

On Musical Patronage:
Popular Music, Oil Capitalism,
and State Politics in Equatorial Guinea



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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis examines the centrality of the state in the constitution of the popular music economy in Equatorial Guinea. It examines transformations and continuities in music production, circulation, and consumption as they have been shaped by the introduction of digital technologies and the Central African micro-state's growing dependence on the export of fossil fuels. The spectacular oil boom of the last quarter century has consolidated the already-authoritarian rule of Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who stands today as one of the longest-serving heads of state in the world. From within a highly politicised social sphere, popular music emerges as a privileged medium, employed by the petro-elites to accumulate prestige and by musicians to negotiate their relations with the state and to gain access to (unequally distributed) oil revenues.

Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea's major cities, I argue that the local music economy is governed by patronage relations that are embedded in long standing, yet evolving, social and political formations characterised by regional logics of power and wealth accumulation. Rather than disturbing and radically transforming musical patronage, the oil boom and the introduction of digital technologies have opened unimagined spaces of creativity and future possibility but also afforded the exacerbation of these onerous and oppressive relations. While musicians navigate the interstices of the state to find strategies to make do, the music economy is increasingly monopolised by the ruling family. As such, this case stands in contrast to both writing on the Euroamerican music industry and recent scholarship on the seemingly pervasive incorporation of African music economies into (digital) capitalism. Bringing together the anthropology of oil, recent scholarship on the new music industry, and theories of the African state, the thesis resists orthodox Marxist readings of capitalism to offer new understandings of musical labour and exchange.

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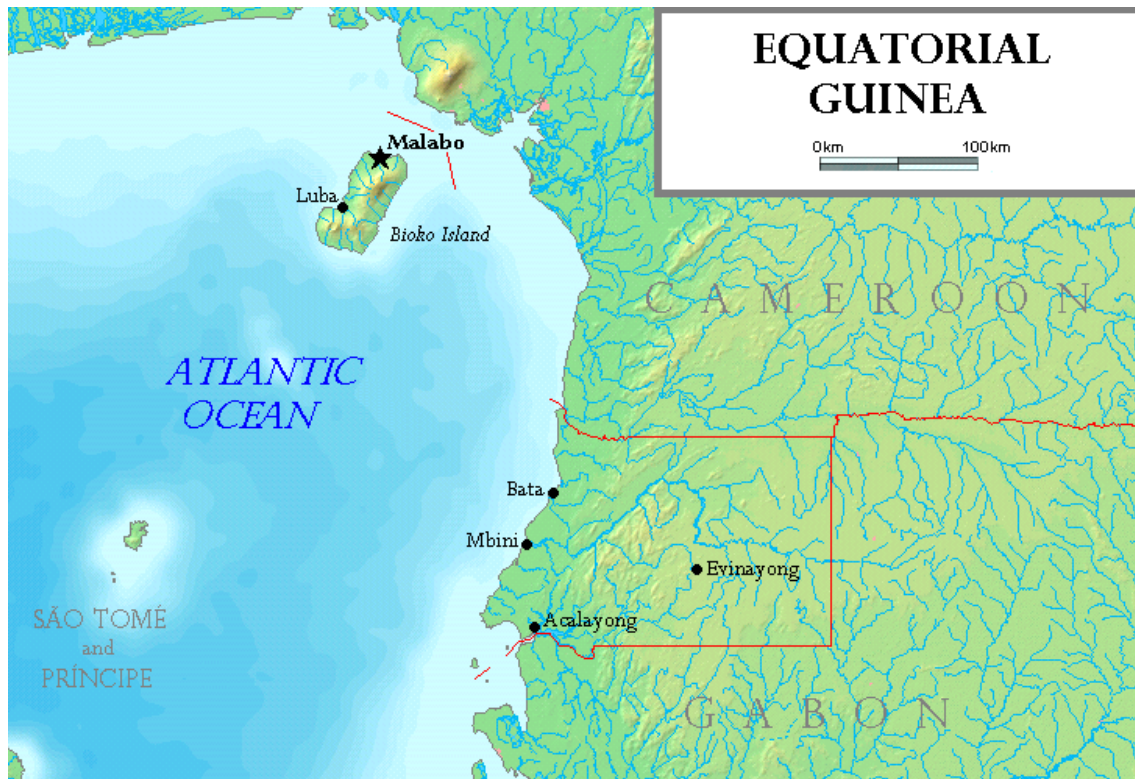
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Source:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Equatorialguineamap.png>

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Introduction

When I began the research for this doctoral thesis, I set out to produce an ethnography of the music industry in Equatorial Guinea. Encouraged by emerging ethnomusicological literature, I was keen on joining debates about the rise of cultural entrepreneurialism, neoliberal logics, and born-digital music economies across the African continent (Mbaye 2011; Shipley 2013; Skinner 2015; De Beukelaer and Eisenberg 2018; Schmidt 2018; Eisenberg Forthcoming a). The field looked promising from afar. Equatorial Guinea, a micro-state off the Atlantic Coast of Central Africa with barely one million inhabitants, had experienced a spectacular oil boom, followed by a period of ‘fast capitalism’, that had brought the country from one of the poorest in Africa to the highest GDP per capita in the continent in less than two decades.¹ I supposed that such a remarkable context would provide a unique lens through which to explore changes in music industries resulting from global capitalism and digital expansion.

But the unexpected nature of ethnographic fieldwork would soon present me with a very different reality. In one of my first interviews, my interlocutor looked at me, puzzled, when I suggested I had an interest in the local music industry: ‘but you know there’s no music industry here, right?’² Of course, I had been warned by the groundbreaking work of Alex Perullo (2011) that African music ‘industries’ are highly different from the Euroamerican global industry often depicted in the popular music

¹ I borrow the term ‘fast capitalism’ from Watts 1992 to describe quick capitalist economic and infrastructural expansions that often follow oil extraction ventures.

² To facilitate the reading, all the quotations from interviews are presented in English, rather than in the original language, except for fragments or specific terms I considered important. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the original Spanish in this thesis are my own.

scholarship. Indeed, Perullo rightly argues, the very use of the term ‘industry’ seems pointless when the music structure does not resemble much of a capitalist venture. The closest I got to a record label was TNO Entertainment, an agency founded by President Obiang’s eldest son, and the current Vice-President of the country. But rather than a capitalist enterprise, I found that TNO embodied the paradigm of a systematic musical patronage that connected music making to the very centre of political power.

Indeed, I am not the first researcher to arrive in Central or West Africa with the goal to write about the music commodity-form, only to find that the ethnography rather leads to the unique entanglement between popular music and local political forms (White 2008, xv). The complex relationship between musicians and patrons, and the way political culture shapes and is shaped by music in the region was addressed by Bob White over a decade ago and has more recently been discussed by Joe Trapido (2017). Karin Barber (1987) and Christopher Waterman (1990) have discussed elite culture and musical patronage in Nigeria, highlighting the role of wealthy members of society in the sponsorship of music performance. And Nomi Dave (2019) has written about the links between authoritarian politics, nationalism, and music in Guinea. But none of them have explored how these entanglements unfold in a context marked by extreme political centralisation and an unseen accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few ruling elites.

In Equatorial Guinea, popular music is not sold as a commodity through market exchanges (Taylor 2007). Rather, it is a value-generating medium employed by the country’s elites to enhance their prestige and by artists to encourage the redistribution of oil funds. Music mediates a mutual (but unequal) dependence between artists and their patrons—members of a political and economic elite that controls all public and private enterprises. Music animates political elections and lavish private parties that are the

visible face of oil-fuelled conspicuous consumption and excess; it also facilitates the building of social relations that can lead to the access of public resources. It empowers an already powerful political class thirsty for praise songs and it is a key source of income and political protection for musicians. Music is instrumentalised (and musicians exploited) to disseminate state ideologies, but it also engenders hopes and expectations for an artistic community long subdued by colonial and postcolonial authoritarian domination.

Located in the Gulf of Guinea, Equatorial Guinea is presided over by Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who has ruled since 1979 and stands today as one of the longest-serving heads of state in the world. Obiang rose to power after overthrowing his own uncle, Francisco Macías Nguema, who had become president of the new republic after the independence from Spain in 1968. The political history of the postcolony has thus been marked by the solidification of what some scholars have dubbed ‘Nguemism’, or the rule of the Nguema family (Liniger-Goumaz 1989). Both Macías Nguema and Obiang Nguema were born into the Esangui clan of the Fang majority ethnic group (ca. 85% of the total population)³ and have privileged kinship and ethnic ties when constituting their governments and granting access into high state offices. While membership into the Fang does not necessarily lead to a better life, as I will show throughout the thesis, it is well-known across the country that minority ethnic groups (Bubi, Annobonés, Ndowé, Bisío, and Fernandino) have long been the target of police discrimination and have met considerable challenges when seeking jobs and to accessing state resources.

³ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/equatorial-guinea/> (accessed 10 June 2021).

This thesis addresses the emergence of an ‘oil culture’ in Equatorial Guinea and its entanglement with local politics.⁴ When large hydrocarbon deposits were found in the surroundings of the Equatoguinean island of Bioko in the mid-1990s, some 15 years into the Obiang regime, the government was on the ropes, pressured by a deep economic crisis and rampant external debt. Oil exploitation began—backed by the capitalist political project of the global oil industry and the specific investment of American companies—and unprecedented infrastructural, environmental, and macroeconomic transformations ensued. Over a period of two decades, the micro-state rose as one of the major producers in the continent and became highly dependent on oil, with up to 98% of government revenues stemming from the export of the black commodity (Appel 2019). But on the political level, continuity rather than transformation seemed to be the outcome. Billions of petro-dollars pouring into the state coffers through Production Sharing Contracts were appropriated by the state elites and enabled the exacerbation of the patrimonial and clientelist trends already in place. Obiang’s power was consolidated by the oil industry’s economic interests (Campos Serrano 2013; Soares de Oliveira 2007).

At the time when countries across Africa were experiencing processes of democratisation and liberalisation, Equatorial Guinea was solidifying authoritarian rule. While music economies throughout the continent took off amid the mushrooming of independent radio and TV stations, Obiang’s family held a tight grip over all public and private media. When elsewhere in Africa artists were developing forms of cultural entrepreneurship, becoming more willing to take risks and animate private enterprises, those in Equatorial Guinea grew even more dependent on the patronage of the elites.

⁴ On the idea of ‘oil cultures’ or ‘petrocultures’ see Barrett and Worden 2014 and Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman 2017.

Whereas digitisation and the rise of the telecommunications industry afforded the creation of unexpected new markets elsewhere in the continent, the digital production and circulation of music in Equatorial Guinea contributed to the exacerbation of patronage trends. The already authoritarian state became even more omnipresent and politicised all spheres of social life and cultural production.⁵

But oil booms are often followed by oil bursts. After 15 years of spectacular oil booming and insurmountable money influx, the Equatoguinean GDP peaked in 2014, then dropped dramatically. In a World Economic Forum article written by Harvard economics professor Keneth Rogoff, ‘the stunning fall in oil prices, from a peak of \$115 per barrel in June 2014 to under \$35 at the end of February 2016’ was described as ‘one of the most important global macroeconomic developments of the past 20 months’.⁶ Hit first in 2008 after the Global Financial Crisis, the Equatoguinean national economy was shaken again with the 2014 sharp global oil-prices drop and has not recovered since. The markedly high dependence on hydrocarbon extraction and export makes the country’s economy extremely volatile and tightly subject to global finance and explains the correlation between the global oil-prices fluctuation and the country’s economic recession for the past few years, as figures 0.1 and 0.2 show.

⁵ The contrasts in this paragraph are based on scholarship about the transformations of African music economies amid the ‘retrenchment of the state’ (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright in Mbaye 2011, 32; see also Perullo 2011; Shipley 2013; De Beukelaer 2015; Skinner 2015; Rösenthaller and Schulz 2016; Eisenberg Forthcoming a).

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/what-s-behind-the-drop-in-oil-prices/> (accessed 10 June 2021).

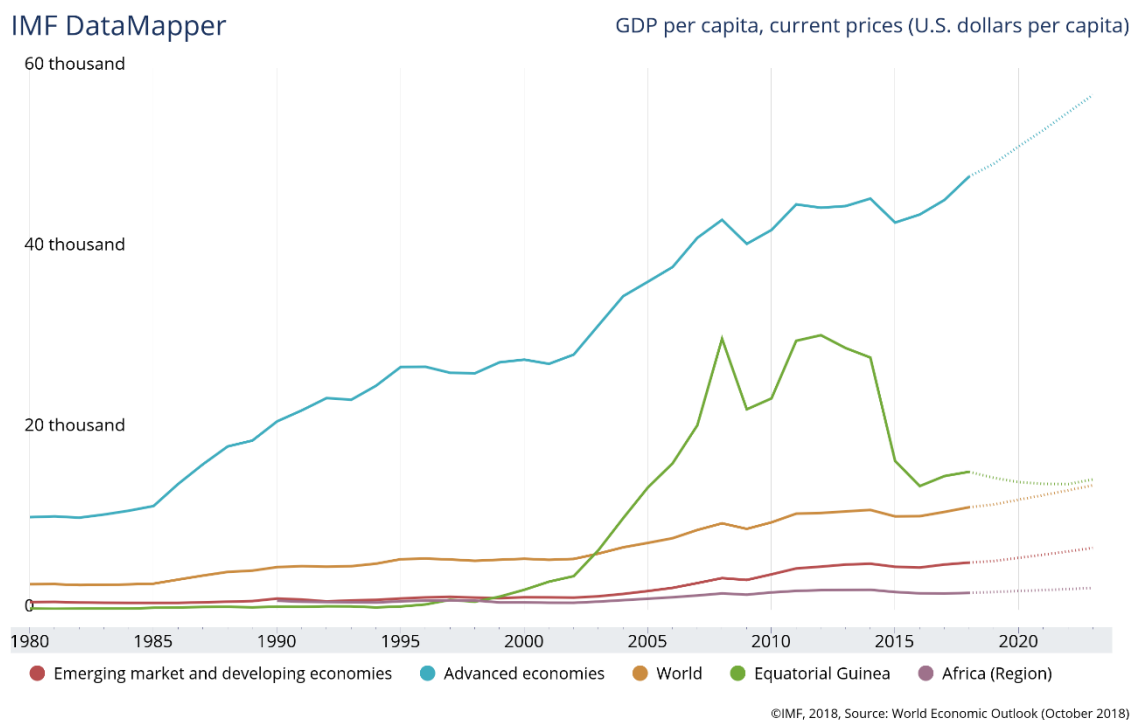


Figure 0.1: Equatorial Guinea's GDP, last 40 years. (Source: author from IMF data)

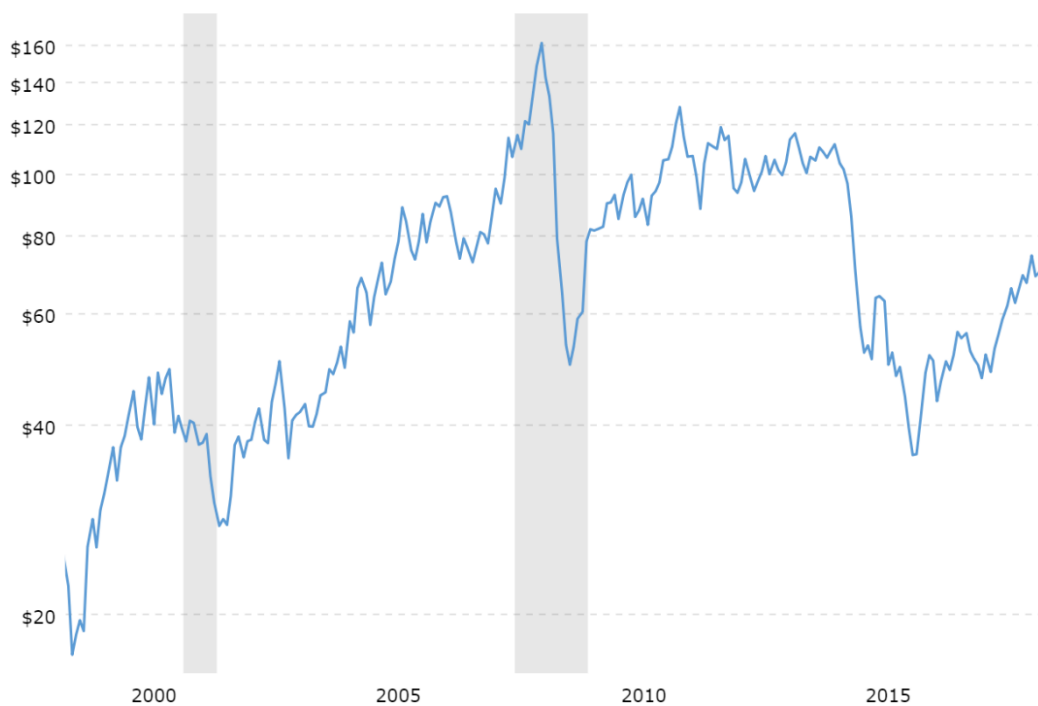


Figure 0.2: Global oil prices, last 20 years. (Source: author from [macrotrends.net](https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart) data)⁷

⁷ <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart> (accessed 10 June 2021).

By the time I started my fieldwork in April 2017, the global oil prices were at ca. \$50 per barrel and the golden days of the oil boom seemed long-gone. Thousands of French, Spanish, Egyptian, and Chinese construction workers had left the country as their companies retrenched from the infrastructural projects that were underway. The ‘landscape not only covered by cranes and scaffolding, etched with ditches and quarries, but also swathed with elaborate signs of futurity—colourful depictions of the infrastructural project that would soon stand in this or that patch of newly cleared forest’ (Appel 2018, 43) had disappeared. Instead, the country was left with hundreds of abandoned, half-built houses dotting both the city centres and the to-be suburban areas around Malabo and Bata, constructions barely started but already in the process of being eaten by the persistent Equatorial forest (see Fig. 0.3). Truncated infrastructures that were meant to represent the construction of the ‘memory of petroleum’ (ibid.), standing as both the monuments and the ruins of oil.



Figure 0.3: Abandoned house in the outskirts of Malabo. (Source: author)

Many local workers who had found temporary jobs in the construction of roads, airports, and stadiums suddenly lost their jobs; others were fired from their public positions or saw their salaries drastically cut. Many turned to taxi-driving as an alternative, a few became burglars, most struggled. Malabo, which was by repute one of the safest cities in Central Africa, quickly became a hazardous town. Iron bars mushroomed over doors and windows, especially in the so-called *cuatas* (rough neighbourhoods), to protect private property from rising burglary. In this thesis I take an interest in how Equatoguineans have responded to the economic downturn, and how music making has mediated those responses.

More generally, drawing on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis explores the mutual mediation between the music economy and the nature of the state in Equatorial Guinea. In conceptualising the state, I extend a framework that considers both the universal features of the institution and the specificity of the field site. On the one hand, I follow the premise that ‘African states, like other states, are made up of bureaucracies and public employees, and that their basic, banal, routinized day-to-day functioning, practices and strategies warrant the interest of anthropologists as much as warlords, smugglers and witchdoctors’ (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014, 3). In that sense, I am inspired by anthropological scholarship that considers the state as a multi-layered, heterogeneous, fluid, and highly contradictory assemblage of institutions, people, and bureaucratic processes (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Gupta 2012).

On the other hand, I take seriously the specific historicity of African politics and the African state. In this direction, this thesis draws extensively on Jean-François Bayart’s (1993) seminal theory of what he calls the ‘politics of the belly’—a mode of governmentality characterised by the accumulation of wealth through political tenure and the management of patronage networks through public resources. Similarly,

discussing the nature of political processes in Nigeria through the work of Richard Josphe, Obadare and Adebawni point to the centrality of a ‘patron-client dialectic in which politics itself is reduced to a Manichean struggle for the allocation of state goods, and the *essence* of state power is reduced to the management of access to, and retaining control of, its distributive mechanism’ (Obadare and Adebawni 2013, 5–6). In Equatorial Guinea, these tendencies are not only present but magnified to the extreme that politics seems to be almost subsumed by the patronage-imbued authoritarian and expansive state; and the state is subsumed by the ruling family.

The thesis thus follows the lifeworlds of musicians as they encounter and navigate state politics, from the mundanity of everyday life to the spectacular and often violent events that they are pulled into. It interrogates the practices and processes through which the Equatoguinean state shapes music production and how music, in turn, is fundamental to the constitution of the state (Olaniyan 2017). It examines how the music economy ‘enhance[s] or weaken[s] the possibilities of human viability and expand[s] or limit[s] [...] the capacity to live a good life’ (Adebawni 2017a, 2). This thesis argues that the music economy operates within a form of musical patronage that is a producer of ideology, a mechanism of wealth redistribution, and a system of domination. It contends that musical patronage contributes to the legitimization of despots in a local prestige economy; that it enables those at the bottom to make claims for their ‘rightful share’ of the country’s spectacular riches (Ferguson 2015, 183–89); and that it is a conduit of state domination, from overt repression to the more subtle forms of violence that saturate economic daily life (Hibou 2011).

One of the main arguments I develop is that musical patronage is embedded in long-standing social and political formations that are governed by regional understandings of dependence, kinship, exchange, and power and wealth accumulation.

The thesis contrasts somewhat radically with much of the emerging literature on African music economies, which I suggest is too concerned with the impact of external factors and the application of often reductionist social theory and pays little attention to the persistence of local economic and political logics that underpin social life in Africa. Borrowing from Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, I suggest that ‘only rarely is there recourse to the effects of the *longue durée* to explain the paths taken by different societies and to account for contradictory contemporary phenomena’ (2001, 6). While I consider the important transformations afforded by oil capitalism and digitisation, I do so by inserting them within the larger continuities and historical trajectories of Equatoguinean societies.

Drawing on the work of Africanist historians, anthropologists, and political scientists such as Vansina (1990), Bayart (1993), Berry (1993), Guyer (2004), and Roitman (2005)—a body of literature often overlooked by the Africanist music scholars cited in the opening of this thesis—I argue that both the oil boom and the digitisation of music technologies, two seemingly transformative events, did not radically alter the music economy but rather exacerbated it, contributing to the continuation and magnification of unequal and asymmetric relations.⁸ Importantly, this does not mean that the Equatoguinean music economy is ‘static’ or ‘crystallised’ in the past. The music economy covered in this thesis is as modern as those depicted in the most recent Africanist ethnographies. Indeed, Equatoguinean musical patronage is a unique object of study through which to explore modern techniques of state authoritarianism as they clash with the rapid development of digital and internet infrastructures and a spectacular

⁸ A similar critique has been extended by Georgina Born (2005) in relation to the socio-cultural study of music. Born charges works that narrowly take micro-social patterns ‘as the privileged locus for an analysis of musical meaning, and as amounting to the entire socio-musical reality’ (14) and calls for a consideration of the historical trajectories of broader social formations alongside the micro-socialities of music to better understand the multiple social mediations of musical assemblages.

and extreme form of (extractive) finance capitalism. What it means, then, is that there are ways of offering an empirically ‘African’ approach to theorisation that at the same time rejects placing the continent as a backward and isolated locality (J. I. Guyer 2007).

This thesis is the first in-depth ethnographic account of popular music in Equatorial Guinea. As such, one of the great methodological challenges was the collection of enough peripheral material to make sense of my central themes. Nonetheless, I learnt much from the scarce but important work on music in Equatorial Guinea. The most relevant writing within this body of literature is Isabela de Aranzadi’s (2009; 2013) historical and organological research on creolisation and the Black Atlantic, which sheds light on the rich musical traditions of the different ethnic groups. Two short articles on the rap boom of the early 20th century by Quimantú Segura Borrás (2009) and Nora Salas Seoane (2011) helped me frame some of the ideas around amateur production and the role of the elites. Last but not least, I learnt much from the less known but equally important work of Equatoguinean writers. I found particularly useful the part-autobiography-part-history of hip hop written by rapper Ebana Edú ‘Negro Bey’ (2016), who features in the thesis as one of my main interlocutors; and the forthcoming book by Jorge Abeso on the traditional ‘griot’ culture known in Fang as *nvet*.

In the following sections, I analyse the main scholarship that has guided this research. I first give an in-depth account of recent research on music economies and suggest that they are useful but also insufficient to fully grasp the reality of my interlocutors. The following section moves to a combination of works that I believe provide a better ground for the thesis, from the scholarship on the nature of the African state to the anthropology of oil.

The Music Economy

Music, Capitalism, Digitisation

One of the central concerns of this thesis is the study of music as an economic resource—that is, something that can be bought and sold, gifted, or exchanged for something else, be it money, material resources, protection, or prestige. The scholarly study of the economic aspects of music has overwhelmingly revolved around the question of capitalism and the commodification of music, i.e. its transformation into an object that can be mass-produced and sold to generate surplus value in a capitalist system of exchange. As an economic system and a cultural and social formation, capitalism has profoundly shaped the way in which music is produced, circulated, and consumed across the world. Capitalism has contributed to the emergence of new genres, the creation of intellectual property legislation, and the transformation of musical labour and exchange. The circulation of music in the global market has made stars rise and audiences cheer in the intimacy of their cars and homes and in public spaces from shopping malls to concert halls, parks to football stadiums.

The first to attempt an approach at the impact of capitalism on the production of culture and music were the members of the Frankfurt School, and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in particular. Writing in the 1940s and aware, through the work of Karl Marx, of the perils of capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer were openly pessimistic. In their view, increasing industrialisation and the development of audio-visual technologies of mass production and consumption had led to the uniformisation and standardisation of culture. In a piece famously entitled ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ (1991 [1944]), they affirmed that consumers were losing their individuality and becoming a passive, alienated mass society.

Highly influential as it was, Adorno and Horkheimer's work was later critiqued for establishing a rather simplistic and negative account, often backed by little historical or sociological evidence. This was partially tackled decades later by economist Jacques Attali (1985 [1977]), who attempted a history of music framed by Marx's theory of the modes of production in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Attali affirmed that music had undergone four main stages throughout history, each embedded in a distinct mode of production: pre-modern/religious (before 15th century), modern/imperialist (15th-19th centuries), market-based (20th century), and a speculative, even utopian account of a future phase marked by easier access to means and technologies for anybody to create their own music.

At around the same time that Attali was writing *Noise*, a number of American and British scholars started to pay attention to what soon would be dubbed the 'music industry' (Chapple and Garofalo 1977; Frith 1987; Garofalo 1993; Negus 1999; Laing 2003). Clearly influenced by the 'culture industry' theories of the Frankfurt School, but also by Marxist French sociology and the emerging Cultural Studies field, these authors enriched the political economic perspective with more empirical accounts of the technological and cultural conditions underlying the industrialisation of music: modes of production and commodification were then considered alongside class conflict, politics, audiences and subcultures, corporate business culture, and the power structures upon which the entertainment industry was built. These writers '[steered] a deliberate course away from the pessimistic laments of mechanical determinists and economic reductionists' (Negus 1992, 3), focusing instead on the human actors that conformed the industry and the cultures they inhabited.

Two scholars have been particularly prolific in their contributions to our understanding of music and capitalism: David Hesmondhalgh (from sociology and

media and communication studies) and Timothy Taylor (from musicology/ethnomusicology). Albeit in different ways, the two of them build on the more nuanced approaches of the 1980s and early 1990s. Yet both end up admitting the transformative power of this economic and social form. In a set of studies published in the late 1990s, Hesmondhalgh (1996; 1998; 1999) explores the emergence of indie music and the close interrelations between small, ‘alternative’ record companies and the so-called ‘majors’. He offers a less centralised picture of the music industry, but affirms that actors in the indie scene eventually end up leaning towards conservatism and adopting an institutional politics characterised by ‘a pragmatic acceptance of the need for partnership with major capital’ (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 56).

Taylor has covered a number of issues spanning the world music industry and globalisation (1997), processes of commodification (2007), technological transformation (2001), and the role of marketing, branding, and advertising (2012). His lifelong commitment comes full-circle in his most recent monograph, *Music and Capitalism* (2016), where he deals more explicitly with the rise of neoliberalism, ‘a more virulent strain of capitalism’ (ibid., 3). Taylor moves away from totalising views of capitalism, yet his remains a rather daunting account: capitalism is not total but it is hegemonic (ibid., 42). As a ‘structure, a social form [...], a cultural system, a set of ideologies, and an ensemble of practices’ (ibid., 181), capitalism defines ‘not only the production, consumption, and distribution of music but also the roles that music plays in people’s lives’ (ibid., 2). And in its neoliberal phase, cultural production is ever more driven by profit-making (ibid., 79).

The above works were written at a time when the purchase and sale of music was done via physical artefacts—vinyl, cassettes, CDs.⁹ But with digitisation and the introduction of the MP3, Digital Audio Workstations, new portable devices, the Internet, social media, and streaming platforms came profound transformations. With varying degrees of adherence to technological determinism, most contemporary music academics agree that the face of the music business has radically changed in the 21st century, and some do not hesitate to announce the advent of a ‘new music industry’ (Wikström 2020).

In the effort to understand the changing relation of music and capitalism amid the historical conjuncture marked by neoliberalism, globalisation, and digitisation, a number of writers have focused on the production and distribution of the ‘digital music commodity’. In digital format, music has become ever more mobile, fluid, and ubiquitous, produced at the convergence of the music and computing industries (Sterne 2012; Gopinath 2013; Gopinath and Stanyek 2014; Morris 2015). The creation and circulation of digital music has also triggered changes in cultural policy, copyright legislation, and business models. Amid a seemingly terminal crisis caused by rampant piracy and a drop in profits in the dawn of digitisation, the music industry was quick to innovate and adapt to the new circumstances, thus becoming a symbol of ‘capitalism’s ceaseless experimentation’ (Leyshon 2014, 5 drawing on Nigel Thrift).

Perceptions about these transformations have been ambivalent, but there remains a certain level of critique towards the nature of capitalism. While allowing greater levels of control and participation by users, the new music industry has produced novel forms of precarious and self-exploitative labour that require musicians to become

⁹ The more recent works of Timothy Taylor (e.g. 2016, 118–53) and David Hesmondhalgh do engage—partially the former, more centrally the latter—with the digital transformation.

entrepreneurs and work longer and harder as a result of increasing competition (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 284–87; Leyshon 2014, 165; Taylor 2016, 140–45). While consumption via streaming platforms such as Spotify is now easier and more personalised than ever, it is realised through the employment of recommendation algorithms, the generation of user data, and the ‘study of human behaviour at scale’ (Eriksson et al. 2019, 4). The ‘datafication’ of music is indeed part of a larger set of contemporary practices that raise critical questions about unprecedented forms of power and mass surveillance; about a new form of capitalism dependent on the prediction and modification of people’s behaviour (Zuboff 2019).

Somewhat surprisingly, a large part of the ‘new music industry’ literature does not come from the fields of musicology or ethnomusicology, but rather from human/economic geography and media and communication studies. It thus tends more towards top-down theorisation and the employment of fixed economic models rather than bottom-up, inductive type of analysis that a more ethnographic, empirically grounded approach may afford. How are musicians’ everyday lives affected by the new music industry, and what are the contradictions and subtleties that emerge in that digitally mediated relation?

Like the more classic works on music and capitalism, this new literature offers invaluable perspectives to understand the changing nature of commodification, musical labour, circulation and consumption, marketing, and profit-making strategies in the present, neoliberal phase of capitalism. Yet all the works so far discussed share a feature that makes them problematic to employ in this thesis. Above all, this body of literature is predominantly Eurocentric: basing their analysis on North American and European actors and projects, their viewpoint risks becoming a teleological interpretation of the supposedly pervasive, ever-growing advance of capitalism.

Music and Capitalism Otherwise

In a ground-breaking work on Tanzanian popular music, Alex Perullo (2011) posed one of the most openly blunt challenges to the Western-based literature on music and capitalism:

What happens when there are no record companies, radio promoters, or publicists? What if there is no person to chart record sales or handle music publishing? And what if there are no lawyers involved in music? Is it still a music industry? (Perullo 2011, xv)

Perullo's conceptual move is not to be taken lightly. Rather than the 'music industry', he prefers the 'music economy'—a term that allows for a more accurate theorisation of an equally 'commercial' music that nonetheless does not operate within purely Western customs and logics. My thesis embodies this critique and is attentive to the broader work recently developed on the complex entanglement between music's social, economic, technological, and aesthetic lives in the neoliberalising Global South (Guilbault 2007; Dent 2009; Stokes 2010; Perullo 2011; Shipley 2013; Butterworth 2014; Morcom 2015b; Graves 2017; Garland 2019). Working from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Caribbean, these scholars argue that capitalism is not hegemonic but contentious, heterogeneous, contradictory, always entangled with local histories and social formations. This literature thus represents a common effort to construct anti-teleological accounts of music's institutional forms; accounts that are built from close ethnographic analysis rather than deducted from abstract, universalising theory (Born 2012).

Two lines of argument seem to cut through this literature. First, these studies recognise that capital changes according to the political and economic *conditions* underly the music industries. Starting from the 1980s, the introduction of neoliberal policies across the world encouraged a political and ideological inclination towards liberalisation, privatisation, and the deregulation of markets, alongside a retrenchment

of the state. In this environment, musical traditions were quickly commodified, and a network of actors emerged to meet market demands, from independent media to recording studios, managers to music venues. Such was the case, for instance, of Carnival music in Trinidad, where national festivals ‘reorganised along the lines of a business venture’ amid the ‘growing marginalisation of the state’ (Guilbault 2007, 239–40). Yet ethnomusicologists have been quick and right to point out that neoliberalism across the world took very different shapes and therefore impacted music-making unevenly. In his work on rural country music in Central-Southern Brazil, Alexander Dent perceives a risk in ‘overselling neoliberalism’s novelties’ (2009, 240). He argues that issues of commercialisation are always emmeshed with local notions of tradition. And in yet another example, Martin Stokes (2010) shows how neoliberalism in Turkey coincided with the wake of Islamist power, thus bringing about a whole different set of national and religious symbols, of which music was part.

A second element to feature prominently in this body of work is *musicians’* responses to these changing conditions through a growing embrace of entrepreneurship as the definitive mode of cultural production. Importantly, entrepreneurship is understood as both a *set of practices* and an emerging *subjectivity*. Animated by increasing privatisation and competition in the ‘free market’, common entrepreneurial behaviours include hard work, risk-management, branding and marketing, proactivity, flexibility, investment, innovation, and an imperative to take responsibility for one’s own career. Once again, these entrepreneurial subjectivities and aesthetics are always mediated by local social and cultural forms. In the Andean Peruvian music industry, for example, James Butterworth argues that the production of the neoliberal self among *huayno* musicians clashes with local ethics of suffering embedded in Catholic moral philosophy. These ‘alternative sources of “ethical subject formation” [have] the

potential to endorse, contradict and mediate the ideal type of the neoliberal subject in practice’ (Butterworth 2014, 215). Equally, neoliberal entrepreneurial logics have been adopted by Bengali performers of the Hindi genre *padāvalī-kīrtan* (Graves 2017). The recent shift towards professionalism and commodification among this community of musicians has been locally critiqued for turning a devotional genre into a commercial one; and a similar critique could be made from an orthodox Marxist perspective. But Eben Graves shows how, in conditions of material scarcity, such efforts ‘might represent something of an “air pocket”, a space within larger economic flows that further offers musicians a sense of agency’ (ibid., 81).

In Africa, neoliberal policies were largely introduced via so-called Structural Adjustment Programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. SAPs were a series of loans granted to developing countries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund depending on the local governments’ acceptance of tight ‘conditionalities’—including liberalisation of markets, privatisation of public enterprises, and reduction of public spending. SAPs were intended, according to their proponents, to reduce poverty, create efficient and sustainable economic growth, and promote democracy. In Africa, what they *de facto* caused was precisely the opposite: destruction of employment, further indebtedness, wealth inequality, capital flight, and political corruption.¹⁰

A number of scholars have explored the transformations in African music economies following these reforms (Perullo 2011; Mbaye 2011; Shipley 2013; De Beukelaer 2015; Skinner 2015; Schmidt 2018; Eisenberg Forthcoming a). The particularly strong decline in state capacity and the persistence of informal and illegal economies combined to produce both exceptional everyday challenges and precarity,

¹⁰ See Ferguson 1990; 2006; Van de Walle 2001 for a critique; and Sachs 2005; Stiglitz 2001 for a recognition of failure by the very programme’s architects.

and unexpected economic opportunities for African social (including musical) actors. This environment has thus been ripe for the development of petty capitalist markets, especially in the absence of large corporations and labels. In Tanzania, for example, the music economy expanded rapidly in the late 1990s and early 2000s as musicians responded in creative ways to the increasingly challenging life in Dar es Salaam. This makes Perullo argue that ‘neoliberalism can be both a form of economic imperialism and a benefit to individual entrepreneurial freedoms in the economic situations that people live with on a daily basis’ (2011, 30).

Like elsewhere in the Global South, neoliberalism has triggered the growth of entrepreneurialism among African artists in the last couple of decades (Röschenthaler and Schulz 2016). But the rise of new subjectivities is emmeshed once again with local histories and moralities. In Ghana, for instance, *hiplife* musicians embody the cultural entrepreneur’s struggles with the privatising state. Making use of the affordances of digital technology, these artists turn music value into fame into economic value. Amid neoliberal constraint and opportunity, a generation of dispossessed youth celebrates the freedom of lyrical speech and self-sovereignty while posing moral and aesthetic questions about tradition and modernity (Shipley 2009; 2013). Meanwhile, in the ‘born digital’ music industry in Kenya, entrepreneurial aesthetics and new avenues for profit-making feature prominently too. Andrew Eisenberg (Forthcoming a) shows how producers in Nairobi ‘have employed digital music technologies to simultaneously enact new aesthetic formations, business organisations, networks of exchange, and forms of value’ (ibid.). In this case, actors seek new audiences by re-inserting Kenyan identity symbols into new, digitally produced urban genres.

In the wake of digitisation, the commodification of African popular music has taken unexpected directions that challenge universalising assumptions proclaimed by

the ‘new music industry’ literature. Take the case of Ghana and Kenya, where mobile telecommunication and technology firms (MTTs) have entered the music business and taken the space occupied in the West by ‘big tech’ and music distribution platforms such as iTunes or Spotify. These new business models have emerged amid an environment marked by vibrant music scenes but weak distribution systems and a lack of market regulation. In a fast-growing and competitive mobile phone market, network service providers offer music as ‘content’ to improve the sale of data bundles and ‘value added services’. Music mobile-based commerce or ‘music m-commerce’ reproduces inequalities from ‘old’ music economies, but it also provides new leverage for musicians, who emerge as powerful intermediaries between corporations and audiences. Musicians’ popularity is key in the network service providers’ expansion of their market share (Eisenberg 2012; De Beukelaer and Eisenberg 2018).¹¹

In sum, like the work emerging from other regions in the Global South, these Africanist scholars warn us against teleologies and impositions of Western paradigms of capitalist modernisation onto the economies of the Global South (Chakrabarty 2000). They argue that the transformations caused by the rise of neoliberalism and digitisation on music economies have been equally disruptive across the world—but they have taken multiple and heterogeneous forms.

Illuminating and ethnographically rich as it is, taken together this body of work risks being read in teleological terms: in ways that suggest that capitalist expansion and the commodification of labour and exchange are relentless; that however heterogeneous

¹¹ These uniquely African capitalist entanglements are shaped too by regionally specific cultural, historical, and legal logics around issues of ownership, distribution, intellectual property, and piracy. Despite growing efforts to develop copyright regimes and recent adherence to international copyright law, African states have been known for their limited enforcement capacity (Skinner 2012b; Perullo and Eisenberg 2014; Eisenberg Forthcoming b; see also Shipley 2013 on corporate sponsorship and turning fame into economic value).

and contentious are the forms that it takes, African popular music is or will eventually become a commodity. Like in the more classic literature on music and capitalism starting from Adorno, the focus is still on ‘productive labour’. And yet African economic history ‘bears out’ neoclassical and Marxist arguments ‘only in part’ (Berry 1995, 300; J. I. Guyer 2004; Ferguson 2015). By emphasising technological and economic *transformation*, these works downplay the continuity of African understandings of wealth and the embedding of economic structures within long-standing social and political formations.

As I will show throughout this thesis, the Equatoguinean case stands in stark contrast with the most recent ethnographies of African music economies. Equatorial Guinea did not undergo a period of liberalisation in the 1990s. Instead, an oil boom thwarted the timid aspirations for democratisation and solidified the power of an already authoritarian and omnipresent state. Rather than developing entrepreneurial attitudes towards music production, artists in Equatorial Guinea are caught up in non-capitalist, vertical, and unequal relations of dependence with powerful state actors, who instrumentalise music for their own benefit. Thus while growing consumption and the occasional presence of the music commodity-form are hard to deny, the Equatoguinean music economy’s connection with the very centre of power demands that we turn away ‘from economistic notions of wealth to focus on relationships, in particular asymmetrical relationships, that is on the accumulation of power by individuals or groups by making themselves the centre of networks of connection, through mixtures of coercion and attraction’ (F. Cooper 2017, 136).

In order to unfold these political and economic articulations, the next section turns to the classic literature on African economic systems and the nature of the African

state. But before, let me briefly discuss the important but scarce work on ‘non-capitalist’ music economies.

Beyond Capitalism

In a recent article, ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom encourages us to move conceptually ‘beyond the ideas of commercialism or commoditisation and takeover or resistance that have dominated theoretical approaches since Adorno and have fixed popular music especially with a still-enduring “capitalist” image’ (2015a, 275). This thesis takes such a direction. To be sure, the impact of capitalism on the Equatoguinean music economy is undeniable, from the monetisation of music to the import and distribution of technologies of music production and consumption. Yet, as Taylor (2007) has rightly pointed out, not every music exchange for money is a capitalist transaction: ‘A person may sell her music as a service, but that makes her a merchant, not someone producing surplus value in the capitalist system’ (282). In the pages that follow, I hope to show how placing extraordinary emphasis on capitalism and neoliberalism may obscure rather than clarify the structures and logics of a given music-economic system.

What then lies beyond capitalist labour and the music commodity form? What theoretical tools are there to understand other music economic structures? One obvious avenue is the one proposed by Karl Marx’s principal counter-theorist: Marcel Mauss. Mauss’ (2016) ‘gift exchange’ theory first proved that not every society—and every actor within it—acts according to market principles. In many communities, Mauss argued, material exchanges operate under the principle of gift-giving and are fundamental to the accumulation of wealth but also to the building of solidarity and

alliances. Gift exchanges are governed not by laws of supply and demand but by social obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate.

While highly discussed alongside (or in opposition to) Marxist theory in the field of economic anthropology, Mauss has received surprisingly little attention by music scholars. One notable exception is Jim Sykes' (2018) recent work on Sri Lankan music. Drawing on the notion of 'the gift', Sykes develops the idea of 'sonic generosity', i.e. music and sound as a 'technology of care' with the potential to forge interactions between communities and to encourage reconciliation amid ethnic and religious difference. Sykes thus opens the door for new thinking beyond the music commodity form. Similarly, Nancy Baym (2011) argues that the rise of online distribution and file-sharing is affording the reconfiguration of the Swedish independent music industry, away from 'control and sales' and towards 'decentralization and gift exchange' (36). In the Swedish Model, gift and market economies coalesce around affective notions of community building. The new relationships established between producers and audiences invite one to think about file-sharing not as illegal distribution but as 'participatory culture'.

Indeed, it would be easy to understand many musical transactions in Equatorial Guinea as gift exchange. The offering of a car, a job, or political protection from a patron to a musician could be considered an act of gift giving. And the musician writing and performing a praise song would be the expected act of reciprocity. But as David Graeber (2011, 109–20) points out, hierarchical relations such as those between patrons and clients should not be read in terms of exchange and debt. Gift exchange implies equality and reciprocity. On the contrary, patronage is predicated on inequality and driven by a 'logic of precedent': a one-sided act of generosity, repeated over time, is

taken as precedent and added to a web of custom that is eventually treated as an obligation.¹²

But what then if neither capitalism nor gift exchange models seem to properly capture the logics underlying the Equatoguinean music economy? A couple of works have offered nuanced interpretations of complex or hybrid music economies. Martin Stokes (2002), for instance, shows how a large number of musicians in the Mediterranean region base their music practices not on commodified forms of music and labour, but on local solidarities and sentiments, which by no means are pre-capitalist or non-modern, but ‘fragmented yet also reconfigured by modernity’ (161). Ana María Ochoa and Carolina Botero (2009) move away from the dualistic opposition between the music industry and informal exchanges. Comparing two Colombian popular genres (anarcho-punk and ‘fusion musics’), they address more complex, hybrid forms of exchange in music production and recording, from economies of sacrifice to techniques of *rebusque* (finding innovative ways of making a living, such as selling goods on the street).

These works encourage radical new thinking. Yet they are nonetheless constrained by the space limitations of article-length essays. As a result, they lack in-depth explorations of the social and political formations in which these music economies are embedded. More importantly, coming out against the background of the numerous and well-developed critiques of capitalism and political economy, these works lean towards non-critical and idealised readings of non-capitalist forms of musical labour and exchange. Like Sykes and Baym’s writing on music and gift exchange, they emphasise non-capitalist economies’ potential to foster equal

¹² Charitable donations take this logic: ‘If you give some coins to a panhandler, and that panhandler recognizes you later, it is unlikely that he will give you any money—but he might well consider you more likely to give him money again’ (Graeber 2011, 110).

distribution, solidarity, community building, and well-being. But ‘if one takes up the Maussian project with too much uncritical enthusiasm, one ends up with a naive relativism utterly blind to power’ (Graeber 2001, xiii). As a result, this scholarship cannot account for the violent, asymmetric, and hierarchical relations that may underlie some economies, as will become evident in the case of Equatorial Guinea. In the next section, I turn to a series of bodies of literature that I think can better illuminate the music economy I address in this thesis.

An Africanist Approach

Economy

The African continent has provided anthropologists with numerous scenarios from which to question and critique orthodox economic theory—be it neoclassical or Marxist. One of the earliest and most invoked examples is Paul Bohannan’s (1955) theory of the ‘spheres of exchange’. According to Bohannan, the Tiv of Nigeria exchanged goods within a ranked hierarchy of ‘spheres’, or categories of interchangeable commodities of different value. These spheres included, from lower to higher value: locally-produced foodstuffs; ‘prestige objects’ such as slaves, cattle, expensive clothes, and metal bars; and most importantly, ‘rights in human beings other than slaves’, particularly women in marriage (Bohannan 1955, 62). Exchanges within the same category were ordinary transactions with no moral or status implications. It was exchange *across* the different spheres that constituted the basis of economic endeavour and success in Tiv society. An ‘investment’ was thus made when ‘converting up’ from a lower to a higher category: i.e. food into prestige objects, prestige objects into dependents.

While this model has been contested and refined over time, Bohannan opened the door to overcome Marxist-Maussian dualisms: that is, he pushed scholars to argue that ‘use and exchange value do not exhaust value dynamics in a monetarist economy; gift and commodity do not exhaust the forms of exchange’ (J. I. Guyer 2004, 175). Bohannan documented several key features of African economies: a multiplicity of scales and forms of non-economic value; the role of morality; a complexity of material exchange where objects can be commodities, currencies, and prestige goods at the same time; a predominance of *asymmetry* over *equivalence* in exchange; and the high social and economic value of accumulating dependents, which is fundamental for this thesis and will be tackled in-depth in the next section.

If there is an Africanist scholar whose work forcefully warns against the application of pre-existing orthodox theories of capitalism, that is Jane Guyer. Guyer’s ideas have inspired a generation of scholars to build theory up from ethnographic detail and historical context.¹³ Brilliantly conveyed in *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (2004), her most highly-praised book, Guyer shows the wealth of forms of rationality and valuation that have long-coexisted in Africa. In her view, African economies are characterised by asymmetry, instability, calculation, volatility, negotiability, multiplicity (of currencies and of forms of value), and a lack of regulation and standardisation.

These features are not perceived by Africans as a weakness. Rather, ‘it is their ability to bridge enduring disjunctures that allows actors to realize the “marginal gains” that are crucial to these economies’ (Geschiere, Goheen, and Piot 2007, 38 commenting on Guyer 2004). Guyer’s consistent empirical focus on ‘marginal gains’—i.e. a

¹³ See Geschiere, Goheen, and Piot 2007 and Adebaniwi 2017b for works explicitly derived from and inspired by Jane Guyer’s *Marginal Gains*.

‘characteristic generative element’ (2004, 17), a ‘persistent possibility of a gainful margin in exchange, what people hope and plan for’—is taken as a guideline in this thesis. Somewhat similar to James Ferguson’s notion of ‘survivalist improvisation’ (2015, 94), both concepts destabilise pre-conceived understandings of labour and entrepreneurial rationality, and will be further discussed throughout the thesis in relation to Equatoguinean musicians’ work and livelihoods.

While always favouring empirical data, a primarily Africanist perspective, and a focus on the *longue durée* or the continuity of economic formations, Guyer does not take the impact of exogenous forces lightly. In Atlantic Africa, the focus of most of Guyer’s research and the context from which this thesis emerges, external influence dates back at least to the growth of mercantilism and the European economic expansion five centuries ago (J. I. Guyer 2004, 4). The progressive introduction of capitalism and European ‘general purpose money’ through colonial intervention indeed shook popular economies and trade systems. Local communities adapted to the slave trade, and existing power structures and forms of exploitation were re-shaped into new ones (F. Cooper 2014, 11–37). Yet these changes did not entail a ‘currency revolution’ (J. I. Guyer 1995a). Today, after centuries of monetisation, ‘calculative rationality continues to play a limited role and does not necessarily subsume other forms of valuation, as is generally (but often implicitly) assumed’ (Geschiere, Goheen, and Piot 2007, 40; Berry 1995, 305).

Even in more recent times, under the ever-growing spectre of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism, Africa’s place in the world has been described as ‘remotely global’ (C. Piot 1999) or in the shadows (Ferguson 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Across the continent, economies are characterised by the persistence of informality (Hart 1973), the presence of criminal and illicit activities at the heart of the

state (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999), and increasing fragmentation of regulatory authority (Roitman 2005). In sum, then, the work of Bohannan, Guyer, and other Africanist anthropologists documents the ‘failure of capitalist arrangements to become universal forms of economic life’ (Roitman 2007, 156). The next two sections explore, respectively, the nature of social relations under a mode of accumulation based on the attraction and management of dependents; and the nature of the African state and its entanglement with the social and economic spheres.

Relations

As Bohannan (1955) pointed out in his ‘spheres of exchange’ theory, African societies have long placed high value on the accumulation of dependents. Unlike in Europe, where power has tended to be exerted by control of land, in large areas of Africa where land abounded but people were in demand, leadership was built upon the attraction of followers. Since precolonial times but with a continuity up until the present, possessing rights over women, children, and clients was a symbol of status, fame, prestige, and ‘bigmanship’. Considering this political logic, scholarly interpretations of pre-colonial Africa ‘suggest that the ultimate purpose of material wealth was to transform it into personal allegiances’ (J. I. Guyer 1995a, 23; see also Vansina 1990, 237,251).¹⁴ This uniquely African mode of accumulation was famously termed ‘wealth in people’ by Miers and Kopytoff (1979) and has been particularly strong in Equatorial Africa—which makes it key for this thesis (Vansina 1990; Bayart 1993; J. I. Guyer 1993; 1995c; Ferguson 2015, 141–64).

¹⁴ In Bohannan’s theory, this transaction would be an ‘investment’, a conversion up from a lower-value sphere to a higher-value one.

Understanding the continuity of the ‘wealth in people’ logic is fundamental to comprehending the social relations underlying the Equatoguinean music economy. Political leaders, who control most of the economic and material resources of the country, still pursue the accumulation of followers. Among the latter are musicians, who have a double facet: as dependents and as ‘boosters’ of big men’s fame through praise singing. Karin Barber depicts this logic eloquently in her work on Yoruba praise poetry or *oriki*:

Yoruba precolonial polities were hierarchical, with highly elaborated chiefly and royal structures, but the driving dynamic was the competitive self-aggrandizement of individuals. *Oriki* make people, by representing in concentrated form the gaze of recognition by adherents, the ultimate basis of big men’s power in an achievement-oriented society. The praise-singer herself enacts this gaze, locking eyes with her addressee and repeatedly calling upon him to pay attention, to respond. The reciprocal relationship of patron and client is apparent, for the praisee, swelling with gratification, may dig deep into his pockets to reward the singer. (Barber 2007, 115–16)

Barber pinpoints very clearly the entanglement of ‘wealth in people’ with praise-singing’s capacity to make and unmake subjects in Nigeria. This is a tendency that is present throughout this thesis, but which takes particular prominence in Chapter 4, where it meets the lavishness and spectacularism afforded by oil wealth.

The wealth in people mode of accumulation depicts well how African big men ‘invest’ their wealth to create social relations (of dependence)—to build social networks in which they are central. As Sara Berry has put it, success in politics depends ‘on the size and dedication of one’s following, which could, in turn, be increased through strategic acts of generosity or patronage’ (Berry 1989, 42–43; Barber 2007, 114). Within this framework, we are encouraged to interpret Equatoguinean elites’ funding of music production and recording not as a capitalist investment in pursuit of profit, but as techniques to improve their prestige and accumulate dependents. As will become evident in Chapters 1 and 2, music as praise singing is a privileged medium used by

local elites in their competition to ascend the ladder of power—a competition among big men that has long been intrinsic to Equatoguinean political formations.

This ‘investment in social relations’ did not happen only among big men seeking political mobility. As Sara Berry (1985; 1989) has argued, it was also common among the lower classes as a strategy to access resources and generate a livelihood. Berry extends the Africanist interest in dependence and accumulation into class mobility, kinship, and social change in 1970s Yourubaland, Nigeria. Unlike Europeans, Berry argues, Africans were not dispossessed through the introduction of capitalism: ‘they retained access to land, labour, and some forms of credit’ (1985, 7). But that access depended on membership in social units—such as a house, a lineage, a clan—or on personal connections to wealthy members of society. In order to secure access, peasants and other workers spent their wealth to advance their status.

Berry emphasises the continuity of this pattern of accumulation through the colonial and postcolonial eras. With 20th century colonisation, mechanisms of access to resources changed, but the general pattern persisted. Africans employed ‘their newfound wealth and influence in ways which served to restructure old institutions and social relations rather than to destroy them’ (Berry 1989, 44).¹⁵ Thus the expansion of monetisation ‘did not necessarily work to reduce levels of expenditure on social payments or to diminish their importance in legitimating and defining social relationships’ (Berry 1995, 305; see also Ferguson 2015, 147–51). Later on, with the advent of the postcolonial state, ‘many ordinary citizens entertained high hopes of furthering their own access to the resources of the state through the gratitude and/or patronage of their successful protégés’ (ibid.). As states developed stronger control over

¹⁵ A similar argument is made by historian Frederick Cooper (2014, 20). In critiquing Marx’s predictions of the outcome of the British colonisation of India, Cooper observes how British power reinforced certain social structures, rather than undoing them.

resources, ‘access to the state became a precondition for doing business successfully’ (ibid.).

The *longue durée* of the conditions and patterns of access and management of resources has had implications for economic performance. The investment of surplus to strengthen social relations ‘instead of in the expansion of productive capacity’ (Berry 1985, 193) gave domestic economies an *unproductive* nature. While in capitalist economies accumulation encourages increased productivity, in much of Africa it led to the exacerbation of dependence and patronage relations. These findings made Berry approach orthodox Marxist theories of capitalism critically, arguing they paid too much attention to production and too little to exchange and distribution—indeed central features of African economies. As Bayart confirmed, ‘trade, more than production, is still the major economic activity south of the Sahara’ (1993, 103).

This tendency is particularly remarkable when considered alongside periods of extreme accumulation—such as oil booms. In 1970s Nigeria, Berry observes, the impact of oil was ‘less dramatic than the figures suggest’ (1985, 2). Such an argument is highly relevant for this thesis. Following Berry, I too believe a) that the persistence of ‘unproductive’ modes of accumulation based on dependence, investment in social relations, and distribution prevents other types of economies (including capitalism) from developing; and b) that the Equatoguinean oil boom has not led to structural changes—rather, it has exacerbated long-standing social formations of patronage and dependence, which have long shaped the music economy. Under this light, most musicians do not envision their labour as part of a capitalist ‘music industry’, but rather as embedded within relations that can be used to enforce redistribution based on moral values. As a singer records a song praising a congressman, she is implicitly making a distributive

claim—demanding her ‘rightful share’ of the (very large) state cake (Ferguson 2015, 165–89).

In seeking redistribution, thus, many Equatoguinean musicians, like many other Africans, purposefully enter relations of dependence in which they are lower than their patrons. Importantly, as Ferguson has pointed out, ‘the desire for dependent relations with powerful others is not some archaic and reactionary remnant of the paternalistic past but a contemporary (and in at least some measure effective) response to current economic conditions’ (2015, 25–26). While Western theory and social policy often depict dependence as an inherent African problem, ‘an ethnographic view suggests that it is really only via relations of “dependence” that most of the population survives at all’ (Ferguson 2015, 97; see also F. Cooper 2014, 34). This active seeking of hierarchical relations or *mise en dépendance* has been interpreted by Jean-François Bayart as a ‘mode of action’, i.e. not as a passive condition but as a display of agency and smart adaptation to constant crisis (1993, 24; 2000, 218). Indeed, as I will emphasise throughout this thesis, dependence can entail ‘hard social labour’ (Ferguson 2015, 97).

And yet, the Equatoguinean case forces us to remember that these are *unequal*, *vertical*, and highly *asymmetric* relations (Berry 1985, 192; F. Cooper 2017, 136; Graeber 2009, 115). Musicians tend to accept dependence because very often it is the only choice, even if their expectations end up not being accomplished (F. Cooper 2002, 188). Indeed, as I will show, the power asymmetry intrinsic to such networks—which has outstandingly increased with the influx of oil money in the last two decades—allows patrons to tweak or ignore altogether musicians’ redistributive claims.

Even worse, musicians’ agency is very often overpowered by coercion and sheer violence. Those who sometimes refuse to enter patronage relations are pulled into them by threats, intimidation, and the direct use of police violence. In this environment, the

‘exit option’ often discussed in the Africanist literature—i.e. the idea that dependents, if disregarded, can freely choose to penalise and leave their patrons to find the favour of some other (Bayart 1993, 256–59; Ferguson 2015, 145)—is practically non-existent in the Equatoguinean music economy. As I will show in Chapter 2, the dominant control imposed by figures such as Vice-President and Obiang eldest son Teodoro Nguema conditions the actions of other ‘smaller’ patrons.

The State

Throughout the 20th century, the local modes of power and wealth accumulation and structures of dependence in Africa were incorporated into the fabric of the state, creating a ‘complex mode of governance’ that Bayart (1993) famously called the *politique du ventre*. The ‘politics of the belly’ points to the persistence of patron-client relations and the tendency towards the accumulation of wealth through political power in African postcolonial societies. Critiquing accounts that saw the state as an exogenous institution in Africa, Bayart and other scholars like Achille Mbembe convincingly argued that ‘despite their recent fabrication, [...] African state entities rested on eminently indigenous social bases’ (Mbembe 2001, 40). According to Bayart (1993; 2000), African states have long been shaped by their *extraverted* character—that is, the capture of rents generated by dependence on external resources, rather than the creation of wealth through productive enterprises, to consolidate power. Those resources have changed over time, but they include funds from foreign development aid, customs revenue, and rents from resource extraction.

Historian Frederick Cooper (2002; 2014) has developed similar arguments in his theory of the ‘gate-keeper state’: ‘Gatekeeper states, like colonial states, are strong at

the nodal point where local society meets external economy, dependent on manipulating revenues and patronage possibilities deriving from that point, including foreign aid and commercial deals' (F. Cooper 2014, 30). Along the lines of the works just above, Cooper too takes into account the *longue durée* of African societies and the historicity of the state, arguing that extraversion and gate-keeping were already present in pre-colonial states and were exacerbated with colonial intervention first,¹⁶ and with independence after.

