CHAPTER 6.5

Music Technologies of Power in Gabon

Alice Aterianus-Owanga

Introduction

From July to August 2024, the WhatsApp news feeds of many of my contacts and friends in the Gabonese music scene, as well as the conversations I had in Libreville, were filled with references to images of the transitional president, Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema,[1] appearing alongside music artists. During the national inclusive dialogue held in April 2024 as part of the reconstruction of national institutions, he first organized a notable opening ceremony featuring artists from different generations. A singer from the 1970s (André Pépé Nze) reappeared on stage after being forgotten and sidelined for several decades, even receiving a presidential embrace in front of an audience of officials. In this same moment of high political significance, a rapper who had been exiled for several years due to his critical stance (Lord Ekomy Ndong) came to share his odes to the promotion of local cultural heritage. He introduced his performance with an acoustic sequence on the *ngombi* harp, putting this *bwiti*[2] ritual instrument and its melodies at the centre of his message, and was joined on stage by the president who backed up his claims for change.

Later, the President of the Transition confirmed his closeness to and strategic use of artists and musical performances during his republican tour across the nine provinces of the country. After appearing dancing in a *corps de garde* in the north (in his father's home province), he later performed *ndjobi* dance steps during a visit animated by a folkloric group from Haut-Ogooué (his mother's home province). His movements and the wearing of symbolic attributes confirmed his familiarity with the area and with this repertoire rooted in secret society. Finally, in August 2024, during performances held in various locations around the country ahead of the Independence Day, the president once again joined the stage, this time alongside a rapper and *ntcham*[3] artist, performing mechanical urban dance steps with hip-hop undertones.

In the social media where these videos were shared, the president was described as 'the best of presidents', a 'purebred Gaboma', 'a true son of the country,' 'the president of artists', or even the most 'charismatic'. In response or reaction to these online comments, the conversations I participated in during my fieldwork in Libreville in the summer of 2024 revolved as much around the appearances of the new president as around the artists accompanying him, whose relationships with the new authorities were scrutinized. Behind the scenes, these meetings were accompanied by a whole series of (money) transactions and negotiations, weaving a network of exchanges between the new regime and the music artists that make up

Gabonese urban soundscapes. Ultimately, whether through smartphone screens, taxis and minibuses tuned to local radios, or in the nightclubs frequented by city dwellers, the omnipresence of hymns to 'freedom' and musical celebrations of the new independence[4] offered a revealing insight into how power, its ideologies, and its agents manifest in an undeniably sonic texture, resonating through a variety of human and non-human mediums.

These observations echo earlier work on the politics of performance, which called for moving beyond the state-centrism of previous theories and considering the relational and performative dimensions of power. Based on her historical and ethnographic study of Tanzanian music and dance groups, Kelly Askew famously proposed a renewal of debates on power and nationalism by developing a 'theory of the politics of performance', which would make sense of 'how performance is actively employed in the negotiation of power relations' (Askew, 2006: 21).

Drawing on long-term research in Gabon,[5] my paper partly continues this reflection. Yet rather than discussing the construction of the nation state (and its strategic production and negotiation of territories and ethnicity), my aim is more specifically to examine the web of technologies, affects, experiences, and sensory mediums that concretely shape and materialize the presence of music in Gabonese urban life and its intersections with the realm of power relationships. I introduce the idea of 'music technologies of power' as a framework for understanding how sound, sensory, and material mediations contribute to the daily (re)production of local experiences, performances and relationships of power. As this paper will demonstrate, the power of music and the diverse mediations it mobilizes can be defined in this context as a capacity to affect: to evoke emotions of hope, rebellion, or compliance; to stir the imagination and memories; to penetrate people's minds and souls; to enchant or inflict harm; to accuse or praise. It serves as a currency in relationships of interdependency and competition between musicians' and political elites. In this paper, I pay special attention to the transformations of music technologies of power over the recent decades of digitalization, in a context marked by growing mediatization, the proliferation of screens, and the ubiquity of smartphones in urban daily life.

