File Under "Import": Musical Distortion, Exoticism, and Authenticité in Congotronics

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Abstract: The success of the Congotronics series of recordings has been described by journalists as both a "global sensation" and "a small phenomenon in Afropop marketing." According to their label's promotions, the music of "tradi-modern" Congotronics bands like Konono No 1 "draw on traditional trance music to which they've incorporated the heavily distorted sounds generated by DIY amplification . . . making their music a sonic cousin of some extreme forms of experimental rock and electronic dance music." This paper is a brief meditation on some of the representations of Konono No 1 in the media, including promotional materials, press articles, reviews, and blogs. A critical analysis suggests that various representations of Konono's music amplify and distort problematic issues of musical technology, exoticism, tradition, and authenticity. Why are detailed descriptions of Congotronics bands' electrified instruments repeated in nearly every journalistic account, which—conversely—almost never include descriptions of their previous, acoustic musical traditions? What role does technology play in the enthusiastic reception of Congotronics in Europe and North America? And what is "Bazombo trance music"?

This paper explores some of the representations of Konono No 1 in the media, including promotional materials, press articles, reviews, and blogs. A critical analysis suggests that various representations of Konono's music amplify and distort problematic issues of musical technology, exoticism, tradition, and authenticity.[1] Following the group's trajectory from relative obscurity in Kinshasa to prominence in North America and Europe, this is also a story of my own search to learn more about Konono and their music. Specifically, I discuss musical and rhetorical connections between Konono's electrified, urban sound and previous acoustic iterations of "Bazombo trance music"—a term that has been repeatedly employed to describe the origins and essence of Konono's distinctive style. Along the way, I also offer a case study of music in the early 21st century that suggests some definitions of "the proper relationship between the critical agenda and the rhetoric of those promoting global music commerce" (Stokes 2004:47).

Many music aficionados in North America and Europe have been introduced to the music of Konono No 1 by the hundreds of magazine, newspaper, and blog features on the band published during the last several years. The following brief account of the band's history by *The Guardian* correspondent Alex Petridis is characteristic of this coverage:

> The band, formed in Kinshasa in 1966, had all but ceased to exist. Scattered among villages along the Congolese-Angolan border, first by the disastrous economic mismanagement of President Mobutu Sese Soko [sic], then by the effects of civil war, every original member except Mingiedi had died. The only external evidence that a band called Konono No 1 had ever existed was a solitary 26-minute-long track recorded in 1978 by the radio station France Culture and later included on a long-forgotten French compilation of music from Kinshasa.
>
> That would presumably have been the end of Konono No 1, if it had not been for Vincent Kenis. A stern, slightly professorial figure, Kenis is a former Belgian punk musician turned record producer, who had been startled by what he heard on the 1978 France Culture broadcast—what sounded like an electronic version of the traditional trance music of the Congo's Bazombo tribe, laced with feedback and distorted almost beyond recognition. "To me it was a kind of African punk music," he says. (2006)

Formerly—and much more formally—known as L'Orchestre Folklorique Tout Puissant ("all powerful") Likembe Konono Numero Un de Mingiedi, Konono No 1 are immigrants to Kinshasa who identify themselves as Bazombo, a subgroup of the broader Bakongo ethnic group from an area along the border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola.

The front cover of Konono's 2005 album *Congotronics* displays three well-worn *likembe*—central African lamellaphones related organologically to the *sanza* and *mbira*[2]—with electrical cables flowing out behind them. Remarkably, Konono's likembe have been fitted with magnetic pickup microphones for amplification by Konono's founder, septuagenarian Mawangu Mingiedi.



Figure 1: The cover of Congotronics by Konono No 1 (2005) features photographs by the album's producer Vincent Kenis, design by Zoran Janjetov, and art direction by Hanna Gorjaczkowska.

