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'Faut que ça rappe!': Musical revitalization, social healing and the politics of performance in the Gabonese rap world (2009–20)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to contribute to our understanding of how local rap worlds evolve by describing the successive processes of the decline and revitalization of rap music in Gabon between 2009 and 2020, and by questioning the technologies and mediations employed for that purpose. This article considers how these transformations overlap with a history of complex relationships between music and politics, arguing that the revitalization of the rap world was related to a broader attempt at social healing and reconciliation after a violent political conflict. It stems from a long-term ethnography study conducted in Libreville and the Gabonese diaspora from 2008 to 2016 and on the analysis of two recent rap projects launched in Libreville: 'Bwiti Gang Cypher' and 'Catalogue Challenge'. Through the analysis of these two performances, I highlight how the attempt at revitalization was relying on a complex mix of mediations and technologies, including original hip hop conventions and local healing rituals and how it has

KEYWORDS

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2. In this article, following from Howard Becker's (1982) theory of 'art worlds', I define the 'Gabonese rap world' as a broad network of social interactions and activities conducted in cooperation between different actors (rappers, beatmakers, producers, managers, dancers, etc.) who are involved in rap production and who share common conventions related to this music practice in Gabon. At other moments, I also refer to the 'hip hop music world', because rappers often collaborate with other artists in R&B or navigate within other Afropop genres. Finally, I occasionally employ the term 'Libreville rap scene', via which I intend to offer a more territorial perspective on this network of artists and production.

3. This crisis has been characterized by a decline of the public health system, education and cultural institutions as well as by an economic downturn that had already started in 2014 with the drop in oil prices. The economist Mays Mouissi describes how 2016 led to an explosion of public debt (by 2.5 per cent) and a decline in fiscal resources (Mouissi 2019).

allowed for the transformation of divisive conflicts into a cathartic moment of collective listening. This article finally proves the double dimension of musical revitalization, one where music rebirth and social healing overlap, and it shows how the embeddedness of music and politics can be permanently transformed through the agency of social actors who develop a creative play between different technologies and mediations.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, social media and the music press praised the ongoing 'rebirth' of Gabonese rap, a milestone long-awaited by fans and artists for years.[1] A social and political crisis had wracked the country since the contested presidential election of 2016. The resulting proclamation of President Ali Bongo's re-election had led to vigorous protests, brutal repression and a deep crisis that hit both society and the music world. Following these developments, the majority of concerts had disappeared, several artists had gone into exile and the rap world had become strongly divided. This was particularly true because, during the elections, some rappers had promoted the idea of a change of power, whereas others had expressed their support to Ali Bongo and his party, which had ruled the country since 1968 (Piot 2016; Aterianus-Owanga and Debain 2016). Nevertheless, since 2018, a series of projects launched by Gabonese artists has led to a new movement within the local hip hop music world,[2] expressed through the challenging and provocative slogan 'Faut que ça rappe!' ('We gotta rap!') proposed by some rappers. Through the use of diverse technologies of diffusion and creation, these artists have called for a rebirth of rap activities but also, more broadly, for a healing of a society in crisis.[3]

Since the 2000s, various social science studies have attempted to examine the appropriation of rap music into new spaces, shedding light on the development of local rap scenes (Condry 2006; Mitchell 2001; Ntarangwi 2009; Shipley 2013). On the African continent as elsewhere, research has addressed the first stages of the creation of these hip hop music scenes by describing the pathways of the pioneers of African rap (Haupt 2001; Moulard-Kouka 2008; Perullo 2005). Others have analysed moments and places of intense liveliness of rap productions, insisting on the role of rap as a tool for social protest (Clark and Koster 2014; Clark 2018), the invention of tradition (Samper 2004; Appert 2018) or identity construction (Auzanneau 2001). Through these lenses, researchers have often contributed towards a representation of the high 'vitality' and durability of African rap worlds. However, local rap worlds do not conform to uniform processes of 'growth', and their trajectories are also characterized by periods of decline, related to sociopolitical, economic or historical conjectures. As discussed by Howard Becker in a stimulating short essay (Becker 2014), 'art worlds' are not as stable as they often appear in social science scholarship, and large-scale research in different contexts is essential to understanding their cycles of evolution in relationship with diverse political and cultural contexts.

My aim in this article is to contribute to our understanding of how local rap worlds evolve by describing the successive processes of the decline and revitalization of rap music in Gabon between 2009 and 2020 and by questioning the technologies and mediations (Meintjes 1990; Hennion 2015) employed for that purpose. At the same time, this article considers how these transformations overlap with a history of complex relationships between music and

politics, arguing that the revitalization of the rap world has been related to a broader attempt at social healing and reconciliation after a violent political conflict. The purpose of my article is not to provide a political analysis of rappers' complex participation in the conflicts of Gabon and other African countries – an attempt which has been made previously, at least in part (Englert 2008; Künzler 2016; Almeida 2017). My aim is, rather, to understand a specific period of relationships between hip hop and politics in Gabon, one that has led to an impulse of healing and revitalization in the rap world and beyond: a regeneration of Gabonese society through a mix of digital technologies, hip hop performance conventions and the initiation rituals of local religious systems. In this perspective, despite its focus on hip hop and Gabon, my study adds to a broader tradition of anthropological research that highlights the contextual meanings of relationships between popular music and politics in Africa (Askew 2002; Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005; Turino 2008; White 2008).

