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Cultural Animation Groups (in Gabon)

In Gabon, as in other African countries, cultural animation groups (*groupes d'animation culturelle*) represented an important branch of musical creativity during the era of one-party rule from 1968 to 1990, and they continued their activities after that date to a lesser extent. The Gabonese groups were made up of women assembled according to ethnic and territorial origins, and constituted a section of the Union des femmes du Parti démocratique gabonais (UFPDG) (Union of Women of the Gabonese Democratic Party), on which they depended for their funding and schedule of activities. They performed songs in French and in local languages, dedicated to the core political figures of the country and above all to the glory of the president, Omar Bongo. Praising the success of his regime, their dancing and singing, accompanied by male musicians and with choreographies known for their sexual symbolism, formed a distinctive element of national and official events. As symbols of a past period of political hegemony and authoritarianism, these groups of women represented an ever-present part of the music and dance life in urban Gabon from the 1960s to the 1990s.They also exerted a strong influence on the popular music that developed after their decline following the abrogation of one-party rule in 1990, which occurred during the national conference organized in Libreville in March of that year. The conference was arranged in response to the current social crisis and to significant protests on the part of syndicates, opposition parties and students, which in turn led to the emergence of new rights and freedoms, and to a critique of the use of music as propaganda. As a result, groups of cultural animation declined, and the accompanying decrease in the control and censorship of musical productions by the state enabled the emergence of new musical content and lyrics.

History and Origins

The emergence of cultural animation groups in Gabon coincided with the installation in November 1967 of the second president, Albert Bernard Bongo, who changed his name in 1973 to become Omar Bongo. The newly elected president abrogated multi-partism and created the Parti démocratique gabonais (PDG, Gabonese Democratic Party) on 12 March 1968. With this instrument and with his concept of 'Renovation,' he asserted an ideology that broke profoundly with the previous era, one marked by ethnic and territorial divisions, in order to promote national unity. Bongo defined 'Renovation' as 'the projection on the political stage of the deep tendency among the people towards unity, harmony and peace' (quoted in Minko 2010; author's translation). The development of the country depended on the union of all 'tribes,' 'clans' and 'ethnic groups' through the central figure of the president and the state (Ndombet 2009; Minko 2010; Mbah 2015). President Bongo insisted upon amplifying the strong feeling of national belonging that had existed since the colonial period and the era when Gabon was part of French Equatorial Africa (Pourtier 1989), and upon the cohesion of the country's values of peace and unity. He maintained his hegemony with the help of several communication institutions, including media (radio, television, press) and music, and these became core ways to spectacularize and embody the power of the state.

Two main kinds of musical groups were at the center of state politics and of urban popular life from 1967 until the 1980s. First, from 1950, the new citizens of Libreville – which was in the midst of a demographic explosion resulting from the rural exodus – embraced 'modern' instruments (such as piano, guitar, bass, drums, trumpets and saxophone) in brass bands and orchestras. These orchestras went through a period of great turmoil around the time of independence, between the end of the 1950s and the 1960s, and they enlivened Libreville's nightlife. Their emergence was enabled by the development of festive venues, bars and dance halls, and inspired by African-Caribbean and Congolese orchestras who were invited to perform in Libreville during their African tours. Composed almost exclusively of men, these musical formations, ever-present in Libreville's nightlife during the 1960s, were requisitioned by national armed forces and turned into national military orchestras in 1971. Musicians who performed in informal musical groups such as the Sorciers Noirs (Black Wizards), Négro Tropical or Afro-Succès (Afro-success) were forced to join the ranks of the orchestras created in the armed forces: they entered in the group Gena

(for 'Gendarmerie nationale'), the Orchestra of the National Police Forces, Akweza, les Diablotins (the Little Devils), or the Forces armées gabonaises (FAG, Gabonese armed forces), where they were obligated to uphold the messages and serve the preferences of the law enforcement and police chiefs.