Extraversion has been fundamental in the process of political centralisation, economic accumulation, and the structuring of relations of subjection and 'local systems of inequality and domination' (Mbembe 2001, 40; Bayart 1993, 23–25). States with particular extraverted and gate-keeping inclinations have often led to authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, fostering 'self-aggrandizing rulers and violent conflict over the gate' (F. Cooper 2014, 33). As Achille Mbembe has bluntly put it, 'the general practice of power has followed directly from the colonial political culture and has perpetuated the most despotic aspects of ancestral traditions, themselves reinvented for the occasion' (2001, 42).

While Bayart's arguments have triggered as much critique as praise for his tendency towards homogenisation, extraversion is a remarkably good framework to understand the Equatoguinean state—both in its relation with the world economy (Campos Serrano 2013) and in the economic inequalities and forms of dependence it generates at the domestic level (Valenciano-Mañé 2018). As I explain further in Chapter

¹⁶ As Mamdani (1996) has shown, in their struggle to establish political control, colonial authorities built upon already-existing forms of domination, legitimising and further expanding patronage links and networks that gave access to resources.

1, the continuation of extraverted tendencies in the Equatoguinean state aligns with the continuation of patronage logics in the music economy.

Among the many types of African states, petroleum producers share particular economic and political configurations. Contradicting classic accounts of capital investment in Africa, countries like Nigeria, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea have recently attracted enormous amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Ferguson 2006, 194–210; Soares de Oliveira 2007; Appel 2019). Unlike other forms of mineral extraction such as copper or gold, which generated vast social investment including the hiring of thousands of local workers and the construction of ‘company towns’ with schools and hospitals, oil production is socially ‘thin’: the extraction takes place off-shore and depends on high-capital investment, and little labour, of which very little is done by locals. In exchange for rights over the exploitation of the reserves, oil companies pay spectacular sums to the countries’ elites. Thus of the billions of dollars generated in rents, almost nothing enters the wider society (Ferguson 2006, 198).

The anthropological literature on oil states is often critical of the generalisations and naturalisations of the so-called ‘resource curse’ literature (Coronil 1997; Watts 2004; Mitchell 2011). According to this economic theory (e.g. Humphreys, Sachs, and Stiglitz 2007; Ross 2012; J. D. Sachs and Warner 1995), oil exporter countries will eventually develop certain pathologies, including corruption, clientelism, armed conflict, inflation, lack of transparency, and authoritarianism. Ethnographic approaches have proved that the impact of oil capitalism must be analysed in relation to the social and historical context in which it operates.

As Hannah Appel (2019) has shown, in order to secure better deals and improve its profits, the oil industry actively seeks to exploit the resources of those countries where such pathologies are already in place, intentionally disentangling itself from

socio-political membership. Oil booms thus tend to exacerbate long-existing extraverted, gate-keeping, and patronage practices. In 1970s Nigeria, for instance, the growing dependence on oil exports helped reveal long-standing political and social processes (Berry 1985, 2). In sum, as Cooper has written, ‘oil can turn a gatekeeper state into a caricature of itself’ (2002, 172). As we will see in the next chapters, the oil boom in Equatorial Guinea equally contributed towards an extreme form of the extraverted state (Campos Serrano 2013).

Methodology

This thesis is based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, of which 13 were conducted in Equatorial Guinea and one consisted of follow-up research in Madrid, Barcelona, and Jaén, Spain. I first visited Equatorial Guinea for a month in the summer of 2015, after which I conducted extended research for 12 months between April 2017 and May 2018. I spent most of my time in the two major urban spaces in the country: the capital city of Malabo, located in the Bioko Island (10 months), and Bata, the largest city in the continental region (2 months). Given the overarching nature of the project, my fieldwork led to a series of encounters with a heterogeneous pool of actors of different gender, ethnic, and age background, including singers, instrumental performers, studio producers, deejays, managers, fans, radio and TV workers, internet and social media based entrepreneurs, European cultural promoters, and American oil Corporate Social Responsibility officers.

During my fieldwork, I attended rehearsals, recording sessions, and performances as a participant-observer. The time spent at the studios of Rubén Edú and DJ Beyoso, in particular, helped me understand much about technological use and

production processes and logics. As artists rarely spend their days only rehearsing, the occasions when they did helped me shed light on the importance of certain periods of high musical activity. Attending a variety of concerts, including public ones at the state and foreign cultural centres, but also two private parties of particular importance, enabled me to discern the differences but, above all, the persistent patterns between them. But beyond the purely musical events, I also spent many hours helping some artists out with bureaucratic processes, including countless visits to the different state institutions in charge of culture. These trips were key to understanding the role of state institutions in the provision of resources and to observe the interactions between artists and important state officers.

Much of my data also emerges from 126 recorded interviews conducted between 2015 and 2018. Interviews had an open-ended structure: I normally arrived with a few issues to discuss but always let the interviewees express themselves in a way that drove me to new themes and questions. But beyond formal interviews, a great amount of key information came from informal conversations in unexpected situations. ‘Hanging out’, an often-cited methodological technique in ethnographic research, was particularly useful in such a repressive environment—and was only enabled by the extensive nature of the fieldwork. Hanging out allowed me to build trust and consolidate relations that led not only to data on the banality of life but also to sensitive information about everyday political encounters that hardly feature in other types of research on Equatorial Guinea. By the time I came to understand the intimate connection between music and the very centre of power, some interlocutors already trusted me enough, being not only willing to provide sensitive data but also thankful that I shared their stories—always provided I hid their identity.

In informal conversations with Equatoguineans about the politics of their country, lack of freedom of expression is often brought up, sometimes in tension with what some perceive as positive social and economic developments afforded by the oil boom. As one part-time soldier, part-time taxi driver once told me: ‘Here we can’t talk [*no expresamos*, literally “we don’t express ourselves”], but at least we have good roads. You should see Benin. They can talk more, but they have to receive the presidents of other countries on such bad roads’. Speaking up in a public space, discussing something that might be perceived as remotely political or subversive, is considered by most Equatoguineans a risky activity. It is well known by the local population that the state ‘has ears’ in the most remote corners of the country (and outside their borders), and one never knows who can be listening from the next table at a bar.

I learnt this lesson the hard way early on in my fieldwork. One evening I sat at a bar in the Malabo city centre to catch up with a man I met during my first visit in 2015. About an hour into our evening, my friend, of Annobonés origin, was speaking of his beloved hometown Annobón, a remote island lost in the Atlantic Ocean some 800km away from Bioko. At some point, my friend started describing the recent government’s decision to turn Annobón’s main village into a *distrito urbano* (‘urban district’), a term that refers to an infrastructural development programme aimed at urbanising rural areas across Equatorial Guinea. He quickly pointed out that a *distrito urbano* was useless in Annobón, and that that money could instead be spent on other social projects to target the island’s high rates of alcoholism and teenage pregnancy. Aware of how the conversation suddenly turned perilous, I mostly sat back and listened, nodding every now and then.

Out of the blue, a man sitting in the next table turned his head and abruptly joined the conversation, violently protesting about my friend's words. Not having noticed the arrival of the group, I looked at our neighbours and realised, by their outfits, that they were off-duty soldiers. The man, unmistakably inebriated, turned more and more angry and suggested the risks of Equatoguineans transmitting such ideas to white Europeans who could be recording the conversation to then tamper with the information and spread it abroad. After a couple of minutes, the man stood up and started looking around our table, counting how many beers we have had. Surprised by how quickly the tension had escalated out of a simple mention of the new *distrito urbano* in Annobón, I kept quiet as my friend argued back. And when the situation seemed unresolvable, my friend stood up and we left the place.

The fact that an off-duty soldier took a critique of the *distritos urbanos* programme as a direct attack on the state tells us much about how central infrastructural development is to the building of the oil-fuelled Equatoguinean state, but it also points to the way public critique is quickly repressed at any time and in the most unexpected places. The need to watch out for my words was something I was constantly reminded of throughout my fieldwork: 'they can twist anything you say', people would tell me. As Enrique Okenve (2009) has argued, repression in Equatorial Guinea is partly maintained by the omnipresence of police forces in public spaces, but also by the existence of a security body that operates in plain clothes and the effectiveness of which is based not on its sophisticated methods but on its invisibility. These techniques of repression are further boosted by the small population size of a country where everybody seems to know each other.

Fear and paranoia frequently showed themselves when people avoided certain topics or suddenly lowered their voices if a discussion turned slightly political, even if

they were in their own houses, as if the walls could hear too—a habit I often surprised myself replicating with newly arrived foreigners. In such an environment, gaining access to information and certain musical activities was not only difficult but also risky for me and for my interlocutors. Consequently, information on the violence intrinsic to patronage (Chapter 2) and ethnographic detail such as the private party described in Chapter 4 become even more relevant.

The collection and management of politically sensitive data were thus some of the greatest challenges of my research. Sensitive information was often collected off the record. On the occasions where I was given permission by my interlocutors to use my recorder, we found safe spaces such as my own flat to conduct the interview. Managing the data was also complex. Growing more and more fearful about the information I was collecting—boosted by circulating fears and paranoia, as I will describe—I made sure to password-protect and encode all my devices. Transcribing interviews was complex, not only because of my translation from Spanish to English, but because recordings were often full of stops, sudden silences, double meanings, and hidden information, which over time I learnt to interpret.

Hiding the identity of participants is particularly difficult when researching popular music, considering how famous some interlocutors are, and how some others wanted to become more famous through my thesis. But during both the fieldwork and the writing of the thesis, I always prioritised the safety of participants. Consequently, I have not only included pseudonyms for those who asked for it, but also taken further precautions to change some interlocutors' ethnic, gender, and age groups, and I have even modified their role within the music economy in some instances. In the cases I was not fully able to hide any person's identity, I chose not to use the data.

Regarding my own safety, I managed to get by thanks to the paradoxical, double nature of music, which I discuss in further depth in Chapter 8: an overtly political and politicised art form, it can also be taken as an innocent, totally apolitical object of study. This double nature helped me gain access to the field in the first place, a task highly complicated given the hermetic nature of the country—considered one of the least visited in the world.¹⁷ Without ‘tourist visas’ to apply for, I was lucky to gain a letter of invitation from the Centro Cultural Ecuatoguineano, which led to a temporary visa first, and an extended one later. Once in the country, vaguely responding ‘I study Ecuatoguinean music’ to questions from the police or the elites that I met was normally followed by interest rather than suspicion.

Last but not least, throughout my fieldwork I drew much on online ethnography through social media and, most notably, through WhatsApp, a free, internet-based texting phone app. By joining so-called WhatsApp groups, I was able to collect information and songs in different ways that I did offline. Soon, smartphones and WhatsApp became not only methodological tools but also objects of ethnographic enquiry. As will become evident in chapters 5 and 6, social media and WhatsApp in particular have emerged as unique new channels of communication, enabling new forms to exchange music but also spaces for group debates that do not often replicate offline. In navigating the interpretive challenges of digital ethnography, I was inspired by a number of works that argue for the importance of conducting a parallel online and offline fieldwork that cuts across seemingly bounded spaces of socialisation (Burrell 2012; Hjorth et al. 2017; Born Forthcoming)

¹⁷ Aranzadi and Moreno Feliú 2016 regret the small number of ethnographies on Equatorial Guinea caused by the challenges of accessing the country.

In considering my fieldwork alongside the pre-existing theoretical tools with which I arrived in the field, I followed Georgina Born's proposal to take empirical research 'to have theoretical effects or to serve as a site for conceptual invention' (Born 2010, 197). Rather than taking purely inductive or purely deductive approaches, I moved back and forth between established theory and my own ethnographic insights, considering that 'the strength of ethnographic fieldwork is that it throws up material and findings which cannot be incorporated into existing frameworks, and which demand that they be extended' (ibid., 198). The theoretical implications of my fieldwork become evident, I hope, in the pages that follow.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into four parts, each containing two chapters. Part 1 offers a historical and ethnographic approach to musical patronage. Chapter 1 constitutes a historical examination of the embedding of the music economy in long-standing social and political formations. From the early 20th century up until the discovery of oil in the mid-1990s, this chapter explores the political and economic *conditions* for the production and exchange of music. Drawing on scarce secondary literature and on oral stories built upon original interviews, I attempt a reconstruction of the parallel history of popular music and state formation in Equatorial Guinea. Following the work of Bayart and other scholars on the historicity of the African state, I posit that the Equatoguinean music economy is not characterised by capitalist logics of market exchange but by the *longue durée* of patronage relations and regional modes of power and wealth accumulation. From colonial dance contests to the 1970s dance bands to the 1980s *coros de animación* (political animation groups), musical patronage emerges as an

evolving but persistent mechanism of redistribution defined by relations of dependence between musicians and the country's elites.

Chapter 2 offers a broad perspective of contemporary musical patronage, especially considering the impact of the 1990s oil boom—which is further developed throughout the thesis. I begin by examining how the boom halted a timid period of democratisation and instead magnified the extraverted nature of the state and consolidated the Obiang regime. With billions of petro-dollars pouring into state coffers, I show how the increasing accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of the ruling family has exacerbated the inequalities, asymmetries, and contradictions already present in patronage relations. The case is best exemplified through TNO—the 'label' run by Obiang's eldest son and current Vice-President, Teodoro Nguema—which emerges as the paradigm of patronage. Amid the promise of large, oil-funded payments from the elites, more and more Equatoguinean artists are turning to musical patronage as a mechanism of redistribution, creating a highly speculative economy of uncertain outcomes. With increasing power derived from a tight grip over oil funds, the elites often stretch the moral rules upon which patronage is predicated, not only failing to meet artists' expectations of redistribution, but also enacting more overtly forms of violence and social control through patronage. I thus argue that oil capitalism has consolidated musical patronage as a system of domination.

Part 2 explores the politicisation of music ethnographically. Chapter 3 focuses on the mutual mediation between studio production and patronage, in particular during special political periods such as elections. Drawing on an ethnography of recording studios, I show how the convergence of digital technologies and musical patronage are extending speculation in the music economy and boosting amateurisation. Attracted by the growing demand for praise songs and the affordances of digital technologies to hide

the lack of musical skill, more and more average citizens are turning to the production of praise songs as a medium to access patronage networks. Highly skilled producers negotiate prices, power, and political responsibility, normally establishing control of the recording process but taking up economic risk that is passed onto them from the singers. Joining debates about the ‘democratising’ nature of digital technologies, I argue that while the growing availability of laptops has liberated music production from the funding of the elites, economic profit still remains linked to patronage.

Chapter 4 moves into the *private* realm of praise singing and patronage, this time with a focus on performance. It specifically discusses so-called *eventos*, or ritualised, lavish parties organised by the elites to enhance their prestige. Starting with a detailed ethnography of a member of the elite’s birthday party, I depict how excess, spectacularism, and seamless coordination come together to impress guests. At these lavish parties, the spectacle of oil riches is brought into sharp relief. In analysing the micro-socialities between artists and celebrants, including praise singing and a form of money ‘spraying’ known as *faroteo*, I show how these events are unique spaces for the petro-elites to perform their power. Indeed, *eventos* contain the debris of older rituals but have been exacerbated by the spectacular accumulation of wealth afforded by the oil boom. With the potential to induce oil-fuelled fantasies of remarkable fees among non-invited artists but also to expose outstanding debts and forms of forced labour, *eventos* emerge as a neat example of the deep inequalities of patronage and the privatisation of performance by the country’s elites.

Part 3 turns to media technologies of (online) circulation. Chapter 5 describes music circulation as central to the constitution of patronage relations. It interrogates artists’ efforts to spread their (unlicensed) songs in search for popularity, which in turn may lead to new personal connections or performance invitations. After charging the

emerging scholarship on the new music industry for taking internet access as unproblematic, I show the daily challenges by Equatoguineans to stay online. Then, I explore the main channels of circulation, considering the growing role of smartphones and the continuing importance of music vendors. Ethnographic insight reveals that new technologies still depend on old logics of exchange and old channels have been renewed by digital technologies. I conclude that music circulation depends on a heterogeneous combination of technologies and that fans and artists alike navigate and adapt smartly not only to changing technologies that were not originally designed for them but also to persistent forms of control and censorship deployed by the state.

Chapter 6 focuses on the possibilities and limits of online circulation to access international markets. While internally artists have adapted the new technologies to fit the demands of the patronage economy, some look to find alternative sources of income outside of the local elites' control. The chapter homes in on two case studies. The first one discusses the struggles of a young rapper to market his crew's music online, revealing an unfamiliarity with some social media and, especially, with the legal regimes in which the global music industry is embedded. The second case examines the efforts of a group of Equatoguinean entrepreneurs who, based in Spain, aim to monetise the music of their country through major streaming platforms. While the venture is seemingly promising, they face many challenges posed by a highly sceptical Equatoguinean community and by music streaming platforms and their AI recommender systems. I finally conclude that the persistent inequalities of patronage combine with the barriers created by a global music industry built upon complex, Eurocentric legal regimes and technological infrastructures—all of it working towards the marginalisation and invisibilisation of Equatoguinean music.

Finally, Part 4 addresses the heterogeneous ways in which musicians encounter the state in their everyday lives. Chapter 7 explores how musicians adapt creatively to get by amid the omnipresent and oppressive state. It specifically looks at the strategies and techniques developed to encourage the trickling down of oil money—from displaying political ambivalence to techniques of *perruque* (de Certeau 1984, 25), trickery and deception, and the manipulation of bureaucratic structures. The chapter highlights forms of work that are not necessarily music related, but rather more connected with James Ferguson’s (2015) notion of ‘distributive labour’, or the ‘hard work of dependence’ through which Equatoguinean artists claim their ‘rightful share’ of the oil riches. Resisting reductionist accounts of the implications of political deference in authoritarian regimes, the chapter argues that what may look like political affiliation or collaboration could instead be understood as mechanisms to encourage the redistribution of resources amid uncertain and precarious conditions. The chapter thus shows how musicians ‘play with the state’, working within and yet against it.

Through a series of cases of artists struggling to ‘play without the state’, Chapter 8 considers whether music can be conducive of alternative politics in a country where social life is politicised on a daily basis. Specifically, it analyses examples of subversive rap, the only form of ‘music protest’ in the country; a cultural institution involved in forms of ethnic politics; and an electronic musical genre known as *temblete* and characterised by its practitioners’ aims to disengage from the politics of the state. Joining recent work that goes beyond reductionist accounts of music and resistance, I consider the liberating potential of ‘apolitical’ cultural production and the future of projects aimed at the generation of alternative politics and the disentanglement of music from state politics. But I hold this potential in tension with the violent and onerous responses by the state to each one of the projects.

Chapter 1: Genealogies of Patronage: The *Longue Durée* of Music and Politics

Introduction

In the Introduction to this thesis, I hinted towards music's close relationship to politics and the nature of the state in Equatorial Guinea. In this chapter, I follow Jean François Bayart's (1993) interest in the 'historicity' of African societies to trace a genealogy of musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea. If modern African politics must be analysed, as Bayart proposes, through the lens of the *longue durée* of local modes of rule and domination, to understand the music-politics nexus it is then imperative to explore the long-standing connections between the two. The chapter is thus a reconstruction of the parallel history of music production and state formation throughout the 20th century—a history that illuminates the continuities and changes that have led to the contemporary music economy.

The chapter contributes to the growing literature on African popular music economies (Perullo 2011; Shipley 2013; Skinner 2015; Steingo 2016; De Beukelaer and Eisenberg 2018; Eisenberg Forthcoming a) by offering a contrasting perspective: one that moves away from increasing attention to capitalism, entrepreneurship, and digital economies. Instead, I contend that a closer analysis of the historicity of the social formations in which African music economies are embedded can expose unexpected logics and patterns that reveal more about the nature of musical value than orthodox Marxist theory. Consequently, I get inspiration from a wide range of historical and anthropological literature on the political, economic, and cultural configurations of

Central African and Equatorial societies (Balandier 1970; Berry 1989; 1993; Vansina 1990; J. I. Guyer 1993; 2004; Mbembe 2001; F. Cooper 2014).

Drawing on secondary literature and original oral stories from interviews with old musicians, I argue that the Equatoguinean music economy has long been shaped not by the logics of market exchange, but by the *longue durée* of patronage relations and regional modes of power and wealth accumulation. In the pages below, I first review the long-standing logics of kinship, exchange, and domination among the Fang—the majority ethnic group and the one that has dominated the realm of politics since the independence of the country until today. Then I explore the genealogy of musical patronage across the various periods of the 20th century: the colonial period; the coming of the postcolony and the regime of Francisco Macías; and the rise to power of Teodoro Obiang. The chapter finishes with the event that would come to transform Equatoguinean society and that sets the scene for the rest of the thesis: the discovery of massive oil reserves.

Power and Wealth Accumulation in the Equatorial Region

Oral history and archaeological evidence generally agree that the Fang-Bulu-Beti populations settled in Equatorial Africa after a series of migrations whose origin is still debated.¹⁸ For centuries, their social and political structures were organised around exogamous, clan-based kin networks—from the smallest family unit or ‘house’ (*nda-bôt*) to the *ayong*, a large kin group or ‘clan’ (Vansina 1990, 73–82). The Fang were thus a paradigmatic segmentary or ‘lineage society’, where kinship, the political, and the economic were intimately connected. These social units were in contradictory

¹⁸ See Okenve-Martínez 2007, 36–44 for a comprehensive review of the relevant literature.

relation and engaged in both competition and allegiance creation to maintain their power and status (Balandier 1972, 50; Fernandez 1982, 149; Mbana Nchama 2017, 59–81).

At the forefront of these communities were polygamous men who sought to marry women from other clans to enlarge their families and create allegiances. Given their capacity to accumulate *akúm* (wealth), they were known as *nkukuma* (pl. *mikukuma*, literally ‘rich men’).¹⁹ *Mikukuma* competed for this form of wealth, which created inequalities between them. Much like other communities across Equatorial Africa (Vansina 1990; J. I. Guyer 1993; 1995c), interpersonal dependents such as wives, children, clients, and slaves were highly valued and sought-after among the Fang. This is best understood under the theoretical notion of ‘wealth in people’, which maintains that, in such contexts, status and power were achieved through the number and quality of followers and social ties. As Guyer and Belinga write, ‘in some places [dependents] were the pinnacle, and even the unit of measurement, of ultimate value’ (1995, 92; see also Berry 1993; J. I. Guyer 2004, 10).

The figure of the *nkukuma* and his desire to accumulate dependents is fundamental in this thesis for its clear resemblance with contemporary music sponsors/patrons and their central role in the music economy. As we will see in Chapter 2, the President’s eldest son, Teodoro Nguema, stands out as the biggest of big men for his alleged capacity to ‘take care of’ and ‘help’ large numbers of musicians and artists. The persistent search for fame and public admiration is common among today’s Equatoguinean elites in their quest for political mobility. And so the continuity of the *nkukuma* logic partly explains music’s intimate entanglement with power in

¹⁹ The *mikukuma* were figures of authority that however only exercised power over their respective family units (*nda-bôt*). Outside of warfare periods, the Fang rarely recognised a figure of overall authority (Fernandez 1982, 179).

contemporary Equatorial Guinea. Music's unique capacity to circulate quickly (especially in its digital format) and to intimately affect people's consciousness, emotion, and behaviour makes it a powerful instrument for the new rich men to accomplish their goals. Just as musicians depend on the elites' patronage to get by, so do elites depend on musicians' praise songs to accumulate prestige.

To be sure, the indigenous notion of *akúm* (wealth) did not only encompass 'wealth in people', but also 'wealth in material resources' (J. I. Guyer and Belinga 1995; Valenciano-Mañé 2018, 82–91). The exchange of material objects, foreign goods, and a variety of currencies was common and widespread in pre-colonial times. Yet early ethnographies (Balandier 1970; Fernandez 1982; Günter Tessmann 1913) and more recent accounts (Mbana Nchama 2013, 167) agree on describing the pre-colonial Fang as a non-commercial society. Instead, material wealth was exchanged, often in ceremonial ways, in a more complex matrix that involved the circulation of people and the accumulation of power and prestige. Take, for example, the precolonial, special-purpose money known as *ekuele* (pl. *bikuele*), an iron piece in the shape of a spear that was dedicated to the payment of the *nsoá* (bride-price). The *bikuele* received by the bride's family were then subsequently used to pay the *nsoá* requested in the marriages of the family-head's sons (Mbana Nchama 2013).

And take also the example of gift exchange institutions such as the well-known *bilaba*, where wealthy men performed lavish displays of hospitality to their guests in a similar fashion to the potlatch. These 'economic dramas' (Fernandez 1982, 136) or 'total social phenomena' (Balandier 1961) encompassed a multiplicity of functions including the accumulation of prestige and the creation of allegiances (J. I. Guyer 2004, 41). *Bilaba*-type ceremonies extended well into the 20th century (Fernandez 1982, 36)

and, as I will describe in more detail in Chapter 4, have evident reflections on contemporary *eventos*, where music performance is central.

Precolonial forms of exchange and accumulation across Equatorial Africa were of course shaped by colonial intervention, notably from the mid-19th century. To some scholars, colonisation caused the ‘death’ of political traditions (Vansina 1990, 239–48) and the disappearance of former, non-capitalist forms of economic exchange (Bohannan 1959). Yet more recent interpretations suggest that such impact may have been more partial than originally thought, allowing for the *continuity* and *transformation*—rather than the total erasure—of indigenous economic and political formations and logics across the region (C. D. Piot 1991; Bayart 1993; J. I. Guyer 1995b; Mbembe 2001).

One key continuity of African political forms is the recourse to strategies of *extraversion*. The theory of extraversion describes the formation of the postcolonial state in the process of globalisation. It points to how African political leaders have actively sought to enter relations of dependence with external agents to secure accumulation and establish local systems of domination (Bayart 2000). Extraversion has encouraged unproductive and *rentier* political economies, contributing to ‘the personal fortunes of whichever person or group was the gatekeeper of this system’ (ibid., 261). The strategies of extraversion predate colonialism, were perpetuated during the European domination, and have been actively used and crystalised in the postcolonial state, functioning as ‘a historical matrix of inequality, political centralization and social struggle’ (ibid., 222).

While the theories extended by Bayart have often been critiqued for their universalising tone, his research was primarily done next-door to mine (in Cameroon), and indeed Equatorial Guinea reflects well the historical tendencies described by the French political scientist. As Equatoguinean expert Alicia Campos has suggested, ‘the

historical integration of Equatorial Guinean territories and its people in regional and world dynamics has promoted extraverted political economies that have brought about different authoritarian forms of power' (Campos Serrano 2013, 333).

In Equatorial Guinea, colonisation was particularly uneven and heterogeneous. The insular territories (Bioko, Annobón, Corisco, and the Elobeyes) were used as strategic bases for the Atlantic trade as early as the 15th century (Bolekia Boleká 2003; see Sepa Bonaba 2011 on the specific case of Fernando Poo [today's Bioko]). But the continental region of Spanish Guinea, known as Río Muni, remained largely unexplored—let alone ruled over—until the 20th century. As Gustau Nerín (2010) has richly described, Río Muni was one of Africa's areas with less European presence, and the process of submission of the Fang only started with the beginning of World War I, when Spain was caught between Germany and the Allies in the scramble for Equatorial Africa. Before that, an early disinterest by the Spanish administration (then struggling to control their last colonies in America) was followed by a strong indigenous resistance and a harsh environment.²⁰ After World War I, Spain increased its military presence to gain control of the local population and secure Río Muni's borders from growing French interest, finally succeeding in 1927 after a military operation. Only after that did the process of cultural and religious submission and the economic exploitation of the land and its peoples begin.

At the economic level, the rise of colonial intervention and the growth of the colonial state meant the introduction of a capitalist economy and, notably, an all-purpose, single currency. The Spanish *peseta* became prominent and slowly replaced the *ekuele*. But as with other African communities (Berry 1989; 1995, 305), rather than

²⁰ Such were the limits of the colonisation of Río Muni that indigenous populations from neighbouring French and German territories fled and settled in Spanish Guinea, causing a great population increase up until 1914 (Nerín y Abad 2010, 21).

undoing social structures, monetisation helped to reshape and reinforce some of them. One of the most obvious examples is polygamy and the accumulation of dependents by big men. As colonial money substituted the *ekuele*, Fang men working in factories, plantations, or the colonial administration found it easier to pay the *nsoá*, which favoured the rise of polygamy (Mbana Nchama 2013, 177). Indeed, the almost perfect articulation of the colonial, credit-based agri-capitalist economy and the indigenous debt economy of the bride-wealth shows the continuity and transformation of well-rooted forms of exchange. In this case, the external market system did not shape indigenous social structures, but the other way around. As Enrique Martino (2016) has argued, Spanish administrators in need of labour force adapted their recruitment practices to successfully bring almost 25,000 Fang men from Río Muni to the cocoa and coffee plantations in Fernando Poo in the 1930s. Their strategy: to pay each worker a cash-advance for exactly the price that had been established for the *nsoá* in colonial money: 300 pesetas.

Regarding politics, the Spanish' need to control and exercise power over the local population brought about transformations of indigenous political forms. In order to subdue the local population, colonial administrators sought to gain the trust of local chiefs, in a classic example of 'indirect rule'.²¹ Used to previous contact with Bubi traditional rulers in Fernando Poo, the Spanish could not understand the Fang acephalous society, which made them 'make up chiefs where they couldn't find them' (Campos Serrano 2000, 83; see also J. Aranzadi 2009, 82; Álvarez-Chillida and Nerín 2018, 36–39).

²¹ According to Mahmood Mamdani (1996), indirect rule was a form of governance deployed by European powers to address 'the native question': that is, how to subjugate a large local population with a small group of foreigners. The response—indirect rule—consisted of ruling through pre-existing political structures, leaving the everyday exercise of power in the hands of local chiefs.

Up to the early 20th century, Fang society had been successful in avoiding excessive and despotic concentrations of power (Balandier 1970, 143; Günter Tessmann 1913, 208; Martino 2020, 341). The rich were ‘tolerated but not allowed to extend their tentacles onto the political or the religious realm’ (Mbana Nchama 2017, 39). Let us remember that, while *mikukuma* (big men) exercised power over their families, ‘leadership was rarely acknowledged at clan or lineage level within this segmentary society’ (Okenve 2007, 55). In fact, the Fang did not have a term that could be translated into ‘chief’, and no figure represented something like a ‘clan chief’ or a ‘village chief’. The notion of the ‘traditional chief’ was put into circulation by the Spanish to name those they thought had power over extended communities and could act as middlemen—i.e. the *mikukuma* (J. Aranzadi 2009, 82).²²

The figure of the *nkukuma* then took a new meaning during colonisation, emerging as a middleman between colonisers and colonised. The impact is neatly summarised by Fang political scientist Enrique Okenve:

By the late 1940s, Fang society was left without the mechanisms to counteract the individualistic trends encouraged by all sectors of the colonial establishment. The younger generation of Fang chiefs did not share the same values of their predecessors. To them, personal ambitions came before their responsibility to their communities, a tendency that was accentuated during this period. (Okenve 2007, 277)

While Okenve suggests a turn to extraversion around this time, the fact is that similar logics had been in place almost since the first encounter with the Europeans in the late 15th century. During the centuries of Atlantic trade, African elites accumulated foreign material wealth in exchange for their intermediation. But this extraversion became more evident in the first half of the 20th century, with the increased colonial activity. More evidently during the 1930s and 1940s, the elites’ *akum* (wealth) was not

²² According to early sources, the figure who most approached the definition of overall authority was the *mienlam*, a representative of the village. And yet ‘the recognition gave few if any arbitrary powers’ (Fernandez 1982, 170).

generated from productive activities but through their gatekeeping position in the indirect rule established by the colonisers, as mentioned earlier.

These transformations, and the ones that came after the country's independence in 1968, did not however erase indigenous political structures. As Okenve (2007) has argued, the 'new political tradition' that emerged through the colonial and postcolonial decades was deeply rooted in the 'old tradition', and was formed through a complex process of re-adaptation to the new socio-political realities. In the rest of the chapter, I follow the historical trajectories of these modes of accumulation and the specific role of the *nkukuma* in the production of popular music.

Exchange and Monetisation in *La Guinea Española*

Accounts of pre-Independence music making in today's Equatorial Guinea are scarce.²³ The most complete piece of writing is perhaps a chapter by comparative musicologist Eric von Hornbostel that appeared in Gunther Tessmann's (1913) classic ethnography of the Fang. As known to contemporary ethnomusicologists, Hornbostel was not an ethnographer himself. Instead he worked with recordings and drawings collected by others in the field, looking to unveil the structural differences between Western classical music and other musical traditions from around the world—a task a number of later music scholars critiqued for being 'tempted by essentialism' (Agawu 2003, 160). Accordingly, von Hornbostel's chapter, entitled 'Music', offers an organological approach to the Fang instrument collection and a few musical

²³ See Aranzadi 2009 for a detailed bibliographic review of the literature on musical instruments of the various ethnic groups that today inhabit Equatorial Guinea.

transcriptions and analyses, most notably from xylophone performances and vocal pieces. But it gives little interpretation at the social and cultural levels.

Arguably the most well-researched musical tradition in the region, given its lyrical and historiographic importance, is the *nvet* (also *mvvet* or *mvot*) (Pepper 1972; I. de Aranzadi 2009; López Ortega 2011; Mbana Nchama 2017; Abeso Forthcoming). The term refers both to the art-form and the musical instrument (a four-stringed harp-zither) with which the semi-nomadic *mbom-nvet* (*nvet* performer) accompanied their chants, recitations, and stories in their travels from village to village. The *nvet* mixed ‘the charm of a poetry recital, the action of a theatrical play, and the vibrant dance of a pleasant concert’ (Abeso Forthcoming), all of which took place during hours-long performances at the *abáa* (‘house of the word’, a common building at the centre of the village). The tradition has particularly drawn the attention of literature scholars for its rich texts. Not purely narrative, not purely epic, ‘the principal theme is almost metaphysic: man’s struggle against obstacles and forces that are against his access to immortality’ (López Ortega 2011, 212). *Nvet* performances were an extraordinarily complex art form that involved a mix of personal lyrics, topical songs, and epic poetry, and that described the history of the Fang people. The *mbom-nvet* was thus considered the ‘guardian of secular traditions’, an ‘itinerant observer of society and culture’, and a ‘bearer of information from other parts of the Fang country’ (Fernandez 1982, 59)

The *mbom-nvet* has popularly been compared to the West-African griot for obvious reasons. Yet unlike griots, who served and accompanied kings and nobility, the *mbom-nvet* did not share clear connections to praise singing and great political leaders, perhaps because the Fang acephalous political and social structure was quite different from the West African kingdoms (Charry 2000, 96–115; Ebron 2002, 100). The *mbom-nvet* ‘appeared in the village either on direct invitation or in the process of his

itineration. In either case he was sponsored by one or another “village family” (*mvogabot*) which offered him the use of one of their “council houses” (*aba*)’ (Fernandez 1982, 59–60). Fernandez gives no further details about what exactly was offered through this ‘sponsorship’. Indeed, the account *does* resemble the economics of the West African griots, whose payment, according to Eric Charry, was not considered part of a market economy but a contribution towards the ‘cementing [of] an ancient historical interdependence’ (Charry 2000, 98)—a sort of gift exchange. What could be argued, however, is that given the itinerant nature of *nvet* performance, no long-lasting or onerous links of reciprocation were established between the artist and the sponsors—as is the case with the griots or with today’s music economy in Equatorial Guinea.

As with other spheres of social life, music making was transformed with the rise of colonialism, especially from the 1930s (see above). It would be reasonable to think that monetisation and the increasing use of the *peseta* as a general-purpose currency affected the local music economy and earlier forms of sponsorship. But unfortunately, the existing literature offers little evidence of it.²⁴ Perhaps the most illuminating case is provided by James Fernández (1982) in his brilliant ethnography of *bwiti*.²⁵ In a chapter on resource distribution and social reciprocities in the 1950s, Fernández takes the case of the production of group dances for sale. He describes the way Fang villages hired dance teams to teach the local team a new dance, and how the learning team subsequently tried to teach the dance to other villages’ teams to earn back what they

²⁴ Tessmann briefly mentions the monetisation of other forms of artistic expression, such as tattooing and wood carving. Yet he emphasises how these exchanges had a non-commercial nature. In his opinion, the reason why wood carvers charged an extremely low price for a chair (2 *bikuele*) was that there was no lucrative intention in the transaction. Instead, honour and artistry were most important for the artist, and the payment was a token that obligated buyers to be equally fair in the future when selling their labour to the carver (Günter Tessmann 2003, 244–45).

²⁵ *Bwiti* is a spiritual discipline among the Fang, common across Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea, and characterised by the consumption of the *iboga* plant root, which induces psychedelic and dissociative states.

paid. Fernández details how bank notes were exchanged during the time both teams were dancing—how each group’s leader showed respect to the other via the spraying of cash. But crucially, the exchange of money was part of a deeper drama (1982, 148). As argued in the previous section with the case of *bilaba*, while the increasing use of colonial currency was obvious, these events were ‘economic dramas’ that involved ‘enduring social values’ (ibid.) related to bride payments, clan exogamy, the creation of allegiances, and the exchange of dominance for subordination. ‘The consequence of this “exchange”, in addition to the relationships established by purchase, was the tying together of social units which were ordinarily in opposing or contradictory relation’ (ibid. 148-49), which links to the segmentary nature of precolonial societies. The case confirms the idea that, beyond Marxist readings of money, ‘monetarisation does not automatically lead to commoditisation’ (Geschiere 2000, 58). The *longue durée* of such ‘economic dramas’ will be made evident in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The colonial economy was marked by a poor physical and financial infrastructure (Sundiata 1990, 35). But the development of cocoa and coffee plantations, especially on Fernando Poo (Bioko Island)—where tens of thousands of Nigerian *braceros* (agricultural contract workers) arrived as indentured labour (Sepa Bonaba 2011, 174–241; Martino 2015; 2017)—led to a quick economic development towards the end of the colonial period. By the 1960s, exports headed to Spain totalled ‘more than \$33 million, the highest level of exports per capita on the continent (\$135)’ (Sundiata 1990, 1). As part of the developmental turn adopted by the European powers after WWII (F. Cooper 2014), the Spanish government started to invest part of the capital that the plantations were producing to improve the colony’s private and public infrastructure—including roads and factories that powered the resource extraction (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019, 101–3). This alleged prosperity contained however deep

inequalities: within the frame of an extraverted economy and the export of most profits to Spain, the wealth that remained in the country was mostly funnelled towards Spanish administrators and a tiny African elite (*ibid.*).

These historical shifts nonetheless had an impact on popular music production. According to my older interviewees, music stores opened, and access to musical instruments was much easier. The arrival of electric guitar and basses, in particular, was a turning point in the emergence of the first dance bands around the late 1950s and 1960s, such as Exterlina, Bomba Jazz, Okukut Obiang Mba, Tú y Yo, and Etofilí (see Fig 1.1).²⁶ Music consumption was transformed too. First, the arrival of gramophones and the opening of a national radio station allowed the local population to consume recorded music—which arrived from Spain but also from neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Zaire, and Nigeria. The national radio station was set up in the 1950s by the Spanish government and improved in 1967, just a year before the independence of the country (Darias del Castillo and Darias de las Heras 2001).²⁷ Second, the emerging nightlife in Malabo and Bata enabled some entrepreneurs to open up bars and beer gardens and to hire dance bands to perform. The leisure world, however, reflected ever more evidently the extent of racial segregation and discrimination. The development of a timid petty-capitalist music economy linked to the sale of tickets depended almost exclusively on a Spanish wage-earning class. Moreover, access to certain bars and clubs, such as the Casino de Santa Isabel, was exclusively reserved for white people (Álvarez Chillida 2013, 63–66). This limited economy, as we will see, would soon disappear under increasing patronage activity.

²⁶ See more on dance bands below.

²⁷ I cite this article for the objective facts it provides about the introduction of radio stations in Equatorial Guinea during the first half of the 20th century. I do not share, however, either the colonialist tinge it has or the authors' reverence for everything the Spaniards did in the former colony.



Figure 1.1: Orquesta Tú y Yo (1970). (Source: Bokusu)

Praise Singing, Nationalism, and Violence in the Macías Regime

Demands for independence started in the late 1940s (Álvarez Chillida 2016) and expanded rapidly in the 1950s through the activism, among others, of Acacio Mañé, Atanasio Ndongo—leader of the Movimiento Nacional de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial or MONALIGE—and Enrique Nvo, who was killed in 1959 in Cameroon by pro-Spanish militia (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 45). In 1959, amid increasing pressure from these rising nationalist movements and from the United Nations (Campos Serrano 2003), Spain agreed to turn its colony into two different overseas provinces, Fernando Poo and Río Muni. Ceding to further internal and external demands, the provinces were then converted into a single autonomous region in 1964. While nationalism grew across

the territories, the period was marked by increasing tensions and divisions among the local political class (Campos Serrano 2002). After what most scholars consider a disastrous decolonial process, general and presidential elections were held, and Francisco Macías Nguema, former mayor of the Fang city of Mongomo, was democratically elected President. On 12 October 1968, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea was born.

Macías' regime is widely considered one of the most tragic periods in the history of Africa (Nugent 2012, 546). During the ten years or so that he was in power (1968-1979, a period popularly known as *la triste memoria*, or 'the sad memory'), Equatoguineans suffered political persecution, lack of freedom, unlawful detentions and arrests, and forced labour; and about a third of the total population went into exile or was killed. Macías' violent turn was triggered by an attempted coup supported by the Spanish government. His mandate became overtly anti-Spanish, but other Africans were also alienated. After the Nigerian braceros (plantation labourers) fled due to rising conflicts, Macías forced unpaid labour from all men in 1972 through a decree act (Bolekia Boleká 2003; Fegley 1989; Liniger-Goumaz 1989; Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019; Sundiata 1990).



Figure 1.2: Francisco Macías Nguema on a stamp. (Source:

<http://librodenotas.com/cartasdesdeexilioguineano/10135/francisco-macias-nguema-mbasogo-primer-presidente-de-guinea-ecuatorial>)

And yet, paradoxically, the period is arguably one of the most flourishing in the history of Equatoguinean popular music. These years of Equatoguinean music history seem to confirm the idea that, even during periods of marked repression, the African state has persistently animated cultural production (Olaniyan 2017, 4). By the mid-1970s, dozens of *orquestas* (dance bands) had been created across the country; both in the main cities and in smaller villages, live music thrived. Given the lack of recording infrastructures at the time, the music of this period is lost.²⁸ But many musicians I interviewed, now in their sixties, still remember the period as a sort of golden age that has not been matched since then (see Appendix A). What were the reasons behind this rise of live music?

During the first months of his mandate, in 1968, President Macías Nguema ‘showed an extraordinary moderation’ (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019, 149). Displaying clear

²⁸ The only 1970s recording I know of is a 45 rpm record made by Etofil in 1972. According to producer Herbo Bokusu (interview with the author, 11 March 2018), the band was sponsored by the government to travel and record at a Spanish studio.

signs of conciliatory and collaborative efforts with both external and internal actors, he spoke publicly of Spain not as an oppressive coloniser but as a friend nation, and he offered offices to his political rivals. Lots of youth found in music-making a medium to express the thrill, hopeful anticipation, and optimism about the new-born nation. They were motivated by the pan-African independence movement that celebrated the postcolonial moment as a liberatory process. José ‘Pichi’ Siale Djangany, now a Malabo lawyer and writer, and former member of Lasser Boys, Tam Tam Boys, and Etofil, described it as follows:

When the *orquestas* were born, we were at the peak of all that independentist movement in Africa. People knew about [African leaders] Nkrumah, Diallo Telli... And here Pro-Independent artists were also keen to be out there, to express themselves. And musicians, what did they hear when they listened to the radio? They heard [Congolese singer] Kabasele, and they felt moved. [...] So bands like Etofil, Tú y Yo, Los Bolabobes, and Los Piques started to sing songs about independence, about freedom. Early on, the scene wasn’t really encouraged by politicians’ funding or pressure. It was developed by musicians themselves, who were aware of what was going on. They felt like they could make a contribution.²⁹

Pushed by the hopefulness of emancipation, and greatly inspired by then highly popular Central African *rumba*,³⁰ young musicians devoted themselves to learning the complex guitar style and to making their friends and families dance at parties and celebrations.³¹ At the time, access to professional instruments was difficult. Beyond a few of the high-end *orquestas* that were born during the economic impulse of the last

²⁹ ‘Pichi’ Siale, interview with the author, 6 April 2018.

³⁰ *Rumba* is an umbrella term used to refer to a number of different genres originating mainly in Zaire between the 1930s and the 1970s. It is characterized by mix of Cuban rhythmic influences, its multi-layered guitar riffs, and its long instrumental sections. Among the most popular sub-genres of rumba is *soukous*, a term that often caused confusion because it is used by some scholars and musicians to refer to Congolese rumba in general. As Kazadi wa Mukuna (1999; see also Stewart 2000) has pointed out, however, soukous only represented a specific period in the long history of rumba (developed between 1966 and 1968).

³¹ According to famous singer Maelé, ‘Congolese music has brought us so much. Congolese rumba was sacred’ (Maelé, interview with the author, 31 July 2015). Bessoso—the other great Equatoguinean singer from the 1980s together with Maelé—affirmed to me in an interview that ‘back then, at that time, the Congolese influence was enormous. Everybody wanted to imitate Franco [Luambo Makiadi] and [Tabu Ley] Rochereaux’ (Bessoso, interview with the author, 30 July 2015).

years of the colony, most emerging musicians got by with guitars they made themselves. A musician recounted:

At the beginning it was hard, there was a lot of material scarcity, you know? We began playing with little guitars we built from the trees we chopped ourselves, using nylon rope we normally used for fishing. The strings were made of fishing rope. It was just like a simple wooden board, our own invention.

Soon, the need for musical instruments was filled through the elites' patronage, who purchased and imported professional instruments, including guitars and drums. More and more *orquestas* appeared across the country, even in the smaller villages, and those youths who did not have instruments joined bigger *orquestas* as replacement for the older, main musicians when the latter wanted to rest or preferred to have a drink or dance.

From an economic viewpoint, playing in these bands did not provide a secure livelihood. Some were invited to play at *fiestas patronales*—annual bank holidays that villages celebrated after the influence of Spanish catholic missionaries. Occasionally, members of the elite called an *orquesta* to perform at their private celebrations, which often included weddings or first communions. Others played weekly at clubs or beer gardens. But few managed to make a living from music: they made little or no money from performances and depended on the patronage of the elite or the state, especially for the purchase of instruments. Consider the band Los Blaquis, from the village of Rebola (some 15km from Malabo). The members of the band reached an agreement with a woman known as '*la viuda*' ('the widow'), who had been married to the Vice-President of the country. The deal involved their labour in her plantations in exchange for the purchase of instruments. But the band reached a sub-agreement with their *socios* (associates, friends or fans of the band): if any given *socio* was willing to cover for the musicians in their agricultural duties at the widow's plantations, he would have the right to a free ticket to the band's weekly concert on Saturday night at the Bar El Sol. During

the time the *socios* were working at the plantation, the musicians were rehearsing and composing new songs.³²

Amid this musical boom, the state soon emerged to take advantage and encourage the production of ‘musical nationalism’ (Turino 2000). Just as in other African countries, the ideas of ‘culture’ and ‘music’ began to be perceived as an ‘emergent and contested target of post-colonial governmentality’ (Skinner 2012a, 515). As Ryan Skinner has written of Mali’s First Republic, “‘culture’—articulated through state sponsored music, theatre, and dance troupes—accrued nationalist use value, becoming a salient means of propaganda for the government’s nation-building efforts’ (ibid.). Consider the story of Eusebio Ndong, a Fang born in the Bioko city of Luba (formerly San Carlos). While a secondary school student in mid-1960s colonial Malabo (formerly Santa Isabel), Ndong joined a *banda de tambores y cornetas* (military brass band) inserted in the Francoist youth organisation OJE (Organización Juvenil Española). He became passionate about music and started to follow a Cameroonian dance band that often played at Ewaiso public square. The musicians used instruments owned by a local big man by the name of Mariano Robot. After the *orquesta* disbanded, Ndong approached Robot and convinced him to let him and a group of teenage friends practice with his instruments. In 1967 they formed the band *Los Piques*, and by the time of the independence, they were a sensation in town. Soon, they attracted the attention of the higher state officers:

For the first anniversary of Independence Day, Macías said he wanted the most popular *orquesta* in the country to perform. And people voted for Los Piques. I was in class the day when the President sent his *protocolo* [bodyguard, aide], searching for the leader of Los Piques. At that time, when somebody came from *presidencia* [the president’s office], people started to shake. I was called into the principal’s office and found a man there, standing: ‘we’re looking for Eusebio Ndong, is that you?’. I say ‘yes’. Everybody there is afraid that something terrible is going to happen. ‘Are you the leader of Los Piques?’. I say ‘yes’ again. ‘Follow me right away to *presidencia*’. All the students ran outside to see me getting in the car, ‘cause they didn’t know if I was taken for good or bad reasons. [...] Then they take me to meet President Macías: ‘I’ve

³² Boia Sialo, interview with the author, 27 October 2017.

asked to see the leader of Los Piques, is that you?'. I say 'yes, your excellency'. I was scared. 'You?! You're the leader? Sit. I want your band to play for the first anniversary of the Independence Day. And then you'll play at the *feria* in Ewaiso, at the centre. That alright?'. Then looking to his *protocolo*: 'You: bring that briefcase'. He starts moving banknotes into a smaller briefcase. 'Here, this is your fee'. 8000 *pesetas*.³³ [...] That was a lot of money! My dad was a mailman and made 45 *pesetas* a month!'³⁴

Former instances of musical patronage thus became centralised, for the first time, around the institution of the postcolonial state and the political leaders (former *mikukuma*) who now occupied state offices. On the intimate relation between the state and music production, Siale—the lawyer and artist quoted above on Pro-Independent movements—reflects as follows:

Music in Equatorial Guinea began to be monitored by the state not by the imposition of politicians, but through artists' own subordination. When artists began to sing praise songs in the mid-1970s, they were not songs about freedom or independence anymore: they were songs directed to the enlargement of politicians, to the deification of the leader. When that music first appears, it doesn't happen via politicians' imposition. When artists began to sing praises, they found themselves in their own trap. Because if they stopped to sing praise songs, if they stopped to deify the chief, the chief would see them as enemies, as subversive. Musicians created their own trap.³⁵

Siale's argument resonates with Bayart's notion of *mise en dépendance* —i.e. a 'mode of action' through which African actors actively seek to enter hierarchical relations to get by under extreme living conditions (Bayart 1993, 24; 2000, 218). But he also points to the risks involved in entering state patronage. Such ambivalence is also present in the Ndong story above: while he shows certain pride above being called to the President's office and being sponsored by the state, his words are permeated by the fear that the institution had begun to instil in the population. Aware of the potential of praise singing to promote nationalism, Macías did not hesitate to appoint a national dance band and to sponsor music festivals (see Fig 1.3). His use of music production to extend an anti-imperialist culture resembles that of other African authoritarian figures

³³ The number might be an exaggeration, considering a few months after the independence of the country the new government found the Spanish had emptied the coffers. According to Ndong, barely 2000 *pesetas* remained (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019, 149).

³⁴ Eusebio Ndong, interview with the author, 26 October 2017.

³⁵ 'Pichi' Siale, interview with the author, 6 April 2018.

such as Guinea's Sékou Touré (Dave 2019). And things seemed to work for him and for local musicians for a brief period of time.



Figure 1.3: Orquesta Tropical Fiesta at the state-sponsored festival 'Macías y los jóvenes' ('Macías and the youth') (1975). (Source: Bokusu)

But the early thrill about the independence of the country quickly dissolved as things turned sour with the new regime and violence and oppression escalated. Only months after independence, Spain, unhappy with Macías' rule, supported a coup attempt, and the positive relations between the two countries instantly broke. Macías declared a state of emergency and his mandate turned overtly anti-Spanish. Amid a rapidly deteriorating state of affairs, the Spanish government advised its citizens to leave the country shortly after the coup, leaving the new republic devoid of commercial managers and experts. The economy quickly collapsed. As paranoia grew, Macías persecuted political opponents and abolished rival parties in 1970. Shortly after he instated severe censorship, banning all foreign journalists in 1971 (Fegley 1989, 72).

Ethnic violence in Equatorial Guinea differed from other African countries. The president ‘circumvented or [intimidated] traditional rulers and, in the name of African authenticity, replaced them with members of his own family’ (Sundiata 1990, 66). The president placed his home village (Mongomo) and his Esangui clan at the centre of the political sphere: Nguemism was born.³⁶ But other Africans were also alienated. After thousands of Nigerian *braceros* (plantation labourers) fled due to rising conflicts, agricultural production vanished, deepening the economic disaster. To compensate, Macías forced unpaid labour from all men in 1972 through a decree act. Around the same time, all Equatoguinean citizens over 17 years-old were forced to march in parades and drill with wooden guns (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 55).

In the music sphere, the thriving scene took a violent turn. Obsessed with the celebration of the Independence Day, Macías mandated that every village in the country must create an *orquesta* to perform annually on 12 October at the Ewaiso fair in Malabo. As a result of this form of compulsory music-making, the number of dance bands rose even more. Guitarist Baba Djide described the presidents’ efforts to force joy:

Macías’s period was the time when there were the most bands here. There were [bands] because it was compulsory during some holidays. [...] For example, it was mandatory that every 12 October every village come to their stand [in Ewaiso]. It was an obligation. [...] There were many bands! Yes. We made percussion instruments out of cans. But it sounded right. Everything there. And playing live. People had to dance. Everybody had to play.³⁷

Between ca. 1972-1978, Macías established a regime of terror that completely subsumed the Equatoguinean population. Many musicians were killed or fled the country, and the music scene declined along with every other aspect of social life. The Macías years thus saw the rise and fall of a lively music scene and the origin of state-

³⁶ ‘Nguemism’ (stemming from Macías’ last name) is the term that defines the rule of a single family from Independence until today.

³⁷ Baba Djide, interview with the author, 20 July 2015.

sponsored praise singing, which would expand greatly and become an important ideological tool for the next regime. Musical patronage in this period was characterised by political centralisation and the deployment of modes of domination characteristic of the African postcolonial state (Mbembe 2001). Like Touré's Guinea, the Macías years are full of contradictions, perceived by some old musicians as a period of brutal repression and violence but also as 'a moment that articulated postcolonial possibilities, new feelings of collectivity, and new sounds of change' (Dave 2019, 1).

Praise the PDGE, Praise the Man: The Early Rule of Teodoro Obiang

By the late 1970s the social and economic situation of the country was dire, and even communist allies began to turn their back on the regime. On 3 August 1979, a coup d'état was staged against Macías and he was overthrown by his own subalterns, led by Lieutenant Colonel Teodoro Obiang Nguema. After being tried and found guilty of genocide and treason, among other crimes, Francisco Macías Nguema was executed on 1 October 1979. The news was received with optimism by the local population and the international community alike. But the country Obiang inherited was one of the least developed in the world (Sundiata 1990, 2). Moreover, Obiang's involvement in the old regime raised suspicions early on about his will to make real political changes. Not only was he a member of the Esangui clan and nephew of Macías Nguema, he had also been Vice-Minister of Defence in the old government. In any case, the new president and his military council thought international aid could help improve the conditions in the country, so public and private international organisations 'began once again knocking

on the doors of the regime, with delegations from Spain and France in the lead’ (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 124–25).

This re-establishment of international relations marked a key moment in the history of cultural production in the country. In the early 1980s, both France and Spain opened cultural institutions in Malabo as part of their larger development aid packages—and aiming to use these institutions to negotiate commercial relations with the Equatoguinean state. Spain agreed to refurbish the old secondary school ‘Cardenal Cisneros’ and inaugurated, in 1982, the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano—a collaborative institution between both governments.³⁸ The CCHG offered a space for musicians, artists, and writers to develop their creativity, and became prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s (J. Aranzadi 2014; Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019, 398). Regarding music, the CCHG took up the role of organizer of concerts and festivals, providing rehearsal rooms and instruments, and even facilitating recordings. Artists that would become highly popular over time started their careers there—including Las Hijas del Sol, Mastho Ribochó, David Bass, Dr. Mbomeche, and Ngal Madunga. Pablo Tarifa, a guitar player who used to play for the band Bisila System, put it as follows:

There were very few job opportunities beyond the cultural centres, because the cultural centres were, mostly, the only organizers. The CCHG put together the shows. You go, ask for a concert, and two or three months later they call you: ‘Hey, it’s approved, you’re playing on such and such a day’.³⁹

The foreign humanitarian aid that arrived during the 1980s intensified extraversion once again. The Obiang regime tried to balance the need for foreign investment and loans against internal political factors—including several attempted

³⁸ In 2003, the Spanish and Equatoguinean government parted ways and the CCHG was split into the Centro Cultural de España en Malabo (run by the Spanish Development aid office) and the Centro Cultural Ecuatoguineano (run by the Equatoguinean government). At the time of my fieldwork, the CCE remained opened but with no activity, seemingly because of lack of funding and/or lack of coordination between state offices. These issues are further developed in Chapter 2.

³⁹ Pablo Tarifa, interview with the author, 20 July 2015.

coups. The result of this was not only ‘adaptation and resistance’ to external economic pressures and internal political linkages (F. Cooper 2014), but also a musical dependency on foreign aid—most notably French and Spanish aid.

But the Obiang government did not turn their back on music production. Quite the opposite: his regime took another step in the instrumentalisation and politicisation of music. Early on, Obiang sponsored so-called *cantantes solistas* (‘solo singers’). Indeed, he followed on the previous regime’s techniques of employing music for ideological purposes, this time putting an emphasis not so much on the organisation of music festivals as on the sponsorship of music recordings at professional studios in France and Cameroon, amid a lack of studios in Equatorial Guinea. In the style of *cantantes solistas* that developed, a single individual would take the leading role while the rest of the musicians would function as accompaniment. They constituted a landmark in the popular music of Equatorial Guinea, especially because of the prolific discography they left. Among the first artists to promote this style is Martiniano Elé ‘Maelé’—considered by many the most important figure in the history of Equatoguinean popular music. Bessoso, the other great *cantante solista*, described to me the aesthetic evolution of the early 1980s:

In the 1970s there weren’t any *cantantes solistas*. There were dance bands that, beginning in the 1960s, copied the Congolese style. They followed Rochereaux, they followed Franco. [...] They imitated those bands. But the pioneers in the lead-singer style, following the Gabonese style and specifically Pierre Claver, was Grupo Maelé.⁴⁰

As Bessoso points out, *cantantes solistas* were partially inspired by Gabonese musician and politician Pierre Claver Zeng. Claver was a member of the Fang ethnic group who powerfully combined Afro-rock music with elements of Fang traditional music. It was Leandro Mbomío, a well-known Equatoguinean artist and painter

⁴⁰ Bessoso, interview with the author, 30 July 2015.

popularly known as ‘the black Picasso’, who encouraged the *cantantes solistas* to imitate Pierre Claver’s style. Mbomío, who had been exiled during Macías’s rule and had been very critical of the regime, was recalled by Obiang Nguema after the 1979 coup and eventually became Minister of Culture of Equatorial Guinea—a post that he held between 1982 and 1991. To Mbomío, Pierre Claver represented the perfect combination of modern, Western-like popular music, and Equatoguinean traditional music. The development of such a style would definitely be followed by many Equatoguineans and would project a unique, Afro-modernist profile among the international community. Such a style would help develop national sentiments domestically while demonstrating political muscle abroad.

The promotion of this style was embedded in and contributed to the expansion of an emerging politics of ethnicity characterised by the conversion of Fang culture into national culture.⁴¹ By choosing Pierre Claver and Fang traditional music to develop nationalism, the government intrinsically downplayed the rest of the ethnic groups’ musics. In fact, the three *cantantes solistas* selected by the government to receive funding and promotion were all from the Fang ethnic group: Maelé, Efamba, and Bessoso, who was first a member of Maelé’s group and then started a solo career (see Fig. 1.4). With the entirety of the government being members of the Fang—under both Macías and Obiang—this promotion strategy could be interpreted as an intent to impose the superiority of an ethnic group that was already the majority in the country. While other Fang popular musicians were too alienated during the period, those born into other ethnic groups received particularly limited economic support and did not have the same opportunities to develop their creativity and promote their music abroad.

