

Listening Together, Thinking out Loud: Popular Music and Political Consciousness in Congo-Zaire

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Abstract: This text argues that by watching people who listen to music, we can understand the unfolding of political events in the popular imagination in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Because listening to music in this context is very often a social activity, music fans make associations between their individual experiences and the political history of their country, at times articulating a new political consciousness as something emergent. After presenting three examples of this political “prise de conscience” during the Mobutu regime—the beginning of opposition, the period of structural adjustment and the fall of the regime—I analyze the relationship between political consciousness and popular music via a discussion of interpersonal listening: listening together, thinking out loud.

Résumé : Le propos de cet article est qu'en observant les gens qui écoutent de la musique, nous pouvons comprendre le déroulement des événements politiques de la République démocratique du Congo. Écouter de la musique dans ce contexte étant très une activité sociale, les auditeurs font souvent des liens entre leurs expériences individuelles et l'histoire politique de leur pays, en présentant parfois leur nouvelle conscience politique comme quelque chose d'émergent. Après avoir présenté trois exemples de cette « prise de conscience » politique sous le régime de Mobutu – le début de l'opposition, la période d'ajustement structurel et la chute du régime – j'analyse la relation entre la conscience politique et la musique populaire à travers une discussion interpersonnelle : écouter ensemble, penser à haute voix.

The story behind this text begins in the fall of 1997, in the living room of a colleague at the University of Michigan. Together with two Congolese colleagues, we had been invited to entertain during an informal evening event during a conference about youth, culture and recent political events in Zaïre. In the spirit of the conference we organized a short performance about subversive messages in Congolese popular music. One of the songs chosen was the composition of a musician whose father had been assassinated

shortly after independence in 1960. In the lyrics of the song, the artist sings the lament of a man who will never see his son again:

The boat I am in will not stop
 Until its final destination
 I will be gone forever
 I will get off in America
 I am a slave, working on others' lands
 Oh! Lord, the black man has suffered so
 Our hearts are crushed, our families divided
 They started with the Mau Mau
 And now they kill all the gods of the Congo
 Today, they separated me from my son
 It hurts so bad I can barely speak
 So many thoughts invade my mind
 I will never again see my homeland¹

J.P. Busé (formerly of Zaïko Langa Langa), the singer with whom I organized the *soirée*, chose this song not only because the composer was a personal friend of his, but also because it reminded him of his youth in Kisangani. During the last part of the performance, after several days of thought and discussion about the history of violence in his country, J.P. broke into tears. This songbird, who was known for being able to soar effortlessly through the complex phrasing of Congolese rumba, was suddenly incapable of singing. His voiced cracked. He tried again, but no sound came from his mouth. Then he turned his back to the small audience that was gathered in front of us and tried to gather himself as tears ran down his face. My colleague Mbala Nkanga and I, both confused by what was happening, began singing the chorus of the song (*Humanity, Humanity-oh...*), while J.P., holding himself like a baby, rocked back and forth until the end of the song.

When the song was finally over, J.P. took a deep breath and turned toward the audience to try to explain what had happened:

I'm sorry, I really am. I have never spoken about this before. It's difficult to ... well, in 1963 when the rebels approached, we did not think that we would be targets ... So when they broke down the door at our house we didn't know what to do. They told us to wait outside and to watch while they emptied out everything that we had of any value then they lit the house on fire ... We couldn't do anything. This song made it possible for me to express some

emotions that I had been ignoring for a very long time. I feel a lot better now ... thank you. (October 1997)

By telling this story, J.P. was searching for the words to try to explain not only what happened that night in Ann Arbor, but also what happened that night in Kisangani; two events linked by the performance of a song. Thus, in the story he told, we can see the complex interactions between popular culture and memory about violence. Violence is an integral part of the political economy and of the history of Congo-Zaire, and the stories of people affected by this violence demonstrate that memory functions at the intersection of individual and collective identity (Foxen 2007; Jewsiewicki 1993). The stories of the victims of violence express themselves through a feeling of powerlessness, the incapacity to act and speak that is inevitably tied to the faculty of memory (Antze & Lambek 1996). When emotions creep up on us, memories are mobilized and a personal story can be told. Different forms of artistic expression—such as music, writing and dance—facilitate the telling of such stories, in part because they depend on the presence of an audience that can play the role of witness but also of catalyst.