The second type of musical group to occupy the musical foreground after the creation of the single party in 1968, was the cultural animation group. In Gabon and other African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the notion of *animation culturelle* (also called *animation politique et culturelle* in the Democratic Republic of Congo) referred to a kind of 'state-sponsored singing and dancing that came to be synonymous with the image of the state and the system of the one-party rule' (White 2008, 73). The term *animation* was synonymous with the idea of enlivening (*ambience*) the official events and the public sphere. In Gabon, cultural animation groups were created as a ramification of UFPDG, a partisan organization created for the promotion of women and their autonomy and equal rights in the new modern society. Consisting exclusively of women, these ensembles danced and sang to praise the glory of the single party and the president. An organization for the promotion of women had already existed under the previous government (the Organisation nationale des femmes gabonaises, ONFG). In 1971 it was renamed Union des femmes du Parti démocratique gabonais and integrated into the PDG by Omar Bongo in order to involve women in state politics and militancy (Mouélé 2009, 58). Cultural animation groups mainly took charge of *animation* and popular propaganda (Nzengue 1989).

Josephine Bongo, honorary president of UFPDG, wife of President Bongo and a passionate music lover, created the first cultural animation group on 23 November 1968. Initially called Akébé II, in reference to the borough in Libreville where several members of the group lived, it was later renamed Kounabeli and then Mbil'asuku (in languages from the eastern province of the High Ogooué) to give it a more 'authentic' and traditional appeal. The group gathered women mainly from the eastern province of the High Ogooué, the birthplace of President Bongo, Josephine Bongo and the presidential family. Accompanied by their orchestras of musicians (the Superstars, also known as Banowita), and often by the First Lady herself, their mission was to create ambience at the events and political activities of the president and his single party. As the first, most popular and closest to the party, Kounabéli remained the most important cultural animation group during the golden era for these groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Its 1985 album *One* was arranged by US jazz and funk trombonist Fred Wesley, through Josephine Bongo's connections within the American music markets. After her separation from Omar Bongo in 1986, Josephine Bongo left for the United States where she worked under the stage name of Patience Dabany and recorded several albums before returning to Gabon in the late 1990s. She subsequently toured with James Brown, contributed to the tours of Gabon of pop stars such as Michael Jackson and promoted the spread and adoption of new modern and pop music in Gabon. In his biography Fred Wesley recounts his work with Patience Dabany for Kounabeli's album, and their ambition to 'Americanize this African music' (Wesley 2002, 255).

Following the model of Kounabeli, several other groups arose after 1968 to represent first each province of the country, then each department within each province, where they added to the ambience at parties, official ceremonies, invitations of political personalities, cultural festivals, celebrations and inaugurations. During the 1970s and 1980s the country counted 13 main groups, among them Centre-ville, Nkol Engong, Dimossi, Nyenzi, Missema and Mikouagna, each of which could sometimes gather thousands of members. In 2008, 17 cultural animation groups were still active and recognized by the PDG (Mouélé 2009, 62).

Each of the country's major groups was ruled by a hierarchically organized committee containing 15 different levels of status (ibid.). The committees were in charge of the supervision of smaller groups inside the country, connecting the capital with its hinterland peripheries and with the new citizens who had been arriving in Libreville as part of the rural exodus from the beginning of the twentieth century, under the control of political institutions and figures.

Groups of Animation in Africa and African Studies

Far from being a national anomaly in Gabon, political animation by musical groups has been common in many African countries, serving the messages of the party in power. Some cultural

animation groups have become famous, for example, in Togo, during the presidency of Gnassingbé Eyadema, where they were named 'groupes de choc' (shock groups) (Toulabor 1986). In Malawi, the one-party period (from 1964 to 1993) was also synonymous with the creation of female musical groups (*mbumba* groups), linked to the Malawi Congress Party, that sang the praise of leadership and of the president, Kamuzu Banda. Female groups appropriated *mbumba* culture and traditional melodies that they mixed with popular rhythms and political lyrics (Lwanda 2008). In the genre's manifestation in Democratic Republic of Congo (previously Republic of Zaïre), Gazungil Sang'Amin Kapalanga considers – in the only monograph concerning this genre in the Democratic Republic of Congo – that 'animation is a resurgence of traditional artistic forms in a new form of representation' (Kapalanga 1989, 118; author's translation), because these spectacles honor the chief, just as in traditional cultures. He notes how consent was made through these groups, comparing this mass choreography to a 'rape of the crowds' whose aim was to conceal incoherence and to arouse a collective delirium (ibid., 118). Also writing about the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bob W. White has analyzed the connections between these groups and the construction of cultural authenticity under Mobutu's regime (White 2006) and their importance for the diffusion of a certain vision of 'culture' as a political tool in Congo. White returns to the discussions concerning the origins of cultural animation, which is often considered to be a product of Mobutu's inspiration in Northern Korea and in China, defending the point of view that they were probably also inspired by previous folkloric animations from the colonial era.

