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## **‘Orality is my reality’: the identity stakes of the ‘oral’ creation in Libreville hip-hop practices**

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Based on an ethnographic study in Libreville, this presentation examines the political and identity issues contained in the inscription in the register of orality for Gabonese hip-hop artists, mainly in rap music and slam poetry. It describes the history of these two genres’ appropriation in Libreville, then analyses how the claim for orality is deeply shaped for Gabonese youth with a dynamic of identity construction and of reafrikanization, manifested in three different ways: the creation of a peer language (*toli bangando*), the use of a traditional Fang epic (*mvvet*), and the staging of religious initiation societies. It finally discusses how this identity construction coincides with postcolonial issues and with connections with the black diaspora.

**Keywords:** hip-hop; orality; identity; postcolonial context; Gabon

Since the early 1990s, young people in Gabon have shown a strong enthusiasm for the practice of rap music and slam poetry: in one sense, these two artistic verbal expressions have become the favourite way of criticizing a postcolonial context characterized by severe economic inequalities, by the violent pressures of the state and the market, and by the expression of the feeling of a so-called ‘acculturation’ among the youth. In a second sense, and contrary to some dated visions of hip-hop as essentially subversive, rap and slam have also been deeply integrated into the spectacle of political advertising,<sup>1</sup> and they tend to be transformed into more dancing or ‘animation’ genres, under the pressure of the commodification of hip-hop in local musical markets (Clark 2013).

Divided between several sections within the rap music network, Gabonese rappers compete amongst themselves to affirm a ‘real’ or an ‘authentic’ rap music, replaying a classical thematic of rap music debates about the ‘realness’ of rappers (Forman 2002; Kelley 2011). In some parts of the rap music networks in Gabon and in Africa, that issue of realness takes a particular meaning, and it resonates with the question of the ‘Africanity’ or the ‘African identity’ that rappers affirm in their music, in order to create an original adaptation of rap music (Ntarangwi 2009).

This article analyses this process of ‘africanization’ of rap music and slam poetry in Gabon, and it especially demonstrates how this process ties in with the assumption that hip-hop artists veer towards the oral genre and to notions of orality. Indeed, even if rap songs and slam performances represent the complex and fluctuating products of a creative process combining writing,

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orality, and digital technologies, rappers and slammers of Libreville identify with a practice of orality considered as a characteristic of the 'Africanity' they claim. Therefore, they reformulate a mythification of orality, symbolized for them by icons of literature like Léopold Sédar Senghor and Amadou Hampâté Bâ, and they reformulate this ideology about orality that Ursula Baumgardt qualified elsewhere with the adjectives 'nostalgic and passéist' (Baumgardt 2008, 250).<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the observation of this strong and intentional enrooting of young hip-hopppers in the oral genre, this article investigates the ideological and identity processes underlying their claims of orality. To what identity construction and ideological processes does the inscription in the register of orality echo alongside these young artists? What patrimonies and images are summoned, reinvented, or created by their artistic practices? How does hip-hop practice enter into a dialogue with their wish to create an African or a typical Gabonese kind of expression?

To discuss these identity issues raised by the transformation of youth popular cultures and music in a globalized world (Ntarangwi 2009; Kiwan and Meinhof 2011; White 2012), I base my argument on observations, texts, and interviews collected during an ethnographic fieldwork research into the hip-hop movement of Libreville, part of a thesis research about the identity processes happening through the appropriation of rap music in Gabon.<sup>3</sup> I present briefly how the issue of orality and identity has developed in my research, in dialogue with some literature about hip-hop in Africa, in order to introduce the position that I choose to adopt to understand the specific claims and processes observed in Gabonese rap, beyond some common visions expressed sometimes about African hip-hop. After having described how rap music and slam poetry have been adopted in youth practices in Libreville and the strong historical ties between those two genres in Gabon, I then turn my attention on the identity stakes that are sustained by rappers and slam artists' performances in Gabon. The article argues that the claim for orality is deeply shaped by a dynamic of identity construction and of 'reaffricanization' that coincides with postcolonial issues and that takes place through multidirectional connections within the Black Atlantic.

### **Questioning the oral dimension of hip-hop in Gabon and in Africa**

Rap music, created during the 1970s in the Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean communities of New York (Chang 2005), has spread to different countries throughout the world (Mitchell 2001), and has been adapted according to local specificities or politics (Condry 2006; Fernandes 2006). It has conserved nevertheless a few common elements characteristic of the genre of rap, such as the combination between oral, written, and digital techniques, and the importance of the assertion of the oral performance.