Sentiment, Structure, Emergence

To borrow an expression from the historian Henry Rousso (1994, with Conan), I would like to explore the conditions that make it possible for the *past to pass*. In order for memory to be mobilized, it needs to go beyond bodily experience to language, without, however, becoming disassociated from the body. The creation of a narrative about the past requires us to recognize that time is not singular or linear, but that it expresses itself through a series of ruptures that mediate between the past and expectations about the future (Jewsiewicki and White 2005). Be it through representations of a faraway past (Fabian 1996; White 2002) or through more recent events (Jewsiewicki 1999), popular culture remembers the past in order to give meaning to the present, and thus memory is not only socially constructed, but it is also collective (Hawlbachs 1968). In the cases presented here, listening to popular music together makes it possible to see how people in the Congo became increasingly aware of political processes and problems and how this increased political consciousness was brought to bear on collective representations and individual trajectories.²

Raymond Williams used the expression “structures of feeling” to explain the complex relationship between individual and social experience.³ This idea, which is often cited but rarely explained, could help us understand

how popular culture is related to emergent forms of political consciousness. According to Williams, art is inseparable from history (1977: 133), but the exact nature of this connection is context dependent and has to be explained. If it is true that culture (here used in the anthropological register) evolves through what Mannheim and Tedlock refer to as “dialogic emergence” (1995), it is also true that anthropology provides very few models for explaining how knowledge about culture is actually produced (White and Strohm 2014). Even in its most “dialogical” form—North American post-modernism—anthropological theories about social experience are reduced to a series of facile formulas about reflexivity or plurivocality (ibid). Interestingly, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer situates understanding in moments of intersubjectivity where the self and the other do not share the same vision but rather a horizon that is constantly moving and being redefined. In Gadamer’s dialogical hermeneutics, prejudice is not an obstacle to understanding but rather a resource for reworking truth through a series of questions, answers and recalibrations. According to this model, knowledge is not the result of “mysterious communion of souls, but a participation in a common signification” (Gadamer 1996: 319, my translation).

In this text I will analyse a series of interviews, each of which represents a specific social and ethnographic context. The first two took place in Montreal in February of 2006 and its participants, most of whom were from the Congolese city of Lubumbashi (in the southeastern part of the D.R. Congo), had also spent a significant time in the capital city of Kinshasa (located nearly 1000 miles to the northwest). Their identity as a group is specific among the larger Congolese community: they are *kinois* (from Kinshasa) but they are also *lushois* (from Lubumbashi), and they live as immigrants in French-speaking Canada. The group interviews made it very clear that they feel like foreigners, not only in Montreal but also in Kinshasa. This feeling most likely has an impact on their way of interpreting popular music and political history. Their position of relative marginality (in addition, many of them have more education than the average *kinois*) raises the question of representativeness. This particular group interview ended up being not only the longest, but also the last of a series of interviews that took place in Kinshasa and Montreal as part of a larger research project on the ethnographic study of audiences (White and Yoka 2010). Interviews took place far away from the Congo and this is not incidental for my interlocutors, especially if one considers the fact that physical and temporal distance can have an impact on the way that people remember.⁴

The analysis presented here gives a central place to the role of conversation.⁵ I have decided to reproduce some of these exchanges in

their entirety not only because in some cases the ideas being expressed are apparently being articulated for the first time, but also because the back and forth between the researcher and the research participants enables the reader to observe the research process as it is unfolding and question the validity of the claims that are made as part of the analysis. In this text I am not setting out to show that popular music is political—a complex question that requires further reflection (White 2008)—rather, that by watching people who listen to music, we can understand the unfolding of political events in the popular imagination, what people in Kinshasa refer to as “la conjuncture.” By listening to music together—because listening to music in this context is very often a social activity—music fans make associations between their individual experiences and the political history of their country, at times articulating a new political consciousness that seems similar to Williams’ notion of “structures of feeling.” After presenting three examples of this political “prise de conscience” during the Mobutu regime—the beginning of opposition, the period of structural adjustment and the fall of the regime—I analyze the relationship between political consciousness and popular music via a discussion of interpersonal listening: listening together, thinking out loud.

Take 1: Manuaku is Gone, Long Live Manuaku!

As the flagship group of the third generation of Congolese popular dance music, Zaiko Langa Langa always held a special place in the hearts of fans in Kinshasa, especially among those born following World War II. Partly inspired by the musical groups made up of Congolese students living in Belgium in the 1960s, “Zaiko” (as it is commonly referred to) came to stand for an entire generation of music lovers and fans. The group’s success as the leader of the “new wave” of *la musique zaïroise* was due to its delirious stage presence, but also because Zaiko is one of the rare well-known groups in the history of Congolese popular music to have emerged without the tutelage of musical elders. By breaking with the hegemony of the second generation of popular musicians in Kinshasa (especially with the “cartel” of Franco, Tabu Ley and Verckys) Zaiko quickly marked the popular imagination of its generation. From the perspective of people from Kinshasa, Zaiko represented not only a new way of playing music, but also a new way of organizing music, since the group was not organized around a single charismatic leader but a small number of “co-fondateurs” (White 2008).

