust the dialogue: it is the vibration of the utterances what counts most. The performative nature of this African discourse is interestingly displayed during the only one slight disagreement Mulele and Corey had talking about Africa and African music. This discussion puts on the table the main vectors of the discourse: African imaginaries, ancestral connections and bad memories, the centrality of music, the conflict of identities and representations. The weight of the arguments in the discussion depends on the common horizon projected by the words and the narrative force of the reasoning, more than any specific evidence given by the discussants.

The dialogue with Corey is a test-bed for an idea Mulele has lengthily asserted: the Congolese origins of Blues. Mulele introduces his theory during the very first conversation he has with Corey in the tube:

it is crucial to agree on that point for the music dialogue to start. The main challenge is that Corey has embraced the thesis that tracks the origins of Blues back to West Africa, having collaborated with leading Malian musicians through his career. Mulele starts right from there:

- Mulele: Maybe I am a bit controversial about it... From what I have learnt about Ali Farka Touré, it's not African blues; he plays more American blues than African blues.
- Corey: I would say that his music came before the blues. So if you look at the music of the Hausa, the Bambara: that's the real blues, you know. He already has this style before he listened to American blues; this sound is already there. And then he called it blues. But he already was playing before either he knew what blues is.
- But Blues has been in Africa for long time! What I know for certain, there was a period, especially in the time of colonisation, when we, African music, were inspired by Americans: funk, blues... Ali's concept of music is inspired by Americans. But, have you ever had the chance to listen to mutwashi?
- Mutwoshi?
- Mutwashi. It's an old, ancient music from the Kasai. The only African music that has the dominant chord. Because blues is the dominant 7th, the dominant chord. I'm not talking about blues scale; I am talking about the chord. That's how we define music, not the scale. You can play a scale in any chord. The only music in Africa that plays dominant 7th is mutwashi, no other music.
- Mh-mh! – Corey scratches his chin and caresses his beard: – They do it in Bambara.
- No, not the chord, they do blues scale. I am talking about the chord. I listen to Mali music, I can play Mali; the dominant chord is not familiar there; the dominant chord is familiar in Central Africa. Blues never came from Mali – Mulele says the final sentence looking at Corey with an open grin, waiting for his response. Corey maintains his idea:
- No, not in that sense. But that music was heavily influenced by the Mali Empire. Because the people that were enslaved by the French and ended in New Orleans, many of them are Jula, Bamana, Bambara, Manding...
- But that's after, when they go to New Orleans. The French was after. I'm talking about the first wave: it was Congo. Forget about the Transatlantic; we are talking about the early slaves, who are not recorded.
- True. Mh-mh.
- Brazil, South America: early slaves, It's not recorded in history; it's there, but they never mention it. I'm talking about blues, at that time. The Europeans went to discover West Africa later, because West Africa is far from there. The closest part of Africa to Europe is North Africa: Egypt, Sudan, and then next to Sudan, the Congo. – Mulele draws an imaginary itinerary on Corey's guitar case with his finger: – So those, the Congolese, are the early slaves. The music came from there, not from Mali. I have argued a lot with the scholars, because they don't talk about that. – Corey seems finally convinced:
- Yes, true, you're right.

- You know, like I said to you, our history, we have to divide ourselves, to try to please people, because other people read our history to impose us. Ali Farka Touré, he was influenced by the ethnomusicologists of here, especially in London. There was a time, in the 80s, when they started the World Music, with pioneers like Ali Farka Touré and the kora player, Toumani Diabate. They wrote a lot of rubbish. Ali, he is definitely inspired by American blues.
- It's an old language, an old music. And one thing is also true, that I was reading about these days: actually the term blues is misleading in a sense, it was the term they used to talk about a music they couldn't describe, and made them feeling in a certain way.
- Similar to jazz! Similar to funk. It makes them nervous."

Corey relies on a somehow ahistorical image of Africa: Ali Farka Touré, a musician from a village on the Niger River shore, totally unaware of global music trends, would have been playing the "real blues". Through "discovering" Ali's music, Corey finds the uncontaminated essence of his own music, not disfigured by centuries of enslavement in America. Mbembe (2017: 7) indicates this attitude as "the Black Man" insisting "on seeing himself through and within difference," overwhelmed by cultural "loss and separation, cultivating a dream of returning to an identity founded on pure essentialism and therefore, often, on alterity."

Afrocentric attitudes have received a large array of critics from postcolonial thinkers. Mbembe and Eshun underline the creative, cultural, and psychological fallouts of Black cultural exclusivism. Mbembe (ibid) looks at the desire for difference as potentially a mimetic inversion of the racist paradigm that sustained the invention and the exploitation of the Black Man. The proclamation of difference must be subordinated to the project of "a world freed from the burden of race." Eshun (1998) discards notions like genealogy, roots, tradition, 'staying black' in diasporic African music, for they are "putrid corpses of petrified moralism" that reinforce "notions of a compulsory black condition" rooted on marginality, victimisation, and oppression. The "artificial discontinuum of the Futurhythmachine" needs to dissolve "the solid state known as 'blackness' into a *fluidarity*" that can express the rhizomorphic, transcultural power of digital African diaspora and launch it into a more brilliant future.

Yet, the encounter with two diasporic African musicians dialoguing about their common roots has shown me how a piece of music architecture and the diasporic celebration of the joyful nexus can encompass and harmonise divergent thoughts and interfering senses that are rather presented as sharp dichotomies in written texts. The mainly non-verbal texture of the music medium allows performances to display a large array of human ambiguities without falling into incoherence, revealing nuances and polysemes that would remain concealed if one takes the discourse's verbal formulation at face value. Music's performative reflexivity (Turner 1986: 24) manifests the capability to represent a dominant paradigm as well as its opposite, the status quo and its radical subversion, the main Afrocentric discourse and all its possible variations and deviations at the same time.

Corey's view on the African origins of Blues reflects the plot of *The Blues: Feel Like Going Home* (2003), Martin Scorsese's documentary film to which Corey has lent his voice as a narrator, musician, and main character. Throughout the film, Corey interviews and plays with eminent Black American and West African musicians engaging with blues repertoire from the Mississippi Delta, the film pointing at Mali as the cradle of blues, "the place where everything began." Save the cultural ties between African American music forms and various continental African traditions (Kubik 1999; Durán 2013), there seems to be too little evidence in order to establish a direct filiation of the blues from a single Sub-Saharan musical region: "All the talk about roots of the blues in Mali is just enough to satisfy the public's need for wild imagination" (Gerhard Kubik in Durán, 2013: 215).

The film uses Africa as a "projection screen for Western fantasies" (Baker 2014: 4-8). Corey's personal inquiry matches with the lure for authenticity of "armchair tourist-consumers" disgusted by developed-world commercialism who are nonetheless eager to consume cinematic and sonic exotica (ibid). The narrative of roots always entails a political choice and an arbitrary separation, discarding many other possible sources of African-American culture. The inclusion/exclusion of African music traditions within blues original

influences makes a bold difference in terms of exposure to the global attention and the market. What is for Corey a purely African art form shedding light on the original cultural roots of Black Americans, appears to Mulele as an early product of globalisation passed off by Africans musicians as their original style in the effort to please the international audience: “We have to divide ourselves, because other people read our history and impose it to us.”

Mulele adheres to Corey’s quest for roots; he just proposes a different source of African-America resilient creative power, one closer to himself. A scholarly, educated musician, Mulele’s strategy passes through the recognition of structural similarities between the blues and Central African music style, selecting dominant seventh chord as the defining element of both genres. However arbitrary it may look, Mulele has projected the collaboration with Corey to prove his thesis right, enabling an unprecedented African diasporic music dialogue. The push and pull for tracing an African ‘national’ sonic narrative keeps providing the colonizer with exuberant, exotic cultural products to trade in the global market. The narrative of roots corresponds to the “Western obsession with origins and authenticity” (Savigliano 1995: 166), a way to reduce the “Other” – namely, the colonised – to a reflection, a deflection, of something else.

Being colonialism in all its expressions “a systematic negation of the other person,” dominated people are forced “to ask themselves, constantly, the question: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Fanon 1963: 250). There is no self to which to return; hence, “the colonized permanently tracks back her origins and obsessively describes coming into being only to find layer over layer of hybridization” (Savigliano: *ibid*). The only stable event is the colonial encounter, the slave trade, against which Corey and Mulele’s identities keep bouncing. The search of one’s own origins is in itself a process of alienation in which the colonised look at their world through the oppressive discourse of the coloniser (wa Thiong’o 1986), re-producing the social link of their subjection (Mbembe 2017: 18).

The above argumentations are not meant to dismiss Corey and Mulele's discourse about the African roots of blues as unsophisticated and subordinated to neo-colonialist world music industry. Yet, the articulation of Corey and Mulele's dialogue aims to ignite musical creation rather than critically assess music theories. Reciprocal healing, support and understanding are fundamental elements of the collaboration. The neoliberal dynamics centre/periphery are inverted: African music is at the centre of the process of re-inventing Africa: it is the creative driving force and the predominant language in this polyphony. The agglutinative capacity of Congolese music practices allows to smoothen the cultural clash between the two musicians and to include heterogeneous elements.

When two Jamaican fellow coreligionists of the Bobo Ashanti section of Rastafari come from Brixton to the studio to visit Corey, Mulele involves them in the performance and recording of track called 'King aye' (Lingala for 'the king comes'). Mulele re-arranges a Kongo piece used to welcome visitors in a welcome-back song dedicated to African American repatriating to Africa, in body and/or in mind: "*Awuti mosika na America / aye na mabele Africa / Tokokisa ye bonkono / Tolongola ye ki boumbu* (he comes from far, from America / he comes to Africa, the land of the ancestors / we will put the ancestors back inside him / we will remove him from slavery). The descendants of African slaves are welcome back as kings, restored of their humanity through their ancestors.

Mulele and Corey's dialogue is already a performance; it must be read as a process rather than a text. Logic discrepancies and coherence are not means to validate or dismiss arguments in the dialogue; they are lines of tensions within the social drama. The presence of the camera intensifies the dramatic aspect of dialogues and other non-musical moments in the process, transforming the entire territory of Corey and Mulele's encounter into a vast performance space (wa Thiong'o, Cantalupo 2016).

Corey and Mulele embody the drama of a colonised identity. Performance, though, turns alienation into creative engagement with

reality, and the frustration of an untenable identity pushes the artist to move, activating new cultural dynamics. The performative aspect of the dialogue about roots does not solve the thorough criticisms of postcolonial thinkers: Corey and Mulele's social drama puts into play their historical marginality without providing any way out. Yet, through facing their drama, the two Black artists acquire a renovated historical self-consciousness and position their discourse into the world, breaking up Blackness subjection by means of its revitalising representation. I will show in the following sections how the musical enactment of Afrocentric discourses is able to turn the inverted cultural exclusivism Mbembe points at into an inclusive, agglutinative transcultural process. This intimate and collective drama, and the sophisticated ways it is dealt with through performative creation, has been one of the most moving elements of my research project.

The discourse around roots corresponds to an intimate quest, an unappeasable desire for rootedness, associated with the angst against embodied elements of the dominating culture. Corey's essentialised picture of Africa is framed by his urge to find an archetypal double, a figure of African originality he can refer to, responding to his refusal of an imposed North American legal identity. Greeted by Ali Farka Touré on arrival at the Niafunké Hunters Association in Central Mali, Corey exclaims "Back home!" in front of the camera. The same feeling of altered familiarity resounds at Mulele's studio, some 15 years after the film was shot. Describing his experiences in West Africa to his two Jamaican Bobo friends, Corey keeps stressing the same impression: "In Cameroon, I could guess what a woman was about by her way of putting the hands on the waist, or the way she was sucking her lips, of waving hands, or walking. All these things remained the same after 400 years of slavery." The two Bobos fill Corey's words with continuous approving "Hm-hm," sharing his same need for African identification and his same satisfaction for finding living correspondences to their desires.

The unsolvable conundrum of origins constantly destabilises the discourse, making every answer shaky, precarious, incomplete. It may

be enough for Scorsese and his audience to have on camera Corey and Ali Farka Touré jamming together on Catfish Blues theme⁵⁸ sitting under a tree in Ali's courtyard in Niafunké, to mentally establish the origins of blues in a village in West Africa. For Corey, it is not; the search of his personal roots continues. The existential drama shapes an identity in resistance, not afraid of being constantly reframed. Corey re-discusses his points of references, expanding his discourse to encompass Mulele and his views. What really matters in Mulele's discourse, more than his point about filiation of musical structures, is the human contact, the forced passage of people from the Kingdom of Kongo to the New World. Referring to the "first wave" of slaves, Mulele inserts himself in the climax of Corey's identity drama: the *Maafa* (Swahili for 'great disaster'), the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade.

It is very interesting that one of Mulele's arguments that seems more effective in convincing Corey, is the reference to the untold story: slaves from Congo who are not been mentioned in manuals; American music depicted and represented from outside, to domesticate African culture, to make it acceptable for the West. As Africans, both of them feel like they have to struggle, to investigate, to deconstruct the official 'truth' in order to know something meaningful for them: they both believe that their history has been written by someone else, someone who is constantly trying to manipulate them according to external interests. The western obsession with origins and authenticity may be a way of delegitimizing the Other (Savigliano 1996: 166) but it also constitutes a level wherein to experiment new discourses, new alliances, new strategies of resistance. The African artists defy the marginality of their musical worlds – including the blues as the expression of deprived, peripheral Black American working classes – and the definitions and categories the 'West' pushes them to fit in; at the same time as they play their part in the musical market and push themselves into more refined, updated definitions and categories. Mulele's challenge of the idea that American blues come from Mali – at

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgBcj4CJmOw>. Retrieved 18 April 2019.

the same time as it denies any legitimation to such musicological discourse – stems from his annoyance about Congo being excluded from this genealogy.

Congolese people would have constituted the first waves of slave labour in the American colonies: it was their music, then, to firstly come into contact with other music experiences and constitute the African foundation of the creative melting pot that gave origins to the Blues. The tragic memory of slavery becomes an instrument to rescue Congolese music from its actual insignificance on the international market, and re-assess his centrality through a highly culturally prestigious and easily marketable good like the blues. Mulele individuates *mutwashi* – a popular Congolese dance and music style originating from the Baluba people of the Kasai province and made popular by Dr Nico and his Orchestre African Fiesta in the 1960s – as ‘the only African music’ where the dominant seventh chord enjoys particular prominence as it does in the Blues.

The origins of a national sound are a political matter, from both within and outside a postcolonial country. In the case of Congo, the sonic identity of the nation was of primal importance in the process of nation building, especially in the years straddling independence and during the era of Mobutu (Trapido 2017: 28-44). Mulele implies all his theoretical and creative musical skills to foster his musical nationalism, which implies a musical counternarrative. He recognises current definitions of Congolese music as part of the same oppressive, misleading agenda interfering in African history that he detects in tales about the Blues. Both discourses are silencing the ‘real’ African story that needs to be told by engaged and conscious artists like Corey and himself.

Arrived at the studio, Mulele grabs his guitar and tells Corey: “This is the music I was talking about: *mutwashi*. Normally it was played with balafon.” He starts playing the theme of Kongo Dia Ntotila’s *Mutwashi* from the upcoming album 360°. “Yes I!” Corey approves. Mulele continues playing on his Fender Telecaster, evolving the melody into something else. Ngeya accompanies the guitar ticking the beat on

the herb grinder while Samba shakes two little maracas. Corey listens, softly claps the hands to the tempo. Then, he takes his guitar, tunes it and starts playing it, staring at Mulele's hand while they are moving through the strings and up and down the neck. After a few minutes Mulele stops playing, followed by the others, and talks to Corey:

- This song... the lyrics... I have an idea: it's about the history. How they came. So I'm gonna sing in Lingala, you translate into English. So, it's like the way they take our brothers and sisters away from their homes, take them somewhere, and they never return. It's like we are the fathers and the mothers, we have all these pains. Africa is like a mother who is left in the sadness, because we know some of our children they went away and we never had any news of them. They never come back, so even if you see them, you cannot recognise them, because they chained them. Some of them became Harris...
- Mh-mh. Mhmhmmh!
- Some of them become Johnson. So, it's like generation after generation we're still in search of them. Those children, they think like their parents abandoned them. It's not. They should not forget that they have to go to see the mother, because the African mother has been waiting for them since they went 400 years ago. We believe one day they'll come back. The day they will go is the day the mother will be happy. An example, like this.
- Mh. Yes I, yes I.
- What do you think?
- I love it. It's truth.

Mulele talks smiling, his hands crossed, looking almost shy. The morning after, they want to watch the footage I shot before rehearsing, to remember the song structure and the conversation they had about it, in order to write the lyrics:

Once in the recording studio, Corey asks Mulele to start playing so that he can play along, as he is still "shaky on it". The melody is in $\frac{3}{4}$. Mulele calls the time before to play: "One, two, one-two-three". Corey tries to keep himself on time tapping his foot on the floor, but he loses the time as soon as the Mulele starts playing. Mulele keeps calling the first two beats: "One... two..." and starts playing his riff after the third beat. He calls the first every 7 beats. "So when we are inside, we come at 2. In the intro it's gonna be 3." "Show me where are the counts." Mulele plays. "I'm not sure where the one is again. Show me again." "One is here:" Mulele counts "one" every other beat. The 'intro' starts after the 'one' beat and lasts 3 beats. Corey struggles staying on time and

counting the beats tapping his foot. Mulele stops him at some point: "That off." "Oh no! Off!" "Yeah! That's the G, and then the A." "It's all so new, man!" "Don't worry." Mulele keeps playing, sometimes he cues Corey with his head and says "Go!" before the 'intro'. Corey just plays along with the accompaniment. Mulele cues another couple of times, then stops playing and comes with his explanation:

"So, in African music we count the 1... I'm glad because I studied a little bit the Western side: I went to a conservatoire so I can explain, I know the both sides of the situation." "Aha!" "So, in Africa, if you count 1, 2, 3, 4... you are gonna be out." He is tapping on a little table with a blue plastic Bic lighter on the beat. "We don't count that. We count on 1. It's like a beat. So, you mute the 2 and the 3. Or you can start in the 3. If you start in the 3, we can make it easy to interlock. If you start in the 3, another person is starting on 1"

The whole module is a 7-beat bar wherein the guitar bridge starts right after the 4th beat. "That's the strong beat; the strong beat is always in the 4, opposite to the West. In West, the strong beat is in 1." "Mhm! That's good, I'm learning! I've never learned music." "I think this theory as well, they never taught it in school. I am glad, because I've studies music from the West, when I was in Africa; they never teach you in this way. Jimmy, you studied music, you studied the conservatoire..." "They don't talk about that," Jimmy says. "No they don't know. No one knows it. Because the problem is that the people from Africa, they didn't study Western side, so they can't explain, communicate their music to the Western side! So I have the opportunity to come from both sides and then study the music here, so I know the problem." "Yeah, the same language!" Jimmy says, and then to Mulele: "Do you wanna harmonise it?" "Yeah, we can harmonise it. 1, 2, 3, 1..." and plays it over again. Mulele and Corey tap their feet in unison every other beat. Corey stares Mulele's hands to better understand how the music goes; he tries and plays along, but he mistakes the clue and plays the 'intro' after the 5th beat. Mulele says: "I can put it there, if you want." "No! I don't wanna do there. I'll do it the right way." They both laugh, and keep playing together the main theme, not bothering the 'intro' anymore.

After a while, Corey starts improvising a snappy, fast-tempo Blues solo; Mulele encourages him: “Yeah. Yes! Yes I!” Mulele pauses for a second, and Corey stabilises a groovy accompaniment; it’s Mulele’s turn to go solo. They both start to interlock their improvisations. Corey seems more at ease, and starts dropping more complex phrases on his guitar. Jimmy looks at Corey playing a bit, and comments: “It’s very interesting to see you playing together.” “Yeah! That’s the whole point you know, the branch meets the root.” Mulele: “You know, this is a very important melody, and this melody, it was banned. The missionaries, they didn’t like it. They were saying, it was kind of spiritual.”

Mulele seems very satisfied of his solo, yet Julian insists on recording another take because of some minor mistake he notices in the track. During the following take, Mulele seems particularly inspired; when he stops playing, he takes off his headphones and shouts: “Julian, they inspired, the ancestors inspired you, but you didn’t see it. You see? You came, you said: ‘this is not good! Play it again.’ You see how good we have done today? You are part of it, you know? One love.”

Mulele’s Afrocentrism is an open invitation. The creative power of African ancestral sources includes diasporic offspring as well as white sympathisers. Music practices absorb the contribution of different social actors, accepting the otherness and including it in what seemed to be a rather exclusivist narration. This encounter between African diasporic musics manifests the inclusive potential of hybridity (Gilroy 1993) and establishes a political discourse capable of clustering European counter discourses in a social critique of the capitalistic system (Stewart 2005).

4.5 Conclusions

The musical dialogue between two African diasporic artists overcomes cultural differences by referring to imagery of Africa, reciprocally adding each person’s representations and creating common images from their memories, fears, and desires. The creative modality that I define as digital organicity echoes the communion between humans

and things in Mbembe's African metaphysics of life (2017: 117) and is capable of including otherness in the creation of an African discourse.

Rather than in their partisan narratives about the 'origins' of Blues, Mulele and Corey realise their ideological project of an emancipatory Africanness in the actual space of their improvisatory joyful music creation. The performance of Mulele and Corey's Afrocentrism escapes essentialism, sublimating the dream of racial purity in a political counterdiscourse wherein the brutality of western capitalism is targeted as being responsible for the African historical tragedies.

The discourse is based on physical inputs and narratives rather than arguments and reasons: the brotherly vibrations of Mulele's utterances overcome academic authorship and historians, establishing a connection between two stories of suffering and projecting the creative power of Congolese ancestors onto African American musical creations. By virtue of Mulele's artistic mastery, Africa is put at the centre of the creative processes, as both an inspirational image and a music language.

The camera enters the creative process, becoming an intensifier of the event rather than a mere witness. Collaborative filmmaking provides the African diasporic protagonists with an additional instrument of representation, and it introduces a constant element of reflexivity that pushes forward the reciprocal process of sounding one's African inner voices.