In an influential article dealing with the ambiguous musical significance of Paul Simon's *Graceland*, Louise Meintjes highlighted the complex overlapping of meanings at stake in music's production and reception:

> the political is not merely an adjunct to the sound but embedded in it through strings of connected signs. The embeddedness of the political in the sonic means that the political becomes entangled in and communicated through affective experience. This capacity of music to communicate through affect, to communicate feelingfully and intuitively, is a source of its potency.
>
> (1990: 69)

My article continues this reflection on the embeddedness of political meanings and music experience by considering the role of digital technologies in the social healing and musical revitalization of Gabonese society after a period of traumatic conflicts.

This work results from a long-term ethnographic study conducted in Libreville and the Gabonese diaspora from 2008 to 2016 in the context of doctoral and postdoctoral research around rap and hip hop music in Gabon. This research has led to a book (in French), two documentary films and several papers in academic journals.[4] After living in Gabon for eight years, I left the country at the end of 2014; since then, I have mainly followed rap activities through shorter fieldwork periods in Libreville (in 2015, 2016 and 2019), contacts with rappers settled in the diaspora and analyses of social networks[5] and the specialized press of Gabonese rap.

In the first part of this article, I will briefly recount how the increasing interconnections between music and politics in Gabonese hip hop since 2009 have led to an irresolvable conflict between different branches of Gabonese hip hop and to a deep decline in music activities once this political crisis erupted in 2016. In the second part, I will describe how the Libreville rap world has been enlivened by the organization of recorded ciphers, called Bwiti gang cypher, and analyse how this first attempt at revitalization relied on a complex mix of mediations and technologies, including original hip hop conventions and local healing rituals. Last, I will describe the exchanges and conflicts that occurred around the 'catalogue challenge' project in 2020 and provide an ethnography of a virtual performance that sought to transform divisive conflicts into a cathartic moment of collective listening. I will conclude this article by

4. For this research, I have conducted more than one hundred interviews with local rappers of several generations, conducted research in press archives and oral memories and participated in many rap activities with different local hip hop crews (studio sessions, concerts, national and international tours).

5. In this article, I pay attention to the importance of digital technologies and social medias for the politics of participation and revitalization. Nevertheless, following Madeleine Pastinelli's critique, I consider the inclusion of digital interactions in my method not as a radical rupture leading to a pure 'e-ethnography' but rather an 'extension of a fieldwork approach whose primary object is the universe, experience, history and practices of people whose lives are largely played out offline' (Pastinelli 2011: 48, translation added).

insisting on the double dimension of musical revitalization – one where music rebirth and social healing overlap. I will finally show how the embeddedness between music and politics is permanently transformed through the agency of social actors who develop a creative play between different technologies and mediations.

'FOLLOW' OR 'NOT FOLLOW?' THE TRICKY ISSUE OF HIP HOP AND POLITICS IN GABON SINCE 2009

Hip hop in Gabon holds a long history of ambiguous relationships with power and with the Bongo presidential family, which has led the country since 1967 (Ngolet 2000; Yates 2019). The first rap groups appeared at the end of the 1980s, and rap performances have multiplied in the Libreville streets with the transition to a multiparty system and the opening of new freedoms in 1990. At that time, rappers asserted a clear rupture with previous music genres that had been subordinate to a single party and that were involved in the spectacle of 'animation' used by Omar Bongo to ensure popular consent to his hegemony (Ndombet 2009). Instead, the first rap groups proposed a crude and explicit critique of social inequalities, political corruption and neo-colonial relationships with France. The Libreville rap scene functioned in relative autonomy from the rest of the music industry, and rappers funded their recording sessions with personal savings.

But gradually, since the end of the 1990s, the popularity of rap music among the youth led concert promoters and music producers to invest in hip hop production. The relationship between hip hop music and politics strengthened from that moment on, partly through mediation of people related to local elites who became involved in music production, such as the minister of finance during that time and the son of the president himself. These intermediaries contributed to the progressive inclusion of hip hop artists in networks of interaction and collaborations with politicians in power. It led to rap songs inviting listeners to vote, the participation of rappers in private concerts sponsored by the presidency and in concerts for political campaigns.

The progressive injection of political funding into rap production connected local hip hop music with a long history of the co-optation and integration of artists into the 'spectacle of power' (Balandier 1980) created after Gabon's independence in 1960 – a system that gave structural durability to the music industry. The connection between rappers and political elites represented one of the many examples of the progressive inclusion of the rap world in local mechanisms of power and musical production.

On 8 June 2009, President Omar Bongo Ondimba died after 42 years in power, and elections were organized to determine his successor (Bernault and Tonda 2009; Debain 2009). Ali Bongo Ondimba, his son, was chosen as the candidate of the reigning party (PDG) against the representatives of the opposition. In order to create an image of change and renewal, Ali Bongo focused part of his communication campaign on appeals to the youth, collaborating closely with a team of rappers who produced a song to support him ('We Follow You!'). The team was given access during the entire campaign and even brought Ali Bongo to participate in a rap concert with them.[6]

