

## THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE URBAN MUSIC OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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**ABSTRACT:** The term “globalization” has recently become a catchword in most languages. In the field of music, globalization begets the concept of “world music”. As a new concept in music, globalization presents a challenge to scholars and layman as to the scope of its definition. In this paper I assert that regardless of its accepted definition and concept, “world music” is becoming a reality as a product of the globalization process. As a hybrid product, “world music” is feeding on music cultures of the world. As with its community, and its culture, the semantic field of its language is also at present being defined. This assertion is sustained by a myriad of sound recordings born out of experimental collaboration by musicians. the urban music of the Democratic Republic of Congo has contributed and continues to contribute to the evolution of the hybrid product in the attainment of its new identity.

**Keywords:** Ethnomusicology; globalization; Popular Music of DRC; World music

Although it has recently become a catchword, “globalization” is an open-ended process that implies different levels of unification. It is a reality that began emerging in recent decades in economic and political arenas, specifically in reference to the creation of a world market and the promotion of multinational industries. However, a closer look at the semantics of the term also brings to mind that globalization is a process which has occurred since the dawn of time, consciously or otherwise, through various forms of human activities. Migrations, territorial disputes, navigation, technology, and arts are but some of the activities that have

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turned the concept of globalization into a reality. In the arts in general, and music in particular, globalization is not a quest for sameness nor homogenization of styles, but a process of hybridization, the product of which acquires an identity peculiar to a new reality. To understand this concept, it is necessary to accept *a priori* that, as both a process and a product of processes, and regardless of its genre or the concept held by its makers, music has a limited semantic field in which it operates. This field is culturally specific and transformed in concordance with extra-musical elements of a society. As such, in music, globalization engenders the concept of a "world music", which reflects levels of attainment in various aspects of human life in a global reality.

One of Africa's most popular styles of urban music comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It embodies musical characteristics for which it has been recognized as the continent's most representative style of guitar-led urban music. Known as "Soukous"<sup>1</sup>, this music is characterized by the insertion into the rumba dance of a quasi-circular motion of the hips characteristic of the Bantu (Luba) traditional dances. "Soukous", the lingalization of the French verb "secouer" (to shake), designates an evolutionary phase of urban music in the 1960s.

Since its inception in the 1950s, guitar has always played a prominent role in the Cuban styled ensembles. Elsewhere<sup>2</sup> I describe these bands, which were composed of a lead guitar, a rhythm guitar, and an upright double bass, a wind instrument, and an array of percussive instruments. In this combination of stringed instruments, the rhythm guitar provided the basic harmonic framework of the accompaniment, often in the "palm-wine" style, to which the double bass outlined the bass line of the harmonic progression following the clave pattern. Above this harmonic tapestry, the lead guitar added melodic interludes and ornamental melodic improvisations.

As this style of urban music evolved, this somewhat rudimentary instrumentation also changed with distinct and yet overlapping stylistic expressions. Each evolutionary phase was characterized by the guitar players' artistic creativity, measured by the ability to capture the rhythmic relationship of their ethnic music on their instruments to accompany the new dances, which were often ethnically inspired. This instrumentation, together with other extra-musical factors, constitutes the basis for the stylistic characteristic of urban music of the DRC.

The diffusion of this music throughout the African continent and the world was accomplished through the activities of both individual musicians and ensembles. The focus of the influence is three-fold: a) the adaptation of the instru-

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(1) Generic name of the style of urban music in DRC.

(2) MUKUNA, Kazadi wa, 1994, p. 64.

mentation; b) the assimilation of the style of playing lead-guitar; and c) the adaptation of dance forms. Whereas the influence of the latter began to be recognized in the 1970s and 1980s with dance movements by the Zaiko Langa Langa band, most of the process was dominated by attempts to assimilate the style of playing lead-guitar. This is corroborated by a variety of urban music styles in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. To comprehend the result of the process, let us look at some of the means by which it was accomplished.