Chapter five. The liturgical rhythm: African Christian music and the project of inculturation seen from the Congolese Diaspora in Rome

This chapter and the following one are dedicated to the second fieldwork setting in Rome. I will describe here the milieu where I conducted my research, presenting some of the protagonists – mainly Don Pierre Kabongo, a Congolese priest, music composer and performer based in Rome. I will discuss their music discourses and practices together with the academic debate around African Christianity and the theology of inculturation, reflecting on the specificities of Catholic Congolese music in the particular frame of the Italian diaspora.

This chapter deals with the conflict between the spiritual and religious views of the research protagonists – Mulele Mantondo Afrika and the Congolese Catholic community of Rome – elaborating a theoretical frame that could embrace both their spiritual dissonances and consonances. Regarding the ethnographic section in Rome, my main research questions concern how Christianity is embodied as an African discourse, how it relates to the joyful nexus, and the way it engages with the conflicts and contradictions of the postcolonial condition (Sanga 2013: 126-127). In particular, I will focus on the use of music as a specific African Christian language and its potential to catalyse cultural policies and discourses linked to spirituality and evangelisation – intended as a transcultural project and a mode of social engagement aimed at the spiritual welfare of the community – by discussing Don Pierre's rhythmic liturgy and analysing our collaborative music video clip *Udi Dibue*.

I will observe African Christian music in relation to the Africanist diasporic musical discourse I also explore in this thesis, looking at differences and similarities in intending and performing spirituality and social engagement. Finally, on a more personal note, this chapter is an attempt to elaborate a reflexive process about my personal relationship with religion and spirituality through the dialogue with the research subjects.

The ethnographic data are based on the collaboration and friendship with several people of Congolese origins in Rome who are involved in musical activities – with various degrees of personal engagements – and share the Christian faith. Music and faith, besides the language and a few occasional political demonstrations, are the principal modes for them to live and perform their participation in the Congolese community of Rome.

5.1 Congolese Rome

There are around 1000 people of Congolese origins living in the Metropolitan City of Rome Capital⁵⁹, scattered between Rome and the neighbouring towns. There is not an area with a particular concentration of Congolese residents or commercial activities. As far as my research goes, Congolese in Rome face Italian society individually, rather than as a collective body, in their everyday lives.

I encountered only two places in Rome that gather a specifically Congolese crowd: a church, Chiesa della Natività di Gesù on Piazza Pasquino, headquarters of the Catholic Congolese parish in Rome; and the ‘New Entry’ (although everyone refers to it under its previous name ‘Libulu’, Lingala for ‘hole, pit’), a bar collectively run by a group of Congolese and Congolese-Italian associates in a basement close to Termini railway station.

Werbner (2004: 896) defines a diasporic community by the sense of collective responsibility to the home country and also to compatriots in the diaspora, despite all divisions and dissents. During my research in Italy, such a collectivity was most strongly felt at the Neo-Renaissance church on Piazza Pasquino. Despite its limited opening hours, the national church constitutes a pillar of the Congolese community in Rome, and presents itself as the most intense Congolese

⁵⁹ According to the INSTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics), on 1st January 2019 there were 842 Congolese-born residents in the Metropolitan City of Rome Capital. Adding non-official residents and Italians born of Congolese parents, the overall figure should be close to 1000. Unfortunately, I cannot provide more precise data, as the Embassy of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Rome did not respond to my inquiry.

communitarian spatiotemporal dimension in the city. Due to the fundamental liturgical role of the choir, the church also provides the only scene in Rome for live Congolese music, allowing the diasporic community to enjoy this crucial aspect of their culture.

Although I met and shared good times with many interesting people at the Libulu, the church provided me with a warmer reception and soon became a more fertile research site. The precarious immigration status that some Congolese diasporic persons face, as well as a general lack of social integration within the Italian community at large, makes for a potential level of distrust towards unknown Italian people entering into Congolese diasporic social spaces. Due to the institutional power of Catholic Church and the warm feelings of togetherness elicited by the temple, the Congolese parish represents a safer hub (Facci 2019: 11) and consequently a place more open to contacts and social exchanges outside of the Congolese diasporic community.

My persistence in attending Sunday masses, choir rehearsals and other church activities has been fundamental in building initial social bonds and slowly gaining the confidence of church members. Successively, the lives and circuits of the people I have been working with, rather than any specific place, became my fieldwork. Yet, my relation with each of them has been mediated – and still is – by my participation to the spiritual community who gathers every Sunday at Piazza Pasquino.

5.2 Spiritual patterns

It is beyond the scope of the present work to attempt a critical definition of religion; it is enough for me to quote theologian of inculturation Aylward Shorter (2006: 36):

Religious experience is the encounter with ultimate reality, the intuition of a truth or power that transcends the evidence of one's sense. Culture renders faith in such a reality imaginatively credible and provides the psycho-social terrain for such a faith-encounter. Religious faith endows all experience with a new dimension. It imparts conviction and motivation, and is, according to this view, at the root of culture itself.

The crucial importance of religion in the Christian definition of culture, and its experience as an “intuition” transcending human intellect, are elements I have had to take into account as non-negotiable principles when critically approaching religious issues with Congolese priests and enthusiastic Catholic practitioners in Rome. Religion entails a particular dialogic mode where critical arguments do not cover the entire spectrum of the discourse. It has been impossible for me to conduct deep conversations with Linda Samba, Don Pierre Kabongo, Don Cola Lubamba, and other Congolese friends in Rome without having to suspend my critical arguments and accept the existence of a supernatural, self-explanatory, not empirically knowable dimension revealed to humans through perceptive spheres that do not involve reason.

Faith is a decisive factor: it finds a justification to the European mission in the kerygma, the commitment of announcing the word of God and sharing with other humans the salvation in Jesus Christ. Don Pierre clearly states that: the encounter with the Gospel turns humans into what they ought to be, but it also “divinises a culture.” Pierre does not worry about African cultures being jeopardised by Christianity: the Gospel is not the product of white Mediterranean cultures nor does it belong to any specific human group. It is the word of God, a purely divine message which no man holds any special right to. The Bible has to be taken at face value; every historical mistake that happened throughout evangelisation depends on the human inadequacies in carrying on the message of God. The “evangelical logic” remains the key to improve not only the work of the Church, but every human interaction, from the global economy to the European migrant crisis.

Faith entails the mission to convert: “an inescapable imperative for the faithful, and a challenge to reason” (Mubimbe 1997: 203). From the believer’s point of view, the Church’s missionary mandate comes directly from the Great Commission, the instruction of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). In spite of any historical error, the encounter with the

Gospel is seen by African Christians as a necessary moment in the divine project of salvation.

Christian faith poses limits to cultural relativism as it does to critical assessment, for “the truth of religious traditions requires that general moral principles be held in common (ibid: 26).⁶⁰ I will discuss below the historical impact on African cultures of such an argument. Notwithstanding the Church’s openness to multiculturalism (ibid: 29), Christianity still implies a non-negotiable hierarchy of cultural values displayed along the axes material/superficial versus deep/spiritual. Consequently, every materialistic, agnostic, or atheist formulation is nothing but the sign of “an impoverished culture” (ibid: 37). This inescapable orientation of historical and cultural processes linked to Christianity constitutes a matter of criticism for diverse African diasporic and postcolonial thinkers.

Congolese philosopher Valentine-Yves Mudimbe (1997: 4-5), in line with post-structuralist theorists, considers religion as a performance, the embodied practice of representing something beyond human control. With the words of Merleau-Ponty, Mudimbe challenges the Christian hierarchy between visible and invisible, deep and superficial components of reality: “Truth does not inhabit only the inner man or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (ibid: 7). In a conversation with Mulele,⁶¹ he presented this paradigm as an original African way of conceiving spiritual matters:

Who is god? God is me. You’re god. Everyone is god. What is inside you, your soul is god, your conscience. God is you when you give life. Did you ever see god? We don’t see. We come to the world as humans. Spirituality is to be human: you don’t need to do magic, to light candles, to go to the temple to find spirituality. Spirituality is: you wake up in the morning, that’s spirituality; you sleep, that’s spirituality. You don’t put money in spirituality. You don’t build the church or the big house, for you to go and pray god there, you know. In religion, you have the power to bring people in, to take their money; it’s like scam. You see the

⁶⁰ Shorter specifies these values to be “the necessity to safeguard the lives and property of fellow members of one’s group, the need for respect towards parents and elders, the avoidance of incest or the rejection of indiscriminate killing”. Curiously, the right to private property is affirmed as basic to a religious society.

⁶¹ Interview at the studio in Stoke Newington, East London, Friday 17th November 2017.

difference between religion and spirituality? [...] We Africans, we didn't have religions before the Bible and all that.

Mulele's earthly ontology of the sacred echoes the idea of an African traditional holistic cosmology where "social relationships, ritual practice, and belief in the powers of the unseen were intricately woven together such that for an African, the sacred and secular constituted one organic reality" (Ilesanmi 1995: 53-54; also, cfr Mbembe 2017: 180-182; Peel 2003: 88-89). He characterizes spirituality as opposite to religion, as an everyday phenomenology that connects human beings to the cosmic order, without any need of additional institutions. In his view, Christian cosmology and ethics absolutely alien to African cultures: the process of evangelisation throughout Africa – as well as the spread of Islam – implicated a loss of culture (Reily, Dueck 2016: 3). Moreover, Mulele refuses the image of a God he cannot help but to associate with slavery, colonial, and postcolonial oppression (Ilesanmi 1995: 68). His conclusion is quite trenchant: "The Gospel is just another weapon of the West to enslave Africa: look up to our God, close your eyes and pray; you won't see us stealing everything from your pocket!"

Such was the approach of a generation of critical African thinkers at the height of the decolonisation process in 1950s-1970s. Among them, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1972: 31) publicly rejected Christianity and blamed the Church for having been "the greatest opponent of the African struggle for freedom," referring to 'christianity' with a small 'c' in his works ever since. Yet, Ngũgĩ himself (1986: 77) turned abundantly to biblical tropes and language in his effort to establish a mass-appealing national Kenyan literature in Gikuyu language, once again confirming the importance of faith in African societies even if in polemical terms.

In the present work, I prefer the more inclusive term 'spirituality⁶²' to refer to feelings, ideas, and practices spread from the embodied belief in "the communion between human beings [...] and objects, nature, and invisible forces" (Mbembe 2017: 117) in order to

⁶² Here, spirituality must not be seen as separate from the bodily, a crucial element of Congolese experience of the otherworld.

encompass in the same semantic scope the religious sentiments of Christian believers together with non-religious formulations like Mulele's. I use the terms 'religion' and 'faith' when these feelings, ideas, and practices refer directly to structured system of beliefs and institutions – in this thesis, mainly Christianity. The difference is not only terminological: as the present chapter will show, despite their overcoming contrasts about the Church's policies and symbolism, Mulele's digital organicity and Pierre's liturgical rhythm share a few spiritual concepts and present some similarities when performing their musical rituals.

5.3 The heretical genius

Mbembe (2002: 270) asserts that "in contemporary Africa, it is the subject's relation to divine sovereignty that serves as the main provider of meanings for most people." More often than not, in my conversations with Congolese people, faith in God is taken for granted as a self-evident aspect of social reality.

I am not to generalise Mbembe's statement, for one of the protagonists of my research, Mulele Matondo Afrika, openly challenges the idea of any codified religious belief, as did relevant African thinkers over the last decades (Ngũgĩ 1972; Mudimbe 1997). Yet, all of them, including Mulele, posit their anti-Christianity at the centre of their political discourses, still positioning somehow their personae in relation to religion. On the other hand, in the discourses of my Congolese informants based in Rome, the existence of a supernatural sphere and the absolute necessity for humans to socially elaborate a relation with that sphere have been largely assumed as facts (Chennels 2009: 15). In my research of diasporic sonic spaces in Rome, I have seen how the Church provides the main social glue for the scattered Congolese community in Italy, and it constitutes the only space of civic engagement for Congolese to interact with the wider Italian society and to try and influence the political events in the Democratic Republic of

the Congo – where Christian Churches, and Catholicism in particular, seem to be the only solid social structure (Mudimbe 1997: 174).

To assume a Catholic church as the main fieldwork setting and ethnographic topic has been quite challenging for me. In my adulthood, attending Catholic mass for family occasions has felt very uncomfortable, and I have often left church before the end of the liturgy. I do not feel any spiritual sincerity in the liturgical setting, and I have always had reservations about the Church's policies throughout history, even more concerning the role of Christianity in the colonisation of Africa. At times, my prejudice against Christian institutions has led me to conceive the relationship between Africa and Christian faith as the opposition of two mutually exclusive terms, whose only way to coexist in the same chronotope was through the subjugation of the former by the latter. A fairer approach to the issue proved me wrong. Indissolubly linked to colonialism, the history of African Christianity surely had traumatic aspects; nonetheless, it would be misleading to interpret it as a radical break. As Peel (2003: 8) says:

The European colonial empire passed, and mission too is transient – for it is either rejected or it passes into a local church – so what endures are its effects on the local religion scene; that is, the further development of a religious history antecedent to it.

All the participants in my Italian research – many of whom I consider friends – are priests or devoted churchgoers. I always felt very welcomed by a community of believers who were unquestioningly accepting me as a brother in Christ. I have been impressed by the spiritual intensity expressed in the social drama of the liturgical rite by Congolese believers, whose intelligence and virtues I got to appreciate, with in depth conversations and rich intellectual exchanges.

Although I have not entirely dismissed my reservations about the institution of the Catholic Church, this emotionally moving ethnographic experience shed another light on my view of African Christianity, attracting my attention on the great deal of cultural creativity, intelligence, political engagement, and personal initiative passing through – or directly elicited by – faith. The impact of these spiritual vibrations challenged my preconceptions and led me to take

into account the Christians' point of view in my research with full anthropological attention (Reily, Dueck 2016: 3).

The contact zone between Christianity and Africa has been the subject of endless negotiations, inventions and appropriations whose complexity is beyond the scope of the present work. Emblematic for this process are the missionaries, miscellaneous actors of modernity who had a tremendous impact on African moral economy with very few resources (Comaroff, Comaroff 1991: 9). Jean and John Comaroff (1991, 1997) analyse the enmeshment of Tswana in Protestant evangelism through everyday symbolic, labour, and spatial transactions, acknowledging the transformative power of the Bible in its appropriation by both South African emerging hegemonies, and as a language of resistance practices that led to Black consciousness and the fight against apartheid (ibid: 12).

The transformative encounter with Christianity affected African cultures in their entirety, including the perception of the self. As MacGaffey (2016) points out, missionaries, among other Euro-American agencies, have substantially contributed to production of "things Kongo:" ethnic borders, language, history and myths – the same cultural references as those of boosting anti-Western Congolese hypernationalistic rhetorics – have all been invented through this contact.

The transformative flow is bi – or rather, multi – directional, and negotiation depends on the specific circumstances. Peel (2003) depicts how Christianity has been progressively absorbed in Yoruba cultural terms; MacGaffey (1977: 186-187) explains how baKongo received Christian practices and Capuchin missionaries as a renewal of access to the empowering dead, in line with their system of thought. Hence, the idea of 'conversion' is misleading, for it relies on a "concept of religion as a discrete field of human activities" which is rarely if ever found among African social groups, for whom the articulation of Christian discourses has always been entrenched with "a quest for power" (Peel 2003: 88-92).

However imposed, violent, and unbalanced the renegotiation of spaces and symbols by means of Christian institutions (missionaries, national churches, colonial armies and laws) has been, scholars have given plenty of evidence of the creative resilience of African cultures and their capability of turning cultural transformations into languages of resistance both in the continent and in the transatlantic diaspora. Mbembe (2017: 101-102) counterposes African transformative liveliness to Afrocentric ideas of precolonial idyll and cultural purity:

People tend to believe that Africa is falsified through contact with the exterior. But how, then, should we understand the falsification to which Blacks themselves, in their effort to take in the world, have in fact subjected the world?

Nonetheless, the debate around the contradictions and ambiguities of African Christianity is far from gone. Religion, in Africa as in many other parts of the world, “is a complex, many faceted and multi-levelled social phenomenon that operates as both a brake and an accelerator on social change. It is both the 'opiate of the people' and a 'source of social renewal' (Villa-Vicencio 1991: 51).

In contrast with the view of an African creative appropriation of Christianity, postcolonial scholars like Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ point at cultural loss and insurmountable alienation as the main outcomes of evangelisation in Africa. This current is worth mentioning here as it resonates well with Mulele’s position on religion, and it is symptomatic of an ongoing debate within Africa and the diaspora about Blackness that I touch upon in chapter four. The polemical position of these authors towards Christianity is functional to their radical critique of colonialism. Although I do not intend to lessen any political criticism towards colonial processes, I have observed how the subjects of this research creatively use religious content to reformulate their identities and engage with their social and political networks, refusing symbols and practices they reckon to be “alienating” and creating new spiritual references from their cultural background.

I intend my ethnography of diasporic African Christian music as a contribution to the analysis of this creative negotiation of symbols and cultural elements through spiritual processes. Mbembe (2017: 101-

102) outlines “the heretical genius at the root of the encounter between Africa and the world,” a performative capacity “to inhabit several worlds at once and situate themselves simultaneously on both sides of an image.” The Congolese parishioners of Piazza Pasquino would probably not take “heretical genius” as a compliment, for their strict adherence to the Catholic doctrine is a fundamental aspect of their personae. Yet, I think that Mbembe’s definition fits the dynamics of Congolese Catholicity and its efforts to deal creatively with the religious doctrine, pushing the boundaries of orthodoxy to adapt faith to the ever-changing cultural dimension of its people, as I argue further on in the text. Due to its dramatic capability to embrace polyphonic cultural identities, Congolese diasporic music becomes an ideal locus of this heretical genius, reshaping even the harshest historical processes in creative terms.

Rather than a monolithic religion imposed by colonial authorities, Congolese people have “turned Christianity upside down” reshaping rites and spaces according to their needs and creativity, “all without Christianity ever being stripped of its core concept.” Thus, according to Mbembe (ibid), this research explores how a Congolese diasporic community uses “Christianity as a mirror through which to represent their own society and history to themselves,” in line with the exceptional history of Kongo Christianity.

5.4 Black saints burning at the stake. Four centuries of Congolese Christianity

Except for the thousand-year-old Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the baKongo were the only Sub-Saharan people with an established pre-colonial Christian church. In 1491, a few years after the Portuguese explorers reached the Atlantic shores of Kongo dya Ntotila⁶³

⁶³ ‘The Kingdom of the Kongo people’. According to Mulele, the kingdom was founded by the Egyptians escaping the 7th century CE Muslim invasion; consequently, it was the direct heir of the cultural power of the Pharaohs, its influence expanding all over the Bantu people. Instead, historians date the foundation of Kongo dya Ntotila to the end of the 14th century and circumscribe its sphere of influence to what is now southern Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, the western part of the Democratic

and came into contact with its people, the *manikongo* (king of the Kongo) Nzinga a Nkuwu allowed missionaries to come to the country and asked to be baptised together with his son.

Scholars argue over the sincerity of Kongo court's conversion, the colonial pressures behind it, and the actual penetration and persistence of Christian faith in the country. Thornton (1984: 147-148), instead, contests the image of Kongo Christianity as a struggle between an alien religion and indigenous actors, considering it rather as a place of cultural negotiation, wherein ecclesiastical hierarchies and doctrines were determined as much by locals as by Europeans. I favour Thornton's approach as I find it more in line with Mbembe's (2017: 101-102) perspective of the African "heretical genius." Once again, this is not meant to reduce the violent impact of colonial contacts, but rather to focus on the microphysics of resistance and re-appropriation of European religious forms by African people.

Controlled by the Kongo court and administrated by the *mestres* – a state-funded corps of indigenous lay noblemen – Christianity was absorbed into local cosmologies and ritual practices as philophically comparable to the cults of the dead (Trapido 2013). Such a process was not devoid of conflicts: the missionaries present in the region, sure of their racial superiority as educated white Europeans (Thornton 1998: 88), were constantly trying to demonise spiritual energetic practices and possession rites, persecuting them in the name of the Inquisition (ibid: 63, 71, 109, 124, 179) and approving the selling of spiritual practitioners as slaves (ibid: 81, 90, 102-104). Nonetheless, open repression was limited to sporadic events and the religious orthodoxy of Kongo people was generally not put into question by the Vatican institutions (Trapido 2013).

The adoption of Christianity by Kongo elites corresponded to their effort to maintain social integrity in response to war, enslavement,

Republic of the Congo, and northern Angola. Both historical recounts are fantastic narrations projecting present needs and desires into the past: as MacGaffey (1977: 162) points out, the very idea of Kongo dya Ntotila as an institution relies on oral traditions gathered by Catholic missionaries and taken literally by historians. In 1914, the territory was definitively absorbed into the Portuguese colony of Angola.

colonial expansion, and other threats of globalised modernity (MacGaffey 2016: 178). Dealing with an independent African kingdom recognised by the Pope, European missionaries had to adopt an inclusive concept of Christianity:

Coming not as conquerors, they approached Kongo with the same sort of spirit of concession and willingness to syncretize as the Church approached Europe in the sixth century, and a great deal of mixing of cosmologies occurred” (Thornton 1984: 154).

Major prayers like Hail Mary and Salve Regina were sung in kiKongo as early as the 17th century (Thornton 1998: 80). Key religious concepts were rendered in kiKongo terms referring to ancestral beliefs: priests are called *nganga*, the same term as the traditional spiritual healers⁶⁴, and while the Church had to follow the rules of an independent Bantu kingdom, they were also performing similar tasks, providing charms in the form of religious medals, appealing earth spirits with penitent processions in case of drought, performing initiation ceremonies as baptisms (Thornton 1984: 156-157), and using salt rather than water for baptismal blessings (Thornton 1998: 17). *Nkisi*, indicating a material object with spiritual powers, also means ‘holy’ in Kongo catechism, while ‘soul’ is translated with *moyo*, the local word for ‘spirit’⁶⁵ (Thornton 1984: 152). Even the name of God, *Nzambi a Mpungu*⁶⁶, may come from the creator of the universe of Kongo mythology (ibid).

At the beginning of the 18th century, amid a fierce civil war for the succession to the throne, a new religious movement spread around

⁶⁴ In Lingala, *nganga* is the name for the traditional healer, whereas the priest is called *sángó*.