However, other rappers expressed strong criticisms towards these peers involved in the campaign, accusing them of becoming 'groups of cultural animation', a reference to the musical genre of female singers and dancers that had been created in order to sing the praises of President Bongo and his

single party (Nzengue 1989; White 2006). Following this perspective, these dissenting rappers asserted the independence of rap music from politics and decided not to appear alongside candidates during the campaign, even if they produced songs where they expressed their desire for social transformation. The most famous group that asserted this claim for independent hip hop was Movaizhaleine, a duo recognized since the middle of the 1990s for its blunt political criticism. Lord Ekomy Ndong, one of the members of the duo who settled in France, wrote a rap song before the election titled '30.08.09' (referencing the date of the election), wherein he claimed his hope for change and the importance of playing his part in this historical moment (Ndong 2011).[7]

Nevertheless, on 30 August 2009, Ali Bongo was elected as president, and despite opposition protests, he celebrated his inauguration with a big concert accompanied by the rappers who had participated in his campaign. As the seven-year term of Ali Bongo's presidency went by, between 2009 and 2016, his 'emergence' programme and his mode of governance became the object of manifest distrust among the people (Moundounga-Mouity and Ndjimba 2012). The violent repression of popular protests and the deterioration of living conditions led to an explosion of criticism. On the musical side, these years were synonymous with heightened state oversight of music production and the rise of media funded by personalities in power. Censorship increased through explicit threats towards protesting artists as well as through implicit refusals to broadcast critical songs and music videos.

During this period, Facebook and online media became key tools for overcoming censorship and spreading rap production. This helped in the broadcasting of protest songs that were censored by official media and allowed for connections to emerge between rappers from Libreville and Gabonese youth who travelled abroad (whether to study or in exile). Public criticism and popular mobilization reached its climax on the eve of the presidential election of 2016, with the rise of protests and joint meetings of associations from across civil society. In July 2016, songs such as 'Mister Zero' (as a reference to Ali Bongo) and 'On ne te suit pas' ('We Don't Follow You', as an answer to the song 'On te suit' ['We Follow You']) were published on Facebook by rappers settled in France and became the anthems of the opposition. These were broadcast loudly at the meetings of Jean Ping, Ali Bongo's main opponent, who succeeded in uniting different opposition parties and civil society associations in his support and who was declared the winner of the elections in the projections.

But in the final count, Ali Bongo was again ultimately proclaimed the winner (see Bernault 2016). Through the night of August 31, thousands of popular protestors gathered in Libreville's main avenues to call for a fair recount of the votes, and they were violently repressed by military forces. On that night and for days afterwards, protests were quelled by the army, by a total blackout and by arbitrary arrests. Despite constitutional appeals and mobilizations, Ali Bongo's victory was confirmed and Gabon entered a deep period of political, economic and social crisis. The crisis had obvious consequences on the economy and social structures of the country (Mouissi 2019), but also in the field of music.[8] International festivals such as Gabao Hip Hop disappeared, many concert halls closed, and several rappers who were considered as opponents were forced once again to move into exile (and have not returned to the country to date).[9] After this government repression killed the friends and relatives of many rappers, the division between those who had

'followed' and those who had refused any involvement with power transformed into an irreducible antagonism.

This chain of events and the dislocations that erupted between 2009 and 2016 led to the slow decline of Gabonese rap. Even if music and politics were already involved in relations of complicity before 2009, this had not prevented the development of their activities: on the contrary, it often led to creative competition. But as soon as the broader system collapsed, a large part of the rap activities that had become dependent on political structures were destabilized. Even if some activities organized in the Afropop genre persisted, this situation led many artists to consider that 'Gabonese rap was dead'.[10]

As I will show later in this article, the situation has changed in the last few years, thanks to several actors, projects and technologies that have attempted at healing the violent divisions of this art world. The first one, 'Bwiti gang cypher', initiated this rebirth through cypher performances and references to the healing rituals of local systems.

'BWITI GANG CYPHER': HEALING THE RAP WORLD THROUGH MULTIFORM TECHNOLOGIES

On Sunday, 28 July, 2019, in the Libreville neighbourhood of Derrière l'Ecole Normale, I met with Tris, one of the initiators of the project 'Bwiti gang cypher'. Born in 1990 to a southern family of the punu ethnic group and a philosopher father, he soon developed a passion for writing and Gabonese hip hop. Through his diverse collaborations with different rappers and media, he has established himself in recent years as one of the best rap lyricists and part of the next generation of conscious rappers. I had been introduced to Tris a few days before by Rodzeng, another rapper involved in 'Bwiti gang cypher', with whom I have worked since 2009. This first encounter took place during the shooting of an episode of 'Bwiti gang cypher' in the Rodzeng family house courtyard. After having explained the aim of my research to Tris, we had agreed to meet at his own family house in Ecole Normale the following Sunday in order to have an informal interview and discussion about his work and career.

After having met at the designated point, Tris and his brother guided me down the small dented pathway that leads to their house, and we climbed the wall of a neighbouring house to drag ourselves onto the roof of a building, where they had set up decorations for the occasion. In fact, Tris and his brother explained to me that they had planned to shoot the interview, having announced it on Facebook as a live session. After a short overview of his pathway as a rapper since the 1990s, he explained to me how Gabonese rap has changed since 2016, the difficulties he has encountered and how it has led to the project 'Bwiti gang cypher':