In that sense, this discussion echoes earlier research on the digitization of music (Taylor, 2017) and its global expansion beyond the Western world (Olivier, 2020, 2022; Born, 2021). A significant portion of recent studies on music digitization has drawn, implicitly or explicitly, on the perspectives of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to explore music mediation. The concept of music mediation was notably introduced by Antoine Hennion (a close collaborator of Bruno Latour) in his work on baroque music enthusiasts (Hennion, 2015; 1995 for the French edition). Hennion emphasized the need to move beyond frameworks focused solely on the audience, artists, and musical oeuvres, urging scholars to explore the multiple mediators that animate music and forge the relationships between music, artists, and audiences. In doing so, he aligned with

broader sociological shifts led by scholars at the École des Mines in France, who sought to re-evaluate the significance of objects, technologies, material elements, and natural entities in understanding the social world (Latour, 1996).

Already well-known in France, Hennion's theory of music mediation gained broader attraction internationally, in part through the work of scholars such as Georgina Born (2019), who expanded the concept by introducing the notion of 'assemblage.' Born argued that mediation is an aggregate of music's social, technological, and temporal dimensions, which varies across different contexts and historical periods. In a recent edited volume on music digitization, Born revisits a wide range of previous theories on music technologies, highlighting how research on music mediation and micro-sociological studies of music materiality, often inspired by STS, have frequently overlooked the political dimensions of the phenomena they examine (Born, 2021). Beyond the realm of music, similar critiques have been directed at Bruno Latour's project of a symmetric theory of society, which posits the equivalence of humans, natural entities (such as water, plants, trees), and objects (such as cars, microscopes, and computers) in social analysis. In a recent book, Christine Chivallon (2022) critiques this new materialism, arguing that in its effort to erase the nature/culture and human/non-human dichotomies, it bypasses critical issues related to power, politics, and domination[6].

In contrast to contemporary understandings of technologies and social worlds, often criticized for their depoliticization, the material and embodied nature of power has been famously theorized in previous research on technology in Central Africa (Warnier, 2007). Jean-Pierre Warnier's concept of technologies of power emerged from his study of the Cameroon Kingdom of Mankon and his desire to understand how domination and power relationships are concretely materialized and embodied. Material culture and ordinary bodily practices in the Cameroon Grassfields place significant emphasis on the notions of 'receptacle' and 'pot,' which also underpin the political structure of the kingdom. The analogy between the circulation of bodily substances and hierarchical positions in the social order serves as a metaphor for political authority.

In another work, which is more closely related to the area discussed in this paper, Florence Bernault introduces the notion of 'colonial transactions' to analyze the network of shared imaginaries and struggles that linked Africans and Europeans in Gabon during the colonial period. She argues that this concept of transaction draws attention to the 'things' that mediated exchanges (Bernault, 2019: 9) between Africans and Europeans, highlighting the instrumental role of material and immaterial assets in processes of domination (Bernault, 2019: 10-11). These assets also served to accumulate status, reshape identities, and extract various forms of value and power.

My paper is predicated on the possibility of bridging these apparently distant theoretical traditions – the anthropology of the materiality of power in central African countries and the growing body of research in the anthropology of music

technologies – to explore the significance of music and its mediums as conveyors and negotiators of power relationships in Gabon. My purpose is not to portray power struggles as the ultimate framework for all social relationships or musical experiences. However, as I will demonstrate, music technologies, affects, senses, and imagination wield agency within networks of relationships between humans and non-human entities, which also engage in transactions of power, influence, and control. This occurs not only in the political realm (which is the focus of this paper), but also in other contexts, such as interactions among peers, elders, or between men and women, as I discussed elsewhere (Aterianus-Owanga, 2017).

In the first section, I will outline briefly how the history of political participation in popular music in Gabon has been closely intertwined with the transformation of technological and media infrastructures, focusing on changes observed over the past two decades. I will then use an ethnographic example to examine the convergence of different registers, realms, and dimensions of power relationships as materialized through music. This will lead me to highlight the fusion of political and religious forces in musical mediations, and to stress the relevance of multimodal ethnography as a way to apprehend the multiple ontologies and realms of social, political and religious life mediated through music performances.