Created in 1969, Zaiko remained more or less stable until 1973, the

year of its first split, which led to the creation of the group Isifi Lokole.⁶ Six years later the group went through another transition, but this time the splinter group held on to a part of the group's original name, as is commonly the practice in Kinshasa. The group Grand Zaiko Wawa was led by the musical guitar genius Félix Manuaku, also known as Pépé Fély. Another series of splinters would occur in 1981 and then again at the end of the 1980s, but the departure of Manuaku in 1979 seems to have been the splinter that had the most impact on local audiences in Kinshasa:

Participant 1: Isifi didn't work very well, so it didn't really affect Zaiko that much ... because when Wemba left Zaiko, he wasn't a big star yet. He was just one singer among many.

Bob White: OK, so it didn't really feel like a split ...

P1: When Manuaku left, I never experienced anything like that.

Participant 2: Manuaku wanted to bring another sound, another rhythm to the music. He had this double-neck guitar, he had this "wawa" sound, a little bit more rock. His colleague Nyoka Longo didn't like this very much. He said: "This is not our sound. We just do *seben*" [the fast-paced dance section of Congolese popular music]. He had this crazy wawa sound. What was that song again where he starts playing that way ... ? [participants try to remember the name of the song]. And then he brought musicians with him when he left. There was Chekedan, Yenga-Yenga, even Evoloko. There was ... anyway a certain number of people came into the group through him. So these people were suspended and Manuaku was not notified. And he was the leader of the group, Nyoka Longo was number two. When Manuaku tried to defend the people that were suspended, everyone voted against him and he decided to leave the group.

BW: So when you learned that he decided to leave the group it was pretty serious?

Participant 3: It was very serious. I was in Matonge [an important neighbourhood associated with music in Kinshasa] that day. All the taxis stopped in the streets. "Pépé Fély left Zaiko." I was totally confused.

P1: It's like to bring a child into the world and then you turn it away. It was a very important event.

BW: But he left of his own will ... ?

P2: They wanted to get rid of his people. He brought them into the group and ...

P1: He was the leader of the group and he didn't even know it was happening.

BW: So he starts a new group. What effect did this have on you to hear that he was no longer part of Zaiko?

P1: Me, personally, I was really broken up over this [j'en étais malade].

P3: Actually we were all that way. It was impossible to imagine Zaiko without Pépé Fély.

P1: For everyone that followed Zaiko, it was the death of Zaiko. We couldn't see where the strength of Zaiko could come from. Everything revolved around Manuaku.

BW: You mean in terms of the sound or the organization of the group?

Participant 4: The sound. He was the soloist.

P1: Everything was based on him. It was him ...

P2: You have to understand, when you say it was based on him it's because when you take a song like "Eluzam," for example. This guy Manuaku, even Nico [the most famous guitarist of the previous generation] said it: I only see one [guitarist in the third generation].

P4: Because "Eluzam," it was a song ... in concert it was really something. When they played "Eluzam" or "Onassis," it was amazing. But who made it possible? Manuaku. That's why people would go to Zaiko concerts because they wanted to see how the musicians were in person. Manuaku was always calm and collected.

BW: You are not alone; a lot of people have told me similar things about Zaiko. But why would it be a problem that he leaves the group? They are just going to continue playing elsewhere right?

P4: He was the guardian of the group's rhythm.

P1: Not so much that he was the guardian, but many people believed that Zaiko belonged to him. Imagine that one day you learn that Franco leaves OK Jazz ... That's exactly what happened with Manuaku and Zaiko.

P3: We thought that Zaiko was his and that he abandoned it.

P1: It's like if today Koffi Olomide decides to leave Quartier Latin.

BW: Tell me if I am going too far here, but could we say that the departure of Manuaku was a deception also because people thought he was a good leader?

P1: Yes that's right.

[several participants nod in agreement]: Yes, that's right !

P3: Manuaku's departure caused a lot of disruption in the group also. For me personally, I didn't think of Manuaku as just another musician. And the fact that he left the group helped me think through certain things. It seemed impossible. He ran this group and he left the group in support of people that were a minority, for people that were not even well known.

BW: That's really interesting. How do you explain what he did?

P1: With hindsight I think of this as a noble gesture [geste de grandeur]. And at that time people put a lot of pressure on him, saying that he shouldn't do it. But he had his reasons. He thought he could trust the other members of the group. And he thought there should be some degree of consultation. When the decision was made behind his back, he said, "I am leaving and I am not coming back."