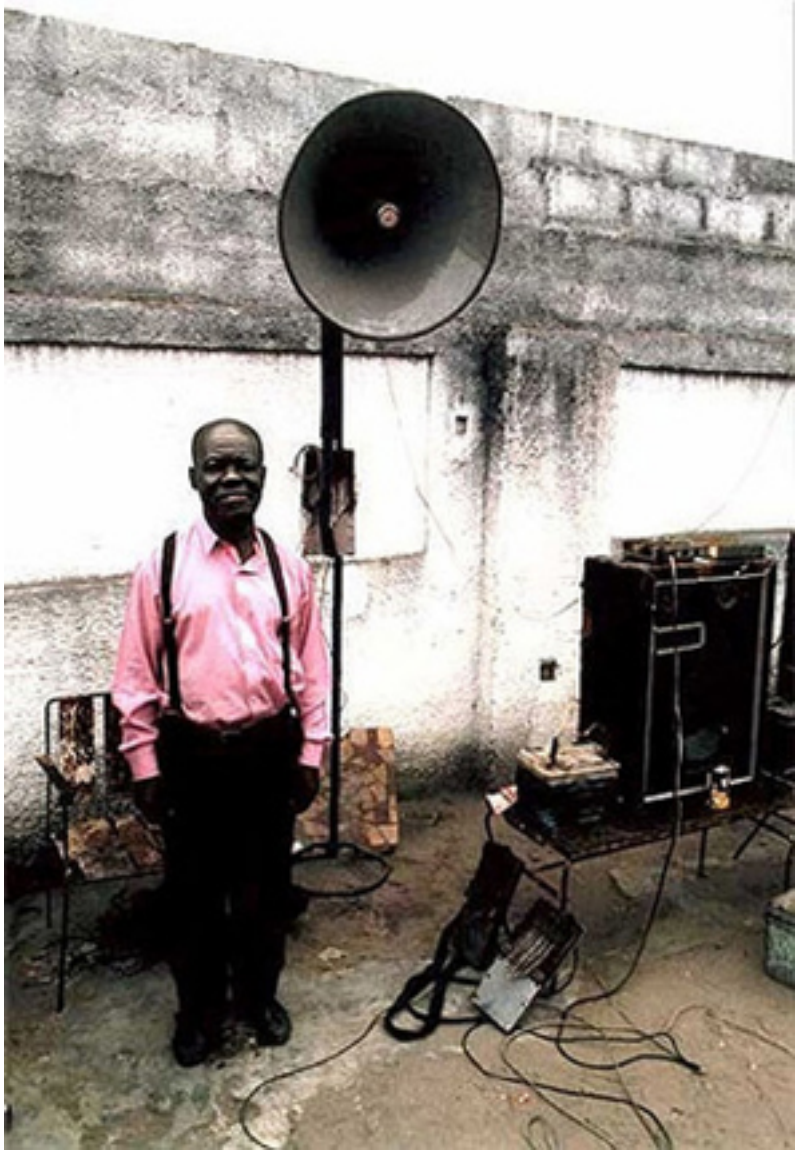

Figure 2: The back cover of Congotronics includes a photo (right) of the band's leader, Mawangu Mingiedi.

Audio 1: Excerpt of "Lufuala Ndonga" by Konono No 1 From *Congotronics* (2005).

The back of the album pictures Mingiedi standing next to an enormous *lance-voix* ("voice-thrower") loudspeaker, likembe, and other rugged looking electronics for amplification. The *lance-voix* speakers, which look and sound like enormous megaphones mounted on poles, were introduced to the Congo by the Belgian colonial government; they remained in use as public address systems throughout the 26-year regime of Mobutu, during which the country was (temporarily) renamed Zaïre. The text on the back cover of *Congotronics* explains,

> This is the first volume of Congotronics, a series devoted to the spectacular styles of Kinshasa. These are bands who draw on traditional trance music, to which they've incorporated the heavily-distorted sounds generated by DIY amplification of their instruments, making their music a sonic cousin of some extreme forms of experimental rock and electronic dance music. (2005)

Until *Congotronics*, the only international recording of Konono appeared on an album on the Ocora label. Now out of print, *Zaïre: Musiques Urbaines à Kinshasa* (1987) is a compilation featuring four bands in the "tradi-modern" style—a sound nourished by acoustic, rural, ethnic traditions and electrically amplified, urban, cosmopolitan hybrids. [3] It was a French broadcast of this recording that captivated producer Vincent Kenis and sent him to Kinshasa. Indeed, as an initial glance at the packaging of their 2005 album makes clear, Konono's image vividly projects this

"tradi-modern" aesthetic, deftly juxtaposing the dualities of village and metropolis, old and new, local and cosmopolitan.