Digitization and the Shifting Power Struggles Around Music

As in the example chosen in my introduction, music tracks, musicians, and their analogic or digital mediations have long constituted a pivotal sonic and multisensory texture for political mobilization in Gabon. During the single-party era, the bodies of dancers in political animation groups were part of the spectacle of power, as in other Central African one-party states (Kapalanga Gazungil Sang'Amin 1989; Covington-Ward 2016); they consistently spread images and sounds that materialized the ideologies and influence of Omar Bongo and PDG patrons through TV channels, radio sets and live performances, which filled central African citizens' urban lives with popular music (Gondola 1999; Grabli 2019). From 1968 to 1990, most Gabonese musicians evolved in military orchestras, and few possibilities of music production existed out of the control of PDG (Parti Démocratique Gabonais) infrastructures, whose members also often owned the technologies used for recording and had the means to produce artists abroad (Matsahanga 2002; Aterianus-Owanga 2017). Musicians who transgressed official ideologies did it through veiled messages, irony, double-entendre; the others went in exile, or encountered pressures and censorship.

Several cases of intimidation or persecution of musicians demonstrate how their influence was, at that time, perceived as highly threatening to political elites, particularly male figures, whose success in attracting women came into competition with that of political figures. Numerous stories and rumours circulate in

Libreville regarding conflicts between singers and politicians over competition for women. It is, for instance, said that the singer and military orchestra musician Mackjoss had an affair with Patience Dabany, the first wife of President Omar Bongo Ondimba, which led the president to prevent Mackjoss from advancing to higher ranks in his military career. In the early 2000s, the singer Serge Egniga was allegedly assassinated by a general and police commander to end their rivalry over the same mistress. As these rumours suggest, prestige, fame, and the ability to attract women are consubstantial to the representation of masculine power figures, leading to competition between artists and politicians.

Over the course of this history of competitive and collaborative relationships between musicians and political power, the introduction of certain technologies has exerted an often-decisive importance. In the 1990s, the one-party landscape of explicit control and censorship changed radically around the time of the democratic transition, partly due to constitutional reforms, but also thanks to the emergence of new media and means of music production. In the 1990s, the rise of an autonomous circuit for the production and dissemination of popular music which supported the emergence of hip-hop, was intrinsically linked to the introduction of private home studios and radio stations, as well as to investments of independent entrepreneurs. This development temporarily loosened the grip of political patrons on music production.

However, as hip-hop gradually integrated into the media landscape and listening habits, these technological transformations were progressively recaptured by local ruling elites, renewing the mechanics of cultural patronage. Indeed, from the late 1990s, the unrelenting growth of rap and hip-hop's popularity in the media and urban landscape attracted investments from businessmen, political elites, and intermediaries, who invested in brand new equipment, state-of-the-art recording studios, and expensive music video productions, transforming the standards of the music industry considerably. Because these capital injections were carried out by members of presidential spheres or senior civil servants, part of the rap scene became embedded in a long-standing system of patronage and co-optation. Rappers especially garnered attention from political spheres during the presidential election of 2009, when they became Ali Bongo's preferred intermediaries to gain influence over the youth. After his election, Ali Bongo involved several rappers at official positions, and some rappers' music careers became springboards to interfere with state elites and senior officials.[7] The control on rappers' productions and insidious censorship became omnipresent over the course of Ali Bongo's presidency, particularly after the electoral crisis of 2016, which led several artists to go into exile.

