

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“How will God hear us?”: Sonic and linguistic difference among Kinshasa’s *Églises des Noirs*

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Abstract

This article studies how anti-Christian, ‘traditionally African’ organizations, locally known as *Églises des Noirs*, navigate religious competition in the Congolese capital through sonic and linguistic strategies. It focuses on the understudied Mpadist community, a ‘dissident’ branch of the better known Kimbanguist church. Mpadists mobilize diverging appreciations and meanings of sound and language to set themselves apart from the dominant Lingalophone Pentecostal loudness of the city. In doing so, they pursue a delicate balance between Kongo traditionalism, the source of their spiritual legitimacy, rooted in colonial prophetic movements, and tactics of ‘modern’ community making in order to remain competitive within Kinshasa’s prolific religious setting. The article argues that ideologies of sound and language should be analysed within the same nexus, for they operate and are operationalized in similar ways. It therefore proposes to expand the sociolinguistic notion of indexicality to incorporate elements of the volume and modalities of sound making. The article also shows that sonic and linguistic ideologies are bound by context. In Kinshasa’s ‘low-fi’ soundscape, the indexical values of the languages Kikongo and Lingala, and of unamplified and amplified sound production, share similar features, yet they are evaluated differently in rural ‘hi-fi’ sonic environments.

Résumé

Cet article étudie la manière dont des organisations anti-chrétiennes « traditionnellement africaines », localement connues sous le nom d’*Églises des Noirs*, font face à la concurrence religieuse dans la capitale congolaise par le biais de stratégies soniques et linguistiques. Il se concentre sur la communauté peu étudiée des mpadistes, une branche « dissidente » de l’Église kimbanguiste mieux connue. Les mpadistes mobilisent des appréciations et des sens du son et du langage divergents pour se distinguer de la bruyante communauté pentecôtiste lingalaphone dominante de la ville. Ce faisant, ils recherchent un équilibre délicat entre traditionalisme kongo d’une part, source de leur légitimité spirituelle et ancré dans les mouvements prophétiques coloniaux, et tactiques de construction communautaire « moderne » d’autre part, pour rester compétitifs dans le milieu religieux prolifique de Kinshasa. L’article soutient qu’il conviendrait d’analyser les idéologies du son et du langage dans un même nexus, car ils opèrent et sont opérationnalisés de façon similaire. Il propose par conséquent d’étendre la notion sociolinguistique d’indexicalité pour incorporer des éléments de volume et de modalités de production du son. L’article montre également que les

idéologies soniques et linguistiques sont liées par contexte. Dans le paysage sonore « low-fi » de Kinshasa, les valeurs indexicales des langues kikongo et lingala, et de la production de son non amplifié et amplifié, présentent des particularités similaires, et sont pourtant évaluées différemment dans les environnements soniques « hi-fi » ruraux.

Resumo

Este artigo estuda a forma como as organizações anticristãs e ‘tradicionalmente africanas’, conhecidas localmente como *Églises des Noirs*, navegam a competição religiosa na capital congoleza através de estratégias sonoras e linguísticas. Centra-se na pouco estudada comunidade mpadista, um ramo ‘dissidente’ da mais conhecida igreja kimbanguista. Os mpadistas mobilizam apreciações e significados divergentes de som e linguagem para se diferenciarem do ruído Pentecostal lingalafono dominante da cidade. Ao fazê-lo, procuram um equilíbrio delicado entre o tradicionalismo kongo, a fonte da sua legitimidade espiritual, enraizada nos movimentos proféticos coloniais, e as táticas de criação de comunidades ‘modernas’, a fim de se manterem competitivos no prolífico cenário religioso de Kinshasa. Este artigo argumenta que ideologias de som e linguagem devem ser analisadas no âmbito do mesmo nexo, uma vez que operam e são operacionalizadas de formas semelhantes. Propõe, por isso, alargar a noção sociolinguística de indexicalidade para incorporar elementos do volume e das modalidades de produção de som. O artigo também mostra que as ideologias sonoras e linguísticas estão ligadas pelo contexto. Na paisagem sonora ‘low-fi’ de Kinshasa, os valores indexicais das línguas kikongo e lingala, e da produção de som não amplificado e amplificado, partilham características semelhantes, no entanto são avaliados de forma diferente em ambientes sonoros rurais qualificados como ‘hi-fi’.

Kinshasa, October 2017.¹ I take a taxi together with Tata Kongo. We are on our way to meet the spiritual leader of *Kintwadi Tuka Kongo* (‘Union since Kongo’ in Kikongo), a so-called *Église des Noirs* with Rastafarian tendencies. Tata Kongo is a prominent member. Upon entering the car, Tata Kongo immediately asks the driver to turn off the Christian music that is playing on the radio, gesturing that it is disturbing to his ears. The driver is surprised but complies with his customer’s request and switches channels to a popular rumba song, which is more to Tata Kongo’s liking, and we continue our ride. Fervent Christians in Kinshasa, on the other hand, avoid being exposed to such profane music, which they perceive as demonic.

In Kinshasa, a city that has been described as both ‘a sonic battleground’ (Lambertz 2018: 202) and ‘a prolific religious universe’ (Pype 2012: 33), the production of sound – including parameters of loudness and language – and religious competition are profoundly intertwined. This article explores that crossroads of sound and religion by zooming in on the members of *Églises des Noirs* (‘traditional’, anti-Christian ‘churches’) and their discourses and actions regarding religious sound production and linguistic registers in Kinshasa, a city dominated by a Pentecostal soundscape.

¹ Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted eight months of fieldwork in Kinshasa, interviewing members of different *Églises des Noirs* and participating in their activities. I spent most of my time among Lulendo’s Mpadist followers and maintain good contact with them through social media and repeated visits to Kinshasa.

More particularly, I focus on the profoundly understudied community of Mpadism, a prophetic Kongo movement with roots in the colonial era.

Sound, 'a highly subjective realm of perception encompassing different degrees of sensitivity to acoustic stimuli' (Gandy 2014: 8), provides a refreshing means to explore religious practices and urban livelihood because 'hearing is a way of touching at a distance', and, as a sensorial experience, it cannot easily be switched off (Schafer 1977: 11). This means that sound renders the boundaries of intimacy (and the power to impose intimacy) somewhat porous, especially in a megacity such as Kinshasa, where the physical proximity of more than 15 million people already puts pressure on individual and collective privacy. Sonic and religious competition hence go hand in hand because they both engage in struggles over invisible forms of power.