⁴¹ The role of ethnic politics in cultural production is further discussed in Chapter 8 through an examination of ongoing Bubi-Fang tensions.



Figure 1.4: Maelé in the center; Bessoso on the right. (Close-up of illustration included on souvenir poster. Used with permission of Bessoso)

The clearest example of the politicisation of music during the early Obiang era is the birth in the 1980s of the so-called *coros de animación* (‘animation choirs’). Created under the direct influence of *animation politique* in Zaire and Gabon, the choirs became a fundamental tool directed to ‘mobilize and maintain support’ for Central African regimes (White 2008, 74). Normally comprising a female choir and a group of male instrumentalists, *coros* were part of a re-traditionalisation of musical performance and folkloric rhythms and songs with nationalist overtones—with lyrics devoted to the display of unconditional support for the regime and with women dressed up in the *popó de partido* (traditional clothes covered with prints of the president’s party PDGE [Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial] emblem and Obiang’s portrait).⁴² *Coros*

⁴² As anthropologist Alba Valenciano-Mañé has argued, *popó de partido* is a tool of social control: ‘in official events such as electoral campaign meetings, but also during popular celebrations such as

performances represent the African postcolonial custom to use bodies ‘to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades’ (Mbembe 2001, 122–23). They exemplify the way power ‘[colonised] the dances previously linked to particular rituals and specific rules. Amid the cacophony accompanying such a show of strength could be found, scattered here and there, the debris of ritual acts of the past’ (ibid.). The juxtaposition of cultural performance, the invention of tradition, and nationalist and ethnic politics formed what Mbembe calls the ‘postcolonial dramaturgy’ (ibid.). *Coros de animación* are a perfect example of the way the regime has long profited from the extraction of labour and political capacity of ordinary women, since the colony to the present (Castillo-Rodríguez and Valenciano-Mañé 2020).

Up until today, *coros* have been funded by the PDGE itself or by specific party members or state officers. Fig. 1.5 shows the front and back cover of an LP recorded by one of the country’s first *coros*—Number Two—to mobilise the population ahead of the 1989 presidential election, entitled ‘Only Candidate’. On the right in a black jacket is the sponsor of the recording: Lucas Nguema Esono, aka Luquito, who would later become PDGE Secretary General and Minister of Education and Science. On the back, on top of a photograph of Obiang, a ‘thank you’ note reads:

The animation group Number Two expresses its deep gratitude to SS Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and Ms. Mangué de Obiang. For their constant and unconditional moral and material support since [the party’s] foundation in 1986. We manifest our unbreakable support for Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, founding president of the PDGE and guide of our great movement, placing our vote by saying ‘Yes’ to the only candidacy in the upcoming general election of June 1989. [...]

The sponsorship of praise songs thus sought not the vote of the population, but the deepening of the personalisation of state power and the legitimisation of a regime that, beyond the lack of explicit genocide and mass incarcerations, did not differ much from

fiestas patronales, there exists an unspoken obligation to wear the party uniform’ (Valenciano-Mañé 2018, 272).

its predecessor.⁴³ Following international pressure, Obiang allowed the introduction of multi-party politics in 1992, but he placed his frontmen as leaders of the new ‘opposition’ parties. As in other Central African countries such as Cameroon, Gabon, and Zaire, ‘the transition to multi-partyism was no more than a fig leaf hiding from the prudish view of the west the enhanced exercise of the *politique du ventre* [‘politics of the belly’] by authoritarian regimes’ (Bayart 1993, xxi). Praise singing thus was not only embedded in, but also contributed to the continuation of patron-client relations and a ‘politics of the belly’.⁴⁴

⁴³ The specific use of music in electoral campaigns will be the theme of Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ See the Introduction to this thesis for a more elaborate discussion of Bayart’s ‘politics of the belly’.

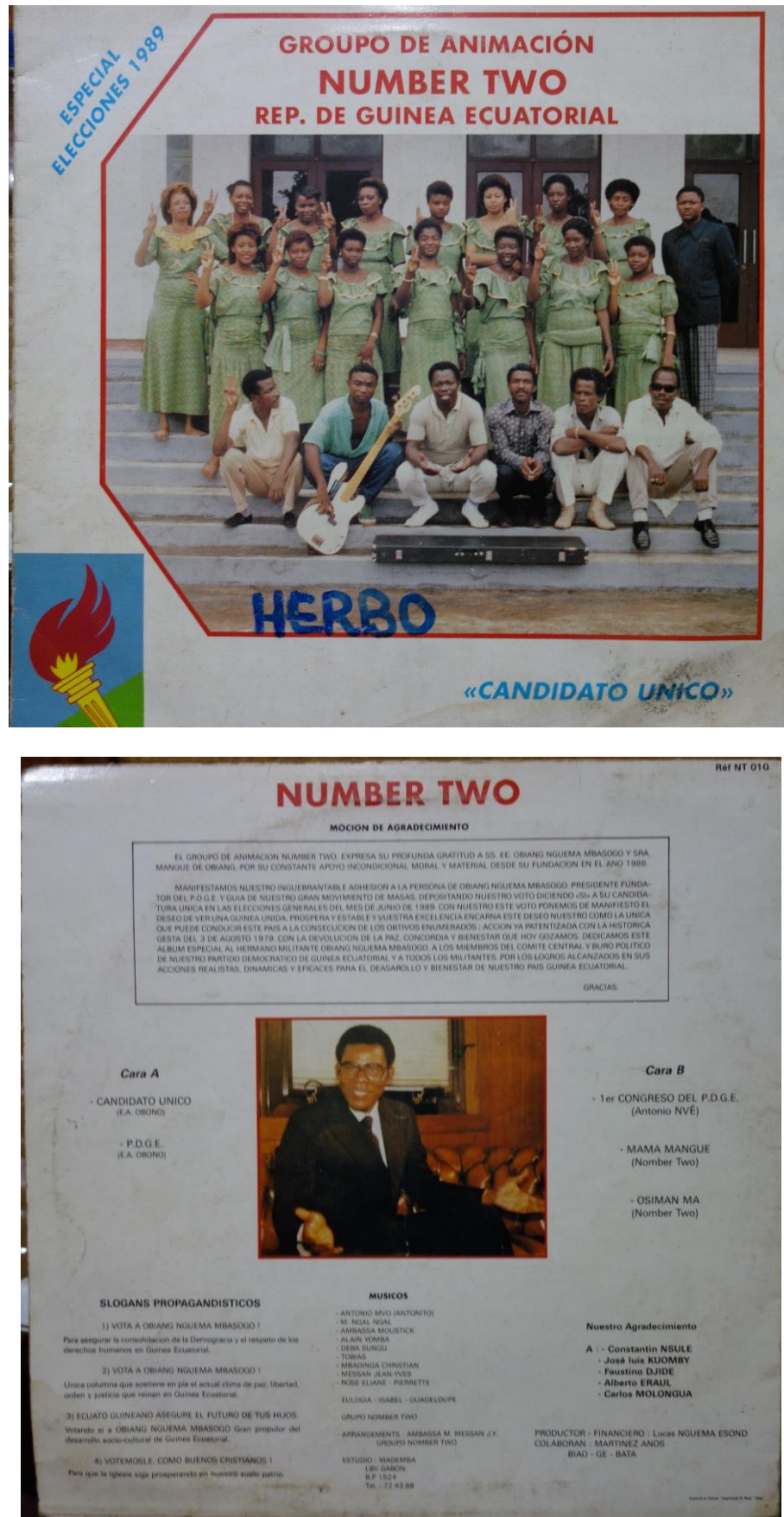


Figure 1.5: Front and back cover of the Number Two LP 'Candidato Único' (1989). (Source: author)

State politics during the early Obiang years (ca. 1980s) became even more centralised through increasing clientelism and the legitimisation and legalisation of his rule via the creation of a party politics. State patronage transitioned from an encouragement of anti-imperialist nationalism towards the praise for the PDGE and Obiang himself. In contrasting the new regime with the old one, a musician described Macías as a ‘true nationalist’: ‘He was a dictator, yes, but he wasn’t corrupt. Here, now, only one family benefits. Wherever you see private business, wherever profitable enterprise, you’ll find one of the boss’ children, grabbing all the money’. Rather than a nostalgic praise for Macías, the old musician was establishing a critique of the rising inequality and sense of economic injustice the Obiang regime would generate over the years.

By the late 1980s, and despite the influx of development aid, the country’s economy was crumbling. After joining the Bank of Central African States and adopting the CFA franc as the main currency in 1985, a major devaluation ensued, affecting the value of wages (Campos Serrano and Micó Abogo 2006). The first IMF structural adjustment programme began in 1988, when the international debt was some \$200 million (Sundiata 1990, 101). Subsequent programs arrived in 1991, 1993, and 1994, for a total of \$13.8 million in loans (IMF 2015). Political extraversion was once again reinforced, with Obiang using the incoming funds to extend a clientelist network that maintained him in power. Because of the SAPs and the increasing international involvement, timid steps were taken towards good governance and democratisation—a movement taking over most of the continent by the early 1990s. But a remarkable event would come to halt this trajectory, as the next chapter depicts.

Conclusion: A Genealogy of Patronage

It is hard to ignore the manifold transformations that music making in Equatorial Guinea has undergone in the last century or so. Colonialism brought about monetisation, technological change, and the influence of Western instruments and styles. The coming of the postcolony saw an unprecedented growth of live popular music enabled by an extreme overlap between the joy and celebration of the Independence movements and the compulsory music making and violent coercion established by Macías. The pre-oil Obiang regime brought about a less obviously violent but still authoritarian regime that sponsored the recording of praise songs as an ideological tool. Finally, as will become more evident throughout the rest of the thesis, the oil boom and the huge influx of external finance have triggered an exacerbation of the unequal nature of patronage by means of extreme political centralisation and the constitution of an even more omnipresent state.

And yet, just as in the scholarship on the African state, in the ethnomusicological literature ‘the continuity of African [musical-social] formations over the long term has been hidden’ (Bayart 1993, 5). While music in Equatorial Guinea has been influenced in various ways by external agents, from colonial authorities to the global music industry, musicians have most evidently laboured according to regional social relations of considerable historical depth. The development of musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea reveals the *longue durée* of a particular entanglement of music, a ‘politics of the belly’, and an extraverted mode of accumulation. Leading up to the present, the specific sociopolitical configurations of each one of the historical periods examined in this chapter point not to radical music-economic transformations but to different typologies of patronage that nonetheless share some common elements, including a mutually dependent relation between musicians and the political elites.

The Equatoguinean music economy has thus long been dominated not by logics of market exchange and capitalism, but by long standing paternalistic relations of dependence and by the moral rules of redistribution that underpin them—i.e. by the notion that big men are obligated to provide for their dependents, and the latter are expected to reciprocate through labour and deference. These forms of patronage are not reducible to economic gain or value: rather, they highlight the value attributed to social relations and ‘wealth in people’ (J. I. Guyer 1993), in which musicians as dependents are as enmeshed as their patrons. But while patronage is governed by rules of reciprocity in which both parts make some kind of gain, it is fundamental to remember that these are highly asymmetric and unequal relations, as economic anthropologists have argued (Sahlins 1963; Scott 1972; Graeber 2011, 109–20). The next chapter dwells on the violent nature of musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea, attending in particular to the exacerbation of its most oppressive elements caused by the elites’ spectacular accumulation of wealth and power after the oil boom.

Chapter 2: Musical Patronage: The Political Economy of Domination

Introduction

In the mid-1990s, large hydrocarbon deposits were found around the Equatoguinean Island of Bioko. Since then, the country has received over \$100 billion in capital investment mostly from American corporations. With an area of just 28,000 square kilometres (ca. the size of Hawaii) and less than one million inhabitants, what was once one of the poorest countries in the world recently became the highest GDP per capita economy in Africa and topped the rank of states with the largest foreign capital investment in the world in 2012 (Appel 2019). The spectacular influx of oil revenues caused deep transformations at the environmental, socio-economic, and technological levels. An infrastructural boom triggered the construction of roads, airports, and skyscrapers overnight (Appel 2012). But the political sphere has rather been marked by continuity. As Alicia Campos Serrano has argued, oil extraction stopped the timid efforts towards democratisation of the early 1990s and ‘has reinforced the dynamics of extraversion in place since colonial times and the autocratic power of the ruling family who succeeded the Spaniards’ (Campos Serrano 2013, 332). Aided by the billionaire contracts with the global oil industry, Obiang has solidified his rule to become one of the longest-serving heads of state in the world.⁴⁵

This chapter examines the nature of contemporary musical patronage attending to the transformations afforded by the rise and recent decay of the oil boom. The outstanding riches and power amassed by Obiang’s circle has triggered an exacerbation

⁴⁵ Obiang has ruled since 1979 until today.

of musical patronage. With the increasing monopolisation of the music-economic activities by the elites, musicians labour amid a combination of the already present violence of a postcolonial authoritarian state and the new ‘petro-violence’ encouraged by oil capitalism (Watts 2001). And yet, inundated by images and stories of the lavish displays of wealth and the conspicuous consumption publicly exhibited by the petro-elites, artists are increasingly drawn into patronage in hope of getting a piece of the cake. As the anthropology of oil has shown, the magical nature of oil money generates unprecedented expectations about an accumulation that seems ‘instant, effortless, and above all spectacular’ (Apter 2005, 42; see also Coronil 1997).

In this chapter, I continue this thesis’ interrogation into the nature of the pervasive music economy in Equatorial Guinea, for which I draw inspiration from recent writing on non-commodified musical exchange and labour. Works by Stokes (2002), Ochoa and Botero (2009), Baym (2011), and Sykes (2018) have been groundbreaking in their efforts to move beyond orthodox Marxist theory and reductionist readings of the music economy as destined for an unstoppable subsumption into capitalist logics. This literature opens the door to radical new thinking on the heterogeneous nature of music economics. Written against the backdrop of well-developed critiques of capitalism and political economy, they emphasise non-capitalist economies’ potential to foster more equal distribution, solidarity, community building, and well-being.

I expand on this literature to nonetheless offer a contrasting cautionary note: while non-commodified musical labour is freed from the constraints and violence inherent in capitalism, it can be embedded in equally onerous social relations. I contend that the inequalities and asymmetries already existing between musicians and their patrons in Equatorial Guinea have grown increasingly violent and oppressive, as power

and wealth have continued to be concentrated in the hands of Obiang's close circle. Drawing on the Foucauldian analyses of political scientist Beatrice Hibou on Tunisia, this chapter explores 'over and beyond the most brutal repression, the modes of government and the concrete economic apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of power that render constraint painless and even invisible, and render the "servitude" "voluntary"' (Hibou 2011, 9). Specifically, the chapter first explores the role of the new petro-elites in the music economy. Then, it discusses the evolving nature of the music economy and its transitioning from a commissioning to a speculative one. Next, it tackles the growing asymmetries within patronage triggered by oil capitalism and the increasing accumulation of power by Obiang's close circle. Then, it looks at the inefficacy of non-state forms of sponsorship. And finally, the chapter considers the longing for commodification among some musicians.

Patrones, Productores, and Esponsores: The Role of the Petro-elites in the Contemporary Music Economy

As we saw in Chapter 1, the Equatoguinean music economy has been shaped by the *longue durée* of a unique and localised entanglement between music and politics. This economy has been characterised by changing but always unequal relations between musicians and political elites. In the last quarter century, music patronage has been exacerbated by the oil boom. The billions of dollars in oil contracts with American companies have enabled unprecedented accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of the ruling family and their close circle. The petro-elites have drawn on existing structures of music exchange and labour to tighten their control of the music scene. The growing concentration of opportunities for profit in patronage relations has also

contributed to inhibiting any attempts to create independent markets, including private venues and festivals.

Throughout this thesis, I employ many times the concept of the ‘elites’. With this term I refer to the members of a political class that hold a tight grip over the state institutions and resources. At the ground level, notions about the existence of an elite are widespread but also abstract. Referred to with many terms such as *los grandes* (the big ones), *los gordos* (the fat ones), or *los peces gordos* (the big fish), these big men are the continuation of the political class formed through the colonial and postcolonial periods—the *mikukuma* (wealthy men) described in Chapter 1. The formation of the elites in Equatorial Guinea resonates with Bayart’s (1993, 150–79) notion of the reciprocal assimilation of the elites in African societies, which points to the continuation of families and networks across historical periods and modes of economic accumulation. These elites compete to gain access to better state positions, which are normally granted based on kinship, ethnic, or friendship ties to the ruling family. The ruling family, in turn, is an even more powerful and rather static group comprised of President Obiang, the First Lady, their children, and their most immediate kin circle—although competition between them may also happen.⁴⁶ My use of the term ‘petro-elites’ is meant to emphasise the radical increase in power and financial capacity (as well as their conspicuous consumption) by the existing elites through the accumulation of oil rents.

Importantly for this thesis, the petro-elites and the ruling family have long been deeply invested in music. Not only do they sponsor the production of music through patronage, but some of them have a genuine passion for music and have themselves

⁴⁶ The most obvious example is the struggle to succeed Obiang between two of his sons: Teodoro Nguema Obiang (Vice-President and eldest son) and Gabriel Mbega Obiang Lima (Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons).

been artists. In the rest of the thesis, a few of them will show up, including MC Russo (nickname used by one of Obiang's sons, Ruslán Obiang Nsué, during his period as a rapper); Victoriano Bibang Nsue Okomo, aka 'Efamba' (former *cantante solista* [see Chapter 1], recording studio owner, and First Lady's brother); Cándido Nsué Okomo, aka 'CANO' (studio owner and First Lady's brother); and Kicko B (former rapper and CANO's son). All of them, besides having interests in music, have held different political positions in the last few years.

The quintessential example of these tendencies, and thus the paradigm of the contemporary music patron, is Teodoro Nguema Obiang (b. 1968), President Obiang's eldest son. From his first political appointment as Minister of Agriculture and Forests to his current tenure as the country's Vice-president, Nguema has accumulated enormous wealth and political power, gaining track as Obiang's most likely successor.

Internationally, he has earned a reputation as an African playboy for his displays of conspicuous consumption on social media, most notably on his personal Instagram account,⁴⁷ and for his involvement in several corruption cases.⁴⁸ A unique mix of spectacular private accumulation and an extravagant lifestyle has often been channeled through his passion for music. He has been known to spend millions of dollars on the sponsorship of a Brazilian samba school parade at Rio's Carnival,⁴⁹ and he famously purchased a collection of expensive Michael Jackson memorabilia, including the legendary Swarovski crystal-covered 'Bad Tour' glove.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ <https://instagram.com/teddynguema?igshid=1dn1czzzfz63t> (accessed 15 April 2021).

⁴⁸ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/playboy-waits-for-his-african-throne-xvxx0db50th> (accessed 20 April 2021).

⁴⁹ <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/travel/2015/02/1590896-african-dictators-sons-sponsorship-becomes-biggest-controversy-at-rios-carnival.shtml> (accessed 21 April 2021).

⁵⁰ <https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=4207&lang=en> (accessed 21 April 2021).

This spectacular entanglement of conspicuous consumption, oil wealth accumulation, and music passion becomes more evident through TNO Entertainment, Nguema's own 'record label'. TNO was officially founded in 2001 and based in Beverly Hills—then Nguema's residency—with the goal to promote new fusions between hip hop and R&B. Its trajectory was seemingly short-lived, not going much further than the release of an album by Haitian rapper Won-G. TNO would soon be found to be linked to fraudulent economic activity during the Riggs Bank scandal—and so ended the Californian adventure.⁵¹ Investigations led by the United States Justice Department uncovered huge payments being made from American oil companies to Equatorial Guinea government officials, allegedly in exchange for better deals and contracts. One of the visible outcomes was the US government seizing of more than \$30m worth assets from Nguema, who agreed to hand over his Malibu villa and a dozen luxury cars.⁵² But importantly, the investigation pointed to the key role foreign agents play in so-called African corruption cases. As Equatoguinean lawyer and activist Tutu Alicante put it:

The Teodorin [Nguema] case highlights the degree to which corrupt officials in poor countries rely on enablers in the Global North to help launder, hide, and spend their stolen loot. Nguema relied on a network of anonymous shell companies in countries around the world to covertly finance his high-end lifestyle. A cadre of lawyers, accountants and real estate agents shielded him and enabled his secrecy. (Alicante 2017)

The Riggs Bank case is one of many international scandals surrounding Nguema. Indeed, he was famously tried during my fieldwork, causing a clamorous support by the government. On 27 October 2017, following a complaint by Transparency International France filed in 2007, Nguema was sentenced in a French court for the embezzlement of dozens of millions of euros out of his government and

⁵¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-apr-10-fg-riggs10-story.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

⁵² <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/second-vice-president-equatorial-guinea-agrees-relinquish-more-30-million-assets-purchased> (accessed 5 June 2021).

their subsequent laundering in France. He received a suspended fine of €30m (which will only come into effect if he reoffends) and all his French assets (worth over €100m) were seized, including a €25m mansion in Avenue Foch, Paris.⁵³ In an official statement, the PDGE described the trial as a ‘farce’ and ‘a political manoeuvre to destabilise our country, orchestrated by the international powers with the help of small groups [...] self-defined as “opposition”’ (Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial 2017). The case was indeed remarkable, it being the first time a high-level African politician was sentenced in a European court—though it was not the first time an international court tried Nguema for similar charges, as I have explained.

But these cases have fed a media industry thirsty for news of the hermetic petro-state, Nguema has received a much more ambivalent reaction locally, in particular by the artistic community. While some see him as a corrupt, lazy, and incompetent politician who uses musicians at will, others acknowledge his displays of generosity and constant *ayuda* (help). Popularly known as *El Patrón* (The Patron), Nguema has been a great mobiliser of the local music scene for the last three decades.⁵⁴ He opened the first professional studio in Equatorial Guinea (more in Chapter 3) and has sponsored recordings in the country and beyond; he puts on free concerts on New Year’s Eve in Malabo and Bata, paying any artist who wishes to perform; and he owns the main private media outlet, Asonga, which includes a radio and a TV channel where local music is constantly played (see Chapter 5).

Much of Nguema’s work towards the music scene has been done through the above-cited TNO agency. TNO is known by many as a *productora* (record label), but an

⁵³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41775070> and <http://en.rfi.fr/africa/20171027-e-guinea-president-obiangs-son-given-suspended-sentence-french-trial> (accessed 4 August 2020).

⁵⁴ Nguema’s figure reflects a larger tendency in African oil-rich countries where the children of the elites are highly involved in music making (Moorman 2014; Buire 2016; Alisch 2020).

ethnographic approach to its practices and economic logics uncovers an institution that bears little resemblance with Euroamerican labels or distribution firms. The use of the global industry jargon by Equatoguinean artists to define the work of Nguema and other patrons reveals how notions of ‘the music industry’ permeate the otherwise hermetic local economy. The label is the institutionalisation of Nguema’s figure as *El Patrón*. Through TNO, Nguema has famously sponsored the recordings of many Equatoguinean artists (usually in Douala and Paris), of various genres: from rappers such as Mista Rega to Congolese *ndombolo* singers such as Selín Samurai and Petit Chabal. In the 1990s, a period when recording studios in the country were almost non-existent, the support of TNO contributed to the huge expansion of Equatoguinean recorded music. Ndowé singer Dr. Mbomeche explains the usual deal between TNO and local artists:

They send you to Douala, they pay for the hotel, the flights, visas, expenses... everything. Then, once you’re back in Equatorial Guinea, they give you half the *placas* [CDs]; and they keep the rest. Finally, they give you the *recompensa* [literally, the ‘reward’, cash]. And you keep on going.⁵⁵

As can be drawn from these words, the potential sale of CDs that TNO keeps does not generate enough profit to cover for the expenses: it is not economically sustainable, and it cannot be considered a capitalist business. Rather, the model elevates Nguema as a generous patron that provides for the country’s musicians: he appears as the *nkukuma* (wealthy man, see Chapter 1) that gains prestige through the accumulation of dependents and through the sonic praises he receives from musicians in exchange. In the words of a producer: ‘he does it for the fame. He wants people to know that he has the capacity to produce and promote musicians. That’s all. He definitely doesn’t make any money from it, because that music doesn’t sell’. Beyond orthodox Marxist frameworks of market exchange, this formation is thus more closely related to Central

⁵⁵ Dr. Mbomeche, interview with the author, 31 January 2018.

Africanist notions of redistribution and ‘wealth in people’, as analysed in the Introduction to this thesis (see J. I. Guyer 1993).

The TNO case is paradigmatic of a hierarchical structure that reproduces at a smaller scale through other patrons. The terminology to refer to these big men that invest in music can sometimes be confusing. Overall, the Spanish *patrón* is usually reserved for Nguema, who is also known as *hermano mayor* (big brother). He claims the monopoly of patronage.⁵⁶ The Spanish term *productor* (producer) comes also to mean patron, though it is normally employed to address ‘smaller’ patrons. While governed by very different economic and social logics, both Equatoguinean *productores* and Euroamerican producers are those making the initial capital ‘investment’ that enables a music recording. *Productores*, like Nguema, are usually highly involved in music making, sometimes own a recording studio, and maintain long-term relations with their artists-dependents. Often, these are high state officers and politicians who nonetheless have a genuine passion for music. Known *productores* are former Ministry of Education and Science Lucas Nguema ‘Luquito’ and First Lady’s brother Cándido Nsué ‘CANO’.

Finally, the anglicism *esponsores* (sponsors) is reserved for those who *help* musicians before or after a music production through more sporadic and arbitrary relations. Importantly, any member of society has the potential to become a sponsor, regardless of their political, racial, or gender affiliation, as long as they are perceived to possess the economic resources. Consider the following vignette. After several months in Malabo, I was invited to a dinner for the birthday party of Martin, an Equatoguinean friend who worked at the Spanish cultural centre. I joined a small group comprised of

⁵⁶ The Spanish term has a well-rooted colonial history. Used widely across the Spanish colonies in the Americas, *patrón* has referred to the male figure that ruled over both the people and the territories, but who was also expected to provide for his dependents in a highly paternalist fashion (Peralta Ruiz 2006).

several of the Spanish workers and my Equatoguinean friend. During the dinner, a couple of the Spaniards were curious about my research and the conversation turned to the mushrooming of studios and the new affordances of digital technologies. Martin, who was not known to us as a singer, suddenly told his interest in recording a few songs he had composed. One of the Spaniards—who I shall call María and was in fact Martin’s boss—suggested that he go to one of the studios I knew. ‘What I need is not a studio: it’s an *esponsor*’, Martin answered. ‘María, do you want to be my *esponsor*?’ María, clearly surprised by the proposition, rushed to say that she was not giving him any money to record his music. Martin then mumbled a protest, and we changed topics.

Redistributive claims in Equatorial Guinea have long been based not only on kin relations of dependence but on larger perceptions of economic inequality. Invitations to become *esponsores* are indirect claims for a fairer redistribution of wealth, and as the vignette depicts, they can be directed to almost anybody, regardless of the kin relation. But given the nature of accumulation in the country, those with the economic capacity to be the target of redistribution claims and thus to become *esponsores* are most often politicians, members of the government or the PDGE, or state officers. These likely *esponsores* have interests in praise songs to accumulate prestige to ascend the ladder of power, and therefore often accept the claims. In exchange, musicians have been known to receive not only cash but also various kinds of material and non-material gifts, including jobs in the public administration, TVs, cars, and even get-out-of-jail free cards. But as the next section explains, this economy is becoming riskier than ever for most artists.

Praise Singing through the Oil Boom and Digitisation: From Commissioning to Speculation

While characterised by the *longue durée* of the entanglement of music and politics, the nature of the patronage music economy has evolved over time. This section turns to the transformations in the relationships between musicians and patrons in the last quarter century, resulting from the confluence of the oil boom and the introduction of digital technologies. As we saw in Chapter 1, patrons have long contributed to the economic lives of musicians by sponsoring recordings at professional international studios. Musicians then made (very marginal) gains from the sale of CDs and the direct gifts and cash received from patrons in exchange for praise singing. Most of the times, musicians were commissioned to record or perform songs that praised the figure of Obiang, the PDGE, or any other famous politician.

But the introduction of digital technologies and the growing number of digital studios and beatmakers has to some extent liberated musicians from their dependence on the sponsorship of studio recordings. Today, the recording of a single song can be as cheap as 5k CFA (£6), including the creation of an original beat and the mixing and mastering of the tracks.⁵⁷ Seeking to keep profiting from patronage, singers are turning the traditional exchange around: instead of waiting for a commission to record or perform praise songs, they are first making the recording to then try to encourage reciprocation from those praised. Singer Roberto puts it as follows:

It's difficult to find *esponsores* now. What I do is... I go into a studio, produce a nice album. If I have a well-positioned friend or acquaintance, sometimes I name him, I praise him a bit in the songs. Then I go looking for that person. I tell him: 'hey man, listen to this'. He'll say '*chico!* This sounds pretty well'. Right then he pulls out his wallet and he sponsors it. So in that system, your relation is not with a distribution company or something like that. You just go do it hand in hand, but it stops there. [...] You can name a congressman, a minister you know? Then take the song to them or to a middleman. But they always have interests. They'll say, 'ok, but now make

⁵⁷ Although as we will see in Chapter 3, prices go up at more established recording studios.

a song that says this, or says that, and then call me'. They want fame, so you have to go and sing the praises they want.

Roberto depicts how patrons are keen on accumulating fame as symbolic capital through praise songs. But the words also expose how the contemporary music economy has taken on a highly speculative nature. Musicians are thus considerably driven by future possibility, by what they *might* gain if they praise certain people in their songs. They often seek to initiate patronage exchanges by trusting the moral rules that a patron *must* reciprocate when presented with a recorded sonic deference. Moreover, to improve their chances of success and maximise profit, singers are increasing the number of potential patrons praised in their songs. As an example, consider the lyrics of the song 'Guinea Cara', by Taskiel Molón.⁵⁸

'Guinea Cara' – Taskiel Molón⁵⁹

Aâ nnam eyong petit Castel an to *cuatro a mil*
pero bot de nií babese dji ya *mil francos*.
Bine adjie etê bidji bia yianabo barato
Bidji biayianabo *barato*, ¿Ngä **Rubén Efa**
Mondongo?

This society... where Castel beer is [only] four cans
for 1000 CFA, but four people can't eat with that
sum. We're in the village, food should be cheaper,
food should be cheaper, ain't that right, **Rubén Efa**
Mondongo?

Taskiel Molón 'The Crazy Man', I'm crazy but
always with good tunes.
Judith, de Ceiba Intercontinental;
Macho Ceiba; Extraña Molón.

Taskiel Molón 'The Crazy Man', I'm crazy but
always with good tunes.
Judith, from Ceiba Intercontinental [local airline
company]; **Macho Ceiba; Extraña Molón.**

Ebina bayam selam eba bâ kuane bidji ye caäfa
be *clientes*.
Nguema Obiang, 'Le Boss de Boss', El Patrón
de patrones, Teodoro Nguema Obiang.

There's no clients anymore for marketplace women
vendors.
Nguema Obiang, 'Le Boss de Boss', Patron of
patrons, Teodoro Nguema Obiang.

Menne *comerciante* kaäfa nkuan nzeng ye atobo
kiri ede ngogö be *clientes* bene vê, Martínez
Hermanos, EGTC y Santi, madjona sirane bidji,
menvong më bot ma djug.

I'm a market vendor, but there's no clients. Since
early in the morning, where are the clients?
Martínez Hermanos, EGTC and Santi, I ask you to
lower the prices of food, the population is suffering.

(CHOIR)

(CHOIR)

Pichu Laser; Tahata Olu 'animateur', 'el
cocinero'; Chiki Oñana Mba, papá de Pablo
Badiga; Desde Mongomeyen: **Macho Bingong.**

Pichu Laser; Tahata Olu 'animateur', 'the chef';
Chiki Oñana Mba, Pablo Badiga's dad; from
Mongomeyen: **Macho Bingong.**

Aduanas sin rival sirane binpuestos madjona
miaboyä mevong me bot ma djug, mbana ba luenë

There's no competition for Customs: lower the
prices. I ask you 'what you doing?' People are

⁵⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad0LR3R6B00&ab_channel=TRONSMANAGERFILM (accessed 19 April 2021).

⁵⁹ Thanks for the Fang translation of the lyrics go to Sergio Micha Andeme.

SEGESA sirane be *facturas* aneyä miaboyä
menvong më bot ma djug,

Alfonso Ateba ‘Le petrolier’;
Bárbara Marcelina caché.

Ebina ye a makit ö cinco madjaminanë sirane
bidji menvong më bot ma djug.
Ebina ye a makit Bikuy, mă zumayi minanë
sirane bidji ö mevang me bot ma djug.

Nuria, la hermanita de Papi Chendo; **Menchu;**
Dudu.

Asonga buabina buabina bë berê ñi a makit ä
kilómetro cinco.
Mayeboyâ mayekevê, abot bamë ebiem mă
kuanebî maä kuanebiô, pero nguë mibode ä
respetar, më tang mă mavë maävêki *por*
exageración, buân benë mă andaä mă yianeä ä
chiri ä sicolô.

Paco Romero Efua Mba Andeme (papá de
Andrea Pirlo)

[continues]

suffering. The company SEGESA: lower the prices.
What’s up, what you doing? People are suffering.

Alfonso Ateba ‘The Oil man’;
Bárbara Marcelina ‘Caché’.

Women of Mercado Cinco, I ask you to lower the
price of food, because people are suffering. Women
of Mercado Bikuy, I come crying and begging you
to lower the price of food, people are suffering.

Nuria, Papi Chendo’s sister; **Menchu;** **Dudu.**

Asonga, women have it in Mercado Cinco.
What am I gonna do? Where am I gonna go? The
stuff I sell here, I don’t sell it using medicines
[witchery]. God is who helped me sell this stuff, but
if you respect the prices I set... I don’t overprice
this stuff: I just got children at home and I have to
pay for their school tuition.

Paco Romero Efua Mba Andeme, Andrea Pirlo’s
dad.

[continues]

In the song, Taskiel complains about the price inflation of food in the last few years. Interweaved with the verses of the song, Taskiel cites names of people, including some members of his own crew, but most notably those *esponsores* that have helped him in any way or may do so when they hear their names in the song. Among those potential sponsors is Teodoro Nguema Obiang, ‘*el Patrón de patrones*’ (the Patron of patrons). In the first half of the seven minute song alone (the section transcribed above), Taskiel name-checks as many as 15 people. But the list continues in the rest of the song: Evuy Monzuy, Clemente Ondo Ndong, José Ramón Ondo Medja (Navy Officer), Omar Bensala (‘The Quite Force’), Tía Chata, from Malabo, Teo ‘el Mayor’ (‘The Old One’, likely, First Lady’s brother), María Consuelo Mangué, Bernardo Elisabeth, Esperanza Bilogo (Bichapa’s mum), Sola Carrasco, Muñe Mba, Chiki Nene, Diosdado Abeso (from Mbini), Tohoto, Escarper Barlock, Chiki Molón, and Eugenio Nze Obiang.

Besides changing recording technologies and practices, the speculative turn in patronage has been encouraged by wealth accumulation during the oil boom. As flows of cash poured into the country, the new petro-elites began to make public and lavish displays of their riches. Occasionally and arbitrarily, they also made spectacular transfers of cash to musicians. Stories and rumours of artists walking off performances with briefcases full of banknotes circulate persistently, animating fantasised images about the magical nature of oil money and the possibility of an instant and effortless enrichment (Coronil 1997; Apter 2005). Taskiel's song represents an extreme case, but it clearly exemplifies the tendency of the last few years. Aware that oil money is circulating among the higher spheres, more and more artists stack their songs with names of known wealthy men and use them to try to enforce a redistribution of public wealth.

But as we will see later in this chapter and more in-depth in Chapter 4, as elites accumulate wealth, so do they accumulate political power, which grants them new mechanisms to oppress musicians, most notably through the evasion of payment of performance fees. Musicians are thus kept dependent through systematic uncertainty. In the words of Roberto:

There is no guarantee of being paid for performing in this country. Not even at events for the PDGE. Sometimes you go and they pay you. But the next time, and it's happened to me on so many occasions, they won't pay. In fact, normally you just get a call but do not agree on the fee. You just go and sing without knowing your own fee. Sometimes they'll give you 5k, or 10k [£6-12], you just grab it and keep going.

Artists thus negotiate the expectation of spectacular fees with the more likely possibility of not being paid at all.

Still, the promise of spectacular riches through the sale and performance of praise songs has encouraged the appearance of more and more amateur artists, who draw on skilled studio producers and digital recording and mixing technologies to hide

their musical limitations. Indeed, I was surprised during my fieldwork by the amount of people who called themselves ‘artists’ and played their songs to me as soon as they heard I was doing research on music. As we will see in Chapter 3, in this speculative economy, risk is often passed from singers onto studio producers. While some singers do make the investment to pay for the studio time expecting to make returns from patrons, others create a debt with producers that may or may not be paid off—depending on whether they get any cash from the potential patrons. Producers adjust their fees accordingly and are often willing to work for free under the possibility of making a larger profit.

The confluence of oil money and digital technologies has thus favoured a riskier and more speculative patronage economy and the mushrooming of amateur singers eager to encourage the redistribution of cash through their recording and selling of (often low-quality) praise songs. The new tendencies highlight how African actors living under everyday economic precarity often willingly turn to hierarchical relations of dependence—what Bayart (2000, 218–22) has termed ‘dependence as a mode of action’ and Ferguson has similarly argued through his notion of ‘declarations of dependence’: ‘the disturbing spectacle of people openly pursuing a subordinate and dependent status’ (2015, 143). But unlike in the cases examined by these Africanists, the relations that some Equatoguinean musicians seek to enter are becoming more and more violent and oppressive.

Rising Asymmetries

In the summer of 2015, I had the chance to travel to Equatorial Guinea for the first time to conduct preliminary fieldwork for my master’s thesis. Originally interested

in Equatoguinean traditional music, I made my way to Bata, the major urban space in the continental region. *El continente*, as it is often called in the country, is home to the Fang majority ethnic group, well-known for their percussion-heavy traditional music. My contacts directed me to the Bata headquarters of the Equatoguinean Cultural Centre. The then director of the centre was a young, friendly, and highly inexperienced man with connections to the ruling family. Excited about the potential of my research as a promotional instrument, the Malabo leadership instructed him to aid with (supervise, monitor) my research.

The director soon gathered a team of the centre's workers, who organised a series of visits to different neighbourhoods to meet, interview, and record local musicians. The centre took advantage of my visit to film everything with their own cameras to create audiovisual content for cultural promotion. I was reluctant, as I felt it could be a bit intimidating for musicians on a first visit. It was not the kind of fieldwork I had originally envisioned, but little could I do amid their insistence. On the first day of work, everything went more or less smoothly. We drove to the outskirts of Bata with the intention of recording the performance of a famous *ndombá*.⁶⁰ We met with him and his musicians and, after a 5-minute interview, they put on an *ad hoc* performance for me and the other cameramen to film. Again, not the type of fieldwork I dreamt of, but I was happy to have recorded such a memorable genre.

But the following day things turned odd. We drove to Ntobo-Esangui to interview a *mbatúa* choir. The group seemed large, and people were slightly late, so we hung around for about an hour. At one point, one of my companions from the cultural centre approached the *mamá* (old lady) and the middle-aged man who seemed to be the

⁶⁰ *Ndombá* is a traditional ritual dance, normally performed in Fang funerals, through which a single dancer, accompanied by a small group of percussionists, is believed to establish connections with the dead (I. de Aranzadi 2009, 57).

leaders of the group. They spoke in Fang and I was not able to understand, but I clearly noticed how the conversation heated up and turned into an argument. I tried to gather some information: my companion hinted that the leaders were hesitant to perform. They had assumed they would be paid for the performance, as they usually are when hired for a celebration. But apparently the centre was only offering them a *recompensa* (literally, a reward, but in effect, a much smaller fee than normal). What animated the argument even more was the fact that the *recompensa* was not even going to be handed on the day, but ‘only when the centre received the funds from the Ministry of Culture’.

I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable and naïve. An inexperienced ethnographer, it had not occurred to me to stop and think how these people were being compensated for performing for the sake of my research. I made immediately clear that they should not perform if they did not have the conviction that they would later be paid for their labour, but my companion asked me to wait while they ‘clarified things’—i.e. while he went back to argue in Fang in an intimidating manner. The man-leader was evidently upset. But the *mamá* had the final word and she decided they would perform. As they got ready, she told me that my research might help them become famous and asked me to let the cultural centre’s director know that the group needed help to replace their worn-out percussion instruments. In the middle of it all, a convoy of about a dozen military armed trucks and tanks drove by, as if we all needed a reminder of the type of control imposed by the state.⁶¹

The vignette animates questions about the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork that shall be discussed elsewhere. But it also evidences patterns of state violence that, as we saw in Chapter 1, go back a long time. In short, musicians and dancers were being

⁶¹ As I was later told, the convoy was on its way to the military demonstrations typical of the 3 August to celebrate the *Golpe de Libertad*—Obiang’s coup against Macías in 1979.

pushed into something close to forced labour for the sake of what the centre's managers understood as cultural promotion. In this case, the cultural centre acted as a patron. While musicians highly suspected that they would end up unpaid, they hung onto the hope that my intermediation would facilitate the purchase of new musical instruments. The example is another reminder that despite patronage relations being *unequal*, *vertical*, and highly *asymmetrical* (Sahlins 1963; Scott 1972; Berry 1985, 192; Graeber 2009, 115; F. Cooper 2017, 136), musicians tend to accept dependence because very often it is the only choice; because, in the words of Frederick Cooper, 'patron-client networks offer at least a possibility for vulnerable members of society to get something—even if most will end up disillusioned' (2002, 188). But in the background is also a persistent fright to say 'no'. In the example, we will never know what would have happened had the group refused to perform. But the hesitations by the leaders recall of many other conversations with musicians who expressed fear about refusing to perform. Hibou's (2011) notion of the political economy of domination is here mixed up with fears of more overt repression that are inspired by decades of colonial and postcolonial experiences and stories of violence.

In the last few years, the increasing concentration of power in the hands of a few, and their control over massive amounts of oil money, have deepened those inequalities and asymmetries to an extreme that is almost unbearable to most musicians. Stretching the moral rules upon which patronage is predicated, the elites are increasingly refusing to pay and forcing musicians to perform (as will be further discussed in Chapter 4), all while they accumulate more private wealth than ever before. The outstanding debt and pressures that musicians suffer enter into considerable friction with the lavish displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption constantly made by the ruling elites—as shown above in the discussion of Nguema.

Consider the case of Mariano, a middle-aged bass player who has been tied one way or another to several state music groups for decades. On one occasion, he was phoned by Nguema to work as a studio musician in the recordings of a few *coros de animación* (see Chapter 1). The music was to be used as propaganda by the PDGE during an upcoming electoral campaign.

You'll see what happened. *El Patrón*, Nguema Obiang, phoned me and other musician friends and said we were to record eight *coros de animación*. [...] *El Patrón* said 'well, when you are done with your work, I'll pay you 15m CFA'. That means 5m each [ca. £6600]. He gave us a 400k CFA advance. Then I travelled to Bata with my two friends, and we began the work. At one point, middlemen began to show up. They would say: '*El Patrón* told me to come pick up the recording', and so on. [...] We recorded one by one, eight different groups. We took about two weeks, day and night. [...] After the work was completed, a week went by and we hadn't seen any money. We asked the middlemen for our payment, but they insisted that the amount we were owed was not correct. So they only gave us 50k CFA per person. From the promised 5 million they went down to 50k [ca. £6600 to £66]. And we still had to go on tour with the *coros*, after which they totally abandoned us.⁶²

As the words depict, musicians are pushed to these gigs by a mix of fear of retaliation if they decline and the possibility of earning spectacular amounts of cash. Such sums do not sound incredible to them, because they have seen with their own eyes the proof of oil money's existence—sprawling skyscrapers and massive infrastructural projects, luxury cars driving through Malabo's streets, expensive suits, squandering in nightclubs and private parties. As Hibou has shown of the political economy of domination in Tunisia, banal practices and mechanisms of control 'can serve coercion or even repression just as well as they can enable the "economic miracle" to take place. They authorize the exercise of punishment and gratification, but also ensure economic and social security' (2011, 11). Similarly, musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea stands as a social formation that contains both oppression and the promise of quick accumulation. Yet as I am contending, the 'economic and social security' Hibou describes seems less and less present for Equatoguinean musicians.

⁶² Mariano, interview with the author, 28 November 2017.

During my fieldwork, the economic recession caused by global oil price drops was used as yet another excuse by the elites to negotiate for smaller performance fees or to delay or avoid payments altogether. But as one of my interlocutors put it: ‘they try to make us think there’s no money all of a sudden. But of course there is! They’ve been keeping it in their pockets, funnelling it to European banks! We’re not fools. They just use the crisis as an excuse to squeeze us even more’.⁶³

Interestingly, some of my interlocutors did not blame Nguema directly, but the middlemen working for him, as Mariano’s words illustrate. But the increasing monopolisation of patronage by those at the top, most notably Nguema, is discouraging smaller sponsors from helping musician friends or relatives. One artist explained how he lost a sponsor because of fear of the policing and repressive state:

My *esponsor* said to me: ‘do you know where we are? We’re in Equatorial Guinea. If I sponsor this, you know... they are gonna come after me asking questions, asking whether I believe I’m the best sponsor. And you know who the best sponsor here is. They are gonna start bothering me with my company: when my containers arrive at the port, they won’t let them through. Stuff. So take this cash and use it as you want. But that’s all. Please’. [...] [So my *esponsor*] preferred not to take a bigger commitment, because he knows where he is.⁶⁴

These words remark the prevalence of competition among big men, as was depicted in Chapter 1 in relation to pre-colonial Equatoguinean society. While Obiang keeps a tight grip on the presidency of the country, changes below him are constant, and big men seek to accumulate prestige to ascend the ladder of power. As argued in the Introduction to the thesis through the work of Sara Berry (1989, 42–43), acts of generosity and patronage and the accumulation of dependents as ‘wealth in people’ have long been key to political success in West and Central Africa. But in Karin Barber’s words, ‘one man’s rise [means] another’s fall—self-aggrandizement [is] at others’ expense—and “big men” [are] always rising’ (2007, 114). With extreme political

⁶³ On the role of Euroamerican banks in capital flight from Africa, see Ndikumana and Boyce 2011.

⁶⁴ Interview with the author, 15 May 2017.

centralisation, competition among big men goes on but it rarely reaches the highest sphere, occupied by the ruling family. In the quote above, Nguema's powerful figure infuses fear among smaller elites, who often restrain themselves from further involvement, limiting entrepreneurial attitudes with the potential to generate small markets.

Non-state Patronage?

Amid these onerous relations, some musicians turn to other sources of support and sponsorship. This section looks at the role that external, non-state cultural agents play in Equatoguinean music. Two institutions stand out among those: the Institut Français de Guinée Équatoriale and the Centro Cultural de España in Malabo.⁶⁵ Run by the French and Spanish national development aid agencies, these cultural centres have somewhat parallel histories. Both opened in the 1980s as part of their respective governments' efforts to renew/establish diplomatic relations after the anti-European regime of Macías. And both are part of larger networks that comprise cultural centres normally located in former colonies.

The centres actively contribute to promoting both French/Spanish and Equatoguinean culture through music and theatrical performances, art exhibitions, talks and lectures, reading groups, and language lessons. Amid a lack of any other formal music schools, the centres have an important role in music education. Well-known Equatoguinean artists including Alex Ikot, Nélida Karr, Fausto Luis Dougan, and Manuel Eyama have taught at the centres in recent years. Moreover, the centres have

⁶⁵ The Centro Cultural de España network runs another centre in Bata that roughly has the same regulations and goals than the Malabo one. For the purposes of the narrative, I will focus on the Malabo centre.

organised large music festivals, making efforts to encourage live performance to diminish the widespread practice of lip-syncing and motivate youths to pick up instruments. The Spanish cultural centre, in particular, has had a considerable impact on the local music scene, promoting two key annual festivals: the Festival de la Canción Hispana, and the Festival Internacional de Hip Hop. Moreover, they offer spaces of interaction and socialisation to all types of artists and youths, who daily gather at these institutions not just to attend events but to simply hang out.

The role of these institutions is not to promote so-called ‘creative industries’ for economic growth, as seems to be the tendency among other NGOs and non-state institutions in developing countries (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright 2008). Instead, they have a much broader approach to cultural promotion more in line with traditional paradigms of development aid and international cooperation (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995). Citing from the Spanish centre’s 2015 Plan de Centro, their main goals are: ‘the promotion of Spanish culture as a form of knowledge and stimulus that contributes to the enrichment and respect of cultural diversity [...]; cultural cooperation, mainly through the promotion and diffusion of local artists and thinkers [...]; and cultural cooperation as development aid, with an emphasis on the modernising of productive sectors and the strengthening of services that enable free and equal access to resources that contribute to the exercise of cultural rights’. While the rights language is similar to that promoted by creative industries policies, the work of the cultural centres is not devoted to economic revitalisation or the creation of jobs and profit opportunities (beyond the hiring of musicians for one-off events).

Rather, firstly, these centres provide services that they think the Equatoguinean state should be providing, drawing on notions of culture as an empowering tool in an authoritarian environment. And secondly, they are fundamental mechanisms of

mediation in larger diplomatic relations between the Equatoguinean government and the European ones: they are instances of what Ndaliko has called ‘charitable imperialism’—examples of humanitarian projects as ‘an extension of and in service to geographically and historically specific powers’ (2016, 170). And yet, many musicians I met felt that the centres provided lots of opportunities for them to develop their art. While they were aware that these foreign institutions were vehicles of soft power, musicians and other intellectuals also perceived them as productive in the provision of spaces of relative autonomy within the authoritarian regime.

At the level of the music economy, the impact of the foreign cultural centres appears paradoxical. While governed by radically different goals, their model interestingly replicates some features of state patronage, some of which prevent the emergence of new economies. As with state patronage, musicians seek to build personal relations with the foreign centres’ workers to profit from performance opportunities. Invitations to events and festivals are granted not on a blind, competitive basis, but on previously existing relations. Similarly, the events at these centres—like some put on by Nguema and the PDGE—are free and open to all. The practice is of course embedded within their larger institutional goals to offer free access to culture, but it also prevents the development of an audience willing to pay for live music. A couple of interlocutors who had thoughts about opening venues were discouraged by what they thought was a heavy, difficult-to-beat competition: they believed a concert hall would not be profitable as Equatoguineans would choose to go to free concerts at the cultural centres instead of paying for concert tickets elsewhere.

This very issue was brought up during an interview with the then-director of the French cultural centre, Maurice Martinez, who critiqued what he perceived as a lack of entrepreneurial attitudes among local musicians. Martinez had the radical idea of

starting to charge for concert tickets at the French centre in an intent to boost the creation of a paying audience. But his project never came to fruition, as it collided directly with the core beliefs of the larger network of French cultural centres, which links to the notion that their role is to provide access to free culture in places where access to culture is not readily available.⁶⁶

Beyond the French and Spanish cultural centres, when considering the role of external agents on cultural production, the elephant in the room is of course global oil companies. Yet, as involved in everyday political, economic, and social life as they are, their involvement in cultural production is insignificant. The social work oil companies do in Equatorial Guinea comes from their Corporate Social Responsibility departments.⁶⁷ In interviews with the CSR Officers of Marathon and Noble, two of the largest oil companies operating in Equatorial Guinea, both acknowledged that most of their budgets are directed to environmental or health-related programmes such as their large Malaria control project. While oil firms have sporadically contributed to one-off cultural events or institutions, they make efforts to remain distant because they consider that the political nature of culture and music in particular could compromise the work and economic interests of their companies. Not only they do not create their own cultural projects, but they also turn down individual petitions from artists. In the words of an American CSR officer:

I'd love nothing better than to be able to take a letter from [one of these musicians] and say: 'guys, can we, out of our moneys, give these guys \$150k to help them do their projects?' That's nothing... I can't tell you how low of a budget that is to an oil company. It's almost negligible. But that would get so much push-back [from my bosses], you know [...] And that's a frustrating thing.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ The privatisation of music performance in Equatorial Guinea is one of the themes of Chapter 4 of this thesis.

⁶⁷ Corporate Social Responsibility is a mechanism of business self-regulation by private companies with the goal of being socially and environmentally accountable. As the anthropology of CSR has shown (Sharp 2006), CSR has often become an engine of development with often unintended consequences.

⁶⁸ American CSR officer, interview with the author, 11 April 2018.

According to this American CSR officer, his bosses rejected getting involved in the local music economy because they were unaware of the politics of the country and feared sponsoring forms of subversive music without realising.

This tendency towards avoiding cultural sponsorship was magnified after the events following the shutdown of a cultural centre in the village of Rebola that the oil firms Marathon, Total, and Noble had all contributed towards building. While this will be discussed at length in Chapter 8, let me briefly state that the government suddenly and violently shut down the centre for what they considered was the rise of a subversive movement. The event highlighted how quickly an apparently apolitical institution could become the node of a huge ethnic-political crisis. Caught up in the middle of the controversy, and afraid they could see their economic interests affected, these external agents, as well as the foreign cultural centres, became even more cautious about their involvement in cultural/musical production. In the words of Marathon CSR officer Carl Maas: ‘After what happened in Rebola, we’ve been a lot more conscious. For instance, one rapper approached us asking for sponsorship, but we found out he had an old song called “Letter to the President”. I listened to it and it wasn’t and nice one, so I thought: “oh boy, we’re not helping that one” hahaha’.⁶⁹

Whether through the active disentanglement from cultural production by global oil firms or through the reproduction of patronage logics by the European cultural centres, non-state actors’ impact on the local music economy is negligible. Fearful of the political and economic consequences than competing with standing patrons may have, these external actors choose to contribute (or not) through ways that do not alter the prevailing music economy, therefore taking part in the solidification of patronage’s

⁶⁹ Carl Maas, interview with the author, 28 November 2017. Note that the rapper he refers to is Negro Bey, whom I discuss in Chapter 7.

hermetic nature. Amid growing control by the state and the ruling family and little exit options, some musicians have started to voice a certain desire for the commodification and commercialisation of music.

Longing for Capitalism

In late 2017, the state and foreign cultural institutions announced an agreement to host the 2018 edition of Vis a Vis, a project run by Spain-based NGO Casa África and meant to ‘support the internationalisation of African music’ and to ‘open new avenues of communication between African artists and Spanish cultural agents’.⁷⁰ In short, Vis a Vis brings together a group of Spanish music promoters and festival managers to scout an African country in search of talent. Founded in 2012, the project had already visited a variety of countries including South Africa, Senegal, and Angola. The news of its celebration caused a certain fuss among the artistic community. The specific rules, posted online a few months later, asked artists to submit their MP3 files for a first round of evaluation. From the songs entered, 12 artists would be selected to participate in a contest/festival open to the public between 1-4 March 2018 at the Malabo National Park. The Spanish promoters would fly into Malabo to judge the festival and hold meetings with the participants. From that festival, two artists would be invited to tour the largest world music festivals in Spain in the summer of 2018.

The response was outstanding. The days after the publication of the rules, I felt like every musician and singer I knew was speaking about it. A few months later, the 12 selected artists/bands were made public. Some confusion was generated when artists found out, shortly before the festival, that *playback* (lip-syncing) was strictly prohibited.

⁷⁰ <https://www.casafrica.es/es/visavis> (accessed 13 April 2021).

The surprise and tension exposed how aesthetic and performance preferences encouraged by the patronage economy did not match the expectations of the international world music scene. Even the Ministry of Culture intervened without success to try to convince the Spanish managers to accept lip-synced performances, as one of the managers told me in a private conversation. Some singers reached out to the few musicians that could learn their songs with a short notice and hired them for the occasion. The Ministry of Culture opened up rehearsal rooms in the Equatoguinean Cultural Centre and everybody spent days rehearsing like I had not seen so far in my fieldwork.

On 1 March, 17 people arrived from Spain. They were interviewed on national TV and finally gathered at the National Park in the evening for a first round of performances. Upon my arrival, the first surprise was the top-notch mixing desk that was set up in front of the stage. A friend mentioned that Nguema had lent his personal sound equipment for the event. The festival went on for three consecutive evenings, when artists of all ethnic groups and musical backgrounds participated. While interest from musicians was high, public attendance was rather low (see Fig. 2.1). Despite mini-buses being available for free from the Malabo city centre, most people found it an inconvenience to travel well outside Malabo for the occasion. Being one of Obiang's top public infrastructure projects, the magnificent, spectacular National Park seemed to have been chosen to impress the Spanish delegates rather than out of convenience for the public. In fact, from the interviews on national TV to the opening of rehearsal rooms, from Nguema's involvement to the elaborate opening speech of the Secretary of State for Culture, it seemed as if all political elites were making efforts to give a good impression.



Figure 2.1: Small audience at the Vis a Vis Festival. (Source: author)

In the end, the two winners were renowned composer and drummer Alex Ikot and Bubi singer and multi-instrumentalist Nélide Karr (Infante-Amate 2018). Both are widely considered exceptional artists by most Equatoguineans and, unlike most other participants, have great experience in performing live with their bands. But their music is usually believed to be, in the words of a friend, ‘for the likes of white people’. Indeed, both are notorious for creating highly original fusions of local sounds with global genres such as jazz and funk in the fashion normally displayed at large world music festivals. The rest of the artists ended up disillusioned, not just because of not being selected but because they did not have the chance to meet with the Spanish promoters, as they had been promised from the beginning.



Figure 2.2: Nélida Karr performing at Etnosur 2018, in Alcalá la Real, Spain. (Source: author)

In informal conversations and a follow-up questionnaire sent to the Spanish managers and producers, they affirmed that, compared to previous editions, this had received the largest participation by far: a total of 55 applications. ‘It is really remarkable considering how small Equatorial Guinea is and the little presence it has in the African world music scene, especially compared to giants such as DRC, Senegal, Ethiopia, Mali, or South Africa’, Director of Pirineos Sur Luis Lles said. The case reflects the rising numbers of amateur singers encouraged by the patronage economy, a fact that was also pointed out by the promoters in the questionnaire. In the words of Martin Rivero, Director of Afrona SOS Atlántico: ‘I must say there have been other countries where we found much superior level at the musical and production levels. In Equatorial Guinea, there was little professionalism and a lot of amateurism. However, it was much better regarding musicians’ interest and their willingness to interact with us’.⁷¹

⁷¹ Pirineos Sur and Afrona SOS Atlántico are both ‘world music’ festivals based in Spain.

The final statement speaks to a much larger issue that relates to local artists' imperative desire to find alternative (perhaps idealised) markets outside Equatorial Guinea. The high number of applicants and the interest the festival generated among the community clearly reflects the aspirations and hopes resulting from an exhaustion with the pervasive patronage economy. In fact, this was not the first time I was made aware of the existence, among some musicians, of a certain longing for recognition, connections, and audiences beyond Equatorial Guinea that they abstractly linked to notions of capitalism. Unlike scholarly fears about the destructive potential that the global music industry poses for African music economies and beyond (Perullo 2011, 358; Taylor 2016), some Equatoguinean artists expressed desires and fantasies about multinational record labels landing in the country in search of talent.