[Group interview, Montréal, February 18, 2006]

This exchange shows that the departure of Manuaku had a profound effect on fans, enough in fact that 25 years later, they remember clearly how they felt and where they were standing ("j'en étais malade," "the taxis stopped in the streets"). Leaving the group of which he was the leader was understood as something honourable ("geste de grandeur"), and Manuaku was acting based on principles ("He left the group in support of people who were in the minority"). According to the participants, in spite of his power within the group, he renounced his status as co-founder in order to defend the people that were forced out. He also withdrew as a sign of protest against the refusal to function on a consensual basis. What happened to Manuaku was not insignificant, especially since his signature sound was so important to the success of the group ("Everything was based on him," "He was the guardian of the rhythm"). But his leadership status was also based on his temperament ("Manuaku lui, c'était le calme").

The disruption at the heart of Zaïko Langa Langa corresponded with a period of political instability at the national level in Mobutu's Zaire. It was, after all, during the second half of the 1970s that the first cracks began to appear in Mobutu's authoritarian system of political rule. After the disastrous experience of nationalization ("zaïrianisation" and "rétrocession"), and the increasingly visible excess of the only officially recognized political party (MPR), the legitimacy of the Mobutu regime reached a new low in the beginning of the 1980s. The international community, civil society and especially the members

of parliament that would later found the UDPS (Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social) began to apply pressure for the democratization of a “revolution” that seemed to have no end. In December of 1980, the leader of the UDPS, Étienne Tshisekedi, and twelve of his colleagues signed the famous “lettre des 13 parlementaires” that denounced the abuses of the Mobutu government and the concentration of power. Unfortunately, explains the historian Isidor Ndaywel è Nziem, “[t]his initiative was poorly received. The authors of the letter were stripped of their parliamentary privileges and arrested” (1998: 759, my translation). Reduced to internal exile, those who signed the letter formulated a first form of political opposition to Mobutu. As with the co-founders of Zaiko, Mobutu permitted his personal objectives to take precedence over the political process. Indeed, in a very similar way, this gesture of contestation was permanently etched on the collective memory and moral imagination of an entire generation of Congolese.

Take 2: Koffi Olomide and the Futility of Education

The first attempts to break with the Zaiko generation did not occur until the first half of the 1980s, when the protégés of Papa Wemba first became known as artists in their own right, especially Kester Emeneya and Koffi Olomide. From early on in his career, Olomide became known for the lyrics he wrote for Papa Wemba beginning in the late 1970s. Olomide’s first solo recordings were quite successful, highlighting not only his songwriting talent, but also his skills as a crooner. Contrary to the dance-oriented music of Zaiko (“musique d’ambiance”), Olomide used his facility for poetic, romantic lyrics to carve out a new space in a declining national record industry. In the beginning of the 1990s, when he decided to integrate choreographed dancing and the *seben* into his music, he reached a level of commercial success that had rarely been seen before, and that continued well into the 2000s.

At one level, Olomide’s formula, bringing together melancholy romantic melodies with high-energy extended dance sections, certainly had an impact on the way that people compose and produce music in Kinshasa, especially given the attention that he paid to professional quality recording and promotions. By the mid-1990s he seemed to dominate the local music industry and his mid-career album entitled *V12* is still considered one of the best albums ever produced in the genre. It is also important to mention that during this period Olomide was one of the very few popular musicians to have completed a university degree. Even though he did not specialize in music or arts (apparently he studied marketing in Bordeaux, France), he became

known as a poet, following in the footsteps of Lutumba Simaro (OK Jazz) and preparing the way for the musical poets of generations to come (Reddy Amisi of Viva La Musica and later Félix Wazekwa). These two aspects of Olomide's career, one referring to the melancholy nature of his music and the other reflecting on him as someone who had pursued his studies ("qui a été à l'école") can be seen in the comments that participants in the group interviews made with regards to his musical contribution:

Bob White: So what is the relationship with *Objectif 80*?⁷

P1: There was a lot of optimism about *Objectif 80*. With this plan a lot of people thought that things were going to get better, but nothing happened. This is when a lot of people started thinking about leaving the country.

BW: Okay, let's start with this. [Speaking to P1]: You said that before this time people wanted to leave the country and that they intended to return. But during this period was it because of their age or because of the political situation that people wanted to leave without the intention of coming back home?

P3: To answer your question ... during that period, those of us that were young we had hopes for a better life with *Objectif 80*. We had lived through the 1970s where Mobutu was able to create expectations for a better future and then he began talking about *Objectif 80* ... so we started thinking about the future differently. We thought to ourselves that in the 1980s there would be real change.

P1: We were in the second year of our university studies and we thought to ourselves that in two years we would have a good job, maybe become a manager in a company. And then all of a sudden the beginning of the 1980s ...