The dovetailing of religious competition and the production of sound, and in particular its 'excessive' and subjective experience as noise – 'matter/sound out of place', as several authors have argued, following Mary Douglas – is not unique to Kinshasa (Cardoso 2019: 3; Gurney 1999, as cited in Atkinson 2007: 1905). Weiner (2014), for example, discusses the polysemic reactions of Detroit-based opponents of the practice of *Adhān*, the Muslim call to prayer, while Corbin (1998) and Garrioch (2003) analyse the augmented contestation of church bells in nineteenth-century European cities. Ranging from anxiety over unwanted exposure to religious difference to more banal complaints about disturbed sleep, religiously produced sound easily becomes a site of contestation in contexts of clashing modes of community formation.

Diverging appreciations of sound technologies make up an essential part of religious competition and its sonic manifestations. Larkin (2014), for example, investigates how inhabitants of the religiously plural city of Jos in Nigeria have developed 'techniques of inattention' to cope with undesired amplified religious sound production (see also Ibrahim 2022), while de Witte (2008) analyses how Pentecostals and Ga neo-traditionalists in Accra vie for the occupation of urban space through competitive uses of sound and silence. She describes how Pentecostals 'colonize' Accra's public space, not only visually but also through sound production that permeates far beyond the spatial limits of their churches. Those practices conflict with the prescriptions of the 'traditional' Ga Homowo festival, which imposes a month of silence and a ban on drumming in the city (see also Arthur 2017). According to de Witte, 'the struggle over sound and silence becomes a struggle over the flow of spiritual power' as sounds *embody* (rather than *represent* or *symbolize*) 'the spiritual power of God, gods or evil spirits' and can therefore affect the hearer (2008: 706–7).

In Kinshasa, too, religious actors identifying as 'traditional' often dismiss Pentecostal interpretations of the relation between sound and spiritual power, a rejection that resonates with 'longstanding anti-urban sentiments and a distrust in technologically mediated environments' (Gandy 2014: 12). Although cities do not have permanent soundscapes – administrative neighbourhoods can be bustling with activity during the working week but uncannily silent at weekends and in the evenings – they are generally perceived as 'loud' in contrast to the 'silent' countryside (see also Arquette 2004: 162). According to Ferguson (1999), noise is part of a cosmopolitan/urban cultural style not only because it 'signifies' the city, in opposition to a more 'silent' idea of localism/rurality, but also because it is disturbing and unreadable, like the city itself. In other words, 'the town makes noise, but the noise

makes the town' (Serres 1982: 14, as cited in Pype 2016: 232). Schafer (1977: 43) speaks of rural soundscapes as 'hi-fi' systems, in which discrete acoustic signals are audible due to a low ambient noise level, in contrast to the 'low-fi' city, where individual sounds are lost in an over-dense atmosphere of sonic production. Yet, what is experienced or discursively constructed as noisy and disturbing in one context is not necessarily so in another. As Patsarika, Schneider and Edwards (2018: 87) have pointed out in their study of Delhi, sound is profoundly related to the construction and maintenance of identities. Matters of cultural subjectivity often play a more determining role in the experience of 'noise' than measurable loudness (see Chandola 2012: 402).

This cultural sensibility is also at play in evaluations of linguistic registers. As Silverstein (1976) argued when coining the sociolinguistic notion of indexicality, semantic relations make up only part of the total meaning of linguistic signs. Languages are attributed different indexical values, and these are based on people's ideologies and convictions about 'systematic behavioral, aesthetic, affective and moral contrasts among the social group indexed' (Irvine and Gal 2000: 37). The sound of a language hence forms an important constitutive element when it comes to ideologically constructed representations of linguistic registers. Therefore, this article argues that competing linguistic registers and clashing modes of decibel production should be analysed within one and the same nexus. While sociolinguists have paid attention to the former through the framework of indexicality, and anthropologists such as Larkin and de Witte have done an excellent job in situating the latter within urban spheres of religious competition, the two are rarely integrated. Yet, as I show below for Kinshasa, ideologies about silence and noise and their discursively constructed relation to 'rurality' and 'urbanity', and to 'tradition' and 'modernity', show strong similarities to the indexical values attached to certain languages, in this case Kikongo and Lingala.

To contextualize the sonic and linguistic ideologies of *Églises des Noirs* members, I first explain how the city's 'two main spaces of appearance' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 95) – the bar and the (Pentecostal) church – set the tone of Kinshasa's soundscape and share similar sonic features despite their supposedly antagonistic relationship. Second, I elaborate on Kinshasa's *Églises des Noirs* and the community of prophet Simon Mpadi (1906/09–91). I then explain how members of several *Églises des Noirs* approach sound and language in the spiritual realm and how they discursively contest Pentecostal sound production. To conclude, I zoom in on the 'acoustic register' (Hunt 2013) of the Mpadist community and discuss how it operates differently in Kinshasa and in the rural context of Mvuila, a small village in Kongo Central province. In doing so, I emphasize my argument about the contextual relativity of sound production and the role of ideas about urban–rural relations.

La Kinoiserie, Pentecostalism and sonic excess in Kinshasa

Every Kinois (inhabitant of Kinshasa) knows what it is to be kept awake by the sound system of a nearby nightclub or bar, or to be awakened by the amplified praying and singing of a Pentecostal church around the corner. Having a drink at Couloir Kimbuta, one of Kinshasa's popular streets for nightlife, means to be exposed to decibel levels that can be felt throughout one's entire body. Visitors who travel from other regions

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to the capital persistently identify sound pollution as one of the main things that make Kinshasa a stressful place to be.

According to De Boeck (2015: 147), Kinshasa is a site of semiotic overproduction in which the 'excessive' character of the city generates so much meaning-making that its inhabitants end up lost in translation when they try to make sense of their urban condition. This excess is generated not only through an 'overproduction of words' (*ibid.*) but also through the widespread use of electrical devices to achieve sonic expansion (loudspeakers, amplifiers, microphones). Broadly speaking, this sonic excess can be situated in two distinct, seemingly opposite spaces of community making: Kinshasa's nightlife scene (the realm of *la Kinoiserie*), on the one hand, and the city's booming Pentecostal environment on the other.