Consider for example Young Bello, a singer/trap artist raised in Malabo. Young Bello began making gangsta rap with his crew, Calles de Sangre. In an interview with him, he mentioned being hired to perform at events through contacts with government members in the mid-2000s. But after a period living in the Dominican Republic as a student, he returned with fresh new ideas about the global music industry:

In the Dominican Republic there's a real music industry. There's companies like Sony... people who invest their money in artists, expecting to make profit through them. [...] If a multinational like Sony arrived here, it would be incredibly positive. Because we're undervalued here. If Sony or any other label came here, and they signed me or any other artist, they would say 'man, we'll pay for anything you need'. And that would change even your look! You could move into a mansion with the cash they would give you. And then other artists would look at you and say 'man, I could really live off music'.⁷²

Young Bello's words combine idealised views of the global music industry with a strong feeling of dispossession and what he perceives as a lack of appreciation from Equatoguinean patrons. His discourse reflects hopes about what an independent music economy would look like, and how profitable it could be for both artists and investors.

⁷² Young Bello, interview with the author, 11 October 2017.

He went on to argue that the ‘discovery’ of Equatoguinean music by a single label would help make visible the local scene, attracting other labels and boosting, in his own words and in a positive sense, the economic ‘exploitation’ of music.

Other artists raised similar issues in more specific terms. Consider the words of Bata-based rapper and producer Alexander el Trueno, which include an open critique of the patronage system and, implicitly, of TNO:

If a wealthy person approaches me and says: ‘look man, I like your music, I want to sponsor you, I want to send you to France’. I’ll ask: ‘and what would you make of it?’. If he says: ‘nothing, I just want to help you’. Then I’ll say: ‘look man, forget about it. [...] Don’t send me to France to make a recording and release it, cause then I come back here and what? When you get tired, you’ll just move away—because when you just do it ‘to help me’, one day you’ll be fed-up. Then it’ll be the case that I call you and you don’t pick up. But if you saw me as a business and you knew you could profit from me, you’ll always be pushing me and caring about me. You’ll be the one asking me to work hard, because you know that when I publish an album, you’ll get your cut. And since we can’t do that here yet, artists are struggling.’⁷³

Alexander embraces some of the typical features of market economies and liberal thinking, including vague notions of hard work and profit making. But entangled with the praise for capitalism are complaints about sponsors’ minimal commitment to musicians and a certain feeling of abandonment from big men. He is turning to capitalism because the rules of patronage are being broken by those at the top, who are socially and morally expected to provide for their dependents.

Similar issues were raised in an interview with David, a Cameroonian artist, manager, and cultural consultant who has lived in Equatorial Guinea for 10 years and had worked in the cultural industries in Canada:

The artistic sector is not well structured in Equatorial Guinea. There isn’t IP legislation, there isn’t a musicians’ association, there isn’t anything. So far, there’s only Nguema, the boss’ son, whenever he wants... He is not a professional himself, nor are those who work for him. So he just does as he pleases. He picks the artists, sends them to France, they’re there, they’re given pork ribs, and when they come back, he grabs all the CDs and eats all the money; the money is his. The same artists that you see in France, in flashing videoclips with top-of-the-line cars and everything, they’re the same that starve here. Why? Because it’s not well structured.⁷⁴

⁷³ Alexander el Trueno, interview with the author, 11 February 2018.

⁷⁴ David, interview with the author, 19 March 2018.

David equally intersperses praises of a regulated music industry with critiques of patronage and TNO. Once again, the issue is with the failure to meet moral expectations. It is not wrong that Nguema and other sponsors help musicians: it is the fact that the latter are abandoned to ‘starve’ afterwards. But in this case, the argument goes a bit further: Nguema’s strong monopoly prevents an alternative economy from taking off. David’s argument is furthered by his account of an intent to organise a music festival a few years earlier at a football stadium. After months of planning and work, everything was ready for the event: musicians had been hired, the venue was booked, advertisement had been done. But the evening before the event he received an anonymous call commanding him to cancel the event without further explanations. He never knew who made the call, or in whose orders, but he suggested Nguema might have been behind it, simply pushed by jealousy. The example reminds once again of the competition between big men brought about before through the work of Berry and Barber. But in this case, Nguema objected to not a classic political patron but a rather different, market-based approach to the music economy.

The Vis a Vis case and the words of Young Bello, Trueno, and David suggest that, amid rampant state control of the music economy, there is a widespread awareness of and discourse on the potential benefits of a marketised music economy. This longing for capitalism and the private market comprises a fantasised and idealised notion of the global music industry but also implicit and explicit critiques of patronage. Rather than a mode of capitalist exploitation, what this ‘music industry’ would mean, in many artists’ minds, is a way out of the patronage sticky web.

Conclusion

Before his passing in June 2020, I had the chance to interview renowned artist Ngal Madunga. Ngal was then affected by a long sickness but still agreed to chat to me. One of the country's greatest voices was barely audible anymore. Known by many as 'the king of rumba', Ngal had a prominent role in the 1970s scene as a singer for the mythical dance-band Etofili. Later, he continued to sing as a solo artist, many times sponsored by the government, the PDGE, or Nguema. Ngal was recognised by both the artistic community and the wider population. Born to the Bisío ethnic group, he was known for making efforts to sing in the languages of the other ethnic groups to bridge cultural gaps and create a greater sense of community within the country.

We organised for the interview to take place at his home in the neighbourhood of Ela Nguema. As he walked me from the meeting point, I was surprised to see the precarity of his living conditions. His wooden house, literally located on a hazardous cliff under a bridge, seemed to be about to collapse on the passing river. It felt shocking to me that a musician with the talent and musical past of Ngal had to live under such uncertain and marginal conditions, especially knowing he was a TNO artist. And yet, hanging on one of the worn-out walls next to a portrait photograph, a poster of an album release, and an acoustic guitar, I noticed a framed certificate of 'Proved Ideological Conviction' given to him by the PDGE, and signed by Obiang himself, 'in recognition of and gratitude for the selfless availability demonstrated in the evolution and consolidation of the party'. I thought that the proud display of the diploma next to the guitar in that crumbling house reflected in obvious ways the radical contradictions of musical patronage: the coexistence of extremely unequal and violent relations of dependence with continued acceptance and deference (see Fig. 2.3).



Figure 2.3: Ngal Madunga's home wall. (Source: author)

Hibou has argued that often in authoritarian environments, 'domination is ambivalent, and negotiated accommodation is the rule. What outside observers may present as a constraint, or even a coercion, a power of normalisation and discipline, is in fact most often experienced as a mode of normal life' (Hibou 2011, 13). While Ngal's story and the ethnography presented in this chapter partially confirm these words, I would add that Equatoguinean artists live their everyday lives through ambivalent emotions of recognition, pride, and deference. For decades, many Equatoguinean artists have willingly accepted or even actively sought to enter relations of patronage that could grant them access to resources. But as the chapter has shown, the exacerbation of extraversion and the increasing accumulation of power and wealth by the ruling family encouraged by oil capitalism have motivated increasing oppression within musical patronage. As a result, more and more artists are voicing their uneasiness via implicit or

explicit critique or through discourses of the potential benefits of a marketised economy.

And yet, critiques are always partial and contradictory, and in my experience, they are rarely directed towards Nguema, who paradoxically embodies the paradigm of patronage. Some artists genuinely believe he is doing right by them, or they feel morally obligated to show deference because of the favour received in the past. Moreover, the promise of quick accumulation animated by the oil boom still pushes musicians into patronage. Motivated by the growing demand for praise songs and digital technologies' simplification of music recording and performance, Equatoguineans with no previous musical background try to take a shot at musical patronage, triggering an amateurisation of the music scene. The next two chapters dwell further on these issues, focusing on how these transformations affect music studio production and live performance, respectively.

Chapter 3: Producing Praise: Music Economics and Technology during Electoral Time

Introduction

It is November 2017 and Legislative Elections are taking place in Equatorial Guinea. The days prior to Election Day are taken over by the political event. As I eat my breakfast, the TV in the background shows non-stop praises in the form of music videos in Asonga TV, Nguema's TV channel. The images display groups of women dressed in PDGE *popó* clothing, singing and dancing in front of the newly built, shiny skyscrapers of Malabo II. 'Eeeh, Obiang Nguema eeeh, *papá* Obiang eeeh'. The videoclip introduces images of President Obiang Nguema and the First Lady, happily greeting people during an official event. The audio-visual mesh effectively overlaps the joy of dancing women and smiling politicians with the party symbols and the mantra of infrastructural development. Political propaganda floods national TV for days before the Elections, greatly aided by music's unique capacity to incorporate such a rich array of ideological messages.

I am meeting producer Rubén Edú at his recording studio and the Equatorial weather strikes me as soon as I set foot on the street. It is the dry season in Malabo and the hot Harmattan haze, blowing all the way from the Sahara Desert, limits visibility on the streets of the country's capital. The dust however does not cover the political propaganda that has taken over the town's walls and billboards. *Vota PDGE, por el Progreso y la Paz Social* (Vote PDGE, for Progress and Social Peace)—the message reads next to a large photograph of Obiang Nguema. As I walk to Rubén's recording studio, a group of Equatoguineans gather around an old portable radio on the sidewalk

outside their house. A praise song blasts out of it—a female singer recites: ‘Legislative, Municipals, and Senatorial Elections. For the continuity of development and peace, vote PDGE!’ Her words are drowned out by a passing van which, covered with the party’s posters and armed with several loudspeakers, drives around emitting sonic propaganda.

I finally make it to Rubén’s studio, located at the back of a colonial patio partially owned by his family. Rubén, a full-time computer engineer at Marathon Oil, is rarely at the studio on a Thursday morning. Most often, he produces his music in the evenings or at weekends. But he’s taking a vacation period from his job in Punta Europa to accommodate the increasing demand from singers as Elections approach.⁷⁵ I find Rubén alone, editing and mixing a song by a female singer that, in his opinion, is not particularly good. Yet she, like many others in the country, is attracted by the market that the electoral campaign and other political events create every few months. The customer’s lack of vocal talent is not an issue for Rubén, who will eventually create a fine product thanks to the affordances of new digital software and his vast musical and computer skills.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which digital studio production and musical patronage are mutually mediated. It addresses studio labour and the specific mediations and socialities that the praise singing economy favours. Specifically, the chapter offers ethnographic insights into the ramifications of the increasingly speculative economy that I introduced in the previous chapter. Attracted by the high demand for praise songs by the petro-elites—especially during a period of remarkable political intensity such as the 2017 Elections—more and more average citizens seek to enter relations of patronage

⁷⁵ Punta Europa is an isolated, enclaved compound outside Malabo where most American oil workers live. See Appel (2012) for a history and analysis.

through the recording of non-commissioned praise songs. Motivated by the affordances of new digital technologies and the skilled labour of studio producers, these amateur singers manage to produce decent-quality songs without previous training or experience. But the mushrooming of amateur singers across the country is turning around the chain of supply and demand, generating more and more competition for the rare patronage that may or may not flow to the singer.

Broadly, the chapter contributes to the study of the social relations in which the African recording studio is entangled (Meintjes 2003) and responds to recently raised concerns about the lack of ethnographic writing on the impact of digitisation in studios across the world (Bates 2016, 273). More specifically, it holds scholarly discourses about the democratisation of music by digital technologies (Leyshon 2009; Prior 2018, 86–91; Hesmondhalgh 2019; Hodgson Forthcoming) in tension with an ethnography marked by an overly undemocratic environment. While the introduction of Digital Audio Workstations seems to have liberated singers from the constraints of patronage funding to produce music—as I argue in the first section of the chapter—they are still inextricably linked to the political elites for profit making.

The ‘democracy’ factor is also brought into sharp relief by the temporal nature of praise songs demand, normally marked by political events including the ruling family’s birthdays and the periodic, undemocratic elections. As the anthropological literature has suggested, elections in Africa have often signified much more than the allocation of political positions: they are also theatrical and ritualised events that enable, among others, a scramble for access to resources (Young 1993; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). As the opening vignette shows, music making is greatly affected by these periods, where politicised music hogs the sonic environment from the media to the streets.

A History of the Recording Studio in Equatorial Guinea

I begin with a brief history of recorded music in Equatorial Guinea. The goal is to explore the last few decades of socio-political and technological transformation to better understand the nature of the contemporary recording studio and its role in the music economy. The examples in this section highlight the persistence of what Aditi Deo has called a ‘technological creativity born of necessity’ (Deo in Born Forthcoming). The efforts by musicians and producers to make do with whatever resources are available reveal an incessant creativity but also a radical technological disjuncture—or ‘socio-material stratification’ (Born Forthcoming, 29–31)—between Equatorial Guinea and other countries, including African neighbours.

Giant states across the continent began to record and reproduce music in mass in the first half of the 20th century. In West Africa, the first commercial recordings were made in the 1920s, and the mass-reproduction and dissemination of *jùjú* music in Nigeria (on 78-rpm shellac gramophone discs) was common by the mid-1930s (Waterman 1990, 8, 76). The opening of local branches of European companies such as Decca and Gramophone Company, Ltd. (later EMI) helped boost the growth of the local industry and the opening of recording studios (ibid. 90). Equatoguinean musicians had to wait a bit longer to be able to record their music in a (semi-)professional setting, limited as they were by a much smaller economy and an early colonial administration with little interest in infrastructural development (see Chapter 1). Furthermore, the lack of a productive industry amid an extraverted and extractive economy has long made Equatoguinean musicians dependent on the import of music technologies, further complicated by the relative geopolitical isolation of the country.

From data gathered in interviews with older musicians, the first recordings ever made in Equatorial Guinea may have occurred in the late 1960s or early 1970s, at the Radio and TV studios in Malabo. There is little consensus and a lack of information about the technologies used, the people involved, and even the specific *orquestas* (dance bands) that recorded. Unfortunately, nobody seems to know the fate of those recordings today.⁷⁶ There is an agreement among musicians and the public in general that the first professional recordings by Equatoguinean artists were those sponsored by the Obiang government in the 1980s—a belief that seems to be indirectly reinforced by a constant erasure by the current regime of anything remotely positive that occurred before the *Golpe de la Libertad* (the name used to refer to Obiang’s coup on 3 August 1979). However, evidence points to much earlier productions by state sponsored *orquestas* Tú y Yo and Etofili, of which very few copies seem to exist today. Figure 3.1. shows a 45rpm single record by the *orquesta* Etofili, produced in Spain in 1972 and sponsored by the Macías government.

⁷⁶ A deeper study of the currently existing archives may well be the focus of a future research project.



Figure 3.1: 45rpm recording by Orquesta Etofilí (1972). (Source: author)

The 1980s saw the demise of the *orquestas* and rise of the *cantantes solistas*. At the forefront of these new groups were lead singers of great charisma and powerful voices. As their popularity grew, and given the absence of professional studios in the country, the Obiang government selected three singers—Maelé, Bessoso, and Efamba—and sponsored them to fly to Paris and record their music with some of Cameroon’s greatest *makossa* musicians, Aladji Touré and Toto Guillaume (see Fig. 3.2).⁷⁷ Obiang thus picked up on the previous government’s state patronage of international recordings, expanding it greatly with more explicit forms of praise singing after the advent of the *coros de animación* (see Chapter 1).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Maelé and Bessoso went on to record about a dozen albums each, becoming some of the greatest artists the country has produced. Efamba, brother of the First Lady, Constanca Mangué de Obiang, became a high military officer and financed the creation of a studio in Bata in the 1990s around the time Nguema opened one in Malabo. Efamba, like CANO, is yet another example of musical patrons and music lovers closely connected to the ruling family, as we saw in Chapter 2.

⁷⁸ Data gathered from interviews with Martiniano Elé ‘Maelé’ (31 July 2015) and Baltasar Nsue ‘Bessoso’ (30 July 2015).



Figure 3.2: Back cover of Maelé's album *Evom Nguan*, recorded at Safari Ambiance studio in Paris.

(Source: author)

The first professional studios did not open until the 1990s, when members of the elite and the foreign cultural centres made efforts to promote the local scene. Herbo Bokusu (b. 1956), a former member of the *orquesta* Tropical Boys and someone with a passion for technology, became one of the main sound engineers of the time. First a self-taught telecommunications technician at the Malabo airport and a radio host when I met him, he started building home-made amps in the 1970s and making amateur recordings with a simple 2-track cassette recorder in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, he became the producer at Bahía Sound, the first professional studio in the country, funded by Nguema. Bokusu remembers it as follows:

The first studio in the country was Bahía Sound. It was located here in Malabo, in a little room of the Hotel Bahía. I set it up for *El Patrón* [Nguema]. He bought the equipment in the US. It must have been 1990 or a bit later. I don't have any photographs of the studio, but I still keep the recorder that I used [see Fig. 3.3]. It's a Tascam 238, an 8-track cassette recorder. And it still works today! [...] *El Patrón* has always been a music lover, he's been very supportive of local

musicians. We recorded a lot of singers there: Ngal Madunga, Chery Malé, Sita Richi... Each singer recorded an album.⁷⁹

The use of the Tascam 8-track cassette recorder reveals the technological stratification I alluded to at the beginning of the section. While a huge novelty in the country in the 1990s, this recorder was already a second-class technology in the Global North at the time.



Figure 3.3: Tascam recorder from Nguema’s first studio in Malabo. (Source: author)

Shortly after Nguema opened Bahía Sound, the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano in Malabo also installed a little studio, and Bokusu started operating it.⁸⁰ The first recording ever made there was *Calles de Malabo* (1994), a unique collaboration of several local musicians and singers and one of the country's most legendary recordings, which was later re-mastered by Nubenegra in Spain and became a terrific work under

⁷⁹ Bokusu, interview with the author, 11 March 2018.

⁸⁰ The CCHG was the first iteration of the Spanish cultural centre. In its early stage, it was run in collaboration between the Spanish and Equatoguinean governments.

the new name of *Malabo Street Band*.⁸¹ The studio had a 4-track cassette recorder and was worse equipped than Nguema's Bahía Sound, but it produced the first recordings that were not sponsored by the state or Obiang's family. Around the same time, the French cultural centre (then Institute Culturel d'Expression Française, see Chapter 2) brought sound engineers from France to teach production courses (Fig. 3.4).⁸² Not long after, the first studios in Bata were opened—funded, respectively, by Nguema and former *cantante solista* and President Obiang's brother-in-law Efamba (see footnote 77).



Figure 3.4: Students of a production course at ICEF (1990s). (Source: Bokusu)

The 1990s thus saw a surge of recordings, which were previously reserved for a few lucky ones. But even so, the lack of infrastructure to mass-reproduce the recordings prevented many from seeing their music circulate. To overcome that need, Nguema

⁸¹ Fausto Luis Dougan, interview with the author, 17 July 2015.

⁸² Data from interviews with Bokusu (11 March 2018) and drummer in the diaspora Obama Kouki (8 September 2015).

started funding the recordings made in his Malabo and Bata studios to be mastered and reproduced in Douala, Cameroon. Figure 3.5, for example, shows a cassette cover by Orquesta Machoski Internacional, where ‘Patrón Nguema Obiang’ figures as ‘*productor*’, a term often used to refer to high-end sponsors (right column). These were the beginnings of TNO, Nguema’s ‘record label’ (see Chapter 2).

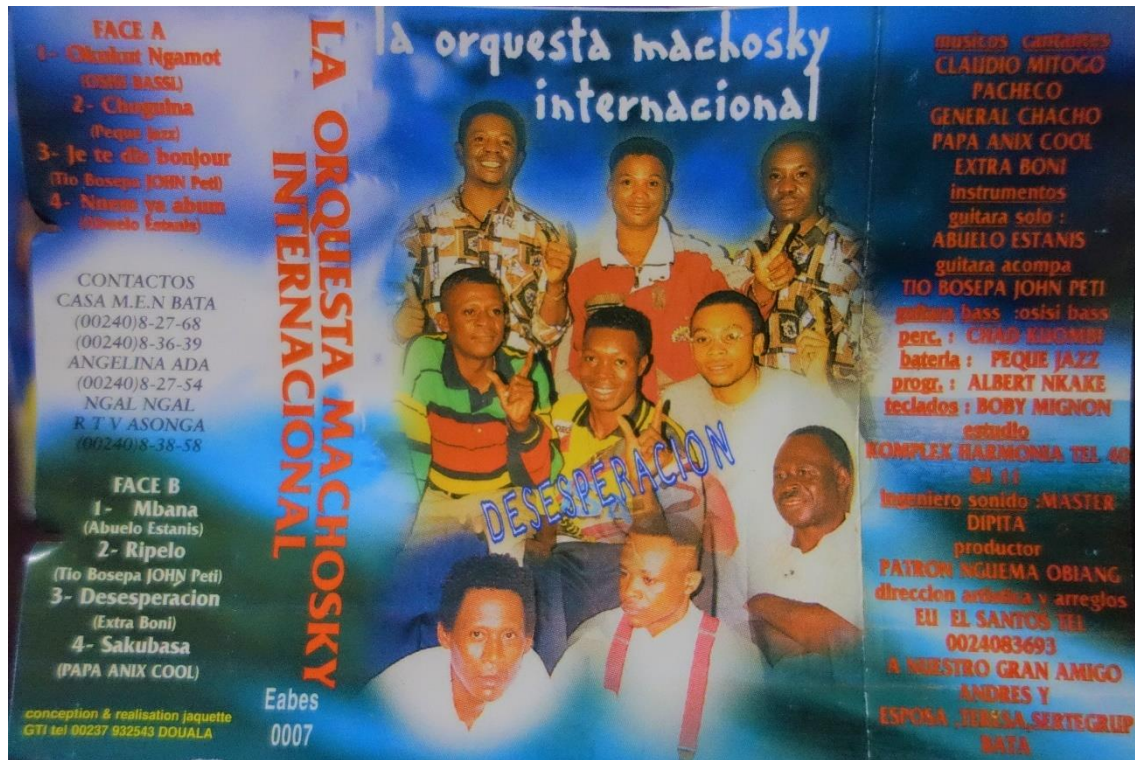


Figure 3.5: Cassette cover of a tape by Orquesta Machoski Internacional. (Source: Author)

By the turn of the century, artists with fewer political connections and no easy access to professional studios did what they could to record. Experienced musicians such as Obama Kouki and Samuelín Karr set up amateur studios in their houses with small tape recorders they managed to import from Europe.⁸³ And rappers within the growing urban youth, increasingly interested in recording and circulating their work,

⁸³ Data from interviews with Obama Kouki (8 September 2015), Bokusu (11 March 2018), and Samuel Karr (14 April 2018).

struggled with the resources available to them.⁸⁴ Negro Bey, founder of the famous crew Verso Roto, recounted in an interview:

The crew was born in 2003 or so. We used to buy cassettes with hip hop beats that a Cameroonian guy named Chris sold in the marketplace. We liked hanging out with him because he knew a lot about rap, he said he was a rapper. Over those beats, we started to create our own lyrics, and soon we were keen to record them. [...] But recording a song at a studio was like 50k CFA (ca. £68), which was so much money at the time. [...] So we started experimenting. At the time there were CDs circulating already, but we recorded on worn-out cassette recorders and then brought the tape to a guy in the marketplace who copied it onto a CD and duplicated it. We made a 4-song mixtape and called it *Clave de Fa*.⁸⁵

Negro Bey's words and the efforts by Kouki and Karr above highlight the continuing tendency to make do with whatever means and resources were available to musicians at the time. As pointed out earlier in the section, these examples show the constant technological creativity displayed by musicians living in precarious and uncertain conditions.

The scene started to shift with the arrival of the first computers and, with them, the first digital studios. While digital studios were gaining ground in Europe and North America since the 1980s (Born 1995, 183), digitisation did not have a very obvious impact on Equatoguinean popular music until the turn of the 21st century. There are contradictory opinions about when exactly the first digital studios were set up, but it was not until the early 2000s that some level of experimentation started to happen. Sr. Fran (b. 1981) was among the first to experiment with computer recording. Then a young Fang just settled in Malabo, he joined efforts with DJ Júpiter and created Escuadra Records, both a rap crew and a bedroom studio:

We worked with a worn-out computer with Windows XP. At the beginning, we used the computer recorder. We opened Windows Media Player with a beat, and at the same time we held the recorder very close. Then we hit REC on the recorder and at the same time PLAY on WMP. And the recorder captured both the beat and our voices. It all came out in one track with no

⁸⁴ The interest in recording among rappers may have been motivated by an early album sponsored by Nguema, comprising songs by some of the first rappers in the country, including Nene London, Peque Wambo, and MC Russo, one of Obiang's sons. The title of the album was *Colección Rap ASHO* (1997), which referenced the name of a youth branch of the PDGE created in 1996 and presided by Nguema: *Asociación Hijos de Obiang*, or Obiang's Children Association (Edu 'Negro Bey' 2016, 50).

⁸⁵ Negro Bey, interview with the author, 23 May 2017.

possibility to edit or mix: rough style. The beats, we got them from American rappers' albums that Júpiter bought in the US, cause he travelled there all the time. The last tracks of the CDs included the beats with no voices. [...] Later on, we started to use Cool Edit Pro, which was much better for editing and mixing. But we still didn't make original beats. We started to download them from the Internet. Júpiter had Internet at home, cause he was the son of a *grande* [big one]. His father was the Prime Minister at the time, Ricardo [Mangue Obama].

Sr. Fran's words are interesting for several reasons. He describes the beginning of computer recording and the transition to Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) and edition software.⁸⁶ But more importantly, he demonstrates that even with the introduction of digital studios and the Internet, music recording was still tightly linked to state power and the political elites in the 2000s. It was only through the Prime Minister's son's travels to the US and his access to computer technologies that a group of rappers were able to set up a (very basic) studio and record their music.

Andrew Leyshon (2009, 1317) affirms that, before the advent of DAWs, recording studios were 'privileged sites' that only few could access. In Equatorial Guinea, that was the case even after the introduction of digital studios. As we have seen, the first musicians to ever make professional recordings were a handful sponsored by Macías in the 1970s and Obiang in the 1980s. Both governments had to send artists abroad amid the lack of studios in the country. That came to an end with the setting up of the first studios in the 1990s, but they were owned and controlled by the ruling family first and by foreign cultural institutions later. Even with the arrival of the first computers in the 2000s, music recording was still in the hands of the political elites, who were the only ones in possession of the money and networks to purchase the new technology.

⁸⁶ DAWs are application software used for the recording, editing, mixing, and production of audio files, usually inserted in a user interface based on the visual metaphor of an analogue multitrack tape recorder. DAWs first appeared in the United States in the 1980s but became prominent in the 1990s and 2000s. They were fundamental to the rise of small-scale, home studios, which afforded musicians the possibility to self-produce their own music and posed challenges to markets based on traditional, professional studios (Savage 2011; Théberge 2015).

But in the last decade, the introduction of laptops, a device that more and more people can afford, has transformed the music scene. Youth across the country have set up bedroom studios with minimum technology and generated a flow of local, original music never seen before.⁸⁷ In that sense, digitisation has brought about a certain democratisation of music making, to use the terminology employed by some digital music scholars (Leyshon 2009; Prior 2018, 86–91; Hesmondhalgh 2019; Hodgson Forthcoming). But what if we look at the economics of production? What if we study the nature of studio labour and the pricing and value of songs? What if we explore the power relations between producers and singers? Despite the affordances of digitisation, we may find a not-so-democratic music economy.

The Recording Studio Today

Let us now peek into a contemporary recording studio. But before we start, I shall point out that there is a great variety of studios in the country today, from bedroom studios barely comprised of a laptop, to more sophisticated digital studios with independent booths, to studios with highly expensive equipment that are however abandoned; there are studios owned by politicians and run by foreign engineers, and studios owned and built by the producers themselves. There is no such thing as an ‘average’ studio in Equatorial Guinea. All of them, however, are built around a computer and run through a programming software—even if some still depend on acoustic and electric instruments.

⁸⁷ The avalanche has come with costs for well-established studios. Popular guitarist and producer Ossisi Solo regretted the changes during an interview: ‘my studio used to work well. For a while, I kept improving it and purchasing new sound tech with the money I made from recordings. But it’s not working quite well now, because there’s too many studios and therefore fewer customers’ (Ossisi Solo, interview with the author, 9 April 2018).

Let me take as a case study R.B. Sound Track Studio, owned, built, and run by Rubén Edú, who was introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Rubén is a Malabo-based producer and musician of Fang origin who represents a neat example of what would locally be considered a professional producer and sound engineer. Trained as a computer scientist in Bamenda, Cameroon, he works as a full-time technician at Marathon Oil. In his spare time, he runs one of Equatorial Guinea's most popular recording studios. And he still finds the time to conduct his church band and teach the church's young musicians. Rubén first learned music theory, piano, and guitar from Fausto Luis Dougan, a member of the Fernandino ethnic group in his late 60s who left Equatorial Guinea as a kid and became a professional musician in Spain before returning to his home country in the early 1990s. Rubén then taught himself electric bass and drums, and in the late 1990s he participated and won a local singing contest together with his brother. In the early 2000s, he started to make amateur recordings with a 2-track cassette recorder and soon got his hands on a basic Tascam. In 2007, he moved to Cameroon to study a degree in computer science and encountered a digital studio for the first time, run by local priests who taught him the basics.

Rubén first built a little studio in his family patio near the Malabo old townhall in 2010. He only had a computer he brought from Cameroon and a couple of old speakers. But his growing popularity and skilfulness granted him more and more customers and he managed to save some money to keep improving his equipment. In 2014, the studio felt too little, and he built a new one just across the patio, where he had enough space to fit a control room and a separate booth.

I was lucky enough to meet Rubén quite early in my fieldwork, and I learned much of what I know about Equatoguinean music in his studio. The first time I entered R.B. Sound Track Studio, the place felt marvellously small but cosy, warm, and

welcoming. With walls made of wooden planks and an aluminium roof, like most traditional buildings in the country, the outside looks like a big, unstable box that will not resist the Equatorial rains. But the inside reflects the passion and care Rubén puts into his ‘second home’. Upon entering the main door, one finds oneself directly in the control room (see Fig. 3.6). There is a cool breeze coming from the AC system that always feels nice amid the usual Malabo hot and humid weather. The walls are covered in wooden strips, and throughout the cow-hide-effect ceiling are pieces of foam intended to create some insulation. A black and orange sofa against the left wall invites guests to sit and enjoy the recording process, accompanied by some sweets that Rubén usually has on a little table by the sofa. In the front-left corner is a Roland electric drumkit with an old and uncomfortable table chair. On the front wall hang several electric guitars and basses, an old Yamaha keyboard below. On the right, next to the keyboard, a somewhat disorganised desk supports an HP laptop and an Apple computer, alongside a sound card, a couple of speakers, and a plaque from Marathon Oil with the words: ‘Rubén Edú Nguema Biye: Employee of the Month’. Above the desk is a window that communicates between the control room and the small booth.



Figure 3.6: Rubén working in his R.B. Sound Track studio. (Source: author)

As the internal material culture and the layout of his studio demonstrate, Rubén has the technical capital, and the knowledge of what a modest Global North-based studio looks like. While he has not technically trained as a sound engineer or producer, he is locally considered a professional, a category that is often awarded not only based on skill level but also on technological and material capacity—both of which Rubén possesses. He prides himself on being an eclectic producer, and part of his business success stems from this. Being proficient in a variety of African and global genres, customers of all generations and ethnic groups faithfully trust him. During the time I spent at the studio, he recorded rap songs and R&B, gospel music and Afrobeats, zouk and blues, makossa and even a film soundtrack. Economically, there are worse and better times and genres that are more profitable than others. Lately, religious music has been popular, and encouraged by Rubén’s connection with the gospel music scene, more and more church choirs have been keen to (cram into and) record at his studio. But

if something reliably provides periods of high work intensity and profitability, that is the praise song economy, in particular during electoral campaigns.

The Economics of Recording Praise Songs

The vast display of propaganda and the outright monopolisation of the sonic public space during elections by the Obiang government, as the chapter introduction suggests, encourages the rise of a music economy based on the recording of praise songs. This economy, of course, is alive and well throughout the year. But it gains prominence in the weeks prior to key political events, such as the President and the Vice-President's birthdays, milestone PDGE meetings, and electoral campaigns. Accordingly, many people across the country seek to profit—economically or otherwise—from music making. This includes producers and singers but also members of the elite, who sponsor the recording of praise songs as a gift to the party and the ruling family, expecting to build new relations or strengthen existing ones in order to climb the power ladder. Aware of these machinations, singers rush to record songs that they can exchange with politicians, entering complex relations of patronage described earlier in this thesis. This section, however, explores the economic relations that emerge between singers and studio producers—relations that do not directly involve patrons but depend greatly on patronage rules and expectations.

As I anticipated in the previous chapter, the combination of oil capitalism and growing patronage is triggering more and more singers into a speculative economy to seek to enter relations of patronage. Through recording praise songs and then presenting them to potential sponsors, they expect to enforce a redistribution of oil money. The exchange between producers and singers is (from the outset) more straightforward: the

singer pays cash (or creates a debt, as we will see) for the producer's labour. Usually, a singer comes to a recording studio with a pre-composed melody and/or lyrics. The studio producer then takes care of creating the digital beat or playing and recording the musical instruments, recording the singer, and finally, editing, mixing and mastering the song. Most Equatoguinean studios operate according to a project-based model, where they charge by the song or album, rather than by the hour. The model works especially well for highly skilled producers who can work quickly, but the increasing amateurisation of artists, attracted by higher demand for praise songs, complicates the business. In Rubén's words: 'The system is profitable for the producer when the singer is good enough and the recording takes little time. But more and more often they come terribly unprepared, and I'm forced to spend hours and days trying to correct all their mistakes'.

The project-based model seems to be becoming more common in other (market-based) African new-industry recording studios, like Eisenberg (Forthcoming a) notes in Kenya through his Still Alive Studio. In his portrait, Eisenberg describes this studio as a 'true production house' focused on the supply of production service, including the skill and labour of creative producers. This model is in fact the most widespread in Equatorial Guinea, where producers stick exclusively to their production profit, choosing not to enter further relations of managing, promotion, or rights distribution. In fact, they waive altogether any rights on the songs they create, even though most of the musical and compositional work is done by them and not the singers. As we will see in the final section of the chapter, this relates directly to the level of political involvement producers are willing to pursue.

The economics of studio production thus seems quite transparent and unambiguous, compared to the complex relations of dependence that subsequently

emerge between artists and patrons when exchanging songs (see Chapter 1). And yet many variables come into play when setting the price, negotiating, and collecting the money. The price of recording a song varies considerably between studios and depending on what exactly is being recorded. At a relatively high-end studio such as Rubén's, the fixed prices are: 45k CFA (ca. £62) for a beat, 50k CFA (ca. £69) to record the voices and finish the song when the beat is brought by the singer, and 100k CFA (ca. £138) for the full package. But at bedroom studios such as that of ACM Ghetto, teenagers record their songs for as low as 2k CFA (£2.75), and sometimes, even for free. So the aesthetics of the eventual track depend on how much one can afford to pay

Producers may have 'fixed prices', but as Sara Berry has noted, negotiability is 'a pervasive feature of social and economic process' in Africa (Berry 1993, 13), and so is the case within the recording studio. A major factor in the negotiations is whether a song is sponsored by a member of the elite. Take the following example. One day at Rubén's studio, a woman in her 40s (who I shall call María) comes in. She greets us, sits on the sofa, and starts inquiring about Rubén's prices. Since María is a Bubi and Rubén is a Fang, the conversation takes place in Spanish. Rubén shows her a piece of paper with the 'fixed prices', as listed above. While the woman reads the paper, Rubén shows me photographs of the Marathon-managed oil rig where he sometimes works. María speaks again, expressing her agreement with the price but adding that she is in a hurry to record: her village's football league is kicking off the day after and she would like to have a song to be played at the event. Rubén listens attentively and then tells her the timeline is tricky, as he already has some appointments for the day. But if she is willing to work late, it could be done.

Rubén then asks María to get into the booth to record a guide vocal track which he will work from in order to compose and programme the instrumental section of the

song before she comes back with a few other singers to record the final vocal lines. As she starts singing in Bubi across the glass, we overhear the name ‘Nguema Obiang’ (the President’s eldest), whose birthday happens to be only a few days later. Rubén looks at me and whispers: ‘I have just been tricked. She didn’t mention it was that kind of song’. Noting my confusion, he continues, while María keeps singing in the booth: ‘when a song praises an *ilustre* [literally, “illustrious”, “distinguished”; i.e. a big man], I charge more, because singers are being sponsored to record it or else they’ll make big money performing at an *evento*’. María finishes and leaves, and Rubén explains to me further: his hunch is that her real intention is to play the songs at the league opening because she knows there might be an *hermano militante* (party member) around. And since he will probably approve of the song, she might gain an invitation to sing at Nguema’s birthday party, where artists allegedly make at least 500k CFA (ca. £670) per song performed.

The vignette suggests a conception of ‘price’ that does not align with capitalist notions of market exchange. As Valenciano-Mañé has argued in her ethnography of clothing goods provision in Equatorial Guinea, price in the country often becomes ‘a political device, rather than a calculation of the labour and production costs of commodities’ (Valenciano-Mañé 2018, 52). Rubén’s expectations to be paid higher come from the fact that the singer is or will be sponsored by a wealthy patron, not by a calculation of the amount of time he will spend working on it or the quality of the technology used. In fact, he will record the song for María by working just one late evening session, in marked contrast with the months he spent on complex and well-thought through productions such as rapper Negro Bey’s *El Trovador* album.⁸⁸ Rubén aims to exercise rational pricing based on a set of moral rules usually considered fair by

⁸⁸ https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_nXM4PUmC5vjUp62X6VdqisV9_tNQq0KbE (accessed 4 May 2021).

both producers and artists: charging higher for the recording of praise songs is accepted by most singers because it is a legitimate mechanism to enable oil money to trickle down. In other words, producers, just as artists, have the right to tap into patrons' pockets. Both parties operate within a set of rules defined by common beliefs that the extraverted wealth derived from the exploitation of oil should be distributed more fairly.

In the vignette, Rubén feels tricked because María did not account for her future plans with the song. But in the end, Rubén decides to keep going, accepting the risk María already bears by looking to participate in the speculative economy I have been describing. Furthermore, María herself is likely to get tricked by patrons who often refuse to pay artists after hiring them to perform at private parties, as we will see in the next chapter. The lack of real regulation, the negotiation and calculation, and the asymmetry of value scales that the vignette shows are key features of African economies, as Jane Guyer (2004) has famously argued. Rather than perceiving these characteristics as weaknesses, African economic actors manipulate and exploit these disjunctures to create margins of profit—to realise a 'marginal gain'.

Overall, the example shows how risk and uncertainty is passed down from patrons onto singers onto producers. Despite producers like Rubén aiming to establish rational pricing and to detach themselves from the patronage economy, they too tend to get pulled into the web, often attracted by the possibility of spectacular fees. But many other times they suffer economic exploitation they did not agree to. During my fieldwork, Rubén complained about how some singers never paid him for his work and then became extremely popular thanks to songs he had produced. In their refusal to negotiate back or to claim due payments, some producers show a mix of exhaustion over everyday trickery and fear of retaliation, since many female singers are wives or relatives of powerful state officials. And yet, as I depict next, while producers are often

forced to labour for free, they too have great power and control over almost every aspect of the recording process.

Production Labour and Technological Affordances

Once negotiations have taken place and a price has been agreed between producers and artists, the recording starts. Artists are involved in the production process in heterogeneous ways, but the praise song economy attracts a particular type of singer that is often not very experienced. This section explores the micro-relations developed in such cases, and the particular use of technology by producers to overcome challenges arising from the need to create fine products with mediocre material and in little time. For the sake of the narrative, I'll continue with the case of María, which provides a neat example of a typical song recording in the speculative praise song economy.

Picking up from where we left it, María has departed the studio, Rubén has helped two other customers, and he is now playing back the guide track for María's song and developing arrangement ideas on his keyboard (see Fig. 3.7). In this case, the singer came to the studio and recorded the vocal guide track. But on many occasions, singers simply send him a voice message via WhatsApp where they mumble around some improvised melodies—confirming the argument that 'electronic and digital technologies afford and enhance a dispersed and collaborative creativity' (Born 2005, 24). At the most, some singers give indications of the type of '*ritmo*' (literally 'rhythm', meaning 'genre') they would like the song to be. But at other times Rubén figures it out by himself just from the style of the vocal line.



Figure 3.7: Rubén develops ideas for a beat. (Source: author)

Like most producers in Equatorial Guinea, Rubén creates his beats on a pirated version of Fruity Loops Studio, a DAW created by Belgian company Image-Line. The process of programming a beat can be as quick as Rubén wants or needs. In the case at hand, where the singer wants her song by the end of the day, he draws on a pool of pre-programmed rhythmic patterns that he creates on quieter days. ‘We are gonna make a *makossa* because it’s very popular among the Bubi and it fits well with what María recorded. The Bubi *makossa* includes the African clave on the hi-hat and a subtler snare drum. That’s why I’m using this pattern’, explains Rubén. Often recording amateur singers, Rubén needs to develop an ear and an eye to understand customers’ needs without waiting for them to verbalise complex musical ideas.

What I always do, for example with *mamás* [literally ‘mum’, used to refer to older women in a warm but respectful way], is to look at how and when they clap, dance, and stomp with their feet. That reveals the rhythm and the genre they want. I gotta be creative, yes, but I also try to understand what singers need.

Having settled on the rhythmic structure, Rubén now moves quickly from the keyboard to the large Apple computer to the smaller HP laptop in the middle, where he begins to compose and programme his beat. Because he will later add an electric guitar and bass, for this song he will only include a fairly simple piano line. For that, he draws on reFX Nexus, a sampler Virtual Studio Technology (VST) plugin that offers a large library of sounds and virtual instruments. After finding a sound he likes, Rubén hits the record button on his laptop and moves quickly to the keyboard to record a 4-bar line over the rhythmic pattern. Then he goes back to the laptop and, by moving little squares back and forth, he easily fixes any rhythmic mistakes he made (see Fig. 3.8).

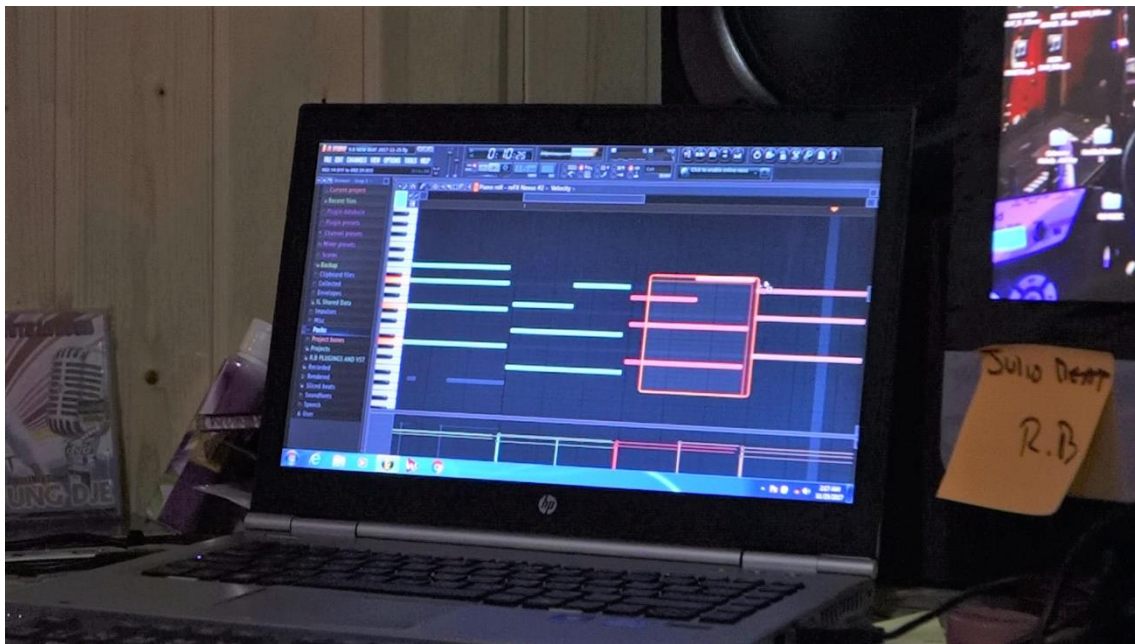


Figure 3.8: Rubén corrects rhythmic mistakes on Fruity Loops Studio. (Source: author)

The centrality of the visual component in DAW software, which provides a ‘new kind of musical and sonic notation’ (Théberge 2015, 332; 2013), facilitates composition and production in a context where formal music education is deficient. While Rubén has great musical skills and ‘knows’ what he is doing, the Fruity Loops Studio interface, like other DAWs, is easy enough for amateur producers to create music from scratch.

Rubén inputs the notes directly from his piano keyboard, but those beatmakers who do not own one just use the computer keyboard or mouse. The rapid introduction of digital production software is behind the mushrooming of beatmakers in Equatorial Guinea, where more and more young men with little or no formal musical training but enough computer skills are creating brilliant beats in their bedrooms with no more than a laptop and a pair of headphones. In fact, the single most popular genre at the time of my fieldwork—*temblete*, which I explore further in Chapter 8—was created in the most precarious studios in the poorest neighbourhoods of Malabo and Bata.

Once the beat is finished, Rubén exports the file and transfers it onto his Apple computer, which he uses to record vocals and electric instruments, and to edit, mix and master the songs. Like most producers in the country, Rubén started working with Adobe Audition (formerly Cool Edit).⁸⁹ But in the middle of my fieldwork he switched to PreSonus Studio One, which according to him, had worse mixing features but was overall better than Adobe Audition. On Studio One, all the tracks from the beat are reduced into a single track, which makes it easier to mix with everything that will be recorded next.

Later on the day that María first arrived, she returns to the studio, accompanied by three other women who will record chorus lines. Before she begins, María confesses, she still needs to finish her lyrics: ‘*Chico*, I’ve had a busy week!’ Rubén is more than used to singers not going into the studio ‘with the homework done’. Some singers even go into the studio without any lyrics and write them down on the spot, based on notes they took at PDGE meetings or watching TV news. The lyrics then combine praises of a

⁸⁹ Only a few venture into more complex DAWs such as Steinberg Cubase or Apple Logic Pro.

past event or details of a future one with name checks of the President, his relatives, or a wealthy sponsor.

Happily for Rubén, María finishes quickly and she goes into the booth to record the lead vocal line, warning on the way that she has a sore throat today. Even so, she is done after only three tries. The recording is not perfect, but as I have seen Rubén do many times, he would rather spend less time recording and instead work more correcting inconsistencies during the editing process. Next, the three members of the choir go into the booth together. All of them young and inexperienced, it takes a bit of time for them to shrug off their embarrassment. Patiently, Rubén jokes about and encourages them, to make the environment less intimidating. He also sings along to help them find the right pitch, displaying his experience instructing young singers at his church. After a few tries, it is obvious that the choir also have difficulties singing in time, so Rubén stands up and starts conducting them through the glass. But still, he is not totally happy: the choir harmony is a bit too simplistic in his opinion and he proposes to harmonise it a bit. María seems reluctant at first but she ends up agreeing, and Rubén teaches the girls a new melody. A few minutes later, he is pleased enough with the recordings and asks María to go home and come back later that night to collect the song on an MP3 file.

Once the beat is done and the voices are recorded, Rubén adds electric guitar and bass lines. Having already memorised the main harmonic structure, he rehearses just a couple of times, creatively engaging the singers' melodies but also respecting the genre's particularities: 'in Bubi *makossa*, it's important to leave a "raw chorus" at the end comprising only the vocals and the percussion section'. Standing close to the computer in the control room (see Fig. 3.9), he records himself at the bass before doing the same at the guitar. The process of composing, rehearsing, and recording the guitar

and bass lines barely takes 30 minutes. Many contemporary producers and beatmakers cannot play a musical instrument, and they still create high quality songs. But the most respected ones are excellent sound engineers but also master one or several musical instruments. Besides Rubén, this is also the case with Ossisi Solo, one of the country's greatest guitarists, and David Bass, an experienced bass player and current producer at a studio owned by *producer* and First Lady's brother Cándido Nsúé Okomo (aka CANO, see Chapter 2).



Figure 3.9: Rubén recording a bass line (Source: author)

Having finished the recording, the final part of the process encompasses editing, mixing, and mastering. Once again, Rubén spends more or less time on these depending on the type of song and on his estimation of the quality appropriate for the envisaged event. For the one I am describing, he took less than an hour, of which most of the time went into fixing off-key inaccuracies made by the singers. At this stage, vocal

manipulation software such as Auto-Tune and Melodyne enables Rubén to modify pitch on a note by note basis, making singers sound pitch-perfect. As existing research emphasises, digital audio-recording technologies possess an outstanding ability to compensate for musicians and singers' mistakes, especially at the level of pitch manipulation (Wikström 2020, 120). The process as a whole suggests that these praise songs are highly generic, but they still fulfil the speculative instrumental functions for which they are intended.

Minutes after exporting the song into an MP3 file, María passes by one more time. Rubén plays the song for her and she quickly shows her delight. Looking at me, she adds: 'he really knows what he's doing, he knows the kind of *ritmos* that we like!'. But excitement is quickly followed by awkwardness: María does not have the cash to pay Rubén right now, but she promises to deliver it in a couple of days. Rubén will remain unpaid until María manages to get some 'help' from a sponsor or to be invited to perform at an *evento*.

The production process described in this section points to how much a recorded song depends on the producer and his employment of digital technology. As I have tried to show, whereas María came to the studio with barely a vocal line and some unfinished lyrics, Rubén composed, arranged, and programmed the beat, harmonised and recorded the vocals while instructing and conducting the singers, composed and recorded electric and bass lines, and edited, mixed, and mastered the song. And he did all this in less than half a day, adapting to the singer's tight schedule. The result is not a terribly creative song, but it is a perfectly balanced, highly danceable tune that the customer ultimately loved.

The vignettes illustrate how the job of the producer is complex and requires a combination of musical and technological skill, adaptation, charm, and a fine balance

between determination and flexibility. Rubén is warm and nice and at times funny and encouraging, but when needed, he displays an authority he thinks necessary to create a high-quality product:

Sometimes, singers come with ideas that sound very weird to me. Often, the lyrics are long and rushed, as if they want to say everything that needs to be said about the PDGE, but they don't think about the musicality. So that's where I enter. The producer must convey a certain authority, even if the artist is very popular. But still I try to respect the customer's inspiration.

As Louise Meinjes (2003) vividly argued, the African recording studio is a privileged space to examine conflicting power relations and negotiations. While Equatoguinean producers are drawn into patronage's uncertainties, risk, and economic exploitation, as I pointed out in the previous section, they still maintain a great deal of control over music aesthetics. During the recording process, many singers are exposed as musically untrained and unskilled, and therefore forced to accept producers' decisions. Digital technologies and software facilitate and speed up the recording of non-trained and amateur singers, but the process is still dependent on the technological knowledge and material capacity of highly skilful producers.

Credit and Disentanglement in Music Production

Spending much time at various recording studios during my fieldwork, I became well aware of the important role that producers have throughout the process of creating recorded music. What came as a constant shock to me was the little amount of credit they got in the street. Once a song is produced and starts circulating and being consumed, it is immediately associated with the singer or rapper, even though some barely put any labour or musical skill into the production. It is well-known that with digitisation and the demise of physical recordings, the information previously included in booklets is now lost. But even in sonic name checks at the beginning and the end of

songs—which are becoming more common through the influence of rap and reggaeton—producers are rarely acknowledged.

One of the reasons behind this is the fact that for years, upon the arrival of the first computers in the country, rappers began to self-produce digital recordings with pirated and downloaded beats. With subsequent specialisation and the emergence of beatmakers and digital producers, this work remained unrecognised. In fact, the average Equatoguinean is quite unaware of the exact role of the producer, who is normally known to be just *‘el que “toca” el ordenador’* (that who ‘touches’ or ‘plays’ the computer). This description, as the section above illustrates, falls rather short and ignores the producers’ involvement at the level of composition, arrangement, performance, harmonising, teaching, and conducting—indeed a trend that also relates to the role of producers elsewhere in Africa (Eisenberg Forthcoming a).

And yet, whereas there is no doubt that producers are proud of their own work, working behind the scenes can be extremely useful in a country as highly politicised as Equatorial Guinea. Consider the next example. I am with Rubén during the editing of María’s song. As we listen closely in search of mistakes, we arrive at a verse where she is particularly profuse in her praise for Obiang. Rubén bursts out laughing. I suspect I know why, but still ask ‘what’s the matter?’. His reply catches me off-guard: ‘she’s so off-pitch! Hahaha’. What to me is the striking aspect—the lavish praise—to him is absolutely ordinary. His full attention is on the musical aspects of the song. His goal is to make everything sound just right. When I ask him whether he has any objections about recording praise songs, he answers: ‘I really don’t care what they sing. They come with their ideas, which is work, and I just do it’. Detaching himself from the lyrics places him in an apolitical position where he tries to avoid any risks associated with the uncertain market in praise songs, as well as their uncertain outcomes.

Such a move also operates in the other direction. During my fieldwork, I spent countless hours observing and participating in the recording of popular rapper Negro Bey's album *El Trovador*.⁹⁰ Musically, the album was challenging to both Negro Bey and Rubén, who collaborated to produce a uniquely complex fusion of rap and traditional Fang music. Once again, Rubén kept away from the content of the lyrics. Negro Bey is known to be one of the most critical artists in the country and he has several times had problems with the local authorities (see Chapter 8). During the recording of a particularly harsh song, and while Negro Bey is in the booth, Rubén looks to me and a couple of other people in the control room and jokingly says: 'don't go around saying I recorded this!'. Rubén is more than aware that some people will inevitably know who produced the song, but he still reminds us publicly that he is not responsible for the lyrics: only the music. He thus takes a safer position to avoid any hint of retaliation or repression from the state.

Like Rubén, many other producers disentangle themselves from the songs they create, abdicating political responsibility and trying to reduce any risk. The lack of credit received for their productions grants them a relative anonymity and secures them a heterogeneous clientele. This ambiguous and 'silent' position towards politics, also common among other African musicians living in authoritarian contexts (Dave 2014), grants them physical security and economic benefit to get by on a daily basis.

⁹⁰ See footnote 88.

Conclusion

The digitisation of the recording studio has enabled the creation of an unprecedented amount of recorded music in Equatorial Guinea. The increasing access to laptops and the growing use of DAWs have encouraged the proliferation of beatmakers and producers, making artists less dependent on earlier forms of production tightly linked to patronage from the state and the ruling family. Has music production therefore been democratised by the introduction of digital technology? We could argue it partially has. But as Nick Prior (2018, 86–92) argues, the idea of the democratisation of music depends on what we understand by democracy, a concept that is particularly complex to define in African states. Moreover, is production democratic if (beyond easier access to recording technologies) it is still shaped by patronage and hierarchical relations, from the genres encouraged to the lyrics, from the process of recording to the circulation and sale of songs?

On the one hand, the immediate social relations linked to who can and who cannot make recorded music have been widened through digitisation and easier access to music technologies. In this sense, production has been democratised. But on the other hand, this realm of sociality remains, as I have argued throughout the chapter, tightly embedded in the wider hierarchical and unequal social relations bequeathed by patronage. A closer study of contemporary music production demonstrates that the state, the PDGE, and the ruling family persistently encourage the recording of praise songs, in particular during periods of intense political activity like the 2017 campaign. Aware of the potential benefits of meeting this demand, people across the country—many of them with little singing experience—rush to the recording studio, where they find skilled producers capable of creating good products with the software at their disposal.

While the impact of digital technology on music production and the music economy can be felt, economic structures and social forms ‘largely predate the widespread use of recording technologies. [...] Some of the distinctive ways in which DAWs inserted themselves into existing production networks tell us more about extant [...] sociomusical structures’ (Bates 2016, 282). An ethnographic look at labour, social relations, and technological use in an Equatoguinean studio reveals an increasing amateurisation of singing motivated not only by the affordances of digital technology but also by a highly demanding patronage economy and the temporal nature of local politics.

Chapter 4: Performing Power: Oil, Spectacle, and Illusion at *Eventos*

Introduction

Live popular music is hard to find in Malabo. While recorded music blasts from taxis, bars, restaurants, and hairdressing salons, public street performances are rare, and private concert halls and venues are non-existent.⁹¹ Cine Marfil in Malabo and Okangom in Bata, which were originally cinemas during the colony and then became the main venues of the 1970s dance bands, are now closed, surviving only in the memories of older musicians. Even beer gardens and bars—well known across Africa for providing stages for some of the best live music in the continent—are scarce.⁹² Live music decayed quickly in the last years of the Macías regime, and the 1980s economic recession deepened the crisis, with many relevant artists such as Hijas del Sol, Mastho Ribochó, and Baron Ya Búk-Lu leaving the country in search of a better life. During my fieldwork, a few nightclubs such as Carmen Galaxy put on rap or *temblete* shows every now and then, but they were mostly attended by the very singers and crews that were performing, and therefore did not generate any income for artists through the sale of tickets.

With the oil boom came great flows of cash that, rather than encouraging entrepreneurial ventures that animated the take-off of a live music business, boosted

⁹¹ A popular exception is the *bonkó* or *ñánkue*, a ritual dance performed by the *Fernandinos* and *Annoboneses* ethnic groups during the Christmas period that takes the form of a masked procession through the streets of Malabo (I. de Aranzadi 2014).

⁹² The lack of live music performance also ties to racialised forms of everyday oppression: during my time in the field, a couple of bars hosted cover bands on the weekends, but only drummer Alex Ikot's band at *Aviator* was regular. The audience at this pub was largely white. As it often was at what constituted notable exceptions in the live music scene: the French and Spanish cultural centres.

increasing expenditure by the petro-elites in private parties where music performance is fundamental. With growing investment in the last few years, the elites have effectively monopolised the live music scene, making these parties highly attractive but equally uncertain for singers. The chapter thus points towards a new kind of stratification of musical life resulting from oil wealth and the increasing privatisation of live performance itself, which has become the preserve of the wealthy and powerful. As I will argue below, privatised music performance participates in the wider enclaving characteristic of oil-dependent economies.

This chapter examines musical patronage in the context of performance by focusing on these parties, known locally as *eventos* (literally, events), i.e., celebrations that commemorate important life-cycle events or institutional landmark dates. Ranging from birthdays and weddings to public institutions' or private companies' anniversary days, they are lavish, oil-funded elaborate rituals. Due to the centrality of music to *eventos*, they are a key source of income for artists. But beyond that, they comprise a multiplicity of economic exchanges, cultural meanings, and social functions—most notably the accumulation of prestige by the celebrants through their outstanding displays of wealth. *Eventos* could be considered 'total social phenomena' that expose ongoing social dynamics particularly well (Balandier 1961). As I will argue later in the chapter, *eventos* bear resemblance with other 'economic dramas' such as the Fang *bilaba* (Fernandez 1982, 136). But they also contain the spectacularism and excess typical of cultural shows in oil-rich countries (Apter 2005). Therefore, *eventos* are privileged spaces through which to explore the performance of power and the micro-social interactions between musicians and their patrons but also larger dynamics including the *longue durée* of exchange institutions and the impact of global oil capitalism on culture.

I draw on scholarship that takes performance in Africa to be not just the individual enactment or representation of artistic objects and everyday practices, but also a particularly contingent (and ephemeral) mode of social interaction (Barber 1987; Fabian 1990; Drewal 1991). In these writings, the emphasis is on process over form, and attention is given to the temporal nature of social practice. Performance thus not only reflects social formations: it becomes itself a privileged space for negotiation, reshaping, and transformation. In the field of music, scholars working on both traditional aspects (Berliner 1978; Chernoff 1979) and urban/popular genres (Coplan 1985; Waterman 1990; Erlmann 1996; Askew 2002) have not ignored the particularly powerful nature of performance in reconfiguring and creating social relations.⁹³ In the words of Erlmann, ‘performance cultures are processes of active structuralization of social relations rather than institutions annexed to social classes’ (1991, 180). Erlmann moreover encourages us to not dismiss the persistence of long-standing practices: despite wide-reaching processes of urbanisation and industrialisation throughout the 20th century, pre-industrial musics and practices remain a key influence in the evolution of South African performance (ibid., 180-81).