The access to new technologies – be it social medias and smartphones provided by global tech companies or digital cameras and editing applications – once again played a pivotal role in the changes that occurred in the music world under Ali Bongo's regime. As early as 2009, Facebook and online media had become key

tools for circumventing censorship and disseminating rap productions. This helped broadcast transgressive songs that had been censored by official media and facilitated connections between rappers in Libreville and Gabonese youths studying or living abroad, whether for education or in exile. From 2018, a series of initiatives, notably around new forms of digital creation and distribution, emerged as alternatives to official media, unexpectedly transforming the music scene. A salient repercussion of the increased presence of digital tools is the development of a new music and dance genre called *ntcham*. Drawing on an aesthetic of robbers and bandits, as well as of criminal economies, this Afropop genre emerged out of the official music industry and media and was primarily popularized by young men, who recorded themselves with their smartphones and spread their songs via YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook. Sometimes self-identifying as robbers and street hustlers, they borrowed the singing and animation practice that enlivens the routine of prisoners in Libreville's jail to make covers of famous Nigerian and Ghanaian singers such as Shatta Wale,[8] to represent their peers and to generate recognition in their neighbourhood.

The genre then emerged directly from the increased circulation of a broader range of recording technologies and devices, but also progressively escalated its presence in music industries though the patronage of other powerful (male) figures. Indeed, famous *ntcham* artists benefited from regular support from patrons to fund the recording of their songs in studios or the shooting of their video clips. These sponsors whose names are often praised in *ntcham* songs include former prisoners who have made fortunes through drug dealing, digital entrepreneurs who have gained fame by sharing humorous videos, businessmen, and progressively, senior civil servants of Ali Bongo's regime. For instance in 2023, a close collaborator of Noureddin Bongo (Ali Bongo's son) built a highly equipped studio with the latest technologies and signed the most famous *ntcham* artists of that time, such as Eboloko, Fetty Ndoss, E.J., etc. Most of them ended up performing songs and concerts in support of Ali Bongo's campaign in 2023, just weeks before the 30 August coup d'état. The emergence and multiplication of new means of music production, dissemination, and consumption in recent years have thus coincided with the rise of new entrepreneurs, including artists themselves or music entrepreneurs who used digital means to invent new pathways to success and social recognition while inserting themselves into existing state power structures. This dynamic amplified the media presence and popularity of alternative successful and prestigious figures, whether they were artists and musicians themselves or new entrepreneurs collaborating in their promotion and dissemination, which enabled them to access better social positions.

This brief historical overview (which I develop in detail in other publications) highlights how, in the last three decades, irregular cycles of transformation and reconfiguration of music industries occurred in dialogue with the intrusion and commodification of new technologies: at different moments, the diffusion and

commodification of new tools for music recording and dissemination generated a disruption of existing structures of production and a dissociation from patronage structures to whom the ubiquity of music was instrumental. Yet time has betrayed the existence of a reverse and reactional process, which consists of a renewal of elites' hold over music through a form of cannibalization of digital tools within existing structures. This statement should not lead to any teleological representation of an intrinsic and immovable 'culture' of domination that would endlessly reproduce itself and predetermine the course of Gabonese music technologies of power. At the opposite of this vision, the recent emergence of *ntcham* and its entrepreneurs, as well as the coup d'état itself, prove that unpredictable transformations are generated by the complex mix of (local and global) networks, markets, technologies, and specific conjunctures entangled with music dynamics. Still, the Gabonese case demonstrates the vacuity and cul-de-sac of social sciences' academic perspectives on music technologies that evacuates the issue of power relationships from their analysis.

That said, this socio-historical overview of the power relationships at play between popular musicians and elites – and their entanglement with media and technological transformations – might seem quite narrow and insufficient if approached at only the meso-level analysis. The multiple ontologies associated with music technologies can also be understood through an ethnographic lens which observes performance situations, individual biographies, and the social life of music technologies themselves at a lower level. As I will describe below, the ethnographic lens allows a better understanding of the capacities granted to music to affect and transform existing power structures, by making perceptible the pervasion of religious objects and forces into the everyday practices of music consumption and production.

The Multidimensional Power of Music Technologies

In Central Africa, the field of music has long been a place where technologies and material mediations were used to navigate between the worlds of the visible and the invisible, of the living and the dead. Earlier work in Gabonese ethnomusicology has demonstrated the place of music in the ritual domain of *bwiti* and initiation societies (Sallée 1985). In these rituals, the sounds of the *mongongo* bow and the *ngombi* harp convey voices of the ancestors and spirits (Bonhomme 2014). Julien Bonhomme analysed the agency conveyed to musical instruments in *bwiti* rituals by explaining that human actors are not 'responsible' for rituals, but 'just act as animators of actions taken over by artefacts, or more exactly by spirits, ancestors, or mythical characters that they represent in the ritual scene' (Bonhomme 2014, 108, my translation).