⁶⁵ The lexical examples are important to underline the specificity of Kongo evangelisation. In the areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo outside the territory of Kongo dya Ntotila, where missionaries arrived together with the colonial invasion, there is less linguistic continuity between the Christian vocabulary and local spiritual terms. Colonial evangelism dissociated the language of spiritual conceptualisation from the previous vocabulary of daily interactions, identifying Christian religious symbols with external linguistic signifiers to sever any continuity with previous African experiences (cf. Ngũgĩ 1981: 28 about colonial alienation). In the Lingala Catholic liturgy, as well as in Don Cola’s lyrics, God is referred to as *Nzambe*, but the terms for ‘holy’ and ‘spirit’ are adapted from the Latin terminology into *santu* and *spiritu*. I found the same use of *santu* and *spiritu* in Don Pierre’s tshiLuba lyrics of the song Udi Dibue.

⁶⁶ Trapido (2013) defines *Nzambi Mpungu* as a relative term meaning ‘highest power’ also in reference to the king of Portugal.

the figure of Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, a young Kongo noblewoman and former *nganga marinda* – a category of spiritual operators specialised in addressing social problems – who, after a deathly illness, affirmed herself to be Saint Anthony of Padua reincarnate. Dona Beatriz started preaching, proclaiming that Jesus, Holy Mary and many other saints were from Kongo (Thornton 1998: 111-114) and criticising the Italian Capuchin missionaries for not supporting black saints. She announced to hundreds of her followers that she would die every week and go to Heaven pleading the cause of the blacks and the restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo before God, to then return to life and bring the news to her people (ibid: 166).

After initial hesitation, the royal court, in agreement with the Capuchins, considered the Antonian movement as a threat and arrested Kimpa Vita, who was burned at the stake as a witch and heretic in 1706, aged 22. Despite the tragic end of Antonianism and the intolerance of European missionaries, the short story of the Kongo Saint Anthony provides an early example of how Christianity has contributed to grass-root movements of political participation in the Congo, and more generally, Dona Beatriz's case sheds light on the great relevance of religious symbols for political ideologies in Central African history (ibid: 159)⁶⁷. In particular, the mystic performances of the Antonian movement's leader indicate a constant in the many charismatic, popular and revolutionary movement of Congolese modern history: the effort at restoring harmony and fostering social justice by the contact with the dead, depositaries of the vital forces of nature (MacGaffey 2016: 178).

Although performed as an *auto-da-fé*, Kimpa Vita's martyrdom was the repression of a political movement. Defining her Antonism in religious terms is difficult, as she constantly referred to Christian images and concepts as well as inscribing herself in the tradition of Kongo prophetism (MacGaffey 1977). Repressed in Kongo dya Ntotila, Antonism migrated to America together with Kongo slaves, becoming

⁶⁷ More recent examples are the preaching of Simon Kimbangu and other anticolonial forms of Christian syncretism spread all over the country between the two world wars (cf. Van Reybrouck 2014: 142-155).

one of the languages of the slave revolts (see section 1.2.2; Thornton 1986, 1991)

Antonism manifests the fluidity of Central African modes of action and belief, as well as the joyful nexus, the cult of the dead migrated with the enslaved Africans, negotiating new alliances and inventing new cultural languages on the other Atlantic shore. Like their prophet Kimpa Vita, Kongolese slaves blended different spiritual languages, combining in the diaspora with Yoruba *orisha* cults as well as with Iberoamerican popular saints in a multitude of overlapping syncretic forms (MacGaffey 2016).

With the increasing power of modern capitalism and the spread of colonial control, European policies and thoughts started challenging fluid Central African cultural forms more intensely. The experience of a self-regulated Congolese Christian faith came to an end, and a new form of European evangelism impacted on the people of the personal colony of Belgian king Leopold II, as it did in the rest of the continent. Facing the Otherness of Sub-Saharan Africa, missionaries aimed at turning local cultures into a *tabula rasa* as a prerequisite to evangelism (Kabongo 2011: 291), imposing Christian symbols disconnected from the local context. Yet, the African heretical genius kept operating, through the interstitial spaces of the colonial system, or in open opposition to it. In the Congo, the creative engine of these practices of cultural digestion, reinvention, resilience, and resistance has been the vivifying contact with the dead, celebrated in the joyful nexus.

5.5 Congolese and African Christianity under colonialism

Christianity is as rooted in today's Sub-Saharan African societies and their diaspora as it is dramatically entangled with the history of colonialism and slavery. Mbembe (2017: 96) mentions the "primordial tragedy" behind the colonial evangelisation of Africa: "In the Judeo-Christian narrative Africa serves as the metaphor par excellence of the

Fall⁶⁸. Inhabited by humans chained in a night of shadows, Africa lived away from God.” There are plenty of cases wherein Africans and the missionaries cooperated in mutual respect and to their mutual benefit, and many missionary groups systematically incorporated elements of local cultures and saved their artifacts and customs from cultural shipwreck (Hofmeyr 2004: 51). Nonetheless, the missionary endeavour was based on approaching Africa as a primitive ‘ethnic’ space to convert and introduce into history – intended in Hegelian and evolutionist terms of a rational progress (Mudimbe 1997: 40-41, 145-146). If the encounter with the Book (the Bible, or the Quran likewise) allowed African peoples to accede to modern historical time (Jewsiewicki 2002: 594), the bearers of the Christian values violently opposed the cultural otherness of Africa, denying every other form of ‘civilisation’ outside Cartesian rationality and Judeo-Christian ethics (Mudimbe 1997: 147-148).

Evangelisation, then, “invented and organised a transcultural *espace métissé*” in Africa, animated by conflicts and contradictions – the main one being the paradox of the exploitation of goods and humans carried on alongside the proclamation of a Gospel of universal love and equality (ibid: 147-154). The extreme cultural challenge embodied by African Christianity is a conundrum and, at the same time, a great tool to access contemporary fluid, contaminated identities (ibid: 199-203).

Christianity permeated Congolese society under colonialism, constituting a fundamental reference both for policies of colonial control and for movements for local emancipation. Since the end of the eighteenth century, European missionaries dismissed as ‘fetishism’ what had once been accepted as a local variation of orthodoxy. The cause of the switch from an inclusive to an exclusive attitude should be sought in the introduction of Belgian colonial rule and the spread of pseudo-scientific racism, as well as the centrality of ideas like ‘rationality’ and ‘civilisation’ in new European anthropologies (Pietz 1988; Thornton 1984: 166; Trapido 2013). Missionary campaigns

⁶⁸ On the biblical relate of Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:20-27) and its racist outcomes in Christian theology and missiology, see also Sanga 2013: 130.

against fetishes, combined with the missionaries' habit of salvaging interesting charms for personal or ethnographic collections, did not diminish the importance of *minkisi* in the local imagination, although it assigned a nocturnal, devilish, ambiguous moral value to traditional rites (Trapido 2013). Together with the joyful nexus, social customs and artifacts mediating the empowering contact with the dead were condemned by colonial morality, yet kept flowing – and flourishing – in the underground of Congolese colonial consciousness.

The history of Congo provides one of the most infamous examples of colonial brutality; and missionaries had to do their part, as was cynically made explicit in the letter sent by King Leopold II of Belgium to Colonial Missionaries in 1883:

Your principal objective in our mission in the Congo is never to teach the niggers to know God [...]. Have courage to admit it; you are not going to teach them what they know already. Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world. For these things, you have to keep watch on disinteresting our savages from the richness that is plenty [...] encouraging your followers to love poverty, like “Happier are the poor because they will inherit the heaven.” [...] You have to detach from them and make them disrespect everything which gives courage to affront us. I make reference to their Mystic System and their war fetish – warfare protection – which they pretend not to want to abandon, and you must do everything in your power to make it disappear.⁶⁹

However, the missionaries' attitude very often differed from Leopold's requests. Baptists and other Protestant missions, who were present in the territory before the concession of the Congo to king Leopold, evangelised in African languages and became strongly associated with African traditions (Hofmeyr 2004: 51). The principal compendium allowing us to understand the richness of Kongo spirituality and social relations was written by Swedish Lutheran missionary Karl Laman, a fluent kiKongo speaker, and a team of Kongo collaborators, over years of passionate and respectful research (cf. MacGaffey 2002: 12, 2016).

⁶⁹<http://www.fafich.ufmg.br/luarnaut/Letter%20Leopold%20II%20to%20Colonial%20Missionaries.pdf>. Retrieved 5 august 2019.

Laman also wrote a monumental kiKongo-French dictionary and curated the translation of the Bible to kiKongo. Ngũgĩ (1986: 66) dismisses all missionary cultural endeavour, including the introduction of writing to many African languages, as aimed to repress every form of African expression outside “the biblical message of subservience.” Yet, already in 1910 the Protestant mission bulletin published an appeal in kiKongo spurring linguistic and cultural nationalism and complaining about foreign rule (MacGaffey 2016: 163). Through contact with missions, African people were collecting symbols and images to formulate their messages in writing, developing modern forms of communication. The circulation of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan through Sub-Saharan Africa led to unexpected results, like the version of the South African Church of the Nazarites, in which white souls were turned away from heaven in reason of earthly privileges (Hofmeyr 2004: 139-140).

Nonetheless, colonialism produced a significant shift in the cultural significance of Christian practices, limiting African creative participation and substantially cutting African believers off from their traditional spiritual ways. Until the XIX century, Christian baKongo kept venerating local deities and natural forces in rural shrines, referring to local cosmologies, practicing ancestral propitiatory possession rites with the blessing of the priests, and using natural objects and traditional artifacts in rituals. These Christian African representations did not survive the colonial era. As colonial control strengthened and rethorics of an European civilizing mission took shape (Trapido 2013), missionaries wiped out the syncretic experience of Kongo Christian theology in favour of a rigid European orthodoxy. Yet, in the interstitial spaces between colonial power and evangelisation, African people found modern instruments for their political and cultural emancipation, as in the case of Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels’ book *Bantu Philosophy*, which constituted a milestone in the process of African cultural recognition. In the Belgian Congo, anti-colonial movements found ways of recovering or reinventing elements of traditional cosmology within the framework of Christianity through the mediating

role of the spirits of the dead (MacGaffey 2016: 163). The most eminent and radical example was the prophet Simon Kimbangu, whose movement became a pillar of Mobutu nationalism. Other less radical examples of Congolese religious synthesis are the Kitawala and Jamaa movements, the latter springing directly from Tempels' Franciscan mission (Fabian 1966, 1971).

It is hard to argue – even for historians sympathetic to Christianity – that the mission was not instrumental in colonial policies (Ilesanmi 1995: 53) and the seminary a violent device of forced 'civilisation' (Mudimbe 1997: 54-58). But it is also true that the Catholic Church refused to participate in the practice of *immatriculé* status – an examination to grant privileges to Congolese *evolué* black elites (Trapido 2017: 33) – and it was the source of the largest group of African professionals at a time when locals were specifically kept from obtaining higher qualifications by the Belgian colonial state. In fact, the priesthood was the highest social status a Congolese man could aim for (Cosentino 2019: 25). Because of its permeability to the Africans, and despite its strong links with the colonial administration, the Christian religion was one of the first cultural sectors to manifest consistent evidence of national striving for independence in the Congo.

Besides giving instruments to local experiences of reappropriation and resistance, Christianity's great contribution to the African – and specifically, Congolese – position towards the postcolonial is the promise of universalism and global interconnection linked to spiritual salvation. The missionaries spread the Gospel by using a universalizing vocabulary that intended to trespass all class, race, and gender differences in the formation of a Christian transnational community (Ilesanmi 1995: 53). Some postcolonial thinkers firmly argue against this idea: Mbembe (2017: 96) sees the historical process that included Africans into the modern world by means of their conversion to Christianity as "a perfect example of antiliberalism," while Ngũgĩ (1972: 32) evokes the robbery of African people's souls. By presenting conversion as an imperative for inscribing oneself into a history, Christianity asks for the total withdrawal of one's identities to

embrace modernity and salvation, turning the message of universal love into a powerful cultural threat (Mbembe: *ibid*). In the case of Congo, one must take into account the utmost relevance of ideas and symbols of cosmopolitanism in the shaping of a national urban culture under colonial domination (see section 1.2.3) and the role of both bodily and fantastic mobility in postcolonial Congolese discourses (section 1.2.6). For Congolese believers, Christianity is an embodied visa to global circuits and to otherworldly bliss, as the research protagonists point out.

Cola Lubamba acknowledges the missionaries – and, more broadly, the colonisers – for having brought Congo into modernity through the insertion of French language, science, and universities. Pierre Kabongo points out that the encounter between him and myself would not have been possible without evangelisation, neither would he had the opportunity of celebrating confirmations at the Vatican. Cola and Pierre’s personal successes, their access to mobility, their international network, their relevance as theologians and musicologists rely on their adhesion to Christianity, as do their efforts to empower their communities and foster the process of decolonisation of their country. They – among many others in their community – live Christianity as a “rooted cosmopolitanism”, deploying it as a set of practices and “seemingly contradictory identities” as they “navigate between a particular and a cosmopolitan identity” (Reily, Dueck 2016: 23). A decisive contribution to the cosmopolitan feeling connected to the research protagonists’ African Christianity came from the political shift in the Catholic Church’s attitude towards cultural diversity in the middle of the last century, and the ensuing cultural debate about the theology of inculturation.

5.6 The cultural shift

The attitude of the Church had to change between the 1950s and the 1960s (Mudimbe 1997: 72-73) according to the political transformations of postcoloniality. The general attack driven against

the Enlightenment rationality by the Postmodern turn in social sciences, and the emergence of nationalist ideologies in the former European colonies opened up to the dialogue between cultures also in theology (ibid). This was the context of the emergency of the concept of inculturation. I discuss inculturation as both “an external as well as an internal relation” (Antonio 2006: 1): a cultural turn in the policy of the Catholic Church⁷⁰ in the second half of the twentieth century, and a specifically African theology.

Don Pierre links the birth of African inculturation with the moment when an increasing number of native priests acceded to pastoral responsibilities. The evangelisation of Africa passed from the hand of white missionaries to African priests and bishops, who found themselves dealing with “signs and symbols” extraneous to their cultures and imbued with colonial values. Scholars like Sanga (2013) and Okigbo (2010) read these dynamics in postcolonial terms, critically analysing the process of re-appropriation of the liturgical space to transmit cultural messages more relevant to African socio-political experiences. Don Pierre observes the process from a pragmatic Christian point of view: colonial evangelisation reached Bantu people of Kasai only superficially, as the liturgy was based on a series of incomprehensible sociocultural habits. For Bantu people in the process of decolonisation to reach a “deep evangelisation”, a totally different evangelic approach was needed, one more open to cultural listening and adaptation.

The theology of inculturation is rooted in the belief of “incarnation”: Jesus was born as a man in a particular culture and fully embraced his cultural context, expressing the message of God in his language (Schineller 1990: 20; Ilesanmi 1995: 60). Though inculturation is a twentieth century neologism, the term is presented by

⁷⁰ The inculturation movement has involved the Christian Churches – as well as Islam (Mubimbe 1997: 91-92) – in the second half of the twentieth century. I refer to the general Christian theological debate concerning inculturation, quoting both Catholic and Protestant sources. Discussing the policies of inculturation, I focus instead on the Catholic Church, observing cultural practices of Congolese diasporic Catholic priests and believers and their incorporation by the Vatican into liturgy, official cultural discourses, and events.

its theorists as a necessary dialogic approach to put into place every time the Gospel “speaks to” a human culture through space and history. Since its origins, the spread of the Gospel had depended upon its ‘translatibility’ – the passage of its contents from Aramaic to Greek, then to Latin, and to the other recipients’ cultures (Sanneh 1983: 244; Okigbo 2010: 47-48).

Jesuit Pedro Arrupe (1978: 1) defines inculturation as:

The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expressions through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remarking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’

Based on the modern practices of evangelisation of the Jesuits and other missionary orders in Africa, Asia, and America, the idea of inculturation opens up to a definition of Christian culture as a dynamic, multi-faceted, non-normative process, more in line with contemporary social sciences. Evangelisation is now interpreted as a constant process of transculturation, of hybridisation between human cultures and the divine message, differently realised according to historical and geographical specificities. The assumption of cultural diversity reframes Christian theology in its entirety, transforming it into an inductive, practice-based, imperfect ministry (Shorter 2006: 20; Mubimbe 1997: 74) where differences are acknowledged as positive contributions (Mudimbe 1997: 158-159).

The Second Vatican Council adopted inculturation as a central strategy for the Catholic Church to approach the modern world (Shorter 2006: 98; Chennels 2009: 17-18). Religious messages are declined in cultural terms, and the process of evangelisation must be carried out “from within” of a cultural community and not vertically imposed by foreign agents as it used to be (ibid: 11-12). Furthermore, the boundaries between the Euro-American heart of Christendom and the ‘New World’ are now blurred: Christianity is at home in every culture, and the ongoing process of inculturation is as relevant to the recently Christianised cultures of the “Third World” as it is to the countries of

Europe and North America who are facing an intense process of de-Christianisation (ibid).

This strong move to decolonise the Christian language corresponds with the Church's awareness that "the centre of gravity of the Christian faith has shifted southwards" (Orji 2017: 4). Pierre address this issue very clearly:

The mission territory has changed. There has been an inversion: mission land is now here, where we are. We must be the evangelizers of this generation. How many of us here in Europe today do not know God anymore? We must now succeed in expanding the field of action of evangelization, because it is no longer just there in Africa and Latin America, eh? You have to talk to this generation, to these new cultures, with a language that they can understand.

Current processes of social secularisation, religious scepticism and vocation crisis in western countries have determined the growing importance – both numeric and political – of believers and priests from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The religious fervour of the world's peripheries acquires a new centrality and provides new evangelical energy. Inculturation, then, providing the new cultural identities within Christendom with specific theological languages, expresses the Holy See's intellectual sensitiveness to the "signs of the time" (Mudimbe 1997: 117) and the necessary apostasy of any explicit Eurocentrism that would now be generally perceived as unacceptable authoritarian ignorance (ibid: 72). Also, it responds to a direct request on the part of Christian churches of the world of new, original and culturally appropriate theologies, different from the ones imposed by the North Atlantic communities (Orji 2017: xiii).

The theology of inculturation immediately became an eminent field of action for Christian African intellectuals. In the next section I describe the personal implications and articulations of the post-Second Vatican Council arena in research protagonist Don Pierre's life experiences and cultural labour.

5.7 Don Pierre

Monsieur l'Abbé Pierre Kabongo is a Catholic priest from Kananga, the capital city of the Kasai-Central province in the Democratic Republic of

Congo. He lives in Rome, serving as the private secretary of Emery Kabongo Kanundowi, Congolese archbishop and Canon of St. Peter's Chapter. Pierre is the second of eight children of a Luba middle class family, rooted in a very Catholic environment:

My mother, who was a catechist, made us – my brothers and sisters, and me – pray every night before going to bed, we must pray the rosary. When she prayed, she often asked God that among her children there was at least one who could consecrate himself to Him.

Pierre grew up singing in the church choir and serving mass as an altar boy since he was six years old. Christian music has always been a fundamental aspect of his vocation:

I grew up soaked in singing, soaked in music, soaked in the composition of liturgical chant. I tried to put the passion for music at the service of the liturgy in worshipping God and community thanksgiving.

In the mid-1970s, when Pierre was ten years old, he expressed to his family his desire to become a priest. After two years of preparation, he joined the minor seminary, leaving his home to start his life journey. Some fifty years later, Pierre recalls that he spent most of the first months away from home hidden in a corner of the seminary, crying. Nonetheless, he was already determined in his vocation at that time:

All of a sudden, I became a man, facing life alone. Since then, serving the Lord and his word are still my basic aspiration. To me, serving God is the harmonizing point, the rhythm of my life, the rhythm of my days, my nights, my concrete commitment, the rhythm of my studies and my productions. The most serious thing a man can dedicate himself is eternal life. If this life is good and beautiful, as I see it, it would be better if it were perpetuated, not finished.

Under the pontificate of John Paul II, Pierre was sent to study Theology in Italy by his bishop, in the context of a collaboration between Congolese and Italian dioceses. In Italy, Pierre was ordained priest and started his research in theology and liturgy. In 2011, he defended his doctoral thesis entitled: « Le Rythme est Liturgie. Performance, action et participation de chants liturgiques africains Luba du Kasayi » (The Rhythm is Liturgy. Performance, action and participation of Luba African liturgical songs in Kasai). In the meantime, he continued to compose liturgical music in tshiLuba, his mother

tongue. Around 80 of Pierre's compositions have been included in the collection of African liturgical songs of the Archdiocese of Kananga.

Fluent in several African and European languages, Pierre navigates a transnational network between Africa, Europe and North America composed by his family bonds, his academic circuit of conferences and other theological dedications, and his activity of liturgical composition. While in Rome, his many responsibilities, including the Vatican and several charities, interfere with his time spent with the Congolese parish and his choir; nonetheless, he is very well known there – in fact I have been directed to him by the parish priest as an expert of Congolese musical and liturgical studies.

An extremely pleasant conversationalist, man of great culture, and delightful spirit, Pierre is one of the protagonists of this research. We have spent quite a lot of time together, discussing his ideas over a couple of Peroni bottles in central Rome. Also, Pierre and I filmed the music video clip for his song *Udi Dibue*,⁷¹ shooting scenes in between his busy schedule. Educated in European academy, with a musical background deeply grounded in his native Kananga, Don Pierre embodies the project of inculturation and is an appropriate narrator of diasporic African Christianity in its creative, transcultural potential as well as in its strident contradictions.

I set up an interview on camera with Pierre, because I felt he was the right person to unload the tension produced by my conflictive feelings about religion in the fieldwork. I wanted to dialogically address with him my reservations about the Church and its African missions. Without noticing, my on camera conversation with Pierre lasted for more than three hours. Transcribing the interview, I realised how I tried to challenge the foundation of his system of beliefs, asking him to make sense out of the thorniest aspects of African Christianity, like colonialism and the slave trade. In retrospect, I am not sure whether my

⁷¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK4Qb3bH4u4>. Pierre decided to shot the video clip in St. Peter's Basilica, for its direct connection with the figure of Saint Peter. The part when Pierre acts Jesus saying: "Peter, you are a rock" is shot in a country field outside Rome. To have a visual reference for the *tshipanda*, we shot a short scene close to a straw beach umbrella in a Roman beach.

questions were respectful. From my privileged position of assessing other people's cultural choices without sharing their history of oppression and marginalisation, I was playing the postcolonial thinker. Even with his reputation at stake, Pierre accepted the challenge. He went through his toughest life memories, exploring uncomfortable nexuses of both personal and collective memories. Yet he succeeded in making sense of his choices, of his position in the universe, of his spiritual existence, and this by referring to the language of faith. While I was talking the language of academic reasoning, he was speaking to the divine tongue of faith. Our conversation helped me to make sense of the cultural and emotional energy of faith, and how this element must remain central in a critical assessment of African religious music.