In Gabon, it is also commonly supposed that Omar Bongo was inspired to create these propaganda spectacles by socialist regimes and by his travels in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mouélé 2009). Therefore, before the emergence of the name 'groupes d'animation culturelle' and of the PDG, the early creation of dance and music groups before independence and their participation in colonial animations (Bernault 1996) corroborate the idea that orchestras and practices of folkloric music and dances were predecessors of the genre during the colonial era.

While some articles and books address the existence of these groups (Matsahanga 2002; Rossatanga-Rignault et al. 2005; Tonda 2009; Minko 2010), only a few studies and monographs are devoted specifically to this genre, in particular, two masters theses (Nzengue 1989; Mouélé 2009). In the existing studies, these organizations have been analyzed from the perspective of their political meanings and functions rather than their musical dimensions.

Furthermore, while many documents from the archives of the national press in Gabon describe the musical scene with its orchestras, dance troupes and solo singers, and identify their role in the representation of the nation, it is very hard to find journalistic articles devoted to cultural animation groups. These groups were only cited in articles about the official ceremonies and travels of the president, or later, in portraits of singers who came from these musical formations. In summary, these musical formations have, above all, been considered in public and scholarly discourses as political instruments, and not so much for their aesthetic and musical contents. Nevertheless, they created a genuine aesthetic, endowed with musical and choreographic characteristics, that remains, for a part of the population, as an emblem of this historical era and of Gabonese identity, and that has deeply influenced the subsequent generation of musicians.

Cultural Animation Groups: Social Contexts and Musical Contents

Cultural animation groups that developed during the second part of the twentieth century in Africa can generally be defined, using White's words, as 'a particular kind of spectacle that allied the sensibility of folklore with popular music, but that sang at the same time the praises of the single party and its chief' (2006; author's translation). Even if the attempts to create fusions of modern Western instruments with traditional songs and instruments were numerous in this period, the spectacle presented in cultural animation groups came from a special dialogue with politics and ideologies of each nation-state, highlighting local singularities, in musical contents, political impacts and gender norms associated with these groups.

In Gabon, groups of animation were constituted on the basis of common provincial or ethnic origins, and mostly led by important women from the country, such as wives of state ministers or rich political personalities. Of the dozens of groups supported

since 1968, many also depended on the main political figures of their provinces; described as 'sponsors,' they provided general funds for the group, costumes, the small amount of material remuneration that the members received for their travels, drinks and food, and sometimes meager financial support; they also intervened to provide jobs for some members and partisans of the PDG (Mouélé 2009, 61).

Cultural animation groups aimed to represent local features of an 'authentic' African culture, which was called for by several nation-state ideologies after independence (White 2006). As a consequence, ethnicity and provincial singularities were strongly highlighted in music, languages and textual contents. The common linguistic element that linked members of each group was predominant in their songs. Their mother tongue was mixed with French, which remains Gabon's national language and which is used to avoid the ethnic claims to which the ideology of national unity in the PDG is strongly opposed. Henceforth, the group Dimossi, for example, produced texts in *ipunu* and in French, northern cultural animation groups while Kounabeli used *bateke* and *obamba* languages in its songs.

Lyrics were mainly dedicated to a description of Bongo's successes, presented as 'Camarade Bongo Ondimba,' 'Papa Omar,' 'Yaya Bongo,' 'father of the nation,' 'strong man of the country' or 'great guide.' Depending on concerned groups and provinces, some dedications were made to other ministers, deputies or senators. Songs were then punctuated by shouts of the solo singer such as 'Bongo Oyé!,' 'Josephine Bongo, Oyé!' or 'PDG, Oyé!,' repeated by the whole choir of women. In these praise songs, themes of peace, development, national wealth, national unity and solidarity were also very present, and they progressively included other social issues, such as the prevention of AIDS. These songs were used to spread the idea of nation, political values and social norms among popular classes; through singing, the repetition of political slogans by women from diverse generations and social classes permitted the incorporation of the single party's messages by large audiences and the recruitment of new militants.