In James Ferguson's words, *la Kinoiserie* is a cosmopolitan style, 'a motivated process of self-making' through which the city's residents perform their relation to urban modernity (Ferguson 1999: 101; see also Pype 2012: 31). *La Kinoiserie* represents the ambiance of nightlife, loud and seductive rumba music, scantily dressed women, big spenders, alcohol, boastful language and (fake) designer clothing. Especially from a Christian perspective, it is mostly referred to in a pejorative sense – it evokes connotations of exaggeration, hedonism and immorality – yet it also entails a certain attraction for those who do not have access to it. *La Kinoiserie*, as a performative competence, is the term that best captures Kinshasa's appeal as a vibrant and entertaining city inhabited by *ambianceurs*, as a pleasurable cosmos of entertainment, seduction, gossip and wit.

In terms of sound production, the world of *la Kinoiserie* is a world of amplification, of the reverberation of booming sound systems in and beyond bars (often distorted to the extent that the original message is no longer audible), and of boastful language practices such as the phenomenon of *mabanga*, a form of praise singing in popular music where sometimes praise names make up almost the entire song. Amplified sound production constitutes an important part of *la Kinoiserie* as the performance of 'modern cityness'.

Pentecostal churches also build on this 'modern', 'urban' source of identity construction. Over the last twenty to thirty years, they have become the most dominant group of religious players in Kinshasa and have set the tone for its religious soundscape. The 1990s witnessed an exponential rise of Pentecostal churches in the DRC/Zaire, when Mobutu's authority started to show visible cracks, economic conditions worsened, migration to Europe boomed, and Congolese citizens increasingly found themselves in need of spiritual guidance (see, for example, Demart *et al.* 2013). As Meyer (2007: 7) argues, Pentecostalism boomed among urban middle classes across Africa at a time when 'democratization, liberalization and commercialization of the media' coincided with the anchoring of neoliberal, capitalist conditions, leading to a reconfiguration of the postcolonial African state. These churches propagate an apocalyptic worldview, dividing human experiences into 'demonic' and 'divine' dichotomies (see also Trapido 2013). Practices and individuals associated with the world of *la Kinoiserie* are often loudly condemned as being part of this 'demonic', 'occult' or spiritually reprehensible 'second world' (see, for example, De Boeck and Plissart 2004). Popular rumba artists, for example, are often accused of being witches and are said to have sold their souls to the devil or to ancestral powers in exchange for artistic success.

Yet, Pentecostalism and *la Kinoiserie* draw on somewhat similar stylistic and sonic features. They both make widespread use of amplified sound. According to Lambertz (2020), the Pentecostal notion of the Holy Spirit and sound share evanescence as a feature. Therefore, 'Pentecostalism is foremost a sonic religion' that attempts to occupy Kinshasa's soundscape. To fill public space with prayers, sermons and songs is to fill it with God's presence. From a Pentecostal perspective, loud prayer and music are necessary to invoke the Holy Spirit and to ward off demonic spirits, to sonically claim God's presence. During Pentecostal services or more intimate prayer sessions, a certain level of sound production is always guaranteed, if not through electronic amplification – which can be a challenge in a city afflicted by power cuts – then through shouting and raised voices. Praying happens out loud, often resulting in a dissonant mixture of individual voices that try to supersede one another.

The dances performed in numerous Pentecostal churches, too, show significant similarities with the mundane choreographies and melodies these same churches characterize as diabolic, not least because many musicians playing Christian songs previously had 'profane' careers (Tsambu 2004; Pype 2006). Hence, in Kinshasa, 'an urban world complicit with the many transgressions it so loudly condemns', the performative aspect of Kinois cosmopolitan style is present in both religious and nightlife spaces, even though Kinois often represent them as being in an antagonistic relationship (Hendriks 2019: 85).

Volume through amplification is not the only shared sonic feature of churches and bars. Eloquence, as a way to attract the public and to make money, is a highly valorised quality in both milieus, and Lingala functions as the linguistic register par excellence in that regard. As is the case for Nouchi in Côte d'Ivoire (Newell 2009) and Wolof in Senegal (McLaughlin 2008), Lingala has the status of an urban, 'modern', pan-Congolese language (see Bokamba 2009; Büscher *et al.* 2013) with a cosmopolitan appeal. The fact that it is also the dominant language among Congolese diasporas in the global North contributes to its worldly reputation, as it is constantly fed by new vocabularies emerging from metropole cities such as Paris, London and Brussels. Lingala is not only heavily interspersed with French (adding a hint of colonially infused 'sophistication'), but it is also continually changing through linguistic innovations from Langila and Yanké, the languages of the capital's youth, artists and street gangs (see Nassenstein 2015).

As Meeuwis and I have shown elsewhere, this worldly status of Lingala, which emerged as a colonial lingua franca, was a thorn in the side of many missionaries during the colonial period. Lingala was considered a 'motley language' and an urban 'gibberish', especially by radical indigenist missionaries with Herderian beliefs about 'authentic' African languages as linguistic representations of 'authentic' ethnic communities (Luyckfasseel and Meeuwis 2018: 91). Kikongo, in contrast, had a more 'ancestral', 'traditional' status in the eyes of these missionaries, not least due to its association with *Kongo dia Ntotila*, the precolonial Kongo Kingdom.² As I show below, the indexical values of these languages have changed little and continue to resonate

² 'Kikongo' is a container term, referring to both the vehicular language Kikongo ya Leta/Munukutuba, spoken in the provinces of Kongo Central and former Bandundu, and other, less widespread vernacular languages (Kindibu, Kintandu, Kimanyanga, etc.) from Kongo Central, often referred to as the Lower Kongo region. Kinois rarely distinguish between these when talking about 'Kikongo'. From the 1940s

in contemporary debates about adequate language use in religious settings, which underscores my argument that the sound of language and its indexical meanings must form an integral part of any analysis of Kinshasa's religious soundscape.

The negative evaluation of the Congolese city as an undesirably loud place also has its roots in colonial missionary ideology. Missionaries viewed the city as an uncontrollable Babel and the countryside as a romanticized bucolical sanctuary for Christian activity (Schalbroeck 2022). Pentecostal churches break loose from that missionary sound ideology as they literally set the tone for Kinshasa's religious sphere through their amplified sound production and Lingalophone mediatized presence. As I show below, *Églises des Noirs*, on the other hand, often criticize this sonic dominance and argue in favour of more modest sound levels and of Kikongo as an 'ancestral language'. Thus, somewhat ironically, they adhere to ideologies of sound and language that show similarities with those of the white missionaries they explicitly condemn as corrupters of true African spirituality for bringing Christianity to the continent.