5.8 Music as self-implication

Being a collective communal performance, music has always been a crucial activity of Christian communities and a great tool for religious conversion (Reily, Dueck 2016: 1). The Second Vatican Council paid particularly attention to music, for:

Liturgical worship is given a more noble form when it is celebrated in song [...] Indeed, through this form, prayer is expressed in a more attractive way⁷², the mystery of the liturgy, with its hierarchical and community nature, is more openly shown, the unity of hearts is more profoundly achieved by the union of voices, minds are more easily raised to heavenly things by the beauty of the sacred rites, and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures that heavenly liturgy which is enacted in the holy city of Jerusalem (*Musicam Sacram*: article 5).

Don Pierre also stresses the communal aspect of singing, which “holds individualities together, transforming them into community.” Pierre compares the liturgical effect of singing to the social energy flowing throughout music in parties and concerts, making “everybody vibrate to the beat of what is going on.” Similarly, liturgical chants interconnect all the assembly into “the same gestures, the same action.” Making music together and sharing a sonic space are “ontological

⁷² “A more joyful way” in the Italian version. *Musicam Sacram*, instruction on Roman Catholic sacred music issued by the Sacred Congregation of Rites on 5 March 1967 in conjunction with the Second Vatican Council. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html. Retrieved 1 august 2019.

aspects” (Reily, Dueck 2016: 2) that make sense of the ritual and scriptures, allowing the Christian symbols to come alive within the believers. His is a liturgy of the joyful nexus.

The dancing movements of the singing bodies espouse the bodily actions of the rite in a choreutic liturgy that engages the believers in the entirety of their bodies, emotions, and social feelings. It is this holistic engagement that produces “the self-implicative aspect of the liturgical singing,” like Pierre says:

It is quite limited to say that we praise God only by the mouth, through words. Putting the entire human body in motion from head to toe, from mouth to ear, from arms to legs, totally in praise to God, means to be really into it, to be at the centre of the praise that we offer to him. In this way, assuming the totality of the body at the centre of the liturgical celebration gives rise to an active, constant and fruitful participation as wished by the Second Vatican Council.

Pierre bases his observation on to the crucial liturgical role of music in the Zaïre Use, a variation of the common Roman Mass approved by the Vatican on 30 April 1988 for dioceses of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (former Zaïre) and the other dioceses of Central Africa.⁷³ Choreutic participation in prayer is also a spiritual pattern for personal devotion through the bodily involvement of musical joy, at the centre of the mystic experience: when Pierre and I shot the images for the video clip of his song Udi Dibue, he performed his bodily adoration in front of the camera, composedly waving his arms towards the Crucifix and the portraits of John Paul II and John XXIII.

The classical Christian paradigm spiritual-high-deep versus material-low-superficial is challenged at its foundation from within. It is the embodiment of the celebration that produces the deepest implication of the believer in the word of God: the body in its entirety is the locus of the soul. Pierre reads African Christian music and joy in its theological implications, referring to the call by the Second Vatican Council for a “more clearly manifested” rite of the Mass so that “devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved”

⁷³ I discuss the Zaïre use more in depth in the next chapter.

(*Sacrosanctum Concilium*: article 50)⁷⁴. African spirituality challenges Eurocentric paradigms of Christianity and claims a new cultural centrality not as in reparation for its past victimisation, but proposing more sensorial and contemporary liturgical interpretations, in line with the new turn of Christian theology. An African thinker, Pierre formulates without any timidity his message on the transnational plan of Christianity, turning what could have been called his “traditional indigenous background” into a universal paradigm of liturgical participation.

In Pierre’s formulation, music becomes liturgical as it proclaims the word of God and “it does what it means.” Liturgical singing accompanies the liturgical action, at times becoming a liturgical moment in itself. In any case, it must be the joyful expression of the love of God: the act of singing has to connect all the believers between them and with the divine sphere through vibrations of joy; otherwise, the celebration of the salvation in Christ remains an empty formula, pronounced but not lived by the assembly. The Central African social and political tradition of joyful gatherings provides an appropriate setting to reconfigure postcolonial Christian practices: the bodily nexus of music-induced ecstasy as the vehicle of transit between the social body and the otherworld assumes centrality in the practice of African Christianity. The expression of full eucharistic joy has to pass through the body and the music, for “the one who loves, sings.” Music is not only a means for expressing community actions and praising God properly, but becomes an instrument of salvation in itself, allowing the believer to collectively embrace the word of God and to be transformed by it – that is, to collect the vital energies spreading from the otherworld.

Liturgical music here displays a rich spiritual phenomenology that involves all human senses at both a personal and collective level, tuning religious feelings into active worship. I have experienced the liturgical performances of the Bondoko choir at the Congolese church in

⁷⁴ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 4 December 1963
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html. Retrieved 3 august 2019.

Rome: the moments when the entire church joyfully sings at unison with the choir, rhythmically oscillating their bodies, provoked in me intense emotions of spiritual participation, involving me in the collective joyful feelings. The predominant musical aspect of the Congolese Mass points at the direct involvement of the assembly; as in Mulele's concerts, the "fourth wall" between the musical celebrants of the rite and the audience/assembly tends to disappear. The rite – whether it be a concert or a mass – cannot succeed without the full involvement of the assembly, in terms of music-making and emotional vibrations. Pierre claims this performative involvement as a specific feature of African cultures, evocating the centrality of the joyful nexus: "In this, I think that the African is very favourite, because in Africa all the stages of human life are sung and danced, from birth to death, through bereavements and festivals. All is sung." As in Mulele's musical nationalism, cultural essentialism here becomes an instrument to affirm a spiritual advantage of African people, an experiential mode passing through singing, but involving way more than that.

5.9 The rhythmic paradigm

African singing – as Pierre refers to his musical liturgical experiences – is characterised by a triple dimension: singing is accompanied by dance and held to the body through rhythm. The consubstantiality of singing, dance, and rhythm recalls the ternary order of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. Rhythm corresponds to the divine logic of creation. It is the divine order, the harmonising principle that connects natural and human existences to their divine creator. In Pierre's words:

To create, for God, is nothing but to rhythm. The book of Genesis says that in the beginning there was darkness and chaotic waters on which the spirit of God was flying. And all of a sudden, God says that light be. And it was the first day, and it was the first night. On the second day, God says: let the water of sea be separated with dry land. We realize that at the end of the day, when God created, he transformed chaos into cosmos. He harmonized what was chaotic. Concretely, he has paced life. The conclusions of recent biblical theologians point out that creating on God's part is rhythmic.

Rhythm entails an entire cosmology; Pierre interprets nature as a rhythmic manifestation of the divine that can be witnessed in the “magnificent alternation” of day and night, dry lands and oceans, in the rhythmic correspondences and dissonances between men and women, birds fluttering in the sky and fishes swimming in the sea: “and here it is, a rhythmic message that has neither voice nor words to listen to, but whose fascination, whose energy, makes this message pass, until the end of the world.”

Rhythm conveys a connective intelligence, a sensorial understanding of the universe: humans feel in themselves the rhythmic harmony of creation and rejoice in it while contemplating the perfection of God’s plan – and rhythmically giving thanks in the liturgy. For Pierre, rhythm is the expression of a joyful, relational, collective embodiment of Christian values, whose direct output in human life is the total surrender to the divine love:

The heart of the human, after adhering to God through the fullness of time when the Son of Man has come, begins to vibrate to the rhythm of the mystery of God, to the rhythm of the love of God, which implies in everyday life an application of the love of God through love for our neighbours, love for the others.

Pierre’s conception of rhythm transcends any arithmetic symmetry to embrace the free rhythm of life, the rhythmic pulsating of vital functions, of sleeping and being awake, the oscillation of life flowing between rest and action, emptiness and fullness. Curiously, Pierre’s rhythmic paradigm echoes Mulele’s definition of spirituality, and both put into play the transitional, agglutinative nature of Central African joyful nexus: the living resonances between human beings and the other elements of nature are the material manifestation of divinity; as Mulele would argue, they are the divinity. Christian cosmology would not allow one to say that God is rhythm, indicating the locus of divinity in the natural cycles and flows. Yet, Pierre defines the work of God as essentially the rhythm of life and creation. In line with Mudimbe (1997: 4-7), Pierre outlines the performative aspect of religion, finding the most important manifestation of spirituality in the relational dimension of humans between themselves and the rest of creation.

The musical image of the divine rhythm entails a rhythmic epistemology. Rhythm is a way for the human intellect to explore the mysteries of faith, to perceive their beauty and their salvific energy, to vibrate with them. Pierre looks at history – both universal and particular – through the prism of rhythm, appreciating the divine plan in terms of timing: the sequence of prophets announcing the arrival of Christ, the incarnation of God in his unique son, his passion, death, and resurrection, and then centuries of evangelisation. The plan of salvation unfolds gradually, each step at its favourable moment: “God saves us by taking into account the rhythmic evolution of each of us.” This could lead to the acceptance of evolutionist ideas of African historical delays compared to Europe. Such a perspective does not upset Pierre, as the rhythmic paradigm brings back all power imbalances and historical atrocities to the universal principle of the discontinuous, alternating energetic life flow. Through alternation and discontinuity, rhythm introduces the living harmony in the original chaos, breaking the spatiotemporal continuum into patterns of sense (Buttitta 1996).

As the liturgy is the celebration of the divine design, it has to be vivified by its rhythmic inner energy. The ritual of the mass is seen as a rhythmic succession of actions whose significance is to involve the believer in the celebration of the word of God. To fully praise the Lord and celebrate the divine mystery must involve every aspect of the believer, and the rhythm of liturgical singing – especially African music – is an efficient way to reach a complete self-implication in the liturgy.

In Pierre’s terms, the centrality of self-implication implies a theological anthropology where the believer is at the centre of the ritual, whose power depends on the holistic involvement of the practitioners. In that sense, the construction of the ritual has to “feed on the environmental wisdom,” to refer to the cultural riches of the human groups who celebrate it. In other terms, the will of God has to be expressed to his people in a language that the people can easily understand. The main task of the liturgy is to fill the gap between the language of the celebration – that is, the word of God – and the actions, feelings, and thoughts of the believers. It is, basically, a labour of

cultural translation and continuous readaptation, whose goal is: “to arouse in the heart of the believer the complete, total, self-implicative adherence to the will of the Father so as to become a little more man between other men and Christian between other Christians.”

Rhythm is the harmonic energy of life as well as the mysteries of faith. Rhythm is an efficient way to adhere to the word of God, and consequently, to become fully human, to be saved, to vibrate to the divine rhythm of creation. The rhythmic power of Luba liturgical singing goes beyond post-Second Vatican Council strategies of inculturation; it becomes a leitmotif to entirely rethink not only liturgy, but also culture through the creative power of the joyful nexus. The rhythmic paradigm is presented as an interdisciplinary platform, a holistic perspective on humankind that integrates organic flows, cultural interactions, emotions, historical and individual dynamics, collective bodies in a divine rhythmic harmony. And Africa is at the very centre of this paradigm; Pierre’s ideas are rooted in his cultural experiences, yet his vision embraces the “people of God” in its universality, proposing his African musical sensibility as an instrument for the new evangelisation.

5.10 The African Theology of Inculturation

In Africa, inculturation emerges from Pan-Africanism, African Nationalism and the movements of Black emancipation (Martey 1993: 7-35; Sanga 2013: 129) as a claim for a Church that truly allows Africans to worship God in their own terms. To do so, African theologians and priests fostered a “return to the source” of the traditional African religious sensibility, devaluated and severely undermined by missionaries and other colonial agencies (Ilesanmi 1995: 72). It is an attempt from both African theologians and the central ecclesial institutions of the Vatican to reconcile the contradictions inherent in African Christianity, proposing it as an authentic African mode of self-definition (Ilesanmi 1995: 52; Mbembe 2002: 269; Orji 2019: 283).

Inculturation refers to “the adaptation of Christian teachings and practices to local cultures, and how the cultures shape the evolution of Christian practices” (Okigbo 2010: 46). Whereas Afrocentrism and other Pan-African discourses address exclusively Black people and their place in the world history, the African theology of inculturation aims to be theology *tout court*. Rooted in African evangelical practises, African inculturation aspires to become a universal discourse and to modify the transnational principles of evangelisation through the spiritual knowledge of African cultures. This universal aspiration is the main difference to the other Black movements: the community which African Christians refer to is not restricted to Africa, but embraces the transnational family of Christendom. Don Pierre Kabongo’s theories confirm this twofold direction of inculturation discourses that gather theological ideas from the African cultural milieu and present them to the family of God through theological sciences.

According to the view of inculturation, the negative aspects of colonial evangelisation in Africa had been due to the European missionaries’ ignorance and bias (ibid) and not to any inherent quality of Christianity. The emphasis on the tragic outcomes of colonialism is softened; theologians make efforts to focus on positive moments in the history of evangelisation and to interpret the law of the Church as inclusive (Sanga 2013: 130).

The endeavour to lessen the damages of colonial evangelisation implies an original stance regarding African historical positionality. When I asked Don Pierre whether there still are hierarchical imbalances in the way white missionaries approach African people, he answered that arrogance is “in every human heart,” since Adam and Eve. The missionaries’ pride made them forget they were God’s humble servants and pushed them to impose their own cultures rather than establishing a “horizontal” cultural dialogue at the basis of evangelisation. In Pierre and Cola’s version of inculturation, racial conflicts move to the background. Africa ceases to be the predestined victim; through Christianity, the bad memories of slavery and colonialism are reconciled in the participation to a transnational

community where Africans can engage without the burden of their past suffering.

Christian transnationality challenges the classic paradigm of Europe being the cornerstone of the Church's power with Africa and the "Third Worlds" at the periphery of Christendom: "The real central power of the church comes from the Gospel, not from Rome," as Pierre points out. In his plea to revert African marginality, he refers to Pope Francis' continuous mention of the "centrality of peripheries" and the necessity for the Church to "abandon self-referential attitudes" and embrace differences within Christianity. The first pope from the Southern Hemisphere marks the move southward of Christianity's centre of gravity all the more.

In the first decades after Independence, new African churches began to spring up from the most liberal Protestant churches – with several hundred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone (Mudimbe 1997: 74) – establishing new, more horizontal and syncretic dialogues between Christianity and local religious sensitivities rooted in traditional beliefs (ibid: 152) at the same time as provoking a radical transformation of traditional cultural institutions during the last two decades (Trapido 2013). Inculturation works as a strategy to contain this centrifugal force; as opposite to syncretism, it maintains the essential Christian meaning as untouchable and more valuable than any specific cultural content (Shorter 2006: 43). The Vatican, while inviting Africans to assume their own responsibilities for building a theology incarnated in their living continent, has often warned against a purely Africanist theology "deprived of any real and profound link with Christ" (Ilesanmi 1995: 59). The institution of an African theology with its own cultural categories and rooted in its own people shall be enough to Africanise Christianity and alleviate the identity crisis of the continent (ibid: 56; Antonio 2006: 26).

The goal of inculturation is not to promote African cultures; it consists instead in obtaining a deeper and fuller evangelisation of the Africans through a culturalist approach (ibid: 60). Pierre outlines how the African evangeliser has to maintain a double fidelity: to the Gospel,

and to African culture; yet, the focus is on the Christian language, and the efficacy of evangelisation. The dialogue between cultures must be subordinated to the Revelation – the Bible and its theological interpretation, dogmas, the Church and its messages. From an anthropological point of view, I consider inculturation as a refined version of cultural essentialism where a set of ethical values are assumed as universally valid on the premise of their divine provenance: “what passes as universal [...] is actually a particular in disguise” (Sanga 2013: 138). Like Don Pierre Kabongo says, Christian faith implies that the core message of the Gospel must not be intended as a product of any specific culture, but rather as the voice of God, as a content revealed to humankind by supernatural agents in cultural terms. There is an unbridgeable gap between human comprehension and the divine message: inculturation fills this with cultural adaptations and critical discussions within the theological structures, but the perfection of the divine message in its culturally accepted forms cannot be contradicted (ibid).

Inculturation insists on an African cultural and personal renewal based on traditional spirituality, excluding political issues from the concern of faith (ibid: 63-64). This explicit apolitical stance divides inculturation from other strands of African theology; namely, the theology of liberation, deeply rooted in the struggles of the poor and the oppressed. Liberationist theologians accuse inculturation of espousing a dead view of African society lost in the past and consequently distracting the “hungering masses” from the daily violation of their basic rights (Éla 1994: 71). African women’s theology – another politically engaged strand of African theology – blames inculturation for reinforcing traditional African oppressive tendencies like patriarchy and sexism (Masenya 2003: 114-117). More generally, inculturation mirrors local cultures to draw African believers, without venturing any attempt to criticise social practices in light of a contemporary reading of the Gospel (Ngong 2012: 355). Also, the Christian liturgy using indigenous music, the theology of inculturation’s forte, is seen by Jean-

Marc Éla (ibid: 22) as an example of how theological nativism maintains religion as “the locus of our daily alienation:”

A liturgy using indigenous music might cause Africans to forget that they are human beings under domination. Expressing their calvary through the rhythm of their own music give them the hope of celestial happiness – as happened through Negro spirituals in America. When Christianity was implanted in Africa, something important happened at the same time: while the converts were distracted by the Bible thrust into their hands, their land was stripped from them. [...] The rhythm of drums and balaphons within our churches cannot shelter us Africans from the threats (Éla 1989: 147).

As critical as it might be, the project of inculturation remains within the institution of the Church: *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, outside the Church there is no salvation. African theology is committed to local cultures, but does not challenge the conversion to Christianity as a necessary passage to accomplish civilisation. Traditional African spiritual forms are validated as “stepping stones,” preparing the ground for the providential encounter with Christianity (Mudimbe 1997: 77). If Afrocentrism tries to erase any trace of the violent acculturation produced by Europe from African cultural practices, inculturation maintains the cultural other – the impact with colonialism – within the African discourse, preserving the basic rules of the Christian message according to its European institutions. In this sense, paraphrasing Ngũgĩ (1986: 23), it fails to be a truly new African language like West African Pidgins: a re-appropriation of the language of the master, imposed by historical necessity but unabashedly Africanised in syntax and rhythms by African working classes through the living forms of social and political speech.

African inculturation is an intersubjective discourse where several voices are put into action. It brings with itself the contradictions of postcolonial consciousness, expressing the remains of the sense of inferiority to the colonial master together with the effort to overcome it once and for all (Sanga 2013: 126-127). Because of these ambiguities, it does not respond to Ngũgĩ’s (1972: 34) plea for “a true spiritual anchor for the continuing struggles of the masses in today’s Africa.” Yet, despite its explicit political neutrality, it deeply challenges to the paradigms of Christianity, breaking its historical monochromy, using contact with

otherness as a source of cultural and political power. In fact, inculturation is “in itself a response to an existing theology;” it represents the conflict between different discourses with the specific purpose to soften and overcome it (Orji 2019: 281).

The theology of inculturation stands opposite to the classicist conception of evangelisation for it recognises the epistemological relevance of cultural variations, mutability, and breakdowns (ibid: 285). The theological language embraces these conflicts and differences: it becomes “contradiction-ridden” and “tension-filled” like the heteroglossia of everyday language (Bakhtin 1981: 272). In Bakhtin’s terms, inculturation possesses the dialogic quality of the novel: it deconstructs the epic of classic Christian theology, the sacralisation of its European past, the close determinacy of its standard formulation, impenetrable by everyday human experiences and new points of view (Orji 2019: 276). Rather than attempting to replace received theology, inculturation heightens its contemporary relevance by means of privileging a polyphony of voices, attuning the theological messages to life of the people (ibid: 281).

Like Afrocentrism, inculturation attributes a crucial role to the African past. Yet, the theology of inculturation promotes the idea of a universal community in which the main goal for the African is to be more connected, more universal, more Christian, whereas Afrocentrism is based on African thinking and the claim of radical cultural diversity, at its extreme pursuing the “mad dream of a world without Others” (Mbembe 2002: 252). Traditionalism is only one of the voices included in the theology of inculturation: references to African traditions are displayed according to their practical efficacy, without any ideological fixity. Inculturation is more a strategy of acquiring formal power than a reflection on the causes of African disenfranchisement (Mbembe 2002: 250). Through it, African thinkers and believers permeate the institutions and policies of Christianity with African discourses and workforce, using their cultural difference to the North Atlantic ‘norm’ as a key tool to elaborate compelling contemporary narratives.

5.11 The music of inculturation

Pierre's musical theories exemplify how music constitutes a crucial inculturation practice, both as a liturgical tool and an epistemology. The quality of music as a multimodal, performative language makes it particularly suitable for displaying inculturation's heteroglossia and polyphony.

Among other reforms, the Vatican fostered the liturgical incorporation of popular forms of religious music in different cultures and languages other than Latin, encouraging missionaries to actively promote traditional music in their missions for "its great importance in the religious and social life of these people." The musical forms to be used as sacred should nonetheless "correspond to the spirit of the liturgical celebration itself" according to the religious authorities (ibid: article 9), it being understood that "Gregorian chant, as proper to the Roman liturgy, should be given pride of place" (ibid: article 50a). The instruction of Vatican II legitimated a series of liturgical practices already in use in Africa and elsewhere, encouraging their wider implementation within the Catholic Church (Sanga 2013: 129).

5.11.1 Music example 1: the Missa Luba

An important African forerunner of adopting local music idioms in church has been the Missa Luba, a sung mass composed in 1958 in the former Katanga province (now called Haut-Lomami), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by Belgian Franciscan friar Guido Haazen together with a Congolese male choir and a small orchestra of percussions from collective improvisation on traditional song forms of the baLuba. Conceived just before the country's independence from Belgian colonialism, the Missa Luba epitomises the musical practices of inculturation and their criticisms, still representing a crucial reference to Congolese Christian liturgical music.