Most of the songs were musically structured around short verses of two to four sentences, repeated several times by the lead singers with a few variations, and insisting on the grandeur of the political figure and the success of his program, concepts and politics. The lead singer could also shout and deliver slogans. The rest of the group (numbering from dozens to thousands of women) answered in unison to the leader's verse repeating the main sentence or vocalizing around phrases such as 'oyo oh,' 'eh eh eh,' etc. As such, the structure of singing partly reproduced the responsorial scheme ('call-and-response') of many traditional and ritual songs that inspired them. Melodies were often repetitive, allowing easy memorization, but lead singers could also perform virtuoso vocals around the core sentences and verses of the song, punctuated by dedications to sponsors. The sound included several diverse melodic phrases and breaks with changes of rhythms and melodies.

From the end of the 1960s to the mid-1980s cultural animation groups mainly performed live, as they were solicited to perform during official and political events. Some, however, also made records after 1985, first in France and later – thanks to the support of their benefactor – in the first local studios that were created during the 1980s.

During their performances, cultural animation groups were systematically organized in the same way: the women, sometimes in huge numbers, from teenagers to the elderly, occupied the background of the stage, placed in lines and led by one or several solo singers who occupied the foreground. They were dressed mainly in traditional textiles ('pagne'), either with a loincloth wrapped around the waist or in modern costumes and dresses, sometimes with a T-shirt with the emblem of the party and an effigy of the president or the name of the cultural animation group. A few were also dressed in traditional costumes and raffias.

The groups were accompanied by an orchestra consisting of modern and traditional musicians (mainly men), playing guitar, drums, bass or brass instruments, and also very often traditional percussion instruments, such as *nkul* or *ngom* for northern cultural animation groups (Nkol Engong), *mosomba* drums or *obaka* (a rack made of hardwood and hit with two sticks) for southern groups. Musical instrumentation at the time was very much inspired by African *rumba* sounds, but they also included traditional rhythms and 'folklores' of each province, such as *ikoku* rhythm for the group Dimossi – mostly composed of *Punu* – or the *elombo* ritual music for

groups of the province of Estuary and Maritime Ogooué. A song usually lasted around 15 minutes, and could continue until the president of the ceremony decided to stop the performance. Songs often contained a special part called 'chauffé,' with an acceleration of the rhythm usually in the middle of the song and a solo performance of the guitarist, as in *rumba* music (White 2002), which was appropriate for solo improvisations of the best dancers.

Although often considered a women's musical genre, cultural animation groups therefore involved male musicians in their performances whether it was as members of entire orchestras that had their own activities apart from those accompanying cultural animation groups, or as single musicians hired especially for a particular show. This presence of male orchestras was due to the fact that a huge majority of instrumentalists and musicians were men. Placed in the foreground of the stage, they did not participate in dance performances or in singing, and they were absent from record covers and music videos, with just a few exceptions.

Dance represented a core aspect of each performance. In musical terms, dance and choreographies were a mix of *ndombolo* (or other popular urban moves from Congo) and traditional dances coming from ritual ceremonies or festivities. Most of these dances particularly emphasized the swaying hips and the eroticism of waist movements, a feature present both in popular dances and in traditional moves such as *ikoku*, a symbolic celebration of fertility (Plancke 2010). The consequent sexual suggestiveness and extreme eroticization of the cultural animation groups have been subjected to strong criticism (particularly since the end of the one-party rule in 1990), while also being seen as representing the location of the groups' power.