Kongo prophets and *Églises des Noirs*

Alongside the dominance of Pentecostal churches in the city, Kinois are offered a wide spectrum of religious orientations. Catholic and Protestant churches have marked the city's landscape since colonial times. Today, one can also find synagogues, mosques, Buddhist temples and even Japanese messianic temples in Kinshasa (see Lambertz 2018: 4–6; Pype 2012: 33–6). Another important religious player is the EJCSK (*Église de Jésus-Christ sur la Terre par son envoyé special Simon Kimbangu*), the official Kimbanguist church founded by Simon Kimbangu's sons. Kimbangu (c.1889–1951) was a prophet who started his spiritual mission in 1921 in the Lower Kongo region, where his prophetic movement quickly became a source of nervousness for missionaries and colonial agents. After a few months of prophetic activity, Kimbangu was arrested and imprisoned in Elisabethville (today Lubumbashi), in the south-east of the DRC, where he died in 1951 (see, for example, Asch 1983; Mokoko Gampiot 2017). Many of his followers were condemned to relegation – that is, they were deported within Belgian Congo to prison camps far away from their native region because of their religious and civil disobedience (see De Coene *et al.* 2022).

Although EJCSK remains the largest Kimbanguist church, with 5 million followers claimed worldwide, several other prophets (*ngunza* in Kikongo) followed in Kimbangu's footsteps and started other 'Kimbanguist' movements (MacGaffey 1983). One of the most renowned prophets was Simon Mpadi. From 1939 onwards, Mpadi established his own independent church, *Mission des Noirs* (or *Kindombe Kimene* in Kikongo, 'Mission of Black People'). His movement was also known as Khakism because of the colour of the military-inspired uniforms its followers wore, an aesthetic borrowed from the Salvation Army. As a 'therapeutic insurgency', to use Hunt's term (2016), Mpadi's movement provoked even more colonial nervousness than Kimbangu's, as it represented a more radical Black nationalist stance. Mpadi argued in favour of 'African customs' such as polygamy and he no longer described

onwards, migrants from the Lower Kongo region, referred to as 'Bakongo', made up the largest ethnic group in Kinshasa (see Luyckfasseel and Meeuwis 2018 for more historical detail).

Kimbangu as Christ's incarnation, but as the founder-martyr of a distinctly Black religion (Balandier 1953: 56; Mbasani 1981: 116).

On founding his church, Mpadi was immediately arrested. After several escapes, he was sent to jail in Elisabethville in April 1946, where he claimed to have met Simon Kimbangu (Asch 1983: 33; Etambala 2005: 113). When he was released from jail in 1960, Mpadi continued to lead his own movement, struggling to maintain his position as a charismatic leader and claiming Kimbangu's legacy, alongside the bigger and richer EJCSK, until he passed away in 1991. After his death, both Mpadi's son Lulendo and his maternal nephew Molière claimed – and continue to claim – to have inherited Mpadist leadership. As a result of this competition and splintered leadership, Mpadism occupies a rather marginalized role in Kinshasa's contemporary religious landscape, despite having been one of the largest prophetic Kongo movements of the late colonial era.

Mpadist cosmology divides humanity into four distinct races: the black race (Africans), the yellow race (Asians), the red race (Arabs) and the white race (Caucasians). The black race is the oldest, while the white race is considered the youngest and therefore 'the least ancestral'. Every race has its own distinct characteristics. For the black race this means: two prophets (Kimbangu and Mpadi), a sacred book (*Ntemo kia Kuanza*, 'The light of the world' in Kikongo), a chosen people (Bakongo) and a sacred day (Wednesday). Via their prophets, all races pray to the same God, for whom they have distinct names (*Wamba Wa Mpungu Tulendo*, 'the Almighty God' in Kikongo, for the black race).³

Mpadist doctrine includes several rules on how to behave in society. They no longer wear khaki uniforms but choose to dress up in red, yellow and white. Men must shave their heads every twelve days, whereas women are not allowed to use implants or *kabelu* (Lingala for 'fake hair', from the Portuguese *cabelo*). Women should cover their heads and are not allowed to wear jewellery, black clothes or makeup, an interdiction that fits within a wider rejection of 'Western' practices and the belief that worshipping Wamba requires humbleness and purity, in contrast to the opulence and wealth displayed at certain Pentecostal churches.

Besides EJCSK and Mpadism, other spiritual entrepreneurs continue to reinterpret Kimbangu's legacy to create new religious movements. *Kintwadi*, mentioned in the opening vignette, is only one of many. To varying degrees, they refute the Christian aspect of Kimbangu's prophetism and reframe him as a radical anti-colonial and anti-Christian leader. Kinosis mostly refer to these movements with the umbrella term *Églises des Noirs* ('churches of Black people'), which is derived from Mpadi's original *Mission des Noirs*.⁴ The most notorious *Église des Noirs* is *Bundu dia Kongo*, led by the enigmatic Ne Mwanda Nsemi (see also Covington-Ward 2016). In contrast to Mpadism,

³ Most other *Églises des Noirs* refer to God as *Nzambi Mpungu*. According to De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 106), 'Nzambi' should be understood as a 'nonpersonal field of generative energy and vital life flow', while 'Mpungu' means 'knotting, bringing together', hence denoting the notion of *Nzambi* as an encompassing entity or force that unites and interconnects in Kikongo.

⁴ Apart from EJCSK, I would not define these movements as African Independent Churches because, despite varying degrees of radicality, they are explicitly anti-Christian. Lulendo's branch of Mpadism consciously chose the name REMPAD, *Religion Mpadiste*, rather than *Église/Mission des Noirs*. One reason for this name change was to avoid confusion with other so-called *Églises des Noirs*, including Molière's movement; another was the rejection of the word *église* because of its Christian connotation.

Bundu dia Kongo has an explicit nationalist political agenda: restoring the Kongo Kingdom and linguistically reviving Kikongo, which is currently under pressure due to the gradual spread of Lingala, including in the province of Kongo Central (see, for example, Mufwene 2002).

Unlike Mpadism, which embraces ‘typically Kongo’ soft values of piety and modesty, *Bundu dia Kongo* and the ‘prophets’ of these newer movements do not shy away from provocative, insulting and xenophobic discourses to stir up their audiences. Yet, what all these *Églises des Noirs* share is the belief that the only way in which the African continent can move forward is by returning to ‘authentic’ African spirituality and renouncing Christianity.