Particularly important for this chapter is the literature that attends to the imbrication of performance and power. Johannes Fabian inaugurated this line of thought by charging what he defined as ‘political naïvité’ in performance theory: ‘fascination with the communicative, esthetically creative, inspiring, and entertaining qualities of cultural performances all too easily make us overlook that the people who perform

⁹³ For a discussion of literature on performance socialities beyond the African context, see Georgina Born (2012). Born pays especial attention to works that look at the intersection between music’s micro-socialities and other ‘planes of social mediation’, such as wider social formations of class, ethnicity, and race (Born’s third plane) and the larger institutional forms that enable the production, circulation, and consumption of music (Born’s fourth plane). I take a cue from Born to make explicit the links between micro-interactions, social formations of class and patronage, and the larger, extraverted political economy so far discussed throughout the thesis.

relate to each other and to their society at large in terms of power' (Fabian 1990, 17). As we will see, performance at Equatoguinean *eventos* reinforces discourses and social relations that saturate daily life. At *eventos*, elites assert their political and economic power: their bigmanship is reinforced through the display of wealth, conspicuous consumption, and praise singing.

The chapter focuses, ethnographically, on the birthday party of one of President Obiang's daughters. It begins with a description of the lavishness as well as the highly securitised and private nature of the *evento*, which contrasts with older, public forms of life-cycle events celebrations. Then I move on to describe the aesthetics and organisation of the event, marked by seamless coordination and what I call a musical excess, or an overwhelming heterogeneity of genres and styles performed by an impressive number of artists. Then I turn to the micro-socialities of performance, which offer a unique window into patron-artist interactions driven by the public exchange of cash through money 'spraying'. Finally, I examine the contradictions inherent in *eventos*, which reflect the hopes and expectations but also the disillusion and uncertainties that come with oil booms.

A Birthday Party

It is past 10pm on a warm February evening, and I am with artist Taskiel Molón outside the Villa Brenda hotel in the Banapá district. Shortly, Taskiel will be performing on the hotel's patio, alongside many other local artists, for the 50th birthday celebration of Anita Mbasogo Obiang—wife of the then Minister of Aviation Fausto Abeso Fuma and one of President Obiang's daughters. The previous day, I interviewed Taskiel, who was flown in from Bata for the occasion, and he kindly invited me to attend the *evento*.

As we approach the security guards at the doors, the Porsche, BMW, and other luxury cars parked on the sidewalks right outside the hotel are difficult to miss. We are accompanied by Taskiel's local friends, José and María, but the imposing, black-suited guard is curious about my presence: a white man with a backpack, not particularly well dressed. 'Is he with you?', he asks looking at Taskiel, who replies with a nod.

The gated patio, surrounded by the main hotel's building and normally used as a car park, has been lavishly decorated for the event. An oval patio space at the centre, raised slightly off the ground, serves as the sitting area for invited guests. Several tents, adorned with white and red curtains and balloons, provide shelter over the 5ft round tables. About half the white-dressed, red-laced chairs are still empty. A cover band is performing at the centre of the sitting area, next to a lighted fountain. While the central spectacle will largely involve individual lip-synced performances—as usual at *eventos*—the live band adds to the stunning atmosphere. In a period of rapid decrease in the number of instrumentalists, bands have become a rare, luxury item. Two long, red carpets, lined with bright LED lights, connect both ends of the sitting area, surrounding the central fountain: as guests arrive, they cross a white-ballooned arch, take a quick stop at the photo-call area, and find themselves facing the stage at the other end of the oval. A large banner behind the stage wishes Anita a happy birthday. Sumptuous trays of food and a variety of drinks, including a generous number of Möet & Chandon champagne bottles, are set over two long tables on one side. Some two dozen waiters crowd around the tables and serve drinks to the guests as they arrive.

Taskiel rushes to his hotel room to get ready and leaves us wandering around. José proposes to find a seat at one of the tables, but we are ushered away by the staff: tables are for guests, we will have to stand. As we find our way outside the sitting area, I spot a couple of musician friends who I did not know were performing at the event.

Among them are Delmati, leader of the crew Dance Street Boys, and Ema B, a famous Fang singer to whom I will return later in the chapter. Being a last-minute guest at a very obviously exclusive and monitored party, I hesitate to take photographs or notes. But we finally find a more or less hidden corner with enough visibility and close to the area where singers gather before their performance.

Opulence and riches are brought into sharp relief at *eventos*. Anita's birthday, even before the music starts, aims to astonish and overwhelm. Like other oil-funded cultural spectacles across the world, *eventos* are a visible proof of the 'excess of wealth' generated by oil booms (Apter 2005, 201). In his now-classic *The Pan-African Nation*, historian and anthropologist Andrew Apter explores a cultural event—FESTAC '77 or the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture—to shed light on cultural production, class formation, and value transformation in the context of the Nigerian 1970s oil boom. Organised by the 'self-consuming' Nigerian state, FESTAC produced an extravaganza that placed the Nigerian nation at the centre of a new pan-Africanist movement. Elevated by impressive oil wealth, FESTAC was the best evidence that 'the magic of Nigeria's oil-fuelled modernity [...] was instant, effortless, and above all spectacular' (Apter 2005, 42). At the core was a 'seeing-is-believing ontology of the oil boom' (ibid.) that enhanced the credibility of a modernising and developing nation. This cultural drama worked as a 'stabilizing force' that obscured the otherwise mysterious character of oil-money and the absence of a productive political economy.

Beyond the spectacular infrastructures that emerged overnight throughout the country as a proof of Equatorial Guinea's oil-fuelled modernity, to borrow from Apter, *eventos* are the most visible proof of oil's seemingly magical nature (Coronil 1997). And yet, unlike Nigeria's FESTAC, particularly notable of Equatoguinean *eventos* is

their highly enclaved and private nature. Continuing with the Nigerian comparison, *eventos* also stand in stark contrast with the Nigerian private parties known as *ariya*, described by Christopher Waterman in the context of his work on *jùjú* music. Waterman argues that these events soften class distinction, especially as the sound flows out onto the streets and neighbours join the celebration:

At the outer limits of the àrìyá, poor residents of the host's neighbourhood or village gather, waiting for free food, drink, and a chance to join the dance. Sociospatial boundaries become less clear as the night progresses and the music radiates out into the streets of the city, or the uncultivated bush surrounding the village. Music is a sonic index of the successful àrìyá, the first indication a passerby has that something special is happening. Sound, rather than vision, defines the widest reaches of the àrìyá. (1990, 185)

While also meant to reflect status, the *ariya* offers a space for members of the community to come and enjoy the food and the music. At *ariya*, social boundaries are to some extent rendered more fluid. But the lavish display at Anita's birthday was only visible and audible after crossing the hotel's gates. Typically, *eventos* are held inside high-end hotels such as Villa Brenda or Hilton, or in private mansions in newly developed suburbs such as Paraíso. Indeed, rather than 'softening class distinction', *eventos* magnify social and economic differences between the privately partying elites and the rest of the population: the bigmanship and prestige of the elites are enhanced and exacerbated at these events, and social boundaries become more explicit.

Music performance has long been central to life-cycle events or public holidays in Equatorial Guinea. Among the Fang, for example, the birth of a baby is celebrated by a communal gathering accompanied by the singing of a female choir. And dance bands and other popular music groups have frequently performed at bank holidays known as *fiestas patronales*. As Fang elder Don Patricio Mañe Abeme Micha put it to me, such parties traditionally contributed to the enjoyment of the community as a whole, to create

a sense of togetherness and social cohesion.⁹⁴ In contrast, contemporary *eventos* effectively separate the population, accentuate class distinction, and intensify the striking absence of popular music performance in the country's public spaces: only those with the capital to throw such a party, or those who belong to the celebrants' close circle, can enjoy the spectacle.⁹⁵

At the level of spatial separation, *eventos* promote a sonic enclaving that emphasises the infrastructural violence common to oil-capitalist projects (Appel 2012; Watts 2001). As James Ferguson has pointed out, resource-extracting enclave production is hardly new in the African continent, but 'there does appear to be a new extremity in the way that many African states have withdrawn from their putative national societies, leaving export production concentrated in guarded enclaves that are increasingly detached from their surrounding societies' (Ferguson 2006, 13; see also 2005, 378). Through the privatisation of performance, the Equatoguinean elites are increasingly preventing the local population from enjoying the live music of some of their best performers.

Aesthetics: Coordination, Playback, and Heterogeneity

At about 11pm, when all guests are at their tables, the cover band starts to pack up. Shortly after, blasting from the loudspeakers, a voice announces: 'ladies and gentlemen, Dance Street Boys!' As people look around, four young boys suddenly appear and, running through the ballooned arch, along the red carpet, and towards the

⁹⁴ Although now resident in Malabo, Patricio is widely known as a 'culture bearer', often sought by locals to inquire about Fang tradition issues.

⁹⁵ As described above, even once inside the separation between 'official' guests and last-minute companions like me is obvious. As guests take centre stage by sitting at the tables, the rest gather around avoiding getting too close.

central fountain, they perform acrobatics to the public's amazement. After the brief show, a man by the name of Lucas Escalada, dressed in an impeccable black suit, takes the stage and introduces himself as the evening's 'event manager'. A recent returnee from the United States, Escalada runs a firm that, among other things, puts on fashion shows for high-end parties such as Anita's birthday. Escalada then introduces Diana Bolekia, a popular TV presenter who will be the MC of the evening's show. As Bolekia takes the stage in a dazzling red dress, she congratulates Anita for her birthday and thanks Anita's husband, Fausto Abeso, for organising the surprise party. The Minister of Aviation then makes his first appearance of the night, greeting the guests with a big smile. Puzzled by what I take to be a white *agbada* (traditional Yoruba tunic), I ask José whether Abeso's robes are a traditional Fang clothing: 'ah, boy, we confuse everything in this country', he responds. Bolekia then takes the mic back and announces '*una larga noche de espectáculos*' (a long night of 'spectacles', shows) with the participation of local popular artists such as Ela Nguema Ganster, Selín Samurai, Bituck Bibem, Nélida Karr, and Taskiel Molón. It is about 11.30pm and the show has just begun.

Part of the *eventos*' spectacle resides in their seamless coordination. Many other concerts I witnessed (at cultural centres, clubs, or beer gardens) displayed a chaotic and improvisatory character, with open-ended programmes, a lack of planning, failing technology, last-minute absences of key people (including the musicians themselves), or the cancellation of the event altogether. This was commonly described by my interlocutors with the words: 'in Equatorial Guinea, there's too much *desorden*' (disorder, 'discoordination'). At Anita's birthday, however, everything seems to flow: a whole entourage (organisers, managers, DJs, speakers/presenters, waiters, artists) make sure that all runs smoothly. Singers are even handed a programme of the event for them to be ready quickly to take the stage when the time comes (see Fig. 4.1).

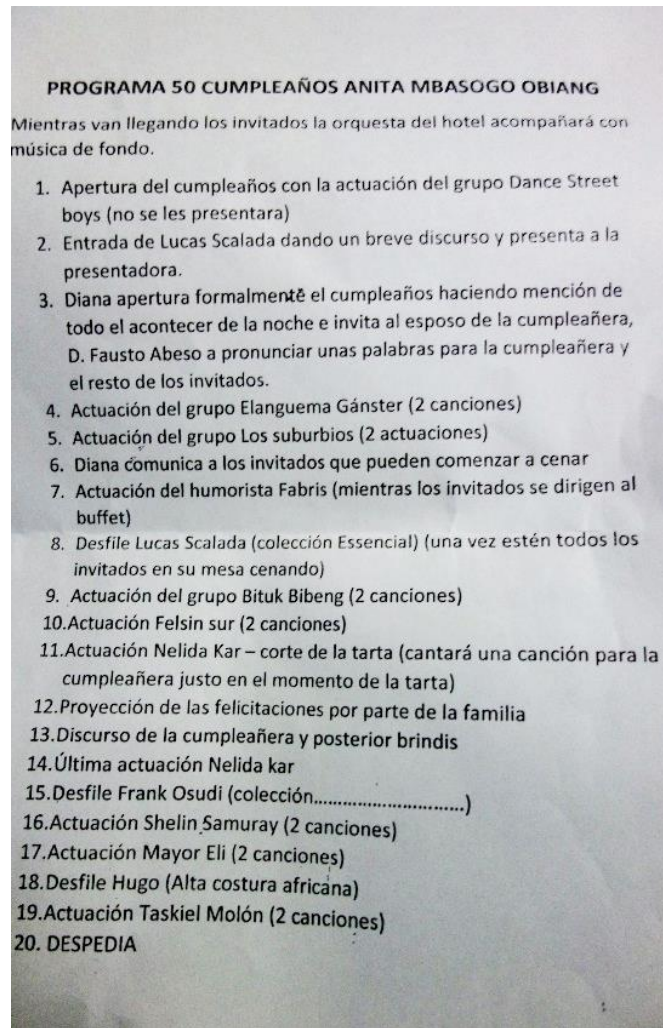


Figure 4.1: Snapshot of the party's programme. (Source: author)

Throughout the evening, comedians, dancers, and fashion models entertain the guests as they eat and drink. But central to the event is musical performance, which comprises about a dozen singers and groups. As specified in Fig. 4.1, each artist/group performs two songs on a small, empty stage, lip-syncing to pre-recorded tracks. Lip-syncing, known locally as *playback*, has become a widespread and accepted practice in the last two decades.⁹⁶ The increase in lip-syncing alongside the spread of digital

⁹⁶ A funny anecdote that proves how internalised playback is in Equatorial Guinea took place during a concert by Annobonese singer Elvidel at the Spanish cultural centre. Committed to preserving live performance, the centre always requires that singers avoid playback and are accompanied by instrumentalists. For the evening, Elvidel was joined on stage by six traditional Annobonese percussionists. After a few introductory words, the singer, ready to start, turns around and yells: 'let's go, DJ!'. The audience burst out laughing, well aware that that is the cue singers usually give to those behind

technologies in Africa is not unique to Equatorial Guinea. On the use of digital music in Ghanaian hiplife performance, Jesse Shipley (2013, 148) describes similar tendencies among rappers. Shipley associates these transformations with audiences' growing interest in the technological aspects of digital music and with the fact that 'artists feared deviating from recordings because audiences explicitly came to hear the hits and the spectacles of technological precision they represented' (ibid.). Similarly, the precision and clean sound afforded by lip-synced performance lines up with the rest of the elements in Anita's *evento*: it avoids the many perils of live performance, including deficient technology and unprepared artists. The performance is thus marked by technological simplicity, with the stage being absolutely empty and the setup being basically comprised of a laptop and a small mixing desk run by one man hiding in the back. The 'DJ', as these sound technicians are often called, has the MP3 files of the different artists in his laptop and is ready to click 'play' as soon as they jump onto the stage.

Unlike the case of hiplife, increasing lip-syncing in Equatorial Guinea is less to do with a particular technological fascination than with the aesthetic trends encouraged by the patronage economy. In particular, the progressive amateurisation of the popular music scene, as described in the previous chapters, makes it hard for some singers to actually perform live. Becoming popular by the circulation of recorded songs that were significantly modified and edited through digital software to hide vocal imprecisions (see Chapter 3), some singers depend on playback technology and lip-syncing to perform those songs. Lip-syncing has now become so widespread and accepted that it is adopted by all kinds of singers and rappers, even in non-elite performances, as I will show below. What gives value to the *eventos* is not the musicians' live performance

the laptop in charge of pressing 'play' at playback concerts. Embarrassed by her momentary confusion, she looks at the percussionists and continues: 'I mean, haha, let's start the song'.

skills. Rather, part of the celebrants' prestige is generated by their economic capacity to unite as many of the most popular artists as possible, often going to the extreme that most of them only perform one or two songs and some do not have time to perform at all.⁹⁷ Moreover, extra value and prestige is generated if artists are of international relevance and popularity, as I discuss more in depth in the final section of this chapter. At the highest-end parties (i.e. the President and Vice-president's birthdays), extremely popular and expensive Nigerian and Congolese artists are commonly featured, some of them expressly flown in for the occasion in the celebrants' private jets.⁹⁸

Characteristic of *eventos* is their extraordinary musical heterogeneity. Just as prestige is generated by the number of artists hired, so it is boosted by the variety of their styles. *Eventos* are thus multi-genre, multi-ethnic, and multi-generational in nature, and everybody seems to enjoy each one of the many performances. At Anita's birthday, the show opened with the omnipresent *temblete* youth crew Ela Nguema Ganster, who made everybody dance to their characteristic electronic genre, inflected with contemporary Nigerian Afro-pop, trap, and dub reggae. Singers such as Taskiel Molón and Selín Samurai are well-known representatives of Congolese *ndombolo*, the dance genre that developed from 1960s-70s Central African rumba. Elder singer Mayor Eli brought digitally produced versions of the Fang traditional rhythms, including popular

⁹⁷ Concerts with high number of artists that barely have time to perform are not exclusive to *eventos*. As I described in Chapter 2, shows organised by Nguema or the PDGE often have a similarly busy line up. In those cases, however, the reason behind is rather the tendency to pay to almost any singer that wants to perform, which can be interpreted as a display of generosity and an act of caring by the state institutions and key rulers.

⁹⁸ The aesthetic preferences that *eventos* generate (i.e. *playback* and short performances) have important ramifications that create unexpected barriers for musicians. Used to lip-syncing only a couple of songs, artists struggle to put on longer shows for other types of events, which in turn complicates their jump onto international markets. This was made evident at the Vis a Vis 2018 Festival. As was described in Chapter 2, artists had great problems trying to meet the expectations of Spanish promoters and managers who sought to recruit the most exceptional live performers for their summer festivals in Spain.

machacando. And Nélide Karr fascinated everybody with her unique combination of Bubi singing and jazz in what she dubs *Afro-fusion*.⁹⁹

The spectacular number of artists and the heterogeneity of their genres all build towards what I call a musical excess that is fundamental to the creation of prestige. The parade of artists, one after another, all performing different genres with almost no time for the public to process it all, contributes to the larger spectacularism of the event. Guests are meant to be overwhelmed by the economic capacity of the celebrants, who have enough money and power to pay for it all. This musical excess lines up with the excess of food and drink described in the previous section, all of it evidence of the excess of wealth produced by the oil boom. And yet, musical excess contrasts with the techno-musical simplicity of the performance itself, driven by a combination of a desire to avoid technical problems that could reveal miscoordination and the reality of a large pool of amateur singers that simply cannot perform live.

Faroteo, Exchange, and the Performance of Power

The evening progresses at Anita's birthday and a peculiar behaviour repeats over and over. As the different artists sing and dance, Anita, Fausto Abeso (Anita's husband), and other guests approach the stage and, while playfully dancing with the artists, shower them with cash. The ritual practice takes a variety of forms, always involving banknotes: celebrants either stick the banknotes on the singers' sweaty foreheads, or they toss notes onto them, or slip them into the artists' pockets. As notes fly into the air, one or two of the musicians' friends run around collecting them. Known

⁹⁹ It is important to note that Karr is a renowned musician that *always* performs live. As I discussed in Chapter 2, she may be one of the few in the country that ascribes with the *world music* market, and many Equatoguineans affirm that her music is 'too European' for the local taste.

locally as *faroteo*, the practice of money ‘spraying’ continues throughout the several performances with different levels of intensity.

The exchange of cash during a performance is not new in Equatorial Guinea.¹⁰⁰ As hinted at in Chapter 1, pre-colonial gift exchange institutions such as the *bilaba*, and other socio-musical activities such as dance crew showdowns incorporated the colonial currency into their ritualised routines. But crucially, ‘the exchange of money was only a salient element in a deeper drama’ (Fernandez 1982, 148): these performances involved ‘enduring social values’ (ibid.) related to bride payments, clan exogamy, prestige accumulation, and the creation of allegiances. Moreover, the case reaffirms common agreements among Africanist scholars about the multiple social uses of money in African societies, both in everyday and in ceremonial rituals, beyond reductionist notions of money as merely a standard of value (Geschiere 2000; J. I. Guyer 2004). While the public exchange of money is a source of income for artists, the conspicuous amounts of cash involved in these micro-socialities raise questions concerning power, inequality, and the performative nature of the elites’ behaviour. Indeed, if power is performative (Askew 2002; Ebron 2002; Fabian 1990), there is no clearer exhibition than the interactions between musicians and the elites as revealed through *faroteo* during musical performance. As Paula Ebron has put it, ‘elites and bureaucrats are also performers, and the full stage includes high players as well as low’ (2002, 5). Through money ‘spraying’, the high players perform power and generosity, enhancing their prestige and celebrating oil prosperity.

Power, inequality, and class difference are overly made visible through the materiality of the banknotes. Each note having a different colour, the financial capacity

¹⁰⁰ Money ‘spraying’ is also not unique to Equatorial Guinea, but a widespread practice across West and Central Africa (e.g. White 2008, 119).

and generosity of the ‘sprayers’ is publicly exposed: brown for 500- CFA notes, blue for 1000- CFA, pink for 2000- CFA, green for 5000- CFA, and purple for 10000- CFA (see Fig. 4.2). While some audience members resign themselves to ‘spraying’ one or a few brown notes (500 CFA buys, for example, a taxi journey or a beer at a bar), some others do not hesitate to flash green and purple ones. Usually, the big notes are placed on the sweaty forehead or chest of the singers, so that the rest of the audience will not miss the display of generosity. Prestige is also accumulated by making repeated appearances throughout the evening. At Anita’s birthday, the protagonist and her husband made frequent approaches to ‘spray’, reinforcing their already-evincing largesse.



Figure 4.2: Central African banknotes. (Source: author)

But in these performances of power, artists are not reduced to instrumental actors. They understand that *faroteo* is an important source of income. Delmati, leader of Dance Street Boys, affirmed to me that the cash collected from *faroteo* often exceeds the fee for the concert (which can range from 100k CFA up to 3 to 5m CFA for local

artists [from ca. £130 up to ca. £6600]). During a performance, a number of strategies are thus deployed to ensure as much ‘spraying’ as possible during the short 10 minutes each singer/group enjoys on stage. A visible example is the way some singers come off stage and approach the tables where relevant celebrants sit, semi-privately dancing for them, expecting the latter to reciprocate accordingly. *Faroteo* is also encouraged through ‘sonic deference’, which takes the form of improvised speech over the pre-recorded track or through the performance of praise songs. Among these, some are commissioned by the celebrants, for which artists charge separately. The lyrics focus exclusively on the honoured guest and the specific celebration, and therefore their ephemeral lives rarely extend beyond the *evento*. Their increasing popularity is afforded by Digital Audio Workstations, which have made music recording much easier and cheaper and less time-consuming (see Chapter 3). ‘If we agree on a good rate, I can make you a good tune in three hours. Because not only do I sing, I also make the beat and produce the song’, Ema B affirmed to me during an interview. At Anita’s party, artists such Nélida Karr and Ema B himself performed such songs, praising and congratulating Anita for her birthday. And those songs elicited a particularly high *faroteo*.

A common strategy to encourage *faroteo* is to perform songs that praise not just individual politicians or patrons, but the PDGE as a whole. On such occasions, a kind of double deference is animated through musical performance. On one level, musicians perform their flattery to their patrons through deference to the PDGE, which elites reciprocate with ‘spraying’. On another level, by increasing their *faroteo* for these songs, elites publicly show deference to higher ranks (e.g. the President or Vice-President themselves). Veneration through performance indeed plays a key role in social mobility among the elites: while the ruling family has stayed in power for decades,

other political positions (ministers, general directors, state secretaries) are quite unstable and shift rather regularly, generating an incessant search for power in which those portraying the most loyalty often succeed.

These political-economic practices permeate all kinds of performances beyond *eventos*, even in the most unexpected musical contexts. Take the following vignette, which illustrates the entanglement of *faroteo* and PDGE praising. In October 2017, I planned to attend an amateurish hip hop concert organised by young rapper Emway Biyogo. The event took place past midnight at Privé Night Club in Santa María III, a Malabo neighbourhood locally known for its alarmingly rising levels of street crime and gang activity. The concert was of the kind mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, where rap crews get together to perform at a nightclub but rarely generate any income. Normally, the nightclub provides free drinks for the teenage artists and the latter enjoy the space for socialisation. As I will depict in Chapter 8 through an exploration of the *temblete* genre, these performances are, from the outset, apolitical. But state politics and patronage logics also co-opt these non-elite shows.

On the night of the rap concert at Privé Night Club, completing the line-up were *temblete* and trap teenage crews—including GS Flow, ACM Ghetto, and Kwata Style—and rappers such as Mr. Game Mba. The audience struck me as oddly hybrid. Near the door, two or three dozen lower-class young men crowded together, many of whom were indeed members of the crews about to perform. At the counter, a few women and a couple of men in their late 20s enjoyed their drinks and looked around curiously, as if surprised by the event. Beyond the dance floor area, a group of older-looking people engaged in lively chat around a couple of tables. The concert developed just as many other I had attended: each crew approaches the DJ, copies their pre-recorded tracks onto

his laptop, and then lip-sync and dance to a couple of tunes before giving way to the next group.

Midway, Emway announced a special appearance: Ema B ‘the master’, from the group Bituck Bibem (referenced above), who happened to be his cousin. I then noticed that Ema was sitting at the table together with the group of older people, who I later gathered were his patrons. His performance was outstanding. He was highly charismatic and a terrific dancer, and even though his music felt a bit out of place,¹⁰¹ most people seemed to enjoy it. Some men from the table, one of whom wore a green t-shirt with a printed Obiang’s face, sporadically stood up and threw a few notes onto Ema. But the *faroteo* reached its climax when Ema performed his popular tune ‘PDGE’, a praise song originally sponsored by Jonchan Media—a privately-owned media company whose owners have ties to the ruling family.¹⁰² Sung in Fang, the lyrics were intertwined with a recitation in Spanish: ‘Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, founding president of the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea, PDGE; and his wife Constanica Mangue de Obiang, our good mother; Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, director of the political campaign; [...] to all the PDGE militant brothers!’ Three men were by then dancing with Ema and kept ‘spraying’ notes. He then shouted the party’s motto, which always takes the form of a call and response:

Ema B		The group
A man!	————→	<i>Obiang Nguema Mbasogo!</i>
A party!	————→	<i>PDGE!</i>
The best party!		
New politics!	————→	<i>New Horizons!</i>
Our slogan!	————→	<i>Democracy, Development, and Wellbeing!</i> ¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ He is known to have created a digitally-born genre dubbed *moturankuy*, which draws on traditional Fang xylophone rhythms and the vocal style of *machacando* pop star, 1980s legend Maelé.

¹⁰² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6T3uhDAV_o&ab_channel=MusicaEGCtv (accessed 6 May 2021).

¹⁰³ In the original Spanish: ‘Un hombre: *Obiang Nguema Mbasogo*. Un partido: *PDGE*. El mejor partido. Nuevas políticas: *nuevos horizontes*. Nuestro lema: *democracia, desarrollo y libertad*’.

At that point the sponsors were visibly roused, and the notes kept flying into the air. In an amateur rap concert taking place at a club in the rough outskirts of Malabo, the power of the state and the extreme politicisation of social life became evident—afforded and animated by the unique, affective nature of musical performance.

Beyond this vignette, the exchange of money during musical performance is well-rooted in Equatorial Guinea. As a mechanism of redistribution, artists exhibit a wide range of strategies and techniques to encourage their patrons to increase their *faroteo*. But the meaning of the exchange goes beyond a simple market exchange. Money ‘spraying’ is the visible, public exhibition of how generous patrons provide for their musicians-dependents. But at the same time, the practice reproduces the asymmetries of patronage. While ‘spraying’ looks apparently lavish at some points, musicians are nonetheless well-aware that their cut is a negligible amount of the wealth accumulated by the petro-elites through the appropriation of public funds.

Illusion, Expectation, and a Doubtful Hope

Oil is known to spur an array of dreams and expectations (Coronil 1997; Apter 2005; Wieszkalnys 2008). For transnational companies, the discovery of petroleum reserves draws new business avenues. For state officers and rulers, it may bring the promise of fast modernisation and open doors for private accumulation of wealth. And for other local actors, oil can generate hopes about life improvement through better public services or through access to whatever remnants of the money may trickle down. With oil, instantaneous riches seem attainable. This line of inquiry was opened by anthropologist Fernando Coronil (1997) in his landmark book *The Magical State*. In it, Coronil explores the profound transformations undergone by the Venezuelan state

during almost a century of oil boom. He shows how successive presidents appeared as transcendent figures capable of magically transforming the country into a modern nation: ‘State representatives, the visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money, appear on the state’s stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat’, Coronil writes (1997, 2).

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how, in Equatorial Guinea, the magical power of oil is performed at *eventos*. A direct result of this performance is the enchantment of the larger population by means of word of mouth.¹⁰⁴ In the Malabo streets, word about spectacular cultural displays and flows of money at *eventos* spreads in countless forms. Rumours fuel collective imaginations about conspicuous consumption, reproducing partial truths and creating new ones: ‘Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies’ (Cabrujas in Coronil 1997, 1–2). The higher level the celebration is, the more mysticism. Interviews and conversations with musicians who do not gain access to the big *eventos* are filled with hearsay of all sorts: legendary *faroteo*, singers walking out with black briefcases full of cash, evenings of free food, alcohol, and women, selfies with the Vice-president, and so on. While some of these are true, they are not the norm. As Coronil warns, what oil’s magic generates is also an ‘illusion’. Behind the myth that these rumours help to erect are stories of outstanding debt, inequality, and forced labour. In the final section of this chapter I turn to more negative accounts of participation at *eventos*, to bring the enchantment of oil together with the disenchantment it equally stimulates (Pratten 2017), continuing with the thesis’ larger arguments about patronage as a political economy of domination (see Chapter 2).

¹⁰⁴ I borrow the term ‘enchantment’ from David Pratten’s (2017) analysis of the works of Coronil, Apter, and others on the idea of the ‘magical state’ and the fetishistic qualities of oil.

There are two annual *eventos* that generate the most expectation: the President's and Vice-President's birthday parties, on 5 June and 25 June, respectively. A few days before Obiang's 2017 birthday, news and advertising breaks across media outlets are filled with good wishes from journalists and public and private companies: 'A great leader, President of the Republic and Head of State, Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who fights heroically to transform Equatorial Guinea'; or 'dynamic, moderniser, warm, pan-Africanist, homely, participatory'. Asonga TV announces the range of activities that will be organised for the occasion, including a fun race, a thanksgiving mass, the usual unveiling of a relevant infrastructural project (the National Park in 2016, the Malabo's seafront promenade in 2017), and a large concert to 'celebrate *in a grandiose fashion* the 75th birthday of Equatorial Guinea's principal statesman' (my emphasis).¹⁰⁵ The PDGE press office confirms a concert on the terrace of their headquarters involving 'over 50 national and international musicians in what promises to be a great *musical spectacle*' (my emphasis).¹⁰⁶

Every year, musicians of all genres look forward to these events, hoping that within the largesse proclaimed there might be room for some substantial reward for them. During my fieldwork in 2017, the President's birthday featured three different musical acts: a live cover band on a truck that drove around the streets of Malabo; the aforementioned concert at the PDGE headquarters; and a more luxurious private party in one of the President's palaces in La Colina, a newly developed and highly guarded residential complex outside Malabo. A singer that performed at the private party described the lavishness to me. Several international singers and bands were flown in

¹⁰⁵ In the original Spanish: 'Amenizar apoteósicamente los 75 cumpleaños del estadista principal de Guinea Ecuatorial'.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.pdge-guineaecuatorial.com/macro-concierto-la-oficina-nacional-del-pdge-malabo/> (accessed 6 May 2021).

for the occasion (from Cuba, Mexico, Mozambique), including the superstar Congolese soukous band Zaïko Langa Langa, which, my interlocutor assured, were paid some 15-20m CFA (£20k-25k) plus expenses. However, he lamented that the national artists were left to perform at the end of the show, which is often interpreted negatively, as celebrants may have spent all their cash ‘spraying’ the first bands. Because they were constantly being watched by security guards and middlemen, national musicians had little room for complaint. And beyond the unequal treatment, he had not yet been paid months after the event: ‘I haven’t even seen 100 CFA’.

Chapter 3 of this thesis argued that increasing availability of digital technologies and the promise of quick cash have pushed singers into a highly speculative economy where they compete to access patronage networks through recorded songs. This chapter shows that uncertainty and risk continue even after singers get hired to perform. Cases of outstanding debt are increasingly common: musicians frequently face the power of some members of the elite when the latter refuse to pay as per previously agreed terms. When trying to claim their money back, they are often met with intimidation and threats. Some musicians have now started to implement written contracts, with the hope that having the celebrants’ signature on paper, they will enforce the fulfilment of the conditions. But even with signed contracts, the examples of debt I came across are not few. A friend put it bluntly: ‘Do you think I can just bring my contract to a court and file a report? *They* create the law; *they* elect the judges: there’s no point in taking action’.

Similarly, the unequal treatment between national and international artists described above is a recurrent complaint by local musicians. A young Fang rapper recounted being invited to perform at a high-level politician’s party in the country’s continental region. Among the invited singers was Togolese popular *afropop* duo

Toofan. ‘I was paid 1m CFA just to perform a 3-minute song, which is a lot. But in comparison... Toofan... I don’t really know how much they were paid, but surely several millions. What I can tell, because I saw it myself, is that they at least made 20 million just from *faroteo*’. Equatoguinean musicians often presented this inequality to me as an example of what they perceive as abandonment by the local elites—as a failure of their patrons to meet the expectations that are determined by moral rules of redistribution.

After the oil boom, these expectations have grown exponentially, as Equatoguineans have witnessed the conspicuous consumption and lavish displays of wealth made by certain sectors of the population. Indeed, oil brings with it hope and imaginations of a better future (Weszkanlys 2008). But as expectations increase, so does risk and disenchantment. As Gisa Weszkanlys argues in her theorisation of the affective capacities of resource extraction, ‘lithospheric dreams of wealth, progress, and modernity emerge alongside anxieties and doubts about uncertain outcomes’ (Weszkanlys 2016, 127). Those artists fed with fantasies and rumours about *eventos* retain some hope that they might benefit from the oil boom. But, as the above examples show, and with the country now facing its largest crisis in over two decades, that hope has turned ‘doubtful’ (ibid.).

Conclusion

In *Performing the Nation*, Kelly Askew asserts that ‘as politics are predominantly performative, so too is performance predominantly political’ (2002, 127). This statement is particularly clear in *eventos*, where music-making comes in direct contact with the centre of power. Beyond regular media appearances, it is at

eventos where elites construct their personae, where they project their aura of the powerful: they become *los grandes* ('the big ones'). As already stated, these practices are not new to the oil period. According to Fernandez, the pre-colonial Fang *nkukuma* (big man, see Chapter 1) 'was not measured by the amount of his possessions alone but by the scale on which he entertained others. The rich man was he whose "name is in the mouth of many others"' (1982, 133). And similarly, Mbembe (2001, 123) has pointed to the centrality of performance—through a juxtaposition of the 'show of strength' and 'the debris of ritual acts of the past'—to the new articulations of power during the formation of the African postcolony.

And yet, the level of lavishness and spectacularism, coordination, and excess at *eventos* are directly linked to the unprecedented appropriation of public funds by the petro-elites. *Eventos* reflect the contradictions of patronage with unique clarity. Artists skilfully adapt to make the best of these performance opportunities and develop strategies and resources to encourage the redistribution of oil money. But importantly, there is also a symbolic capital in it for them: when Taskiel invited me to Anita's party, he probably did not mean to show me how musicians perform their inferiority in front of their patrons. He might have invited me because there is a certain pride in performing before important rulers, in proving one's creativity and artistry. Indeed, what is being performed at *eventos* is not just the petro-elites' power and 'wealth in people' but also musicians' links, as clients, to their powerful patrons—i.e. the social relations in which the musicians are themselves enmeshed, and which is a cause of pride for them.

But *eventos* also rise as an example of the profoundly unequal social relations in which patronage is embedded, and how these are magnified by a rentier economy exclusively dependent on oil extraction. Performance thus mediates symbolic capital

through patronage relations and oil-induced fantasies of quick accumulation with the violent nature of privatisation, enclaving, and unequal distribution.

Chapter 5: Digital Circulation and Infrastructures of Social Control

Introduction

One of the main arguments of the recent scholarship on the new music industry is that the emergence of digital and internet-based channels of distribution has profoundly transformed the ways in which people exchange music, in turn triggering shifts in the very structure of the business.¹⁰⁷ These works contend that physical recordings have given way to an unprecedented presence of music online. From P2P to music on-demand to streaming platforms, the circulation of music has become ever more fluid and faster. Platforms such as BandCamp, iTunes, and Spotify have become the primary sites for music consumption, shaped under the influence of the computing industry and GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon). In Africa, De Beukelaer and Eisenberg (2018) have noticed similar paradigm-shifting transformations resulting from increasing access to the internet through mobile phones and novel collaborations between musical actors and the booming telecommunications sector. This chapter is inspired by these works to address the impact of new means of digital circulation via mobile phones and the internet and how it affects and is affected by the prevailing social relations of patronage within which music is embedded.

Drawing on data from the World Bank, the percentage of internet users in Equatorial Guinea has increased over 1200% in the last decade—from 2.13% in 2009 to 26.24% in 2018. While far from the world average (50.76%), the country is positioned

¹⁰⁷ On these arguments, see Leyshon 2014; Morris 2015; Hracs, Seman, and Virani 2016; Taylor 2016, 118–53; Langley and Leyshon 2017; Spilker 2018; and Eriksson et al. 2019.

slightly above the sub-Saharan average of 25.12% (see Fig. 5.1). According to GITGE, the parastatal that manages the telecommunications infrastructure in Equatorial Guinea, the country has ‘one of the most advanced telecommunication networks in Africa’ (GITGE 2019). The use of smartphones, in particular, has grown exponentially in the last five years, becoming one of the privileged means for music storage, circulation, and consumption. And yet, in contrast with the literature above, a close ethnographic examination of music circulation in Equatorial Guinea reveals considerable divergencies not only between Africa and the Global North but also within Africa itself.¹⁰⁸

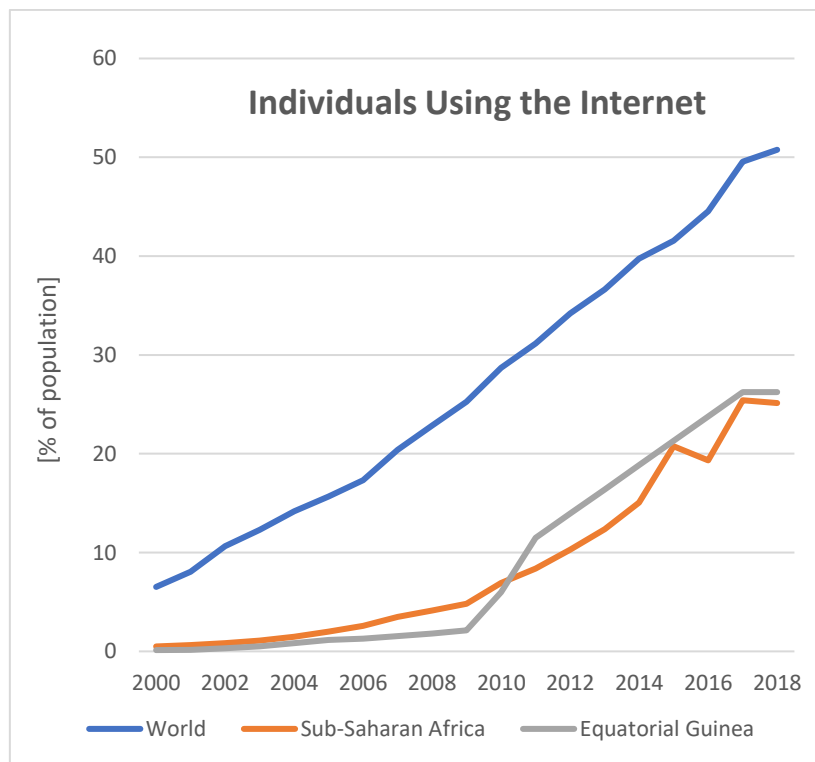


Figure 5.1: Individuals using the Internet. (Source: Author from World Bank data.)

This chapter argues that the transition to online channels of circulation in Equatorial Guinea is far from total and unproblematic. Instead, I explore how musicians

¹⁰⁸ These divergencies are an example of what Georgina Born has recently termed ‘socio-material stratifications’ to describe how digital music technologies are mediated by social and economic inequalities (Born Forthcoming, 29).

and fans draw on a combination of old and new, online and offline, analogue and digital technologies and formats. Such heterogeneous technological use is triggered by a series of challenges to access the internet and by the continuing entanglement of music circulation in well-rooted cultural meanings and economic logics. Against the backdrop of a long history of unregulated exchange and an absence of intellectual property legislation, musicians actively encourage the circulation of their unlicensed songs to boost their popularity, seeking to draw the attention of the public in general and the petro-elites in particular—and hoping that that popularity will grant them access into patronage networks. Efforts to convert fame into other forms of economic value are common in other neoliberalising music economies (including those in Africa), which equally entail ‘uncertainties and risks as well as the potential for material wealth’ (Shipley 2013, 23–24). But as has become evident in the previous chapters, chances of success in the Equatoguinean economy do not depend as much on entrepreneurial efforts to attract an independent audience as on the production of praise songs that elevate the figure of well-known patrons. In this sense, digital circulation is not generating new markets or direct economic value, but rather reinforcing pre-existing notions about music circulation’s centrality to the constitution of patronage relations.

For the first time in this thesis, I offer an insight not only into artists’ practices, but also into those of audiences. I contend that the persistence of technologies and logics of circulation is also a response by users as they adapt to a controlling and censoring state, which suggests that statistics like the World Bank’s above cannot be taken at face value but rather must be considered alongside grounded stories of everyday technological use. As I will discuss in depth below, recent work on music and cyberspace in similar authoritarian states reveals how discourses about the internet rarely account for the ways in which offline hegemonies and power relations can be

reproduced and reinforced online (Nooshin 2018). In that regard, I resist utopian notions of the internet as an alternative space for liberation by tracing how the Equatoguinean state applies old forms of media censorship and control to new media.

The chapter takes off with an examination of Equatoguinean telecommunications infrastructure and an account of everyday experiences of internet access. I outline the various struggles that the local population face to get online, including incredibly high prices and bureaucratic barriers. The second section covers the ascent of the smartphone as the privileged device to exchange music, both online and offline, and it then analyses how WhatsApp—an internet-based, free texting app—has emerged as one of the most prominent channels of music circulation. But this and other online channels are indirectly but persistently curbed by the state through blockages and shutdowns caused by rising fears about the subversive potential of new communication media, an issue discussed in the third section. Finally, section four of this chapter comes full circle to argue that amid these multiple challenges and restrictions, one of the most prominent circulation channels is the oldest: the sale of songs by street vendors at marketplaces, a practice in which music has been digitised but which continues to privilege an offline, hand to hand exchange.

Media Infrastructure and Internet Access

I begin this chapter with an analysis of media infrastructure and access to the internet, providing insights into the contradictions between state discourses about technological development and the actual challenges musicians and fans experience when trying to get online. The goal is to resist a tendency in emerging scholarship on the new music industry in which access to the internet is usually presupposed. While

this literature effectively describes how new circulation channels (including online stores, streaming platforms, P2P networks, mobile apps, and online radios) are changing the way people across the world exchange music, they do not account for the radically unequal ways in which users access the internet.

Ideas of Africa as one of the world's 'black holes' (Castells 2010) of the information age are today discarded. But African users, as Jenna Burrell has argued, 'do not join the digital age unproblematically' (2012, 183). In her ethnography of internet cafes in Accra, Burrell examines how Ghanaian youths use online communication media to build long-distance social connections, adapting technologies that were not designed for them in the first place and employing them to create their own, peripheral, social worlds. Arguing that these users access the internet from a position of asymmetry and inequality, she challenges 'notions of globalization as a teleological process of irreversible and increasing interconnectedness' (ibid., 197). Similarly, Equatoguinean users occupy 'an unaccounted for in-between space, neither simply connected [...] not disconnected and wholly excluded' (ibid., 183). As I will depict, struggles to get online upset users daily but also make them highly adaptative and inventive.

The institutional framework around the Equatoguinean telecommunications infrastructure developed from the 2000s, when the national economy was booming thanks to oil exports. The first law on telecommunications was passed in 2005, the same year ORTEL, the government body to regulate telecommunications, was created. And GITGE, the public institution that manages telecommunication infrastructures, was founded in 2011 (García Fernández et al. 2014).¹⁰⁹ Shortly after, Equatorial Guinea became one of the first states in Africa to gain access to the international broadband

¹⁰⁹ ORTEL stands for Organismo Regulador de las Telecomunicaciones; GITGE stands for Gestor de Infraestructuras de Telecomunicaciones de Guinea Ecuatorial.

network: in 2012, it was connected for the first time to a submarine cable known as ACE (Africa Coast to Europe), which provided high-end fibre optic technology through a project initiated by France-based telecommunications firm Orange and run by a consortium of 20 countries, including Equatorial Guinea (see Fig. 5.2). In their press release, Orange pointed out that, ‘by using this new network, the telecoms operators in these countries will now be able to develop innovative broadband services that are essential to their economic and social development’ (Orange 2012).

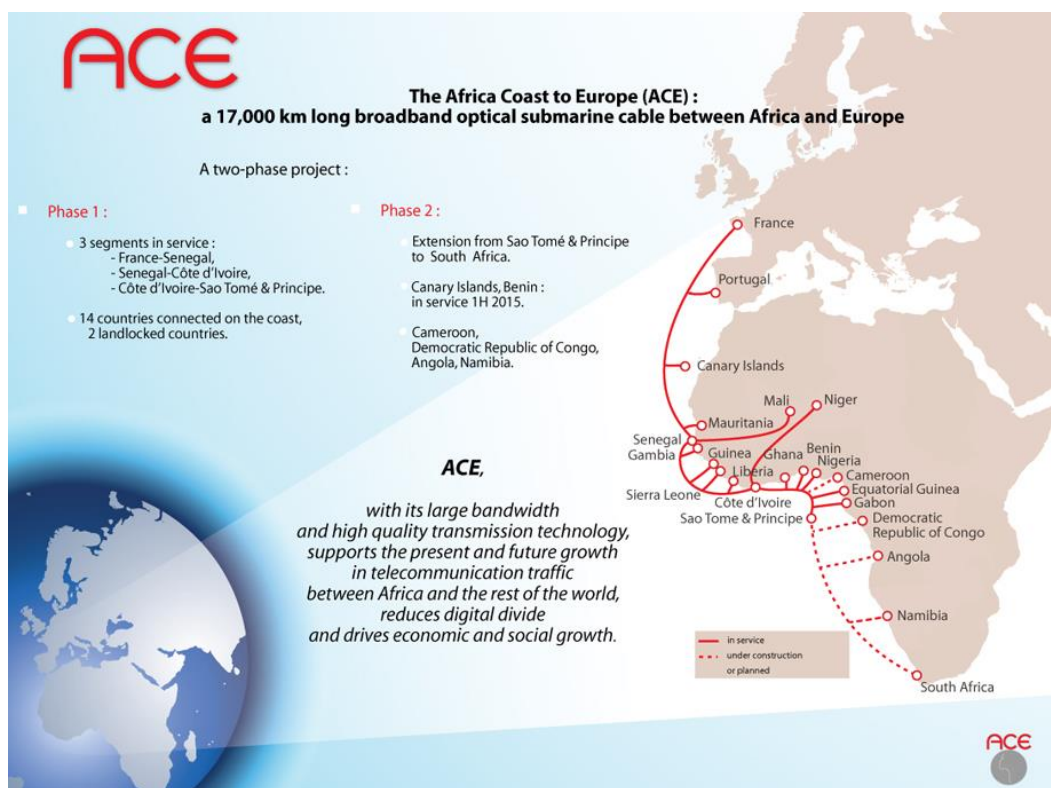


Figure 5.2: ACE cable map. (Source: https://www.ace-submarinecable.com/ace/default/EN/all/ace_en/)

Similar discourses about the future potential of telecommunications infrastructural development are frequently made by the state official media. During my fieldwork, the introduction of fibre optic was often praised in short documentaries on TVGE. And on social media, GITGE frequently makes grand claims about the potential of the telecommunications service, such as: ‘The future of Equatorial Guinea’s telecoms

sector will be one of innovation and of bold leaps into the future, ever more interconnected with its neighbours, its partners and the world' (GITGE 2018). Internet infrastructure is thus presented to the public not only as a proud example of the country's oil-fuelled modernity, but as a device with the potential to push the country's nation into the future—to promote unprecedented connectivity and external relations that will generate economic development.

Yet the 'digital development for economic development' rhetoric resounds awkwardly when considered alongside the ground-level challenges to access the internet. To begin with, connecting to the internet at home is no easy task. Upon arriving in Malabo, I decided to contract an ADSL monthly plan. After some research, I chose to try a 512 kbps package with GETESA, the main operator in the country. I deemed it would be necessary and helpful to keep in contact with my supervisors and family over the course of fieldwork, and it would be a helpful tool to keep track of the online distribution of local music. But the amount of time, paperwork, meetings, and insistence it took me was absolutely not worth the effort. After 23 visits to the GETESA main shop and a great deal of negotiation with about a dozen different workers over the course of 30 days, I managed to have my modem installed. This was only possible through the help of a Beninese friend who worked as a telecommunications engineer at GETESA.

As I would later find out, almost no one in Equatorial Guinea uses this type of connection. The difficulties and heavy bureaucracy to get a home modem installed—in part due to a lack of stable fixed telephone lines—is one of the main reasons. But above all is the stunningly high prices of fixed broadband and unlimited ADSL monthly plans. The package I bought quickly struck me as awfully expensive, and of course it seemed unaffordable to the average Equatoguinean. For a speed of 512 kbps, I paid 65k CFA,

£85 a month—excluding installation costs (32,500 CFA) and the purchase of the modem itself (70k CFA), all of which added up to an initial payment of ca. £135. But the plan I selected looked acceptable when compared to the packages offered across the few other operators in the country. A 2 Mbps connection with Fenix was over £900 a month (690k CFA); with GECOMSA, the price rose to over £1.5k a month. For a shocking comparison, BT offers a service of 50 Mbps for £36 a month in the United Kingdom.¹¹⁰ That is, a download speed 25 times faster than GECOMSA, but over 40 times cheaper.

The ludicrous prices of ADSL connections force people to find more affordable alternative ways to get online. Internet cafes are the first option for many. Among the first spaces to offer internet connection in the country, people can use the cafe's computers without the need to own a laptop or a smartphone at a price of 1000 CFA (£1.35) per hour. But with the increasing use of smartphones, more and more search for the few spaces where free, but slow and unreliable Wi-Fi is provided, such as the Centro Cultural Español and the UNGE (Universidad Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial). Those who can afford it choose to buy a 3g portable modem, which they carry around together with their smartphone. But most simply get online through pay-as-you-go phone data. While more affordable than monthly ADSL plans, these options remain expensive for most of the population (see Figure 5.3 for comparison of services and prices offered by the different public and private internet providers). But importantly, they allow people to not commit to regular fees. Amid a domestic economy where most live on a day-to-day basis, most Equatoguineans access the internet when they have the financial capacity to do so; when they can find *un quinientos* (a 500 CFA note) to top up their phone or up until their credit runs out. Such a situation contradicts the widespread

¹¹⁰ <https://www.bt.com/broadband/deals/> (accessed 28 January 2021).

notion that we all live now in a state of permanent connectivity—an assumption often made in the emerging literature on music and the internet.

	PHONE DATA		WIFI	
	Pay as you go	Monthly packages	ADSL (unlimited data, CFA per speed) ¹¹¹	3G Portable modems (limited data) ¹¹²
GETESA	20 kb = 1 CFA 100 MB = 5k CFA 1 GB = 50k CFA	1 GB = 35k CFA 2 GB = 60k CFA 4 GB = 100k CFA 8 GB = 200k CFA 10 GB = 250k CFA	(Speed) 512 kbps = 65k CFA 1 MBps = 114 CFA 2 MBps = 153 CFA 4 MBps = 260 CFA	1 GB = 35k CFA
Muni		1 GB = 20k CFA 2.5 GB = 40k CFA		10 GB = 25k CFA (expires in 1 month) 20 GB = 40k CFA (expires in 1 month)
GECOMSA	100 MB = 2k CFA 250 MB = 4k CFA	150 MB = 9k CFA 400 MB = 18k CFA 800 MB = 25k CFA 1 GB = 35k CFA	512 kbps = 239k CFA 1 MBps = 449k CFA 2 MBps = 1.2m CFA 4 MBps = 2.4m CFA	1 GB = 5k CFA 10 GB = 20k CFA 25 GB = 45k CFA 50 GB = 95k CFA
Fenix			256 kbps = 86k CFA 512 kbps = 172k CFA 1 MBps = 345k CFA 2 MBps = 690k CFA	
IPX-EG¹¹³				1 GB = 5k CFA (expires in 1 day) 25 GB = 50k CFA (expires in 1 month)
GuineaNet			512 kbps = 200k CFA 1 MBps = 400k CFA 2 MBps = 800m CFA 3 MBps = 1.2m CFA	

Figure 5.3: Chart of Internet prices by company and type of plan as of early 2017. (Source: author from company websites and in-person inquiries at the Malabo shops).

Why is internet access so expensive in the country? To begin to answer this, we must first understand the business conglomerate behind media infrastructure and telecommunications provision. There are three main operators. The leading one,

¹¹¹ The price of the modem with Getesa is 70k CFA, and the installation costs are 25k CFA.

¹¹² The price of the portable modem with Getesa is 112k CFA.

¹¹³ IPX-EG modems are not portable. While the prices seem considerably cheaper than the rest, they require customers to buy their modems for 200k CFA, a price much higher than the average Equatoguinean can afford. During my time in the field, I did not meet anybody with this plan.

GETESA (Guinea Ecuatorial de Telecomunicaciones Sociedad Anónima), is a public company formerly owned by Orange (France Télécom). Founded in 1987, it was the first operator to offer mobile phone services. In 2011, the state of Equatorial Guinea purchased 60% of the telco and a few years later, after a long legal dispute with Orange, the company was completely nationalised.¹¹⁴ During the time of my fieldwork, GETESA's General Director was Constantino Obiang Mba, a nephew of President Obiang.¹¹⁵ Muni is the closest competitor. The only private operator, it is believed to be owned by Kuwait-based HiTS and directed by Pastor Hassan Obiang, one of the president's sons. The third operator, GECOMSA, launched in 2012 as a joint venture between the governments of Equatorial Guinea (51%) and China (49%), is directed by Minister of National Security Nicolás Obama Nchama and allegedly used as a surveillance and censoring infrastructure.

What may look like media liberalisation via the introduction of new markets in the last decade is once again a stranglehold by the Obiang regime. The three operators, either public or private, are closely connected to the ruling family. In effect, practices of state control of the media are nothing new. Traditional media such as radio and TV have long been in the hands of Obiang's family. Ever since the independence of the country, the only national TV and radio broadcasters were the public ones (TVGE and Radio Nacional, respectively).¹¹⁶ In the 1990s, the scene changed slightly with the introduction

¹¹⁴ The dispute reportedly began after Orange communicated their decision to sell their remaining 40% share of the company, as the introduction of new competition ended their monopoly over the telecommunications sector. The litigation went on for four years between 2014 and 2018, concluding shortly after my departure from the field. <https://www.commsupdate.com/articles/2018/10/08/equatorial-guinea-makes-final-payment-to-remove-orange-from-getesa-ownership/> (accessed 2 February 2021).

¹¹⁵ Obiang Mba was dismissed after being accused of having allegedly participated in a coup attempt against President Obiang in December 2017. <http://diariorombe.es/la-sudafricana-telese- denuncia-a-los-cabecillas-de-la-trama-getesa/> (accessed 2 February 2021).

¹¹⁶ 'Africa 2000', a Spanish-run radio station, was opened in 1988 (https://elpais.com/diario/1988/11/15/radiotv/595551605_850215.html (accessed 2 February 2021), but shortly closed thereafter because of misunderstandings between the Spanish and the Equatoguinean governments.

of new TV and radio stations: Asonga TV and Asonga Radio, both owned by Obiang's eldest son, Teodoro Nguema. During the months of my fieldwork, a recently created digital television provider was picking up. Introduced in 2014, Canal Sol offered access to a wide variety of national and international channels. The company is owned by yet another one of Obiang's sons, and Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons: Gabriel Mbega Obiang Lima.

Unlike other African cases where material inequality and technological breakdown condition everyday use (Larkin 2008; Steingo 2015), internet access in Equatorial Guinea is mostly mediated by the deep infrastructural control and management by the political elites. The media liberalisation so often described in recent work on the African music industry has not taken place in Equatorial Guinea, where the timid creation of private media companies is *de facto* in the hands of Obiang's close circle.¹¹⁷ The pseudo-liberalisation of media in Equatorial Guinea creates the appearance of liberalisation, but it is geared towards the reinforcement of control and censorship. Media control is an extension of the patrimonial nature of the regime, built closely around a ruling family and its appropriation of all public and private enterprises.

Circulation: New and Old

It is a warm early evening in mid-June. I am at a bar at the Malabo Ewaiso square with singer and dancer Johnny Juliano and a small group of his friends, most of them members of Equatorial Guinea's National Ballet. Clustered around a small table, the conversation revolves around the country's latest hits. Recently arrived in the field, I

¹¹⁷ For examples of the literature, see Mbaye 2011; Perullo 2011; Shipley 2013; De Beukelaer and Eisenberg 2018; Eisenberg Forthcoming a.

am rather ignorant of what is going on in the music scene, so they quickly offer to update me. Lucas pulls out his phone and tells me to do the same and to ‘open my Xender’. Prompted by my clueless expression, he explains to me that Xender is a free app that enables the exchange of digital files at a fast speed without an internet connection or data service. The app draws on Wi-Fi technology to create a hotspot and connect the two devices. With transfer speeds of up to 10MB/sec, it allows for an almost instant exchange of MP3 files. As I do not have the app, we end up sharing the songs via Bluetooth, an equally popular but much slower method.

Attracted by our conversation, Isaac is keen to show me one of his latest creations. Besides being a proficient dancer and a university student, he enjoys recording rap songs from time to time. People around us smile, aware that he likes showing off about his productions: ‘don’t be fooled, he’s not that good’, one of the group jokes. While Isaac is partly moved to record songs out of passion, he is also one of the many amateur singers expecting to extract profit through the circulation of songs, as the previous chapters have depicted. Sara changes gear and asks whether we have listened to the latest hits by Davido, the Nigerian star singer whose tunes everybody dances to at the local nightclubs. I admit I have not, so she rushes to send me a couple of tunes.

During the course of my fieldwork, I shared innumerable audio files, indistinctly including unlicensed songs by local artists and copyrighted songs by international ones. On most occasions, an exchange between myself and another individual always drew the attention of other people around, who then joined to share their latest acquisitions and, sometimes, their own recordings. Music circulation in Equatorial Guinea is not just the distribution of music for the purpose of making profit or building a fanbase. It is a social interaction that involves an exchange; a transaction that facilitates the

strengthening of existing relations or the creation of new ones. It is the sharing of a creative object (self-produced or not) that you want others to experience.

In the vignette, the exchange is made via one of the most popular media today: the smartphone. The mobile device has emerged in the last five years as a key instrument for the storage, circulation, and consumption of recorded music. In a context where access to the web is extremely expensive and few people own laptops, smartphones have taken centre stage: they are cheap, easy to use, highly mobile, and allow the use of free apps. The spectacular increase in phone use in Africa has been linked, among other things, to its capacity to leapfrog non-existent or weak landline infrastructure and to provide new and powerful communication channels, which are rapidly reshaping social relations (Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman 2009). A phenomenon on the rise across the continent, the literature on smartphone use is still scarce. But everything points to a revolution in the making. Smartphones in Africa have already proven impactful on fields as varied as democracy (Wasserman 2011; Kanyam, Kostandini, and Ferreira 2017), finance (Evans 2018), political elections (Cheeseman et al. 2020), money (Kusimba, Yang, and Chawla 2015), and tourism (Adeola and Evans 2019).