Debate: Domination or Agency

Whereas cultural animation groups in Congo and Togo involved the coming together of both male and female participants, with women in the majority, in Gabon actual membership in these groups was exclusively reserved for women, and they represented a strong sense of gender identity. Under the one-party government, a gendered division structured the emerging musical scene; while the category of musician was designated principally for men, women occupied the duties of spectacularization and embodiment of the power through dance. The abstract dimension of state power and its virile value in Africa (Mbembe 2001) were both present and became reality through the women's bodies and through their singing and dancing for the leadership. Demonstrating the infinite devotion of women to Omar Bongo and the objectification of their bodies by the state, the cultural animation groups have been considered by some scholars as a spectacularization of the body presented as a sexual object to be consumed by high government officials, for the benefit of the political hegemony of the PDG and of Omar Bongo (Mouélé 2009). Several authors have insisted on the political alienation resulting from participation in these musical groups (Kapalanga 1989; Mouélé 2009; Tonda 2009), where women were led to put their body at the disposal of the leaders and to sing in their honor.

However, it may be argued that these groups allowed their members to develop their agency in a society defined by the control of the nation-state, and to reconstitute social links in a context of urbanization and transformation of solidarity relations; they also helped members to improve their chances for a professional promotion or to meet male partners with high influence and power in the political organization of the one-party rule. During the mid-1980s, when Gabon entered an economic crisis and strong inequalities divided urban society, the spectacularization of their bodies, their seductive power and beauty gave women the opportunity to escape precarious life situations. For some poor women who could not be hired in the public sector or in private companies since they lacked the necessary diplomas and/or contacts to family patronage, these groups provided a way to meet important political personalities who helped them to find a job, or with whom they had intimate relationships in exchange for material support, leading potentially, in a few cases, to official relationships. As Bob White affirms (2006), the representation of these artists as alienated and passive individuals is therefore insufficient to take into account all the subtle forms of criticism expressed by these singers and dancers behind the scenes, and to understand all the interdependence that was progressively established between these groups and the single party. If, on the one hand, the single party

imposed the frame for musical creation and the life of the musicians, on the other, its authority also became dependent on these organs of communication, whose presence was an unavoidable condition for holding political and official ceremonies.

Decline and Continuity

In 1990, with the establishment of multi-partism and the end of the hegemony of PDG, cultural animation groups went through an important shift. As icons of Omar Bongo's domination of the masses and symbols of his objectification of women they were strongly denounced during the national conference by opposition parties and leaders, and its members were criticized as 'buttocks shakers.' The title 'cultural animation groups' disappeared and these groups were renamed 'sociocultural groups' during the fifth congress of the PDG, organized in August 1991 with the intention of transforming their political duties into a more cultural and folkloric value.

During the 2000s and the 2010s some sociocultural groups have continued to be active and to record albums and popular music videos (one title 'La botte' [The Barrel], released by Omengo in 2008, rapidly became a hit), and their discs have continued to represent a major part of the sales in street markets of original and pirated CDs (Mouélé 2009). They are sometimes invited to perform in official ceremonies, where they praise the grandeur of President Ali Bongo (Omar Bongo's son, who succeeded his father in 2009). However, their power and their omnipresence on musical stages have suffered from the initiation of freedom of expression, the development of new music markets and the emergence of new themes in songs, since artists have been freed from obligatory involvement in the PDG's activities and from the official censorship from the single party.

At the same time, many artists who were trained in these cultural groups controlled by UFPDG progressively turned themselves toward solo careers during the same period (e.g., Maman Dede, who became one of the most famous Fang singers after her career in the Nkol Engong cultural animation group). Some former military musicians who accompanied these groups have also seen brilliant subsequent careers, such as, for example, Kacki Disco, a guitarist in the group Missema, who was inspired by his many experiences in sociocultural groups to create his own orchestra. He became famous for promoting a dance entitled 'oriengo' that consists of holding the waist of a partner and shaking the hips back and forth. Other groups that appeared at the turn of the 1990s, such as Empire and its singer Amandine, have clearly reproduced some aspects of cultural groups of animation in their texts or in the line formation of their choreographies. In other words, a considerable number of musicians from the generation who have pursued their careers since the decline of cultural animation groups have established themselves in these new formations, which have then had a strong influence on the form and content of contemporary choreographic and spectacle creations.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century popular discourses concerning cultural animation groups (or sociocultural groups) are colored with ambivalent feelings between nostalgia and condemnation. On the one hand, many critics have appeared, for example, in YouTube comments or in popular discussions about music videos of cultural animation groups, condemning the lewdness of their choreographies and the vulgar image of women promoted as sex objects. Since the emergence of new musical genres and freedom of expression, cultural animation groups represent, from the engaged singers' points of view, a negative emblem of subjection, passivity and alienation toward the authoritarian state. Engaged rappers, for example, have used the term as an insult to discredit other rappers who released a song and performed in meetings in favor of the candidate of PDG (Ali Bongo) during the 2009 election.