In the many studies developed about American rap music,<sup>4</sup> orality has played an important part, and it has often been questioned in relation to debates about the 'realness' of hip-hop and about the inscription of rap music in a long tradition of 'black' music and oral expressions. Indeed, as American rap music received the inheritance of oral, rhythmic and poetic traditions rooted in African-American musical culture like street funk, radio DJs, bebop singers, or dozens, the oral tradition has constituted one of the anchoring points of hip-hop into black culture and Afro-American tradition, both in the social sciences and in the discourses of rap artists, who have often identified themselves as 'modern griots' (Tang 2012).

The tremendous expansion of hip-hop in the African continent since the end of the 1980s and the subsequent development of the field of research about African hip-hop have allowed us to examine under a new light this cliché of rapper as griot. Some recent studies have indeed questioned that romantic vision of African rappers, and the idea that the appropriation of rap music in Africa corresponded to a full circle, driving hip-hop back to its roots (Tang 2012; Sajjani 2013).

Damon Sajnani has for example recently criticized – in a paper based on an investigation within Senegalese rap artists – the fact that many works about hip-hop on the continent tend to reproduce an Africanist cliché of Africa as the origin of rap music and rappers as griots (Sajnani 2013). Beyond the special case of Senegal and the trope of ‘rapper-as-modern-griot’, his paper questions the lack of critical and non-essentializing analysis about the presence of ‘oral traditions’ and ‘African culture’ in discourses of both rappers and scholars.

If those questions have been brilliantly discussed for the case of West Africa and Senegal, among others in Damon Sajnani’s and Patricia Tang’s papers, they also echo with many processes and observations that can be raised in the domain of hip-hop in Central Africa and in Gabon, a country that offers fantastic material for a new glance at identity and orality issues in Africa, but that has been insufficiently studied by social sciences. Indeed, little has been written about the French-speaking countries of Central Africa, whereas an important hip-hop scene has existed since the 1990s in this region, more specifically in Gabon; it hosted some of the first groups and hip-hop releases at the beginning of the 1990s. Every year, for example, Libreville is host to one of the most famous hip-hop festivals in the French-speaking part of Africa.

When I arrived in Gabon in 2006 – to realize an academic exchange with the university of Gabon – rap music and hip-hop represented an inescapable and central activity of the youth, omnipresent in public transport, popular boroughs, and of course in the staging of concerts. Nevertheless, no scholar (ethnomusicologist, anthropologist, or sociologist) had devoted a whole research to Gabonese rap music or hip-hop, and scholars seemed generally to be more interested in traditional music or oral practices observed in rural contexts than in urban music and hip-hop. Nevertheless, with the organization of slam sessions in the French cultural centre (CCF), a few teachers of African literacy from the University of Libreville started at this period to pay attention to young urban poets, and French cultural institutions raised funds to settle collective projects with African slammers. Some of the rappers and slammers on the CCF stages tended to present themselves as ‘modern griots’, claiming the inheritance of *mvét* narrators, or of older singers like Pierre-Claver Akendengué, who had created appropriations of oral traditions before them. One of the most famous and oldest rap groups in Gabon (during that period and after), the duo Movaizhaleine, was for example expert in the art of adding traditional instruments, vernacular languages, and traditional religious symbols to their creations, and they had become, across the whole continent, icons of an ‘Africanized’ and conscious hip-hop, associated with other famous rappers like Daara J. or Didier Awadi.

There is a surprising absence of studies devoted to rap music in Gabon,<sup>5</sup> despite the significant importance of that music in Libreville’s social and cultural environment. Conscious of the impact of some hip-hop artists claiming to be going ‘back to the roots’ and for exploring African traditions in their music, I specifically decided to question the identity process and the invention of traditions taking place through the practice of rap music. My theoretical framework has been developed in correlation with several works that have analysed the ‘indigenization’ of rap music in Africa and have highlighted the pertinence of focussing on identity issues, to understand how that musical genre contributes to cultural productions and transformations in the African continent.<sup>6</sup>

Like Le Wise, the young slammer quoted in my title,<sup>7</sup> rappers and slammers of Libreville – linked by strong ties that I describe further below – oriented at that time a part of their identity construction to older oral traditions or to figures of African literature. Expert in the art of slam in the peer language of Libreville’s youth and in the description of Libreville’s popular boroughs, Le Wise has been very famous in Libreville since 2009 and 2010, when he won the national slam poetry competition. Even if he is above all famous for his original slang style, in comparison to other groups who are seen as specially focused on the affirmation of traditions,

Le Wise also asserts in some of his performances and in many interviews that he is the inheritor of the oral traditions of his region (the East of Gabon), relating for example that in Africa ‘slam poetry already existed in traditions. During ceremonies, ancients and wise men used to speak harmoniously.’<sup>8</sup> Le Wise explains that his talent for urban poetry follows from his childhood close to the ancients of the village, and when he relates his life story he reproduces a romantic vision of Africa as naturally rooted in orality. For him and many of his peers, the trope of an intrinsic African competence for orality thus has an important place in identity construction.