A comparison of the recordings from 1978 and 2005 reveals that the group's sound was firmly in place for more than two decades before *Congotronics*. The liner notes to the *Musiques Urbaines* album also foreshadow the 21st-century preoccupation with Konono's handmade, low-tech system of amplification as producer Bernard Treton enthuses about an "electric guitar microphone which plays full blast! The main concern of the band being to blast out the sound as loud as possible, they play in front of a wall of six speakers only three of which contain loud speakers" (1987).

Audio 2: Excerpt of "Mungua-Muanga" by Orchestre Tout Puissant Likembé Konono No 1. From *Zaïre: Musiques Urbaines á Kinshasa* (1987).

Listeners familiar with Congolese popular music will recognize some conspicuous affinities between the music of Konono and styles falling under the broad rubric of Congolese Rumba.[4] For example, the rhythmic underpinnings of "Mungua-Muanga"—and the majority of Konono's more recent recordings—are clearly related to *clave* patterns common to Congolese, Afro-Cuban, and West African musical genres (see Figure 2).[5] Somewhat hyperbolically, *Dusted* reviewer Andy Freivogel writes:

> The sharp rattle of the hand-tooled snare drum permeates throughout, relentlessly and flawlessly maintaining the semi-ancient rhythmic cornerstone of *clavé*. Absent the improvised electronics, *Congotronics* could still fascinate as a tight, 50-minute argument on the sizable contribution the Kongo people made to *rumba*, often obfuscated by its mad popularity as a Cuban export. This is the *Afro* in Afro-Cuban, as well as Afro-Brazillian [sic], and maybe Afro-everything. (2005)

For the moment, it is worth emphasizing that Freivogel's comments frame Konono's music as an archetypal expression of Congolese musical forms and aesthetics in a historicized, transatlantic context. It is significant that Freivogel places the band's "improvised electronics" at the margins of his analysis, an approach that I will return to shortly.

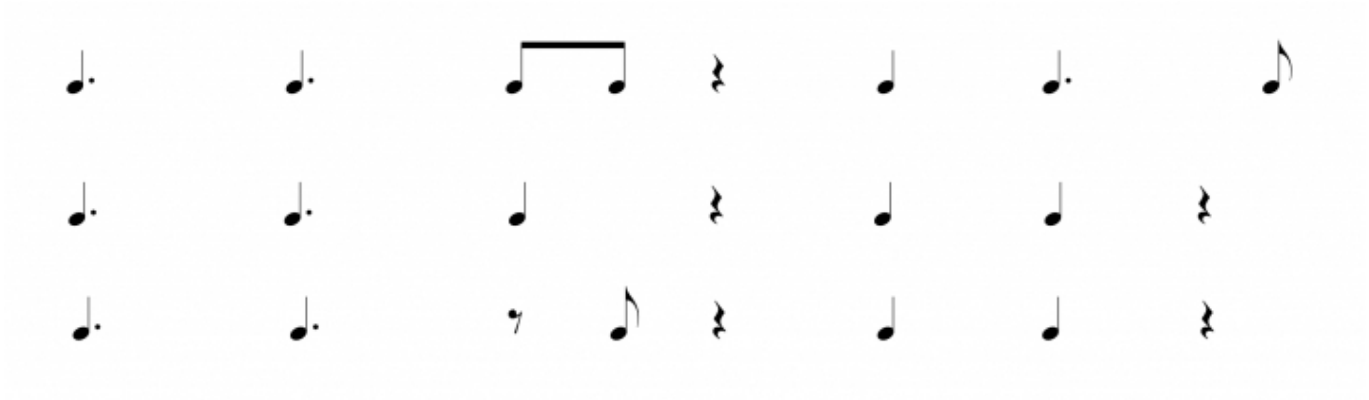

Figure 3: Related *clave* patterns common to various Congolese, Afro-Cuban, and West African musical genres.

In "Congolese Rumba and Other Cosmopolitanisms," Bob White describes Congolese Rumba in terms of a "mind-bending genealogical tale of successive musical waves back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean" (2002:666). Examining the central role of Kinshasa (formerly Leopoldville) in the history of Congolese popular music, White places his focus on the influence and impact of Afro-Cuban music in the development of Congolese Rumba. However, White's central argument relates directly to my discussion of Konono, and it has far broader implications. He writes:

> Afro-Cuban music became popular in the Congo not only because it retained formal elements of "traditional" African musical performance, but also because it stood for a form of urban cosmopolitanism that was more accessible—and ultimately more pleasurable—than the various models of European cosmopolitanism which circulated in the Belgian colonies in Africa. (ibid.:663)

White argues that Congolese popular music presents a “rooted cosmopolitanism” that is explicitly tied to a specific place yet connected to a much wider, transatlantic network of cultural flows.