> [since 2016] It got worse, it got so much worse. First, there are no shows anymore. They [the people in power] are the ones doing the shows, so you can imagine that nobody is singing anymore. But the hip-hop movement is a knowledge in motion, and we will not leave it static. This is why Rodzeng and I, we came to create Bwiti gang cypher. […] Cyphers are part of hip-hop, and we thought it was a good way to make our rap heard in everyday life. So, we've said 'come on, let's do freestyle': we try to invite everybody, to make the whole Gabon rap. Faut que ça rappe! And our way to do that was Bwiti Gang Cypher.
> (interview with Tris, 28 July 2019, Libreville, Derrière l'Ecole Normale)

Tris created 'Bwiti gang cypher' with Rodzeng, another virtuoso rapper of his generation, when Rodzeng came back from his studies in China and South Africa.[11] In October 2018, 'Bwiti gang cypher' broadcast on YouTube the first episode of a series of videos that would excite Libreville's audiences for almost a year. The project gathered different rappers from the Libreville rap scene around cypher sessions, filmed and shared on YouTube and social networks only. This project of filmed rap sessions aimed to give shape to a common passion for freestyle and street hip hop and spoke to the determination to revive rap music in Gabon as a tool for social critique and the diffusion of knowledge. Beyond their individual will to spread their music, the idea was also to involve as many people as possible in rap performances and cyphers as expressed in the slogan '#fautqueçarappe', which quickly was associated with the project on social networks. For that purpose, and for each episode of the cypher, they gathered rappers from different neighbourhoods of Libreville and different generations of the rap scene, from the diaspora and, later, from other cities of Gabon.

After their first online episodes, the three rappers of the project decided to build upon their revitalization of the rap world by also organizing rap concerts in nightclubs and in larger venues such as the French Institute, where their 2018 show was sold out.[12] The popularity of the project grew as the organizers involved other famous rappers, but also because the lyrics did not fail to include tricky attacks on other rappers, following from the hip hop spirit of clash and competition. It is through this encounter between a dramatic social situation, a will to recreate independent medias of expression and a deep anger against the political instrumentalization and co-optation of hip hop that the first part of the 'revitalization' of the Gabonese rap world took place.

In my analysis, the notion of revitalization should not be confused with the concept of 'revival', proposed by a broad range of ethnomusicological and dance studies to refer to the celebration of a tradition outside of its original context or by people who are part of other cultures (Shay 2013). On the contrary, the concept of revitalization is used in my perspective to describe an attempt to regenerate an existing practice that had decreased or disappeared because of oppressive structures. In this sense, my use of the term 'revitalization' can be related to Victoria Levine's perspective on revitalization in Northern American Choctaw societies. She defines this process as 'a special kind of musical change' and 'a strategy used by oppressed people to perpetuate their musical cultures in situations where an imbalance of social power exists' (Levine 1993: 392). In Gabon, a similar imbalance of social power has structured the hip hop music world for a certain period, due to the ways in which music markets overlapped with political structures: musical revitalization was also here a means to 'transcend social constraints such as repression' (Levine 1993: 392).

In the case of 'Bwiti gang cypher', this musical revitalization relies on a clever use of different technologies and mediations. The first, the cypher, is considered as a cornerstone of hip hop techniques and performing conventions. According to some authors, the word cypher was created by the Five-Percent Nation during the 1980s (Miyakawa 2005) and is related to the number zero and the figure of the circle (Porteous 2013). In this circle, 'MCs "feed off of one another" in keeping a rhyme going in a cyclical fashion' (Keyes 2004: 124, quoted by Porteous 2013: 171). Whether it be in mediatized studio sessions with famous rappers or in informal street competitions, it symbolizes the coexistence of competition, complicity and inclusiveness present in hip hop performances.

In Gabon, many rappers of the first generation recount how they started rapping in improvised cyphers with their friends and how, at that time, rap practice occurred in the streets of their neighbourhood, in high school court-yards or in each other's rooms. However, with the expansion of recording technologies, beat making, home studios and specialized media around hip hop, one's recognition as a 'rapper' has become much more dependent on the production of albums and good-quality video clips. By highlighting the tech-nique of cypher, 'Bwiti gang cypher' is in that sense bringing back the roots of hip hop culture. This impulse of going back to refined types of performance is visible in the lyrics of each episode: no special theme is assigned for each cypher, and rappers' performances consist mainly of ego-trips and self-cele-bration exercises (typical of rap poetics), critical descriptions of the poverty and despair of Gabonese populations and attacks on other rappers involved with politics. This idea of rough performances also appears in the refined video clips produced around each episode, which always consist of one simple sequence shot in a home studio, in the street or in the courtyard of a house, where all participants rap one after the other.

As demonstrated in the ethnographic extract of my interview with Tris at Ecole Normale, this revitalization process also obviously relies on another mediation: digital technologies and social media. Spread exclusively on Facebook and YouTube, the aim of 'Bwiti gang cypher' is to retake power from 'traditional media' by employing systems of production and diffusion that would be autonomous from radios, TV channels and producers, suspected of being controlled by politicians. For that purpose, 'Bwiti gang cypher' not only consists of a team of rappers, it also includes a whole group of media manag-ers and communication experts. Besides the field of diffusion, digital technolo-gies are involved in the creative processes themselves, as diverse beatmakers can send their instrumentals for each episode, and music producers of differ-ent generations can be involved. In the same sense, music videos are produced by self-trained video makers who have bought digital cameras and started to create self-produced videos. This use of digital technologies also helps to over-come the gap that separates Gabon and its diaspora: participants who live in exile can record themselves and thus take part in some of the episodes. The 'Bwiti gang cypher' was soon joined by artists and designers who have come up with a graphic identity based on Afro-futurism and superheroes (see Figure 1). The project thus relies on a whole chain of production composed of rappers, beatmakers, music video directors and communication managers and creates a broad digitally networked cooperation.