BW: I don't want to interrupt you, but we know what happened in the economy of the late 1970s. There was the oil crisis and then there was zairianisation. In the music industry, there was only Mazadisc. [When Mobutu began] taking companies and giving them to his political allies or family members, I think this had a lot of impact on the economy.

P3: That's right. So this changed the economy, but we weren't ...

P1: Ordinary people didn't see this change.

P2: When Mobutu changed the currency, from Congolese Francs to Zaires, the economists could see that things were going to spin out of control.

BW: So they saw what was coming. How did most people feel about the change of currency, were they excited about it or indifferent?

P1: The masses were happy because they were being told that this was good for them. One Zaire was worth two dollars!

P2: You see, [turning to researcher] this is what my colleague was explaining to you: it was like in the beginning of *animation politique* [political rallies and propaganda]; most people liked the idea. It made them feel good. And for these people at first zairianisation made them feel good too. But for people who saw what was happening ...

BW: It's like there were expectations that were created with *Objectif 80*, then 1980 arrives ...

Participant 5: And that's what Mobutu said to the people: "If we work hard, we will have results."

BW: The feeling of disillusionment with regards to *Objectif 80*, was there any link between this and what you felt about the situation with Manuaku? I might be going too far, sorry, but it seems like there is a connection there ...

P4: Non, this is just political.

P1: [Disagreeing with P4] Well actually we saw our fathers who said they were eliminating jobs at work and our professors who were going on strike. Why were they on strike? Because the economy was going downhill. You talk to your mother just to get money for transportation ... At that time, there was not television everywhere and not just anyone had enough money to buy cassettes and all that ...

P3: Why are we talking about this? It's important because the beginning of the 1980s was the first time that students—I was a student at that time—became aware of their situation. People started realizing that what they were telling us about the future was not true and that in reality things were getting worse. And then we started seeing the International Monetary Fund, with all the structural adjustment programs ... so people started saying "Oh, things are really bad!"

P1: For me, this was during the time that Olomide was just starting. I was a student. I had a friend and the only records he had was Olomide. We used to go to his place to listen to songs like "Anibo" and [during that period] we went on strike. During the strike we used to go to his room and listen to "Anibo" so economically

speaking, these are songs that are associated with bad memories. By bad memories I mean it makes me think of a period where we felt like we had no future. To achieve our objectives ... actually were like a transitional generation. Most of our parents had not been to university. They pushed us to complete our studies. When you start university and you realize that you're not actually going anywhere, what is left? You put on a record and you listen. It's not that it was bad, it wasn't bad; we listened to that music and it kind of put us in a state of melancholy.

(Group interview, Montréal, February 18, 2006)

This exchange with people who were students during the 1980s reminds them of the experience of the economic and political transition and the impact of this transition on their plans for the future. Young people in this position were constrained by their position in society; in relative terms, they were fortunate because they were attending university, but they were also marginalized by the arbitrary nature of the political system that made it difficult for them to get jobs since they were not from families with wealth or political connections. At the same time, they were disillusioned by the image of a young musician who, by the force of his words, had achieved a certain degree of success that had absolutely nothing to do with his education. This "sacrificed generation" believed that independence had been "eaten" ("bouffé") by their fathers (Jewsiewicki and White 2005), and their optimism for the future did not last. It is a generation that had the impression of being stuck between the promise of education and the injustice of political favouritism ("most of our parents had not been to university"). By virtue of their situation, these young people could not avoid becoming cynical about a political system that constantly displaced the problems of governance, all the while performing a sort of "autocritique" in order to arrive at the same conclusion, in the name of "the people." This created a new set of promises that were impossible to keep.

For these young people, the signs of the economic crisis were very clear: the presence of the IMF, the loss of jobs, the need to ask parents for spending money. In 1982, the Blumenthal Report exposed the abuses of the first 15 years of the Mobutu government, and a significant number of humanitarian organizations and international companies began withdrawing their investments in Zaire. In 1983, Mobutu declares himself "Maréchal." The activities of *animation politique* were in full swing (White 2006), as if all the regime's legitimacy was being held together by a fragile thread made up of dances, uniforms and slogans. While participating in widespread strikes, students listened to music in order to console themselves, but music did not

hide the harsh reality of their future: “What is left? You put on a record and you listen.” Twenty years later, this music reminds people of a period of financial insecurity and anxiety about the future (“These are songs that are associated with bad memories,” “We felt like we had no future”) when music was one of the only ways of coming to terms with despair (“We listened to that music and it kind of put us in a state of melancholy”).