Continuing along the line of previous research about the identity processes happening through rap music in Africa, my article questions the importance of this ‘branchement’ (Amselle 2001) to orality in Gabonese rappers’ construction of an ‘African’ identity, and it suggests observing critically the link often established between African rap music and traditional orality. To discuss these questions, I will concentrate on the observations collected in the Gabonese hip-hop network, a fantastic body of material through which to analyse further the stakes of the claim for orality in rap music and slam poetry, two expressions that share a specific interpenetration in the history of hip-hop in Gabon.

### **Rap, slam, and their interconnection in the history of hip-hop in Gabon**

The practice of rap music appeared in Gabon between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, during a period of democratic transition and growth of freedom of expression in public space.<sup>9</sup> Hip-hop was spread in the coastal town of Libreville following several decades of connection to the Afro-American and Caribbean waves of music, first in the crucible of colonial cultural exchanges, which imported biguine, rumba, salsa, and other Caribbean sounds, then in the 1970s with the global diffusion and recognition of black culture and music (Hall 2008, 299–310), soul music, and funk among others.

Hip-hop first appeared in Gabonese soundscapes during the 1980s, through the observation of dance movements<sup>10</sup> and aesthetics of American rappers that young people who belonged to upper classes discovered in American video-clips and movies.<sup>11</sup> Even if tracks by Public Enemy and Grand Master Flash provided the background sounds for their dance competitions in boroughs of the town, and even if they were inspired by their clothes and ways of life, Gabonese young people did not understand the content of rap texts and they identified neither the existence of a ‘rap music’ genre, nor the possibility of themselves executing such oral performances. The transition from dance to rap music happened with the spread of a third influence: French rap music (or rap music performed in French), that revealed to the youth the possibility to develop an oral hip-hop performance. They first copied tracks of famous French rappers, and second they created their own rap creations, in French or vernacular languages.

As in other African countries, it was mainly elites and the children of upper economic classes who came into contact with this hip-hop wave during the first moments, as they were the ones who had access to records, video cassettes, and cultural products from the West, and were able to travel abroad (mainly in France and the US), where they learnt about this new urban culture. Even if rap music became during the riots of 1990 the media of expression of dispossessed and downtrodden people, a class conflict surrounds the implantation of rap in Gabon, manifested by the authenticity debates developed between rappers of elites and rappers of lower social classes. But whether they came from one or another class, the first rappers from the beginning of the 1990s engaged above all in a critique of the political governance of Gabon and Africa, of corruption, authoritarianism and neocolonial relationships with France.

After President Omar Bongo’s re-election in 1993 and after the democratic impulse had dissipated in favour of the rallying of several opponents to Omar Bongo’s new government, the political issue has been erased progressively from rap texts, under the pressure of a

veiled censorship. Other themes have become more preeminent, like the description of urban ambiances, party allegiances, gender relations, and for some groups, the identity issue. Since the beginning of the new millennium and the rise of a production system linked to authorities and political elites, advertisement has become a main aim of rap creation, in reaction to the commodification of this music; many artists have adopted the model of the US-based dirty south and its glorification of parties, sex, money, and fun.

Invented by Marc Smith on the streets of Chicago, slam poetry spread in Libreville during the 2000s, in the crucible of rap activities, and this is also the reason why the two verbal expressions have stayed strongly linked since that date.<sup>12</sup> In 2004, two young Gabonese students travelling in France and the US discovered slam poetry. Both belonged to Libreville's rap and R&B groups and they decided to organize a slam poetry workshop when they came back to Libreville, in collaboration with the CCF. The workshop, called 'Nyabinghi poetry', attracted mainly young students from high schools and universities, and it led to the creation of the first slam poetry group, under the mentoring of the famous rap duo Movaizhaleine. Even if other slam poetry workshops developed later, mainly in high schools, this activity has been assimilated into hip-hop networks, sharing the same performance places, the same references, and sometimes the same ideologies. Some of the most famous slammers are also rappers, others are invited by rappers to appear on their albums or in their shows, and they often belong to the same labels. Nevertheless, as rap music tends to be more popular than slam poetry, and as rappers are often older than slam poets (because that expression appeared later), an implicit hierarchy confers to rappers a superiority over slam poets.