From a philosopher’s vantage point, Kwame Anthony Appiah reflects on the history and meanings of the word “cosmopolitan”:

> Cosmopolitanism dates at least to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, who first coined the expression cosmopolitan, “citizen of the cosmos.” The formulation was meant to be paradoxical, and reflected the general Cynic skepticism toward custom and tradition. A citizen—a *politès*—belonged to a particular *polis*, a city to which he or she owed loyalty. The cosmos referred to the world, not in the sense of the earth, but in the sense of the universe. Talk of cosmopolitanism originally signaled, then, a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities. (2006:xiii–xiv)6

In the context of Konono’s music, Appiah’s return to the etymological and historical roots of cosmopolitanism serves as a reminder that the band’s international prominence involves the simultaneous association and dissociation between people, places, ethnicities, and nationalities: Konono obviously makes music that is explicitly Congolese, but its appeal extends far beyond its cultural and geographical origins. As I discuss below, the relationships between Konono’s “rooted cosmopolitanism,” ethnicity, and national identity are subtle and often paradoxical.

The international success of the Congotronics recordings has been described by journalists as both “a global sensation” (Petridis 2006) and “a small phenomenon” (Eyre 2006). As the flagship band in the Congotronics series, Konono has reached an extraordinary level of notoriety in Europe and North America. In 2007, they were featured in the three-day Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California, which drew an audience of more than 120,000 music fans. In 2007, Konono was enlisted by the iconoclastic Icelandic singer Björk to contribute likembe parts for her album *Volta*. The video for Björk’s single featuring Konono, “Earth Intruders,” depicts animated, headdress-clad silhouettes marching with shields, spears, and guns—a pre- and post-modern symbolism that has characterized one aspect of Konono’s media image. Björk’s lyrics in “Earth Intruders” include a sharp-edged commentary on the concept of cosmopolitans as “citizen of the cosmos”:

> I have guided my bones through some voltage
> and loved them still
> and loved them too
>
> metallic carnage
> furiousity
> feel the speed
>
> we are the earth intruders
> we are the sharp shooters
> flock of parashooters
> necessary voodoo. (2007)



Konono's popularity has not diminished since the release of *Congotronics*: they have not, as one might have expected, receded back into obscurity after enjoying success as a passing fad or "flavor of the month." Rather, they have continued to record and release recordings on Crammed Discs, and they continue to tour extensively in Europe and North America. Perhaps more significantly, they continue garnering substantial attention from journalists and critics.

Konono's sound is characterized by analog distortion generated by the pickups and amplification used to amplify their likembe and voices. The technology that Mingiedi developed to amplify the likembe—both technically resourceful and aesthetically striking—is continually in the foreground of descriptions of the band, and Konono's "lo-fi" (low fidelity) sound goes hand-in-hand with their public image as musical ambassadors of a raw, resilient, and somewhat-skewed African modernity. The electric likembe amplified with recycled magnets from old cars, the rustic post-colonial *lance-voix* speakers, and the resultant sonic distortion have all been presented as essential elements of the group's distinctive appeal. On National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, Tom Moon offered the following testament to the cross-cultural power of Konono's distortion: "When the three likembe players lock into the same phrase together, it's like heavy metal guitars cranked to eleven" (2005).[7]

In an early concert review for *PopMatters*, a website that bills itself as "an international magazine of cultural criticism," Andrew Phillips wondered how Konono would be received without the distortion of their likembe:

> One problem: as I walk into SOB's, ready to see one of the band's first stateside performances, their handmade amps are missing. On each side of the stage there's a large bullhorn speaker, the type that you'd expect to emit an air-raid siren. But these are just for show; they're not even plugged in. I later find out that the band broke one of its original amplifiers on the plane ride and the other shorted out the evening before this performance. The group has been forced to trade in the allure of rickety, jerry-rigged equipment in [sic] for reliable, run-of-the-mill amps.
>
> Uh oh. Sure, we'll shell out a few bucks to see an out-there African band, but will this sniveling crowd of indie wonks make it through an evening of unadorned tribal music? I know I will, but I'm not so sure about the guy in the black horn-rims . . . With no uber-hip distortion to dress up the music, all that remains are the modest men behind the curtain. Will that be enough? (2005)