Cypher performing techniques and digital technologies are then mixed with a third element, another mediation that has been incorporated into Gabonese hip hop creation for decades: *bwiti*. The word *bwiti* refers to an initi-ation society and a healing ritual based on consuming a local hallucinogen, iboga (Mary 1983; Bonhomme 2006).[13] Practised since the precolonial period, this ritual was fought by missionaries during colonization and slowly came to be regarded as an element of national heritage (Mary 2005; Bonhomme 2007; Chabloz 2014), including by the first generation of 'tradi-modern' musicians (Aterianus-Owanga 2016). *Bwiti* rituals (like other Gabonese initiation socie-ties) draw on the use of several liturgic instruments for the communication with ancestors, including the musical bow (*mongongo*) and the harp (*ngombi*). Since the 1990s, rappers have made use of bwiti as a proof of return to preco-lonial cultures, of the liberation from western or Christian influences and of the Gabonization of their music. A special branch of Gabonese rap led by the
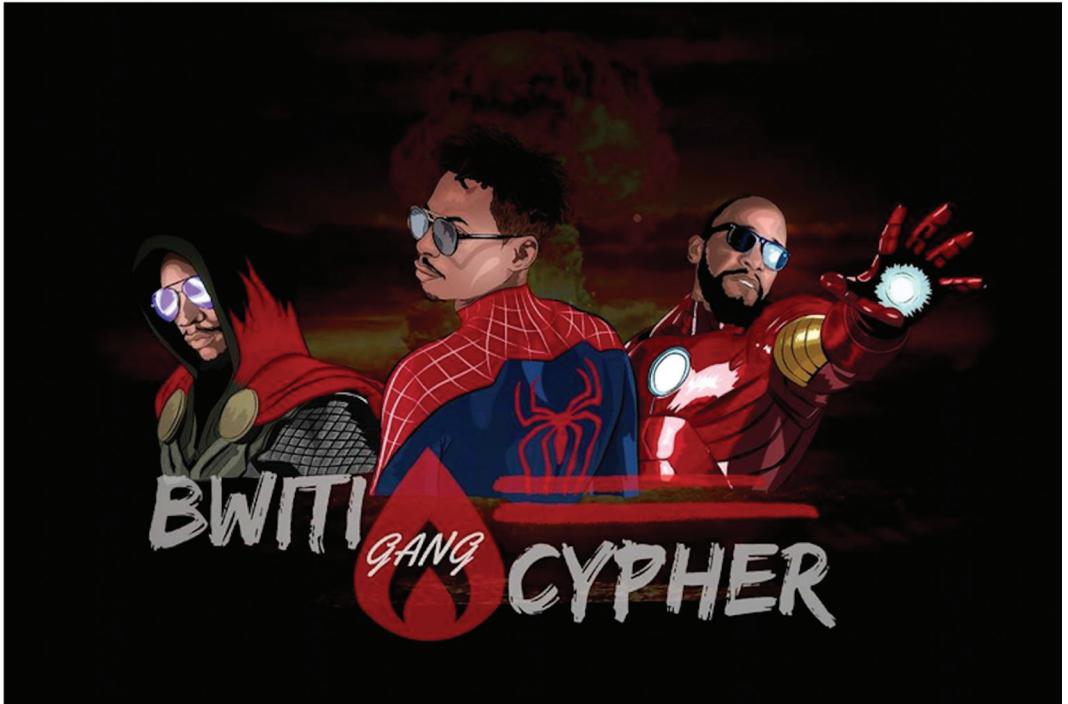
Figure 1: Bwiti gang cypher's Afro-futurist and superhero aesthetics. © Bwiti Gang Cypher and Osc'art.

group Movaizhaleine has highly popularized this mix between hip hop beats and liturgic instruments.

Embracing this movement, 'Bwiti gang cypher' exhibits *bwiti* symbols such as the *ngombi* in their performances, in some of the beats used and in the graphic visuals of the group. This attempt is not only cosmetic and stylistic: for the leaders of 'Bwiti gang cypher' such as Tris and Rodzeng, the valorization of *bwiti* symbols is associated with personal initiation pathways and is officially related in their discourses (in rap songs and online activities) to a will to transform Gabon into a country of *banzi* (initiates). 'Bwiti gang cypher' leaders often assert bwiti as a means to 'heal' social order and identity troubles of the Gabonese youth. In their lyrics and self-presentations, Tris and Rodzeng present themselves as 'doctors' or 'healers' (Rodzeng's two first albums were called *Dr Nzeng*), and they describe 'Bwiti gang cypher' as a 'treatment' for social troubles. In Tris' verses in an episode of the cypher, references to *bwiti* are mixed with personal ego trip lyrics:

Au chrono du *bwiti* l'heure a sonné, tu vois les petits sont passionnés,	On the timer of *bwiti*, time has come, you can see how youth is passionate
On me dit: 'Tris toi tu rappes trop bien, les grands ont même envie de te bastonner'.	People tell me: 'Tris, you rap so well, that even elders want to beat you up'.
Prenez des calmants, on vous sert les médocs lyricalement,	Take tranquilizers, our lyrics are your drug.