Rap music and slam poetry are now well implanted in urban areas (in public transport, bars, and markets) and in the daily lives of youth; a special industry has developed to promote these genres, in connection with the local and global music markets. Contrary to slam poetry in the US, where slams are seen as multicultural places to perform marginalized identities (Somers-Willett 2009), this genre is not in Gabon a place of diversity and multiplicity, and it remains a mainly generational phenomenon, practised by the urban youth.

But, as for French or US cases, where slam poetry 'lives on both the page and the stage' (Somers-Willett 2009, 19), creation and performance in Gabonese hip-hop are built on a coexistence of orality, writing, and digital media, and artists use techniques of sampling and overlapping of digitalized elements.

During the first period of Gabonese hip-hop history, 'freestyles', 'clashes', or verbal sparring matches of improvisation took place in public, on street corners (Vettorato 2008),<sup>13</sup> which provided an arena for competition, fun, and pleasure. More recently, radio stations have become central places for those competitions, and, progressively, rappers have placed an increasing importance on the recording of albums. Since the 2000s, situations where oral performances have been undertaken in front of a public audience have constituted a minor part of rap practice, compared to time given over to studio sessions, the shooting of video-clips, and promotion on radio and television programmes. For slam poetry, even if most of the creation takes place during open sessions and public workshops where slammers perform their poems, writing time is a main part of the activity, and many slammers try to record their creations, in order for them to be broadcast on radio and television. Just like rap music, slam nowadays combines writing, orality, and digital techniques.

Nevertheless, the inscription in the register of orality is at the centre of different claims for an African identity that rappers and slam artists seek to put on stage. As we will demonstrate, the medium of orality and the link established between former oral traditions and recent hip-hop expressions represent for the youth a way to create connections with the elder generation and to take on a heritage, countering therefore some generational and cultural ruptures.

### Identity stakes and appropriation of traditions

Gabonese youth often express the feeling of being acculturated, westernized, and partly ignorant of Gabonese traditions, particularly because, on the whole, they do not speak vernacular languages, and adopt the clothes and ways of life of the Occident, also staying away from religious and cultural traditional ceremonies. For a portion of the youth, the adoption of language and practices linked to the former colonizer, added to the mimicry of American hip-hop celebrities' clothes and gestures or to the high value conferred on products and practices coming from abroad, leads to an impression of acculturation or westernization. In reaction to what they call the 'complex' (a feeling of cultural inferiority) and to the devaluation of local patrimonies and customs, some hip-hop artists have developed a project of identity construction and 'back to the roots', revealed by an appropriation of local patrimonies, an invention of tradition, and a special place conferred to orality, represented as the African essence. These rappers or slammers are animated by a desire for a so-called 'consciencization' of their peers and of the youth, whom they consider as alienated by a political context where the state's institutions are desegregating and where they experience the absence of a professional horizon. That way, they pursue a project that we can describe as a kind of 're-africanization', and they expand the project developed by several African politicians and intellectuals of the independences, among others Kwame Nkrumah, whose ideology of 'consciencism' invoked an African revolution, by bringing together the different cultural influences which mix in African towns (African 'traditions', Islam, and Western influences). Contemporary rappers and slammers aspire to put on stage their ethnic, African, and national identifications, and they try in various ways to overcome the rupture with ancient practices and costumes that prove their 'Gabonity', their 'Africanity', or their blackness.

### A kind of linguistic invention: the 'toli bangando'

One of the first manifestations of this identity construction is demonstrated in the linguistic domain by the use of a peer language characteristic of the young generation and the urban context. This language, named the '*toli bangando*', is based on the grammatical structure of French, combined with vernacular languages from Gabon or from African populations living in Libreville, and English terms. Even if seen as typically Gabonese, this expression is in fact a hybrid product, resulting from the multiethnic and multinational context of Libreville's boroughs. For a few rappers who present in their texts a drawing of the daily life in Libreville's poor areas and of the youth's ordinary environment, *toli bangando* is used as a medium for the production of a cultural difference through rap music: it distinguishes them from the elders and from French, the language used between different ethnic groups of Gabon. Contrary to the many vernacular idioms of various Gabonese groups, it also permits them to be understood by the whole of their generation, whatever their ethnic belonging. As many rappers do not speak their mother tongue fluently, *toli bangando* is a way to create a particularity in their music, adding a flow typical from Gabon and African towns.