Of course, it was enough. Philips continues,

> Missing are the crackly tones that brought the band its acclaim. Of course, that's not a bad thing. With the jarring edge lifted, the band's steady conga drumming and mesmerizing thumb-pianos lull the listener. After awhile you begin to drift off, captured by the steady pulse of the music. This is, of course the point of traditional Bazombo trance, the form from which the band draws its inspiration . . . Ten or so minutes into their first song I begin to float, barely noticing as my hips sway in time (ibid.)

Critically minded readers might squirm in awkward discomfort at some of Phillips' language and imagery ("sniveling indie wonks," "unadorned tribal music," "uber-hip distortion," and "conga drums") and the earnest, reflexive turn as his hips gradually loosen and begin to move. However, the review focuses our attention on two distinct, yet related, sorts of fetishism—fixations—that are consistently woven together in media descriptions of Konono: 1) the "tribal" origins of the group and their music, and 2) the group's musical technology.

In the context of the band's emergence within a variety of loosely related music industry genres (Dance/Electronica, Avant Garde, World, and Rock), the novelty and narrative richness of Mingiedi's innovations certainly help to account for the detailed descriptions of the band's electrified instruments repeated in nearly every feature on Konono. Clearly, the band's success owes a great deal to the cumulative impact of their distinctive technology, sound, and "back-story." Through *Congotronics*, many European and North American music aficionados discovered a band whose dance-friendly style is played on instruments that are not only exotic, but also constructed and re-invented through the technological ingenuity of the musicians.

A somewhat more latent fixation with the group lies embedded in the "tribal" and "trance" designations that are ubiquitous in descriptions of Konono's music and suggest a notion of supernatural, traditionalist African beliefs. I would therefore like to underscore one phrase in particular, which I will return to shortly: "Bazombo trance music." In the meantime, a brief clip of Konono—recorded live at a performance in Philadelphia the night after the New York concert reviewed by Phillips (ibid.)—documents the band relatively light on distortion and at an unusually mellow tempo.[8]

Audio 3: Excerpt of Konono No 1 in concert at World Café Live.

Distortion—defined most broadly as a lack of fidelity in reception or reproduction—can be understood as both an essential component of Konono's sound and a metaphor for their appeal. In other words, there seems to be a fairly direct correlation between the radical alteration of amplitude and timbre in Konono's sound and their public image. The overtones and previously latent harmonics emphasized by the custom-made magnetic pickups and audio distortion suggest shifts in sonic emphasis, as well as new colors and textures. To stretch the metaphor even further, the definition of optical distortion is even more provocative when applied to Konono: "an aberration in which the magnification of the object varies with the lateral distance from the axis of the lens."[9] This metaphor suggests that an audience's distance from the musicians' geographic or cultural location determines the degree and type of distortion. Konono's exoticism within North American and European media—that is, the emphasis on Konono's difference, their "Other-ness," or simply their novelty in the World Music marketplace—can be understood to be a type of distortion. For example, in one of the earliest articles drumming up enthusiasm for Konono in the United States, Andy Pemberton of the *New York Times* wrote that "the band plays curious instruments that resemble children's toys" (2005). More recently, Nick Richardson of *The Wire* attributes part of Konono's success to "the global audience's thirst for exoticism" (2010:36).

However, Konono's jerry-rigged amplification and resultant distortion also invoke a type of familiarity: according to Kenis, Konono makes "a kind of African punk music" (quoted in Petridis 2006) and "a sonic cousin of some extreme forms of experimental rock and electronic dance music" (in the liner notes to *Congotronics*, 2005). Meanwhile, the electronic distortion of Konono's likembe can also be understood as an expression of much broader, pan-African aesthetic sensibilities that favor sympathetic sounds and complex timbres—a notion that is intriguing and worthwhile, but remains outside the scope of the present article.[10]



Figure 5: The cover of the April, 2010 issue of The Wire featuring Mingiedi. Photo by Pieter Hugo.