The idea of having a Latin mass setting in the Luba music language sprung from the "revelation" to the missionary of the "unbelievable musicality of the Africans," and his "great

disappointment” at the church’s commandment for African people “to express their religious feelings only by singing western songs” (ibid: 8). The emotional background of this creative transcultural encounter, as depicted by Haazen himself, points at the sharp power imbalances behind the joyful musical experience:

I selected 40 good voices and let them, each day, sing their own songs. They were work songs, game songs, songs for occasions of illness, death and marriages, and many others. [...] I wished that they would learn to experience the great beauty of their songs. It was also clear that they suffered a feeling of inferiority about their songs when it came to sing them for the White Man, and they would feel ashamed. But as a White man it was not up to me to tell them how they had to do it [...]. And slowly these boys began to realize that they did not have to feel less with their musical expression when around us Whites [...]. It gave the African students a new and a deep feeling of self value and pride in their culture (Foster 2005: 9).

The creative collaboration does not happen between equivalent forces. The social drama of musical creation puts into play the rigid hierarchy of cultural values and languages in (post)colonial Congo. The African students’ feeling of self value and pride in their culture pass through the recognition of the white man.

The cultural exchange is entirely directed and biased by the aura of prestige of the Belgian missionary, from the creative process to the audience’s reception. Formed as a choir leader in Europe, Haazen senses the “real beauty” of Luba singing repertoire “hidden by the coarseness and lack of voice training and discipline.” The potential “beauty” of the local music language is finally expressed only once the choristers incorporate European aesthetics and learn “the concept of starting and ending at the same time,” or “how to sing rather than just yelling or shouting” (ibid).

The musical exchange does not challenge colonial prejudices. Blacks and Whites (with a capital letter in Haazen’s text) remain two separate cultural settings whose interactions have to follow specific hierarchical patterns. An agglomerate of local music forms is decontextualized, selected by a European missionary, pulled together in a liturgical setting, and domesticated according to European parameters, to the “overwhelming delight” of the local community “in

hearing this music performed so well” (ibid: 8-9). The rehabilitation of the traditional music heritage is in itself a vertical move: persuaded of the pagan and evil nature of their own native songs after decades of colonial missionary propaganda, the parishioners of Kamina are reluctantly driven back to be proud of their music by the intuition of another European missionary, and are bestowed with the great honour of performing in front of the king of Belgium and at the 1958 World Exhibition in Brussels. In this tale of musical inculturation, I can see at least as much cultural alienation and displacement as “self value and cultural pride” (ibid).

I am not to attempt lessening the artistic interest of a bona fide cultural experiment carried out seventy years ago, at the end of the Belgian colonial domination in Central Africa. Haazen’s *Missa Luba* has been praised as “authentically African⁷⁵ and not a western arrangement of African rhythms” (ibid: 16); and “quite progressive” for its pioneering use of local percussions and Bantu languages in church, and for its improvisation-led participatory approach (ibid: 10-11). Yet, I insist in analysing the musical discourse around the *Missa Luba* for it presents very similar critical issues to the African liturgical music of Don Pierre, an indigenous composer of liturgical music in tshiLuba who performs similar conflicts and sensibilities some eighty years after the composition of the *Missa Luba*.

5.11.2 Music example 2: Udi Dibue

Like other authors of African Christian music, Pierre does not question the universal application of Christian law and ethical guidelines from the point of view of African cultures. The moral order assessing what is good or bad in music and other Luba cultural expressions is still an external one. The difference with colonial missionary methodologies lays in the shift from a deductive to an inductive method: instead of forcing local cultures into foreign values and references, the indigenous

⁷⁵ However controversial Foster’s definition of an “authentically African” music form may be, his work provides evidences of the massive creative involvement of the Luba choristers – especially the soloist – in the conception and composition of the various pieces. To Foster, Haazen was more of an “impresario” than a composer.

evangeliser has to select indigenous habits apt to express the values of the Gospel, “purifying them” from incompatible elements.

Pierre advocates only for those aspects of his culture that can be assimilated in Christian mentality, dismissing the rest. Haazen was openly assessing the musical skills of his Katangese parishioners from the aesthetic point of view of his European background, as he was evaluating the eventual “impurity” of their cultural habits against his own moral principles. Pierre does the same aesthetic assessments and the same moral selections without even referring to European values: he just refers to the Gospel and its unquestioned purity.

Here, inculturation makes Catholic cultural essentialism pass unnoticed. Having the indigenous clergy executing the old missionary practices of cultural censorship, it is easier to accept as universal values what are in reality global dominant patterns of cultural domestication (Sanga 2013: 138). Inculturation practices tend to avoid direct confrontation between cultural models and centres of power: consequently, these postcolonial cultural conflicts are ignored and assumed as part of the modern lifestyle of African people.

The point of the debate is whether inculturation is a process for establishing a truly ethical relation with Africa and African music as the “Other” within the church’s establishment, recognising its radical and irreducible differences without the need of domesticating them (ibid: 132-133). By defining the primacy of a set of dogmas and principles in the selection of sacred music, the Catholic Church keeps eliminating those elements of absolute otherness – i.e. local expressive forms and polyphonic dynamics in the *Missa Luba*, or “undignified” elements of Tanzanian Bantu music in Mbunga’s *Misa Baba Yetu* (ibid), limiting the acceptance of the ‘Other’ to its non-challenging aspects.

To Sanga, any attempt to “achieve oneness or universality within the church” will be frustrated until the church “fears or restricts the complete otherness of the Other” (ibid: 138). Pierre’s efforts as a composer and a theologian are rather directed to interpret Christian dogmas to allow his cultural agency as Bantu liturgical music maker, and to provide plenty of theological evidences to be accepted by the

official church establishment (cfr *ibid*: 130-132). Nonetheless, his music practices develop a very interesting reaction to the postcolonial condition.

The song Pierre and I shot a video for is titled Udi Dibue, “You are Peter” (in the etymological sense of ‘stone’). Pierre translates in tshiLuba the Gospel’s passage of Peter’s Profession of Faith, especially referring to Mark’s Gospel (8:27-9:1): Peter grasps the divine nature of Jesus and reveals it to his fellow disciples for the first time; Jesus appoints him as the leader of the apostles, uttering: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Translating the Gospel into tshiLuba, Pierre replaces the architectural image of the foundation stone with the *tshipanda*, a central wooden pillar of the traditional dwelling of the baLuba. Pierre adds another lexicographic equivalence to the lyrics: he made Jesus call Peter *tshinkunku*, the tree that gathers all the hunters of a village around itself before going hunting or when they come back from the hunt.

Pierre tells me that the image of the restoring shadow, the communality and the sense of brotherhood among the hunters, and the spatial centrality of the three trunk make the *tshinkunku* a perfect representation of the Christian faith and the social role of the church – translated as *diku*, tshiLuba for ‘family.’ To Pierre, the translation of evangelic references from a Mediterranean to a Bantu imaginary is necessary to make “the people of God” understand “what God is asking them to do.” But when I ask about the cultural relevance of hunting and traditional huts in today’s Kananga, Pierre tells me that his generation has never experienced any of these cultural forms, which are even harder to be understood by the younger ones. He refers to that to open “a space of questioning, a space of knowledge; and consequently, a place of evangelisation.”

This is not a simple operation of cultural translation: the reference to traditional culture makes the passage even less evident for people who embraced Western dwellings and ways of living. Pierre’s translation of the profession of faith is re-writing history through an act of “moral imagination” (Mbembe 2017: 29). His song is the re-

enactment of how the evangelisation of his people should have been done:

There was also a way to say through African cultural habits that we have become baptized, to say that we have made an alliance with God, to say that we have become His sons through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It was feasible: it was simply a matter of listening to my ancestors.

This is the only open criticism that Pierre moves to white missionaries: the general lack of listening and of cultural respect for his “pagan” forefathers, who had plenty of cultural symbols at their disposal to appropriately translate the message of the Gospel. Here, the inductive evangelisation becomes a tool to heal colonial “scars and wounds”. Pierre’s Udi Dibue is a declaration of identity, achieved through the creation of an archive of Luba cultural images of the past. Pierre’s historical operation has a “performative dimension” (ibid: 28) with its goal being to re-open the possibility for his people “to become agents of history itself.” Pierre claims for the baLuba and the Africans in general the right to be citizens of the people of God “like all others:” that is why he performs a tardive, fictional process of inculturation as it happened for all European cultures in the spread of Christianity. Instead of adjusting his message to the actual cultural terms of his people, Pierre decides to challenge current views and symbols through references to the past, opening a space for critical thinking. Christian music becomes an implicit act of historical decolonisation from the revitalisation of ancient cultural symbols: “If Blacks were to reclaim their history, the foundation of an archive was the first step” (ibid.)

5.12 Conclusions

African Christianity performs the delicate mission of reconciling belonging to one of the most powerful institutions in the history of colonialism and expressing African spirituality in its genuine form. It fails to lay bare the colonial discourses behind the universality of the Gospel, accepting the language of the Vatican as if it were coming directly from God. On the other hand, by virtue of its dialogic character, the Theology of Inculturation is able to appropriate to itself the new

language of world Christianity and to successfully express the need and will for more non-European representations in the Vatican's official discourses. The pluralisation of the Catholic liturgy and cultural paradigm constitutes a revolutionary break in the monolithic history of evangelisation, giving the Church a chance to engage with contemporaneity by reconfiguring its presence in the society on the basis of the society's needs and languages.

Don Pierre's rhythmic liturgy is a musical formulation of inculturation wherein the rhythm is the direct action of God as well as an innate anthropological modality of Sub-Saharan African people. The musical liturgy is based on the participation of the people: the community is at the centre of the celebration, and the borders between theology and everyday life become blurred. After centuries of Cartesian supremacy of the mind over the flesh, the body is celebrated as a fundamental liturgical instrument through musical joy. The collaborative video clip of Don Pierre's song "Udi Dibue" shows how musical body movements are the main instrument for the minister of God to worship the Lord and celebrates the ancestors of the Church. Through music, the implication of the believer in the word of God passes through the body. Hence music is the principal liturgical instrument of African theology. As I discuss in the next chapter, music remains virtually the only semiotic sphere wherein African Christians can express their spiritual forms and contribute to the universal Church from a less discriminated stance.

Chapter six. Bondeko, esengo, bolingo: Musical liturgy of the diasporic
Congolesse Rite in Rome

This chapter engages with the musical creations and communicative dynamics of the Congolesse Catholic liturgy as performed and experienced by the Congolesse community in Rome, Italy. The Congolesse version of the Catholic celebration is an exceptional example of inculturation, that is, the Catholic practice of adapting liturgical practices to different cultural contexts, wherein music holds a crucial role. This African re-elaboration of a European spiritual text through the form of the Central African joyful nexus⁷⁶ is an excellent place to observe the multiple representations of, conflicts among, and innovations in the social bodies physically and symbolically involved in the rite – namely, African and Christian traditions, cosmic and social order, the Congolesse nation within Christendom and the international community, the group of Congolesse migrants and the receiving Italian society.

Rome, the main centre of the Catholic Church, provides a very interesting setting for the exploration of Congolesse spiritual practices, because African Christianity – as epitomised by the creative process of Congolesse liturgy – is shaped by a continuous negotiation between internal and external elements, local conditions and global historical trends. The interactions between Congolesse celebrants and music makers,⁷⁷ Italian believers, and Vatican officials in the same fieldwork site made explicit in my research the dialogic tensions contained in Congolesse liturgical evolutions and their ritual expression – the Congolesse Mass and liturgical music.

Approved in 1988 as a variation of the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire), the

⁷⁶ As I point out in greater detail later on this chapter, the Congolesse Rite is officially a variation of the Roman Rite, the predominant liturgical rite used by the Latin Church.

⁷⁷ Due to the collective nature of the Congolesse liturgy and liturgical music making, I consider here the assembly of the diasporic Congolesse faithful gathered in the church to be the communal celebrants/performers of the rite.

Congolese Rite⁷⁸ (still referred to as the ‘Zaire Usage’ in Latin Church) is an accomplished inculturation project that articulates an African discourse engaging with postcolonial sensibilities and challenges. I will analyse the performative representation of conflicts, the *mise-en-scène* of cultural and political strategies and the ritual negotiation of a new spiritual dimension for the Congolese subjects in the contemporary world through the language of Christianity. My main research question concerns the musical dimension of the liturgy: the way musical involvement is key to the experience of the sacred, in what manner musical discourses transmit the main ideas of the inculturation project, and how music shapes social interactions within and beyond the rite. This ethnographic research explores the role of liturgical music in personal and collective modes of diasporic identity making, focusing on the emotional and sensorial dynamics elicited by music in the sacred space. Furthermore, I will discuss Congolese liturgical music as a contact zone between various cultural and social bodies (diasporic Congolese communities, tourists, Italian churchgoers, scholars, the Congolese Episcopal Conference, the Vatican and other Catholic institutions). To borrow from Bourdieu’s terminology, Congolese liturgical music constitutes a cultural capital that various agents try to use and negotiate through their policies. All these tensions fuel musical creativity, turning the Congolese Mass in Old Rome into a locus of continuous transculturation and vibrant social contacts.

6.1 An African Catholic liturgy

The experience of Kongo Christianity cannot be assumed as a historical antecedent for the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo, as most of the populations there have met the Gospel only together with colonisation. Nonetheless, this unique case of a Bantu nation relatively

⁷⁸ Despite its official hybrid status, I prefer the form ‘Congolese Rite’ – according to the original intentions of the Congolese liturgists – to the official denomination ‘Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire’ for the latter stresses the continuity between the two liturgical forms, whereas in the present chapter I point at the different anthropological dimensions of the sacred in the two rites. The other official form ‘Zaire Usage’ insists as well on the instrumental aspect of ritual adaptation, denying the Congolese liturgy the status of an autonomous rite.

free of colonial impositions appropriating Christianity constituted an important reference for the struggle of Congolese clergy “at the vanguard in the courageous effort to look for a liturgy, hymns and rites properly African” since the 1950s (Baur 1998: 618).

The project of a Congolese liturgy responds to the postcolonial imperative to mend the breaks created by colonial missions and to reconnect Christianity more directly to the flow of local history, to approach religion as a space of exchange rather than a vehicle of impositions, and to foster the nationalistic projects of the postcolonial state which would culminate in the *authenticité* campaign.

Approaching independence, the Congolese Church could only re-organise and re-shape prepackaged Christian symbols to Africanise the faith by changing the order of ritual moments, introducing local formulae in the Mass, stressing the importance of some liturgical symbols over others. The only religious field still open to including original African representations, based on African creative modes and languages, was and still is, music.

Liturgical music has become a crucial locus for the re-negotiation of Congolese cultural spaces. Since it had already been at the centre of missionaries’ inclusive practices of incorporating local instruments and dances in the rite (Fromont 2014: 21-23), Congolese religious people conveyed in liturgical music their zeal for elaborating local adaptations of Christian masses. The 1950s saw many projects of original African liturgical compositions, with several Congolese experiments: besides Haazen’s *Missa Luba*, l’Abbé Bruno Kalumbwa composed the *Messe Dominikale* for the dioceses of Kivu, East Congo; Dutch missionary Bernard Van Boem composed a sung mass for the Kwango province together with the parish choir *Le petits chanteurs/danseurs de Kenge*; and lay composer Joseph Kiwele wrote the *Messe Katangaise* in Lumumbashi (then Elisabethville).

The country’s independence from Belgian colonialism happened in 1960, concurrently with the proclamation of the Second Vatican Council. The changed political conditions and the new tendencies within the church pushed the first attempts to compose African

religious music to evolve into more complex liturgical efforts. It was a liturgical music composer, Cardinal Joseph Malula, who ignited the elaboration of the Congolese liturgy and started collecting the mushrooming Lingala religious musical compositions in the volume *Toyembani*, “we sing together” (Cosentino 2019: 30).

Music, then, is at the core of the Congolese liturgical project since its initial conception, and the composition of religious and liturgical songs has always accompanied the commitment of the Congolese Church “to make the Christian faith at home in Africa” (Ibeka 2016: 6), as most Congolese bishops, theologians and liturgists – and many priests – are also composers of music. The Church is a powerful locus of music production, and the musical creativity of the celebrants directly alimnts the rite, providing liturgical and popular religious compositions.

The Congolese postcolonial liturgical discourse is a musical discourse. Music – intended to mean here rhythmic body movements connected to an artificial sound scape comprising musical instruments, singing, spoken words, and silence – is a key component of the idea of an African liturgy, and liturgical music practices and compositions are the main vehicle to enact the strategies of the African theology of inculturation. Music is also an easy way to typify African masses, to distinguish them from the Roman Rite without changing canonically significant elements of the structure, to reduce the problem of cultural differences within Christendom to their colourful, artistic epiphenomena. But besides stereotypes about African musicality – and their instrumental use by African liturgists – Congolese liturgical music carries an anthropology of the sacred In continuity with the ritual forms of the joyful nexus. I do not use ‘anthropology’ here in reference to the social science, but rather to imply an entire system of beliefs about the human and the cosmos, a collective mode of experiencing the divine, and a network of interpersonal relationships that structure the faithful community. This chapter is dedicated to the exploration of such a musical spiritual anthropology, and the magnetic force it exerts on the bodies of the Congolese community and others who get attracted by it.

6.1.1 The Zairian anomaly

The Congolese Episcopal Conference (CENCO) developed the project of an autonomous liturgy between 1969 and 1973 and then presented it to the Holy See. It took 15 years before the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments promulgated the decree *Zairensium* on 30 April 1988, officially approving the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire – that meanwhile had been in use *ad experimentum* in the country. The Congolese rite is the only inculturated full Eucharistic celebration approved after Vatican II (Chase 2013: 28, Baur 1998: 684-687) after a long and uneasy negotiation resulted in an anomaly unparalleled in the Catholic Church's recent history.

By establishing an autonomous liturgy, the Congolese Church, unique in the continent, has been able to assert its relevance to the Universal Church (Ibeka 2016: 1, 5). Yet, the 'Zaire Usage' is not a rite: it is just an adaptation of the Roman rite with a minor alteration of the ritual sequence, the use of which is limited to Congolese gatherings (ibid: 6). After 15 years of negotiation, the decision to limit the Congolese liturgy to a 'usage' of the Roman Mass could seem "a bit restrictive" (Baur 1998: ibid).

The difficult negotiation concerning the Congolese liturgy brings into play various tensions within contemporary Christianity: the discrepancy between two modes of religious worship and life, rooted in two different cultures yet directed to the same God; the tension between the Congolese bishops' will to base their ministry on the premises of their own culture and the necessary obedience to the tradition of the Catholic Church; the ongoing conflict between post Vatican II inclusive tendencies and Traditionalist, rigidly Eurocentric positions, still present within Church hierarchies; and the fluctuations between old and new protagonists of Christendom and their representation in the official narration of the Church.

The Congolese rite was created right after the publication of the

Sacrosanctum Concilium constitution of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, according to the Vatican-established guidelines to renew the liturgy towards the active participation of the entire assembly of the faithful. The *Sacrosanctum Concilium* also encouraged religious composers to produce liturgical music using popular and local musical idioms, which demonstrated the paramount importance of music in Congolese liturgy and evangelisation (cf. Facci, Cosentino 2018: 19). Resistance to these inculturation practices come from the most conservative fringes of the Latin Church, which see the Roman Rite as the only valid, legitimate Eucharistic celebration and fear the idolatry and heresy intrinsic to African cultural otherness. By accepting the Congolese liturgy without consecrating it as a distinct liturgical rite separate from the Roman Missal, the Vatican mediated between these opposite stances, embracing Congolese liturgical creativity while silencing the concerns that the post-Conciliar Church would have been exposed to centrifugal movements from the periphery.

Although the liturgical development took place in Kinshasa, Rome has been the main location of negotiations. During my research, I met with Monsignor Emery Kabongo Kanundowi, currently Canon of St. Peter's Chapter. Don Pierre Kabongo, who is Monsignor Kabongo's special secretary, told me that during the final stage of the discussion about the Congolese Rite, Emery Kabongo was the special secretary of the Pontiff John Paul II. The negotiation was at a critical stage: Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), quite close to Traditionalist positions, was the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and did not seem too keen on approving the formulation made by the Congolese bishops. John Paul II – Pierre tells me – had been asked to express his opinion about the Congolese liturgy, so he thought of asking his Congolese secretary about it. Emery Kabongo went through the liturgical text, discussing every point of it with the Pontiff, eventually convincing the Pope to give a favourable opinion on the liturgical project, overcoming Ratzinger's resistance and speeding up the process. Besides this anecdote, having conducted research in Rome, I have been

able to observe the various voices that contributed to the Congolese liturgy, and to lay bare the tensions within the liturgical text.

6.1.2 Politics of the ancestors

In the years right before and immediately after independence, the Congolese Church had to react to the country's great political transformations. The growing anti-colonial sentiment of the population urged the Church to change its cultural role and transform the Mass from the quintessential manifestation of colonial power into an African practice. Mobutu Sese Seko's despotic regime (1965-1997) pushed this urge further: the years during which the Congolese Rite was developed saw the apex of the *authenticité*, a national campaign aimed at forging a national Congolese identity by ridding the country of 'Western' influences. The relationship between the regime and the Catholic Church have been ambiguous ever since; yet, Congo's political turmoil contributed to liturgical creativity, challenging the Congolese Church to navigate through the advent of postcoloniality.

Congolese bishops transmitted a fundamental political statement through their liturgical work: the new evangelisation of African people was to start from the traditional African cults and rites. It was a momentous turning point. Throughout all its history, Christianity had consistently moved away from paganism (Kabongo 2011: 290), repressing every remembrance of or sympathy for ancestral cults in popular religiosity in Europe and abroad, and avoiding any liturgical connection between the Mass and pre-Christian rites.

The Congolese liturgical project implies a radical criticism of colonial missionaries: they have failed to genuinely evangelise Africa; and despite the violence of colonial evangelisation, they had not been able to turn local cultures into a *tabula rasa*. In keeping with the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Congolese bishops invented a liturgical rite aiming to reconnect the spiritual experience of African Christians to the traditional beliefs of their cultures. Persecutions of local geniuses were over: paganism – when “right-hearted” (ibid) – was not a demonic

heritage to eliminate anymore; rather, it became a precious gate into the sphere of the divine. Inculturation was ready to accomplish the divine project of evangelising the Congo – a project that white missionaries had left half done.