Take 3: Wenge Musica and the Spectre of Ethnic Conflict

With the arrival of the soon-to-be super-group Wenge Musica at the end of the 1980s, the fourth generation of Congolese popular dance music was born. The creation of Wenge resembled that of Zaïko one generation earlier in the sense that the group was led by a series of co-founders and not a single charismatic leader. Like Zaïko (and before them OK Jazz), Wenge Musica broke into the music scene without the help of their elders. The group experienced its first splinter relatively early with the departure of Marie-Paul (Wenge El-Paris) in 1993, but it remained relatively stable until the middle of the 1990s. With the release of his first solo album *Feux de l'amour* (1996), co-founder J.B. M'piana exacerbated a tension between himself and his primary rival in the group, Werrason. One Saturday evening in December 1996, during a concert at the upscale Intercontinental Hotel in downtown Kinshasa, the separation of Wenge seemed inevitable and rumors immediately began to circulate about the conflict and the group's future.

Following a protest organized by the group's fans who set out to keep the group together, the government expressed its concern that this situation might be potentially explosive, especially given that the political movement led by Laurent Désiré Kabila was gaining momentum in the eastern part of the country. In December 1997, the Minister of Information and Cultural Affairs organized a meeting between the two artists, J.B. M'piana and Ngiamu Werrason in order to search for a solution to their conflict and maintain peace among musicians and among the youth of Kinshasa: “... the musicians were asked to not be distracted at a time when there is a need for unity in the name of national reconstruction” (cited in Kasongo 1997). Unfortunately this meeting was destined to fail and several days later, Wenge Musica split into two groups: Wenge Musica BCBG (J.B. M'piana) and Wenge Musica Maison Mère (Werrason).

In Kinshasa at the end of the 1990s, it seemed as though the conflict and rivalry between M'piana and Werrason dominated the social and musical landscape of the city. It was very rare for people not to have an opinion on this

topic and the vast majority of young people in the city had chosen either one camp or the other. Participants in group interviews remember this period as one that was particularly divisive, not only in terms of national politics but also at the level of neighbourhoods and even families. In the narratives of young people from this period, the two conflicts—the one in the East of the country and the one between the rival Wenges—became inextricably linked:

J.B.'s album was really a turning point in political terms ... from that moment on, the conflict between the musicians became worse and for the first time at the level of individual neighbourhoods, people started trying to see who was who [meaning who supported which side of the conflict]. (group interview, Montréal, May 15, 2005)

A young man in his twenties explained to us that he had “lost a lot of friends during that period” (*ibid.*). Here he was referring not only to those who had left the Congo because of political instability, but also to the fact that the Wenge conflict seemed to be divided people along ethnic lines. People from the center of the country (Kasai) supported J.B. and those from regions closer to Kinshasa (especially Bandundu) Werrason. The ethnic makeup of the group never seemed to be a problem in the past, and the fact that the split in the group was perceived in ethnic terms signalled a structural change, as much in political life as in the social organization of the popular music industry.⁸ Faced with this tension, many young people asked themselves the question of whether the Congo had the potential to become another Rwanda.

Thinking Out Loud Together

In the Congo, where listening is a fundamentally social activity, popular music is charged with political and cultural meaning; in many ways it is a laboratory for understanding the “moral imagination” (Beidelman 1993). But it is not enough to observe that popular music is important to the people who listen to it. On the contrary, it is necessary to understand how music is mobilized in the production of everyday language and meaning. For most Congolese, the extra-musical aspects of music are every bit as important as the music itself (White 2011). As an illustration, consider the fact that in the three examples presented above, there is very little reference to the lyrics of the songs or even the sound. In the context of our interviews, what seemed to most interest participants was the social organization of musical groups, and participants

very often put this information to good use in order to formulate social critique and political analyses. When Manuaku left Zaiko to protest against the actions of his co-founders, young people began to question conventional wisdom about what it means to be a good leader (“In the Congo, the *chef* can’t quit like that!”). Listening to Koffi Olomide’s music, students became aware of an increasingly arbitrary political system and grew cynical about education as a means of social mobility. With the threat of Wenge splitting, young people began to feel the effects of divisiveness related to a conflict that would end up taking millions of lives and leading to even more inestimable costs in terms of human livelihood and displacement.

What makes political consciousness possible? First of all there is memory. Memory gives coherence to events from the past in order to make meaning in the present (Fabian 1996).⁹ Popular culture is like a coherence machine, enabling the reproduction of values without completely unraveling the social world, which is constantly faced with new challenges and (especially in this context) crisis. Either by taking distance from pain or by neutralizing it, popular culture provides us with the tools to mobilize memory and move beyond the absurd and unsayable. Next, there is the music. Through its capacity to engrave memories into the body, music plays a primordial function. More than other forms of expressive culture, music does a particular form of work, and not only in Africa. By this I do not mean that music constitutes a universal language that goes beyond linguistic barriers, but rather that wherever music takes place it facilitates new forms of communication and shared experience. If music facilitates expression, it is not because it transcends words, but on the contrary because of how it makes it possible for us to articulate meaning. It is in this sense that we must take seriously the intersubjectivity of interpersonal listening. Faced with one or more interlocutors, the self articulates new narratives and new angles to old narratives. As narratives are transformed, the self is transformed as well.