In 2008 the famous rap group duo Movaizhaleine edited a track called 'the bilangom', which represents one of the most evocative illustrations of the use of *toli bangando* in rap music. Introduced as a musical dictionary of *toli bangando*, it presents a lexicon of several notions employed in that peer language:

Est-ce que tu know le toli bangando ?  
Esa c'est le toli bangando,  
AlloC'est le toli bangando,  
Tous les kwats,  
les waps tcharlent le toli bangando.  
On a la verve, le verbe,

Do you know toli bangando?  
My friend, it's the toli bangando  
allo? It's the toli bangando.  
In each district,  
guys speak toli bangando.  
We have got the verve, the verb



le verse et le vocabulaire,  
considère ce verset comme un dictionnaire,  
un petit bilangoum, une sorte de Petit Robert,  
de Alibandeng jusqu'en Nzeng ...

Matiti slang.

Hey yo la pia c'est le dough,  
les pièces les piécos, le fafio,  
le balle, la tchoko, le mbom,  
le colo, le mbongo,  
Le smig, la brique, la posi',  
les feuilles, les pécos,  
Le miang, les ronds, les jetons,  
les CFA, les forces.<sup>14</sup>

the verse and the vocabulary,  
consider this verse as a dictionary  
a little lexicon, a kind of « Petit Robert  
From Alibandeng to Nzeng  
[names of urban areas]

Matiti [ghetto] slang.

Hey yo money is the dough,  
coins the piécos, the fafio  
the ball, the tchoko, the mbom,  
the colo, the 'mbongo',  
the smig, the brick, the posi',  
the leaves, the pecos.  
the miang, the rounds, the counters  
the CFA, the forces.

Apart from this linguistic creation, among the many different genres existing in Gabonese rap, a category of artists also try to affirm their African, ethnic, or national belonging, appropriating and transforming oral repertoires emblematic of their Africanity.

### ***Appropriation of oral tradition: the mvét and the rap group 241***

The main example of identity construction through the claim to orality in Gabon is through the appropriation of an oral tradition and mythical epic of the Fang ethnic group, the *mvét*. Usually, *mvét* is performed by night, under the shelter of what is locally called the guardroom ('*corps de garde*'), accompanied by banging noises provoked by wooden baton instruments (*bikwara*) used by a part of the assistance during the narration of the *mvét*-teller, called *mbome mvét*.<sup>15</sup>

As Lea Zame Avezo'o (2013) clearly demonstrates, *mvét* represents since the colonial era a major vector of the 'cultural resistance' and of the struggle against cultural homogenization in Fang society – demographically a majority in the country. Since the 1970s, several *fang* writers have exerted their intention of reaffricanization and their quest for recognition by transposing this traditional epic from oral to written forms, in literature and in philosophical analysis (Ndong Ntoutoutme 1970; Biyogo 2002). Since a more recent period, the 'neo-talers' have also developed in Libreville a new form of transformation of *mvét* on the stages of story-telling. Finally, some *fang* rappers pursue nowadays this *fang* 'cultural resistance' when they mix *mvét* performance with rap music.

In contrast with the authors of the 1970s who wanted to demonstrate the existence of an African literacy and the competence of Africans to use the written support, contemporary rappers operate another displacement of the *mvét* tradition, and they carry it back to the oral genre through recording techniques, with the objective being to demonstrate their *fang* ethnic belonging through the means of oral performance. In their techniques of recording, the *mvét* epic that they heard in traditional contexts or read in books is fragmented, sampled, and mixed to other sounds, in order to create a distinctive *fang* rap.

One of the most famous illustrations of this phenomenon is the group 241 (the country code number of Gabon), a duo which is also a striking example of the connection between rap and slam poetry. Indeed, they first broke into Libreville's hip-hop movement as slammers, and then started to record rap songs, as the label that they belonged to produces both rap and slam groups. This group introduced in 2004 the album called '241, Love, Immortality' with a track called 'the message of *mvét*', which included extracts of the *mvét* told by Tsira Ndong Ntoutoutme, a famous *mvét* teller and the author of several books about this oral tradition (Ndong Ntoutoutme 1970). To better understand the relationship between this group and the *mvét* tradition, it is important to notice that one of the two members of 241 is the direct grandson of this *mvét* teller; he



affirms his ascendance by declaiming his genealogy at the beginning of some of his slams, just as the *mbome mvet* traditionally does in his performance. Called ‘sir Okoss’, this artist explains the privileged place that he gives to the *mvét* in his music:

We claim oral tradition because we think that orality finds its meaning nowhere else than in Africa, and that *mvét* that we promote is an oral tradition. African traditions are originally orals, so we are impregnated with that, and that’s why it’s so easy for us to do slam poetry. That’s also the reason why we can give to slam poetry an African identity.<sup>16</sup>

That discourse of Sir Okoss seeks to explain the links that this group makes between *mvét* and rap music – or slam poetry – by the existence of a certain tendency to orality which is supposedly intrinsic to the African culture.