Standing both outside and at the very center of this discourse, Konono's founder Mingiedi asserts, "I play authentic music, traditional music and I don't borrow from anyone. My music lives independently from current trends" (quoted in Petridis 2006). In Mingiedi's statement, we run head first into a powerful, nearly all-encompassing source of distortion: the notions of authenticity and tradition. His words provide both a radical refutation and a pitch-perfect echo of a paradox articulated by a Yorùbá Jùjú musician in Waterman's *Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music*: "You know, our Yoruba tradition is a very modern tradition" (quoted in Waterman 1990a:2 and 1990b). Konono—like so many other musicians and artists whose work crosses and straddles national and cultural lines of demarcation—demands a nuanced, layered approach that exceeds the limitations of most conventional notions of cosmopolitanism, tradition, modernity, and authenticity.

In the English language, twice removed from Mingiedi's original statement in Lingala, "authenticity" and "tradition" have repeatedly been dissected and deconstructed by music scholars.11 Nonetheless, within discourses among music journalists and their readers, as well as among World Music producers and consumers, the thorny concept of authenticity continues to exhibit a bewildering variety and exert considerable force. Konono provide an example of how this discourse about "authentic" world music can play out in the press and the marketplace. I would argue that authenticity, in the English language and as applied to Konono in popular media, most often works as a euphemism for ethnicity. Despite the emphasis on the technological and urban context of Konono's music, it is the

rustic and ethnic aspects of their image that preclude any potential assault on the authenticity of their music.

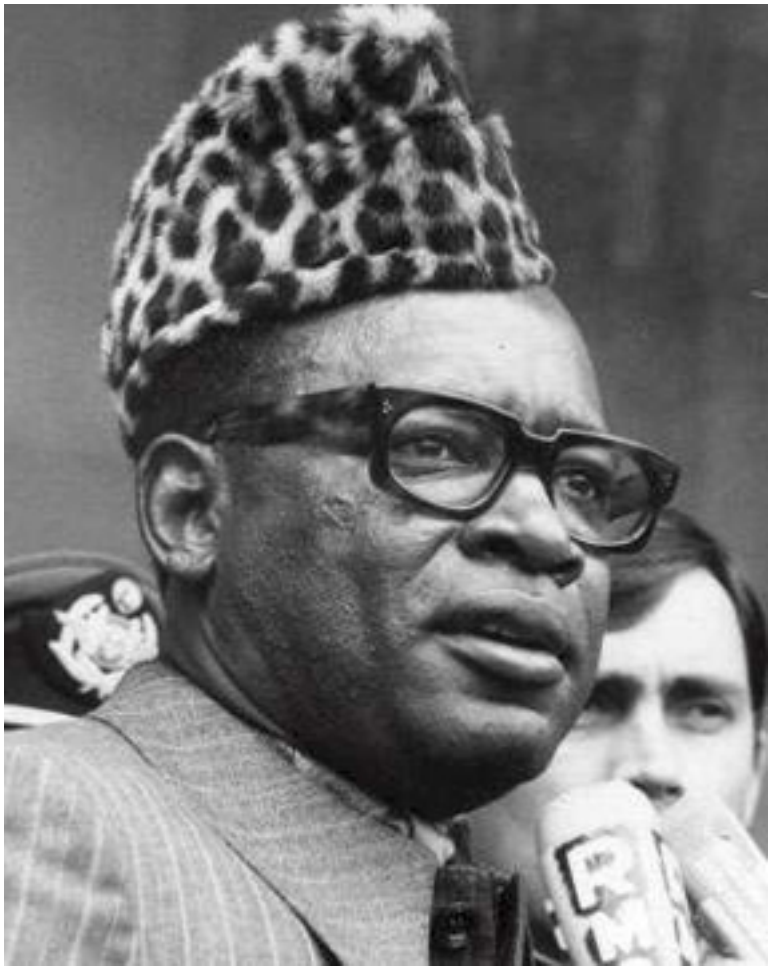

Figure 6: Mobutu Sese Seko.

