

Liturgical music in Congolese diaspora; the case of Rome, Italy

The social network of the city of Rome has always been marked by the strong presence of powerful transnational organisations – among them, the Vatican and other prominent Catholic institutions – which have made Rome a cosmopolitan city for all its history. Today, the growing – both demographic and cultural – presence of foreign communities within Italian society and the Vatican hierarchy puts religious bodies and practices at the very centre of the cultural encounter between migrants and locals.

This is the reason why I selected Rome as a particular case study for my PhD thesis based on a comparative ethnography of music and cosmopolitanism among Congolese Diaspora communities in Europe. Thanks to the Royal Holloway Travel Award, I spent more than two months of fieldwork in the capital of Italy, conducting an audio-visual ethnographic exploration of the local Congolese music scene, centred around the Catholic community.

The starting point of my study has been the *Chiesa della Natività di Gesù*, a little church a stone's throw away from Piazza Navona that hosts the headquarters of the Congolese chaplaincy in Rome. This church is a public urban space where several cultural and economic actors (migrants, locals, and tourists) encounter each other through the mediation of music and religion. The weekly mass is celebrated according to the Zaire Use, a variation of the common Roman Catholic mass that incorporates elements from sub-Saharan Bantu cultures, where music and dance assume a prominent liturgical importance. In fact, the mass of the Congolese community is accompanied by the Bondeko (Lingala for 'brotherhood') choir, a group of amateur musicians of Congolese origins who perform religious hymns during the two-to-three-hour long Sunday function. The religious experience becomes a show: the vibrant Congolese gospel music amplified by speakers tied to the confessional, and the flamboyant Sunday clothes of the churchgoers attract every Sunday a crowd of tourists and local residents – some of them have become members of the community over the years.

The choristers have been my main research companions, guiding me into the spiritual experience of African Christianity, and accepting me as a welcome guest in all the community gatherings that took place during my permanence in Rome. I have attended baptisms, confirmations, weddings, birthday parties, gigs, and lots of private and public religious celebrations that turn almost every Sunday into a community event. Such an intense, participatory ethnography led me through the social, economic and communicative networks of Congolese musical migrants beyond the borders of the European countries, investigating the agency of international stakeholders – such as the Catholic Church – in Congolese music making, tracing economical and cultural flows that cover the whole extent of Congolese diaspora, and establishing new, important bonds of friendship with the people of my research.

Through following the activities of the Bondeko choir, I have had the opportunity to access other Congolese music spaces and practices in the city, notably the creation of several songs by Congolese musical priests, composed and recorded in music studios in Rome, which production has involved musicians of other origins and from other Congolese Diaspora communities in Europe.

Together with the musicians involved in the research, I shot and edited several collaborative music video clips, providing the musicians with a useful promotional support which also constitutes an experimental channel of academic communication beyond the usual Ethnomusicological audience. By working collaboratively with the musicians, I have

been able to observe many implications of the transnational circulation of digital music goods, affecting the musicking in the diaspora for what concerns the composition and the visual accompaniment to the tunes.

Another contribution of Congolese musical migrants to the local scene I have been researching is the diffusion of 'Afro' music into Roman clubs and nightlife. A Congolese party organiser – who started his career as a doorman at discos – together with a handful of young DJs, dancers, vocalists and public relations officers of Congolese origins have created a weekly 'Afro' party, in which dance music genres from different African countries like Angola, Cabo Verde and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are mixed together in front of a youthful crowd of new Italians of various ethnic origins.

The research experience among Congolese music migrants in Rome has been a fundamental step in my PhD research project, relating my thesis to current academic debates about the cultural forms of diaspora and transnationalism. Besides, the study of an example of creative integration and peaceful exchange between different ethnic groups in Rome constitutes an ideal workshop to analyse existing practices of transculturation and positive cultural reception, despite the increasingly problematic status of refugees and other migrants in Italy and other European countries.