Although there are no direct references in the Congolese Rite to the pre-colonial evangelisation of the Kongo Empire, I have observed two fundamental tendencies that echo Thornton's description of Kongo Catholicity: the active involvement of the laity in the religious life, and the importance of producing Christian representations based on African symbols. As I argue below, the latter trend is expressed through a wide range of elements in the Congolese liturgy: the liturgical use of African languages, a different liturgical order which stresses the importance of community interactions, the veneration of black saints – from Kimpa Vita's Kongo hagiographies of the Holy Family, to the celebration of the blessed Isidore Bakanja and Anuarite Nengapeta in the Congolese parish of Rome.

Criticisms, though, were implicit. An organic process within the Catholic Church, the reform of the Roman rite in Congo has been a delicate negotiation where continuity with Catholic tradition and respect to Christian principles and institutions have been stressed continuously by Congolese bishops. Proposing an inculturated Catholic rite avoided any direct confrontation with the powers of white Christianity and presented the return to African tradition as a more effective way for Congolese people to embody Christian ethics and liturgy. Additionally, the symbols of African paganism had already been domesticated, weakened by one and a half century of colonial missions; deprived of their threatening Otherness, they were incorporated in the rite as a sort of cultural archaeology.

The use of *bakoko*, 'the ancestors', in the new liturgy is a perfect example of the delicate negotiations shaping postcolonial Congolese Christianity. Usually presented by missionaries as "the acceptable face of African religion" (Trapido 2013), the vengeful, greedy, jealous, and powerful ancestors of Kongo cosmology (Macgaffey 2000: 222-223) were part of the complex spiritual entity of the *bisimbi*, the spirits of the

earth, mediators between the worlds. During colonial times, ancestral spirits underwent a process of cosmological simplification and domestication as well as positive polarisation with respect to the transformations in the Central African moral horizon, whereas traditional *ganga* and *ndoki* spiritual operators, *minkisi* ritual charms, possession rites and joyful ritual forms progressively moved towards the negative, devilish pole of *sorcellerie* (Trapido 2013; see section 1.2.4). Odd as it may seem, Mulele and his fellow-countrymen who are Christians share a very similar idea of ancestors deriving from quite a large shared set of moral values that are the result of the tormented and ever creative processes of Congolese modernity.

Nonetheless, to renew the invigorating contact with the ancestors has always been a central element in every Congolese movement aiming to resist external threats and reinvent society on more equal terms, from Kimpa Vita to Simon Kimbangu, and the composite spiritual experiences of the slaves' diaspora.

The Congolese rite is on the same line: an ambitious cultural operation to alleviate the traumas of colonial missions by reinventing the history of evangelisation as it was supposed to be; that is, a cultural exchange based on the deep understanding and respect of African reality.

6.1.3 Putting Africa at the centre

The Congregation for Divine Worship imposed respect for the Roman *Ordo Missae* – the invariable structure of the European Mass – upon the Congolese bishops as a prerequisite to the development of their liturgy. The imposition of the European model prevented a truly autonomous African celebration (Chase 2013: 31); nonetheless, the dialogism of Christian African Theology transformed a conflictive space into the terrain for the encounter and turned the clash of two different cultures into a common language.

The Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire professes a triple fidelity: to the Catholic faith, to the tradition of the Catholic liturgy, and

to the Congolese-African “religious genius” and cultural heritage (Conference Episcopale du Zaïre 1989b: 9). To represent the “genius of their culture and civilisation,” the Congolese liturgists have sought ritual forms and symbols that could “inculturate the liturgy according to the ancestral costumes of the Congolese people” (Kabongo 2011: 336). With a few adjustments in the liturgical order, the CENCO moulded the Roman Rite into the locus of a different spiritual experience.

The liturgical space is crossed by the negotiation of symbols; the integration of new cultural signifiers shifts the communicative orientation of the rite, turning it into an identity device rather than a symbolic system alien to the local context. The shift is considerable: the structure of the Roman Rite – as well as the architectonic model for Latin Cross-planned churches – is seen to originate in official edicts from Rome, without the participation of the congregation (Ibeka 2016: 9). On the contrary, Congolese liturgy is inspired by African assemblies (ibid: 6; Kabongo 2011: 324), where communal communication leads to reconciliation and social communion. Subordinated to the Vatican hierarchies, the Congolese Church manipulates the symbolic order of the rite to overcome the restrictions of the liturgical space – meaning both the church’s physical buildings and the Roman *Ordo Missae* – and conveys new cultural significance with the same spiritual language. It is as if the African symbols were to transform the longitudinally planned church buildings into a circular space for community gatherings. The Congolese faith inhabits the Eucharistic liturgy with another sense of the religious experience; it speaks the same liturgical language as the Latin Church, but tells another story.

The model of the African assembly shifts the focus from the presider to the assembly itself (Chase 2013: 32). The Mass is animated by a constant dialogue between the priest – who represents the community chief (Kabongo 2011: 324, 336) – and the believers, mediated by lay figures like the announcer (*atalaku*), the readers of the Scripture readings, and the choir. These figures underline the important moments of the rite, inviting people to the action of silent meditation.

In Rome, regular churchgoers take turns fulfilling the active ritual roles over the liturgical year. In the social economy of this diasporic faithful community, lay ritual roles serve as much as dialogic devices to facilitate the assembly's involvement in the rite as they are a way to make the parishioners serve Mass together with the priest. In the Congolese Rite, the liturgical power belongs to the people: following the model of the Last Supper, the liturgy is a popular celebration wherein the entire community of priests and believers participate in the same dramatic and salvific action of cult. The active involvement of the community implies a grass-roots approach based on shared cultural values rather than the distant abstruseness of the colonial mass (Kabongo 2011: 287, 294).

The assembly model implies proximity to the African ritual universe, cosmology and understanding of the afterworld (Chase: *ibid*). The ancestors hold a major role in the rite: they are invoked by the assembly at the beginning of the Mass, together with the saints, as mediators between the living community and the divine. The smoke spirals of the incense burnt in the thurible connect the prayers of the faithful with the celestial prayer of saints and ancestors, linking earthly and heavenly communities in the ritual (Kabongo 2011: 324). Congolese cultures conceive permeable boundaries and mutual influences between dead and living people, and African Christianity does not challenge this interconnection (Kabongo 2011: 296-300). Even as "Pagans", they were nonetheless blessed by the divine living energy before knowing Christianity. The ancestors are part of the faithful community, at the same time as they open the path to the eternal bliss of Paradise. The African past is finally redeemed in a Christian perspective.

The adherence to the African model pushed Congolese liturgists to change the positions of a few liturgical moments in the Roman *Ordo Missae*. The sequence of the Mass is altered, with the Liturgy of the Word now coming first, before the Penitential Act, and then the Reconciliation (the exchanging of the sign of peace with each other) comes before the Preparation of the Gifts. A new section, the Aspersion,

precedes the Reconciliation.⁷⁹ Centrality is thus given to the Gospel and homily, according to the pivotal importance of orality as an African communicative mode. The word of God – to which the assembly listens while sitting, according to the Bantu custom (ibid: 322) – entails the recognition of human fragility and reconciliation with other sisters and brothers in Christ. Only then the assembly can present the gifts to the altar and share the Holy Communion, as “Africans who are in enmity never eat together” (Chase 2013: 33; Ibeka 2016: 8-10; Kabongo 2011: 322-323).

The centrality of Africa in the Congolese liturgical discourse has a marked tendency to cultural essentialism. References to African culture, Black African culture, Bantu culture, Congolese culture – or Luba culture in Pierre Kabongo’s writings – are used interchangeably. Often, Congolese liturgists support their propositions with common stereotypes about Africa. Among others, two commonplaces are frequently used as liturgical arguments: the intense religious commitment of African people, and their innate musicality. Congolese liturgists refer to “the spontaneity with which Congolese pray” (Kabongo 2011: 286) and the “religious foundation of traditional pagan communities”;⁸⁰ statements like “in Black Africa, rhythm is sovereign. It is everywhere, and in everything” (Kabasele-Lumbala 1996: 25); or “in Black Africa, the entire life is crossed by singing and dancing. [...] The prayer being a fundamental part of Black African life, it must be danced” (Kabongo 2011: 289) are assumed without further explanation.

The frequent use of stereotypes is not the result of Congolese liturgists’ naivety. The dialogic nature of the African theology of inculturation allows the liturgists to assimilate the “understanding” of referents they obtain from the Vatican, their cognitive background of emotional expressions, and to shape their message accordingly

⁷⁹ Ritual order in Roman Rite Mass: Penitential Act – Liturgy of the Word – Preparation of the Gifts – Reconciliation (the sign of peace) – Eucharistic Prayer and Communion rite. Ritual order in Congolese Rite Mass: Liturgy of the Word – Penitential Act – Aspersion – Reconciliation (the sign of peace) – Preparation of the Gifts – Eucharistic Prayer and Communion rite.

⁸⁰ Anonymous quote from an explanatory leaflet dedicated to the Congolese Rite printed by the Dioceses of Frascati (Rome) that I have found in the sacristy of the Congolese parish in Rome.

(Bakhtin 1981: 281). As Congolese liturgists instrumentally use the bias of their European counterparts to pursue their goals, so too does the Congolese community in Rome within the Italian receiving society. The widespread trope of a spiritual Africa opposed to a materialistic West contributes to the claim of a greater relevance of the African component within the Universal Church, both in terms of obtaining a specific liturgy and the permeation of Vatican high positions by African clergy. The myth of African musical talent, often taken for granted in Italian society, offers a liturgical and theological space for autonomous African representations and, more importantly, provides a privileged contact zone whereby the African contribution is appreciated and looked upon positively by the Church hierarchies and European society.

The instrumental use of African stereotypes seems to have provided an effective strategy in the negotiations for the Congolese Rite. Recounting the process that led to the approval of the Zairian Usage, Don Pierre told me that when Pope John Paul II went to Zaire on a pastoral visit, he took his Congolese secretary Emery Kabongo with him. Attending the Sunday Mass in the Cathedral of Kinshasa, the Pope realised that the service, animated by live liturgical music – the Zairian Rite was already in use *ad experimentum* – had lasted more than two hours; astonished, he asked Kabongo about it, thinking that maybe the presence of the papal delegation was the reason of this long show. Monsignor Kabongo said with a smile: “No, His Holiness, it is always like in the Congo. When it comes to celebrate the Lord, we Africans don’t watch the clock!”

As showed by the entanglement of these two stereotypes about African spirituality and musicality in the Congolese liturgical formulation, the Congolese rite is inseparable from its musical component. Music, for better or worse, is the main terrain for liturgical interaction and cultural exchange between African and Universal Church.

6.2 A musical anthropology of the sacred

Music in Congolese liturgy cannot be reduced to only chanting and instruments. The Congolese rite privileges the composition of the ritual sonic scape and the associated body movements as an essential vehicle for worship. The musical dimension of the rite involves the believer holistically – muscles, senses, emotions, thoughts, social links – connecting the assembly in a common ritual body through musical vibrations.

In many African traditions, chants and dances establish the mediation with the divine. Rhythm is the creational principle, the action of God; and dance is the way to harmonise one's body to the cosmos (Kabongo 2011: 288-289). In the Congolese Rite, music is not a mere accompaniment to the liturgy; rather, it carries out a central ritual role, unifying the worship of the assembly and connecting the faithful to the divine sphere. This entrenchment of music, fleshy and collective bodies, ritual joy and the contact with the divine, associated with the liturgical mediation of the ancestors, make up the Christian joyful nexus, which although through a very different set of symbols, gestures and cultural references, shares the same mode of social and political action as the other diasporic forms of the joyful nexus I have discussed in this thesis – namely, the *mikiliste* joyful nexus, Mulele's AfroJOY and digital organicity, and Don Pierre's rhythmic liturgy.

Since music and dance are the vehicles of contact with God, worship is a physical activity. The Congolese Rite entails a distinctive spiritual anthropology wherein the body in its entirety is the locus of the soul and the instrument to celebrate the glory of God. Liturgical music induces the believers' body movements to connect with the ritual sonic scape, activating and constantly reactivating the spiritual enthusiasm of the assembly, capturing the sensorial attention of the faithful and focusing them to the actions of the cult, harmonising the individual prayers into collective praise to God.

Music interweaves with the other liturgical actions, accompanying the ritual steps, spacing the liturgy out, and becoming a

liturgical moment in itself. The liturgy follows the flow of the assembly: music stops when the liturgical action changes and vice versa, depending on the degree of the believers' participation in the chant, the energy of the choristers, the general atmosphere of the day. There is no strict time schedule in the Congolese Rite: the length of the Mass varies between one and a half and three hours, depending on the importance of the celebration and on the mood of the day. In the festive interval, Central African time re-emerges, and the social events retakes control over time schedules (see section 1.2.3). Though, it is music that holds control over the liturgical rhythm. I have witnessed a discussion between *l'Abbé* Cola and Angela, the choir director, over the length of the choral pieces. Cola was reproaching Angela for holding the chants' refrains for too long, slowing down the liturgy; the priest recommended that Angela pay more attention to the liturgy while directing the choir, as her task was to support the celebrant without overcoming them. Besides the conflict over roles, Cola's concern shows that the musical execution dictates the ritual time, and that the liturgical direction is shared by a cluster of ritual agents, including the choir.

6.3 The Bondeko choir

Bondeko, Lingala for 'brotherhood' – or *chorale Bondeko*, their official French name – is the name of the choir of the Congolese Catholic community of the Chiesa della Natività di Gesù in central Rome. The choir was established by the previous parish priest, Augustin Bitá, in 1994, right after the foundation of the Congolese parish in Piazza Pasquino.

The Bondeko choir is composed of a fluctuating membership – between 5 and 25, usually around 12 to 15. Due to the current crisis in the Italian labour market and the small number of Congolese residents in Rome, the choir, like the Congolese community in general, is marked by grand mobility. There are only a handful of choristers who have remained for longer than a few years. Among them, I have found amazing people, good friends and extraordinary protagonists of my

research. *L'Abbé* Cola Lubamba, artistic director and lead guitar player; Angela Ndawuki Mayi, choir director; Linda Samba, social media manager and secretary; Theo Muanza, bass player; and Michel Wodja, drummer, have contributed greatly to my work.

Although a few members like Cola and Theo participate in musical projects and activities outside the Congolese church, the majority of the choristers do not have any musical experience outside liturgical music making. Rather than being a way to express one's own artistry, to enter the choir means first of all to take on the commitment to rehearse, learn all of the liturgical compositions, and get exposed to the community's comments and judgements about Sunday's performance. Besides musical talents, everyone's role in the choir depends on personal charisma and their position within the community. In any case, the liturgical responsibility of singing is held collectively in front of the community, as Linda says:

We really love each other – well, we are not all best friends. However, we appreciate each other's merits; and it's reassuring to have them all; someone like *suor* ('sister') Thethé, she's hyperactive, she makes me want to burst out laughing. Plus, her unpolished treble perfectly fit on some songs, so I know I can count on her for these songs. [...] On Sunday morning from 11 am to 1 pm, we are all indispensable; and if anybody is not there, I miss them. Also, we are united by the fact that if it does not go well, they [the community] will criticize the entire choir; so we are a team, there is a team spirit. It's like a little family, full of characters. They are all great people, certainly not perfect, neither am I perfect, but it is a group of people that go well together, I could not think of that group without anyone of those characters.⁸¹

The *chorale* Bondeko is a small social corps with very strong social bonds – despite the usual quarrels – and mutual solidarity that become evident on special occasions like the wedding of a choir member, when the rest of the choir performs a special Mass in honour of the bride and groom, selecting chants from their area of origins, and offers support for managing the wedding party.

Despite being amateurs and their lack of financial means, the Bondeko are a renowned musical force in Rome and have already attracted the attention of several scholars (Ethnomusicologists Serena Facci and Alessandro Cosentino from Tor Vergata University of Rome,

⁸¹ Excerpt from the interview with Linda Samba on 8 October 2017.

ethnographic filmmaker Francesco De Melis from Sapienza University of Rome). Further, every Sunday the musical vibrations coming from the church attract the curious and tourists, some of whom, although non-Congolese, have gradually become part of the community.

The choir is a fundamental contact zone between the community and the rest of the city, also by virtue of the particular personality and life histories of some of its members like Cola, Angela, and Linda. Soon after I started orbiting around the Congolese parish, I was introduced to Cola by telling me “he is the music expert, he will help you.” The community demands that some of its music makers – mainly Cola and Angela – mediate with external visitors, by virtue of their musical and cultural competence and their personal openness. Curiously, other ethnographic works with the Congolese community in Rome have involved the same protagonists. These qualities and tasks place them at the top of the musical social hierarchy of the parish and guarantee them the respect of the entire community. My ethnographic work strongly depends on their points of view, their generosity and friendship, and the rich emotions and knowledge that I gained hanging out with them.

The choir rehearses on a more-or-less regular weekly basis. Every week, Angela selects the chants from a repertoire of 500-600 Congolese liturgical compositions, passing the selection to Linda, who prints in her office the leaflets to distribute to the choristers. The chants, although mainly composed in Lingala, are also composed in the other four Congolese official languages (kiKongo, tshiLuba, kiSwahili, French) plus several other local languages whose speakers are present in the community. The choristers usually know the languages ethnically and geographically linked to them; for the rest of the songs, they learn the lyrics by rote, grasping only the general meaning. Usually, apart from the most well-known Lingala and kiKongo songs, the vocal lines are recorded on a mobile phone by a native-speaking – or fluent – chorister and then sent to the rest of the choir via WhatsApp audio messages. The same method is used by Cola to instruct the choristers on their melody lines. Melodies and phonetic pronunciation are shared and learned in a process of “technical aurality” (Cosentino 2019: 83-83)

without recourse to written texts nor music notation – since no other chorister except Cola can properly read and write music.

The rehearsals are inside the church, close to the altar, in the same place occupied by the choir during the Mass. The session starts with the sign of the Cross, then Angela recites a prayer aloud, concluding with a collective “Amen.”

The choristers are divided into 3 or 4 vocal registers: women are sopranos or contraltos, men are tenor or bass. The choir is a hierarchical space: Angela and Cola direct the musical activities, leading the rehearsals, occasionally asking the choristers for more concentration, more commitment, more attention. When the choir is preparing for special occasions like outside performances on special festivals, the choristers are divided in two opposite semicircles, men facing women. Angela directs the female section, Cola the male one – a fully educated and experienced composer, the priest supervises the overall performances and occasionally intervenes to correct Angela or any other female chorister. The little inner conflicts inside the community – between male and female choristers, or between Cola and Angela over the choir direction – usually emerge during rehearsals and generally lead to frequent laughing at, and with, each other. Musical activities are the vehicle of joyful social dynamics wherein social bonds are represented and strengthened even at the expense of a delay in the time schedule or disciplined artistic training. Every time Angela picks up a composition less frequently sung, Papa Mambu, a chorister since Bondeko’s foundation and an historical memory of the community, would regularly forget the bass line he has to perform – even if it is the same chant the choir always performs in that period of the year – and the entire choir has to go through his part, generally with benevolent amusement.

Angela, the choir director, is a pivotal figure for the entire community. Arriving in Italy in the early 2000s with her parents, she lives in Rome with her mother and her two teenage daughters, working as a teaching assistant. A young woman of great personality and charisma, Angela directs the choir with the vigorous waving of her arms

and her beautiful, naturally loud voice. During the liturgy, it is she who decides when a chant has to finish, connecting the choir to the other celebrants of the rite. Angela is also in charge of the uniforms: whenever possible, she commissions her good friend Laity Mbaye, a Senegalese tailor whose atelier *Métissage* is close to Piazza Pasquino, with the design and manufacture of new superwax uniforms.

Linda Samba was born in Kinshasa and moved to Rome with the rest of her family when she was 3 years old, as her father was appointed Congolese ambassador in Rome. She joined the choir and the community in her 20s, discovering her own Congolese roots through the Bondeko choir. She had to overcome general mistrust from the community and malicious comments about her clumsy Lingala, but thanks to her perseverance and her good singing skills, she is now a central element of the choir and manages the choir's Facebook page. An outsider, she raises suspicion and gossip, but she is nonetheless highly respected and often openly admired for being educated, very enterprising and fully integrated in the Italian society.

Cola Lubamba is the choir's artistic guide. His life trajectory and personal projects shed light on the tangle of cultural policies, interests and flows intersecting at the Congolese community of Rome, showing the transcultural processes linked to the international inculturation project of the Congolese Rite.

6.3.1 L'Abbé Cola

Cola Emmanuel Lubamba was ordained priest in 2009, in Kinshasa. A prolific composer of popular Christian music, his cardinal, Laurent Monsengwo, sent him to study at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music (PIMS) in Rome, with the idea of establishing a school of liturgical music in Kinshasa whose director would be Cola.

Cola had to engage with a radically different music language, learning piano, music notation and harmony, and studying Gregorian chant. With his new musical expertise, Cola approached the Bondeko choir, practicing his harmonisation on the liturgical chants, teaching the

rudiments of music theory and singing techniques to the other choristers, providing the parish with his chants and his expertise as performer and band leader. Cola has organised many musical activities outside the church, bringing the Bondeko choir to perform at festivals and ecclesiastical events.

An enthusiastic cultural explorer, Cola enjoys his musical journey through the ecclesiastical tradition. His approach to music is deeply relativist: music is always the expression of a culture and carries a cultural message, which is the most important part of musical expression. “The mystery of music,” as he says, is the extraordinary communicative power of music, its capability to spread a message further than any other means. In that sense, Cola is a strong promoter of musical inculturation: he sees positively the contamination between popular music, even dance music, and sacred music, as the only way to involve the youth in the faith is “to bring the church where they are, even in clubs, why not, and speak their own languages.”

On the other hand, Cola is fascinated by Gregorian chant and its primacy, confirmed by the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as the Catholic musical language to express the Word of God. The project of his diocese in Kinshasa is to introduce Gregorian chant in their cathedral, and Cola is excited about the idea.