Appelle moi Jesse Owen, mes concurrents c'est des Allemands.	Call me Jesse Owens, my contenders are German.
Mamo, ça finit brutalement, on vous bole *mangong a di boko*	Mama, it ends up brutally, we will kill you *mangong a di boko* (swear).
J'écris au son de la cithare, tu comprends que mon verbe en dit beaucoup	I write to the sound of cithar ngombi, you understand that my word means a lot.
Banzi, on a la recette, on a apporté les condiments,	As *banzis*, we have got the receipt, we have brought all condiments
Trop frais, niang dans mon kaolin, je te sors le rap du tandima,	So fresh and clean with my *kaolin*, I bring you rap from *tandima*
Aka, c'est pas le maquillage, pas de make up dans ma mafia	Aka, it's not cosmetics, no make-up in my mafia.
Mon royaume n'est pas de ce monde, vu que ma couronne est en rafia.	My kingdom is not from this world, as my crown is in rafia
Il ne faut pas fia, c'est le début de ma pénitence,	Don't be scared, it's the beginning of my penitence
c'est au son du *bwiti* que le pays danse, du *madwaka* jusqu'à la présidence	It is on the sound of *bwiti* that the country dances, from ghetto to presidency.

In this text, Tris uses words from toli bangando, the local slang of Libreville's youth, and he incorporates a set of references to bwiti and to his own initiation. For example, when he uses the responsorial formulas that bwiti initiates employ during rituals (*mangong a di boko*), or when he refers to *kaolin* and *rafia*, a powder used as a ritual makeup, and a type of dried liana used in *bwiti*.

According to these rappers, as in other religious movements related to cultural revitalization (Guedj 2011), the contemporary youth of Gabon look to address identity and social complexities due to colonization and Christianization by reaffirming local religious knowledges. In this rap genre, *bwiti* symbols and calls for going back to traditional rituals are inserted within a broader political discourse that critiques Gabonese governance and that proposes to 'heal' the social order by going back to local precolonial systems of knowledge such as *bwiti*. In terms of music, this overlapping of political, identity and religious issues has led to a creative process where self-celebration lyrics mix with political critiques of a decadent society, references to the power of initiates' words and healing rituals and the sounds of liturgic instruments.

Through their attempt to heal the rap world, 'Bwiti gang cypher' is thus creating an intersection of different mediations between 'local' and 'global', ancient and contemporary. The cypher technique is used as a way to doubly revitalize local rap networks by going back to hip hop origins, inventing a new ecosystem of production and diffusion that answered the digital transformation of music worlds and embedding local religious and political meanings in hip hop performance. 'Bwiti gang cypher' has thus represented a first step in the process of rebirth of a rap world in the sense that it has recreated a network of cooperation that involves different rappers (and 'support personnel' [Becker 1982]) – both famous and anonymous, youths and elders, diasporic and local – and invents new systems of diffusion and music production through digital technologies.

While 'Bwiti gang cypher' was preparing its next season in 2020, another event occurred as a reaction to COVID-19 and brought this idea of revitalization to another level: 'Catalogue Challenge' provided a new music platform that would transform the conflicts related to 2016 into a reconciling performance, recreating a community of listeners around a common memory.

CATALOGUE CHALLENGE: ON THE POWER AND POLITICS OF (DIGITAL) PERFORMANCE

On Saturday, 2 May 2020, the Gabonese hip hop community was enlivened by several days of intense online excitement related to the organization of the project Catalogue Challenge. Inspired by a US concept, the Catalogue Challenge's aim was to create an online live confrontation between two famous figures of Gabonese hip hop history who were supposed to compete by presenting their most famous tracks one after the other. This project was created by Lestat XXL, a famous rapper from Libreville who began rapping in the 1990s, before travelling to study in Canada and France[14] and returning with a degree in communication.

His idea behind the Catalogue Challenge was, first, to advertise his compatriots and to struggle against the boredom of the COVID lockdown and, second, to reassert the value of Gabonese music that, from his point of view, was 'losing momentum'. For that purpose, each episode of the challenge brought two rappers (or hip hop music artists) into confrontation, usually part of the same generation and music subgenre, and this contest was broadcast each Sunday evening online on Facebook and YouTube. By inviting 'conscious' rappers, R&B singers and other rappers who have close links with politics, this project involved the whole local hip hop network, regardless of music genres, labels, generations and political borders.

After the first five episodes, the announcement of the sixth Catalogue Challenge, organized on 3 May 2020, quickly attracted a large amount of online attention. It proposed a long-expected confrontation between two legendary figures of Gabonese hip hop history: Lord Ekomy Ndong and Ba'Ponga. These two MCs both started rapping at the beginning of the 1990s and became members of rival groups (Movaizhaleine for Lord Ekomy Ndong, and Raaboon for Ba'Ponga) that battled each other over the past eighteen years in what remains the biggest concert clash in Gabonese hip hop history. After the contest, and during the first decade of the 2000s, the competition between these two artists took on new meanings: Ba'Ponga joined a label considered close to politics (EBEN), pursued his career in an Afropop rap genre and participated in the spectacles of the presidential campaign. On the other hand, Lord Ekomy Ndong lived partly in exile, radically refused any political collaboration, and presented himself as a standard-bearer of 'upstanding' hip hop.