The tracks of 241 are not an exact reproduction of dictions and narratives of the *mvét* style, but they use fragments of this epic (characters, toponyms, formulas) that are rearranged for rap music. Thus, in a track called ‘Chez les immortels’, sentences traduced from the *mvét*, vocal recordings of Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume, and descriptions of the mythical universe of Engong are presented in a text in French, whose aim is to teach the *mvét* to the young audience:

“ Sir Okoss, sir Enigmatik.	[names of the two rappers]
L’olivier posé sur la colline	The olive tree standing on the hill
que toutes les tribus voient.	that every tribe sees [abstract of the <i>mvét</i> ]
C’est pas nos débuts dans le rap.	We are not new in rap music.
Voici Engong, suspendu dans les nuages	Here is Engong, suspended in clouds [mythical territory of <i>mvét</i> ]
Le pays des immortels	The country of immortals
vous souhaite donc la bienvenue.	bids you welcome.
Selon les contes, les conteurs, et les	Depending on tales, tale-tellers and landscapes,
paysages,	
d’immortel en immortel,	from one immortal to another,
vous connaissez le contenu.	you know the contents.
On sonne le Gong,	We ring the bell,
D’Akoma à Engouang, de Ntoutoume à	[characters of the <i>mvét</i> ]
Engone,	
Bon compte-tenu, que la liste est longue,	As the list is long,
les soldats sont nombreux.	soldiers are numerous.
Très cités, quatre clans,	Very cited, four clans,
Je t’assure que la saga continue.	I swear that the saga is continuing.
Lutte continue de l’homme	Continuous struggle of man
contre toutes les forces visibles ou invisibles,	against all forces visible or invisible,
vincibles ou invincibles,	vincible or invincible.
Pour buts: la vie et sa domestication, l’accès	Our aims are life and its domestication, access
à la survie, l’immortalité et son acquisition,	to surviving, immortality and its purchase.
Présence constante de la puissance de Dieu	Permanent presence of God’s power
dans le corps et l’esprit de l’homme,	in man’s body and soul.
Les larmes dans les yeux.	Tears in the eyes.
Carrefour des conflits,	Crossroads of conflicts,
Engong Zok Mebeghe me Mba,	[village of immortals in the <i>mvét</i> ]
L’olivier posé sur la colline	The olive tree standing on the hill
que toutes les races voient.	that all races see. <sup>17</sup>

In this text which quotes formulas, characters, and toponyms of the *mvét*, we deal more with a conscious recourse to emblems of oral patrimonies than with a total oralization of the speech. Therefore while we see their hybrid beat-music blending traditional instruments with electronic sounds and rhythms, the final result is still rap music, and not ‘neo-*mvét*’.

Furthermore, in the interview quoted before, the rapper Okoss gave a nodal place to identity issues when he addressed the question of orality: for this artist, claiming his orality is nothing else

than claiming his Africinity, and in some cases, his Fang identity. As Okoss explained: ‘That’s also the reason why we can give to slam poetry an African identity’, their aim is to give to their art an African colour, to distinguish it from French or American rap. And so, there are no better exploitable materials for them than *mvét*: in this oral tradition dwells the foundations of the Africinity imagined and summoned by rappers and slammers. *Mvét* tradition appears thus as an element always reinvented to serve the construction of African, Gabonese, and *Fang* identity categories, in the continuity of the idea that oral tradition is essentially African, and *mvét* essentially *Fang*. This identity process is influenced by a double logic: on one side, it results from an internal dynamic of particularization specific to the hip-hop movement and the young generation of Gabon; on the other, it continues on a broader cultural resistance intention within the *Fang* community, that has for many decades now employed the *mvét* epic for identity stakes.

### ***The staging of religious patrimonies: ‘Nyabinghi poesie’ and bwiti emblems***

The group 241 insists particularly on *mvét* and the oral traditions of the Fang ethnic group to particularize and ‘gabonize’ its music, but other rappers and slammers also often use emblems of religious traditions, like the secret society of *bwiti*, an initiation society existing in the whole west of Gabon, and based on a consumption of the local hallucinogenic plant called *iboga* (Bonhomme 2006). For Nyabinghi slam, the first slam group in Gabon, slam represents the vector for a search for identity and a dynamic of ‘back to the roots’, passing by the rejection of cultural elements linked to the colonial past. For them, the issue is to ‘repossess themselves’, to recover cultural and artistic emblematic features of the Gabonese and African identity that they are looking for. They call themselves Nyabinghi in reference to a princess that struggled against colonization in the beginning of the twentieth century, connecting in this way also to the Rastafarian Jamaican movement.<sup>18</sup> On stage, they use attributes of orality, like the fly-swatter (*chasse-mouche*), emblem of authority and speech in the traditional context, or the *kendo*, a long bell used in religious initiation societies. For example, during his performance at a slam poetry competition (organized in March 2010 in Libreville), the slammer Princio held the *kendo*, displayed in ritual ceremonies of *bwiti*, and he asked the audience to answer ‘*basé*’ to his affirmations, lending to his performance the attitudes and formulas of initiators and initiates of high rank.