In the case of Konono, however, the issue of authenticity is even more complex. The Mobutu regime's *authenticité* policy—which went along with changing the name of the large, recently independent, and profoundly multi-cultural nation of the Congo to Zaïre—was intended to cultivate a Congolese national identity and foster support for the government by appealing to authentic African values.12 There is an inherent irony in the term, since *authenticité* mapped a host of diverse African experiences onto a French word. In contrast to authenticity as a euphemism for ethnicity or even class, Mobutu's *authenticité* served as a euphemism for his own brand of nationalism. Kenneth Adelman writes:

> One cannot find in the "ancestral philosophy" any notion of solidarity "between all the citizens of the nation" since there was no "nation" then. This leads to a major conceptual problem since the cultural past is tribal or ethnic, while the Government hopes to instill national unity through authenticity. An ingenious solution to this contradiction was found in *animation*. . . . Basically this involves changing the words of traditional songs and chants so as to praise the President and the national party, rather than the founding ancestors or the goodness of life. Hence on 24 November 1973, for the grand celebration of the President's eighth year in power, each of the nine regions of Zaire was given one hour to perform its own traditional dances and songs with the new words added. (1975:135)

While scholars Kazadi wa Mukuna (1992, 1999, and 2005) and Bob White (2002 and 2008) have written valuable analyses of popular music in Zaïre during Mobutu's *authenticité* policy, Konono's producer Vincent Kenis offers the following:

> That was a very good time for tradi-modern music because . . . Mobutu used to give plenty of money to musicians because he wanted music to be a vector of his propaganda, his Pan Africanist, nationalist

> discourse. In the seventies, there was this *authenticité* campaign, which basically said we don't need to listen to other cultures. We're the strongest. We're the best. Women are not allowed to wear pants any more. And people had to change their names to authentic names, whatever that means. (quoted in Eyre 2006)

And so I would like to return to the phrase that has been ubiquitous in discussions of Konono: "Bazombo trance music."

As I became more familiar with Konono's story (and increasingly enamored of their music), I wondered: Why do vivid descriptions of Konono's instruments almost always lack any sort of complementary description of their previous, acoustic musical tradition? This observation is what compelled me to seek recordings—any recordings—of "Bazombo trance music." In a wry commentary on the prevalence of this catch-phrase in media coverage of Konono, Mike Powell of *Stylus* writes, "I realized that no amount of Googling would give me any insight into what in the fuck people were talking about" (2005).13 Like notions of authenticity, the phrase pointed to a tantalizingly empty, abstract media context for the music.

A survey of hundreds of articles, reviews, and blog entries on Konono reveals innumerable instances of the phrase "Bazombo trance music." In a randomly selected sample of twelve articles and blog entries about Konono that I collected in 2006, this exact phrase appeared in eleven out of twelve articles. Regarding a tokenism he believes is embedded in the phrase, "Bazombo trance music," Powell writes, "The crux of discontinuity is that it leads to ignorance. . . . Discontinuity in the realm of taste seems questionable enough, but it's when you float into the unsettling area of *factual* discontinuity that tokenism gets really ugly" (ibid.). He implores us to "take a token not as a resting place, but as a simple beginning . . . There's no shame in needing a place to start as long as you keep moving. Someday, you might even find a new favorite Bazombo trance band" (ibid.). The literal challenge in Powell's observations is to establish a musical context for Konono that establishes continuity—a basis for comparison between "traditional Bazombo trance music" and Konono's "tradi-modern" style.

The initial element in the phrase "Bazombo trance music" is also its most obscure: Bazombo refers to various communities located in the Bas Congo region near the border dividing Angola and the DRC. Significantly, the term is most often used to describe communities whose ethnic identities are intimately associated with contested national boundaries: put most simply, the Bazombo are members of the much larger Bakongo group whose communities lie at the boundaries between the Angola and the DRC. As will become clear, the subtle connection between the Bazombo and Bakongo ethnonyms offers an opportunity to connect the "Bazombo" music of Konono to research and recordings of Bakongo music.

What do we make of the word "trance" embedded between the middle of the phrase "Bazombo trance music"? Between the ethnic marker "Bazombo" and the noun "music," the word "trance" invokes a variety of images and cultural phenomena, including ritual and a mystical, hypnotic effect. Notably, the word "trance" is used to designate an entire genre of electronic music. In journalistic accounts of Konono, the suggestive, but rather empty use of the word "trance" works as an imaginative trope: like the even more loaded but widespread use of the word "tribal" as a vague stylistic adjective, "trance" is used primarily as a vague rhetorical bridge between Konono's music and its European and North American fans—albeit one that may lie uncomfortably close to pejorative rhetorical devices like "primitive."14