These mediating functions attributed to sound and organology are not limited to the realm of traditional music or ritual contexts, and they have been

reconfigured with the development of the music industry, as new technologies made their entrance into religious and non-religious music spheres. On the religious side, music recorded on recorders and downloaded onto mobile phones or USB sticks has been integrated into local rituals of protection and initiation (Jadinon 2017), and into Pentecostal churches which use popular gospel music to convey faith. Outside religious spaces, musical sounds and messages are also given agency in popular artists' relationships with the intermingled domains of power and the occult. There are various ethnographic examples that illustrate the way in which Gabonese hip-hop genres have expanded and reconfigured this well-tuned multidimensional scape of music sounds, experiences and objects over different (visible and invisible) worlds and entangled power relationships. In the course of my research, for instance, I met a rapper who used his métier to condemn the sorcery attacks of his 'witches', elders of his kin who had allegedly sacrificed his maternal family members; he had transformed his use of hip-hop after his own initiation into *bwiti* and the discoveries he had made over the course of his initiation. Another artist who had converted to Pentecostalism recounted how he had used the power of hip-hop instrumentals by 50 cent combined with biblical prayers to ward off the attacks of a devil who attacked him by possessing a close friend and rapper (Aterianus-Owanga 2017).

This agency given to music devices, sonorities and their multiple correlated means of action is also striking when we observe concerts and performances in the public space. Due to their almost unique capacity of gathering a number of citizens from different classes and positions on the political chessboard, concerts are interesting places to observe the sonic and multimodal agency of music in power relations. In August 2023, two weeks before the elections and the consecutive coup d'état, a big concert was organized for the independence celebration. The '*festival de l'indépendance*' is a yearly event (often also called '*Fête de l'indépendance*'), allegedly unaffiliated with political parties, even though organized by the ministry of culture. Its political significance becomes quite noticeable during electoral years, as the independence celebration takes place two weeks before the presidential election and the presence in the show's line-up is perceived as proof of an artist's allegiance or otherwise dissociation from authorities in power. This year, the concert given to the audience was conceived as a broad gathering of different genres representative of the nation, including traditional artists, popular musicians, *ntcham* artists, and rappers such as Rodzeng.

Renowned for his engaged lyrics, Rodzeng rose to fame in the late 2000s with a group called 241 (Gabon's telephone country code) and set himself up as heir to the previous generation of conscious and traditionalist hip-hop. After a period of studies abroad (in South Africa and China), he came back to Gabon and participated with two other rappers in the creation of an online hip-hop contest called 'Bwiti Gang Cipher,' which adapted the hip-hop technique of cypher contests into a filmed format for broadcast on YouTube and Facebook. The project brought together

rappers from Libreville's rap scene, other Gabonese cities, and the diaspora for cypher sessions that were filmed and shared exclusively on YouTube and social networks, to gain independence from radios, TV channels, and producers, who were suspected of being controlled by politicians. Through its name, instrumentals and music video aesthetics, the project incidentally recycled references to *bwiti* ritual instruments and symbols.

It echoes a trend that started in the 1990s and consisted of rappers using *bwiti* as a proof of return to alleged precolonial cultures, of the liberation from western or Christian influences and of the Gabonization of their music. As visible in the project 'Bwiti gang cypher', Rodzeng pursues this trend and presents himself as one of the ardent defenders of local 'traditions,' without wanting to constrain himself to a genre of hip-hop which is evidenced by his recent collaborations with *ntcham* artists. Rodzeng is also representative of an entrepreneurial trend among hip-hop and other popular musicians to try to transform themselves into 'brands' for companies which use them as advertisers, and thereby to emancipate from political patrons and their production structures. Rodzeng has worked as the face of mobile phone brands such as Airtel, and he is regularly called to provide animations in street programmes organized by brands of the national brewers' company, Sobraga. In other words, Rodzeng is a public figure considered to exert influence on the youth, which he does by spreading daily messages and cleverly managing his image on his social media.