The proliferation of smartphone use is having a great impact on African music economies too. Christiaan de Beukelaer and Andrew Eisenberg (2018; 2019) have shown that digital music revenues are rocketing in the continent as a result of a unique entanglement of music sectors with mobile telecommunications and technology firms (MTTs). The authors argue that digitisation and the internet are triggering a profound and disruptive transformation of music circulation in Africa, but in ways that differ from the Western music industry. Drawing from research in Ghana and Kenya, Beukelaer and Eisenberg reveal that a unique environment characterised by weak

formal distribution networks, limited enforcement of copyright regimes, and a lack of market regulation has caught the attention of a sector rapidly growing due to unprecedented mobile phone demand. Particularly relevant is the increasing involvement of mobile service providers (telecommunications networks) and digital content creators, who not only control distribution and streaming but also music and video production, talent management, and award shows. The authors conclude that ‘while inherently unequal, the convergence of music and MTT sectors in African countries fosters new business models and strategies that benefit actors on both sides’ (De Beukelaer and Eisenberg 2018, 14).

In Equatorial Guinea, smartphones too are transforming music circulation, but these changes are far from the spectacular innovations Beukelaer and Eisenberg refer to. The use of mobile phones has increased in the last two decades, especially during the years of high oil activity, but it is still far from the sub-Saharan average (see Fig. 5.4). Interestingly, the numbers seem to have plateaued around the time the Equatoguinean government began to take control of France-based Orange (see section above) and they have not changed much with the introduction of competitors GECOMSA (2012) and Muni (2014). Regarding the specific use of smartphones, there is no official data (note that the chart below refers to mobile phones in general, which includes basic phones). From my own experience, few people used smartphones by the time of my first visit to the country in the summer of 2015. But only two years later, when I started my extended fieldwork, most of my (city-based) interlocutors owned one.

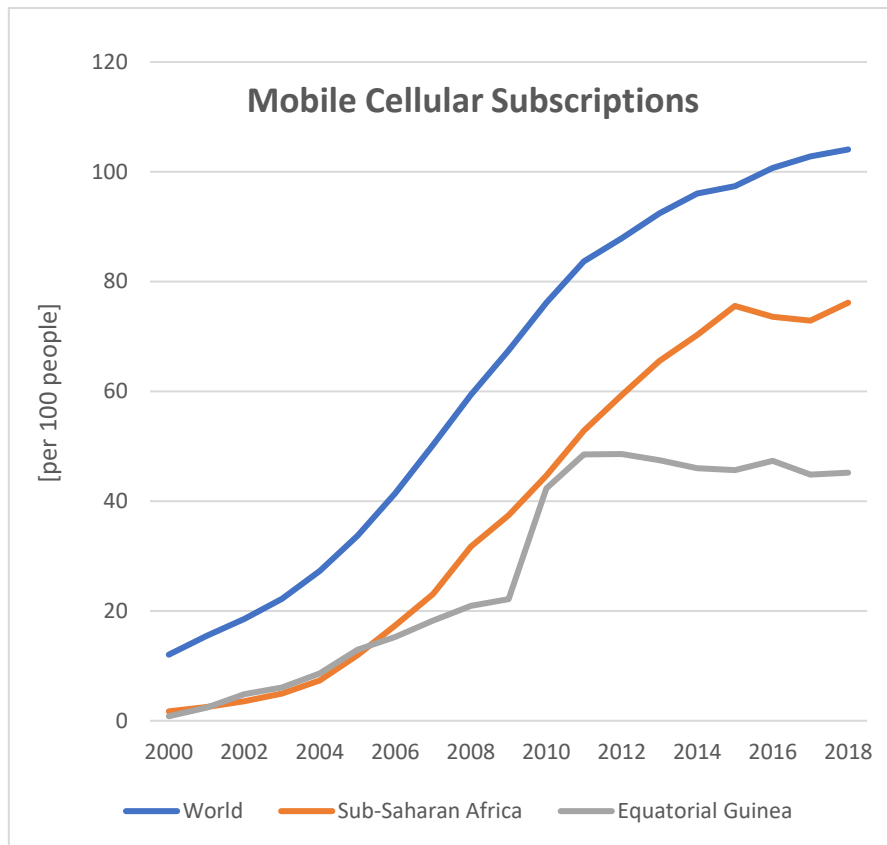


Figure 5.4: Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 people). (Source: Author from World Bank data.)

With the major telecommunications firms being controlled by a state wary of technological changes that could destabilise their grip on power, the reader can guess that the environment in Equatorial Guinea differs greatly from the African cases just discussed. To my knowledge, the only collaboration between the music and the telecommunications sectors was Muni's sponsorship of a music festival in December 2017 and Hannah Appel's reference to another festival sponsored by Orange in the summer of 2008. The impact of these festivals, both organised by the private sector, is not to be taken for granted. As Appel argues, 'capitalism in its own image became a *felt* space of possibility and unpredictability' for both performers and audiences amid a music economy normally controlled and sanctioned by the state (Appel 2019, 225). But sporadic festivals such as the 2008 Orange and the 2017 Muni do little more for the music economy than fomenting 'fantasies' and 'future utopias' (ibid.), especially

considering the intimate connection between the public and private sectors in the country.¹¹⁸ In both cases, the telecommunications companies' main goal was to publicise and market their own respective brands, so these collaborations fall short from the ones recounted by Beukelaer and Eisenberg, where MTTs are actively and creatively seeking profit in the music business.

And yet, even without the involvement of the telecommunications sector, the widespread use of smartphones has had a considerable impact on music circulation in Equatorial Guinea. If there was one privileged channel of online music circulation during the time of my fieldwork, it was WhatsApp. Of course, the Facebook-owned free app was originally created, and is largely employed worldwide, as an instant, online messaging app. But as media anthropologists and sociologists have taught us (e.g. Akrich 1992; Larkin 2008), the material qualities of technologies create possibilities outside the original intentions of their creators. Akrich famously coined the term 'de-description' of technical objects to argue for a methodology that moves beyond the designer's point of view or the user's point of view, to instead move back and forth between the designer's projected user and the real user, 'between the world inscribed in the object and the world described by its displacement' (1992, 209).¹¹⁹ As media get used in everyday life, they generate varied and unintended outcomes.

In Equatorial Guinea, no app has caused a deeper cultural and social impact than WhatsApp. The app is widely used (at least in urban spaces) across ethnicities, class groups, and generations. Unlike social media apps based on the sharing of large files

¹¹⁸ In conversations with local musicians, some were even critical of the Muni Festival for the highly unequal compensation, with international stars such as Cameroonian Lady Ponce and Nigerian Chidinma being allegedly paid over 10m CFA (ca. £13,5k) and local artists 200k CFA (ca. £270, 50 times less).

¹¹⁹ These ideas also resemble Jonathan Sterne's notion of 'plasticity' in aurality, whereby technologies can end up adopting functions different from those originally conferred by the designer (Sterne 2003, 179–214).

(e.g. Instagram or Facebook), WhatsApp privileges the exchange of text messages, which constitute very small files with little impact on the users' phone credit. In a country where free speech and group gatherings have long been co-opted, it is not surprising that a free, inexpensive-to-use app had risen as the primary mode of telecommunication. WhatsApp has grown so central to everyday life that even pubs are named after it (see Fig. 5.5). Built to share text messages but also images and audio files, it has become the default source of local news (real and fake), gossip, memes... and songs.



Figure 5.5: WhasApp Pub. (Source: Author.)

Well aware of its powerful file-sharing capacity, artists make extensive use of the app to circulate their songs via MP3 files. But WhatsApp is not only a key channel of music circulation: it is a space of high socio-musical interaction ripe for online ethnographic work. This is particularly evident in WhatsApp groups: chat rooms freely

created by artists or fans to exchange files, news, and opinions. While a group administrator can send out individual invitations to join the group, it is more common to spam a link in other groups, which people can freely click if they are interested in the description. Groups thus become semi-public spaces that enable up to 256 people to interact. Throughout my fieldwork, I joined several of these groups, which could easily generate hundreds of messages per day.

Some rap and *temblete* crews, such as Zona Sur and DMP Family, run their own groups, where they market themselves, and share their songs and information about new releases or upcoming shows. Other groups, like ‘Solo Música Guineana’ (‘Just Equatoguinean Music’) are managed by anonymous fans and are used to exchange all kinds of songs. Fans here benefit from the unregulated circulation of unlicensed songs, which some creators criticise. But a majority of artists today actively use the app to share their own music. As the next chapter will discuss more in depth, intellectual property legislation is mostly non-existent in the country and unknown to artists and lawmakers, thus songs circulate with no copyright. With no economic value to be made through the direct sale of digital songs, artists operate within a logic of ‘distribution as marketing’, expecting to gain popularity that may lead to potential paid performances or to patronage connections (issues that I discuss in the final section of this chapter).

These artists thus market their songs on WhatsApp by accompanying basic details—title, name of artists, producer—with an audio or video file. Figure 5.6 shows two screenshots of such promotions. In the one on the left, DMP leader Roody Black shares, in their own WhatsApp group, a newly released videoclip with the words: ‘*Here’s the new videoclip by DMP Family, free to download and share*’. The example of the right shows another common practice: a crew spamming their new song in another’s crew group: ‘*The new tune by Star Dynasty, “Dance”, is now available. A*

crew that does not copy the current trends; we make music, not fiction. Title: Dance.

Artists: Whitney x Mule x Marcelo Obiang. Genre: Afrobeat’.

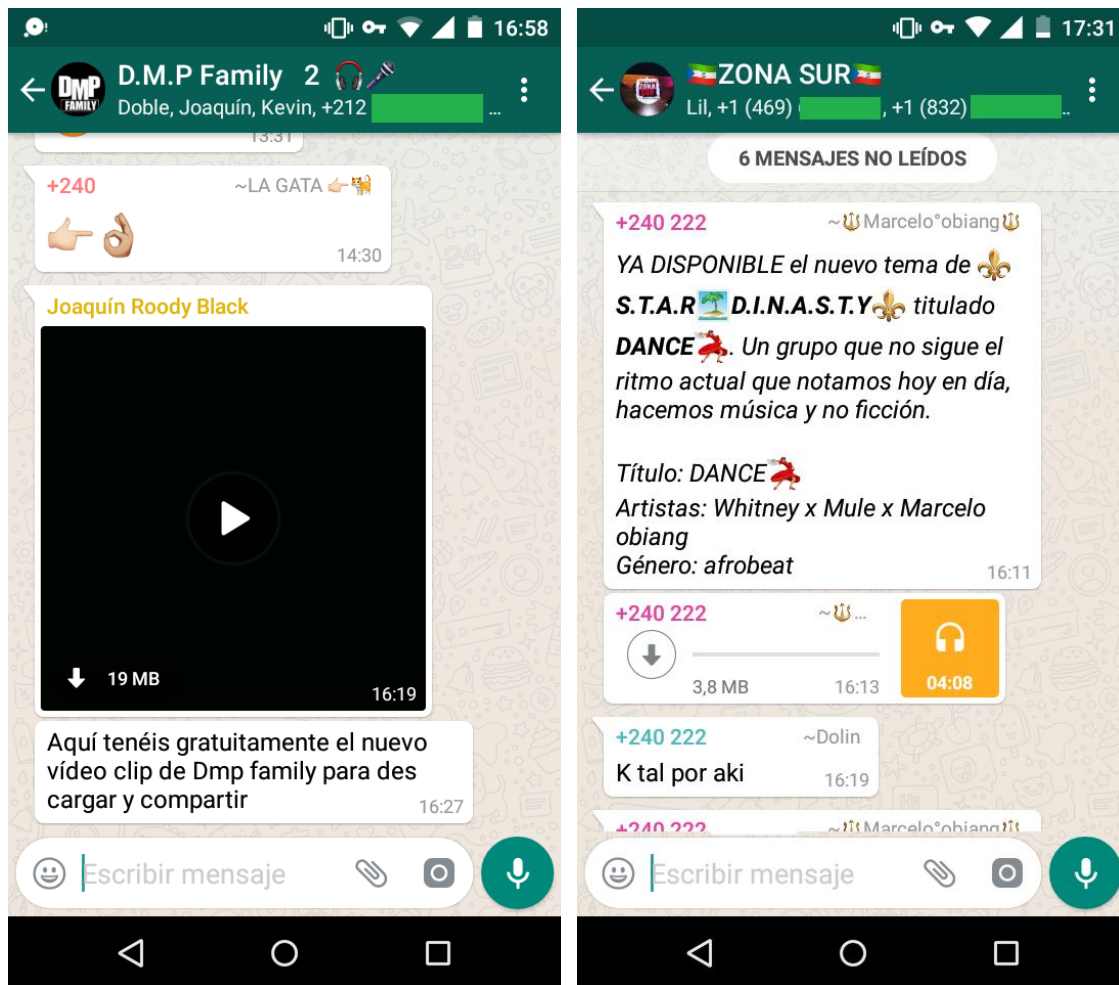


Figure 5.6: Screenshots of WhatsApp groups. (Source: Author.)

Despite WhatsApp’s potential, the many challenges to access the internet, as outlined in the previous section, often make it hard for people to use it, let alone upload or download audio or video files that can be up to 20MB large. But this does not prevent the population from using smartphones to circulate music *offline*. All too frequently, ‘digital circulation’ is wrongfully equated to ‘online circulation’, but the former is a larger concept. As the vignette in the section opening depicts, Equatoguineans make great use of Bluetooth and *offline* Wi-Fi-based apps like Xender to exchange files without internet connection. In the vignette, perhaps people did not

have enough *saldo* (top-up credit) to send files online through WhatsApp, or the net *molestaba* (it was slow or intermittent; literally, it was ‘annoying’), or the government had blocked WhatsApp or shut down internet access altogether (see next section). The inconsistency of the infrastructure and the challenges to access the internet are part of musicians and publics’ everyday lives, so they adapt creatively to make the best of their material and political situation.

Consider also the following example. During my fieldwork, by far the most popular songs in the country were those by the *temblete* crew Ela Nguema Ganster. Everywhere I went, Ela Gs were being played: from cafés to private houses, from taxis to the TV news. How does an artist become so omnipresent without elaborate distribution networks and known intermediaries? In an interview with the crew’s main beatmaker, DJ Patex, he explained that after recording their songs, they normally transfer the files directly onto people’s smartphones via Bluetooth or an USB port at their studio. At this point, they sit back and wait for the impact to come. If the songs are good, they will become a hit.

The distribution now is the same as always, with the exception that people now come with their smartphones. [...] People just come here, to the studio, to get the songs directly. For those who don’t come... we have some friends who come to copy the songs onto their phones and then circulate them.¹²⁰

When I ask whether they charge for sharing their songs, he laughs: ‘No, no, no. Here? In Equatorial Guinea? Ahah. you can’t sell recorded music here’. The technique is simple: to give away their songs and hope that they circulate enough as to grant them popularity and help them create relations to enter patronage networks or gain performance invitations. The songs will eventually circulate on WhatsApp, but they are first shared via offline technology.

¹²⁰ DJ Patex, interview with the author, 4 April 2018.

The reason why smartphones are becoming so prominent in music distribution in Equatorial Guinea is not *only* that they offer an easy and cheap access to online content and streaming platforms, like is the case in the West and in some African countries. Instead, first and foremost, they are devices that allow for multiple and heterogeneous ways to circulate digital files, both offline and online. They work as key storage devices for the collection of audio files, contrasting with widespread assumptions about the seemingly total and worldwide paradigm shift from the ‘ownership’ of the music-commodity form to a ‘renting’ ideology through subscription services such as Spotify.

And second, phones not only enable the building of physically distant social relations but also favour *in person* interactions: in the case of my sharing songs at a bar in the section opening, and in Patex’s description of fans going to his studio to get the new songs, the exchange of music itself became an excuse for socialisation. The new technology is thus widely accepted for its neat fitting within old logics and social functions. Smartphones and digitisation thus reinforce the continuing role of music circulation as a medium to forge social relations, a characteristic of music digitisation theorised by Born (2005, 16). Drawing on the work of Alfred Gell on the capacity of art to generate social relations through its circulation, Born argues that processes of socio-musical connectedness embedded in music circulation have been accelerated by ‘digitized music’s immateriality and hyper-mobility as code’ (ibid., 25). Similarly, the circulation of digital music in Equatorial Guinea has amplified existing ideologies about the potential of music’s circulation to forge (patronage) relations.

Blackouts, Blockages, Bans

The transformation of communications media has not gone unnoticed and unchallenged in Equatorial Guinea. The unequal but increasing access to the internet in the last decade has triggered the alarms of a state forever concerned about subversion and political contestation. Beyond the infrastructure and business control discussed earlier in the chapter, the state has increasingly employed techniques of censorship in line with other authoritarian governments across the world (Hellmeier 2016). In 2013, Reporters Without Borders condemned the blocking of opposition websites and Facebook ahead of elections, calling the event a ‘grave violation of freedom of information’.¹²¹ Similar blocks have been seemingly applied to news blogs that emerged in the last decade, including www.radiomacuto.cl and www.diariorombe.es. Run by Equatoguineans based in Spain, these blogs are providing new alternative sources of information through the collaboration of anonymous informants who communicate with the journalists in the diaspora via Facebook, WhatsApp, and other messaging services.

But while blocking specific sites is technically easy, the virtual space opened up by smartphones and messaging apps carries a promising terrain for political action and a powerful threat to the status quo. In Africa, mobile phones are ‘the location where people are transgressing the hitherto fixed boundaries of what counts as political participation or civic identification’ (Wasserman 2011, 157). WhatsApp groups in particular have emerged as new forums where people share critiques that they would not in an offline interaction. Among these critiques, music patronage does not go unnoticed. Figure 5.7 shows a screenshot of post in a WhatsApp group, in which one person complains about the persistence of praise singing across genres. The example illustrates

¹²¹ <https://rsf.org/en/news/facebook-and-opposition-websites-blocked-ahead-elections> (accessed 2 February 2021).

an ongoing preoccupation among some musical actors to monetise their music, as was introduced at the end of Chapter 2 and as will be further discussed in the next chapter with the case of Equatoguinean entrepreneurs labouring from Spain:

I think a singer [should be] like a good speaker with an ability to define his/her audience before a conference. So I wonder, do Equatoguinean singers and rappers really think about who their next song will be directed to? I ask this because I really don't understand the obsession by not EVERYBODY but the vast majority of Equatoguinean singers who live in Equatorial Guinea to not end a song without praising the president or the PDGE. If you're working towards figuring ways to monetise your music in the country and elsewhere, you should consider defining your audience. Finishing a romantic song by thanking the PDGE is so very sad. Cheers and love to all.

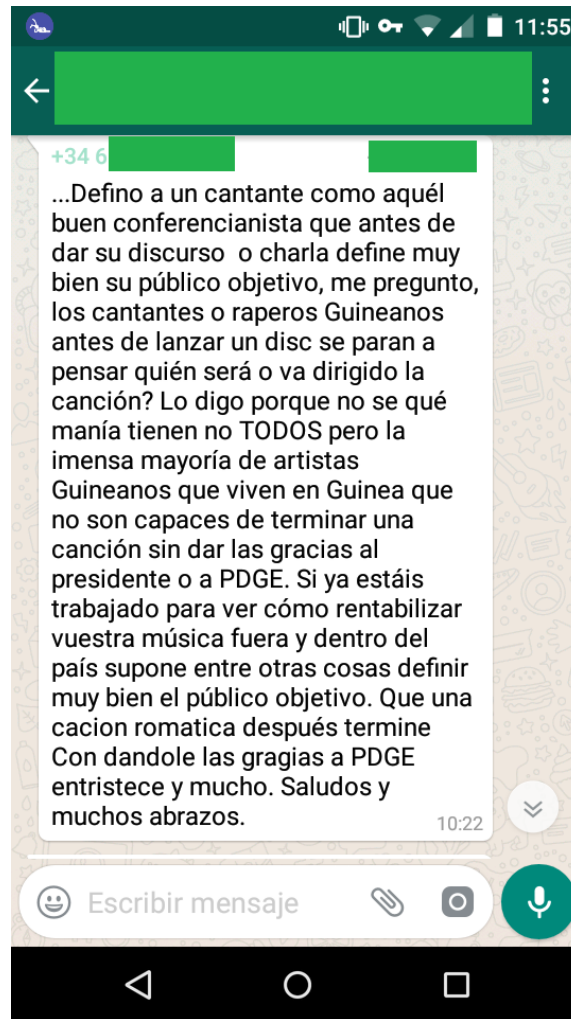


Figure 5.7: Screenshot of a WhatsApp group. (Source: Author.)¹²²

Amid the seemingly uncontrollable growth of new telecommunication channels, one radical response from the government has been the temporary shutdown of the internet altogether, a technique of social control common in other authoritarian states unable to quickly fight against the deployment of encryption systems by messaging apps such as WhatsApp (Clark et al. 2017). As an example, on the 27 October 2017, Wi-Fi and mobile data were unavailable for most of the day. The official version was that there was a technical problem with the optic fibre, but people on the street were quite certain that was not the real reason behind the internet disconnection. Blackouts,

¹²² In order to protect anonymity, I have chosen to hide the name of the group and the author of the post, as well as his/her telephone number with the exception of the country code. More on it below.

breakdowns, and a deficient infrastructure are not new to the local population, who often respond to related problems with the famous statement ‘*la red molesta*’ (literally, the net is being annoying). So the excuse would indeed not have been suspicious had the shutdown not coincided with the beginning of the electoral campaign and the resolution of Nguema’s trial for corruption in France.¹²³

A similar case took place on 12 November 2017—Legislative Elections day. Internet access was shut from the early morning while the official media flooded with PDGE propaganda, including praise singing. On 17 November 2017, five days after the shutdown, Internet access seemed to be back. But on 21 November, WhatsApp was blocked, this time to open again only months later, coinciding with the government’s announcement of the purchase of new telecommunications monitoring material.¹²⁴ By censoring WhatsApp, the state incidentally halted what had become one of the main channels of music circulation. The hundreds of messages that had been clogging my phone for months suddenly stopped arriving. So did the songs and videoclips I persistently received through the various groups I was a member of.

For the weeks following, the WhatsApp block was a subject of discussion among the youth, some of whom struggled to overcome the blockage with the use of Virtual Private Networks. VPNs are protocols that create private networks from a public internet connection, often used in authoritarian states to circumvent censorship. They route the user’s traffic through servers located in other countries, as if the user were physically in a different country. But from my experience, few people in Equatorial

¹²³ As described in Chapter 2, Nguema was convicted to a 3-year jail term and a €30m fine, a sentence that will not be implemented unless he reoffends. In any case, the French state appropriated goods valued in ca. €100m, including a mansion in the Paris city centre and several luxury cars. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41775070> (accessed 2 February 2021).

¹²⁴ According to information published by Wikileaks, Equatorial Guinea was one of several countries in the world purchasing devices to monitor telecommunications and spy on its citizens. See <https://www.publico.es/internacional/mueve-negocio-del-espionaje-masivo.html> (accessed 14 June 2021).

knew about the potential of VPNs, and among those who used them, many struggled to actually make them work: VPNs drowned phone data and many times failed to connect due the mobile broadband not being powerful enough.

To be sure, censorship is nothing new to the Equatoguinean state. For decades, the Obiang regime has prevented free speech and collective gathering and has shut down all kinds of political activism. Equatorial Guinea occupies the position 165 out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (171 at the time of my fieldwork). The report adds that ‘tight control of the media and prior censorship are the norm under President Teodoro Obiang Nguema’.¹²⁵ And Human Rights Watch affirms that:

Freedom of association and assembly are severely curtailed, and the government imposes restrictive conditions on the registration and operation of nongovernmental organizations. The few local activists who seek to address human rights-related issues often face intimidation, harassment, and reprisals.¹²⁶

Long-standing censorship and repressive techniques have just been refined to adapt to ever changing digital media that could compromise the elites’ power status.

Similar transactions from pre-existing social and cultural dynamics into the online world have taken place at the level of self-censorship—a key element of political stability, according to Equatoguinean political scientist in the diaspora Enrique Okenve (2009). I was many times witness to people avoiding political discussion on WhatsApp groups. The notion that politics is something not to be discussed transfers to digital media. Just as ‘the walls have ears’ when you are chatting with somebody over dinner, so do chat rooms become spaces where anybody could be ‘listening’. As Okenve puts it, self-repression is ‘a psychological phenomenon originated by past traumas that lead people to preempt potential government repression, even when there is not real evidence

¹²⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/equatorial-guinea> (accessed 2 February 2021).

¹²⁶ Extracted from their World Report 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/equatorial-guinea> (accessed 2 February 2021).

that this will be the case' (2009, 145). The paranoia and fear that haunt people when discussing certain topics in their everyday lives is reflected on WhatsApp through stories of digital espionage and rumours of collaboration between the Equatoguinean government and Israeli hackers.

In her research on music circulation in Iran, Laudan Nooshin (2018) explores the rise of the Internet as an alternative sphere of musical sociality. In a state well-known for its control and censorship of music, online spaces complicate well-rooted binaries of the public and the private. One of her examples considers the case of women musicians who, by virtue of their gender, have been banned from singing solo since the 1979 Revolution. While the internet offers unprecedented opportunities to gain popularity and circulate their music, they are cautious about what kind of music they publish and how they self-present in terms of clothes and hair cover—aware that their public exposure online will have real effects offline. As Nooshin points out, the anonymity that bloggers and other internet users have cannot be enjoyed by musicians who want their music to be known.

On the one hand, while musicians cannot remain anonymous, online spaces are still ripe for non-musical contestation. Going back to Fig. 5.7, one person felt free to critique praise singing and the pervasive intervention of Obiang's party on music production. But on the other hand, the default channel of circulation—WhatsApp—does not grant total anonymity, as phone numbers are visible and so the user can be traced back. In the message in Fig. 5.7, the country code reveals the text was sent from a Spain-based phone, potentially by an Equatoguinean living in the diaspora. As Nomi Dave (2014) has argued, political contestation to authoritarian regimes is more likely to come from musicians living in the diaspora with physical and cultural distance. And yet

even if the critique did not come from an Equatorial Guinea-based person, it surely was read by the dozens of members of the group.

The Equatoguinean case, like the Iranian one, reveals how ‘utopian discourses (about the internet) often fail to acknowledge the extent to which existing hegemonies may be perpetuated or reinforced online or indeed replaced by new ones’ (Nooshin 2018, 368). It shows that, beyond dualistic narratives of liberation and control, the internet enables new spaces of socialisation filled with ambiguities, contradictions, and challenges—spaces with potential to create cracks in existing power relations but always embedded in social and political formations of a highly authoritarian and controlling nature.

Circulation: Old and New

So far I have remarked that despite the changes in music circulation brought about by the internet and smartphones, the Equatoguinean state makes constant efforts to control infrastructures and censor telecommunication apps. I finish the chapter by taking a step back to argue that, amid such a state of affairs, one of the most pervasive channels of circulation is, paradoxically, the oldest one: the exchange of recorded music at marketplaces. For decades unregulated, as we will see, it offers a space to manoeuvre around state control but also to push artists into patronage networks.

Traditional Equatoguinean marketplaces have long been sites for the sale of a variety of commodities, from food to sound equipment, electric components to imported clothing. They are spaces of intense socialisation, valuation, negotiation, and exchange (Valenciano-Mañé 2018). Mercado Central and Mercado de Semu in Malabo, as well as Mercado Grande and Mercado de Mondoasi in Bata are the largest marketplaces in the

country. In them, music vendors known as ‘DJs’ sell international and local recordings, licensed or unlicensed.¹²⁷ In certain areas of these markets, DJs take up entire streets, placing their wooden stalls against the wall one after another, mingling, but also competing to sell more than their neighbouring distributors. Finding them within the busy and crowded Equatoguinean markets is not a difficult task: one just has to follow the loud music that blasts out of the loudspeakers used to attract attention. Usually young men in their twenties, DJs operate with as little as a laptop, which they use to store files and build music libraries, create compilations, and copy songs onto their customers’ flash drives. Their stalls are little more than wooden structures protected from the sun and the rain by large umbrellas, but they are, in practice, the only music stores in the country (see Fig. 5.8).¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Audiences in Equatorial Guinea use the term ‘DJ’ in a variety of ways, which can often lead to confusion. Besides music vendors, DJ also refers to Western-style disc jockeys and even producers and beatmakers. Broadly, the term is associated with music actors with the ability to ‘play’ or ‘touch’ (*‘tocar’*) a computer.

¹²⁸ The only exceptions are tiny stores at the Bata and Malabo airports, and a small shelf at the French cultural centre. These however only sell CDs—some of them mass produced by Spanish or Cameroonian distributors but most burnt and later embellished with low-quality colour stickers by the artists themselves. During the time I spent in Equatorial Guinea, the only person I ever saw purchasing albums at these stores was myself—perhaps because most people now prefer MP3 files delivered directly to a flash drive or their phones, or due to their elevated price (3000 CFA-10000 CFA, or ca. £4-£13).



Figure 5.8: DJ Apetre at his stall in Mercado de Semu, Malabo. (Source: author)

The sale of recorded music at marketplaces has been common in Equatorial Guinea for decades, but the work of music vendors has changed with the introduction of new formats and technologies. According to old musicians, Cameroonian and Nigerian traders were among the first to import and sell LPs by African artists, which provided material for inspiration for the 1960s and 1970s local dance bands. Music circulation then expanded considerably in the 1990s with the introduction of cassette technology and the increase in local productions.¹²⁹ Later on, digital technologies and formats enabled for a wider growth of circulation at the turn of the 21st century. In the 2000s, the introduction of computers and the MP3 format facilitated the work of the DJs—much

¹²⁹ See Chapter 1 and 3 for analyses of the growth of local productions as a result of opening recording studios and commissions by TNO. On the impact of changing media and formats on music circulation across the world, see Peter Manuel 1993 (cassette) and Jonathan Sterne 2012 (MP3).

faster to create compilations and duplicate albums through CD burning and copying, they were able to lower their prices and attract more customers.

The last decade or so has seen the rise of the flash drive and the smartphone as more convenient devices to store and circulate music files. Today, most buyers come to the DJs with a flash drive, which the latter fill with MP3 files after plugging them into their laptops. One can ask for specific songs or artists, or else ask the DJ for the latest hits, after which DJs will play a few seconds of the new songs for the potential buyer. The average price is 200 CFA (ca. 30p) per song, but some DJs still sell burnt CDs with their own compilations for ca. 2000 CFA (ca. £3). With the increasing use of smartphones, more and more DJs are also selling songs by transferring files from their laptops onto customers' phones via Bluetooth.

The drop in the costs of reproduction and media technologies brought about by digitisation has invited more and more youth to try to profit from the sale of music. As a result of the increasing number of vendors, music circulation has expanded, but so has competition among DJs. Experienced and well-known DJ Apetre argues that 'things changed quickly from 2015 or so. There was an easier access to laptops, so men with little experience in the music scene but with basic tech skills began to set up their stalls around the older DJs'.¹³⁰ Before the digital boom, Apetre earned up to 150k CFA (ca. £203) a day, and it could go up to 500k CFA (ca. £676) a day in December, prior to the Christmas holidays. He remarks: 'Today, if God helps you, you could make 8k or 10k a day, enough to buy some food for the day'.¹³¹

¹³⁰ DJ Apetre, interview with the author, 13 April 2018.

¹³¹ As we saw earlier in the chapter, mobile phones too have taken up part of the space earlier reserved for DJs. As smartphone use became prominent, more and more people began to exchange music files directly from one phone to the other.

The creative community has an increasingly ambiguous opinion about street vendors. DJs have long thrived amid a legal framework characterised by an absence of intellectual property laws (discussed further in Chapter 6). During the time of cassettes and CDs, local artists could make one-off deals with vendors through which both parties would profit from sales. But digitisation has made it easier for DJs to find, copy, archive, and duplicate recordings without consent, thus circumventing creators. Consequently, a few artists do not hesitate to call them thieves: ‘pirates’ who profit from the sale of their music without consent.

But the labour of the DJ is also instrumental to the popularisation of any given song. Especially young rappers but also older singers now give their new tunes to the DJs for free, looking to increase circulation. Some even pay a little fee to encourage the DJs to recommend their new releases to customers or play them through their loudspeakers. Renowned singer Nene Bantú expressed these contradictions to me:

We don’t sell [physical recordings] anymore: piracy has invaded us. [...] A while ago we sold because cassettes were hard to pirate. [...] Then the CD didn’t sell much because anybody could put it in the computer and copy it. And now there’s Bluetooth, telephones, flash drives, the internet, which loads and uploads, Xender, WhatsApp. [...] What protects us now is releasing a song and causing an impact on the public. [...] Then what do we do so that the public doesn’t forget about us? You go to the studio and record a song, and then you go donating the file to those street DJs so they can ‘publish’ it, even if you don’t earn anything. You just want people to listen to it.¹³²

At the intersection of artists’ decreasing profits from the sale of recordings and a growing patronage economy, musicians ‘need’ DJs more than ever to boost their popularity, which could eventually help them build social networks and gain invitations to perform at *eventos*. The tendency shows that, despite digitisation, the role of DJs remains central to the circulation of music. If anything, their power has grown in the last

¹³² Nene Bantú, interview with the author, 5 February 2018.

few years, contradicting the argument that the digitisation of music has led to disintermediation and a reconfiguration of labour structures in the music industries.

The sale of music at marketplaces thus remains a primary mode of music circulation, one that has existed for decades. But its practice has not remained unchanged: digitisation has brought about deep transformations in labour practices and the music economy at large. With access to cheaper technologies and much faster tools to duplicate and copy recordings (and the prevalence of an unregulated market), DJs have been able to circumvent musicians' consent even more. The latter, pushed by these changes and attracted by a growing patronage economy, have quickly adapted to see DJs as not as a hindrance but as assets in their struggle for popularity and connections.

Conclusion

An ethnographic examination of music circulation in Equatorial Guinea reveals continuing failures by artists to monetise recorded songs. While the digitisation of music technologies and formats and the growing access to the internet have contributed to changes in practices and labour structures, they have not encouraged the creation of new, independent economic opportunities. The case stands in contrast with recent literature on the new music industry that, all too frequently, tends to link digitisation to (new forms of) capitalism. Instead, in Equatorial Guinea, both old systems of exchange (music vendors) and new channels of circulation (smartphones) are converging towards the demands of the patronage economy. Amid increasing competition to access patronage networks and to gain invitations to perform at *eventos*, artists make efforts to encourage the circulation of their (unlicensed) songs for free, hoping to become popular enough to attract the attention of the audience and the elites. Circulation then does not

generate economic value, but it engenders the potential to produce social value through the forging of new relations.

Artists, fans, and key intermediaries like market vendors adapt on an everyday basis not only to quickly changing technologies that were not originally designed for them, but also to the political constraints deployed by a state that controls the business and infrastructural conglomerate that allows internet access. From this techno-political position of disadvantage, Equatoguineans smartly circulate music by making use of a heterogeneous pool of technologies. But the exchange remains mostly local. In the next chapter, I move beyond the country's borders to explore how some Equatoguinean musicians struggle to circulate and sell their music internationally. Besides the internal constraints—including a powerful patronage economy that monopolises most musical labour and serious challenges to accessing the internet and staying online—artists face unknown legal regimes and capitalist markets full of (digital) barriers and economic conundrums.

Chapter 6: Looking Beyond: On the Possibilities and Limits of Online Circulation

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the changes and continuities afforded by the growing availability of online circulation channels, and how musicians creatively adapt new digital technologies to extend their goal of gaining popularity in the local music economy. But the internet is better known to open the door to opportunities for longer-distance encounters. As such, some artists, tired of the oppressive nature of musical patronage, are making use of online platforms and social media to try to generate new economic opportunities beyond the country's borders. This chapter thus continues interrogating the nature of the Equatoguinean music economy by exploring the affordances of digitisation and online circulation in making international markets accessible.

Through an offline and online ethnography of the challenges and struggles of artists and diaspora-based entrepreneurs, I offer a window into the everyday realities of the use of major music streaming platforms and social media from a country that has long remained invisible from all historical narratives. The account exposes seemingly unavoidable barriers created by complex international legal regimes and an industry increasingly based on data science—a combination of ‘the expertise of modern engineering, technology, and social science’ that Timothy Mitchell has dubbed ‘technopolitics’ (2002, 15). I argue that the inequalities of musical patronage so far discussed in this thesis combine with the systemic ‘asymmetries of economic globalization’ (Radano

and Olaniyan 2016, 16) to halt Equatoguinean musicians' quests for global membership (Ferguson 2006).

Ethnomusicologists have long written about the exploitation and inequality unfolded in musical encounters between the Global North and South. A major wave of scholarship developed alongside the booming 'world music' scene from the 1980s, which examined novel transnational collaborations and unprecedented musical and social fusions. But in analysing the impact of the globalisation of the industry and Euroamerica's increasing attention to the economic potential of the so-called 'ethnic sounds' emerging from the world peripheries, music scholars also drew attention to the hegemonies, power dynamics, and forms of imperialism infused in this new global era (e.g. Manuel 1988; Meintjes 1990; Erlmann 1996; Taylor 1997; Bohlman 2002).

The most recent research on music digitisation and the encounters between North-based industry and South-based creators signals new trends that are however connected to long histories of unequal power dynamics. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Buenos Aires independent music sector, Geoff Baker (Forthcoming) suggests that, despite the rise of online circulation, many artists from the Global South continue to need the intermediation of Western agents to access international markets, highlighting the persistence of forms of dependence. The extractive tendencies of the Euroamerican music industry have also been linked to the development of music streaming platforms. In an ethnographic research on the impact of Spotify and algorithmic recommender systems on musical creativity, Tom Hodgson (Forthcoming) writes that the narrative around streaming platforms 'produce familiar echoes of resource extraction and the establishment of centres of economic power between the first world and (variously) the third world, the new world, the west and the rest, or, as it is often referred to these days, the Global North and the Global South'. Similarly, Darci Sprengel (2021b) has

suggested that, as music platforms like Spotify and Deezer expand globally, they participate in a scramble for dominance of the untapped markets outside the West. In this venture, these North-based companies engage in what Sprengel terms ‘digital orientalism’, reproducing forms of inequality and racism that are part of the long history of European imperialism in these Global-South regions.

I join these debates with the cautionary notes introduced in the previous chapter regarding the risk of reducing these issues to dichotomic terms, to a reductionist account of a group of South-based subjects being alienated by an abstract North-based capitalist system.¹³³ Instead, I offer a grounded portrait of the everyday hopes and expectations, as well as challenges and disillusiones generated by a mostly unknown online world governed by corporations with specific political projects. I account for the potentialities of distant, unexpected encounters and how these are marked by well-rooted socioeconomic logics encouraged by the local political environment. Specifically, the chapter focuses on two case studies. The first one explores the everyday machinations of a young rapper who navigates the complicated world of international copyright law, with little help from the local institutions, in an intent to market his crew’s music online. In the second case, a group of Equatoguinean young men based in Spain try to monetise the music of their home country through major streaming platforms, but they hit a number of barriers, including the inequalities inherent in algorithm-based recommender systems and the scepticism of Equatorial Guinea-based musicians.

¹³³ See Born Forthcoming for a critique of such reductionist accounts in (digital) music scholarship.

Finding International Audiences

I begin the chapter with the case of rapper and *temblete* artist Roody Black, examining his attempt to find international audiences through online circulation and marketing. I first met Roody while he worked as a receptionist for Hostal Morenita, a tiny guesthouse in the Malabo city centre where I stayed during the first few weeks of my fieldwork. During these weeks, I would spend quite a lot of my time hanging out with Roody, chatting about local music or sports. A male Fang in his late 20s, Roody was born in the town of Kogo, near the border with Gabon, and spent his childhood between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, before he moved to Malabo about ten years ago. Unlike most Equatoguineans, he did not have a close family network and therefore struggled to make ends meet with his small guesthouse salary and the occasional cash he made driving an unregulated taxi.

Semi-retired from rapping, Roody had turned his artistic efforts to the rap/*temblete* crew he had just founded: Decisión Musical Profunda (DMP).¹³⁴ DMP was comprised of some five key central members (male, teenage singers and beatmakers), with about five to ten occasional friends informally joining recording sessions in their bedroom studio in the impoverished neighbourhood of Argentina-Ela Nguema. Roody's role was rather unspecific, with tasks going from recruiting new young singers to acquiring studio devices, providing expert opinions during recordings, and finding gigs. While he called himself the *director* of the group, he would joke with me affirming he was really a 'dictator', often establishing parodic links with Obiang.¹³⁵ DMP was part of the booming *temblete* scene in Equatorial Guinea, a scene enabled by the growing

¹³⁴ *Temblete* is a locally developed electronic music genre characterised by its dancing component and its marked apolitical lyrics. See Chapter 8.

¹³⁵ See Bob White's (2008) work on Congolese rumba and the ways in which band hierarchies reflect political culture and political power.

availability of laptops and the affordances of new digital software to produce music in so called bedroom studios. But beyond the new-found independence to *create* music, the crew struggled to monetise it.

By the time I met Roody, the owner of the guesthouse where he worked already owed him several months' worth of salary, but he stuck around because there was ADSL, albeit extremely slow and unreliable. As I explained in the previous chapter, access to the internet is expensive, and most people depend on phone data when they have extra cash to top-up their smartphones. So being able to connect to free ADSL on a daily basis was a unique opportunity that Roody did not hesitate to take. In his own words: 'I would've quit quite a while ago if it wasn't because I get free Wi-Fi here, so at least I can manage my social media and promote my music'. Indeed, with the guesthouse half-empty most of the time, Roody spent his days on his smartphone, when it or its charger were not breaking down. On top of the several tasks as the director of DMP outlined above, Roody most notably employed his privileged internet access to promote the crew online, especially sharing new songs through WhatsApp. He managed a WhatsApp group specifically created to publicise DMP songs and was also member of a couple of dozens other groups where he persistently spammed the new songs the crew released.

But during the time I spent in the field, the crew did not draw much attention beyond their small circle of friend-rappers, and they did not gain any profitable performance invitations. The case indeed illustrated the uncertain nature of the 'circulation as marketing' logic depicted in the previous chapter: most of the labour Roody and his crew employed in recording songs and marketing and circulating them did not result in any direct economic value. Amid a patronage economy that privileges praise songs, *eventos* are not open to apolitical music like *temblete* except for

exceptionally popular crews like Ela Nguema Ganster (see Chapter 8). As a result, DMP grew increasingly tired and *desanimados* (discouraged).

After months of unproductive work, Roody began to look for opportunities outside the country. ‘I know social media and online marketing can help, but I just don’t know how’, he would often tell me. Besides the WhatsApp groups, which were clearly aimed at, and comprised of an Equatoguinean audience, Roody began to create and manage other social media, including two Facebook pages, three YouTube channels, and at least five email addresses. The high numbers were not always intentional, but the result of experimentation through trial and error and oftentimes accidental forgetting of passwords or blocking of accounts, which illustrated how these impoverished and disenfranchised youth engaged every day in teaching themselves about social media.

While he got by with his phone, I—and my laptop—soon became instrumental in the marketisation and promotion of his music. My basic computing knowledge and equally basic computer software such as Paint and Windows Movie Maker caught Roody’s attention. We started off by cropping photographs or downloading songs into flash drives and soon were unifying his YouTube channels into one and filling it with music. Then we turned to video editing: as he did not have any videoclips, we would create videos suitable for YouTube from MP3 files and still images.¹³⁶ In a few weeks, his social media were full of decent content, including old and new songs but also photographs, often mixed up with other parodic content and memes Roody enjoyed sharing. But while content was filling the new social media, something even more necessary was missing: an audience.

¹³⁶ See, for example, the video we created for the song ‘Decale’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-K6env1SCI&ab_channel=roodyblackAncestralroodyblackAncestral (accessed 31 May 2021).

Without any specific target audience or marketing strategy, Roody was faced with the reality of not quite knowing what to do with his content. Beyond a few likes from random and unknown users across the world with whom he tried to establish contact, he felt his efforts were making no real impact. My experience with Roody and other youths in Equatorial Guinea revealed that while most had a certain sense of the possibilities of online distribution to reach unexpected international audiences, most only drew on abstract notions of a quickly changing global music industry they could not quite grasp. This was made particularly evident when, in a conversation with DJ Patex, the main beatmaker of *Ela Nguema Ganster*, the main musical group in the country at the time of my fieldwork (which I discuss further below), he was completely unaware of what Spotify is.¹³⁷ Roody's struggles with social media and Patex's unfamiliarity with one of the largest contemporary music streaming platforms point not only to a lack of formal ICT education in the country, but also to the hermetic nature of musical patronage, with an artistic community attracted by the promise of quick accumulation through the redistribution of oil money, and thus not very interested in external markets.

Roody's failures to reach an international audience by his own means also made him aware of a central characteristic of the new music industry that was downplayed in the early scholarly literature: that is, the changing but continuing importance of intermediaries to engage audiences. As Geoff Baker (Forthcoming) has shown in his ethnography on the Buenos Aires independent music scene, Argentinian musicians and producers remain largely dependent on intermediaries to reach international audiences.

¹³⁷ The first platform to gain popularity in the country at the time of the introduction of internet access in the 2000s was SoundCloud. Then other services such as YouTube became prominent. But as we have seen in Chapter 5, given the widespread use of smartphones, the prevalent medium of online circulation nowadays is WhatsApp, which does not offer a direct mechanism to monetise music—it is rather used to accumulate fame that could enable the forging of connections.

While some middlemen from the pre-internet era have progressively disappeared, other intermediaries such as bookers or aggregators have risen. In his own words:

For many artists from the global South with international ambitions, industry rules have not changed substantially: while they avail themselves of the new digital tools for publicity and marketing that appear inherently transnational in reach, they also need the services of agents in the global North in order to insert themselves into established commercial circuits – new technology *and* old structures. (Baker Forthcoming)

Struggling to find a solution to his challenges, Roody learnt through a Cameroonian acquaintance about PromoBuzz, a media company that offered promotion services to labels and individual artists by distributing their music to radio stations, among other services. The opportunity sounded promising, but in the process of application, Roody was asked to provide International Standard Recording Codes (ISRCs) for his songs. Developed in the 1980s and managed by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, ISRCs are 12-character codes that identify specific sound and videoclip recordings, facilitating the application of copyright law and the collection of royalties. Unfamiliar with the language of legal bureaucracy, Roody came to me for help. But I could offer little more than my laptop and my knowledge of English. So we both embarked on a weeks-long research which included a series of exchanges with experts in Equatorial Guinea and beyond. The event taught us both much about the Eurocentrism of the new digital music industry, including the legal regimes in which distributors like PromoBuzz operate.

But before I go into ethnographic detail, let me offer a brief overview of the matter at hand. Throughout the 20th century, the exploitation and monetisation of recorded music have been effected through copyright law—a type of intellectual property (IP) and a legal mechanism that protects creative works from unauthorised reproduction and duplication. First applied to music recordings in the early 20th century, the music industry has grown increasingly dependent on copyright to extract profit from

the music commodity-form, especially as technological change has enabled easier illicit reproduction from the 1980s. To Simon Frith, copyright law has increasingly become a ‘double-edge weapon’, serving both as a basic mechanism to protect artists’ intellectual work and as the framework for their exploitation by the large entertainment corporations (Frith 1988, 74; Frith and Marshall 2004).

While IP regimes have led to international treaties to facilitate the application of the law across countries, they have long been developed according to Western legal frameworks and largely directed towards the protection of the foreign trade of countries of the Global North (Laing 2004). In Africa, notions of international copyright law have been met with strong ambivalence, especially regarding local conceptions of ownership of folklore, considered a communal good with social and cultural functions rather than a commodity to be sold. The liberalisation of cultural economies in some African countries seems to have encouraged a convergence of local and Western ideologies about ownership of songs, with African artists being ever more concerned to legally protect their works in order to generate profit (Perullo 2008a). But this confluence has been based on existing, North-based legal regimes. In the words of Alex Perullo:

This commonality between African and Western rights in music, however, often becomes lost in contemporary copyright legislation. [...] Since the [Western-based] laws are not flexible enough to deal with local cultural knowledge, they end up placing the burden of adaptation on artists and governments in charge of using and enforcing the law. (2008a, 47)

On the one hand, Equatorial Guinea has officially made some efforts to join international IP treaties since the 1990s.¹³⁸ The country is a member of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) since 1997, and therefore is signatory to all the WIPO-administered treaties.¹³⁹ In 2000, it joined the Organisation Africaine de la Propriété Intellectuelle (OAPI). Created in 1977 by the Bangui Agreement, the OAPI

¹³⁸ The data on local IP legislation comes from my interview with CICTE officer Martine Lepoittevine Obama, from documents provided by her, and from informal conversations with a government worker.

¹³⁹ <https://wipolex.wipo.int/en/legislation/profile/GQ> (accessed 12 May 2021).

comprises 17 member states, most of them West African, French-speaking countries. On the other hand, not being a member of the World Trade Organisation, Equatorial Guinea has not been affected by the WTO-led agreement known as TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights).¹⁴⁰ According to recent research, many African countries have benefitted from the agreement, as it ‘requires any member country to update laws pertaining to patents, trademark and copyright’ (Perullo and Eisenberg 2014, 148).

Yet an ethnographic approach reveals that macro-legal changes through international conventions often have little impact on the ground in Equatorial Guinea. The application of these international legal regimes has first been complicated by the absence of the necessary bureaucratic structure at the national level. In the country, issues related to intellectual property legislation are managed by the Consejo de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas (Science and Technology Research Council, or CICTE). A CICTE officer, Martine Lepoittevine Obama, indicated that the non-existence of two key institutions hinders the growth of a legal cultural economy: a copyright law and a collective administration society to manage the collection of royalties. Although a copyright law is currently underway, Lepoittevine Obama admitted it could still be a long time until it is approved by the parliament, as it is not considered of importance.¹⁴¹ But the absence of state institutions further meets a widespread scepticism about their efficiency in the country. Another CICTE worker pointed out that the hypothetical creation of such organisations and legislation would face the reality of corruption practices and state power:

The problem in this country is that, when there is money involved, there is always someone watching from above, claiming his share of the cake or indeed the whole cake. You get me? If you create an association whose exclusive role is to collect money from other institutions,

¹⁴⁰ https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_equatorial_guinea_e.htm (accessed 11 May 2021).

¹⁴¹ Martine Lepoittevine Obama, interview with the author, 22 November 2017.

somebody's son will immediately be put in charge to scrutinise or run everything. It would be very difficult to create a copyright society that generates a lot of profit for musicians, because it would involve a group of people going around collecting cash from royalties. And those transactions are very hard to control.

The idea of creating an independent society that can protect artists' rights sounds ridiculous to this public worker, considering the long history of corruption and power grabbing by the ruling family and the tight control over collective gathering. An example of this is the extremely low numbers of foreign NGOs for an African country (Appel 2019, 226) and the overtly political nature of the few national ones that are allowed. On the musical end, the only well-known musicians' association, ASNAMUGE,¹⁴² has an obvious political nature. Originally created not to manage copyright but to provide some groundwork for instrumental performers to claim rights from the Ministry of Culture, ASNAMUGE is now known to organise and provide musicians for PDGE events and for the president and vice-president's birthday celebrations. One of ASNAMUGE's founding members, now detached from the association, critiqued in an interview the way it is being run currently. But his indignation was not triggered by politicisation, but rather by a seeming decrease in the democratic and fair nature of artists' selection—originally through an internal audition, now by personal relatedness to the current director. ASNAMUGE has then become thoroughly immersed in, and a channel for, the patronage economy. Furthermore, the CICTE worker pointed out, the royalties that a hypothetical society would collect would largely be from media outlets owned by the state or Obiang's family: 'Can you imagine somebody going to Nguema's Asonga Radio to force them to pay royalties for musicians?', he added.

¹⁴² ASNAMUGE stands for Asociación Nacional de Músicos de Guinea Ecuatorial (Equatoguinean Musicians National Association).

The particular patronage-imbued nature of the state thus contributes to a double negation by musicians and some public workers. First, the history of routinisation of corruption in the country and the media control by the ruling family (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999, 26) generates scepticism about the creation of the institutions and implementation of the laws that would protect creative rights. Second, the monopoly over the music economy held by the elites and the promises of spectacular riches through patronage connections make a majority of artists little interested in IP legislation—and rather focused on the circulation of their unlicensed songs to gain popularity. In fact, no artist I met during my fieldwork knew of the international treaties described above or the work of CICTE towards the creation of a copyright law.

But back to Roody: while he had not needed to license his songs in the past, he was required to do so now if he were to use the services of PromoBuzz to distribute his music internationally. Having no help from the local institutions, Roody and I googled how else he could obtain the ISRCs. We sent out emails to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), which has been the registration authority since the 1980s; ISRC International, which manages ISRC for those countries without an IFPI office; and SCPP, the French authors society, which seemed to be a common target by artists in many French-speaking African countries, including Cameroon, where PromoBuzz was based. In the end two of them responded at the same time, giving Roody different codes for the same song, leaving us wondering which one he should use. And only when he made a choice and was ready to apply, he found out that PromoBuzz's services were not free, as his acquaintance had suggested. So not having the cash, he gave up on the enterprise.

As I have shown in previous chapters and will be even more evident in Chapter 7, Equatoguinean musicians create strategies of adaptation to get by in an increasingly

oppressive patronage music economy. But those who aim to look beyond the country's borders in a search for new audiences and economic opportunities face barriers that are difficult to avoid. Despite Roody's efforts to establish international connections and market his music online, the challenges to navigate the business and legal structures of the global music industry became far too complex. His unfamiliarity with the mechanisms of international marketing and copyright reveal, first, the hermetic and oppressive nature of the patronage music economy, which keeps most musicians dependent through promises of quick accumulation via the redistribution of oil funds; second, a lack of public and private institutions willing to develop the bureaucratic and legal structure required to access international markets; and third, the asymmetries created by the techno-scientific world in which the global music industry is embedded (Mitchell 2002), which international IP regimes presume to be universal. All these factors combine to deepen the Equatoguinean youth's sense of dispossession and global disconnection.

Diasporic Entrepreneurial Ventures

The promise and scepticism about the potential impact of international audiences on the local music economy became evident through my study of diasporic intents to monetise Equatoguinean recorded music through online platforms. I address these issues through the work of GrandFrend, a small but multi-faceted company created in Barcelona, Spain by three Equatoguinean men living in the diaspora: 'a group of developers, a group of entrepreneurs', according to Andony, one of the co-creators. Citing directly from their website:

GrandFrend is a media group aimed at disseminating artistic content created primarily in Equatorial Guinea, and in the African continent. It seeks the best of artists to showcase them in

Spanish. In the current African entertainment industry, there is a great lack of the second most-spoken language in the world. [...] Since that does not stop our artists, we want to reward their effort by helping them to reach a larger audience, analysing and promoting, in Spanish, all their productions. (<https://grandfrend.com/>)

I first learnt about GrandFrend through the YouTube channel they manage, where contemporary Equatoguinean popular music is frequently uploaded. Surprised by the seeming high quality of their descriptions and photo designs, which contrasted with the online marketing I was familiar with, I did some research to find out that the media group offered a number of services that broadly seemed to combine the functions of a record label, an aggregator, and an online magazine. Specifically, their activity is divided into three main branches:

- A media bundle comprising a website, a phone app, and a WhatsApp group, where GrandFrend publishes information about Equatorial Guinea's main musical activity and new releases. These fulfil the role of a music magazine in which news and reviews aim to generate information about a rather unknown music scene (Fig. 6.1).
- GrandFrend Distro, a distribution branch that offers deals to musicians to upload their music onto GrandFrend's monetised YouTube channel.
- GrandFrend Management, a branch that offers to manage musicians' own social media for them.

The website was created in 2015, five years after Andony, a 30-year-old Fang currently pursuing a telecommunications degree, arrived in Spain. Even though he created this idea in Equatorial Guinea, it all took shape after he met two other Equatoguineans, also living in Spain, with computing and programming knowledge. The other branches of the company developed in the intervening years, with varying degrees of success. For the sake of interest, I will focus below on the role of Distro—the

branch I think has the largest potential but, at the same time, generates the most heated debates among Equatorial Guinea-based artists.

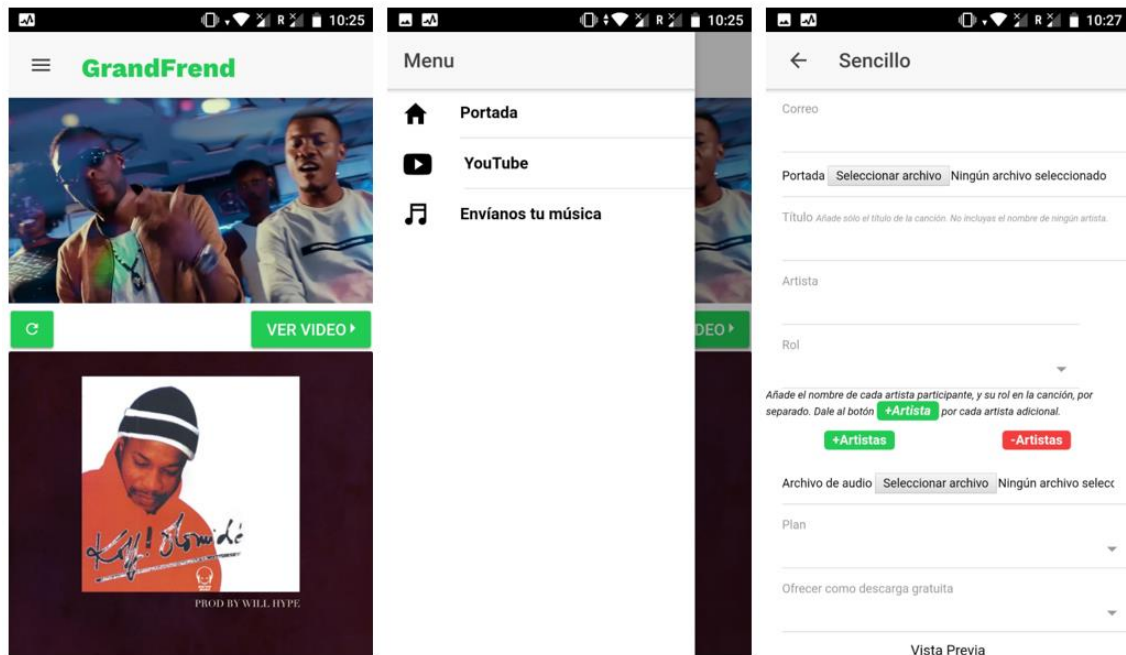


Figure 6.1: GrandFrend app. (Source: author.)

GrandFrend Distro works broadly as an aggregator, that is, a key intermediary between music creators and digital platforms. Aggregators ‘bundle digital rights (copyright to sound recordings and performers’ rights) and deliver them to digital music stores, such as pay-per-download stores (e.g., iTunes) and subscription services (e.g., Spotify)’ (Galuszka 2015, 262). To summarise, GrandFrend seeks to share profits from the royalties collected from online platforms through subscription plans and ads fees. Distro thus offers a novel way to generate income for musicians while overcoming state control and other IP-related restrictions posed by more traditional distribution channels. Indeed, in one of my first conversations with Andony, he made evident that their main goal is to use the possibilities opened up by digital technologies and the internet to monetise Equatoguinean music.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Andony, WhatsApp communication, 15 September 2017.

Working from Spain and with a background in computer science and telecommunications, GrandFrend managers take advantage of much faster internet connections and a familiarity with the computing and music industries—expertise they know is not common in Equatorial Guinea. Moreover, well-aware of the lack of knowledge on IP legislation in the country, as evidenced through Roody's case above, they offer to manage the licensing of songs to obtain ISRCs in order to collect the royalties. More specifically, Distro offers musicians four main packages (see Fig. 6.2). The higher the fees the musicians pay to GrandFrend, the higher the percentage of the total profits from royalties they will keep. For example, Plan A offers a free package where musicians only have to send their music to GrandFrend and royalties are split in half. With Plan C, the artist will pay a unique fee of 5000 CFA (ca. £6.5) per song to GrandFrend, then keeping 80% of the profit generated from streams. Interestingly, the investment risk in this mechanism seems to be passed from the aggregator onto the artist: the artist makes a unique payment to GrandFrend under the expectation that the returning profits will be higher.