Sonic nuisances and linguistic registers

In the opening vignette, I described how Tata Kongo requested our taxi driver to turn off the Christian music that was playing on the radio. In general, members of *Églises des Noirs* indeed portray Pentecostal sound production in a negative way. When I discussed the loud prayers and music of Pentecostal churches with Mpadi Molière, Simon Mpadi’s maternal nephew, he used the term *nuisances sonores*, ‘sonic nuisances’, to define his negative evaluation. In several of his religious pamphlets, *Bundu dia Kongo*’s leader Ne Mwanda Nsemi also criticizes the *makelele ma wenze* (Lingala for ‘market noise’) of Pentecostal churches, arguing that ‘the NOISE kills the seeds of true Spirituality in men’. Man Mamona, a Rastafari Kikongo singer, also complains about the volume of Pentecostal amplified praying modes. He does not self-identify as Christian, but refers to the Bible to question Pentecostal loudness:

*Normalement, prière eza eloko ya silence. Prière soki tosala yango na silence te, okomi fanfaron. Po Bible na bino botangaka, ekomi que ‘Kota na chambre, sambela Nzambe na yo na silence, akoyoka yo’. Tala mboka na biso ndenge tokoma kosambela, ya koGANGA GANGA GANGA, Nzambe akoyoka biso ndenge nini?*⁵

Normally, prayer is something silent. Prayer, if we don’t do it silently, you become a boaster. Because the Bible you read, it says, ‘Enter a room, pray to your God in silence, he will hear you.’ Look at how we have come to pray in our country, by YELLING YELLING YELLING, how will God hear us?

Mamona’s concern – ‘how will God hear us?’ – was a recurrent statement among my interlocutors. Within their discourse, amplified sound is represented – in De Boeck’s words – as excessive. Pentecostal ‘noise’ is said to disturb spiritual communication, turning Kinshasa into a sonic chaos.

The sonic competition between those who cater to Kinshasa’s different religions and the question of effective spiritual communication not only involve the volume of prayer, but also language and the choice of words. As Pype (2009: 551) argues, the Kinshasa emphasis on the power of the spoken word should be understood in the context of a reality that is believed to be orchestrated by invisible forces, where ‘words are believed to have a fundamental impact on people’s lives and experiences’. These invisible forces relate back to what Kinshasa call *le deuxième monde*, ‘the second

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPz_NcKZaLM>.

world', an occult shadow world (De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 56). The second world or city is believed to flourish at night, when *bandoki* (witches or sorcerers in Lingala and Kikongo) come out and define the fate of the first world (see also De Boeck 2005).

Using the right words implies using the right linguistic register. In his study of Japanese religion (*Sekai Kyūseikyō*) in Kinshasa, Lambertz remarks that his respondents, praying in Japanese, a language they do not understand, aim above all to create an acoustic difference. Like Catholics' usage of Latin, or Qur'an recitations by Muslims not understanding Classical Arabic, 'the act of pronouncing words in Japanese by *Kinois* empties the language of any relationship to meaning and makes it, for the praying individual, a purely iconic experience of acoustic difference' (Lambertz 2018: 215). As Alhourani (2015: 113) notes for Somali immigrants in Cape Town with limited knowledge of Arabic, the sound (rather than the meaning) of the language generates a sense of 'aesthetic communality' that binds these migrants in their Muslimness. Linguistic difference can hence engender a sensorial embodiment of belonging and communal intimacy, especially in an urban, often hostile environment.

Within most *Églises des Noirs*, acoustic difference also plays a role as Kikongo gains a ritual status in contrast to the more 'profane' reputation of Lingala, which is used for everyday communication. Because it is commonly believed to be the language of the former Kongo Kingdom, and because it was the native language of Simon Kimbangu and Simon Mpadi, Kikongo has an 'ancestral', spiritual standing.⁶ For example, the leader of *Kintwadi*, who identifies as a reincarnation of Simon Kimbangu, makes a difference between vertical communication with the ancestors in Kikongo and horizontal communication among urban peers in Lingala. He argues that the ancestors spoke Kikongo, and that they should be addressed in their language to obtain effective communication. Yet, for day-to-day communication, Lingala proves to be a more pragmatic linguistic choice.

Within Man Mamona's Rastafarian perspective, too, it is important to sing Jah's praises in Kikongo. He sings in Kikongo because 'it is the only language God placed in the world'. It is commonly believed among Kimbanguists that Nkamba, Simon Kimbangu's birth village, will be the only promised land when the rest of the world perishes (see also Mokoko Gampiot 2017: 189–90; Vähäkangas 2021: 5). According to Mamona, everybody will have to learn Kikongo because it will be 'the only visa' to enter Nkamba when Doomsday comes. In general, many Kimbanguists regret that Lingala, often portrayed as 'a killer language', is becoming more and more dominant in Nkamba, a sanctuary of Kongo spirituality.

While most traditionalists stress the importance of Kikongo when communicating with the ancestors, this point of view is not necessarily shared by all actors who engage in spiritual practices that require ancestral communication. One of them is Maître Sila, a *nganga* (Lingala and Kikongo for 'healer') whom people consult for occult solutions to matters of love, money, illness and so on. Maître Sila was born and raised in Kinshasa but learned his spiritual practice with his grandparents from Mbetenge,

⁶ Recent research shows that the Kongo Kingdom was a multilingual polity (see Bostoën and de Schryver 2018). The claim of precolonial Kongo spirituality is somewhat at odds with the fact that *Kongo dia Ntotila* was Christianized in the late fifteenth century and was therefore one of the earliest Christianized regions in Central Africa.

a village in Kongo Central notorious for its knowledge of the occult. During an interview, he explained that he always starts his ancestral invocations with the Kikongo words '*Tata zibula*' ('Father open up'). However, he always continues his ancestral requests in Lingala. Sila argued that, although communication with the ancestors in Kikongo is more powerful, it is better to speak Lingala than a badly pronounced Kikongo, as speaking a bad Kikongo might insult (*kofinga* in Lingala) the ancestors. According to this *nganga*, 'God understands all languages' and one cannot run the risk of conveying the wrong message because of mispronunciation.