On the evening of 15 August 2023, Rodzeng was called – as several other leading figures of the music scene – by officials of the Ministry of culture, to stage a performance which was implicitly expected to consist of dancing tunes and lightweight lyrics, in accordance with the tone of the event. Instead of that, when Rodzeng was announced on stage, the DJ started a soundtrack with bullet noises, dreadful screams and the voice of a radio commentator describing the military subjugation of street riots, all elements taken from the repression that had followed the 2016 election. After the lively and cheerful performances of *ntcham* artists that came before, this introduction froze the atmosphere: summoning up sonic memories of the previous election touched upon a certain taboo in the public media and inevitably alluded to the possibility of a future reiteration of these bloody confrontations in the weeks after. Before Rodzeng's entrance on stage, a *bwitist* initiate came on stage to perform an operation of purification of the stage with burning branches, as used in the ritual of the *bwiti disumba* initiation society. During this short ritual sequence, Rodzeng went on stage all dressed in white, with a red hat and holding a walking stick, again exhibiting symbols highly related to the initiation world.

When he came on stage, Rodzeng briefly explained the ongoing sequence executed by the *bwitist* behind him: 'We clean the country, with the fire of the country.' He then started performing – on a very simple beat and without playback – his song 'le bled est à terme' ('the country is coming to an end'). The song is a crude description of the tragic dimensions of Gabonese lower classes' daily realities: the

banalization of hard drugs consumption, the collapse of school and university structures, ordinary hatred and violence within families, the alleged obligation for men to submit themselves to homosexuality to go up on the ladder of public service and institutions[9], the regular destruction of poor housing during floodings and heavy rains, but also amendments to the constitution and extravagant spending of public funds by the elites. He also recalled the aborted coup that occurred in January 2019, whose authors have been sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment, and suggested that rather than an attack of state security, this attempted coup was an 'alarm call'.

In front of the stage, watching a performance that was unusually critical for this type of event, the audience first remained silent and staggered, before progressively expressing assent, and shouting their approval. Rodzeng punctuated his song by calling for the protection of the ancestors, in keeping with his adherence to *bwiti* ancestors' cult. Yet he surprisingly ended his song by kneeling in front of the audience, policemen in charge of security, cameramen, and other artists or officials from the Ministry of culture backstage, and he started to recite the Our Father prayer. He called for the audience to join him, offering them the microphone. This Christian prayer surprised part of Rodzeng's following and caused his detractors to criticize him, stressing the seeming contradiction with his engagement as a herald of 'traditional' religions and *bwiti* rituals that he appeared to be betraying. He explained his unanticipated performance to me afterwards:

> '[When I come on stage,] I rap '*bled est à terme*'. People go into a trance, shouting 'yes, he's right, that's it!'. At one point I say to myself 'shit, the authorities are here, the ministers[...]'. I don't know if I'm going to get out of here in peace. I tell myself that if you want to get out of here in peace, just say a prayer, and you'll beat them at their own game. That's why I said the Lord's Prayer. Don't you see? I get the whole audience to pray, I get down on my knees, people start praying the Our Father who art in heaven... [...] Man, when I finish rapping, people clap'. Interview with Rodzeng, 24 December 2023.

As he explained during our conversations afterwards, Rodzeng had not planned to say this prayer; he was just '*dosé dans l'iboga*' (under the influence of iboga roots consumed during *bwiti* initiation rituals). Rodzeng recites this prayer as a reaction to his sudden fear and perceived threat to his person at this event. The overtly critical tone of his song could lead to his arrest or to reprisals by agents or henchmen of the authorities in the form of direct attacks or aggressions inflicted by mystical weapons. The sequence of the *bwiti* ritual at the start of his performance was partly conceived as a protection from these aggressions. Furthermore, by reciting the 'Our Father', Rodzeng also saught a consensual way to place himself under the protection of Christian references, which have been considered part of the religious doctrine imposed by the authorities and part of the language of the dominant elites since colonization. Putting himself under the umbrella of Christian

prayers – which have been mixed and juxtaposed with initiation societies in many ways – in that sense was a strategy intended to protect himself against reprisals, and 'beating them at their own game'. When he went off stage, Rodzeng was not arrested, but instead congratulated by his peers and by the Ministry's official, although one of them added 'you wanted to mess up my concert!'.