In this way, young artists intend to appropriate the attire of an African and a Gabonese tradition, which distinguishes them from other rap or slam artists all over the world; they consciously operate a staging of ‘African roots’. We can also notice here the postcolonial issues of that initiative: the idea is to create artistic expressions and ways of thinking distinct from Occidental ones. In this manner, rap and slam elaborate a similar initiative to that of African scholars, writers, or philosophers, who intended to de-westernize their expressions and consciences.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, after independence, African writers – who had often been educated in French and European countries and universities, or in African universities based on the French system – wanted to be recognized as able to appropriate the former colonizer’s tools, language, and writing. Writing became the mode of distinction and the instrument of elites (Tonda 2005), which several writers tried to Africanize. But in the contemporary period, with new issues of particularization in the world-system and with the young generation’s desire to distinguish itself from the influence of French culture, orality has gained more and more success as an urban strategy of recognition. The fantastic spreading of rap and slam poetry in Gabon, and more broadly in the African continent, can hardly be understood without taking into account this transformation in modes of recognition and identity construction. Contrary to scholars who used literacy to produce African writings of the self (Mbembe 2002), the new generation uses rap music as the third element to build their identity.

## Conclusion: making transatlantic connections through the claim for the ‘Africanness’ of orality

This article has described and analysed some identity constructions elaborated in the crucible of the Gabonese appropriation of rap music and slam poetry, two expressions that are historically linked in Libreville’s context. The observation of rap music’s adaptations created on the basis of *toli bangando*, of the *mvèt* epic, or of the religious patrimonies, reveal how the inscription in the oral genre is at the centre of the conscious identity constructions of rappers and slammers: oral traditions are a way for the youth to create a typical Gabonese or African kind of rap.

At the same time, around the project of africanization of rap music, it is also the connection and the common cultural features within the ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1993) that are discussed by these artists’ practices and discourses. Indeed, just as the famous rapper Ba’Ponga encourages his fans and listeners by singing like that – ‘Go to tell our bros’ that rap comes from here [Africa]’ – many Gabonese rappers consider that the birth of rap on the American continent is only one stage of a ‘boomerang’ phenomenon, one stage of a journey started with the slave trade and the deportation of black people in America. This affirmation is a way for young Gabonese artists to legitimate their appropriation of rap music towards the elders, and to proclaim towards rappers from the US and all over the world that Africans are intrinsically gifted to practice rap music or slam poetry, and that they share that competence with the black people dispersed in the Atlantic world. Transatlantic dialogues and identifications with the populations of the black diaspora play thus an important part in these neo-oral constructions and identity claims of rappers.

This ethnographic study of the Gabonese hip-hop scene makes a contribution to some discussions about that trope of the ‘rapper griot’ and of the equivalence between hip-hop expression and older oral traditions. It reveals how the claim for orality coincides for the artists described with a postcolonial attempt to create connections with other artists and intellectuals of the Black Atlantic, and to gain a legitimacy both in the local sphere and within the black world, claiming the ideal authenticity of African orality.

Finally, transatlantic connections and imaginaries of the black diaspora witness the process of ‘branchement’ (Amselle 2001) operated through rap music in Gabon: as Jean-Loup Amselle’s concept theorizes, rappers realize a recourse to a third element – rap music and hip-hop culture – to build new artistic, ideological, and linguistic forms, where they negotiate different identity categories (Gabonese, Fang, or African). This identity process can be analysed as a continuous process of interaction with the boundaries (Barth 1995) and a strategic interlocking between several identifications (ethnic, national, transnational) that musical practices, mobility, cultural borrowings, and social relations contribute to redefine.