F ¿Tu música en nuestro canal?

pasos a seguir

1. Ponte en contacto con

+34 603 23 90 28
+34 633 03 91 87

Nuestro canal está monetizado y las ganancias se comparten con los artistas según los siguientes planes:

Planes	Álbum	Sencillo	% para el artista
A	Gratuito	Gratuito	50%
B	5000 FCfas	2000 FCfas	60%
C	10000 FCfas	5000 FCfas	80%
D	15000 FCfas	10000 FCfas	100%

*El pago que se realice, es único.

El reparto es anual, es decir, siempre que la obra cumpla un año en nuestro canal. El dinero se envía por western union, moneygram, transferencia bancaria, o servicio similar. Y siempre que la cantidad a recibir, sea superior a las comisiones a pagar por el envío.

2. Envía los archivos

Junto con toda la información relacionada con la obra:

Portada oficial	Artistas colaboradores
Título	Productor
Versión	
Artista principal	

3. Espera a que tu música sea evaluada y subida al canal

grandfrend.com

Figure 6.2: GrandFrend Distro packages. (Source: author.)

While seemingly a promising venture, their real impact on the music economy has so far been limited. During my fieldwork, few musicians knew of the company or their role. And those who knew of it remained highly sceptical. One of the main reasons is the fact that the company first started to upload not-copyrighted music from Equatorial Guinea without artists' permission. While later they began to work with song owners to create benefits for both parties, a number of musicians in Equatorial Guinea still see them as a new, internet-based version of the street vendors locally known as 'DJs' (see Chapter 5).

Another reason for the scepticism is Equatoguineans' larger distrust of streaming platforms and other online circulation channels as creators of any real profit. Perhaps the most striking example I came across was linked to Ela Nguema Ganster. The highly popular *temblete* crew from the impoverished neighbourhood of Ela

Nguema generates the highest number of streams on the GrandFrend YouTube channel. As of May 2021, the song ‘Ninja’ is their most seen video, with ca. 135k streams.¹⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, GrandFrend and Ela Nguema Ganster’s mutual mediation has boosted the popularity of both. Yet in an interview with the crew’s beatmaker, DJ Patex (mentioned above in relation to his unfamiliarity with Spotify), he admitted to not trusting the possibilities of new online markets—a distrust motivated by his own limited use and knowledge of the web. Patex was clueless when I asked about the crew’s own YouTube channel, which generated views but not as many as the songs uploaded onto the GrandFrend channel: ‘I don’t think that’s ours. I can’t remember... Fuck, I don’t know, I don’t know’ he responded, implying somebody else was perhaps profiting from the circulation of their songs.¹⁴⁵

Patex admitted that his disinterest in online circulation was partly due to the barriers to access the internet in the country, as described in the previous chapter. When I inquired whether they uploaded their songs onto any platforms, he was categorical: ‘We don’t have the means here. As soon as you upload a song, you’re already wasting your money [from pay-as-you-go data]. And if you go to an internet café, in 20 minutes... it’s not enough time. So best not try; why spend 500 or 1000 CFA for nothing? [...] Ok, we don’t really know how this works [online promotion]. But I’d say it doesn’t work. It doesn’t work for promotion, I don’t see it’ (ibid.). As hinted at in the previous chapter, Ela Nguema Ganster’s popularity in Equatorial Guinea rose mostly through the circulation of digital songs through smartphones and flash drives, which granted them enough fame to profit from fees derived from invitations to perform at *eventos*.

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih6fV5TPqRk> (accessed 13 May 2021).

¹⁴⁵ DJ Patex, interview with the author, 4 April 2018.

But beyond the most obvious and localised challenges GrandFrend faces, related as we have seen to the direct interaction with Equatoguinean creators, there are also the larger barriers established by the inequalities inherent in global streaming platforms based on algorithmic, recommender systems that push unknown artists even more towards the peripheries. While GrandFrend mostly operates through YouTube, a platform that has drawn less attention by music scholars, similar algorithm-based platforms such as Spotify have received increasing attention due to their growing impact on musical creativity (Hodgson Forthcoming), the transformation of social formations (Werner 2020), and the ethics of corporate behaviour as they engage in user data mining and contribute to so-called ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Eriksson et al. 2019; Zuboff 2019).

For the purpose of this chapter, allow me only to point to the techno-politics that govern these platforms, which align with the Eurocentric and universalising character of international IP regimes, as argued in the previous section. In reorganising our supposedly common world as computational processes (Passoth 2020), the technopolitical governmentality underpinning music streaming platforms leaves behind the worlds of music of artists in the peripheries whose primary audiences barely know of, even less so use, these platforms. The growing dependence of the global music industry on data science and data engineering to generate profit triggers a discrimination of the music that barely generates that very data. How do Artificial Intelligence and algorithms dictating what people across the world should be listening to account for the musics emerging in the Global South? How does the algorithmic creation and recommendation of playlists affect the musical lives of those living in the peripheries of techno-capitalism?

These challenges are not easy to solve for a group of entrepreneurs trying to market the music of a country of barely one million people that has long been ignored by world history. By drawing on analytics offered by YouTube, Andony could learn that their main audience is based in Spain (49%), USA (10.6%), and Equatorial Guinea (7.3%). In his opinion, these numbers reflect the interest of Equatoguineans living in the diaspora, who have an interest in their home country's music and also find it easier to access the internet and streaming platforms than those living in Equatorial Guinea. This hypothesis indeed corresponds with studies on migration patterns that point to Spain as the country with the largest population of Equatoguineans living outside Equatorial Guinea (Aixelà Cabré 2011).¹⁴⁶ But it also means that perhaps not many people outside of the Equatoguinean population in the diaspora are listening to these artists through the GrandFrend media. Moreover, while there seems to be a correlation between online streams and the Equatoguinean diaspora, the raw number of people that make up this diasporic group is not enough to generate an important income, as has been the case with other African country's diasporic populations (Perullo 2008b).

Given the need to locate audiences beyond the Equatoguinean population, Andony insists on the importance of publicising the songs they upload through the advertisement programmes offered by the very platforms. But that is an investment GrandFrend leaves to the artists to make, an issue that during my fieldwork animated heated debates on GrandFrend's WhatsApp group, 'Noticias de GrandFrend'. Originally created by Andony to disseminate information regarding the media company, the group soon became a virtual space in which notions about, and imaginations of, the

¹⁴⁶ As Aixelà Cabré 2011 writes, these migration patterns correspond to the long-standing colonial links between Spain and Equatorial Guinea. A large population of Equatoguineans first established themselves in Spain after they fled from Macías' regime of terror. This first wave then attracted, through family ties, a new wave of Equatoguineans who escaped from the harsh economic crisis the country underwent in the late 1980s, shortly before the oil boom.

Equatoguinean music industry flowed. Comprised of over 100 members including singers, beatmakers, and audience members, participants joined and left on a daily basis; a few exchanged ideas, some shared audio files of their new songs, and some others posted random spam.

On 24 January 2018, Andony started a discussion with Equatorial Guinea-based rapper Jack, both of whom clearly represented opposing perspectives and economic logics regarding music exchange, monetisation, and investment in publicity. Jack defended his intention to self-produce a few CDs of his latest album and try to sell them in the country—in a way that indeed was much more common some 10-15 years ago, before the growing availability of smartphones to exchange and consume music. In an interview with Jack after the WhatsApp debate, he explained:

The only way to sell a few CDs, which is not a lot, is for me to sell them directly to the people. We don't have much access to sites like Amazon here. [I prefer] approaching an acquaintance or relative directly, those who've already listened to my music: it's more human. You meet them and they can ask you: 'what song would you recommend?' It's like creating a connection and all.¹⁴⁷

Jack's words certainly invoke notions of a moral economy of redistribution that I have discussed throughout the thesis. His 'selling' CDs to friends and relatives is nothing more than an act of enforcing a redistribution from wealthier citizens, in a similar way as other singers 'sell' praise songs to the elites. He went on:

What I also aspire to is to create the habit among people to appreciate work, to understand that somebody invested some time in writing [the music]. That the person invested her energy, because it's energy. [...] I think there's other people like me here, and we all need that recognition and motivation to keep going. [...] Currently, it's very difficult to live off music in Equatorial Guinea; not just off rap, but off music in general. The idea that the population have of 'the artist', what they show to us... That's why I try to do other things beyond music, things that don't have anything to do with the art world.¹⁴⁸

While Jack does appreciate the small economic reward he makes from the CD sales, his aim is not only profit-making, but also restoring the role of the artist, which he

¹⁴⁷ Jack, interview with the author, 17 February 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

believes is socially significant. In this moral economy, ‘more than a set of economic rules, these norms are principles of good character, justice, dignity, and respect—in sum, of recognition’ (Fassin 2009, 1244). Jack thus voices a widespread feeling among the artistic community that their work is often ‘used’ or instrumentalised by the elites, and that artists are often underappreciated. The moral economy embraced by Jack signals to music circulation’s potential to forge social relations that exceed those of patronage. Through the sale of his CDs, he seeks to engender social connections that may lie somewhat outside of the onerous patronage network.

Rather opposed to this logic is that of Andony’s, who believed that Jack should be investing his money in online ads to create an international audience:

Some platforms allow you to promote and advertise your music. [...] There’s one called ceature.fm, or you can also do it directly on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook... any social media. With only €10, you can create adverts that will allow you to reach more people. [...] And you know, digital platforms reach everywhere. [...] And that’s what I told them [singers on his WhatsApp group]: why would you invest anything to manufacture a CD that you can only sell in Equatorial Guinea, if you can rather invest in a song that will be heard in Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Colombia, or Spain. That’s better. How much do you spend manufacturing 100 CDs? Instead, try investing that amount in online promotion and you’ll make even more money.¹⁴⁹

Andony’s words illuminate a feature of online music circulation that relates to its potential to create unexpected audiences from distant areas, which was less likely, or required much more elaborate distribution networks, with analogue formats:

In the media accounts I run, Casco Jackson, for example, is listened to a lot, which is something that caught me by surprise. Especially on Apple Music. I was like ‘whoa, who listens to Casco Jackson on Apple Music?’. Those are the surprises that streaming gives you. It’s something that selling music on CDs won’t give you. It can be shocking really. One day, for example, I was checking the analytics and saw that a song that I had barely promoted had over 9k views. I was like, ‘where do all these views come from?’ (ibid.)

Implicit in Andony’s logic is not just a critique of Jack’s case, but a critique of the larger patronage economy, underpinned by what he understands to be an oppressive system that hinders a more independent, liberating capitalist structure. When inquiring

¹⁴⁹ Andony, interview with the author, 18 July 2018.

about why musicians have not yet bought into GrandFrend very much, he is straightforward:

I think the main cause is the dictatorship, easily. People are more worried about having something to eat than about consuming something that will remunerate other people. That's the problem. And artists don't have that business mentality because they are just not businessmen. They are artists. [...] Many don't believe they can live off music. So they are suspicious. I can show them the way. I can say: '*diman*, here you can get copyright for your music and start receiving payments from your royalties'. But they are suspicious, they show no trust. [...] People still depend a lot on relatives: they think that to become artists they must have somebody's approval [a sponsor]. They think: 'I gotta get some cash from this person to get there'. No, you can do it on your own. But also, the country's situation, the technical, social, political difficulties, kind of block everybody there. They're blocked. They think that, because there's a dictatorship in the country, they won't ever be successful in life.¹⁵⁰

The debate between Jack and Andony highlights the clash between entrepreneurial logics (encouraged by GrandFrend) and a moral economy shaped by long-standing patronage logics and certainties about music circulation's potential to forge social relations. Andony blames artists for not having an entrepreneurial mindset, for not being inclined towards risk-taking and innovation, a trend that nonetheless seems to be emerging across the African continent (Röschenthaler and Schulz 2016; Shipley 2013; and Eisenberg Forthcoming a). We cannot forget the fact that Andony's project stems from his ten-year stay and education in Europe, and his contrasting viewpoints are partly shaped by his diasporic experience. But his capitalist logic is indeed full of commitment to Equatorial Guinea and harbours not just a desire for capitalism itself, but a critique of the state as a hindrance for personal and social liberation.

On the other hand, Jack, like other Equatoguinean artists, expresses scepticism and distrust not of GrandFrend in particular, but of digital intermediaries and an unknown online world that may bring about new forms of exploitation, opaque entrapment, and oppression. His insistence on the sale of CDs represents a belief that

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

the exchange of the material music commodity affords a stronger sense of co-present connection with known consumers and audience members. This exchange, to him, becomes a more concrete and reliable kind of satisfaction than the strange, unknown, and disembedded experience of online music distribution.

Overall, the exchanges between Jack, and similar musicians, and Andony reveal the difficulties in online streaming platforms to monetise Equatoguinean music and free it from the constraints of a monopolistic patronage economy. While a seemingly promising mechanism, the difficulty of reaching audiences given the nature of recommender systems and the scepticism displayed by a group of musicians long operating within radically different sets of rules complicates the work and the hopes of (diasporic) entrepreneurial ventures such as GrandFrend.

Conclusion

Colonial studies scholar Benita Sampedro (2008) has argued that historical accounts of Equatorial Guinea have often been marked by two interrelated clichés: the country's specificity as the only Spanish-speaking nation in Africa, and its limited territorial extension and population. Both of them, Sampedro contends, have been invoked in essentialist and uncritical accounts to explain the country's invisibility in academic and political discourses, even within the continent. As this chapter has shown, the invisibility of Equatoguinean artists in international markets is real, but it is caused by a more complex set of political, economic, and technological formations within which these musicians operate. Adding to the challenges created by the Equatoguinean state and the patronage economy, artists face the reality of a quickly changing global music industry embedded in a Eurocentric techno-capitalist world of complex legal

regimes and algorithm-based recommender systems, all of them working towards the exclusion of musicians in the worlds' peripheries.

The ethnography related in this chapter sheds light on the everyday challenges encountered by Global South musicians to join the new digital music industry, an issue not yet fully developed in the music scholarship. The chapter points towards the continuation of unequal power dynamics that, despite musicians' efforts and creative hustling, are difficult to solve. Pushed to labour within the borders of the country, Equatoguinean musicians are left to encounter the state on a daily basis. But they still retain the strategic mechanisms to navigate the cracks of power and extract the best from the opportunities they have, as the next chapter discusses.

Chapter 7: Playing with the State: Strategies of Hustling and Adaptation

Introduction

So far in this thesis I have explored the ways in which musicians produce, circulate, and perform music within a patronage economy intimately connected to the nature of the state. I have depicted the many challenges musicians face under the Obiang regime, and the ways oil capitalism has contributed to the furthering of inequality and oppression. While American companies and Equatoguinean elites accumulate spectacular riches, the majority of citizens experience most harshly the contradictions and often-paradoxical material scarcity brought about by oil capitalism under authoritarianism. How do people cope in such extreme economic circumstances where there seems to be *no other way* (Adebanwi 2017a, 5)? How does oil money trickle down amid a political economy that promotes violent exclusion?

Studies of music-making in authoritarian states have often framed musicians' responses as either collaboration or subversion. This chapter instead turns to issues of adaptation and hustling to investigate how musicians create opportunities for themselves through smart navigations of the interstices of the state. Specifically, it explores how they adapt to creatively profit from the mechanisms of bureaucracy and the personalisation of the state, from building and exploiting personal connections in ministerial corridors, to infiltrating the PDGE, to appropriating public resources. Licit or illicit, concealed or in plain view, these strategies are examples of the ways in which Equatoguineans *play* with the state in order to claim or take possession of what they consider is their piece of the national oil cake. As Mbembe has put it, 'the analyst must

watch for the myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly' (2001, 128). In that sense, the chapter follows the notion that even in the most authoritarian and repressive environments, the weak still have agentive power to turn constraints into opportunities (de Certeau 1984, xix).

Theoretically, the chapter has two goals. First, it sheds light on the complex and contradictory nature of state and non-state institutions. While the thesis has dealt in-depth with the entanglement of music and politics at large, here I zoom in to examine the people, legal regimes, administrative structures, and everyday interactions that sustain the bureaucratic institutions upon which musicians depend. I draw on scholarship that gives value to the ethnographic study of the banal and routinised practices that make up bureaucratic institutions in the Global South in general (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Gupta 2012) and in Africa in particular (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). More specifically, I explore how musicians smartly navigate and extract profit from the Equatoguinean Ministry of Culture and the Spanish and French cultural centres (described in Chapter 2).

Second, the chapter brings into bold relief practices employed by musicians to profit from non-musical activities, an aspect rarely explored in studies of music economies and musical labour. Arriving in Equatorial Guinea, I expected to spend most of my time in the field taking notes and conducting participant observation at recording sessions, rehearsals, and concerts. But I soon discovered that most musicians occupy their days writing project proposals for the foreign and local cultural centres; paying visits to local politicians or wealthy relatives to ask for an *ayuda* (literally 'help', sponsorship in the form of cash); or trying to schedule meetings with important state officers at various ministries to tap into the government's flow of money. In a music economy as challenging as the one this thesis explores, musicians, like every other

citizen, struggle to find cash through a variety of mechanisms that are not necessarily related to the recording, exchanging, and performing of their songs. This kind of labour resembles what James Ferguson has called ‘distributive labour’—a reflection of the ‘hard work of dependence’ (2015, 94). This is a type of labour whose goal is not the production of goods and services (or music) but the securing of distributive outcomes.

On Hustling, Making Do, and Strategies of Adaptation

This chapter is concerned with the way Equatoguinean musicians, despite their incredibly challenging environment, make use of smart techniques and strategies to get by. I thus engage a range of literature that emphasises agency and economic survival among dispossessed or repressed populations. Along these lines, James Scott’s (1985) notable *Weapons of the Weak* is a relevant contribution. In this classic work, Scott explores class struggle in a Malay rice growing field. Questioning the reasons why peasants do not revolt under oppressive conditions, Scott argues that the everyday forms of resistance and contestation employed by Malayan peasants may be more challenging to hegemony than larger rebellions or revolutions. While peasants do not have the power to significantly alter the status quo, they succeed in alleviating oppression.

At around the same time that Scott published his work, Michel de Certeau (1984) was also exploring everyday forms of resistance. De Certeau however frames resistance not through issues of opposition and subversion, but through the creative strategies and tactics of reappropriation employed by the weak. His interest is in diversionary practices whereby ordinary people operate *within* but at the same time *against* hegemonic forces to make their own gains. Critiquing Bourdieu for the passivity of his actors, de Certeau sees cultural practices—including language, space, and

thought—as the means to find cracks and circumvent power structures. He sees ordinary people as capable of finding ‘countless ways of “making do”’ (de Certeau 1984, 28).

Africanist economic anthropology has also paid attention to similar creative strategies to get by under precarious conditions. In a festschrift to Jane Guyer’s work, Wale Adebani (2017b) explores the political economy of everyday life in Africa, or how Africans draw on their agency, resilience, and creativity to adapt to precarity; how they ‘[create] meanings that give value to their lives and make life liveable even under the most stressful economic—as well as political and social—conditions’ (Adebani 2017a, 5). He pushes us to look at everyday economic life as ‘a system of adaptation and circumvention through which life, despite the odds, is lived’ (ibid.). Adebani, in sum, encourages us to try to understand the everyday strategies deployed by Africans to live a good life.

The idea of people making efforts to have a better life is evident in John Chernoff’s (2003) *Hustling is Not Stealing*. In an experimental ethnography of a West African sex worker, Chernoff gives way to Hawa’s fascinating autobiography, which recounts a life of struggles and hard work across cities in Ghana and Togo. Moving beyond the sex-for-money stereotype, the storytelling reveals Hawa’s persistent negotiation between security and oppression, affection and abuse, and her transformation into an expert trickster capable of achieving anything she wants. Hawa’s life story is definitely harsh, but she recounts it with a clear tinge of sarcasm and even joy. In Chernoff’s words, it is ‘a giddy celebration of her will to dignity’ (2003, 7). Smartly navigating race, gender, and ethnic borderlands, Hawa’s story becomes one of a quest for liberation amid conditions of precarity and structural violence.

Similar ideas of hustling and everyday struggle are extended by James Ferguson (2015, 89–117) in his theory of distributive labour and distributive livelihoods.

Exploring a politics of distribution, Ferguson argues that the Southern African poor's contemporary labour can no longer be understood within theories of *lumpenproletariat* or the 'informal economy'. Instead, these 'surplus populations', expelled from agrarian systems of production, thrive on practices and forms of labour that are at the core intended to 'secure a transfer of resources from those who have them to those who don't' (Ferguson 2015, 111). These populations labour within a logic of 'survivalist improvisation', a day-to-day creative struggle to find mechanisms to enforce redistribution.

The examples that follow in this chapter exemplify kinds of creative adaptation, hustling, and survivalist improvisation. But they must also be understood alongside a certain form of resilience that is pervasive across all Equatoguineans. This is best condensed within the most common response one gets to the question 'how are you?': *aguantando*, one will commonly hear back, which literally means 'holding up', or 'coping'. As creative as Equatoguineans need to be to 'make do', their actions and discourses reflect great political exhaustion after decades of colonialism and postcolonial authoritarian rule.

Scene 1: Visits to the Ministry

It is an average December morning and I am hanging with percussionist Manuel Eyama outside the Institut Français as dancer Jesús approaches to greet us. Jesús is a member of the country's National Ballet, a state institution devoted to the performance of neo-traditional music—often at political events and international exhibitions. Today, Jesús looks radiant: his hair brushed and a clean-shaved beard, a navy-blue jacket over a neat white shirt tucked into a pair of elegant trousers, shiny brown shoes. The rather

large diary he carries almost looks part of the elegant outfit. We ask where he is headed so elegantly dressed, and he brags that he has a meeting with the Minister of Culture, Rufino Ndong.¹⁵¹ Brows raised, Manuel enquires how he managed to set up the meeting. ‘I have his phone number so I can call him personally whenever I need to meet with him’, Jesús brags again, bringing into bold relief how personal connections facilitate access to public resources. Manuel pulls out his phone and asks Jesús to share the number, to which the latter mumbles an excuse and leaves suddenly. Manuel looks at him leaving and whispers that that is not a proper way to attend a meeting with a minister: ‘Wearing a nice jacket but with no papers? You can’t sell a project with only words, you ought to bring a well-thought-out document in a hardcopy’. Manuel is slightly bothered by the interaction. The fact is that he has been trying to set up such a meeting for a while to find funding for a project he and I have been developing.

A proficient percussionist and a member of the National Ballet himself, Manuel and I had met two years earlier, when I first visited Malabo. My background as a trained classical percussionist brought me closer to him, and I was humbled to be his student at the Centro Cultural de España en Malabo. For months we shared jam sessions and conversations at the cultural centres and his small wooden house in a densely populated area near the Malabo cemetery, where he lived with his partner and his little son. Manuel’s salary as the lead percussionist of the National Ballet was an improvement over his previous work as a cook at an US oil industry compound, but it was not enough to make a living, which meant he was constantly forced to search for alternative sources of income, including gigs as a studio musician or as a backing percussionist at live performances—all of which is scarce too.

¹⁵¹ The full title is Minister of Culture, Tourism, and Crafts Promotion. Ndong was appointed earlier in 2017, after holding a position as Consejero de la Presidencia en Materia de Artes Escénicas (Adviser to the President on Performing Arts).

Early on, Manuel and I started discussing the possibility of writing a book on the country's rhythmic heritage. He often complained about the lack of written scores to use in his lessons and I thought it would be a neat way to provide further visibility of the more purely musical aspects and structures of Equatorial Guinea.¹⁵² The plan was to combine Manuel's expertise with my knowledge of transcription and my recording and photographic equipment. The goal: transcribing a number of rhythmic patterns of the different ethnic groups onto both European-classical notation and Manuel's own notation system, which would be of interest to his not-classically-trained students. The transcriptions would be accompanied by photographs of the different instruments employed and audio recordings of the patterns. The project was going smoothly as I recorded and photographed Manuel performing the separate lines of each pattern. But we hit a dead-end when it became evident that we would need to hire several ensembles if we wanted to record the full patterns, especially of those ethnic groups that Manuel, a Fang, was less familiar with. A fee that went beyond our individual pockets, we became aware that we would need financial assistance or a grant of some sort if we wanted to finish the project.

'We need to write a formal request and submit it to the Ministry of Culture', Manuel told me one day. 'I have some sample applications that we can use, cause I've done it in the past'. We went ahead and drafted a proposal. When it came to the budget, Manuel insisted that we also include an 'honorarium' for our own work. Hesitant at first about what I perceived was beyond the original nature of the project, I soon understood that cultural grants are a common source of funding for artists who otherwise receive scarce support from a malfunctioning cultural institution. Even more so, I knew from

¹⁵² The only such comprehensive work was written over a century ago by Hornbostel (1913). Isabela de Aranzadi (2009) is another relevant exception, but her work is more inclined towards the organology of the different ethnic groups.

other instances that inflating the budget is a publicly sanctioned bureaucratic strategy to make public funds trickle down.

Indeed, one of the reasons why projects are so often approved is that state officers and intermediaries get a cut from the funding. Often behind the applicants' back, some state intermediaries alter the budget, inflating it even further, before they present the proposal to their bosses: if the project is approved, they keep the difference between the original budget and the tampered one. The state structure thus encourages money embezzlement by intermediaries, but these also facilitate the flow of oil money, which can eventually benefit musicians at the bottom. Without the existence of any grant schemes, these applications are reviewed on a rolling basis. But this is not a synonym of accessibility. To be successful in the chase for cultural projects funding, one has to be highly adaptable and knowledgeable about the workings of the state: more specifically, one must have contacts inside, the higher in the ladder the better.

That is why Manuel proposed to start at the top: 'We need to speak with the minister himself. I'd rather talk to him directly than leaving the proposal with his secretary, cause intermediaries always complicate things'. When I confessed to being intimidated by a meeting with someone as high up as the minister, he told me not to worry because the minister was *familiar* (Spanish for 'familiar' but also 'relative'). I wondered out loud if they really were related, which would not be surprising considering everyone in the country 'has a cousin in the public administration'. In a country of barely one million people and 24 ministries—comprised of Ministers, Minister Delegates, Vice-Ministers, State Secretaries, Government Advisors, General Directors, as well as a Prime Minister, a First Vice-Prime Minister, a Second Vice-Prime Minister, and a Third Vice-Prime Minister, all of them including cabinets and regional representatives—personally knowing or being related to a high state officer is

not unusual.¹⁵³ But in this story that was not the case, and while Manuel knew the minister personally, they were not related, which complicated things.

To begin with the practical problems, we did not have a phone number to reach out to him easily, which was the reason why Manuel was upset in our exchange with Jesús above. So we opted for an easier option: a contact at the CICTE (Consejo de Investigación, Ciencia y Tecnología), a public institution that manages scientific and technological research. After setting an appointment, we took a taxi to the headquarters, located in the *viviendas sociales* near Malabo II.¹⁵⁴ Our contact was waiting for us outside. We greeted her and she walked us into a building half-empty of furniture and people: ‘things are a bit upside down now, because of the elections, so not many people are coming to work’, she pointed out. We sat at a large empty table with her and a young man who was introduced as an anthropologist. After some small-talk, we handed them a hardcopy of our project and Manuel began to describe it. But she cut straight up to the point: ‘what exactly can we do for you?’ We said we were looking for funding and she moved quickly through the document until she reached the budget at the end. ‘The project looks very promising, but we can’t offer you any funding at the moment’. According to her, they could not make any decisions until they spoke with the bosses, but both the president of CICTE and the director of the department seemed to be out of town without a return date.¹⁵⁵ ‘We’re very sorry, you know well this is a very hierarchical system. We’ll let you know’.

¹⁵³ See the government official website for a comprehensive list:

<https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=126> (accessed 24 February 2021).

¹⁵⁴ *Viviendas sociales* are a public housing structure recently developed by the state. A project allegedly created to provide affordable housing for lower-income people, many locals complain that flats are actually rather expensive and access to them is also an opaque process. As my story points out, *viviendas sociales* are also being used to house sprawling state institutions and offices.

¹⁵⁵ The power grab over institutions that some high state officers insist on having is detrimental of the normal working of the institution itself. On one occasion, I visited the recording studio at the Centro Cultural Ecuatoguineano (dependent on the Ministry of Culture) to find the producer killing time and waiting for his computer to be fixed. Apparently, he had communicated the problem to the General

About a month later we were asked to go to another one of the buildings the Ministry of Culture occupies. Upon arrival, a man met us on an empty corridor. Manuel seemed to know him—he was the brother of a famous singer close to the regime. After exchanging a few words, the man told Manuel he did not see him at the meeting a few days before. Social pressure to attend PDGE-related events is part of Equatoguineans' everyday lives, even for non-party members. Manuel made up an excuse, and without much ceremony, the man handed us a piece of paper filled with official stamps:

Debido a la recesión económica y por no existir un apartado de financiación en nuestro presupuesto, les comunicamos dirigirse al Ministerio de Cultura y Promoción Artesanal, por ser de entera competencia a dicha Institución Gubernativa, agradeciéndoles el gran interés que tienen hacia nuestra Entidad.

Due to the economic recession and the fact that there is not enough funding within our institution, we advise you to direct your proposal to the Ministry of Culture and Crafts Promotion, as these matters are competence of that Government Institution. Thank you for your interest in our Entity.

But wasn't CICTE an institution comprised within the Ministry of Culture? I asked Manuel. He shrugged quietly. He was evidently upset, especially by the lack of explanations from his contact. But he decided it was probably worth bringing the project to the ministry's office. A few days later, Manuel called me and told me to rush: he had seen the minister entering his office at the Centro Cultural Ecuatoguineano, so we had a chance to knock on his door. But when we arrived with a newly printed version of our application, a barrier of secretaries stopped us. Manuel tried to get through them but, with few words, they grabbed our application, stamped it, put it on top of a pile of papers, and told us they would let us know.

Over the next four months, we visited many different buildings and talked to many different people in order to chase our paperwork. First, we enquired at the new offices in the Malabo II *viviendas sociales*, but they turned out to be only dedicated to

Director of the centre, who argued he could not call a technician and pay him without the approval of the minister—who happened to be in his home village in the continental region campaigning for the upcoming elections.

the department run by renowned singer Bessoso, who had just been named Secretary of State for Culture.¹⁵⁶ There, we bumped into Bessoso's son and Manuel was smart enough to get his father's personal number from him, 'just in case'. We were then sent to Función Pública (ministry in charge of the structure of the public administration), where we casually and without an appointment had a first meeting with Secretary of State Jerónimo 'Ánimo' Nsue. There, we found out that our project had for some reason been sent to the National Library. During the long process, Manuel was clearly adept at applying for funding: he knew who to flatter and how to chase individual contacts. But the latter mostly evaded responsibility and sent us around again and again.

The climax of the long journey came after Estrella Milagrosa—the General Director of the National Library, who had shown interest in the project—proposed that we meet with Ánimo again, this time with her intermediation. Back in Ánimo's massive office, the atmosphere felt even tenser than the first time. The large man, white shirt and plain blue tie, invited us to sit. Manuel had already congratulated him on his *nombramiento* (gaining his new post) and introduced me in the previous meeting. Like last time, Manuel spoke and gestured with outstanding deference: the extrovert and funny man I knew was then head down, hands on his knees, and silently nodding to Ánimo's long speech about the importance of culture for the development of the nation. Estrella—a subordinate of Ánimo—showed similar reverence. Ánimo cut to the chase: 'well, Miss General Director, what brings you all here?'. Estrella handed him a copy of the project alongside our original request, which we had left months ago at the minister's anteroom. The document had some handwriting on the top, which apparently meant that 'the minister himself decreed it'. Ánimo said that he recognised the minister's handwriting, so we should have gone to talk to him directly. Estrella replied:

¹⁵⁶ More on Bessoso in Chapter 1.

‘Your Excellency, I didn’t want to skip the chain of authority, I wanted to speak to you first’.

Our attempt to gain funding for our book project could not have been more convoluted: after the minister seemingly having green lighted the funding without anybody letting us know, we had had to talk with Ánimo first and Estrella later to then meet all together and get told we were supposed to speak to the minister himself. What at first looked like a shockingly easy access to a high authority such as a minister ended up becoming a complicated back and forth between state officers who feared stepping on their superiors’ toes. Ánimo finally took a look at the project and got to the budget: ‘is this all you are asking for?’. Manuel nodded. ‘*Pero cómo?!*’ (literally ‘but how?!’, everyday form of expression of shock). Ánimo was surprised about all the fuss for what he thought was a tiny amount of money. ‘Look, I have the power to defend this before the minister and I will, but ultimately I don’t touch the money. Others do. That’s why some projects get stuck sometimes. But this project is the kind of stuff I took this job for, so I’ll make sure it is accepted’.

We never heard back about the funding. We eventually gave up chasing it out of boredom and never found out why our application was not successful. If, according to some friends, applications were so often approved—aided as we have seen by interested intermediaries—I wondered why a seemingly relevant project was being bluntly ignored. Manuel’s suspicion was supported by a close friend who works at one of the various institutions within the Ministry of Culture. ‘They [intermediaries and high state officers] have gone a step further: they review the project, inflate the budget, approve it, and then keep all the cash and tell the applicants the project was never approved’.

The case is an example of how artists hustle to get cash through cultural projects and how they strategically navigate the web of personal relations and the convoluted

institutional structure that make up the state. But it also exemplifies the setbacks and challenges to get by in such an extended web of ministries, institutions, buildings, and hierarchies. Such an ethnographically-grounded approach to the interstices of the state apparatus reveals the ‘double face of bureaucracy’, as both a form of possibility and protection and one of domination and oppression (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2019). While the sponsorship of cultural projects appears to be a promising avenue for artists to access public funds, the reality is that we were never able to pull the right strings and ended up wasting an enormous amount of time and money—taking multiple taxis from one end of Malabo to the other.¹⁵⁷ We were indeed able to meet with the Secretary of State for Culture several times without previous appointments, but we were also sent on a wild goose chase where everybody seemed to know about the project, but no one really said what happened behind the scenes. Ultimately, the case brings into bold relief certain bureaucracies’ failure to improve peoples’ lives (Gupta 2012).

Scene 2: A PDGE Celebration

The next section addresses everyday use of trickery and deception by artists to extract profit from state institutions. It considers participation in party-related events and the deployment of strategies of wealth redistribution. Every 5 June, on the birthday of President Obiang, the PDGE organises a big concert at their headquarters. This is not the private *evento* the president usually holds at his palace, but a semi-public celebration for party members to enjoy themselves. As a display of generosity, the PDGE pays *any*

¹⁵⁷ The expenses we made on taxis and printing many hardcopies of our project in order to better negotiate our position and increase our chances of success reminds of Sara Berry’s experience in Nigeria: ‘Since access to resources depended, in part, on the ability to negotiate successfully, people tended to invest in the means of negotiation as well as the means of production per se. [...] This meant in practice that agricultural surplus was used in part to establish or strengthen the social identities and relationships through which people entered or influenced negotiations over access and control of resources’ (1993, 15).

artist who wants to perform: singers just have to sign up beforehand and, of course, perform a display of sonic deference. The flat fee is 100k CFA (ca. £130) for individual artists and 250k CFA (ca. £330) for groups for the performance of a single song.¹⁵⁸ Importantly, according to some musicians, this is one of the few events organised by the party or the government that is always paid—they cannot afford a musician making a fuss on the President’s day. ‘The only important thing is making sure you sign next to your name right after the performance’, a friend explained to me. ‘Then you just go to the PDGE headquarters three days later and pick up the cash’. The lack of screening, the promise of easy money, and the fact that the concert is lip-synced (like most *eventos*, see Chapter 4) attract dozens of amateur and professional singers. On the year of my fieldwork, over 100 people allegedly gathered to perform at the event. Normally, artists gather behind the stage and wait for their names to be called. The show goes on for hours to allow everybody to perform, but some years attendance is so high that some may go home without a chance to sing.¹⁵⁹

This type of event, which resembles the free New Years’ Eve concert sponsored annually by Nguema (see Chapter 2), is criticised by some artists for what they think is a lowering of the artistic quality in the country. One of my interlocutors recounted to me how he used to participate at Nguema’s event years ago but was progressively discouraged by the rising amateurisation: ‘*me desanimé* [I was disillusioned] by singing after people with no musical background at all. So I decided not to contribute to it anymore’. Indeed, the lack of screening and the widespread, sanctioned use of lip-syncing are an enticement for regular people who just seek easy money. From the point of view of the sponsors—Nguema on New Year’s and the PDGE for the President’s

¹⁵⁸ Some believe the budget is actually much higher but intermediaries keep a large part.

¹⁵⁹ While some still do not have time to perform, everybody on the list gets paid the same.

birthday—the expenses from artists’ fees are not an investment to generate more money, but a display of generosity and economic power that also requires reciprocation through praise singing. In other words, their goals are accomplished regardless of the artistic level of the participants. Moreover, these regular annual events keep an open, ‘meritocratic’ image of the patronage economy alive: they reinforce the notion that anybody is welcome to participate. Finally, the promise of a certain payment creates the illusion that patronage always generates fair payment—but as I have shown earlier in the thesis, that is rarely the case.

Alongside amateurisation, events like these also encourage a great level of trickery and deception by both artists and intermediaries. Consider the following case. One day, I am hanging out with a famously subversive rapper when he tells me that he has recently participated at the PDGE show. I am surprised, as the rapper (I’ll call him Ismael) is usually critical of the regime both in private and in his songs. When I ask why he would participate in such a concert, he reveals the trick: ‘we could say that I infiltrate the event; been doing it for three years’, he laughs. Using his laptop and basic studio software, Ismael records a few songs that will fit the event. But instead of getting on stage himself, he hires teenagers to perform and they split the profit:

This year, I have participated with five different groups. Groups are more profitable cause they’re better paid than individual artists. I hire a few *chavales* [youngsters] and make up random names for the groups. This year I had one called Guinea Tradition. That way nobody can link the groups to me.

Ismael’s strategy bears a resemblance to Michel de Certeau’s notion of *la perruque*. In his classic *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau defines the term as ‘the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer’ (1984, 25). *La perruque* is a diversionary practice of an artistic nature through which the weak try to bend rules to fulfil their own needs. Examples are writing love letters during office hours or using company scraps to build goods. Similarly, pretending to be working for the PDGE,

Ismael is instead attending to his own needs. When I ask him whether he has any issues writing praise songs, he is quick to point out that he does it just for the easy money, not out of real political attachment. Examples of *la perruque*, when revealed, can be repressed or ignored. Being in Equatorial Guinea, I ask Ismael whether he fears getting into trouble if somebody discovered his cheeky strategy. But he is unconcerned: ‘even if they found out, I think they wouldn’t care as long as I wish the President a happy birthday’. Moreover, organisers keep cuts, so they benefit from higher numbers of participants.

But we need to remember that the notion of *la perruque* originally emerged to theorise how French workers diverted time from the factory ‘for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit’ (de Certeau 1984, 25). Creative as it is, the work of Ismael is directed, on the contrary, to the explicit creation of profit. He is not diverting company time into his own needs: he is diverting public money into his pocket. In his own words: ‘they steal our money on a daily basis, so I do what I can to steal from them’. Instead of a kind of moral act of resistance like *la perruque*, Ismael’s strategy is better understood alongside contemporary politics of distribution in the Global South, particularly in countries with vast natural resources. Ismael’s argument that he is just ‘stealing’ because elites steal everyday points clearly to the widespread notion that funds derived from the country’s oil reserves should be distributed more fairly among the Equatoguinean population. It reveals ‘the existence of powerful political claims to ownership of a national wealth’—claims to a ‘rightful share’ (Ferguson 2015, 168). And importantly, it shows how people find strategic and creative ways to force that redistribution—albeit, of course, minimal.

Scene 3: Balancing Critique and Help

This section explores the negotiation of political critique and dependence through ambivalent positioning *vis-à-vis* the state. It does so through an exploration of rapper Negro Bey and the strategies he employs to produce critical songs while preserving his physical safety, performance opportunities, and an employment in the public administration. Born in the mid-1980s into a Fang family, Negro Bey spent most of his childhood in Bata, where he started to develop a passion for rap music in his teenage years. He became known for his involvement with Verso Roto, credited as one of the first rap crews in the country, before moving to Malabo to continue his career as a solo artist. In the last decade, he has combined his studies abroad and his work as a computer scientist with his passion for rap. With the publication of three solo albums—*Cicatriz* (2011), *Reliquia* (2014), and more recently, *El Trovador* (2019)—Negro Bey has increasingly gained popularity and is considered one of the greatest artists in Equatorial Guinea.

As a rapper, Negro Bey has long struggled with the stereotypes the genre carries in the country. Early on, rappers were considered gangsters and criminals. But they progressively found their way into the musical mainstream with the support of the foreign cultural centres and even some local elites. In any case, Negro Bey's artistry has always been characterised by a high level of musical eclecticism and creativity, thriving on an original fusion of rap and Fang traditional rhythms, which has even impressed older generations normally unattracted by other types of rap.

From his early days in Verso Roto, Negro Bey has been known to write songs critiquing social inequalities and injustices within the country, which has put him on the government's radar. But he has drawn on a range of creative strategies to preserve his

safety, including building important relations within the state and carefully measuring when to publish certain songs:

When I released ‘Carta al Presidente’ [‘Letter to the President’], it soon became a hit. I knew that it would happen and that I could have problems with the authorities. But I’m a strategist. So what I did, before I published it, was to try to gain popularity and recognition. Because if you write something subversive and nobody knows you... who knows what can happen to you. But if you’re popular, it’s like... *they* hate you but they find it hard to push you aside. Anyway, what I did was to publish first the song ‘Mamá Africa’. Why? Because I know Pan-Africanism is one of the discourses the government likes to promote.¹⁶⁰ [...] So when I released the song, I was expecting *those guys* to say ‘whoa, this kid rules’. Because of that song, they started to invite me to perform at their parties, at the national TV, in large, fancy hotels. And when I was in that position, I started to work on *Reliquia*.¹⁶¹

Reliquia was Negro Bey’s first hit album and immediately caught the attention of the public in Equatorial Guinea and some Spanish media. In particular, the song ‘Carta al Presidente’, as he states, was arguably the one that gained the most traction early on.

While Negro Bey had already written songs that tackled social injustice in the country, he took it a step further in this song, daring to address Obiang directly:

‘Carta al Presidente’ – Negro Bey¹⁶²

La vida una línea de experiencias, Estilos de vivencias, fallos en constancia Escribo esta carta para la presidencia Es un honor... hola Su Excelencia.	Life, a line of experiences, Lessons, multiple failures. I write this letter for the President’s Office. It’s an honour... hello, Your Excellency.
Mis cordiales, un ciudadano en frente Presento inquietudes si usted me lo permite Y espero su respuesta, señor presidente Y que Dios y la historia sean lo referente.	I greet you here as a citizen. I present to you my concerns, if you’ll allow me. And I await your response, Mr. President. And have God and History be the models.
Mi carta es simple, aunque sea compleja Mi mente tiene quejas por eso así se expresa Y me pregunto... que será de nuestra gente Cuando en el futuro el petróleo se agote.	My letter is simple, albeit complex. My mind has complaints and therefore it expresses like this. I wonder... what will happen with our people when oil runs out in the future?
Ya nadie trabaja, el oficio es robar Manejar millones a costa de saquear Coches de lujo, mansiones y castillos	Nobody works anymore, the job is to steal. Moving millions through looting. Luxury cars, mansions, and castles.

¹⁶⁰ In ‘Mama África’ and other songs like ‘Hijos del Folklore’ (‘Children of Folklore’) Negro Bey moves his critique from the Equatoguinean government to Euroamerican imperialism and colonialism. While he is aware that such lyrics will grant him the favour of the local elites, the lyrics are not pure political strategy, but a genuine critique and a display of love for his homeland and the deep-rooted traditions of the Fang people.

¹⁶¹ Negro Bey, interview with the author, 23 May 2017.

¹⁶² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MleHYf4seI&ab_channel=NEGROBEYOFFICIAL (accessed 3 March 2021).

Si el salario... es casi una burla.	But the average salary is almost a joke.
Que si Guinea va bien hablan de Sipopo ¿Por qué nunca de New Billy, para ser escuetos? Sí, nadie es perfecto, pero lo vuestro por exceso. Nos tienen descontentos, para ser exactos.	They say Equatorial Guinea goes well, they talk of Sipopo. Why do they never talk of New Billy, to put it plainly? ¹⁶³ Nobody is perfect, but your behaviour is excessive. We're unhappy, to be exact.
Donde está el bienestar del ciudadano Queremos vivir bien y abrazar al hermano Libertad, paz, igualdad de derechos Justicia practicable entre tantas manos.	Where's the citizen's wellbeing? We want to live well and hug our brothers, Freedom, peace, equal rights. A working justice for everybody.
Queremos agua potable, un transporte asegurado Casas, luz, libros en escuelas.	We want clean drinking water, secure transportation. Houses, electricity, books in the schools.
[...]	[...]
Su Excelencia... el país va mal Tan mal que existe prostitución de menores La miseria, corrupción, hablo de sobornos Militares fantasmas, drogados y matones.	Your Excellency, the country is in bad shape, So bad that there is underage prostitution. Misery, corruption, I speak of bribery, Ghostly, drugged soldiers, thugs.
[...]	[...]
La juventud perdida en el alcohol, emborrachados Nos mantienen tontos, no sabemos quiénes somos Diputados en asambleas van a dormir. Sin ganas de mentir, hoy estoy harto de fingir.	Youth is lost in alcohol, drunk. They keep us dumb, we don't know who we are. Congressmen sleeping during meetings, Without a will to lie, I'm sick of pretending.

One of Negro Bey's key strategies to minimise the risks he faces has long been smartly navigating the various cultural institutions in the country. He is close to both the Spanish and French cultural centres, which often favour alternative artists and have traditionally sponsored rap (see Chapter 2). Personally knowing the directors and most local and international workers in these centres, he usually does not have problems lining up a concert when he wants to present new work. But he is also wise to approach the Equatoguinean institutions to gain their favour.

¹⁶³ Sipopo and New Billy are both Malabo neighbourhoods. The reference is a critique of unequal infrastructural development: he pairs the construction of palaces to host and impress foreign rulers (Sipopo) with a notably underdeveloped and overpopulated area (New Billy).

When the album [*Reliquia*] came out, it was a hit. I presented it on the Radio Nacional de España (Spanish national radio broadcast), on Frank-T's programme. He interviewed me and air played 'Carta al Presidente'. That's when everything exploded. [...] Everybody was worried about me; my mom called me crying asking why I had written such a song. Even Amnesty International called me! But I told everybody that it was fine because I knew nothing was gonna happen [if I was smart]. One thing I did was to present the album at the Centro Cultural Ecuatoguineano, because it's run by the state. If instead I had gone to the Spanish centre first, like others do, *they* might see it as a provocation. (Ibid.)

Besides befriending personnel at state institutions, Negro Bey also tried to gain popularity across the country, believing that being famous would make it harder for the state to imprison him or worse. In that direction, he also made efforts to appear both in international and local press, particularly in publications closely linked to the government.

The final bomb came when I appeared in the local press. I had done an interview with the newspaper *La Gaceta*, but they backed off last minute and were scared to publish it because of the things I said. So I went directly to *Guinea Ecuatorial Press*, which is the government's official website. At the time, it was run by a Spanish woman who didn't quite understand what was going on in the country. I was introduced to her on a flight from Spain and convinced her to interview me. So one day I was on the front page of the government website, haha. People were so surprised: 'how does this guy do it?'¹⁶⁴ Then *La Gaceta* reconsidered my interview, because they knew I was marketable, and they put me on the cover next to the First Lady! (Ibid.)

Negro Bey also makes efforts to downplay the public's perception of him as an exclusively subversive rapper. Interestingly, he is particularly sceptical of the foreign press who is critical of Obiang and seeks to use him to expose the country's miseries in a sensationalist manner:

I was once interviewed in a local TV in Spain, and the conductor just wanted to talk about 'Carta al Presidente' and all the political issues of the country. And I tried to go around, because if I said something out of place, I'd be in trouble when I got back to Equatorial Guinea. But beyond that, I do much more than just critique in my music! If you listen to *Reliquia*, there's only three songs that touch on social issues, but it's an 18-song album! I also talk about my father's death. Journalists could ask artists about that kind of stuff too. (Ibid.)

Beyond the various strategies followed in the publication and marketing of his music, Negro Bey has also been attentive to other opportunities to tap into public resources, without this being an impediment to keep being critical as a rapper. After training in Spain and Cape Verde, he found a job as a computer scientist for GITGE

¹⁶⁴ See the cited post: <https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=4108> (accessed 4 March 2021).

(Gestor de Infraestructuras de Telecomunicaciones de Guinea Ecuatorial), the parastatal that manages and distributes the telecommunications infrastructure and fibre optic in the country. While rap is his passion, his main income comes from this public employment, which forces him to be increasingly smart and ambiguous about the kind of music he produces and when he releases it, on the risk of losing the job.

Negro Bey's position is one of extremes. On the one hand, he has at times feared for his life, being advised by his family not to walk around alone at night after releasing certain songs. On the other, he has contacts within the highest political spheres—which grant him access to resources and physical security—in part because some members of the elite simply enjoy his music:

There's been people a bit older than me that, somehow, have grown up with me, with my music. So now when I walk around, some Ministers and General Directors stop their cars to greet me. I guess that's because in a way, I've added something to their lives.

While Negro Bey's case is a radical one, many other musicians get by, just as him, by moving back and forth, in and around discourses, institutions, and personal connections within the state. As Mbembe has put it, African postcolonial subjects have long developed 'practices that are fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable' (2001, 129). But importantly, we need to emphasise that while these ways of acting and strategic political positionings are ambiguous, they are not contradictory. The case shows how musicians can legitimately be critical of the injustices they experience while getting along with specific politicians or working in the public administration.

Conclusion

A few months before I started my fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea, I received an invitation from a well-known African culture blog to post occasional articles on

Equatoguinean contemporary music. Halfway through my fieldwork, Maelé, known as one of the fathers of Equatoguinean popular music, passed away at a hospital in Madrid after a long sickness. I thought that writing an obituary could be of interest for the blog. I produced a draft and sent it to the editor, who turned down the article because, according to information he found on the internet, Maelé was connected to the Obiang regime—the PDGE had helped fund the hospital bills. The blog, the editor said, wholeheartedly supported human rights and would not contribute to the legitimization of the Obiang regime with the publication of the obituary.

The editor's response took me by surprise and left me rather upset. Some local artists with whom I discussed the case were similarly troubled, arguing that Maelé was admired by most Equatoguineans. They believed that the editor's decision to actively ignore any artists linked to Obiang's regime, however peripherally, would only perpetuate the enduring international silencing of Equatoguinean cultural life. Paradoxically, even Obiang's opposition in the diaspora did not interrogate the links between Maelé and the PDGE, but the fact that he did not receive more help from the state in his last days. In my opinion, the editor did not consider the long-standing tensions between Maelé and Obiang. While being sponsored in the 1980s to record at Paris-based studios and years later being offered a political position, Maelé was also forced into exile in between both periods due to increasing tension after the publication of critical lyrics. More importantly, the event pushed me to reflect on the uniquely intimate connection between music and politics in Equatorial Guinea, and how only a close ethnographic approach can help unveil the ambivalence and contradictions that are intrinsic to that entanglement.

Like Maelé's case, the examples in this chapter reveal how a great number of musicians are to some extent connected to the structure of the state, whether by using

bureaucratic regimes, holding public jobs, praise singing, or tapping into the pockets of friend or kin-related state officers. But importantly, these practices do not necessarily mean political affiliation or straightforward collaboration. If we see them through the lens of pervasive musical patronage and the state's tight grip over the music economy, we are better equipped to understand musicians' practices as creative efforts to adapt and to enforce redistribution in conditions of 'no other way'. Such practices are carefully designed or improvised everyday strategies to create opportunities for themselves despite the odds. One could even argue that they are examples of small-scale, on-the-ground extraversion—where musicians actively exploit their dependent position with respect to the state to gain access to resources. But they also carry implicit claims for the redistribution of the spectacular oil funds entering the state coffers.

The state in this chapter is presented not 'just' as the embodiment of the government and Obiang's regime, but as a live and mobile constellation of institutions and people that are heterogeneously connected to musicians. While many intermediaries and state officers engage in seemingly corrupt and amoral practices, they are also the friends and relatives of those being wronged (or helped) at the bottom. In the navigation of the state structure, ambivalence and fluidity *vis-à-vis* institutions and actors, as we have seen, are among the key strategies deployed by musicians. Furthermore, the creation and maintenance of relations with foreign, non-state institutions such as the Spanish and French cultural centres emerge as key strategies to negotiate economic dependence as well as physical safety.

Throughout this thesis, we have seen how Equatoguinean artists often 'play the state', sounding ideology via participation in patronage networks, praise singing, and other forms of sonic deference in recorded and live performance. This chapter has alternatively looked at the ways musicians operate within and yet against the system,

how they *play* with the state in their everyday lives to extract the largest profit through savvy techniques including navigation and manipulation of complex and extended bureaucratic structures; deception and trickery; careful political ambiguity; exploitation of personal contacts within the administration; and various ways of hustling. The final chapter of the thesis moves in the opposite direction to explore examples where artists make efforts to work and live without the state.

Chapter 8: Playing without the State: Creating Alternative Politics through Music

Introduction

Can music be the conduit for alternative politics in a country where all aspects of social life are so highly politicised; where the omnipresent state, with its remarkable personalistic, hierarchical, and expansive structure reaches almost all corners of society? The final chapter of the thesis considers possible answers to this question. While Chapter 7 looked at the heterogeneous strategies and techniques in which Equatoguinean musicians play with the state—smartly adapting to make the most of difficult circumstances—the present one examines instances where musicians try to play *without* the state. In other words, the chapter explores modes of being and acting that are directed towards the disentanglement of music making from state politics and from the patronage networks immanent in the state.

This chapter builds on a recent body of literature that aims to offer new frameworks for understanding music in/as politics at a time of growing political exhaustion and disaffection. This scholarship encourages us attend to the political nature of music when it is not overtly resistant or subversive (Guilbault 2010; Steingo 2016); to valorise music aimed at emancipation from forms of political oppression even when it is geared not ‘toward revolutionary nationalism or the construction of (proto)national cultures but toward achieving some other type of psychological and/or physical liberation’ (Sykes 2013, 485); to consider the political, affective, and reparative potential of periods of ‘quiet atmosphere’ and sonic absence (Sprengel 2021a); and in sum, to keep an ethnographic eye for ‘sensorial aspects of the experience of music and sound that are usually dismissed as invisible, mundane or hidden, yet which are able to

make a rupture or open a possibility for new forms of political belonging and identifications' (Hofman 2020, 2).

The chapter considers examples of the use of music in projects aimed at creating politics that are independent from the state. Specifically, it is structured around three modes of alternative politics. First, I consider a politics of direct confrontation through an analysis of subversive rap. Then I look at the use of music making to negotiate conflicting ethnic politics and in particular, the tensions between the Bubi minority group and the primarily Fang political elites. Finally, I engage with forms of urban youth politics that express neither praise nor critique of state politics, but rather disinterest and disaffection. Along the way, I point to the seemingly liberating potential of these projects, which destabilise the state monopoly over politics to propose their own political way-outs. But I too present them alongside the violent and co-optive responses by the state that each one of them generates. Attempts to play without the state are pushed back and quickly repressed. The politics of music thus emerges not as an empty concept but as a process of pervasive, endless politicisation, de-politicisation, and re-politicisation.

Sonic Resistance: Confronting the State Through Rap

The first mode of alternative politics I want to explore is attempted through subversive music that directly confronts state politics and the role of the ruling family. As a more or less classic form of resistance through music, this type of politics takes the shape of 'socially engaged art', or instances of 'politically informed interdisciplinary practices in which "external" social and political realms become the arena within which [music] stages its interventions. These practices are emphatically intended to influence

the “real” world via politicized interventions in larger institutional spheres’ (Born, Lewis, and Straw 2017, 37). Importantly, this mode of alternative politics establishes a stance that is definitely *oppositional* to the current regime, or at least to the way things have been run for decades.

Songs that touch on social inequalities or that ridicule political and military leaders date back at least to the colonial period. Nomadic *nvet* performers (see Chapter 1) were famously known to elevate moral and social critique, often in humorous and sarcastic ways. Equatoguinean anthropologist Mbana Nchama (2017, 14–15) analyses a *nvet* epic poetry that celebrates the departure of the *Guardia Civil*, the Spanish police force that subdued the local population during the Francoist regime. Critique through *nvet* extended to the postcolony too. During the Macías years, Mbana continues, *nvet* performance was banned by decree because ‘*nvet* artists diagnosed the emergence of a terrible pandemic [...], which they called *Nhke*, or the sickness of silence. The dictatorship took the hint’ (ibid., 15). And as we saw in Chapter 7 with the case of Maelé, the early years of the Obiang rule also generated sporadic criticism from musicians in their lyrics.

But it was from the mid-2000s when the production of subversive music grew rapidly, resulting from the conjunction of the rap and oil booms in the country. Crews such as Koz2Rim, Dos Dados Trucados, and Verso Roto, and rappers like HL04, Jamin Dogg, Adjoguening, Negro Bey, Métrico, and Mr. O found in rap a privileged medium to express their feelings and opinions about increasing inequality resulting from oil exploitation.¹⁶⁵ Some of the songs that came out during that period directly addressed the elites to critique growing class difference, as exemplified in verses like ‘¿*qué harás*

¹⁶⁵ See Edú - Negro Bey 2016 for a historical account of the period from an auto-biographical perspective.

cuando sepas que en tu tumba no caben mansiones?’ (‘what will you do when you learn that there is no room for mansions in your grave?’), in the song ‘¿Qué harás?’ by Dos Dados Trucados. ‘GETESA y SEGESA’, by the same crew, puts the emphasis on material inequality and the lack of basic infrastructure despite the large flows of money entering the state coffers.¹⁶⁶ Ethnic discrimination is addressed in Adjoguening’s ‘Justicia’ (‘Justice’);¹⁶⁷ and police abuse is the main theme of the song ‘Atrapados’ (‘Trapped’) by Barrio X.¹⁶⁸

Entiendo que el militar es el protector del civil, pero aquí uno te amenaza más encima con un fusil. No valoran lo que llamamos los derechos humanos. Amargan ciudadanos. En vez de protegernos, verás a un militar que a todas partes va armado. Pistola aquí y acá para que la gente tenga miedo. Amenazando a la gente con una expresión vulgar: ‘sabes quién soy yo? Yo te puedo encarcelar.

I understand that the soldier’s role is to protect the civilian, but here they threaten you with a rifle. They don’t value what we call ‘human rights’. They upset the citizens. Instead of protecting us, you’ll see armed soldiers everywhere. Guns here and there so that people are scared. Threatening people with vulgar expressions: ‘you know who I am? I can imprison you’.

Another common theme at the time was excessive nepotism and unequal opportunities, evident in Razas Violentas’ ‘Vamos muy mal’ (‘We’re doing really bad’):

Guinea Ecuatorial, con Malabo capital, acepten que diga que pasa por un momento fatal. Para darte un trabajo, en tu curriculum no buscan qué diplomas tienes; buscan si eres familia del jefe.

Equatorial Guinea, including the capital Malabo, accept that I say is going through a terrible period. To give you a job, they don’t look for your diplomas on your CV; they just want to know if you’re the boss’ family.

The examples show that rap music in Equatorial Guinea, like elsewhere, bends itself towards subversion and critical speech; it has provided a key platform for social protest and for disenfranchised youths to express themselves through ‘explosive and resistive lyrics’ (Rose 1994, 145; Keyes 2004). Indeed, the burgeoning production of

¹⁶⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUvcmStzCZc&ab_channel=MusicaBoom (accessed 8 June 2021).