Cola considers music to be the sonic expression of energy; as such, it has to be scientifically treated. Western notation is, to Cola, a great instrument to preserve the African liturgical tradition from the dominant influence of globalised North American music forms like hip-hop that are jeopardising the Congolese music scene. Comparing his musical heritage to Gregorian chants, Cola is amazed at how, he believes, it is still possible to correctly interpret and execute medieval composition thanks to music notation, and he would love to push Congolese composers to write ‘musically’. When he was still in Kinshasa, he heard that a parish choir used to perform one of his compositions, the chant of *Asperges Sukola Ngai* (‘Wash Me’) inspired by the *Miserere*, the Psalm 50. Out of curiosity, he went to say Mass in this church, only to realise that the choir had totally transformed his

chant, which had passed from ear to ear without music notation, until it lost its original sense. To Cola, music notation would allow Congolese composers to escape the limitation of traditional music orality.

The main fault Cola finds in western music notation is the limited array of signs to express African music languages. He refers to the example of Makamba's *O Nkembo, o Likolo*, the Congolese *Gloria* in Lingala. There is a verse that says: "*Yo Moko Mokonzi, yo Mokonzi, yo Moko oleki banso-o!*" ('Oh Lord, you exceed everything'). Cola interprets this ending "o!" – almost shouted – as the expression of God's power exceeding the boundaries of normal communication. Some African interpreters tried to write it according to the conventions of music notation, necessarily missing the sense of this liturgical composition. Similarly, the ritual lamentations of Congolese professional mourners are impossible to render. Cola raises the issue of inventing appropriate African signs to adjust and expand Guido of Arezzo's alleged invention to the African music horizon. His position towards western music language is softer than Agawu's criticism; yet, through Don Pierre's rhythmic liturgy, Cola claims self-empowerment as a post-colonial African subject so that he can represent himself (Agawu 1995: 395). Cola's position echoes the positions of African theologians of inculturation: the traumas of colonisation belong to the past. Now, Cola approaches his European experience as a mutually enriching cultural exchange that he defines as "the rendezvous of giving and receiving."

Cola graduated from PIMS in summer 2019, came back to Kinshasa and started teaching sacred music in seminars. He accomplished his transcultural project, and now he is applying his skills at home. In the meantime, his former fellow choristers keep expanding the diasporic experience of Congolese liturgy in Central Rome.

6.4 Feeling at home; bodily engagement in the diasporic Mass

The Bondekos have a crucial role in the Sunday rite, as not only do they have to sustain the musical aspect of the Congolese Rite; more generally, they are the decisive element in the creation of an African

chronotope in central Rome, where their community can gather and regenerate every week. This is, according to Linda, the main function that brings together all the parishioners:

They find the Congo there, on Sunday morning, with their language, their people, their music, their rhythms, their gossip, their joys. There they are in the Congo, really. And this is much more evident with those who have just arrived here in Italy, I see how they turn on, there is a switch that turns on and they seem to live in another dimension. Only for those three hours, eh, then after they go out and life returns to normal. [...]. I think that is the main reason why people go there every Sunday morning, even those who come from other cities driving miles or taking Sunday trains. They do it because they feel at home there, for those three hours.

After the Mass, the community usually stays in the church until mid afternoon, sharing the Sunday lunch. The sacred space is inhabited: the believers cross the sacred boundary of the chancel as they wish, bowing in front of the altar before entering the sacristy, their hands full of shopping bags with snacks and drinks. The children run and play between the benches while male parishioners sip their beers, sitting at the altar and chatting. Women prepare the food at home and bring it ready to eat, while men usually provide the drinks. The menu usually consists of some typical Congolese dishes like *pondu*, *fumbwa*, *mikate*, black beans, baked chicken, fried fish, plus Italian recipes – mainly pasta. Occasionally Angela, the choir director, prepares her very sought-after lasagnas, confirming her community leadership role beyond the choir.

The choir is a religious community of practice based on communal worshipping. “He who sings, prays twice;” I have often heard this aphorism – pseudonymously attributed to St. Augustine – when discussing about Congolese liturgical music with *l’Abbé Cola* and the other choir members. Music in liturgical context is essentially a mode of prayer and a spiritual intensifier. When I asked Linda Samba about the impact of Congolese Christian music on the believer during the Mass, she confirmed this view:

What creates excitement is above all to pray by itself: to pray in the way I like, doing what I like best, which is singing. So, it's a set of things that makes it really a thrilling thing. There are some moments of the Mass ... for example during the Kyrie, that is, asking for forgiveness, that I really

feel I am asking God for forgiveness, and that moves me. Sometimes I sang and cried, I realized that I was tearing: this is crazy, praying, singing and crying! And then, the positive thing about Congolese music is this rhythm thing ... you listen to it, you can't just sit still, you have to join in and dance. In my opinion, creating participation is a peculiarity of Congolese music. Bringing that peculiarity into religion really means that you keep the Christian attentive during Mass.

Linda vividly expresses the emotional and sensory impact of the Christian joyful nexus on the rite participants, and the connection to the divine through emotional intensification of the ritual moments. Ritual music-induced madness is inscribed within the boundaries of Christian composure, yet it maintains its irreplaceable role as a ritual device. As in Mulele's AfroJOY, spectacularisation of the joyful nexus in diasporic contexts attracts other social groups without losing ritual efficacy. Singing to God is meant to be a spontaneous act of worshipping; paying attention to the performative aspect distracts from the real focus of liturgical singing, which is to enter in connection with the divine. To Linda, the only legitimate concern about the execution of the chants is the choir's liturgical responsibility to lead the assembly:

To sing, it is not just for us. It is a means for everyone to participate at Mass. Sometimes I realize that there are songs that bring joy and encourage others to pray more. When we sing badly, we make the believers lose their concentration. This is a great responsibility too. So, as I said, it is important to do it well. Like a priest who does not know how to give a homily, a choir that does not know how to sing moves people away from the Mass rather than towards it.

During the Mass, music is inseparable from the other aspects of liturgy, and the assembly (including the choir) executes the musical parts of the rite as purely religious acts, without considering it a performance per se: "It would be a performance if the music wasn't part of the ritual. But as everyone expects the song after the first reading, that becomes a task that is part of the whole," says Linda. The choristers seamlessly switch from singing to other liturgical acts like praying, bowing, meditatively listening or collectively responding to the priest. This genuine religious motivation among the choristers makes the desire for representation and visibility totally unimportant to them. Once I was greeted by a senior member of the community while I was filming the choir rehearsals: "Thank you, I am happy that you are here

doing this.” Nonetheless, my contribution was much more explicitly appreciated when I took the bin bags on Sunday, when I carried the church’s loudspeakers out of the church, or when I helped to fix a palm leaf to the upper part of the church door before Palm Sunday (9 April 2019), or after Don Sylvestre washed my feet together with other believers at the Mass on Maundy Thursday, after the homily, on which occasion I had to stop filming to actively participate in the rite. Apart from a few members of the choir, the interest in my research has always been secondary to the imperative of welcoming me as a brother in Christ who was regularly attending Mass in their church. People started paying attention to me as soon as I started to get physically involved in the community life: in Congolese Christianity, the journey to spirituality passes through the muscles.

The continuous involvement of the assembly in the rite is the fundamental task of all the celebrants, the choir among them. Spiritual participation must be through the active involvement of the body: Angela and Cola often told me that the main failure for a Mass is to make the believers “fall asleep.” The Congolese Mass is a continuous exchange of energy between the liturgical protagonists (the ministers, the choir, and the assembly) wherein music is the main glue.

I will now present a few field notes from the Mass on Maundy Thursday, 13 April 2017, the opening celebration of the Paschal Triduum, to depict this entanglement of social dynamics, ritual music performances and bodily spirituality at the core of the Congolese Rite.

6.4.1 Maundy Thursday

Rome, 13 April 2017, Holy (Maundy) Thursday. Church of the ‘Natività di Gesù’, 11:00 a.m. It is past 11:00 but the church is still quite empty. Today is a working day, and many parishioners are busy at work. Angela is late, caught in the delays of Rome public transport, and none of the usual instrumentalists have arrived yet.

The opening of the celebration is performed by the announcer Jean Bosco, who greets the assembly: “*Bandeko, bobotooo*” (‘Brothers

and sisters, peace') he says from the pulpit, with a rising intonation while modulating a long final 'o'. The assembly responds: "*Bondeko*" ('Brotherhood'); "*Bondeko!*" presses Jean Bosco, shouting his ritual formula on the last syllable of the assembly's response. "*Esengo!*" ('Joy') the assembly responds, louder than before. "*Esengooo*"; again, Jean Bosco's last line overlaps with the congregants' response, spurring the believers to react even more energetically. "*Bolingo!*" ('Love'), the assembly concludes the introductory formula. After a short silence, Jean Bosco introduces the Mass to the audience in Lingala, briefly presenting the main topic, which is the celebration of the Last Supper, and then quickly repeats it in Italian for the non-Congolese audience. Meanwhile, the priest and the other ministers stand at the entrance of the church.

As soon as Jean Bosco concludes his introduction, the choir starts singing *Beto Kumisa Mfumu*, a polyphonic chant in kiKongo, without the director, and with only the accompaniment of the congas. As the music starts, the ministers start slowly walking along the nave, oscillating their bodies and the thurible to the beat, softly clapping their hands to the first and second beats of the 4/4 rhythmic patterns of the chant, opening their hands to the third and four beats, palms facing up.⁸² The choir and the assembly join in this rhythmic movement, accompanying the choir execution and physically entering into the rite.

The choir keeps singing while the ministers take their positions around the altar and the parish priest, Don Silvestre, puts a few more grains in the thurible before incensing the altar, repeatedly bowing to it. As soon as Sylvestre concludes the veneration of the four sides of the altar and reaches the pulpit to greet the assembly, the choir ends, singing "*Okombo ya Tata mpe ya Mwana mpe ya Elimo Santu*" ('In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'). The assembly makes the sign of the Cross while the last note of the chant

⁸² This pattern of two hands clapping on the first two beat of a 4/4 unit, the harms opening on the 3rd and 4th pulsation, is the standard rhythmic accompaniment performed by the assembly and celebrants while singing. The pattern remains the same regardless of the chant's rhythmic structure, eventually interlocking with the different rhythmic patterns performed by the instruments (Facci, Cosentino 2018: 20; Cosentino 2019: 61-62).

still reverberates through the church, until a collective ‘Amen’ responds to the priest’s salutation, silencing the previous echo.

[...]

After the invocation of saints and ancestors, Don Silvestre takes the thurible from the hands of a minister. Angela sings the first verse of *Nkembo*, the Lingala translation of the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* by liturgical composer *Abbé Jean-Pierre Makamba*. The rest of the choir immediately join their director while the assembly sings along, clapping their hands on the first and second beat. This rhythmic accompaniment asymmetrically interlaces the rhythmic patterns of the drums and the keyboard (Cosentino 2019: 61-64). The ministers form a dancing circle around the altar while the choir sings the Congolese Gloria. Jean Bosco, the announcer, shakes the bell furiously in the same rhythmic pattern as the assembly’s hands clap. The priest waves the thurible in tempo: the dense smoke billows all around the altar, moved by the dancing bodies.

While singing the chorus, the choristers wave their open hands to the right, then to the left, up and down. The assembly performs the same choreography, as do the ministers while dancing around the altar. The volume of the chant increases; a woman from the assembly ululates a *mulolo*, a typically Congolese high-pitched joyful sound. The few white people attending the mass at the rearmost benches move along with the music, doing free dance routines. The church is pervaded by the liturgical dance, until Angela gives the concluding sign: the choristers sing the last “*A nkembo, amen!*” (‘Glory, amen’) while slowing down the tempo. Immediately afterwards, they raise their hands and tilt their heads, staying silent, their eyes closed, listening to the priest’ opening prayer before the Lectures.

6.5 A sensitive liturgy

A ritual sound scape of liturgical formulae, silences, small bells’ jingling and the thurible’s metal tinkling is organised around the powerful soundwaves of liturgical singing, occasionally accompanied by popular

music instruments. The rite is articulated through a rhythm of full and empty sonic spaces corresponding to the alternation of physical performances and moments of rest, collective movements, attentive listening and personal meditation.

The resonances of the ritual sound scape through the believers' bodies – both through the active involvement of singing and dancing, and through the believers' emotional responses to the musical rite – make the body a pivotal instrument of the liturgical action. Besides the entry and the Gloria that I have described above, several other moments are marked by ritual dance (Kabongo 2011: 303, 322).

Direct body contact is fundamental in the ritual moments dedicated to community bonding: since my first mass, I have been surprised by the great importance of the exchange of the peace sign in the Congolese community. What is generally reduced to a few handshakes between people sitting next to each other in Italian Masses becomes in Piazza Pasquino a collective movement across the entire church wherein the believers shake hands and kiss friends and family, and strangers as well. Additionally, the function is concluded with a reverse, informal procession from the altar to the church entrance in which the priest shakes hand with every single participant, exchanging a few words here and there, while the choir is playing the liturgical 'jam' – a particularly dynamic piece with long improvised instrumental bridges aiming to entertain the community while the believers greet each other after the rite.

This liturgical attention to “the consistence of the body in the prayer” (Kabongo 2011: 290) implies a critique to the “logocentric burden” (ibid: 366) of European Christianity. Don Pierre Kabongo (ibid: 311-316) contrasts the African pragmatic-corporeal dimension to the Cartesian logic of individualistic intellectualism – the latter the dominant cultural paradigm of Western Europe – claiming the former's greater liturgical pertinence.

The ritual relevance of corporeality extends to the sacred objects. The priests celebrate the divine force radiating from the altar and the Gospel Book through ritual dance, absorbing that force by

direct contact and spreading it to the assembly (ibid: 303). On Good Friday, after the celebration of the Passion of Christ, the crucifix is left in front of the stripped altar and the faithful in turns bow in front of it, touching and kissing the wounds of Christ's wooden simulacrum, while the choir sings *Nzembo ya Kuruse* ('The Cross Song')

Music, dance and joyful sonic utterances are not the only sensorial elicitors during the liturgy: the frequent tactile connections between believers, celebrants and holy objects; the abundant use of incense; the flamboyant colours of the choir's uniforms and the community's festive garments; the play of light and shadows inside the 17th-century church; all these elements compose a transmodal apparatus to excite the believers' senses and emotions and focus them on the adoration of God. The celebration of Holy Saturday provides an example. The Mass starts outside the church with a wood fire where the priest blesses the Paschal candle, gathering a crowd of the curious and passers-by, taking pictures and videos with their phones. Every believer is given a little candle lit from the Paschal candle or directly from the blessed fire. Once the blessing is done, everybody enters the church in total darkness, with the only light coming from the little candles held by the believers. The priest starts chanting the Lingala version of the *Exsultent*, the Easter proclamation of the resurrection of Christ. The choir sings a melismatic chorus composed of a single word: "Esengo" ('Joy'). When the priest gets to the announcement of the resurrection, the lights are switched on; the choir concludes the chant singing "*Yesu asekwi, tosekwa biso na ye*" ('Jesus resurrects, let us resurrect with him').

The importance of the "sensitive pole" (Kabongo 2011: 292) in the Congolese Rite reunites the emotional and synesthetic aspects in a holistic spiritual experience involving the human in their entirety. The Congolese bishops stress the wholeness of their liturgical formulation in their final presentation to the Vatican: "It is there [in the liturgical assembly] that the religious feeling of man is satisfied at the level of affectivity, aesthetics and solidarity with others" (Conference Episcopale du Zaïre 1989a: art. 6, p. 3). Linda Samba confirms that

Congolese bishops have achieved their liturgical goal. Her use of the image of addiction stresses the physical impact of the Congolese Rite:

When I don't go to our church, I miss it. When I go there I am happy, it fills me both the soul and the body, because I dance, I enjoy myself, I sing, I pray. Those three hours bring together a lot of things for me. [...] This place leaves its mark; it's addictive, because it's the joy of Sunday.

Joy is usually the first emotion mentioned when talking about the Congolese Rite by both scholars (Cosentino 2019; Goudreault in Kabongo 2001: 336-337) and Congolese music makers. The Mass is in fact the joyful celebration of the sacrifice of Jesus and the salvation of humankind, and for the Congolese faithful community in Rome it is the occasion for communally celebrating the weekly holiday, sharing Italian and Congolese food and drink, together with their guests, inside the church, after the celebration. Yet, joy is not the only emotion aroused by music during the liturgy: the Kyrie's emotional impact on Linda shows how repentance and acceptance of human miseries are also musically elicited in the rite. Sadness for the sacrifice of Christ and the evilness of humanity is the main emotion in the case of, for instance, *Malozi ma Mokonzi Yesu-Kristu* ('The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ') composed by Cardinal Malula for the Celebration of the Passion of Christ. This long chant in A minor is performed by four voices; Angela usually interprets the narrator, the main role, on Holy Friday, singing from the pulpit, while Cola or another priest plays Jesus Christ. Like other Congolese synonyms such as *kiese*, *esengo* expresses sensory and emotional overload rather than happiness.

The joyful nexus works seamlessly through multiple planes, environments and symbolic negotiations, confirming the efficacy of Central African modes of social and political action. I am not proposing any structuralism or ahistorical continuity in the joyful nexus; by insisting on spirituality rather than boundaries between religions, I engage with the idea of the joyful nexus as a history of continual clashes, transformations and exchanges between Central African actors and other groups, wherein Congolese people are capable of negotiating ample spaces of action through music-saturated forms of

communication despite their chronic lack of economic resources and political leverage.

The homily is another moment for emotional involvement; music can play an unexpected role even there.

6.5.1 Tokolonga. Reactions to Congolese war from the pulpit

Rome, Sunday 2 April 2017, Church of the 'Natività di Gesù', 11:45 a.m. I am late, as this morning I did not have any will to go to the church. Further, today the main routes to the city centre are closed, and I suspected the Mass would start late. I arrive at 11:45; the Mass has just started. There are far fewer people than usual, also because the weather is bad. At the beginning, Sylvestre says that today is the saint's day of Saint Francis from Paola, and the first altar on the left side of the nave is dedicated to him, a Calabrian saint. There is another priest celebrating, Jean Marie Munketalingi, a Congolese Combonian priest, who cannot speak in fluent Italian, so the homily is celebrated in French and Lingala. Since the reading from the Gospel was about the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus, he focuses on "*tombes et tombeaux*", 'graves and tombs:'

Everyone is afraid of the grave: it is scary. But Jesus turns the scariest element into a source of life. We have to come out of our grave, but in order to achieve that, we first have to recognise we are dead and buried. Every grave signifies the identity of the dead; but we Congolese people tend to bury ourselves in spiritual mass graves, where the sins are national sins, or African sins, without taking any personal responsibility. I dedicate this homily to the massacres in Congo, in Kivu and in Kasai. Please, I ask every Congolese to make an effort, to do something in order to bring peace in the Congo, even just giving spiritual and cultural support from the diaspora. Now, I am asking you for two minutes of your concentration and prayer. Close your eyes and imagine what is to be dead, and keep praying.

Jean Marie starts singing a piece he composed about the harsh situation in Congo; as soon as he starts singing, while everyone in the church is bent on the knees praying, Theo improvises and accompaniment on the guitar and Michel plays a soft beat on the drums. The song's title and chorus refrain is *Tokolonga*, 'We Will Win.' At the end of the song-prayer, I see a woman sitting next to me who wipes away the tears from her eyes.

2017 has been a very harsh year in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Violent political clashes, arbitrary detentions of activists for democracy all over the country, and President Kabila's unwillingness to announce the election dates have contributed to the continuous massacres and military instability in the eastern, southern and northern peripheries of the country.

The Congolese Catholic Church has been exerting its pressure on Kabila's regime to make a peaceful democratic transition; echoes of that have arrived at the Vatican, with Pope Francis frequently mentioning peace in the Congo in public prayers and official speeches. The widespread discontent about Kabila among diasporic Congolese communities and the political zeal of the Congolese bishops made the church of Piazza Pasquino a locus of political debate, including from the pulpit. Don Sylvestre has frequently called the assembly's prayers for the tragedies in the motherland, dedicating the Way of the Cross to the victims of Congolese violence, invoking the help of God and God's intervention in Congolese politics. Homilies in Piazza Pasquino have given voice to a wide range of diasporic feelings about the Congolese situation: guilt, indignation, critical thinking, sorrow, and rage. As the example of Jean Marie's *Tokolonga* shows, usually the evocation of Congolese political problems in the rite puts the accent on the hope – better said, the confidence – in divine solution of the issues. The diasporic Congolese rite fulfils the role of emotional catharsis, eliciting all the bad feelings due to the diasporic condition of the parishioners to then solve them in the perspective of faith.

Besides the Congolese community, Don Sylvestre's parish is crossed by other international political flows springing from a much closer source: the Vatican.

6.6 Christian policies on migration

Rome, Sunday 19 February 2017, Church of the 'Natività di Gesù', 11:30 a.m. I am attending my first fieldwork Mass. Gianrico Ruzza, auxiliary bishop of Central Rome, is making a pastoral visit to the Chiesa della

Natività. All the Congolese priests pay frequent and long tributes to the presence of Monsignor Ruzza, who is clearly delighted to have such a reception. Towards the end of the rite, he takes the floor greeting everyone and mentioning the condition of migrants in Italy, often considered unwelcomed foreigners. He claims that the Congolese community is a fundamental part of the Roman diocese, promising to intercede for them in order to get funding to restructure the church. Today's liturgy was dedicated to the forgiveness of enemies; Ruzza says that surely, many times the Congolese parishioners have felt unwelcome, or have experienced some hostility and rejection; but "we don't have to aliment the spiral of violence", so the answer has to be love. He also says that the body who dances is a beautiful offer to God, that he himself doesn't dance "just to avoid a poor figure", and all our bodies are "rented to God" and that this is a marvellous way to glorify His name. He keeps saying that his heart, as a priest and a person, is with this community, and that he'll do his best to help them to get money also for the instruments. He calls on *l'Abbé* Emmanuel Lubamba, remembering that Emmanuel means "God with us". He jokes about the child of a chorister holding a toy guitar, saying, "He is part of the band as well."

Multidimensionality and bodily engagement (Kabongo 2011: 334) mark a clear difference between Congolese and Italian liturgical prayers. This difference entails a conflict but it also becomes a moment of interchange; namely, cultural differences become the locus where the African Church can contribute to the Universal Ecclesia. The European Church is willing to admit that something is missing in its spiritual experience, that "even in the West the Roman Rite is foreign" (Chase 2013: 36). The Postconciliar Church approaches cultural difference as the potential to find more effective means of evangelism. Migration, then, is not seen as any threat, and African ritual differences are appreciated and included in official events, like the Congolese mass performed at the African Synod in Rome in 1994 (Ibeka 2016: 7) and the institution of the 'Festa dei Popoli'. The spiritual sound scape of Rome became increasingly plural; the Congolese community, although

relatively small and recent, was one of the first to be granted a specific place of worship in the city centre, contributing to the city's evolution with their ritual sonic experience (Facci, Cosentino 2018: 5; Facci 2019: 9-10).