## A. RADIO BROADCASTS AND RECORDING INDUSTRY

In 1948, the colonial government appropriated the privately owned and operated Radio Congolia located in Kinshasa and renamed it Radio Congo Belge pour les Indigenes (RCBI). After the country's independence (June 30, 1960), RCBI was renamed Radio Congo (RC) and soon thereafter it was called Radio Leo (RL). In spite of the change of names, the activities of Radio Congolia (RC) were maintained, exposing the population of Kinshasa and those of the neighboring capitals and cities as far away as Cairo, Dakar, and Freetown to the musical styles of the Americas, and promoting an embryonic urban music throughout the land. The broadcasts featured Congolese dance music with Latin American rhythms<sup>3</sup>. To diversify its programming, RC aired live studio broadcasts of performances by bands that had achieved success in Leopoldville<sup>4</sup> and developed a 'hit parade' devoted to the most requested recordings of the month<sup>5</sup>. Pauwels-Boon writes "*The music on the programs was that wished by the population, Congolese modern dance music with South American rhythms rather than African traditional music*" (1979, p. 182). These broadcasts were also vital in the dissemination of the Congolese style of guitar music, which although in its infancy, was already reflecting the aforementioned characteristics. Among the most appealing aspects of this music to the listeners of these broadcasts were the combination of rhythmic patterns, the singing style, and most significantly, the instrumentation conceptualized around stringed instruments. This aspect of the urban music of the DRC earned the generic name of "guitar" music, as distinguished from the brass ensemble tradition that was prominent along the West coast of Africa.

The second significant course of events that contributed to the globalization of this music was the establishment of the recording industry, which turned

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(3) PAUWELS-BOON, 1979: 182. Such Latin American dance names as rumba, cha-cha-cha, calypso, bolero, mambo, merengue, were being interpreted by ensembles modeled after the traveling Cuban bands.

(4) PAUWELS-BOON, 1979, 180.

(5) PAUWELS-BOON, 1979, p. 122.

Kinshasa into a recording capital of Africa<sup>6</sup>. The significance of this event is reinforced by the number of accomplished musicians from other countries who were attracted by the industry. Among them were the Cameroonian female vocalist Bela Belo, the Zambian saxophonist Isac "Siki" Musekiwa, the guitar player Zacharie "Jhimmy" Elenga from the Central African Republic, to mention just a few. Foreigners who were aspiring musicians were assisted by the recording studios to realize their dreams offering to them music lessons free of charge.

## B. TRAVELING ENSEMBLES AND INDIVIDUAL MUSICIANS

The rise in the number of bands in Kinshasa forced some to migrate to other African capitals, especially in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and as far away as Sierra Leone, Liberia and some francophone countries along the West African coast. This situation, which began to manifest itself in the country as early as the 1950s, was intensified by the 1980s with the collapse of the national economy and political infrastructure, directly affecting the music industry with the demise of the recording industry in Kinshasa. As a result, continuing proliferation of bands culminated during this period in a breakdown of bands, forcing the massive exodus of musicians to capital cities in Africa and Europe, and their return to the studio- or freelance-musician status<sup>7</sup>. Whereas musicians from Kinshasa chose to migrate to francophone countries on the west coast before moving permanently to Europe, those from the eastern regions (the Swahili speaking zone) migrated to neighboring countries (Tanzania, Kenya). Describing the musical scene in Kenya, Paterson asserts that "*Congolese have been making musical waves in Kenya since the late 1950s. But it wasn't until the mid-1970s, after the passing of the American soul craze, that music from Zaire began to dominate the city nightclubs*"<sup>8</sup>.

The domination by Congolese musicians of the musical scene of Kenya was first accomplished between 1950s and 1970s with the invasion of Congolese bands such as OS Africa, Baba National, Les Kinois, Boma Liwanza, Super Mazembe, Orchestre Les Mangelepa, to name just a few. However, continuous proliferation of these groups begot a large number of Congolese-led ensembles composed mostly of local musicians. Among these groups in Kenya alone, such names as

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(6) The first of these recording studios was Ngoma, installed in Kinshasa in 1948. For further discussion of the recording industry in Kinshasa, see MUKUNA, Kazadi wa. *The Genesis of the Urban Music in Zaire*, In: *African Music* 7, 2 (1992).

(7) MUKUNA, Kazadi wa, 1994, p. 69.

(8) PATERSON, Doug, 1994, p. 344.

