

North-South Perspectives in SIMM-research in Kinshasa (DR Congo)

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I wish to share some experiences and questions I personally had in relation to my experience collaborating with local researchers in DR Congo.

Before starting my [SIMM](#)-research, I was already often going to Kinshasa for the humanitarian organisation [Music Fund](#), and once even with the well-known music ensemble [Ictus](#). And it is in those years that I discovered the social music projects developed with members of violent gangs and with street children in some of the poor neighbourhoods of Kinshasa.

My research is studying 2 social music projects in Kinshasa. The number of young musicians participating in the research was kept limited (32), in order to be able to develop in-depth case studies with them. A total of 175 hours of individual and focus group interviews were taken.

My data demonstrate strong beliefs in both groups that becoming musicians played an important role in helping them navigate towards different positions in their social lives. They expressed this by saying that they were "saved by music".

I will during this short intervention not go into the main findings of my research, but will take some time to look at how my work in Kinshasa was determined and enriched by my coming from the Global North and working closely together with scholars and participants from the Global South. I will shortly list some of the opportunities and difficulties of this coming together from the north-south perspectives in my research in Kinshasa.

Let me first shortly present the 2 social music projects at the centre of my research in Kinshasa:

Espace Masolo is a community arts centre for street children. The children are sent there by shelters where children in street situations are housed, are staying. These shelters and their personnel of social and community workers are important partners of Espace Masolo. What is being offered at Espace Masolo are artistic and creative activities. They do not only propose music, but also other

training programmes, such as theatre, puppet making and playing, sculpture, drawing, sewing and dressmaking, but also learning how to read and write.

A lot of the children at Espace Masolo arrived there because their relationship with their families were broken. Most of them are so-called 'witch'-children. These are children who were at an early age - 6 to 10 years old - accused by their own family of being bewitched. Their families thought the presence of the devil in these children could explain the misery, illnesses or deaths they were confronted with. The most courageous children fled their homes and - before arriving in the shelters - lived in the streets of Kinshasa. A lot of these children and youth have been able to go back to their families, thanks to the work of Espace Masolo. It is one of the main ambitions of this community arts centre: to reunify them with their families.

The brass band has between 20 and 25 musicians. I had 22 of them in my research. The children start at the age of 10 in the brass band, but I only worked with those between 16 and 23 years old.

Beta Mbonda is a percussion ensemble which started its activities in 2009. They perform traditional Congolese music on tam-tams and madimbas (a Congolese type of xylophone). During my fieldwork in Kinshasa the band was composed of 10 young men between 25 and the oldest 41 years old. Before becoming musicians they have been members of violent gangs. The word 'beta' in Lingala comes from the English word 'to beat', and 'mbonda' is Lingala for drums. The ensemble presents itself as resulting from a social music project which helped young men who were involved in violent gang crime to change their activity and identity... that they in a way stopped 'beating people' and instead started 'beating the drums'.

The co-founders of the percussion band Beta Mbonda, are the Congolese percussionist Alhim Eyenga and flutist Maître Tshamala. They are experts in traditional Congolese music. The project started simply as follows: Alhim was as always rehearsing at his home. This often attracted the youth from his neighbourhood. One day a group of the local gang came to see him and asked him whether they could also try playing the drums. Alhim answered them: "Yes, I may be your master, but it will cost you... not money, but a lot of your time and concentration."

Since 2009-2010 they started developing their project, which became the music ensemble of (now) former members of violent gangs. This project was from the beginning explicitly set up to offer these young men a way out of their former 'occupation' in violent gangs, by interesting them in making music and becoming musicians. The aim being that this new

occupation would distract and even disinterest them from their gang activities. In this, they succeeded. Congo is an enormous country, and also in terms of its reservoir of traditional music it is very rich and diverse. The ensemble plays the repertoire of many different regions and provinces of Congo, and even some music from Rwanda.

Music is omni-present in Kinshasa, appreciated and respected within the Congolese society. My choice to study young musicians in Kinshasa, was taken (1) because music is so present there, and (2) because many young people in this large city are challenged by poverty, lack of occupation and violence. It was therefore no surprise to me that I was able to find in Kinshasa interesting case studies for my research. There are many types of musical expressions in Kinshasa, a lot of musicians, and big audiences. Music is also an important subject for the inhabitants of Kinshasa.

My **fieldwork in Kinshasa** took me a full 7 months: I went there 2 times per year during 1 month, and this then spread over a period of 3 1/5 years, from August 2012 until January 2016. I stayed with Congolese friends living in the poor and popular part of Kinshasa. I moved around the city on foot, and took transportation together with the inhabitants of Kinshasa (taxis, taxi-busses, busses, or on the back of a motorbike). I wanted to get out in the streets and spent as much as possible my time close to the worlds in which the participants in my research were living... 'hanging out', while observing and taking notes. I know of course that it was possible to get only partially 'close', but it was good to make the effort. It brought me every day again in contact with people in the streets of Kinshasa. People would often talk to me, as they were not used to see a white man in the streets of the popular areas of the city of Kinshasa. It made them curious about who I was and what I was doing there.

The particular setting of Kinshasa has not only proven to be appropriate for my research on social impacts of music-making, but maybe it was even the best possible one for me... I did my research in a place which is in many ways so complicated for people living there. And towards the end of my fieldwork, this situation did not seem to have improved much, even though data and statistics differ substantially depending on the sources one consults. Take into account the poverty, the corruption by those who govern (politicians, police, army), as well as the highly uncertain health conditions in which the poor majority of Kinshasa lives, it is impressive how the inhabitants of this immense city continue to live with dignity and courage.