Because of this long-lasting competition and of the respect accorded to these two artists, the announcement of this Catalogue Challenge created intense excitement among the hip hop fans of Libreville and the diaspora. Rappers and fans quickly started to exhibit their support for one rapper or the other on Facebook, using the hashtag slogans #teambaponga or #teamekomy. The day before the encounter, the tension was very high, especially since it was rumoured that the international TV channel Canal+ would be the sponsor of the event and that a charitable gift would be given to an association helping orphans for each 'like' on Canal+Gabon's Facebook page. After these few days of great excitement, many people gathered in front of their smartphones

14. Along his travelling pathway, he has completed a bachelor's in communication and developed many collaborative activities in the hip hop music scene.

15. Jazzé is a Gabonese music and dance genre mixing hip hop and Afropop sounds.

and computers on Sunday, 3 May 2020. A few minutes after 9 p.m., when the clash started, no less than 13,000 people joined the live stream on Facebook and YouTube to watch the two artists share a platform. A short ethnographic description of this digital performance provides an interesting lens for understanding the political meanings of this moment and its impact on the healing of the Gabonese rap world.

The challenge consisted of an alternation of famous tracks that were selected and contextualized by each rapper. Lord Ekomy Ndong decided to follow the chronology of his discography, introducing each song with a sort of narrative that reconnected the song to his own story. He reflected on his experience as an African man exiled in Europe, his engagement towards African cultural revitalization and his conception of artists as critics of their own society. On his side, Ba'Ponga mixed sounds from different periods of his career without following an apparent organization, providing anecdotes related to the moments or encounters that had inspired him (such as his many musical travels in South Africa and Ghana). His songs addressed a broad spectrum of aspects of his life, with musical beats mixing Afropop and jazzé dancing sounds,[15] Ghanaian music and *coupé-décalé*. Through this back and forth within these two careers, online spectators navigated between two different genres that have structured the Gabonese hip hop network since its inception. Both are the result of a process of the adaptation of hip hop to local contents and contexts. Still, they have been put into opposition since 2009 as two antagonistic ways of reacting to elite domination: one a politically and critically conscious genre, the other intended as an 'entertainment' genre.

The flow of comments started as soon as the Catalogue Challenge began, growing during the three hours of the event to reach 147,000 remarks. Among the participants, I recognized many figures of the hip hop and popular music network, rappers from diverse generations and other actors of the local hip hop world (fans, managers, radio animators, dancers). The tension climaxed after two hours of battle, when Lord Ekomy Ndong reached the moment of his discography related to the elections of 2009 and 2016. He first played his song '30.08.09' (mentioned above) and then another song that he had produced just after the bloody repression of 2016. In this track titled 'Nuages rouges' ('Red Clouds'), he describes the chaotic landscape of oppression in 2016 and the pain of families searching for their relatives and deceased loved ones. As soon as the first notes of the song began, comments started to get more tragic and emotional, accompanied by the 'loudly crying face' emoticon. Comments included:

> 'The pain of that' (la douleur de ça)
> 'I have got tears only by listening to this'
> 'Bongo murderer'
> 'Ba'ponga, in 2016, what have you done for people's tears? Seriously!!! Sellout!'
> 'When I read the comments, I understand that we all love hip-hop, but here are the topics that divide us'.

As shown in this small sample, several comments reproached the absence of a reaction from Ba'Ponga in the face of this tragic memory. The day after the event, another person commented about the fact that Ba'Ponga had not expressed pain nor apologized: 'I was so excited, but 2016 will not be forgotten like that, our martyrs, our cries, our tears, our broken hopes. After Ekomy's

track about this crisis, Ba'Ponga should have taken 30 seconds to mark his solidarity'.

The description of these comments provides an idea of the affective dimension of this moment of listening, and it reveals the resentment raised by mentioning the events of 2016 in Gabonese public life. These two rappers' different ways of participating in politics were an obvious reason for conflict, and it can leave an impression of irreconciled litigation. But this conflict was also the reason for the intensity of this online confrontation. As expressed in the comments quoted here, listening to songs related to 2016 raised a collective moment of emotion, interaction and memory associated with the history of violence, death and repression shared between participants. In a context where media are censored and where the repression of 2016 has never been the subject of any official recognition or memorial process, music represents a rare medium allowing the raising of memories and tributes to deceased people. In that sense, the Catalogue Challenge's collective listening to sonic memories of 2016 increased awareness of the silence surrounding this pivotal moment in Gabonese history. It infused this moment with complex meaning, embedding politics within musical emotions and affect.

Furthermore, even if this description can suggest an idea of irreconcilable disagreement, one cannot fail to argue that on a broader scale, this moment also recreated interactions and a feeling of community within a local hip hop world that had been divided by a violent event. It has become quite common in network analysis to consider that conflicts are not always destructive and damaging but that they can often produce cohesion, interaction and relation (Simmel 1995; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1994). Many scholars have also investigated how listening to music together (at concerts, festivals or even online) could be considered as a practice that produces community (Waldron 2018) and collective participation (Pecqueux and Roueff 2015). Digital performances such as the Catalogue Challenges raise disagreements with regard to some aspects of hip hop music history and its relation to politics, visible through comments about 2016 above. Yet, above all else, it worked to reassert the belonging to a common long-term community of Gabonese hip hop fans and listeners. In that sense, following the proceedings of this live event in detail allows us to highlight how this technology recreates many powerful aspects of performance, including its capacity to gather a community of emotions, memories and knowledge shared by the actors of this art world. If, on the one hand, this moment of performance partly raised the memory of intense trauma and potentially irreconcilable positions between participants, it also proved their ability to transform this division into a playful, creative moment for the sake of Gabonese rap.