Orchestre Virunga, Simba Wanyika Original, Les Wanyika, Super Lovy, are among the most popular. Countless similar accounts are recorded in Tanzania<sup>9</sup>, and Tanganyika<sup>10</sup>.

Of all the traveling Congolese bands that can be mentioned here as examples, none contributed more to the globalization process of the urban music of DRC than the four musicians<sup>11</sup> band called Ry-Co Jazz (Rythme Congolais). Formed in 1958 by one of the leading musicians in Kinshasa, Henry Bowane, as a make-shift ensemble for Christmas and New Year's shows in Bangui, the capital of Oubangui-Chari (Central African Republic), Ry-Co Jazz was originally composed of a mix of musicians from the two Congos: singers Freddy Nkounkou and Mbilia Casino; guitarist Pierre Ndinga; bassist Panda Gracia; clarinetist Fidel Bateke; and Pierrot on congas. During the fourteen years (1958-1972) of its existence, Ry-Co Jazz performed throughout West African countries, the Caribbean, and France, packing bars and club houses. While in Guadeloupe, Ry-Co Jazz recorded its music with the producer Henri Debs at his studio and flooded the Caribbean with the Congolese urban music.

As with all Congolese led ensembles outside of the country, the line-up of Ry-Co Jazz was often expanded with local musicians, reaching at one time a total of 15 pieces in Cameroon (1960). Various local musicians were trained in the Congolese music style, while they shared their talents, playing in Ry-Co Jazz. Among them are the Ivorian saxophonist Maurice Isyaka, the Cameroonian bass player Sammy Ndami, the Antillean keyboard player Chico Gelman, and Manou Dibango the saxophonist from Cameroon. This exchange eventually gave birth to the dance music in the French Antilles known as zouk<sup>12</sup>. With this musical exchange between local musicians and members of the Ry-Co Jazz, Congolese rumba gradually adapted itself to the variety of musical genres of the countries visited by the band. From Accra (Ghana) and Freetown (Sierra Leone), for example, came the palm-wine style of guitar playing that was adapted in the rhythm-guitar accompaniment of the Congolese rumba. From the islands came such genres as the beguine and the calypso, which were eventually incorporated respectively as a new variant of rumba and other Latino dances (bolero, tango).

By the end of the 1980s, a large number of Congolese musicians were already living in Europe supplementing their makeshift bands with local musicians and other nationals whom they trained in the style. An excellent example

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(9) Orchestra Makassy and Super Matimila band.

(10) The Shikamoo band.

(11) FREDDY, Jerry, Casino and Gracia.

(12) This is recognized by Jean Claude Naimro of Kasav.

of this is the group that traveled and recorded with the Paris-based Congolese musicians such as the vocalist Kanda Bongo Man, female singers and dancers Tshala Mwana and Yondo Sister. Also noteworthy are the ensemble that accompanied the internationally renowned singer Tabu Ley during his exile in the US and the New York based ensemble African Rhythm Machine under the leadership of the Congolese lead-guitar player Dominic<sup>13</sup>. During the 1970s-1980s, Congolese lead guitar players became a rare commodity sought after by bands from various parts of the world to add their touch to local styles and/or teach local musicians the art of Congolese lead guitar playing. Among the myriad of examples, the most significant one is that of Diblo Dibala heard here featured as guest artist with Juan Luis Guerra's renown band 4 40 from the Dominican Republic<sup>14</sup>.

It can be asserted that the globalization of the urban music of DRC was intensified with the breakdown of the band infrastructure discussed above, leading to the return of freelance musicians. Most of these musicians left Kinshasa and took refuge in various parts of the world. Without another profession to fall back on, most of them continued to earn their living by starting bands with local musicians. Often, their first repertoire was primarily made up of compositions from the past. Those bands that stayed together for a longer period composed songs in the Congolese style. So numerous are these bands that one cannot discuss all them at this point. However, mention should be made of versions of such bands as Somo Somo, which were established during the late 1970s and early 1980s by the lead guitar and composer Mose Se Sengo "Fan Fan" with local musicians in Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya, releasing several albums before heading for Europe. Writing about Fan Fan and his British version of Somo Somo, Ewenso asserts that "*the group served as a school for local musicians*"<sup>15</sup>. Similar accounts are documented all over the world where Congolese musicians have settled.