Rodzeng is not the first hip-hop artist to employ ritual sequences on stage and to take it out of the context of the initiation guardrooms to popular concert stages. A few years ago, I attended a similar concert of the duo Movhaizlaine (which includes Lord Ekomy Ndong mentioned in my introduction), who are older than Rodzeng elders and close collaborators in the hip-hop scene. They had carried out a similar purification of the stage prior to their entrance on stage, because they feared to become the victims of attacks and reprisals from the political elites they incriminate in their songs. For both Rodzeng and his predecessors, performing does not only serve the desire to stage a traditionalist 'local' rap style, it also an answer to a need for protection against attacks from the ruling elites, that also happens to occur in the realm of the invisible and the religious world.

This transfer of religious sonorities, artifacts, or outfits from *bwiti* temples to popular music stages, which is ancient in the history of Gabonese popular music, is partly enabled by the structure of bwiti rituals themselves. These rituals contain both a secret/sacred side and a public/profane side, the latter of which is visible to the uninitiated audience, though cryptic. Artists involved in these transfers are often initiated (as is the case with Rodzeng) and aware of this distinction, and they negotiate with the initiation hierarchy to use some religious emblems on stage.

Unlike other instances where musical elements are moved from temples to music stages, resulting in the 'desacralization' of the sounds or artifacts (Feld 2012), we see here that the ritual elements invoked on stage do not unequivocally lose their religious efficacy. On the contrary, they are deliberately called upon to exert agency. Accusatory words, ritual instruments, comforting or invigorating beats, symbolic outfits, fire sticks, and ritual colourings blur the boundaries between stage performance and ritual, as well as between the social relationships of daily life and the symbolic power struggles of the night and the occult realm. All these tangible elements become active agents in a field of power relations, which play out across different interwoven spaces that music and performance help mediate. While witchcraft is often perceived as operating in an invisible, nocturnal realm accessible only to those who have 'seen' the world of the night (Bonhomme 2006) or who are initiated into secret societies, music, sonorities, and musical technologies offer tools for action and forms of mediation between these interconnected universes in Gabonese social life. Contrary to the assumption of a clear distinction between non-religious public spaces and religious private spheres, descriptions like these highlight the porosity of such boundaries in Gabonese urban life, where popular music stages sit at the crossroads of heterodox practices and multidimensional spaces, mediated by acoustic flows and their associated tools and artifacts.

This ethnographic vignette, with its assemblage of seemingly contrapuntal religious references, technologies, sounds, actors, and spaces, unravels the multidimensional texture of power as expressed through music performance, and its ramifications in religion and the so-called area of the 'mystic'. These observations resonate with prior research on sound and power in the Global South (Steingo and Sykes 2020, 23), particularly regarding ways to approach it without reproducing an ideology of 'sound for itself' (or music for itself) that isolates sonic elements from other senses, objects, beliefs, supernatural agents, and technologies that concretely convey the meaning of these sonic systems of organization.

Conclusion

Music is a particularly interesting lens through which to examine the anchoring of power relationships in sensory and material textures that inhabit the lives of Gabonese youngsters, and their entanglement with multidimensional forces. In turn, the concept of 'textures' interestingly captures the unique duality of music, which is both profoundly immaterial (especially in the digital age) and deeply embodied, and is experienced through tangible mediators, senses, and bodily receptors.