What better example of the intersubjective aspect of knowledge than the cathartic melody sung by J.P. Busé during a conference about violence in the Congo? In his reaction to my text, Serge Makobo questioned the role of the observer in the analysis of this event:

Maybe it would be interesting for Bob to tell us what motivated him to add his voice to the song. In other words, what was the feeling that Bob and his colleague Mbala Nkanga felt when they were both suddenly faced with the reaction of J.P. who had to come to terms with the pain of his memory? How can we explain, in scientific terms, this experience of pain felt by someone

else? How can researchers understand the sharing of an ancient memory that is lived in the present? (Personal communication, July 13, 2007).

At one level, J.P.'s narrative explains an unexpected discovery: music's capacity to do the work of memory. As a researcher concerned with the question of popular culture and social experience, I believe that this discovery in one way or another prepared me for those discoveries that would occur later in the group interviews associated with this research. Thus I see J.P.'s narrative as a turning point in my research on popular music in the Congo and the inclusion of his story makes it possible to better understand how knowledge is co-produced in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. My first reaction to J.P.'s tears was one of confusion and anxiety, not so much for the performance that we had prepared, but for J.P., who was visibly "en dehors de lui" (outside of himself). But as soon as we finished the song and he took the microphone, I had a feeling of relief and admiration, since I know it took a great deal of courage to talk about what had happened. Research and friendship share certain common characteristics, in the sense that they both depend on the capacity to reveal, little by little, the numerous layers of complexity that are associated with a subject matter that is simultaneously individual, social and universal. If we are able to understand anything about what happened that day, it is not because we are somehow able to put ourselves in the shoes of J.P. and what he experienced (Gadamer's "mysterious communion of souls"). This would simply be impossible. Rather, it is due to our willingness to accompany him in the articulation of something that is a fundamental part of his individual identity and yet much larger than him alone. And because understanding cannot function any other way, we are also transformed by the telling of this story.

The idea of *thinking out loud together* may seem complex, especially if we limit ourselves to a communicative model where language serves to simply externalize the thought or experience of a coherent, essential self as the one referred to in much of the literature on phenomenology. A hermeneutic definition of language enables a much more dynamic form of analysis. In the words of Gadamer, for whom every understanding is already a form of interpretation, "as soon as we understand, we understand differently" (1996: 318, my translation). Thus it is through contact with the other that the self becomes aware of him or herself (Mead 1967). That day, during the last group interview that took place in Montreal, we exchanged for more than six hours about Zaiko, Mobutu and popular music in the Congo. My persistent curiosity about the relationship between popular music and political culture did not

discourage my interlocutors. On the contrary, the energy of our common interest for this subject made us push our limits in terms of analyzing these two domains of ostensibly unrelated practice. Like a path in the forest, the discussion about popular music always seemed to turn back on itself in order to talk about politics. And most of us that day seemed fully content to follow the path where it might lead.

Though the reader may be uncomfortable with this proposition, I am not in the least bit concerned with the impact of my questions on the evolution of our discussion during the interview. This is an old question that continues to haunt Western philosophy and especially Western social sciences, whose practitioners are still restrained by the yoke of scientific objectivity (White and Strohm 2014). As Gadamer suggests, the greatest prejudice of science is its problem with prejudice (1996: 291). From this point of view, my presence does not constitute a distortion, but rather an object of study in and of itself. The group interviews attempted to recreate a “natural” atmosphere where the world is explained and also remade through listening and speech, a sort of “working through together.”¹⁰ This listening situation is clearly different from the thousands of exchanges that take place every day in Kinshasa around a table in an open-air bar, filled with empty bottles of beer and soda. And it is exactly this difference that would seem to have permitted a more in-depth reflection about the emergence of political consciousness. What was of most interest to me in these interviews was the degree of concentration that was visible in the expression of certain participants, especially those that attempted to answer my questions to my—and to their—satisfaction. It was also the articulation of certain links that had been felt for a long time (sometimes over several decades), but that had never been named or made explicit: family and rebellion, music and abuse of authority, speech and social mobility, splintering and national unity. It is this aspect of *thinking out loud together* that represents our capacity to surpass ourselves; as soon as we understand, we understand differently.