On the other hand, the mention of these groups also often leads to nostalgia for a lost past, and is associated with the image of the seductiveness and eroticism of 'authentic' African women. For some people, images and songs from cultural animation groups are also linked to family memories, as many housewives were part of these groups.

Cultural animation groups have progressively been transferred into a symbol of a common national history and heritage, particularly for militants from the PDG. Some TV programs devoted to the past music of Gabon accord special tributes to this part of Gabonese musical heritage; channels on YouTube

provide links to their music and to video archives as well as new music videos. Since the turn of the new millennium, cultural animation groups have continued to be invited to participate in official events as emblems of the country or of their province, and they are instituted as part of the local market of music. They tend to become expressions of traditional folklore and cultural authenticity (White 2006). This authenticity mostly relies on the image of the African woman that they promoted: in this ideology, women's bodies and creativity were at one and the same time devoted to the demonstration of men's power and endowed with a sexual power that men depended on and tried to monopolize. This representation of relations between genders underlying cultural animation groups later led to other kinds of representations of women's bodies in musical scenes, such as the ones observed in a subsection of hip-hop and rap creation in Gabon (Aterianus-Owanga 2013). At the same time, the culture of *animation culturelle* has pervaded many sectors of musical production, and even apart from the one-party rule and the cultural animation groups, musical production in Gabon remains partly an instrument for the spectacle of power and the '*ambiancement*' (enlivenment) of public life.

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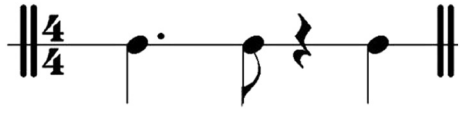
ALICE ATERIANUS-OWANGA

Cumbé

Cumbé is a neo-traditional music and dance genre among the Annobonese people in Equatorial Guinea. It originated in the multiethnic environment of Malabo (the capital city, located on the island of Bioko, formerly known as Fernando Po), from where it was exported to the island of Annobon in the early twentieth century. In Equatorial Guinea, *cumbé* music is played and danced in Palé, the only city on Annobon Island (with approximately 2,000 inhabitants) and also in Malabo. The dance is accompanied by several instruments: a square drum with a double frame and four legs that is also called *cumbé*; the *tambali*, a tambourine constructed in the same way and in different sizes; the *chin*, an iron sheet that is struck; *katá* (two sticks); a bottle; and a carpenter's saw, which is played with a nail, a knife or any other available implement. The music's rhythmic *clave* (timeline) is in quadruple meter with a Caribbean feel and is played by the bottle and *katá* sticks and sometimes by the saw (see Example 1).



Example 1: *Cumbé* timeline pattern

The Annobonese live on the small island of Annobon, located about 350 miles south-west of mainland Equatorial Guinea (see Maps), and have established themselves as a group since the Portuguese colonization of the island in the sixteenth century, with slaves brought from Angola and Sao Tomé. The island was a Spanish colony from 1778 until it became a province of Equatorial Guinea after independence in 1968. The island of Bioko, some four hundred miles to the north, off the coast of Cameroon, is also home to many Annobonese who moved there in search of work and who also dance *cumbé*.

In Annobon, there is an official *cumbé* association, with a president and bylaws. Children up to the age of 12 learn by watching and listening and ask to participate as instrumentalists. They also ask to be 'blessed' and, in exchange for patronage, receive instruction and the 'blessing' of the connoisseurs. From that moment, the initiated may be called upon to play for celebrations and commemorations on the island. For example, 'Papa Pavil' was the master teacher of Ruperto Cachina, who plays *cumbé* in Annobon and Malabo.