I started this paper by recalling the growing interest in STS and ANT theories to make sense of the role of material artefacts and technological mediations in the shaping of music practices and experiences, and I discussed how this issue was connected to a longer tradition of research on performance and the materiality of power. As demonstrated in this case study, social relationships formed in the production and performance of music have been profoundly impacted by the transformation that took place in technological ecosystems, and we are compelled to include the role of these technologies and of material and sensory mediums in our comprehension of social networks of relationships and agents. Yet, the Gabonese music world also proves how the music stage, the sonic textures it generates and the different objects and charged instruments it aggregates can be barely understood without considering the multidimensional and systemic power relationships that predate the introduction of certain tools and partly orient their social life in Gabon.

As famously described by several ethnomusicologists, music is always much 'more than music' (Rouget 1980, Lortat Jacob 1998, Martin, 2021). Drawing on his long-term research on men's choirs in Sardinia, Bernard Lortat Jacob analyzed the ambiguous power of music and its way to be both acted by and acting on social relationships. In Sardinia, imbrications between social and musical practices are 'close and thick' and assume the form of a 'subtle cronyism in which power relationships are at the same time barely visible and omnipresent' (Lortat-Jacob, online). In Gabon as well, the agency of music mediators acts on and makes sense when considered in an existing web of power relationships. These multidimensional relationships of control and competition, which infuse music meanings and

affect agency, relate to generations, social class, gender, kinship or inter-artistic competition, but also, and above all, as described above, to (masculine) links of competition and complicity connecting musicians and political elites. This competition acts on and is acted upon by a multitude of media that cannot be understood, limiting our observation to an anthropology 'without objects' (Latour, 1996). Nonetheless, music cannot be approached as a scene, activity or profession without connecting it to the realm of conflicts and tensions surrounding the access to music textures and technologies, a perspective that might be flattened or shrugged off if the analysis considers human and non-human agents from the same perspective.

Notes

1. On 30 August 2023, Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, along with the Republican Guard, participated in the coup d'état that overthrew Ali Bongo and the PDG (Parti démocratique gabonais), the party that had been in power since 1968. This overthrow occurred just minutes after the announcement of the presidential election results, which had proclaimed Ali Bongo winner. Following the coup, Oligui Nguema was declared President of the Transition by the Committee for the Transition and Restoration of Institutions (CTRI).
2. *Bwiti* is a local initiation, religious and therapeutic society that I describe in more depth in the second part of this paper.
3. *Ntcham* as a Gabonese music genre is often labelled as afropop, and draws from multiples influences, such as Nigerian afrobeat and Gabonese rap music. Highly related to bandits and robbers' street practices, this genre that I briefly describe in my first part, is characterized by its electronic fast beats and its use of Gabonese slang (the *toli bangando*).
4. The celebration of the summer of 2024 progressively transformed 30 August into a second Independence Day, as a commemoration of the liberation of the country from the previous regime. The original Independence Day which refers to the decolonization proclamation is 17 August.
5. This paper draws on old and recent ethnographic research I conducted in Libreville about popular music scenes. First from 2006 to 2014, I lived and conducted my research in Libreville for PhD research. Then, after I moved out of the country, I undertook shorter fieldwork and kept following the music scenes from abroad. Finally, in 2023, I launched a new team-project on music technologies of power, funded by a grant by the Swiss National Foundation, which led me to undertake ten weeks of fieldwork (in winter 2023 and summer 2024). Even though some sequences of its first section were already discussed in other papers, this paper draws on new and unpublished materials, as well as on recent theoretical reflections.
6. In her book, Chivallon focuses on the dehumanizing process at play through the history of colonialism, or through the neocolonial structures of relationships replayed through the contemporary production of knowledge.
7. Some pieces of the reflection proposed in this first section of my paper are more developed in other recent or older publications (Aterianus-Owanga 2021, forthcoming).
8. See, e.g., this 'remix' of a song of Shatta Wale by a young singer called l'Oiseau Rare, who became in the meantime one of the most famous *ntcham* artists, in Libreville and abroad: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vl6oLo7tipo&ab_channel=EZEBIOL%27intouchableSia (consulted on 28 September 2024).
9. Regarding the political nature of homophobic discourses in Gabon, see Aterianus-Owanga 2012, Tonda Maheba forthcoming.