In short, opinions about adequate language use and sound production vary when it comes to spiritual communication. For Pentecostals, amplified prayer and music are essential to Christianize public space in a city said to be full of evil invisible forces. For members of the many *Églises des Noirs*, this sonic occupation represents a chaotic nuisance that disturbs the acoustic registers of the ancestors. Some of them argue that Kikongo is the only effective language for spiritual communication, but their actual linguistic practices show that the use of Lingala is often more pragmatic. Nobody wants to get lost in translation in matters of spirituality. In other words, 'in the pluri- or post-ethnic social texture of the postcolonial city, a plurality of linguistic/semiotic ideologies work side by side' (Lambertz 2018: 211). In Kinshasa, a city that is said to grapple with an inflated sense of meaning due to semiotic overproduction (De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 58–61), these conflicting sound and language ideologies are profoundly enmeshed in religious competition and provide different indexical senses of communality.

Mpadist sonic and linguistic difference in Kinshasa

This hybrid mixture of sonic and linguistic ideologies is also at play within the Mpadist community. During some of the services I attended, Lulendo wore or held a microphone, which was useful to drown out the amplified sound production of the Pentecostal church across the street. Yet it also led to repeated technical issues, especially in a compound where power cuts are legion. Most of the time, his voice was unamplified. Although I never heard Lulendo or his followers complain as explicitly about Pentecostal sound production as members of other *Églises des Noirs*, I did notice that their Kikongo prayers were whispered rather than shouted. As already mentioned, Mpadists in general believe that one must appear humbly before God, and, in that sense, yelling to God would be a sonic anomaly.

Lulendo holds his weekly sermons about the life of the prophets Kimbangu and Mpadi in Lingala, which is the most efficient register for communication among Kinshasa's urbanites. Moreover, Lulendo's mastery of Kikongo is limited, as he grew up in the penal camp of Ekafera in Equateur province, where Lingala is dominant. Kikongo, however, recurs as a sonic leitmotif in Mpadist modes of worship. For example, to keep his followers awake and involved during the services (which can last several hours), Lulendo regularly repeats the adage '*Ndinga*' (Kikongo for 'voice' or 'language'). The community then answers '*TTAT*' (*Tata Ntumua a Tulendo*, Kikongo for 'Father Sent by the Force'). Such rhetorical techniques have the phatic function of checking whether communication is still flowing between the parties involved. If the community's '*TTAT*' is weak, Lulendo insists on his '*Ndinga*' by raising his voice until he is satisfied with the intensity and volume of the answers and can continue his

sermon. During Pentecostal services, a similar technique is used when pastors regularly cry out ‘*Au nom de Jésus*’ or ‘Hallelujah’, upon which the audience reacts with ‘Amen’.

Alongside these sermons, the offertory and practical communications, Mpadist ceremonies mostly consist of singing and dancing. Mpadists, like members of EJCSK, stress the historical importance of hymns in Kimbangu’s prophetic trajectory. The story goes that Reverend Jenkins of the Baptist Missionary Society mocked Kimbangu when he launched his movement in 1921 because his prophetic activities were accompanied by old Protestant songs. Following this provocation, Kimbangu retreated for prayer and spiritual inspiration, and, when he returned, he presented the first Kimbanguist hymn in Kikongo. Hymns, in other words, are an important symbol of Kimbangu’s spiritual autonomy and breach with the white Protestant missionaries who Christianized him (see also Molyneux 1990; Mokoko Gampiot 2017).

Among Mpadists, too, this confrontation between Kimbangu and Jenkins is repeatedly narrated, and songs have an important liberatory function. During services in Lulendo’s compound, the Mpadist choir is generally accompanied by percussionists and flautists, all unamplified. In these songs, the most recurring theme is the suffering of Kimbangu and Mpadi caused by the Belgian colonizer. The lyrics are often accompanied by gestures, such as the pairing of two fists to evoke the tied hands of the imprisoned prophets, or an up and down movement of the arm to evoke the flogging of the colonial whip. In general, most songs are rendered in Kikongo, and they evoke a rather serene, modest and melancholic atmosphere. A short excerpt may serve as example:

<i>Bankaka zeto, ah, basambila Nzambi</i>	Our ancestors, ah, they prayed to God
<i>Nzambi Wamba Mpungu Tulendo</i>	Almighty and uniting God
<i>Nzambi za Bafrika</i>	God of Africans
<i>Kanti beto, ah, tua vilakana yo</i>	But we, ah, we have forgotten you
<i>Nzambi za banzenza kaka</i>	The God of the strangers only
<i>Tua sambilanga</i>	We are praying to

The Kikongo songs are a way to grieve, to honour the suffering of the prophets, and to lament the moral squalor evoked by the neglect of these prophets in contemporary DRC. Not unimportantly, many of the older members of the Mpadist community experienced colonial hardship themselves as they were sent away to the penal camps for following Mpadi’s message. As such, the grieving is a very personal matter and a way of dealing with both individual and collective traumas. Younger Mpadists who grew up in Kinshasa do not necessarily speak or understand Kikongo but learned songs in this language during childhood, as melodic formulas. These songs create an acoustic difference with a soothing function, for they relate to a Kongo past through a Kikongo soundscape to generate a sense of community.

Some songs with more compelling rhythms are sung in Lingala. When I asked Rigo Ingo, the Mpadist choirmaster, about this difference in style between songs in Lingala and Kikongo, he explained that those in Lingala evoke a sense of *ngwasuma*; this is not easily translatable but comes close to ‘good atmosphere’. One of the more exclusive nightclubs in Kinshasa is called *Ngwasuma*, and *pelisa ngwasuma* (Lingala for ‘light up/turn on the good atmosphere’) is the publicity slogan of Primus, one of the main

beer brands in the DRC. *Ngwasuma* thus ties in with the cosmopolitan image of Kinshasa as a Lingalophone city where good vibes are never far off, a city that is home to *la Kinoiserie*. The songs in the ‘pragmatic’ medium of Lingala uplift the spirits and bring the Mpadist community back to the hopes and possibilities of the here and now. As the Lingala song I heard most often says: ‘*Tata Kimbangu, Tata Mpadi, Tata Lulendo, biso nyonso tokobika*’, ‘Father Kimbangu, Father Mpadi, Father Lulendo, we shall all be healed’.

A similar affective contrast between songs in Lingala and Kikongo recurs outside the Mpadist community. The Kunda Sisters, a Christian duo who often perform at funerals, told me that they start playing a Kikongo song if they notice that the audience is ‘not mourning hard enough’. Kikongo songs, they said, guarantee tears. The folkloric Kongo band Kintueni also noted that what people value most in their songs performed in Kiyombe, a Kikongo variety, is the fact that it ‘makes people feel sadness/grief’ (*eyokisa mutu mawa* in Lingala). Sylvanus (2018: 103) makes a parallel observation in his work on music choices in Nollywood films. He cites an interview with a Nollywood director who claims to make his actors grieve in Igbo because ‘when you “cry” in Igbo, people connect with you faster than when you “cry” in English’. In other words, different languages evoke different affects. The Mpadist community draws on both Lingala and Kikongo to generate different affective modes of belonging and to legitimize Lulendo’s leadership.