Last but not least, one of the most remarkable examples of the globalization of the urban musical style of DRC is the account of a group of Japanese musicians who spent time in Kinshasa in 1984 learning Congolese urban music. What they learned was more than just the style of playing lead guitar. Describing what the Japanese musicians learned in Kinshasa, the Congolese singer Papa Wemba explains.

There are Japanese groups who play Zairean music... who sing in Lingala. If you closed your eyes you'd think you were in front of a Zairean band. They

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(13) All these bands had one thing in common. They were composed of musicians from the various parts of the world: Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean.

(14) GUERRA, Juan Luis, 4 40, 1994.

(15) See liner notes *Somo Somo*, Sterns 1014.

were a clone-group, there was a Papa Wemba double and doubles of all the young singers. They dress like us, they do their hair like we do, they follow the repertoire of a typical Zairean group<sup>16</sup>.

### C. SUMMATION

In the field of music, globalization conjures up the concept of “world music”. As a new concept in music, globalization presents a challenge to scholars and laymen as to the scope of its definition. Nevertheless, its musical concept is becoming a reality as a product of globalization — a process that can safely be referred to as a “hybridization”. As a hybrid product, “world music” is feeding on music cultures of the world, as corroborated by the frequent collaboration of musicians from different cultural backgrounds. This assertion is sustained by a myriad of sound recordings born out of experimental collaboration by musicians such as Toumani Diabate (Mali, kora) and Taj Mahal (US, blues)<sup>17</sup>, Toumani Diabate and the Ketama ensemble (Spain)<sup>18</sup>, to name just these four.

In light of the above discourse, the urban music of DRC has contributed and continues to contribute to the evolution of the hybrid product in the attainment of its new identity. While this gathering may not be the appropriate arena to discuss the future of this hybrid product, one cannot ignore questions that are brought to mind thinking about it. “What is World Music?” “Can we speak of World Music at this point or simply of the Musics of the World.” “Is it possible to obtain such an expression?” “If this is possible, what would happen to the distinguishing characteristics of regional expressions such as salsa, samba, makossa, chimurenga, zokela, soukous, and others?” “Would they continue to exist or will they be homogenized and lose their identities?” “Does the concept of globalization imply the quest for sameness in music?” These questions do not need to be answered at present, however, they should not be ignored, for we cannot and will not ignore the result of the globalization process as it is taking its course in all aspects of human life. As an attempt to define this phenomenon, it can be forecast that “World Music” will be a *genre* of musical expression for which the characteristics are being defined through collaborative efforts of musicians from around the world. As a form of communication, “World Music” is an idiom for which the alphabet (style) is at present being negotiated through combination of various languages of the world.

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(16) Papa Wemba's interview reported in Greame Ewen, 1994, p. 320.

(17) *Kulanjan*. Rykodisc (1999) – HNCD 1444.

(18) *Songhai*. Hannibal Records/Nuevos Medios (1988) – HNCD 1323.

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**RESUMO:** O termo globalização tornou-se recentemente um estribilho na maioria dos idiomas. No campo da música, globalização procria o conceito de "música mundial". Como um conceito novo em música, globalização apresenta um desafio a estudantes e leigos sobre a extensão de sua definição. Neste trabalho asseguro que, embora a sua definição e seu conceito fossem simplesmente aceitos, a música mundial está se tornando uma realidade enquanto produto do processo de globalização. Como um produto híbrido, "música mundial" está se alimentando da cultura musical mundial. Como com sua comunidade e

*África*: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos. USP, S. Paulo, 22-23: 111-119, 1999/2000/2001.

sua cultura, o campo semântico de sua linguagem também está sendo definido. Esta afirmação é baseada numa miríade de gravações oriundas de colaboração experimental entre músicos. A música urbana da República Democrática de Congo contribuiu e continua contribuindo à evolução do produto híbrido rumo à sua identidade nova.

**Palavras-chave:** Etnomusicologia; Globalização; Música Popular da República Democrática do Congo; Música mundial