The Catholic Church has always played a fundamental role as a social buffer in Southern Italy, due to the chronic deficiencies of public social policies. Thus, since the 1980s, Catholic institutions have enlarged their web of social services to deal with the increasing wave of immigrants (Caponio 2005: 945). The election of Pope Francis, and the corresponding rising of xenophobic tendencies in Italian society, led to an unprecedented polarisation of the Church's official political stance. The Pope and Italian priests and bishops have repeatedly called for fraternal acceptance of the migrants, pointing at the political responsibilities of the frequent tragic shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. The growing influence of the Lega Nord, a right wing, openly xenophobic political party, and their electoral success in 2018, pushed the Church to assume more explicit anti-government positions (Harlan, Pitrelli 2018).

A social performance par excellence, the religious rite cannot but express these conflicts, incorporating the symbols of the social crisis and their ritual solution. I will conclude this chapter with a great representation of the new position – both symbolical and hierarchical – of the African Church within Catholicism performed by the *chorale* Bondeko on the most important stage of all Christianity.

6.6.1 Bondeko in St. Peter's Basilica

Vatican City, Saturday 13 May 2017, St. Peter's Basilica. The Bondeko choir was invited to perform the offertory chants during the diaconal ordination of 18 pupils of the Pontifical Urban College "Propaganda Fide", for two of the new deacons, Thèodore Cyebwa and Dieudonné Mukendi, come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I filmed the entire event at ground level, with a hand-held camera. The main practical reason behind this choice is the prohibition

of using a tripod within the Vatican City's territory, except with a specific permission that I could not have obtained in time. Nonetheless, I found this limitation very useful while recording the event, as it forced me to move the camera according to my emotions and feelings, keeping the point of view of a churchgoer, without any technical support except the camera lens.

The effect of attending a Mass in St. Peter – even without believing too much in the holiness of the event – was astonishing: I was impressed by the scenic effect of this place. The churchgoers were all looking to the altar, with Bernini's Cathedra Petri and Gloria, and the light above it; the feeling of being part of a community comes through the common astonishment at being beside the holy show. Everything was enormously bigger than me: the high vault of the transept; the tall bronze statues of the Church Fathers above the altar; the dazzling, golden reflections of the sunny spring afternoon light in the glass windows and the stuccos; all of that instils a sense of perturbation, of littleness before the mysteries of the faith. Within this colossal scenario, people around me looked as small and fragile as I felt myself; the altar and the priests were so distant, I could get a glimpse of what was going on up there only by zooming in with my camera. Hence, one is pushed to look upward, to contemplate the majesty of the architecture and arts. There is a big, solid fourth wall between the believers and the altar (the divine stage), a wall that cannot be crossed.

“Propaganda Fide” is the congregation for the evangelisation of all peoples, responsible for missionary work. The new deacons come from 11 African and Asian countries. They came to Rome to be formed as priests, and then they will probably go back home. The church's pews were full of people from all over the world, especially Africa and East Asia. Black people outnumbered the rest by a significant proportion: I had never seen something like that in a European Catholic church before.

The function followed the Roman Missal, including several chants in Latin. Propaganda Fide's choir, mainly composed of African and Asian priests, opened the mass performing the Kyrie, then the

Gloria. Towards the end of the latter hymn, a Black priest started beating the time on a drum decorated with a Cameroonian flag.

By adding little details like this, the Church involves African and Asian sonorities in the mass without changing anything in the traditional structure, displaying its own openness to non-European cultures in front of the *ecclesia*. Thousands of Asian and African believers murmured prayers and hymns in Latin, at the same time as they witnessed elements of their music cultures – and those of other non-western origins – being performed inside the principal temple of Christianity. The inclusion of non-European elements in the liturgy echoes the presence of new occupants in the Church's high places, as I could guess from the various African archbishops sitting in the altar.

The offertory was when the Bondeko choir performed two Congolese chants, both in tshiLuba, language spoken in the central provinces of Congo, where the two Congolese deacons come from. The Bondekos took their positions close to Propaganda Fide's choir, praying and waiting for their moment to sing.

The chant they executed is called *Lambulayi Kavunga biyombo*, 'Offer Your Gifts to the Creator of the Universe'. It is a responsorial chant: the leading voice sings the main verse, and the choir responds "*Lambulayi we, yo-yo-yo*⁸³ *Kavunga biyombo*"; then the leading voice – it can be a different chorister than the previous one – sings the same verse or a similar one varying the name and attributes of God, while the choir always sings the same response. As in Bondeko's performances at the Congolese weekly mass, the duration of the chant varies according to the importance of the celebration, the choristers' enthusiasm and inspiration, and the public's response.

Angela was singing the leading voice during the offertory, although she barely knows the meaning of the chant's lyrics, as she originates from a kiKongo-speaking tribe and cannot understand tshiLuba. She kept repeating the monotone structure of the chant, to fill up space and time conceded to the Bondekos. The only individual

⁸³ *We* and *yo* are common vocal embellishments in tshiLuba music. They do not correspond to any lexical meaning.

variations during the execution were the continuous *mulolo*, mainly modulated by the women, and the polyrhythmic improvisations of the men who were playing various rhythmic patterns, clapping hands or tapping on their Mass handbooks or on their own thighs. The choristers seemed to have good fun while singing: they kept smiling and dancing, and several congregants started clapping their hands with the beat, looking curiously at the choir, taking pictures and videos.

Once the offertory ended, the choristers stopped singing and started reciting the credo with the rest of the believers, while collecting instruments and cables. The spectacular execution of the tshiLuba chant by the Bondeko choir was just another element in the bigger show of the Mass at St. Peter's, meant to impress the viewer. In this setting and scenario, it broke effectively with the fixity of the Latin mass, capturing the believers' attention towards something happening on the human level. People were immortalizing the choir's performance on their phone as they were the marvellous decorations of the church; and after the mass, the Bondekos were taking pictures of the Basilica and selfies with the Swiss Guards, criticizing among themselves the Korean choir who followed for being "too westernised" in their execution and repertoire. The spectators were part of the spectacle and vice versa. The sensational set of St. Peter's Basilica still works as well as it did four centuries ago, capturing the senses of the participants and moving their emotions.

The implementation of non-western elements in the liturgy allows the Catholic Church to easily include non-western priests and believers into its workforce, at the same time as it proposes a positive reception to the increasingly foreign components of the European society, also giving a cultural and political answer to the criticality of the migrant issue for public opinion in Italy. The Church produces little adjustments to its own general structure, trying to interpret the social environment and its role in today's society; the motto is *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, 'the church must always be reformed', the spirit of Vatican II.

I ended my film with a Black priest celebrating the Holy Communion in front of a transnational crowd, saying “The Body of Christ” in Italian with a foreign accent. The Mass ratifies the entrance of new elements into the Catholic world as well as showing the increasing variegation of Italian and European societies. On the other hand, it probably also confirms the extreme importance of Christianity in the cultural life of many non-European societies.

6.7 Conclusions

The Congolese liturgy represents an extraordinary example of music applied to inculturation. The scenic apparatus of lavish European Catholic churches is substituted by a sensorial staging wherein music – both played and danced to – has a pivotal role in the spiritual experience of the believers. The liturgical elaboration of the Congolese bishops expresses the cultural specificities of an African nation, legitimating the forms of traditional African beliefs after centuries of demonization on the part of colonial missionaries.

The Congolese liturgy is a collective rite, where the community is directly involved in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the management of the sacred space. A community based on religious practice, the Congolese parish behind Piazza Navona is a strongly cohesive social body, a reference point amid the mutability of the Congolese diasporic network in Italy in a time of crisis.

In the Italian diaspora, the ‘Zairean’ Rite becomes a fundamental element of cultural identity, basically the symbolic foundation of a scattered community, at the same time as it constitutes a threshold wherein it is possible to collectively mediate contact with the other. The choir is at the same time the main tourist attraction, the strongest element of Congolese national identity, and a vehicle of transculturation. It is an outpost of the Congolese Church in the capital city of Christendom, a strategic element for the agenda of African bishops.

The fieldwork experience in the Congolese parish in Rome required my personal involvement beyond filmmaking. In order to take part in this sacred diasporic space, I had to take part in the rite. The experience was intense on a personal level, pushing me through my unresolved issues and personal contradictions; yet, Congolese spirituality moved me deeply, resonating with my previous religious experiences and my beliefs.

The Congolese Rite and the intense African Catholic devotion become an example of how faith changes with society; otherwise, how it is overcome by new modern forms. The dialogic ability of the Congolese theologians is able to universalise the liturgical changes linked to the African ancestral past, escaping provincialism in their African discourse and promoting the spiritual forms of their continent as paradigm of contemporary universal Christianity. The configuration of a Christian joyful nexus attests to the complexity of Central African modes of social and political action and their capability to permeate powerful dominant narratives like the Catholic Church. Used in the diasporic space, the Congolese music liturgy is a political expression of democratic control over the ritual – which entails the political, the cultural, and so on – and a valid instrument of collective negotiation, able to guarantee a relevant role for the Congolese community in the sonic scape of Rome, despite the lack of economic resources and the collapse of the Congolese state.

Chapter seven. Conclusions

This thesis engages with musical texts of the Congolese Diaspora, performed both live and digitally, that establish a *communitas* between all the participants, blurring the line between performers and audience, through an intense physical (sensory, emotional, muscular) overexcitement that establishes an extradimensional connection between the social bodies involved and the spirit beings they refer to. This conglomerate of sound waves, frenzied bodies, mystic tensions, festive euphoria, and social bonds I define the joyful nexus. Although inextricably linked to the otherworld, in accordance with Trapido (2013, 2015, 2016, 2017) I understand the joyful nexus as a mode of social and political actions that has its roots in the Lower Congo and spread across the Atlantic in modern times along with the slave trade and the other streams of Congolese diaspora. In my research, I have explored some segments of this network. Apparently poles apart, the experiments in jazz-infused musical nationalism of Mulele Matondo Afrika in London, and the musical community of the Congolese Catholic parish in Rome have more than one element in common.

Despite the very composite nature of these music forms, a common element is the insistence by its actors on a particular emotional state: joy. Mulele and Birikiti define their particular mix of jazz influences and Congolese musical patterns as AfroJOY; the members of the Congolese Catholic Bondeko choir often refer to their musical religious experience as pure joy; and joy (*'esengo'*) is often mentioned in the Congolese Rite, shouted by the *atalaku* from the pulpit at the beginning of the celebration, right after *boboto*, 'peace,' and *bondeko*, 'brotherhood'. Joy is an emotional state linked to music: the "joyful character of Congolese people" has to be celebrated with music, *Maman* Charlotte says, distancing herself from the silent intransigency of *les Combattants*.

This emotion, here, does not depend on any specific musical form or content. The feeling of joy, as well as the perception of the beautiful, depends on the sensorial effect that the musical work

produces on the listener: sound forces evoke pleasure in the body through the senses, defining the aesthetic success of a music performance by the level of bodily involvement it produces (Mbembe 2005: 72-73). Over and above any definition of the joyful nexus, its extraordinary interest depends on Congolese musicians' ability to attract very different external and internal actors because of the bodily pleasure of their music rites. My research involvement depends on the bodily pleasure, the sensory engagement I experience in Congolese diasporic joyful rites, which I decided to rely on as a research method. The use of the camera as a collaborative device, and the choice of the music video clip as a shared audiovisual language to experiment with together with the musicians, enhanced the bodily and the non-verbal as techniques of fieldwork engagement, communication and understanding. Music video clips became an additional field to explore, and a useful tool for the musicians to promote and reflect on their music practices.

Music video clips are vital artifacts for Congolese diasporic music makers: the more their homecountry sinks into economic and political collapse, the more their stage of election is the digital. Desires are the content of this research: longing for home, the mirage of glorious success, the dream of peace, the fantasy of an absent Kinshasa, the hallucination of bohemian cosmopolitanism, invention of forgotten history and traditions, and the chimera of a redeemed Congo. Diasporic joyful nexuses are formidable devices of emotional catharsis and sublimation: from the benches of a church, in their squatted studio in front of an entry-level camera, or late at night in cheap bars, the Congolese music actors succeed in their collective effort of staging and communicating their desires. Though it is not entirely fair of me to deny any factuality to this fantastic social drama; in fact, I reckon that the ideal continuation of this research would be a physical exploration of the digital space: the ethnography of the circulation of Congolese digital music artefacts from the diaspora to Kinshasa, that is, the investigation of the impact of the performance of collective desires, and the material texture of dreams.

It may sound like as a sad conclusion: quite the opposite. The joy of the diasporic nexus comes from this endless invention and recreation of fantastic spaces, capable of attracting other actors and sympathisers. The agglutinative nature of the joyful nexus involves the dead, the other, even technology in a continuous, transcultural creation. I call it the principle of the empowering other: an inclusive attitude in music making that contradicts any discourse of cultural exclusivism or ultranationalism the research protagonists may formulate in words.

The various musical performances by Congolese diasporic music makers I have observed are structured around the rationale of involving the audience, making the bodies dance and feel what the singer is singing or what the priest is celebrating. Yet, the accent is never on the content of the lyrics per se: in fact, a large part of the audience of the Congolese diasporic music performances is unable to understand Lingala. The understanding occurs on the physical level, where the emotions are generated. These are the resonances I mention in the title: the ongoing dialogue between sound waves and bodily energetic flows, muscular movements and rhythmic interlocking.

In that sense, Congolese musical forms overcome linguistic barriers. A very complex musical code can be enjoyed regardless of the listener's provenance. Actually, both Mulele's performances in London and the Congolese liturgical chants executed by the Bondeko choir in Rome attract quite a large number of non-Congolese aficionados, some of whom are now fully part of these musical communities. The reduced importance of the verbal aspect corresponds to an increased cohesive capacity, and the potentiality to surpass cultural limitations.

Music performances become a contact zone where the European desire to consume new, exotic, or unfamiliar cultural goods joins together with the cultural xenophilia of the Congolese migrants. The reciprocal consumption is not evenly balanced: this thesis shows it is often a European audience that can explore the diasporic musical worlds, whereas the Congolese communities have to stick to their limited cultural spaces. Thus, music making empowers the Congolese migrants and allows them to interface with the receiving societies with

an additional cultural capital: the *Bondeko* choir becomes the vehicle for its amateur music members to engage with their environment and exchange new cultural experiences, giving some of them the maximum prestige for a Catholic music maker: performing at the Vatican, in front of the Pope.

Exposed to multiple influences, threat and traumatic changes over the centuries, the joyful nexus is a polyphony of discourses. The two observed musical experiences are at the margins of the most popular forms of Congolese social reproduction, and both of them formulate in ritual terms a critique of their society. Following the tradition of popular and charismatic Congolese movements, both Mulele Matondo Afrika and the Congolese Catholic parish in Rome imagine the foundation of a more equal and just society through contact with the legitimating, empowering ancestors, whose spirits circulate through the ecstatic bodies of the participants in the musical rites, dispersing vital energies, activating new meanings and new alliances, and reinvigorating the community. Current cultural flows like the Pentecostal cultural revolution in Kinshasa (Trapido 2013), chronic ultraviolence in the Congolese territory (De Boeck 2005) and the Combattants' aggressive silence seem to threaten the continuous reinvention and reproduction of the joyful nexus. Undoubtedly, it is a fascinating cultural front to research, whose future outcomes are very hard to foresee. Nonetheless, my research has witnessed the extreme vitality of this Central African mode, and the irrepressible energy of its creative actors facing the surrounding disaster.

The field of musical performances becomes a political terrain wherein the diasporic subjects negotiate their position and try – or just imagine – to establish stronger influence on their motherland. The Congolese music makers use their stage to shout their messages and push their agendas further, displaying their mastery in managing emotional stage devices. Big institutions like the Catholic Church and the music market intervene in this negotiation, trying to maximise their profits. Nonetheless, the Congolese diasporic protagonists of this research are very music savvy, and are able to navigate the complicated

streams of the music industry, refusing cheap labels and hitting the right nerves to achieve their goals.

Music is a key means by which Congolese transnational society reflects on itself and its representations (Mbembe 2005: 78). Liturgical music makers and talented jazz players try endlessly to address the main issues of their country, distributing their compositions online or dreaming of coming back to the Congo and succeeding in the local market. Music is a very strong platform for political commentary, helping the diasporic musicians to make sense of their own situation, mediating between their mixed feelings over being away from the homeland and the aspiration to make a change on the personal and collective level using the European facilities. Such a continual internal dynamic produces extraordinary music pieces, some of them constituting the material of the present research.

This music-saturated, highly ritualised form of sociability stands out for its fluidity; in fact, the observed Congolese modern forms of social expression marked by the joyful nexus – above all, Congolese popular music – tend to escape definitions and identities and accomplish their transactional nature in contact, transformation, and transplant. Hence, the joyful nexus takes multiple forms, even contradictory ones, that nonetheless establish a vast network of connections, dialogues, dreams, and desires that constitutes a fundamental stage for transnational Congolese public opinion and political debate.

Congolese musical dialogism expresses all its potential on stage: there is an anthropological intelligence in Mulele's performative strategies as there is in the meticulous liturgical work of the Congolese bishops who have succeeded in shaping their claim for a rigorously African liturgical form in the terms of the Second Vatican Council.

I have observed the multiple compromises and ambiguities in the political discourses of Africanness and African inculturation. Yet, I consider both of them as loci of existence (and occasionally, of resistance). It is an active engagement, in some cases very diplomatic, in other cases openly critical and polemic. Yet, it is always spread from

an understanding of the surrounding reality (both in local, global, and cosmic terms) and entails a strategy to engage with it and navigate through it, for the enhancement of the community, and from the point of view of the downtrodden. I define it resistance, because of its political frame. The Congo has been relentlessly targeted by the most violent and cruel historical processes of the last five centuries, from the slave trade, to inner civil wars, to the despicable Belgian colonialism, to dictatorship, foreign interference in democratic processes, again civil wars and genocides, and mass rapes. Coming from this voice, diasporic music is the expression of a resilient culture. These musical forms have a very strong direct counterpart – the music market, in Mulele’s case, and the Vatican Traditionalists for Congolese liturgists – and yet their attempts to modify their surrounding reality are generally successful, thanks to their determination and to the extraordinary richness of their cultural forms.

The fantasized continuity between postcolonial music forms and the mythical greatness of the African traditional past is ensured by the ancestors, celebrated in the Congolese liturgy, shouted out in every song of Mulele’s. In spite of the enormous diversity of religious points of view between Mulele and the Catholic parishioners of Rome, all of them conceive of the ancestors as part of their daily environment. The ancestors are not dead, and their influence is extremely important in human matters, especially when it comes to music making. The dialogic tendency of Congolese music forms also extends the influence of the ancestors to non-African people if they are good musicians. Congolese diasporic music forms compose polyphonic messages wherein different social actors and representations are piled up composing fascinating soundscapes. Music practices express a constant process of transculturation in which Congolese music migrants absorb other codes and redevelop their creative modality without losing their specificity.

The camera has been a necessary tool in this exploration. First of all, it has amplified every single sonic input, every emotion, every surprise, making my body resonate to the sound of the Congolese Diaspora. This collaborative research is improvable under several

aspects: the collaboration has been limited to some aspects, and many times I struggled with my double position as a researcher, friend and filmmaker. Nonetheless, the moments spent manoeuvring the camera or giving it to other research protagonists have been very enriching for me. The complexity, richness, and beauty of the images that the Congolese protagonists have gifted me with are overwhelming and do not cease to surprise me every time I go through the research rushes again. This thesis is an attempt to fix some of this richness, trying to make sense of my confused feeling and conflicting ideas amid the marvellous storm of Congolese diasporic sound waves.

List of audio visual works made during the research:

- Collaborative music video clips:

‘Seke Bien’ written and performed by Mulele Matondo Afrika and Mbonda Kamikaze. Video shot and edited in London, UK, by Eugenio Giorgianni and Mulele Matondo Afrika. Post-production effects by Chiara Costantino. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khxn28Aiyqg>

‘Sukola Ngai’ written by Cola Lubamba, performed by Cola Lubamba and Angela Ndawuki Mayi. Video shot and edited in Rome, Italy, by Eugenio Giorgianni.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jC5vWr8LLSg&t=40s>

‘Udi Dibue’ written and performed by Pierre Kabongo N’Kishi. Video shot and edited in Rome, Italy, by Eugenio Giorgianni.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK4Qb3bH4u4>

- Other collaborative audio visual products:

‘Bondeko’ short film shot and edited in Rome, Italy, by Eugenio Giorgianni, on occasion of the performance by the Bondeko choir of the offertory chant during the diaconal ordination celebrated in St. Peter’s Basilica on Saturday 13 May 2017. The chant in Tshiluba is called ‘Lambulayi Kavunga biyombo’ (‘Offer your gifts to the Creator of the Universe’).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hS3Xyh3TRUs&t=3s>

‘Hommage à Bakanja’ short film shot edited by Eugenio Giorgianni in Rome, Italy, in the Congolese parish on Sunday 10 July 2017. The Bondeko choir performs a chant by Don Rigobert Kyungu – who directs

the choir's execution – dedicated to Congolese Blessed Isidore Bakanja.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azGhoefhVs>

Pre-launch party promotional video for Kongo Dia Ntotila's gig at the Rich Mix, London, on 24 May 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/KongoDiaNtotilaMusic/videos/1858661940811065/>

- Videos of Kongo Dia Ntotila's performances:

Studio rehearsal 'Africa Ye Ye Ye' Stoke Newington, 15 November 2018.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_vRjejrQg0

Gig at Jam in a Jar, Haringay, 16 November 2018

'Naleli' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFWdIRasiUo>

'Mbongo' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FiG5jOds3w>

'360°' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UElfKZeSWdI>

Will Scott saxophone solo:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19WlsXYtG0Q>

Kongo Dia Ntotila live session on the Tom Robinson Show, BBC6 Music, 17 November 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6kdSXGchog>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FY0tsdmk1c>

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