The examples presented in this text explore different moments in which certain Congolese became conscious of the failures of their political system. Though it might be related, this is not necessarily the construction of a collective narrative about national identity.¹¹ These failings become particularly obvious when they are manifested through expressive culture (not only music; see Fabian 1996; Jewsiewicki 1993) and at specific moments in history, especially in times of crisis. The feeling of uncertainty is simultaneously private and public, individual and social. It is a feeling that is often vague and abstract, but during these moments of “conjuncture,” the subjective experience of politics expresses itself in very concrete terms: how to ensure responsible leadership

in the face of adversity? How to grasp social mobility when it is impossible to finish the school year? How to avoid the rise of regional tensions that seem to call up fears of ethnic conflict? When Congolese people evoke these moments of “conjuncture,” this is the conjuncture they are referring to: a moment in history where music constitutes one of the best means for coming to terms with the fear that something truly terrible could happen. 🌿

Notes

This article was originally published in French and is reprinted here by kind permission of Éditions l’Harmattan (translation by Bob White):

White, Bob W. 2010. *Écouter ensemble, penser tout haut : Musique populaire et la prise de conscience politique au Congo-Zaire, dans Musique populaire et société à Kinshasa : L’ethnographie de l’écoute*, 211-238. Dir. Bob W. White et Lye M. Yoka. Paris : L’Harmattan.

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1. Excerpt from the song « Humanité », Max Mounkali, c.1965

2. My use of the term “political consciousness” is inspired by Gadamer’s notion of “historical consciousness.” According to Gadamer, historical consciousness is a process by which social actors use the past as a resource for the present in order to renew their understanding of the present. Because of this double movement, Gadamer refers to a certain “surexcitation” (1996: 14) that resembles more or less the emergent quality of the “structures of feeling” discussed by Raymond Williams. In the original French version of this text (see White and Yoka 2010), I use the term “prise de conscience” to emphasize this emergent quality.

3. Williams does not give an elaborate definition of this term. In very general terms he presents “structures of feeling” as a way of defining the “... forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process” (Williams 1977: 133). His analysis places emphasis on the emergent (meaning

present but unarticulated) nature of these structures.

4. In the final case presented below, group interviews were conducted with a group of young Congolese men in their twenties, all originally from Kinshasa, with families of various ethnolinguistic origins within the Congo.

5. I take conversation to be an event as well as a metaphor. The analysis of conversation has evolved over recent decades in a variety of disciplines, especially in anthropology, linguistics, communications and sociology. The methodology used in this text is inspired by 1) the sociolinguistic analysis of Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) that emphasized communicative breakdowns in intercultural settings and 2) discourse analysis using the notion of “cultural models” (see Holland and Quinn 1987). See also Bauman and Sherzer (1975) for an overview of the “ethnography of speaking” literature.

6. For more about the phenomenon of splintering in Congolese popular dance music, see White (2008). Tsambu (2004) explores splintering as an expression of symbolic violence among performers and consumers of popular music in Kinshasa.

7. “Objectif 80” refers to a series of programs and policies proposed by the Mobutu government to re-energize the national economy in response to the political and economic instability of the second half of the 1970s.

8. In response to this interpretation, Lye Yoka offered the following analysis: “I am skeptical about placing too much emphasis on the ethnic dimension during the Wenge period. From my point of view, contrary to Thu Zaina and Zaiko (whose fans were more educated and affluent), Wenge’s fan base is made up primarily of undereducated unemployed youth, *shégués* [street children]. The real and profound rivalries come from the different types of fans recruited from these categories. And how can a fan who is socially marginal be sensitive to categories of ethnic belonging if he is not himself manipulated by political and economic lobbying groups?” (Personal communication, April 24, 2008, my translation).

9. The comments of Dieudonné Mbala Nkanga insist on the importance of memory in the constitution of social experience: “Together J.P. and I discussed violence and the symbolism of violence in Congolese popular music. We spoke about the symbolism of the boat and of the canoe in Congolese music in particular and in music in general. We associated the boat and the canoe with departures that do not involve a return, more specifically that of the slave trade. It was then that these memories of the rebellion in the 1960s in Kisangani came back to him. He was very moved by the depth of the song that he was singing for so long without having been fully aware of what it was saying; up until then he was only conscious of [the] song’s melody and its beauty. Then he began to make associations with his own life. He remembered the way that he and his brothers fled from Kisangani under threat from the rebels who had assassinated his father. They left in a canoe. Later that night during the improvised performance everything came together and hit him at the moment when he was least expecting it. This is why it is important to think about MEMORY in terms of its capacity to resurrect emotions” (Personal communication, April 21, 2008).

10. I borrow this expression from John Nimis (Personal communication, July 19, 2007).

11. If there is a moment where the articulation of a national narrative plays an important role, it is most likely during the authenticity campaigns organized by the Mobutu regime in the 1970s and 1980s (White 2006).

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