## Notes

1. As in other African countries (Künzler 2012; Shipley 2013), rap scenes have become a media employed by the youth to integrate themselves into local hierarchies and power issues, and it has sometimes contributed to the reproduction of older systems of power and hierarchies.
2. In a paper published in 2012, Jean Derive argued that ‘the reference to orality as a specific African feature’ and the perception of oral literature as the ‘essential expression of a cultural African identity’ (Derive 2012, 230) had germinated since 1950 in the crucible of French Africanism and its colonial ascendances. Kusum Aggarwal has discussed elsewhere the intimate links between Africanism and African literature, which has sometimes borrowed its ‘fixist and passeist theories concerning the existence of an African substratum at the origins of particularisms’ (Aggarwal 2010, 1196, my translation).
3. This fieldwork started in 2008 has been realized for a thesis dissertation in anthropology at University Lyon 2 (Aterianus-Owanga 2013). It consisted of an immersion of several years in the urban life of Libreville, interviews with numerous rappers and musical agents, observations of rappers’ activities in recording studios, of their daily life and their artistic travels in the countryside of Gabon and in foreign countries, and the production of their life stories.

4. As a non-exhaustive selection of references about rap music in the United States, we can quote Rose (1994); Chang (2005); George (2001); and Kelley (2011).
5. In the only exception to that observation, the sociolinguist Michelle Auzanneau published two papers in which she addressed the case of Libreville's rap (Auzanneau 2001a, 2001b).
6. Studies about African hip-hop have frequently focused on the linguistic aspects (Auzanneau 2001b; Perullo and Fenn 2003) or on the political transformations (Moulard-Kouka 2008) that accompany hip-hop's implantation in Africa. The question of the construction of local identities through rap music has also been discussed in recent contributions (Ntarangwi 2009, 20–43; Shipley 2013), but mainly about English-speaking countries.
7. This sentence is an extract of a slam poetry performed by the artist « Le Wise », observed in 2010 in Libreville.
8. This is an extract of an interview accessible on the following website: [http://www.bondyblog.fr/201006111600/mondial-de-slam/#\\_VCfGGvI\\_tb4](http://www.bondyblog.fr/201006111600/mondial-de-slam/#_VCfGGvI_tb4). See also about that slammer and three other slam artists of Libreville the documentary movie that I made in 2010: "New writings of the self" (Aterianus-Owanga, 2010).
9. For notes on Gabonese history and descriptions of the 1990s events, see among others Metegue N'Nah (2006).
10. Dance constitutes the first discipline of hip-hop that has been appropriated by young people, in Gabon but also in several others countries, like France (Hammou 2012), Brazil (Ailane 2011) or Japan (Condry 2001).
11. Murray Forman describes how the diffusion of hip-hop from New York to the other towns of the United States (US) has also been facilitated and boosted by the influence of the first hip-hop movies (Forman 2002, 74).
12. In the US, even if slam poetry was initially rather associated with white and working-class roots, and even if it tended to be a democratic and multicultural expression, Susan Somers-Willett also notes that 'as it has grown, the slam has seen an infusion of hip-hop inspired performance, so much that newcomers may mistakenly assume that the competition grew out of African American hip-hop culture' and that 'hip-hop is an important influence on many slam poets today' (Somers-Willett 2009, 12).
13. For Cyril Vettorato, who studied the history and rules of verbal sparring, the word 'clash' is employed to qualify a kind of verbal sparring of insults that is practiced nowadays all around the world, but which finds its origins in American ghettos of the twentieth century, in African-American communities, whether in dirty dozens or in freestyle battles of hip-hop culture. In both dirty dozens and battles of hip-hop culture, to clash means 'to face each other using series of poetical invectives, that are used by the player to affirm his superiority and belittle his rival' (Vettorato 2008, 8, my translation).
14. Movaizhaleine, 'Le bilangom', in *On détient la Harpe sacrée Tome 2*, 2008, Zorbam Productions.
15. About this epic, we can refer to Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume (1970), but also Daniel Assoumou Ndoutoume (1993) and Grégoire Biyogo, one of the most prolific writers about this subject (Biyogo 2002, 2006). In her analysis of the relationships between epics and social organizations where they are performed, Christiane Seydou also tackles the question of the *mvét*, and demonstrates that this epic leads to the reproduction of social orders (Seydou 1988, 11). The word *mvét* can be written either with one or two final t (*mvett*).
16. Interview with Okoss, rapper of 241, Libreville, February 2009.
17. 241, 'Chez les immortels', in *241, amour, immortalité*, Nofia sound, 2009.
18. The identification with Nyabinghi order is an emblematic illustration of the dialogues between Afro-diasporic and African cultures, who both imagine themselves in relation to the others, creating a permanent transatlantic circulation of some referents and symbols like that one. Concerning the settlement of Rastafaris in Africa and the history of these dialogues, see Bonacci (2010). About Rastafari ideologies and Nyabinghi dances or secret orders, see Chevannes (1994).

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