It is worth noting that the hybrid mixture of the indexical values of Lingala (as a ‘modern’, ‘urban’ language) and Kikongo (as an ‘ancestral’ language) employed by the Mpadists is also apparent in visual semiotic practices. Lulendo’s throne is covered in leopard skin (*nkuvu* in Kikongo), which symbolizes the authority of a ‘traditional’ Bantu chief, an aesthetic element also engaged by Mobutu (Vansina 1990: 74). He often holds a small sceptre, which he uses to amplify his gesticulations during preaching. Kimbangu, too, held a sacred rod (*mvwala/mvuala* in Kikongo), an instrument for the healing of the sick. According to Mokoko Gampiot (2017: 178) this royal attribute dates back to the time of the Kongo Kingdom and materialized the king’s charismatic and traditional position of dominance (see also Van Wing 1959: 45). On special occasions, Lulendo wears a red robe with colourful decorations that is similar to his father’s typical prophet attire. According to Jacobson-Widding (1979: 179), the colour red expresses magic power, emotional qualities, or physical force across west Central Africa. For Mpadists, too, red symbolizes the power of their leader and refers to the spilled blood of their suffering prophets and ancestors. Through these visual traits, Lulendo inscribes himself in ‘traditional’ Kongo semiotics of authority, an association that is linguistically generated by Kikongo songs and prayer.

But not all Mpadist symbolism is ‘traditionally Kongo’. On regular service days, Lulendo mostly wears a red suit, which radiates the realm of successful leadership in more capitalist, ‘modern’ norms. He often appears in public wearing a cowboy hat, which not only is reminiscent of the leadership dress code of South Sudan’s president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, but also builds on a long history of aesthetics of masculinity borrowed from American Western movies in the city of Kinshasa (see Gondola 2016). Lulendo thus compromises between grafting the image of his leadership onto an ‘ancestral’ Kongo repertoire on the one hand and, on the other, conforming to the rules of the Kinois cosmopolitan game, including the use of Lingala, to remain competitive. The Mpadist community tries to find a balance between honouring its

Kongo legacy, the source of its self-image of ‘authenticity’, and pragmatic adaptations to the Lingala-dominated city in which it operates and competes with so many other religious groups. As the last section of this article shows, this balance changes once the Mpadist community operates outside the capital.

Bringing Mpadi back to Mvuila

Lulendo not only has to compete with his cousin over Mpadist leadership. Outside Kinshasa, too, religious competitors are numerous. In August 2016, Lulendo’s Mpadist community invited me on a two-day spiritual excursion to the province of Kongo Central. The main goal of this trip was the reimplantation of their parish in Mvuila, a small village not far from Madimba, some eighty kilometres south-west of Kinshasa on the road to Matadi. For Lulendo, the trip to Mvuila was particularly important because it was here that Mpadi, often nicknamed *le patriarche* (‘the patriarch’), had allegedly denominated Lulendo as his spiritual successor in 1961. I wrote the following in my fieldwork diary:

When I arrived at the Mpadist headquarters in the municipality of Matete, I found everybody in full preparation. The members seemed excited and were loading all sorts of material (chairs, provisions, electronic devices) into vehicles. When all the material was charged, most vehicles left directly for Mvuila to prepare the ceremony that would take place the next day. I, as a part of Lulendo’s cortege, would instead spend the night in Mpadi’s mausoleum in the village of Sona Bata. Before stopping in Sona Bata, we left for the *territoire* [local government offices] of Madimba. In Madimba, one can find the mango tree onto which Mpadi was chained by the colonial regime in 1943. We honoured his suffering with a song in Kikongo – we placed our hands upon our heads – and prayed. Afterwards the local Administrator explained that there had been a problem: ‘others’ had asked to organize a spiritual gathering at the mango tree. The Administrator said he had prohibited this because these ‘others’ had not consulted the ‘spiritual responsible’ of the tree [Lulendo]. When we left the Administrator’s house, some men arrived. They were from RATESKA,⁷ the movement of the ‘others’ who had wanted to organize the manifestation at the mango tree. Lulendo explained that the leader of RATESKA was an old member of theirs who had founded his own religious movement.

I then understood that Lulendo wanted to go to Madimba to reaffirm his spiritual authority in the region. When Mpadi was still alive, his headquarters were based in the nearby village of Sona Bata. Lulendo, however, resides in Kinshasa and therefore his influence in the region has declined, giving rise to ‘dissident’ groups such as RATESKA.

During the ceremony in Mvuila, Lulendo appeared in his ‘traditional’ attire that copies his father’s prophetic dress. As in Kinshasa, he conducted his speeches in a Lingala strongly influenced by French. Mpadi, however, conducted much of his

⁷ According to Lulendo, RATESKA stands for *Religion africaine par terre de Simon Kimbangu ancestral*.

preaching in Kikongo, and Lulendo's lack of Kikongo proficiency could be interpreted by traditionalists as a decline in spiritual authenticity. Yet, drawing on his Kinois identity, Lulendo was able to compensate for this decline in several ways during the Mvuila ceremony.

As mentioned, Mpadist services in Kinshasa are characterized by serene, mostly unamplified sound production, yet they spared no trouble or expense to sonically fill the village of Mvuila and its rural 'hi-fi' environment. Lulendo's speeches and the choir's songs were amplified, reverberating widely and generating an impressive acoustic difference within the otherwise quiet village without electricity. Not only Lulendo's use of Lingala, but also the entire set-up of the Mvuila event, with sound booming through huge speakers electrified by a generator (most likely borrowed for the occasion), evoked a sense of *Kinoiserie*, of *ngwasuma*. In Kinshasa, the Mpadist community prefers to distance itself from the bombastic 'noise' of Pentecostal churches, but in Mvuila it had to employ a strategy of sonic difference to compete with its rural rivals. Hence, they mobilized a more cosmopolitan mode of power legitimation by evoking the amplified appeal of the capital through the symbolic value of loudspeakers as status symbols and 'icons of modernity' (Larkin 2014: 1010; see also Fahmy 2020: 208).