¹⁶⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-8EwQbusdw&ab_channel=Sanguinea1Sanguinea1 (accessed 8 June 2021).

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDlehkkEcX8> (accessed 8 June 2021).

subversive music during a period of 5-10 years could be considered the first and arguably only ever scene of ‘protest music’. But just as in other countries across the world (e.g. Brown 2004; Lipsitz 1998; Zaw 2004), it has been perceived as threatening and accordingly repressed by the state, as I will demonstrate below.

Importantly, however, not all of rap production in the country has been geared towards social critique. As articles by Nora Salas Seoane (2011) and Quimantú Segura Borrás (2009) show, it has also been employed by the children of the elites to make public and excessive displays of their wealth. In fact, rap in Equatorial Guinea took a radically dichotomic shape, with rich rappers producing songs in an American ‘gangsta’ style and critical rappers being clearly influenced by Spanish hardcore rap. Members of both groups were for years engaged in so-called ‘beefs’, including the one between the crew West Barna and Obiang’s nephew Kicko B, which Negro Bey has dubbed ‘a conflict turned a legend of Equatoguinean urban culture’ (2016, 83).¹⁶⁹

The responses of the state to resistance music have been many and heterogeneous. While the current regime has not approved laws to prevent artistic expressions like Macías did with *nvet* performers, subversive rappers have been constantly monitored. To begin with, rap lyrics have been directly influenced by patronage from its early stages in the 1990s. The most explicit case was the production of the album *Colección ASHO* in 1997. The album was a compilation sponsored by Nguema to support both emerging rappers and the work of his own father: ASHO stands for Asociación Hijos de Obiang (Children of Obiang Society), a well-known youth organisation close to the regime. Some rappers privately praise the sponsorship of the album for its contribution to the legitimisation of rap in the country: with the official

¹⁶⁹ See a song by Jamin Dogg (member of West Barna), critiquing the lavish lifestyle of the elites’ children: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlkkH8wfMj8&ab_channel=westbarnatvwestbarnatv (accessed 8 June 2021).

support of the President's eldest son, many young rappers felt protected from circulating stereotypes that depicted them as thugs. But many also see the problematics of a high politician directly influencing what rappers could and could not say in their lyrics. Other techniques of control have been geared towards driving rappers out of the scene. Evident examples are those where critical rappers have been offered jobs in the public administration in exchange for their quitting music making altogether.

But most commonly, rappers have experienced surveillance and direct physical threats by the different security bodies or by powerful politicians. Or they have been advised by close relatives and friends to soften their tone if they wished to protect their integrity. A common feature of African censoring apparatuses, 'it is often the threat of police or vigilante action (in the form of coercion and violence) which puts real fear into musicians' (Cloonan and Drewett 2006, 216). As Equatoguinean political scientist Enrique Okenve (2009) has argued, 'societal self-repression' is a powerful mechanism of control within the political culture extended by the Obiang regime.

But threats, fear, and self-repression were not enough in perhaps the most remarkable example of state response to subversive music, which involved the wrongful imprisonment of rapper Jamin Dogg after the rapid circulation of a controversial song in May 2017. The chain of events developed shortly after my arrival in the country, so I was able to gather an ethnographically close account and conduct a rare interview with Jamin after his release from prison.

The controversy was linked to a nation-wide crisis that involved the taxi driver community and their strike attempt after the government's approval of legislation that meant further paperwork and fees to do their work. Things escalated after the government responded by banning all taxi circulation across the country. To justify the measure, the government charged taxi drivers on the public radio with being 'criminals

and assassins’ and ‘viciously responsible’ for the increasing crime activity in the country. For weeks, traffic police officers and soldiers occupied the streets of Malabo and Bata, preventing taxis from circulating and consequently students from going to school, workers from commuting to their workspaces, and drivers from making their daily income.¹⁷⁰ The situation reached a high point on 17 June 2017 when a driver was shot to death by the police, allegedly due to a misunderstanding related to the new driving rules.¹⁷¹

About two weeks after the crisis broke out, I received a song via WhatsApp text. The song was entitled ‘Taxistas Yeheyeba’ and was produced by Jamin Dogg—arguably the most popular rapper in the country—and it was a frank cry in support for taxi drivers.¹⁷²

‘Taxistas Yeheyeba’ – Jamin Dogg

Vivo de mi taxi, yo soy jefe de mi taxi no tengo ningún cargo, me alimento por mi taxi	I live off my taxi, I’m the boss of my taxi I’m not in politics, I eat off my taxi.
Al parecer no es bastante que nos puteen tanto, Ahora han decidido que no circulen los taxis.	It seems like constantly fucking with us is not enough, Now they’ve decided to ban taxi circulation.
Trabajos no hay, explicación ninguna pero vemos como despilfarran nuestra fortuna Los precios no bajan, falta la gasolina en un país productor de petróleo, alucina!	There aren’t any jobs, no explanation But we see how they waste our fortune. Prices don’t go down, there’s lack of gas In a petroleum-producing country, crazy!
Se inventan requisitos, como pasan los días y si los tienes todos, se caducan en 15 días	They make up paperwork as days go by And if you have everything, it all expires within 15 days.

¹⁷⁰ Taxis in Equatorial Guinea are the primary means of transportation. They are numerous, fast, and cheap—they are shared and the price for a trip ranges 300-1000 CFA (ca. 40p-£1.3). Given the high demand, taxi driving has become a rather prominent gig economy. High inflation and low salaries have made it extremely difficult for people to make ends meet—so soldiers, plumbers, unemployed youth, and university professors alike drive taxis.

¹⁷¹ https://www.africanidad.com/2017/06/afirman-que-militares-de-teodoro-obiang_18.html (accessed 17 March 2021).

¹⁷² ‘Yeheyeba’ (also spelled ‘yeiyeba’ or ‘yéyeba’) is a Bubi cheering expression that roughly translates into ‘hurrah!’ or ‘hail!’. Now it is common across the country, usually used after names of people, cities, or specific collectivities, e.g. ‘Guinea Ecuatorial yéyeba!’ or ‘PDGE yéyeba!’. The title of the song could thus be translated into ‘Hurrah taxi drivers’.

Están detrás de nosotros como traman los
latinos,
se alimentan de desgracias, nueva especie
de vampiros.

They are watching us all like some Latin
gang
They feed of tragedy, a new kind of
vampire.

Hasta que lo consiguieron ahora estamos
en crisis
y pretenden salir de él subiendo tasa a los
taxis
Les da igual que nuestros hijos no vayan al
cole
si total, sus hijos van en esos coches
grandes.

Until they made it, we're in crisis now
And they pretend to get out of it by
increasing the taxis' paperwork fees.
They don't care if there are kids that can't
go to school
Sure, their kids drive around those big, fancy
cars.

38 años sufriendo esta agonía
Guinea no ha dado ni un solo paso positivo
al día
Intimidaciones, amenazas, torturas,
lo que sea pero ya no viviremos de
rodillas.

38 years suffering this pain,
Guinea hasn't taken a single positive step a
day
Intimidation, threats, torture,
Anything, but we won't live on our knees
anymore

Haced todos los decretos que queráis,
sacad a las calles estas armas que tengáis
pero el pueblo está cansado, y cansado de
verdad
Nos vais a meter presos, no es ninguna
novedad.

Pass all the laws you want,
Bring out to the streets all the weapons you
may have
But the people are tired, really tired
You'll put us in jail, but that's nothing new

As if predicting the future, Jamin was wrongfully imprisoned just a few days after the release of the song, and he spent three days in the Malabo jail graphically known as Guantánamo.¹⁷³ 'The day after [the release of the song], it was all over WhatsApp; everybody was texting and calling me. And I got really scared. I really did. [...] Then, I started to get weird calls, that's when I knew they were coming after me', he told me in an interview after his release from prison. Jamin recounted being overtly monitored the days after the publication of the song, how neighbours and acquaintances started to warn him, and how he was finally captured on the street:

People told me to watch out, because there were a lot of soldiers on the streets, and sometimes they would come and sit by the shop downstairs. I knew something was up. I tried to avoid being home and stuff. Until it happened. [...] I was arrested on Thursday 25 May 2017. Here, by Martínez Hermanos [supermarket]. I was going shopping because it was my daughter's birthday. When I came back, my friend told me there were plainclothes soldiers nearby: 'you gotta leave right now, because they came to get you'. I got very, very scared. There are moments when you

¹⁷³ <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-policia-guinea-ecuatorial-detiene-malabo-rapero-apoyaba-huelga-taxistas-20170527060526.html> (accessed 8 June 2021).

think about it, but it's frightening when it actually happens, and you think: 'is this really happening to me?'. So I left and on my way out I counted some 15 men. I started walking towards my sister's; tried to catch a taxi but there weren't any because of the ban. [...] I could see how they were following me. I managed to text my cousin in Barcelona. And I was about to call my sister when they jumped on me: I was surrounded! I tried to run and almost got hit by a car. They got me, but I resisted. 'Throw him in the car!', they yelled, and I said, 'I can't go, what have I done?'. [...] After a while they said they were taking me to Guantánamo. We were wrestling for like 40 minutes. But the news went viral and people already knew.

He explains how his captors became aware of the amount of people that soon gathered, surprised by the screams and noise.

One of them came and said: 'fuck guys, we've messed up, there's way too many people here'. That made me realise their plan was to take me, throw me into the car, and who knows where I'd be today. In the end they let me call my mother, then I got into the car voluntarily. On our way, the leader kept receiving calls and I heard him saying: '*sí, Excelencia, sí Excelencia*'.¹⁷⁴ It seems like somebody was yelling at him, 'you messed up, the news is on the internet and the boy's not even here yet!'.

Jamin was imprisoned in Guantánamo, where he was charged with drug possession without proofs. He describes the conditions of the cells and his time there:

I was in solitary confinement. [...] But the news of my arrest arrived at the jail and I could hear other prisoners yelling my name and cheering me up. [...] I thought I would get some serious infection because the loo was FULL of shit. I couldn't breathe. There was just a tiny hole where I could stick my nose. [...] It was full of trash, cans, worms, inside the cell. [...] I just sat there to wait for my death. You know how distressing that is? I wanted to pee, but I couldn't, because the loo was so gross that it made it worse. So I had to pee on the floor. [...] And there were huge rats. I couldn't sleep because I thought the rats would attack me, 'cause I had never seen such big rats in my life. Then a soldier came and asked what I'd done, because they know thieves and criminals are all in the common cell, and I was there with that smell. I'm sure he thought I had done something really serious. 'For a song?': he was surprised. I don't think he'd heard the song. So he left and when he came an hour later he asked whether I was Jamin. I was scared, but then he said: 'man, I've listened to your music, I'm a big fan! I always wanted to meet you but not in this situation'. And he was really nice to me.

He goes on to explain how some of his soldier friends visited him every now and then, suggesting his case was difficult.

Every night a different guy came. You could tell when it's a boss because they come with bodyguards, guns and stuff. They just came, stared at me, and left. Like that for three days. I couldn't even take a shower. [...] The other prisoners were allowed to go to the yard once a day, but I wasn't. [...] On my third day there, at 8pm or so, I could see through my window a large black car parking outside. I got very scared, because it's not normal that cars like that come so late in the day. [...] I saw they called the prison director from inside the car. I think I overheard the director saying, '*sí Excelencia, sí Excelencia*'. Then he went back inside, and the car was just there. I thought: 'fuck, they're coming for me, it's happening today'. Because I had seen how they torture people in there. Well, I saw how they took them away to the basement, which is where they abuse the people. [...] And when they came back, they came crawling. So I said to myself: 'they're not gonna beat me, they'll kill me straight away'. Then the prison director came to my cell and I knew I was right. 'Are they gonna kill me?', I asked. He looked down and said:

¹⁷⁴ 'Excellency'; regularly used in Equatorial Guinea to address the highest members of the government.

‘I don’t know what’s gonna happen, but you’re being called’. Suddenly, I wasn’t scared anymore. I put on a sweater my mom had brought me and went downstairs. I approached the car and a man talked from the inside, myself standing. He gave me the speech of the century.

Jamin was finally released under the condition that he wrote a song contradicting his words and apologising. He never did.

The chilling event teaches us that even popularity does not grant total immunity. But Jamin had the conviction that had he not been so popular and generated so much buzz on the street during his capture and right after on social media, his fate could have been much worse. In conversations with him and other rappers, we wondered why precisely this song became such a trigger. As we have seen, many other rappers have been critical of the regime in the past; even Jamin admits many of his older songs are much harsher. But this was the first case ever of a rapper being sent to prison because of his lyrics. One possible answer is fear of the government of the much faster circulation afforded by digital technologies today. In Jamin’s words: ‘Maybe this time the government got scared because too many people could listen to the song, while before, recordings remained in the close circle of the rapper community’. But key to understanding the reaction is also the political moment. While the government seemingly ignored harsher critique during the heyday of the oil boom in the 2005-2015 period, the recent oil crisis and economic decline have provoked an unprecedented political and social unrest.

Today, few rappers continue to be subversive in their lyrics. In fact, some even question whether rap in the country is dead.¹⁷⁵ While older rappers like Negro Bey and Jamin are still active, and younger ones like Kevin Rimas or Lil Zesario have found popularity, the fact is that the production of critical rap has decreased drastically in

¹⁷⁵ See the debate ‘El Rap de Guinea Ecuatorial ya no existe’ (‘Rap in Equatorial Guinea doesn’t exist anymore’) on GrandFrend’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnwUuYcEefg&ab_channel=GrandFrend (accessed 17 March 2021).

recent years. As we will see in the final section of the chapter, state responses to this music (like Jamin's imprisonment) and the increasing influence of other styles closer to trap and *afrobeats* have encouraged new approaches to politics in youth's music. Unlike the examples that follow in the rest of the chapter, subversive in music is a highly politicised form of expression. But as I will show, it shares with those other examples a common political project aimed at putting distance between music and the state.

Negotiating Ethnic Politics: The *Casa de Cultura de Rebola*

I next move to a discussion of the role of music in mediating ethnic politics in Equatorial Guinea. As advanced in the Introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 1, the rise and establishment of Nguemism in Equatorial Guinea has been characterised by a tendency from the government to privilege Fang culture over cultural expressions of other ethnic groups.¹⁷⁶ While membership in the Fang ethnic group does not necessarily lead to a better life, it is well-known in the country that members of other minority groups such as the Bubi and Annobonneses meet more challenges to find jobs in the public administration and are very often the target of police harassment, as I was witness to several times during my fieldwork. These forms of ethnic alienation are described locally as *tribalismo*. As a result of pervasive *tribalismo*, members of these minority groups often use music and culture to create an alternative politics that allows them to find certain independence from Fang-dominated state politics.

I exemplify these issues through an exploration of the role and fate of the *Casa de Cultura de Rebola* (House of Culture of Rebola)—an independent cultural institution based in Rebola, a little village outside of Malabo and traditionally inhabited by

¹⁷⁶ 'Nguemism' is the term used to describe the ruling family lineage since Independence in 1968: from first president Francisco Macías Nguema to his nephew and current president Teodoro Obiang Nguema.

members of the Bubi minority ethnic group (see Fig. 8.1). My first contact with the Casa de Cultura de Rebola (CCR) took place during a preliminary research trip in the summer of 2015. Wishing to gain some first impressions of local culture, I was advised by my contacts at the Spanish cultural centre to pay a visit to the CCR. Once there, I was received by the centre's director, Benjamín Choni, who explained that the CCR was built with funding from American oil company Exxon Mobil, and officially inaugurated in June 2009. Over the years, the centre received other donations from international institutions, including a sound system from American company Marathon Oil. But mostly, the CCR operated with scarce resources and no support from the state administration: it kept going with the will of a group of committed and determined citizens.



Figure 8.1: Casa de Cultura de Rebola. (Source: Anonymous.)

The CCR offered a unique space of encounter where children and teenagers gathered to learn Bubi language and to study comfortably with the help of computers

and blackboards; it provided space for theatre groups and musicians to rehearse; and it housed concerts and music festivals, art and photography exhibitions, and even a small ethnographic museum with traditional Equatoguinean objects including musical instruments. In sum, it was a space of reunion and knowledge exchange for the Bubi youth from Rebola and other neighbouring villages such as Batete, Riaba, Moka and Ureka. In the words of Choni, the CCR was a source of hope for the rural youth of the Bioko Island. Importantly, as pointed out above, the CCR was not completely independent, but had received considerable sponsorship from US oil companies and the European cultural centres with whom they occasionally collaborated.

The involvement of these foreign institutions in ethnic politics is often the elephant in the room in conversations about *tribalismo*. Some of my Fang interlocutors, who admit that the government persistently alienates other ethnic groups, also charge foreign cultural centres for promoting other-than-Fang cultural production to an excessive extent. In the words of one of my interlocutors: 'It's not only the Equatoguinean state promoting *tribalismo*. The *centros culturales* do it as well, but in the other direction. How many Fang do you know of who work at the centres? Most of the people there are Bubi, Ndowé, or Annoboneses'. While the level of ethnic discrimination from the Fang-majority state across all levels of social life is much bigger than cultural centre's selection of ethnic minorities for jobs and performances, the words of this interlocutor importantly address the way ethnic politics are built and shaped through and around cultural production by the influence not only of the state but also of foreign institutions.

Returning to the CCR case, I would like to briefly discuss the important social role of one of their most popular events: an annual hip hop festival. Keen for their children to learn the local language, the CCR organisers asked participants to rap not

only in Spanish but also in Bubi. The festival drew the attention of a youth excited to express themselves in public and of an audience curious about the sound of rap in Bubi—indeed an oddity. During my visit in July 2015, everybody was particularly excited because the centre had recently sponsored the recording of an album with some of the songs performed at the festival. This was a chance for a few local rappers to record their music for the first time ever, which they found a great opportunity to gain popularity beyond Rebola.

But shortly after my departure, things turned sour. Allegedly, one of the rap songs had caught the attention of the Rebola PDGE leaders. The song in question was ‘È Böie’, by the crew Wëkатыòpëta.¹⁷⁷ The lyrics included verses like ‘Lord, listen to our cries, dry our tears, we beg you oh Lord’; and ‘Our traditional leaders keep silent about our misfortune. They don’t want us Bubis to progress’.¹⁷⁸ The content thus combines religious pleas with explicit critiques about the long-term Bubi marginalisation by the Fang ruling elites.

The song triggered a series of meetings between Rebola and district PDGE leaders, the CCR management board, and the rappers that participated in the album. Afraid of the impact the lyrics may have, the regional leaders, all of them Bubi, alerted the Malabo PDGE leadership and the issue reached the Minister for the Home Department. Further meetings took place where the Minister asked for translations of the Bubi lyrics and accused the CCR of being ‘a source of problems’. The Minister concluded that the song fomented hate against the government and demanded the

¹⁷⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKL0CgYwt8M&ab_channel=MocacheMassoko (accessed 25 March 2021).

¹⁷⁸ See Spanish translation of the lyrics: <https://www.wiriko.org/wiriko/atentado-contra-la-diversidad-cultural-en-guinea-ecuatorial/> (accessed 25 March 2021).

resignation of the board and the transfer of the centre to PDGE management. If they refused, the centre would be shut down.¹⁷⁹

Amid the pressures, Choni (the centre's director) communicated to his home village his decision to resign on the evening of the 25 August. Upset by the news, the village youth organised a peaceful protest on the streets of Rebola, expressing their support for Choni. But the protest was dispersed with the arrival of over 50 soldiers, including a heavily armed antiriot squad (Fig. 8.2). The event culminated with the arbitrary detention of nine young men and the closure of the CCR, and the soldiers besieged the village until the evening of the following day.¹⁸⁰



Figure 8.2: Armed police outside the CCR on 25 August 2015. (Source: wiriko.org)

On the photographs that emerged from that night's protest (Fig. 8.3), groups of children appear holding handwritten signs that read:

¹⁷⁹ <http://diariorombe.es/turbulencias-politicas-en-rebola/> (accessed 25 March 2021).

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.africafundacion.org/comunicado-del-cpds-sobre-los-disturbios-de-rebola> (accessed 25 March 2021).

El pueblo aclama a Benjamín Choni. Sin la CCR no hay cultura bubi. La CCR es apolítico (The people hail Benjamín Choni. There is no Bubi culture without the CCR. The CCR is apolitical)

No hacemos política. Hacemos cultura (We don't do politics. We do culture)



Figure 8.3: Rebola citizens protesting on 25 August 2015. (Source: wiriko.org)

The messages on the signs bring into sharp relief the complex connections between culture, politics, and ethnicity in Equatorial Guinea. First, they evidently align the CCR with Bubi culture, claiming that the closedown of the centre would mean an important loss for the community. But they also raise ‘politics’ in contradistinction with ‘culture’, resisting the pervasive politicisation of culture and social life by the state. The struggles to avoid the capture of the centre by state politics were further explained to me in an interview with one of the CCR founders two years after the events:

The rap song was just the excuse. In reality, we had been on their radar for a long time. The real reason behind the closing down was that we didn't want to comply, we didn't want to hand our centre over to the PDGE. First, they called us mercenaries and *opositores* [political opponents];

then, when they figured out that we were just doing good community work, they tried to convince us to do it through them.

The words resonate with a mantra that was repeated to me over and over by my interlocutors: ‘the government doesn’t accept a middle ground. They think that you must be either with them or against them’. The clear-cut opposition between politics and culture on one of the signs (‘We don’t do politics. We do culture’) does not necessarily mean a rejection of politics at large by the centre’s members. Instead, it is a rejection of the oppressive state politics commanded by Obiang’s Fang-majority PDGE. The case reveals an interesting political paradox: by making efforts to frame the CCR as ‘apolitical’, the Rebola villagers take part in a political project aimed at finding liberation—through cultural production—from a state politics marked by ethnic discrimination. Yet just like in the case of subversive rappers above, the CCR was perceived as a threatening form of politics and thus was consequently repressed by the government.

The effects of the August 2015 events, including the CCR closedown and the violent response by the state, could be felt much later. First, it instilled fear and further precaution among the Rebola population. Take the following example. During my extended fieldwork two years after my first visit and the centre’s shutting, I tried to interview an old musician from Rebola whose contact I had got from a common friend. I happened to call him during the campaign for the 2017 Legislative Elections, but I did not think that would be an issue. In the phone call, however, the man expressed that he would rather wait until the end of the campaign, as he considered it was a politically sensitive period and his interview with a foreigner could raise suspicions. ‘I don’t want to put you or me in danger. This is the obstacle we have. They like to politicise everything here, like happened with the CCR’, he told me over the phone.

Second, the event provoked further caution, monitoring, and censorship by non-state institutions (notably the foreign cultural centres and US oil companies CSR departments) over the kind of cultural production they were sponsoring. The most evident case concerned the Spanish cultural centre and was brought up to me by musicians and a worker. According to them, after the CCR closed, the Spanish centre began to ask rappers to bring Spanish translations of their Bubi lyrics ahead of scheduled concerts, to make sure there was no political content in them. American oil CSR officers also affirmed to me, as anticipated in Chapter 2, that the event conditioned their subsequent involvement in cultural production and their relations with the village of Rebola in particular. The case reveals how fragile the relations are between the Equatoguinean state and international aid. While foreign NGOs, development aid, and financial institutions have traditionally had a major impact on politics and economics across postcolonial Africa (Ferguson 1990), they have a limited role in the mediation of cultural production in Equatorial Guinea. More importantly, these institutions tend to avoid any kind of controversy with the local government that could compromise their larger economic and diplomatic interests in the country.

The CCR events highlight the important role of cultural production and music making in enabling the creation of spaces for alternative politics—the discovery of cracks that allow for alternative ways of living and cultural expression that defy the dominant, ethnically-biased patronage structures within an authoritarian environment. But the case also exposes how the state apparatus works towards the repression of any form of ethnically driven politics that is not controlled by the PDGE or the government—especially if it is perceived to be threatening to the dominance of the Fang ruling family.

Youth Politics: The *Temblete* Scene

The final section of this chapter addresses a mode of alternative politics created and embraced by impoverished urban youth who use music to express a lifestyle marked by indifference towards the state. Drawing on the creative composition of new digital sounds and rhythms, but also on the visual and aesthetic aspects common to transnational genres such as trap, these youth draw on music to gain fame, socialise, and set themselves apart from both praise and critique of the government.

These patterns are most commonly reproduced in *temblete*, an electronic music genre that emerged in Equatorial Guinea in the last five years. *Temblete* was developed, and it is widely produced and consumed, by lower-class youth crews in the impoverished urban outskirts of Malabo and Bata. Despite its precarious origins, this music was extremely popular during my fieldwork, enjoyed and danced to across generational, ethnic, and class divides at all kinds of places including bars, the streets, taxis, TV channels, and private parties. Its specific origins can be traced to Ela Nguema Gansters (aka Ela G's), a crew of indeterminate number based in the popular Malabo neighbourhood of Ela Nguema. Mostly comprised of males in their twenties, Ela G's is by far the most popular *temblete* crew (see Fig. 8.4).



Figure 8.4: Ela Nguema Gansters. (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm1u069TtV0>)

Musically, *temblete* is highly influenced by West African new electronic genres such as Ghanaian *azonto* and Nigerian *afrobeats*, yet it is distinct from these genres for its use of minor modalities and the interweaving of vocal elements from hip hop and reggae. *Temblete* crews are usually made up of several rappers in charge of the verses and one or two reggae-style singers who sing the chorus; the specific vocalists change from song to song, but the formal difference between verse and chorus remains in place. Lyrically, *temblete* songs vividly depict the daily lives of urban Equatoguinean youth through graphic allusions to sex, drug use, and criminal activity; and they are characterised by a quick shifting between local languages (from Spanish to Fang, Bubi, and Pichi) that makes it almost unintelligible to people not familiar with several of these languages.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ The Equatoguinean version of *pidgin* English, *Pichi* is the native language of the Fernandinos ethnic group but has become the lingua franca in Malabo. As an example, see the song ‘Ninja’, by Ela Nguema Ganster, one of the most popular songs in the country during my fieldwork: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih6fV5TPqRk&ab_channel=GrandFrendGrandFrend (accessed 8 June 2021).

Temblete practitioners, mostly unemployed and disenfranchised youth, have drawn on cheap access to laptops and DAWs to produce their music. Even in the most precarious conditions, they are able to put together the different elements needed to record in their own bedrooms. Figure 8.5, for example, depicts members of ACM Ghetto recording within the small and dark bedroom of Doble M, the crew's leader. With little more than a worn-out computer, a cheap microphone, and a couple of old speakers, ACM create some of the highest quality *temblete*. And Figure 8.6 shows the exterior of DMP Family studio, located within a dilapidated wooden building in the Argentina quartier of Ela Nguema. In these examples, digital technologies have afforded alternative forms of music production—if not alternative avenues to profit from that music, as we will see.



Figure 8.5: ACM Ghetto working in a cramped bedroom studio. (Source: author)



Figure 8.6: Exterior of DMP Family studio. (Source: author)

Digital circulation has also played a key role in the popularisation of the genre. In particular, the role of smartphones has been central to the quick circulation of *temblete* songs in MP3 format.¹⁸² But another factor, of a purely musical and aesthetic nature, has made the genre much more popular than others of similar technical characteristics. Its appeal originates largely from its highly danceable rhythm and the dance style that always accompanies the music, characterised by a shaking movement across the body as if being electrocuted. In fact, the very name of the genre comes from the Spanish word *temblar* (to shake), and some argue that the dance style developed before the musical genre itself.¹⁸³ *Temblete*'s danceable component results from a

¹⁸² See Chapter 5 for a deeper discussion of digital circulation.

¹⁸³ In the words of rapper Negro Bey: 'people didn't understand rap because it had fast lyrics and no danceable component. [...] Here, in Equatorial Guinea, if you don't produce music that people can dance to, you don't sell' (Negro Bey, interview with the author, 23 May 2017). Indeed, dance has for decades been a key element in many traditional music genres in the territories that today make up Equatorial Guinea, such as the Bubi *kattyà*, the Ndowé *ivanga*, and the Fang *ndombá* (I. de Aranzadi 2009).

combination of a persistent bass drum, syncopated synthesisers, and the regionally widespread African ‘time line’ (Fig. 8.7).¹⁸⁴ These elements are combined in a series of two-measure units, which are looped repeatedly and provide a substrate for other layers of synthesised sounds that are added and subtracted throughout the songs.¹⁸⁵

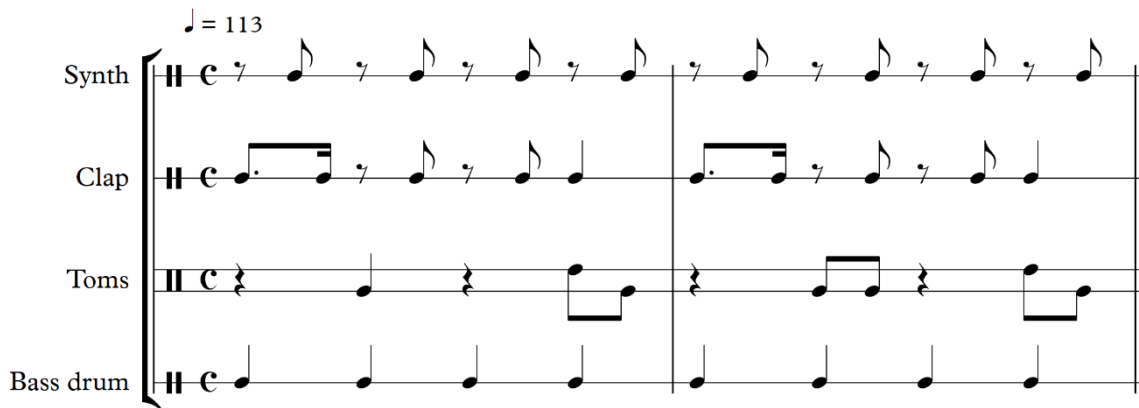


Figure 8.7: Templete rhythmic structure. (Source: author)

While some *templete* practitioners that I met aimed at profiting economically from the local circulation of their music, most sought to turn circulation into forms of non-monetary value—including the symbolic capital garnered through fame, which often led to the respect from rival crews or to sexual encounters. ‘We just want to become popular to meet girls’ was a phrase I heard many times in interactions with these youth. What from the outset looks exclusively like a sexualisation of women by a primarily male-dominated scene, intents by these youth to use fame (afforded by music making) to access sexual and marital relationships links to well-rooted logics of dependence and exchange. As explained in the opening chapters of the thesis, the persistence of bride-wealth related payments among the Fang still shapes social

Moreover, popular music genres have similarly emphasised danceable structures, from the Congolese-style *rumba* dance bands of the 1960s to the 1980s Cameroonian-derived *makossa* and *bikutsi*.

¹⁸⁴ For an elaborate discussion of the term ‘time line’, see Agawu 2003, 75–96.

¹⁸⁵ As an example, consider the song ‘Mi Pengal Debul’ by Ela Nguema Ganster: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6GkL_NsGYQ&ab_channel=PATEXDJIGASPATEXDJIGAS (8 June 2021).

relationships in Equatorial Guinea. To marry a woman, the man's family has the obligation to pay the *dote* or *nsoá* (bride-price) to the woman's family—a cash then used by the woman's male relatives to pay their respective *dotes*, therefore generating a circulatory exchange.

After the monetisation of the *dote* during the Spanish colonisation in the first half of the 20th century (see Chapter 1), bride-price has experienced a spectacular inflation with the oil boom. As a result, impoverished young men rarely have the economic means to pay the *dote* and therefore to marry. In the words of an interlocutor: 'while beautiful girls picked healthy and hard-working men to marry decades ago, now they pick those with money. The wealthy are stealing our girls. But even worse, they're setting a really high bar in terms of the amount paid as the *dote*'. Moreover, men are often the target of redistribution claims from the woman's family, even if they are not married (Nsé Angüe 2013). Amid rising challenges to marry and to provide for dependents, some young men are shifting their values to escape the bride-wealth and to seek not long-term marriages but temporary sexual affairs that pose smaller economic pressure on them. And fame through *temblete* becomes a valuable medium to gain access to those affairs. The transnationally inspired hypersexualised and gangsta-like lyrics and images in *temblete* videoclips thus meet more localised forms and logics of valuation that include sexual exchanges and competition between men related to notions of 'wealth in people' discussed earlier in this thesis.

On the one hand, *temblete* is framed within a global fall off of subversive hardcore rap in favour of more depoliticised post rap styles. On the other, the genre is the clear representation of a local generation of disenfranchised youth that is living through the economic recession following an oil boom. This is most evident when analysed alongside protest rap, which, as described earlier in this chapter, was

encouraged by the rising inequalities that youth experienced in the early years of the oil boom. The new generation of youth is rather experiencing an economic downturn, a rise of street crime, and a widespread political disaffection. Moreover, the lack of direct state critique in *temblete* lyrics links clearly to fears emanating from violent state responses to critical forms of urban music such as the subversive rap produced by the previous generation. This was made evident in a conversation with a young rapper about the progressive depoliticisation of his lyrics: ‘People in this country don’t react to the lyrics, they just dance to the tune. I won’t risk my life so that you can dance to my music. My death must be meaningful’. The words express fear of police prosecution but also scepticism about the real political effect that subversive lyrics have had or may have in the future: ‘people just don’t pay attention to our critique’.

Paradoxically, the progressive move away from rap to *temblete* during the last few years is not politically unimportant. As Darci Sprengel has argued, periods of decreasing political engagement among musicians, what she calls ‘quiet atmospheres’, ‘are not reducible to defeat, inactivity, or repression. Instead, they comprise the exploration of third spaces, alternative imaginations, to pre-existing frameworks’ (Sprengel 2021a, 1). Drawing on ethnography on the Egyptian independent music scene after the 2011 revolution, Sprengel explores how political disengagement among musicians can be understood as political efforts to find self-care and quietude to, among other things, ‘stave off political burnout’ (ibid. 18). While *temblete* music has not followed a ‘defeated revolution’ like in Sprengel’s case, it has come after a certain sense of discouragement about the little effect that riskier, protest music has had, as the words by the rapper in the previous paragraph express.

But even in seeking quietude by trying to play without the state, *temblete* practitioners end up falling into the patronage traps. Fascinated by *temblete*’s

popularity, the elites respond to the genre in inconsistent fashion. On the one hand, some of them publicly criticise the genre for its lyrics, claiming that this music encourages crime and violent behaviour. On the other hand, they feel powerfully attracted to the novelty and popularity of the genre and try to feature it in their private parties (from birthdays to weddings and First Communions [see Fig 8.8]). As Ela Nguema Gansters producer DJ Patex put it to me in an interview, ‘a lot of people say that we the youth are criminals, especially those *grandes* [big men]; they say it very seriously. [...] But then they invite us to their parties and dance to our music’.¹⁸⁶ As we saw in Chapter 4, with the intent to build individual prestige through the display of money and power, members of the elite seek to feature the most popular local artists in their private parties. And Ela G’s are among the most popular today.

¹⁸⁶ DJ Patex, interview with the author, 4 April 2018.



Figure 8.8: Children dancing to Ela Nguema Gansters in their First Communion celebration (source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjD-_pfdssg)

But participation in these events is not unproblematic: as depicted throughout the thesis, many artists are not paid after performing at *eventos* and some even fear that disagreeing to perform might be met with retaliation from the government. In an interview with a member of one of the most popular *temblete* crews, he recounted being invited that year to perform at the birthday parties of the president, the first lady, and Nguema. When I asked whether the crew agreed to them, he replied: ‘How can you say “no” with a gun against your back?’ He spoke metaphorically, but the meaning was clear. ‘We don’t want any problems with those people’, he added. Some of these musicians have learnt to live with intimidation and fear. By the time of my fieldwork, they had recently moved studios because soldiers raided their old studio and took all their equipment, accusing them of being criminals.

Indeed, the history of forced labour in the country—from Spanish colonial times to the bloody regime of Francisco Macías in the 1970s—is refracted in today's music economy. Even though *temblete* musicians intentionally aim to disentangle themselves from state politics through music making, they are often pulled into the political machinations of the elites. A musician in the diaspora described this form of co-optation by the elites as follows:

Even if you don't have any relation with the elites, they will always come to you. Or they'll approach some friend or relative of yours who is already within the circle. And they'll do anything to drag you in. That's how it works, the government cornering people.

The case of *temblete* is yet another example of how intentions to move away from state politics are persistently halted by an omnipresent state that reaches across all spheres of social life, even among those dispossessed youth that do not want anything to do with it. Even more, the increasing interest by the elites in the genre has triggered the emergence of new crews that are closer to the government circles and profit greatly from invitations to parties. The state capture of *temblete* thus illustrates the political paradox of the genre: while being geared towards neither praise singing nor subversion, it is open to potentially being co-opted into the patronage economy. An attempt to disengage with the politics of the state through music making, *temblete* is eventually dragged into prevailing networks of state power.

Conclusion

The three examples in this chapter are modes of moving beyond state control through confrontation, ethno-political negotiation, and disengagement, respectively. The divergencies between these modes are not arbitrary, but rather inserted in the specific lived experiences of those enacting them. The members of the CCR aim to create barriers between their Bubi culture and Fang-dominant state politics to find

independence from dominant power decades of ethnic discrimination. Subversive rappers turn to critical lyrics due to class-based but also generational reasons. Most have lived through the oil boom and experienced first-hand the great inequalities encouraged by oil capitalism; and they have used music to directly confront the state. But the new generation of youth (protagonists of the third case) are instead enduring an oil crisis, economic decline, and political exhaustion. And witness to the perils of writing subversive lyrics, they engender and express non-praising, non-critical lyrics through *temblete*.

The three instances are distinct in their approach to state politics. But they all are projects aimed at creating alternative possibilities for living under authoritarian conditions. In a country where the notion of the state is almost conflated with politics, where the elites insist on politicising every aspect of social life to make it ‘for’ or ‘against’ the government, finding ways to ‘play without the state’ destabilises the established order in extraordinary ways. The nature of the projects thus lies not in their ‘resistive’ or ‘subversive’ character, but in the challenge that they pose to the very notion of politics—in reclaiming new political realities that are less oppressive than the dominant one.

As alternative political projects, however, intents to play without the state are perceived as threatening by the regime. As I have shown, each of the modes of disentanglement are challenged by the state with different degrees of control and subsumption, whether by means of force (Jamin), appropriation (CCR), or co-optation (*temblete*). These oppressive reactions by the state put into question the theory of the so-called ‘exit option’, outlined earlier in the thesis. Originally employed to explain the freedom of individuals within lineage societies to leave their political unit for another, to switch one big man for a different one (Hirschman 1978), the exit option has been

seen as a continued ‘viable strategy’ and a useful concept to study agency within dependence-based contemporary societies (Bayart 1993, 22, 256–27). The idea encourages less stereotypical readings of dependency that challenge ‘liberal common sense’ by highlighting the agency of the dispossessed, the disillusioned, and the disaffected (Ferguson 2015, 162). But the progressive centralisation of the state and the extreme concentration of power in Equatorial Guinea compose a rather different form of dependency. Exit options are sought for through constant struggle and war of attrition, and the autonomy they offer is, as we have seen, rather limited.

Chapter 7 argued that there is plenty of room for adaptation and hustling within the patronage economy, and mechanisms of trickery and deception are not only sanctioned by the state but also encouraged in some instances. But this ‘wiggle room’ is accepted by those in power because it is employed *within* the framework laid out by the state. When the project is not to find cracks in the structure but to move *beyond* the structure, like the ethnography related in the present chapter, the repressive apparatus comes into effect. From examples where musicians were forcefully prevented from literally exiting the country by crossing the land border with Cameroon during the Macías regime,¹⁸⁷ the exit option has been constantly crushed by the Equatoguinean state.

The ethnography in this chapter reveals the heterogeneous articulations between music and several forms of politics, and how they are shaped by a state long characterised by authoritarianism. As this thesis has exposed, the space of the political in Equatorial Guinea is largely taken up by the state; but embedded within it are alternative political projects that seek liberation from power constraints. Yet efforts to

¹⁸⁷ Data from interview with a 1970s dance band musician.

make music devoid of its almost already-politicised nature are persistently repressed through processes of re-politicisation that ensure the reproduction of systems of domination and control.

Conclusion

For an Empirically based Theory of the Music Economy

This thesis has explored how the unique configuration of the nature of the state, oil capitalism, and digitisation in Equatorial Guinea provides a radical space for the exploration of music's multiple social mediations. I have argued that musical patronage is embedded in long-standing social and political formations but nonetheless enables original examinations of contemporary political and economic processes, often producing seemingly radical and contradictory combinations, including: an extremely centralised form of internal politics with a global, highly liberal, capitalist project; well-rooted, regional logics of dependence and 'wealth in people' with spectacular, unprecedented conspicuous consumption and accumulation afforded by oil capitalism; precolonial and colonial forms of social control with postcolonial techniques of state domination, authoritarianism, and digital censorship; enduring with new musical aesthetics and forms of (digital) production; and pervasive ideologies of cultural ownership with novel, creative uses of new communication media to circulate songs.

One of the main shifts of this thesis has been a move away from orthodox Marxism and reductionist uses of frameworks of capitalism to offer alternative ways of theorising music economic exchange. Following Born (2010), I believe that empirical research can stimulate the revision of (grand) theories and their teleologies. While ethnomusicologists and music anthropologists have long been committed to studying the subtleties, frictions, and specificities of the rise of capitalism and neoliberalism in their field sites, I want to push the effort a bit further to argue that, sometimes, not just decentring but dropping such grand theories altogether might be more productive. This

is not to say we must turn a blind eye to capitalism—in fact, we have seen how the continuation of authoritarian politics in Equatorial Guinea is supported by an extreme form of capitalism (Soares de Oliveira 2007; Campos Serrano 2013; Appel 2019). What I mean is that looking at the privileged empirical data thrown up by extensive fieldwork alongside the historical trajectories of local, well-rooted social formations and logics of accumulation and exchange might generate theory that reveals more than established, often static grand narratives.

Importantly, losing orthodox Marxist theory must not come with a loss of a critical perspective on non-capitalist practices and institutions. In revisiting the work of Marcel Mauss on gift exchange, David Graeber argues that ‘there is a great danger of oversimplification [of Mauss’ theories], particularly romanticizing “the gift” as a humanizing counterweight to the impersonality and social isolation of modern capitalist society’ (Graeber 2011, 226). These words stand as a call for caution for any future study of non-commodified forms of musical labour and exchange: looking at non-capitalist or petty-capitalist music economies as pure, frictionless instances of gift exchange would thus be a mistake. An uncritical approach to reciprocal forms of exchange, Graeber follows, ‘is just as meaningless as the habit of seeing “capitalism” everywhere. Even if this is a kind of communism, it remains lodged within larger structures that are anything but egalitarian’ (ibid., 227). As this thesis has illustrated, music economies can be embedded in highly onerous and unequal social formations.

Musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea emerges as a mechanism of redistribution. As depicted in Chapter 7, artists often spend their time engaging in what James Ferguson has called ‘distributive labour’ (Ferguson 2015), a kind of work that is not directly productive but rather geared towards the enforcement of a redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom. From paying visits to rich relatives and friends to

manipulating bureaucratic structures, these forms of labour are meant to make oil money trickle down. With Ferguson, I posit that redistributive efforts are not simply help seeking—though some artists use the Spanish term for ‘help’, *ayuda*, when referring to these practices. The ‘help’ musicians try to get from patrons is not an unreciprocated gift, to use Mauss’ terminology, but rather a ‘right’. Redistribution is thus not understood as a gesture of generosity, but as an act of ‘sharing’ or ‘division’. Distributive labour is an effort by Equatoguinean musicians to claim what they think is their rightful share of the country’s wealth—a wealth, I must remind, accumulated not through productive enterprises but through the collection of rents generated from the exploitation of national resources. Music, I contend, is a unique medium, a currency if you will, to enforce that redistribution. Well-aware of the cultural centrality of praise singing to the elites’ search for prestige as symbolic capital, more and more people record praise songs, full of name checks and deference, hoping that they will trigger redistribution from their (potential) patrons (Chapters 2-3). While the logic of music exchange as claim-making could be applied to musical patronage in its *longue durée*, it has been magnified with the radically unequal distribution of wealth motivated by oil extraction.

But making a claim is one thing, and seeing it fulfilled is another thing. As a mechanism of redistribution, musical patronage is imperfect. As I have exposed (especially in chapters 2-4), the highly speculative economy and the competition motivated by the music economy makes musicians’ economic lives highly uncertain: they never know if the recording of a praise song will lead to new connections or patronage of any kind; they never know if a performance at an *evento* will be generously compensated or not paid for at all. Why then do musicians continue to be drawn into patronage relations?

The answer to this question leads me to contend that, besides a mechanism of redistribution, patronage is also a system of domination. As a social formation, patronage has been studied in the social sciences as a vertical social structure—as inherently hierarchical, asymmetric, and unequal. As described in Chapter 1, the entanglement of politics and music is predicated upon the *longue durée* of relations of dependence. In precolonial times, such relations constituted the fabric of acephalous, decentralised, lineage societies where dependents were relatively free to leave one big man for another—the so-called ‘exit option’. But with political centralisation, and the development of the patronage-imbued postcolonial state in Equatorial Guinea, musicians were forced to stick to a handful of powerful patrons. This tendency has been tremendously exacerbated with the oil boom, with a few ruling elites (most notably Nguema) effectively monopolising the music economy. Furthermore, the growing power accumulated by the petro-elites is pushing them more and more to stretch and break the moral rules that underpin patronage, failing to provide for their dependents and causing rampant *desánimo* (discouragement) across the musical community. Amid this context, more optimistic readings of dependence (e.g. Ferguson 2015) fall short of accounting for the predatory and exploitative nature of the Equatoguinean petro-elites. Pair this with the challenges posed to musicians by a highly complex techno-political global industry (Chapter 6) and the ‘exit option’ is nowhere to be found.

Importantly, the wealth of detailed, empirically-grounded data afforded by ethnographic research allows for a demolition of existing prejudices, stereotypes, and presuppositions—which circulate all too commonly on media about little known, little visited but seemingly radical (authoritarian) states. As this thesis has shown, domination is not always complete, and people find ways and strategies to play with the structures of power to extract (at least minimal) profit from the unequal relations in which they

participate. And conversely, I have exposed invisible forms of control and oppression, inserted in everyday social interaction, that are frequently overlooked but still place a burden on musicians' economic lives. Musical patronage in Equatorial Guinea thus reflects the violence of the postcolonial African state, with its colonial debris of domination and exploitation (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2001; Stoler 2013), heightened by the violence intrinsic to oil capitalist projects (Watts 2001). It shows how the inequalities of the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993) have been remarkably magnified.

Last but not least, beyond a (failing) mechanism of redistribution and a system of domination, musical patronage also emerges as a producer of ideology and political forms. The thesis has shown not only how the state shapes the music economy but also how music continues to be central to the constitution of the African postcolonial state (Apter 2005; Olaniyan 2017; Dave 2019). In other words, while motivated by a need to get by within the monopolistic music economy, musicians' choices still have an impact: through the production and circulation of praise songs, through the enhancement of key political figures and the PDGE, they actively contribute to the legitimisation of the regime. The omnipresence of sonic deference in the form of praise songs is part of the everyday life of Equatoguineans. But it becomes particularly intense during elections and other key holidays such as the President, the Vice-President, or the First Lady's birthdays. In public celebrations and in private parties, blasting from vans and accompanying propagandistic videos on national TV, politicised music is not only a result of the Equatoguinean state but also a key component of the theatrical play of state power.

Ultimately, patronage is defined by how musicians and patrons relate on a daily basis, and how the former adapt to challenging and uncertain circumstances. Patronage is therefore always in flux, highly improvisatory, and shaped by unexpected encounters,

ambiguous reactions to power, and precarious outcomes. The pathways to success seem discursively obvious—everybody ‘knows’ how to build relations with powerful elites—but in practice, they are rather opaque and convoluted. Hopes and expectations are always entangled with disillusion and *desánimo*. As a result, musicians operate in highly creative, improvisatory, and open-ended ways, being at once critical and flattering, never closing potential relations, and labouring across the several and heterogeneous economic models that may eventually lead to economic accumulation or other forms of value. They continue to perceive music as a privileged medium to fuel the currency of social relations as the bedrock of patronage and ‘wealth in people’, rather than any economic telos.

The *Longue Durée* of Music Technologies

The digitisation of music technologies has been a driver of much teleological thinking about music economies. Adding to the liberalisation of national economies across the world, the growing availability of affordable digital technologies and online communications have transformed local forms of musical labour and exchange—or so the master narrative has it (e.g. Anderson 2014; Leyshon 2014; Morris 2015; Wikström 2020). In Equatorial Guinea, rather than affording access to new markets (Chapter 6), digital music production, circulation, and consumption have intensified patronage relations (Chapters 3-5). Joining not a liberalising economy but an increasingly extraverted and monopolistic one, digital technologies in Equatorial Guinea have democratised the *production* of recorded music in a variety of studios. The growing access to DAWs through laptops has freed artists from earlier dependence on patrons to fund recordings at expensive (normally foreign) studios. But digitisation and the

internet have not created new opportunities for profit beyond patronage. Attracted by the promise of quick accumulation through patronage, by the affordances of digital production and playback software to hide technical deficiencies and lack of skill, and by the ability of proficient and knowledgeable producers, average citizens have been encouraged to record and circulate praise songs, creating a large amateur scene and increasing competition and uncertainty among singers.

Rather than taking the advent of digital technology as the beginning of a fundamentally new stage in music history (Taylor 2001, 3), I argue, with other scholars (Sterne 2006; Born Forthcoming), that digitisation must be considered within a longer historical trajectory of musical change. While sharing a technological universality—a compression into code that enables constant re-creation and faster circulation—digital music appears in this thesis as highly contingent and inserted in local music-making practices as well as listening and consumption behaviours. In joining the digital age, Equatoguineans share with other Africans a position of asymmetry and in-betweenness: never fully connected, never totally disconnected (Burrell 2012). But they also suffer the constraints and surveillance more typical of other authoritarian states from across the world (e.g. Nooshin 2018).

Oil Booms, Oil Bursts

This thesis suggests that the world's growing dependence on hydrocarbons is in urgent need of ethnomusicological inquiry. The energy transition to fossil fuels has been described as one of the most important historical events in the making of the modern world. Various disciplines including economics, history, geography, and anthropology have explored the impact of modern energy on democracy, global inequality, climate

change, wars, the Anthropocene, economic growth, and technological change.¹⁸⁸ It has drawn the attention of researchers of other cultural objects such as literature or cinema (Barrett and Worden 2014; Dahlquist and Vonderau 2021). Music scholars, however, have paid little attention to the issue, especially in comparison with similarly key historical events such as colonialism or the digital transition. From British coal mining to off-shore extraction in Africa, from the rise of Chinese industrial production to the recent deployment of pipelines in North America, how have local communities engaged with these global transformations and how has their music-making been affected?

My thesis is a first attempt to answer this question. But importantly, it demonstrates that scholarly research must always beware of the risks of teleological thinking: I have argued that in Equatorial Guinea, like in 1970s Nigeria, ‘the growth of petroleum exports served less to bring about structural change than to reveal with unprecedented clarity economic, social, and political processes that have been underway for some time’ (Berry 1985, 2). Focusing (through music making) on the *longue durée* of social formations in the African postcolony has enabled me to decentre the impact of oil and to relativise the rise and fall of the extractive economy.

As described in the Introduction to the thesis and throughout the chapters, my fieldwork was marked by a steep economic downturn caused by a global oil price collapse. Many people lost their jobs in the construction of infrastructural projects and the redistribution of oil money through public jobs or kinship networks slowed down. The real magnitude of the economic crisis is difficult to quantify. During my time in Equatorial Guinea, the elite spheres insisted on convincing the population that there was no such thing as a ‘crisis’. In the VI Congreso Nacional Ordinario del PDGE in July

¹⁸⁸ See Wrigley 2016 for an approach from economy; Barry 2013 from geography; Humphreys, Sachs, and Stiglitz 2007; Mitchell 2011; Ross 2012 for political science; Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 2007 from socio-ecology and Kander, Malanima, and Warde 2014 from history.

2017, President Obiang affirmed that ‘*en Guinea no hay tanta crisis como se comenta*’ (‘in Equatorial Guinea there is not so much crisis as people are saying’).¹⁸⁹ And while the reality I experienced made me doubt these words—including increasing unemployment and rising crime—both my ethnography and the anthropological literature make me reconsider the analytical usefulness of terms such as ‘crisis’ in places where people experience uncertainty, precarity, and economic violence even during so-called prosperous times (Roitman 2013; E. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Olaniyan 2017, 2).

The specific temporalities of oil booms, marked as we have seen by high volatility and sudden bursts, pushes us wonder not only what oil might bring (Weszkalnys 2014), but also what oil (or its absence) might take away. In his song ‘Carta al Presidente’, rapper Negro Bey asks: *¿que será de nuestra gente cuando en el futuro el petróleo se agote?* (‘what will happen with our people when oil runs out in the future?’).¹⁹⁰ While the probability of Equatorial Guinea’s massive deposits running out of oil in the short-term seems unlikely, Negro Bey’s lyrics contain deeper and widespread concerns about an uncertain future—a future that is not in his hands. A recent report from the International Energy Agency affirms that ‘exploitation and development of new oil and gas fields must stop this year [...] if the world is to stay within safe limits of global heating and meet the goal of net zero emissions by 2050’.¹⁹¹ As people across the world demand bolder political action to tackle the current climate crisis, one must ask: what will become of oil-exporter countries such as Equatorial Guinea?

¹⁸⁹ The Congreso Nacional Ordinario del PDGE is a quinquennial meeting of the Obiang’s party, which unites PDGE leaders from across the country to discuss major political issues.

¹⁹⁰ ‘Letter to the President’, see full lyrics and a discussion of the song in Chapter 7.

¹⁹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/18/no-new-investment-in-fossil-fuels-demands-top-energy-economist> (accessed 20 May 2021).

Similar questions were brought up by a taxi driver during one of my journeys across Malabo:

We have taken a huge step, but backwards. Our leaders didn't figure out how to make proper use of the money we had. Now, nobody knows where that money is. Well, actually we know: it's in some people's pockets. Agriculture, there isn't. Factories, there aren't. When there was oil, people had jobs. But now we're all clueless... Everyday it's all about politics: conferences, meetings. But what's the point if they don't help to change things?

Concerns such as Negro Bey's about an oil-less future are joined by critiques about wasted (or siphoned off) resources—and by a suspicion that, as things have not changed in the oil boom, they might not change in the oil burst either. The volatile nature of oil thus clashes with Equatoguineans' feeling that everything remains the same for them. As this thesis emphasises the *longue durée* of musical patronage, a question arises about whether the prevailing music economy might give way to new economic structures in the future.

Uncertain Futures, Certain Politics

On one of my last days in Equatorial Guinea, I was spending time with two of my main interlocutors, both of whom were in the past members of one of the most critical rap crews in the country. Chatting about national politics, one of them observed: 'In principle, I have nothing against dictators. I kind of understand that they have long-term goals for their countries. I'm not upset if someone is 40 years in power: what bothers me is looking around and not seeing running water. These rocket things are really of no use to me', he added, pointing towards the lavish but deteriorated lampposts on the street. 'You know... I lost my daughter because of the lack of basic health services. She was five years old and didn't get much help when she got malaria'. And without much pause, he concluded: 'what I really don't understand is why, despite all

my critiques, I have the feeling that I would be the same type of ruler if I had that kind of power. Why, Pablo?', he wondered, as if I had a simple answer.

The words contain painful memories alongside great contradictions of the kind I have discussed throughout the thesis—contradictions that however are deeply meaningful in the context. While having been highly critical of the regime in the crew's songs and in our conversation, my interlocutor, 'in principle', did not oppose a dictatorial regime. To him, the point of friction was the failure to invest the massive oil revenues in the kind of developments that would actually improve people's lives. Another contradiction emerges when, after criticising the government's corruption and blaming the lack of basic services for the death of his daughter, he admits that he would likely act just as his current political leaders. The acknowledgement speaks of the deep cultural roots of the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993), and begs the question of the continuation of the persistent political culture into the future.

Throughout my fieldwork, social unrest was heightened by increasing rumours surrounding the health condition of ageing Teodoro Obiang (78 years old).¹⁹² Underneath, a fierce scramble for succession was mounting and polarisation was public knowledge: on the one hand, a faction, led by the First Lady, in support for Nguema as the natural successor of Obiang; and on the other, a faction supposedly in support for Obiang's younger son (from a different mother), Gabriel Mbega Obiang Lima, current Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons—arguably the most relevant political appointment in the country. While the media makes efforts to portray both figures as radically opposed—the former representing the irresponsible, extravagant conspicuous consumer

¹⁹² While rumours about the President Obiang's deteriorating health have circulated for years, debate grew in August 2017 due to his prolonged absence from the public scene, with a few Spanish newspapers claiming he was being treated at a Brazilian hospital. As at other times, rumours went as far as to declare him dead.

and the latter emerging as a cautious ruler with powerful connections to the oil industry—most of my interlocutors did not see them as significantly different. Indeed, they are both Obiang's sons. Uncertain as my interlocutors were about what their future looks like, they were most certain about the continuation in power of a family that has ruled for over 50 years.

As the regime goes on, music's intimate connection to the very centre of power will not likely cease. But a hope remains that artists will continue to hustle, to discover the strategies and the spaces to negotiate their place in society and to find the ways to live a good life despite the odds. In these practices remains, at least, a genuine passion for music.

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APPENDIX A: List of *Orquestas*

(Data compiled from several interviews with musicians in their 50s to 80s, including: Armando Zamora, Faustino ‘Baba Djide’, John Bosepa, Peleté, Djolo, Eusebio Ndong, Boia Sialo, Camalé, Español, Luis Sorizo, Muadú, Dr. Mbomeche, Mbadé, Molú, Obiang Mba, José Efemba, Ngal Madunga, José ‘Pichi’ Siale, and Perico Elamba.)

Name of <i>Orquesta</i>	Year Established	City of Origin	Band Leader	Other Members	Main Venue
Exterlina					
Los Nacionales					
Dodo Jazz	1966				
Okukur Obiang Mba	1966-1967				
Tú y Yo (Bongo Jazz)	1962-1967	Bata		Antoñito (guit)	
Etofilí (Int. Revolución Fiesta)	1968	Malabo	Eu El Santos (Singer, composer)	Pichi Siale (guit), Ngal Madunga (singer)	La Luna, Club Casino?
Mboka Mboka	1968	Bata?	Molú (singer)	Ngal Ngal (bass), Lourdes (sing), Ambuanga (solo guit.), Mustafa (rhy. guit.) Mekwangui (bongoes)	
Super Senú	1968				
Tam Tam Boys	1968	Malabo?		Español (singer), Micha Micha (<i>animador</i>), Saturnino (singer), Bienvenido (singer), Miguelín Matala (guit.), Anguine (bass), Ikuba (bass)	Venta de Vargas
Machoski	1971				
Los Piques	1972		Machú	Machú (singer), Eusebio Ndong (rhy. guit.), Fermín Berrapa (solo guit.)	4 Ases
Los Dinámicos	1973	Annobón-Malabo?			

Suksa Nacional	1973				
Los Bolabobes	1974	Baó		José Vilora (bass)	Bar Abale
Bochapa Bela Bela	1974	Rebola	Machú?		
Bravo Tropical Boys Fiesta	1974				
Justino Coco, Bomson	1974				
Lasser Boys	1974	Baney			
Banguiba	1975				
Ntumba Nkuar	1975				
Voz Negra	1976				
Chicas Pop	1977				
Los Blakis		Rebola	Boia Sialo		
Los Superenjoyment		Luba			
Wala Belako		Baney			
Yeye Boys		Sampaca			
Equatorial Boys		Basupú			
Guinea Boys		Basupú			
Los Trae Boys		Batete			
Los Cráneos					
Los Jefnes					
Unión Nacional				Sr. Milán (solo guit.)	Feria
Los Toronto/Los Berecs		Campo Yaounde?		Bob Cristo	
Bana Bana					Anita Guau