This potency of the performance to overcome existing conflicts and reconnect hip hop networks became even more intense the day after the challenge, thanks to several announcements and publications. Indeed, on Monday morning, whereas some fans insisted on the victory of their favourite artists, both rappers put an end to the debate in the afternoon by posting the same comment on their page, where they underlined the necessity of being united as artists, beyond their divisions:

> The internet hosted yesterday a big event for our green yellow and blue hip hop [Gabonese state flag colours]. The after-challenge must therefore remain in this positive spirit. I invite those who follow and support me to maintain an attitude full of respect towards Ba'ponga /

Lord Ekomy Ndong, as an artist and longtime friend, beyond our differ-
ences - because there will always be differences. But they should not
prevent us from gathering together when it is necessary, and that was
also the meaning of yesterday's event.

(Shared on both Facebook pages of Ba'Ponga and Lord Ekomy Ndong
on Monday 4 May 2020)

Maybe even more than this public announcement, the audience participa-
tion in this event was quickly highlighted in media (including official media)
and social networks as proof of the efficiency of respectful competition for the
revival of hip hop popularity. While Gabonese rappers have often discussed
the genre's lack of success among international audiences and the little recog-
nition given its artists abroad,[16] people were surprised to learn that the event
had brought 3 million CFA (4,500 euros) to the charity association involved,
and that even Cameroonian rappers were discussing the success of this
project, praising the achievements of Gabonese rappers. Immediately after
the challenge, Lord Ekomy Ndong announced the release of his new double
album on all digital platforms, including a Gabonese commercial platform that
sells local music.[17] In less than a week, the double album sold almost a thou-
sand copies, which created a benefit of 3 million CFA, and which became the
best-selling album on Gabonese digital platforms to date. In this way, local
digital music-selling platforms were popularized among new audiences and
were reconsidered by artists as a way to earn money through music. During
the months following this event, Lestat XXL kept organizing his Catalogue
Challenge with the support of Canal+, even involving legendary elder musi-
cians of other music genres, bringing his project of the rebirth of Gabonese
music beyond the borders of hip hop.

After the renewal of activities and interest for improvised rap perfor-
mances created by 'Bwiti gang cypher', the Catalogue Challenge constituted
thus another moment in the revitalization of this art world. First, this online
performance transformed musical experience into a tool for reconciliation and
a collective tribute of a history denied by official media (Rajab 2018; Bissell
and Fouéré 2018). Second, the success of this event confirmed the possibil-
ity of recreating a viable and autonomous network of promotion, production
and diffusion and the relevance of new technologies for that purpose. Thus,
Catalogue Challenge was both a way to expunge the violence of the past by an
embodied performance of the conflict and a manner to recreate an interaction
that 'restores the unity of what has been broken up' (Simmel 1995).

CONCLUSION

This article has provided an anthropological analysis of a piece of Gabonese
hip hop history, intending to understand how rappers use music technologies
and mediations to both reconfigure relationships between music and politics
in a context of social crisis and to write a new page in their musical world
history. Continuing a long tradition of discussions about music and politics
in Africa and on the politics of performance, I have sought to combine an
extended analysis of a music world with a contextualized description of situa-
tions of performance.

After having described the history of ambiguous relationships between
music and politics in Gabon and its climax during the political turn of 2009, I
analysed how a music revitalization has been gradually developed through two

hip hop projects using digital technologies 'Bwiti gang cypher' and 'Catalogue Challenge'. The discussion of 'Bwiti gang cypher' revealed the combination of local and global technologies or references involved in this process to underline how music revitalization has been interdependent with an idea of social healing. In my discussion of Catalogue Challenge, I addressed more thoroughly this issue of the interrelation between social healing and the rebirth of Gabonese rap by showing how an online listening experience could be transformed into a cathartic moment for the purging of tensions. In these two events, the hip hop principle of competition and clash was recalled to recreate an autonomous and fruitful music market in a context of digital transformation and to repair the links destroyed by political conflict.

Finally, this travelling history within the Gabonese rap world allows us to propose several reflections. It reveals how in contexts of overlap between music and politics, such as in Gabon and other Central African countries (White 2008; Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005), relationships between art worlds and the state are neither homogenous nor static. On the contrary, detailed ethnographies reveal how these practices are permanently transformed through the agency of social actors who operate a creative play between different technologies and mediations. In that sense, this analysis of the Gabonese case highlights how digital technologies reinforce the complex intersection of musical meanings and politics that Louise Meintjes addressed 30 years ago, but also allows individuals to assert their agency in order to pursue their strategies.

For that purpose, social actors are permanently creating local meanings and actions through the use of signs related to multidimensional worlds. Thanks to this process, music technologies and mediations are constantly resignified and integrated within a complex set of meanings, where religion, politics and music are deeply intertwined. In this article, I have proposed the concept of musical revitalization to address this overlapping of local and global meaning, of politics and religion, and I have highlighted the double dimension of this process: on the one side, the rebirth of a music world, and on the other, the healing of a society divided by a violent political conflict. This double process of social healing and music revitalization provides a fruitful lens to understand how Gabonese youth assert their agency by creating or appropriating new technologies and music mediations through a permanent mix between different signs: local and global, old and new, past and present.

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