As a way to encourage spiritual loyalty in the region of Mvuila, the Mpadist delegation also brought presents with them. This gifting should be understood as a 'total social phenomenon' that ties together the giver and the receiver in a social contract (see Mauss 1925). Like the use of amplified sound and Lingala, the gifts drew on the attraction of modern cityness to convince the villagers of Lulendo's authority. The first publicly presented gift was a membership card, handed over to an old Mpadist member who had complained that such cards were distributed in Kinshasa, but that she, as a villager, had not received one. The handing over of the card was a public performance that materialized the connection with the imagined Mpadist community in Kinshasa. The goal was to establish a politics of belonging that would overrule the attraction of rival local religious movements.

The second gift was mobile phones for three village elders. Lulendo explicitly mentioned that these could facilitate contact between the capital and the village, making it easier for the villagers to get in touch with Kinshasa in case of problems. A third series of gifts was offered by Lulendo's wife Matondo and her women's non-profit organization: three mattresses, cotton, and some medical equipment for the local medical post. Matondo also gave a speech, saying that those who have must share with those who do not. The medical gifts metonymically invoked the medical infrastructure of the capital, tying in with Mbembe's observation (2000) that religious communities on the African continent intervene in the organization of state services such as healthcare, in the process profiling themselves as generous givers.

Knowing that Lulendo's community in Kinshasa is rather modest, both in terms of behaviour and capital, I was somewhat surprised to see that it had set up such a boastful event in Mvuila. It reminded me of the stories about Congolese living in European or other diasporas, often in dire circumstances, who return to Kinshasa with suitcases full of presents. They pretend to have 'made it' in the global North and contribute to the persistent idea of migration to *Lola* ('paradise' in Lingala) as a formula for personal success and wealth.

The excursion from Kinshasa to Mvuila, too, gave the impression of Lulendo's community as a wealthy one, thereby reaffirming the image of the capital as a place of prosperity in contrast to 'the village'. By going to Mvuila and distributing gifts that evoke the realm of the city but also signify connection and belonging – a membership card, a mobile phone – Lulendo affirmed his authority among the villagers, capitalizing on the reputation of Kinshasa as a place and source of cosmopolitan sophistication. At the same time, the event showcased his authority to the Kinois members who had travelled to Mvuila by proving that Mpadism is still a legitimate religion in the province where it came into existence. After all, from a Kinois perspective, 'the province' or 'the village' often represents ancestral spirituality and moral authenticity. Hence, the strategy used to promote an affective Mpadist belonging is twofold: the idealized image of 'the city' is used to attract 'the village', and vice versa.

The use of amplified sound production in a 'hi-fi' village environment drew on this same rural–urban dialectical relation by producing a form of acoustic difference that is beyond reach in Kinshasa's 'low-fi' soundscape. Given the terrible condition of the road in the last kilometres to Mvuila, transporting the generator and large speakers was no easy task; it was an explicit choice and an effort that is not made for regular Mpadist services in Kinshasa. The production of sound and its interpretation as 'disturbing' noise should hence be understood in relational rather than absolute terms. In Kinshasa, acoustic difference is generated by being 'the silent other' and by speaking and singing in Kikongo. In Mvuila, loudness and Lingala generate a sense of modern cityness that contrasts with the rural setting.

Integrating sound and language

This article has disentangled discourses and practices of sonic and linguistic difference mobilized by so-called *Églises des Noirs* to distinguish themselves from the Pentecostal, Lingalaphone soundscape that dominates Kinshasa's religious marketplace. While Lingala is the most important register for everyday communication, a symbol of cosmopolitanism and urban modernity, these traditionalist movements identify Kikongo as an 'ancestral' language. This indexical distinction dates back to colonial missionary ideologies, which represented the worldly, urban status of Lingala as clashing with ideals about so-called African authenticity and ethnic purity. This perception still resonates with contemporary language ideologies among many members of *Églises des Noirs*. The same holds true for the negative evaluation of the city as a place of loudness. Pentecostals, on the other hand, have turned this around and believe that their amplified sound production is a necessary and beneficial sonic occupation of public space by the Holy Spirit in a city dominated by invisible demonic forces. Although they generally situate the hedonic milieu of *la Kinoiserie* within this morally and spiritually reprehensible 'second world', both 'spaces of appearance' share stylistic features. In fact, they have both contributed to the fact that amplified sound production and the use of Lingala have become indexical markers of modern cityness.

It is precisely this urban acoustic appeal that was mobilized in the Mpadist excursion to Mvuila. The final section of the article testifies to the fact that *discourses about* and *practices of* sound and language are not necessarily the same, and that sonic

and linguistic evaluations should be understood in relative and not absolute terms. They can be creatively appropriated depending on shifting contexts of competition. The Mvuila excursion was inspired by a rising rivalry with newly declared local spiritual leaders. While Mpadists barely amplify their activities in Kinshasa, they put in a lot of effort to bring sound equipment to the village of Mvuila. In doing so, they generated a level of acoustic difference that was meant to impress both their followers and their opponents in a way that they could never aspire to do in Kinshasa's 'low-fi' environment.

Such differences have their roots in practical challenges, such as the lack of linguistic mastery, the need to reach a wider Lingalophone audience and the cost of amplifying technologies, but they also indicate that plural and hybrid ideologies of sound and language exist next to each other in a megapolis that is highly diverse. Even though Kinshasa has been pervasively identified as a 'loud' city, I show, in line with Lambertz (2018), that religious competition is not always fought out through a battle of superseding decibels. Generating acoustic and linguistic difference outside dominant registers can also be a way to distinguish one's community.

While most authors studying religious sonic competition have focused either on the affective role of language for community making or on 'noisy' disturbances in contexts of conflict, this article makes a compelling case to integrate linguistic indexical values and sonic volume into a single analysis, for they draw on aligned assumptions about what is understood as 'traditional rural life' in opposition to 'modern city life'. I argue that culturally informed sensibilities, rather than objectively measurable soundwaves, define people's sonic and linguistic evaluations, as also indicated in earlier work on sound production in Delhi (Chandola 2012; Patsarika *et al.* 2018). In doing so, this article invites scholars working in other contexts to rethink the relation between sound and language by generating a dialogue between the indexical values not only of linguistic registers but also of 'noise' and silence.

Acknowledgements. I obtained travel grants from both the UGhent Humanities Faculty Fund (CWO) and Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) to conduct fieldwork in Kinshasa. I thank Nick Rahier, Emelien Devos, Michael Meeuwis and the two anonymous reviewers of *Africa* for their precious feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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