I am in this short intervention not presenting the main findings of my research in Kinshasa, which you can find in my thesis (www.lukas-pairon.eu/phd) and later this year in the

book which I wrote for musicians and social and community workers.

North-South perspectives.

I developed the fieldwork of this research in the presence of and in a close collaboration with a multi-disciplinary Congolese team of researchers: sociologist Jeudi Bofala and political scientist Dr Patrice Mukulu were with me most of the time. At the time of my fieldwork both were assistants at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Université de Kinshasa (UNIKIN). Sociologist Professor Léon Tsambu (UNIKIN) and social worker Maguy Djokaba of the network REEJER also assisted many of our research meetings. Here are some of the opportunities and difficulties of this coming together of a scholar from Belgium and Congolese scholars and participants in this research:

1. Besides assisting me in my fieldwork by translating during focus group and individual interviews which were held in the local language Lingala, some of the transcriptions were also done by them. But most important of all this collaboration has helped me to understand some of the socio-cultural contexts of the research and informed me on related research done by Congolese scholars. The focus group sessions were lead by myself, but all my questions were asked by sociologist Jeudi Bofala, who was also herself more and more intervening and co-leading and directing the sessions. Next to me sat political scientist Patrice Mukulu who did the simultaneous translation, so that all the sessions could be held in Lingala. I did a lot of the other interviews on my own, but most of them accompanied by a translator.
2. Having worked with these Congolese colleagues (2 academics and 1 social and community worker) strengthened the internal reliability of this study, because we had regular team meetings during which we exchanged our observations.
3. Sexual violence and prostitution have also been an integral part of the reality for many of the youth who spent time living in the streets of Kinshasa. Especially the girls in this research have been victims of this. Some of them were raped at an early age (at least one already at 7 years, others between 10 and 13 years old). I knew about this reality before I started the research and for this reason invited the female sociologist Jeudi Bofana as member of my research team. My Congolese assistants could see and understand parts of the reality I was studying better than I could on my own. The advantage of my own position and my working with my multidisciplinary team has been that I could look at and - at least to a certain point - come to an understanding of these realities from different perspectives.

4. The research involved a group of participants who were known as 'witch'-children. These youth were as small children accused by their own family of being bewitched, and they then decided to flee and go live into the streets of Kinshasa. 'Witchcraft' was a delicate subject within my research team though, because my Congolese colleagues made me clear that they disagreed with me concerning the reality of witchcraft: I do not believe in witchcraft, and they did. They believed that some children might have been witches at a certain point in their lives. Many African people believe in witchcraft, so the beliefs of my colleagues in the team corresponded with what most Congolese people I know believe. It was one of the occasions in which I was confronted with how disconnected I was from their world, as I cannot myself imagine the existence of witchcraft.
5. Our qualitative description methods can profit us researchers to come to a better understanding and interpretation of the language used by participants in research, and to report experiences, opinions and expectations. The interaction of the inter-subjective perspectives of a pluri-disciplinary composed research team as ours could nevertheless strengthen this approach even more.
6. All three collaborators being locals, I needed them even more to agree to respect the discretion I promised the participants of the research. Trust is intimately related to discretion. The participants in the research needed to be able to count on the discretion of the research team in general, and in particular towards the mentors of the programmes, so that they could be free to criticise the weaknesses and failings of the social music project they were involved in. All three collaborators agreed to respect the discretion we promised the participants of the research.
7. I believe the interaction of the inter-subjective perspectives of a pluri-disciplinary composed research team as we had, is something which could and should be developed more in this field of research. It is not easy though, and costly. But it will make research on the possible roles of music-making in social and community work all the more reliable and profound.
8. The complexity of the processes to be studied, as well as the diverse know-how needed to come to an understanding of the different aspects of these realities, exceed the capacities of most individual scholars, and require therefore teams across disciplines and over sustained time periods.
9. One serious handicap I could not overcome in my collaborating with the local scholars is the fact that I wrote my thesis in English. My Congolese colleagues did

not master this language enough. So even though during the fieldwork period we discussed the development of the hypotheses and findings of the research a lot in team, they have not been involved at all in the writing or reading of the resulting thesis. This is one of the reasons why I plan the book I wrote about my research to also be published in French.

10. I am coming from Belgium, the country which colonised Congo. And as founder of Music Fund I also had a specific north-south relationship with the two projects I studied as practitioner-researcher.
11. As Gillian Howell discussed in her keynote-speech to this SIMM-posium in Bogota, part of the reality this research also defined was the fact that some trained musicians try to flee Congo and go to Europe or elsewhere. There is an intimate connection between opportunities of training and people leaving the Global South.
12. In the post-doc research project I am preparing for 2021 in Kinshasa, I plan to give priority to the methodology of participatory action research (PAR) because I will as a researcher partner up with members of the groups I want to revisit and study, and invite them to assist me actively in the research. I will propose the research to be in close connection with the questions to which they seek answers. Also, I will involve participants as facilitators/assistants in the post-doc research in Kinshasa and invite them to themselves undertake some of the interviews, facilitate group discussions and suggest changes in the research process.
13. The Department of Conflict and Development Studies of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Ghent (for which I did my research in Kinshasa) recently created the platform 'Silent Voices' (www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-workshop/). This platform aims at giving a voice to the many local researchers developing research - independently or in collaboration with scholars from the Global North. The Silent Voices platform's intention is to let the people speak out who normally have only a limited say in the output of research. This can be done individually or in dialogue with the Western researcher they have worked with. The local researchers from the Global South are also invited to write about their experiences on the blog of the platform. They can write in their own language, so my Congolese colleagues will be able to do so in French, and even in Lingala.