One of the most problematic aspects of the various representations of Konono's music is also one of the simplest: lyrics. More specifically, descriptions of lyrics—much less transcriptions or translations—are notably absent from Crammed Discs' publishing and promotion of Konono. In fact, journalists who have mentioned the band's lyrics occasionally emphasize a disconnect between the musicians and their audiences; the songs, regardless of their delivery, remain devoid of meaning for fans not fluent in Kikongo, Lingala, or even French. For example, Phillips notes only the "staccato, monotone lyrics (which no one in the crowd can hope to understand)" (2005). I have found only one translation of the group's lyrics into English, included in Richardson's recent profile in *The Wire*. The words to the chorus of "Lufuala Ndonga"—arguably Konono's best-known song—are given as follows:

> Why are you sleeping? Wake up. You look as though you're frightened ['konono']. Don't worry about yourself. Whether you're crazy or smart, whatever kind of mind you have, your family needs you. (2010)

Even the meaning of the group's name has been shrouded in obscurity. One especially loose translation by Petridis—"assume crash position"—was the title of his article in *The Guardian*, and it appears to have inspired the title of the group's most recent album. Richardson quotes Mingiedi as saying,

> Konono comes from a Kikongo word, *kukonana.* . . . It's the state of becoming sad, or stiff, when it's cold and you have no coat and you shiver, that's *kukonana*. . . . "Lufuala Ndonga" came out in the 80s. Everyone loved it. People took its refrain, which uses the word Konono, and instead of calling the group Mingiedi's Group they started to call them "the group that sing 'Konono.'" (2010:38)

However, in Banning Eyre's *Afropop* article "The Congotronics Story," we learn from Kenis that the word konono is synonymous with rigor mortis. Konono is

> this stiffness of the body, and it's a way to tell people to be gentle to their neighbors, because otherwise when they die, nobody will be there to massage them. Because when somebody dies, they massage his body so they get stiff as late as possible. So if you're not very good to your neighbors, none of them will massage you when you die, and you will be stiff immediately. Konono means stiff. All of these tradi-modern groups are necessarily connected with death, because their primary function is to play for the dead, or for the people who just died, or for the ancestors. They are the link with the dead, especially in the city where all these things don't matter so much anymore, because all these people lose touch with their roots. They're pretty much like community groups. (2006)

And so we finally turn—with a closer focus—to Konono's musical traditions, their ancestors, and their community.

In published quotations from Mingiedi and Kenis, we learn that Konono's urban, "tradi-modern" music is based on a more rural, acoustic genre of music known as *masikulu*.[15] Not coincidentally, "Masikulu" is the title of one of Konono's tracks on *Congotronics* (2005). As Mingiedi tells us,

> That's what we call *masikulu*. It's a style of music. It used to be played with drums and a trumpet made out of an elephant's task [sic]. I took that sound and modified it by using the *likembe*, the thumb piano, likembe. It was made out of bamboo back then. But I also used to play a lot with electronics, radios and whatnot. Then one day I [sic] just hit me. I decided to convert the bamboo to metal so I could make a better sound from the likembe. We still play for our ancestors and everyone who has departed. They are here all the time. Although I have changed from the bamboo to the metal and the electronics, I'm still communicating with my ancestors all the time, even here in America. (quoted in Eyre 2006)

Kenis adds,

> One thing that would excite me very much is to see Konono back in their village, back in contact with the music where it comes from. The thumb piano of Mingiedi is actually a traditional horn orchestra in reduction, where every prong is like a musician playing, blowing on a trumpet, which has only one sound. So you turn hocketing polyphony into a little box with all the musicians who are family related, and I'm sure you can say a lot of things about the way the notes are related to each other in terms of family relations. The tonic, to the fourth, to the fifth. You could say this is the mother and father and son. . . . It's very deep, and it's very integrated into what they play. And now they have turned it into an electric, amplified box. Now it turns into big concerts in Europe. And when this tradition which has been modified and modified, comes back to the place where they still play the horns, I want to be there. (ibid.)

Mingiedi's use of the term *masikulu* to describe a traditional musical genre offers a crucial signpost leading to foundational, acoustic sources of Konono's music. Eventually, this led me to two relatively obscure recordings of masikulu. The first of these recordings was made in 1966 by Charles Duvelle, the founder of the Ocora label, and released on an LP entitled *Congo: Musique Kongo: Ba Bembé, Ba-Congo, Ba-Congo-Nséké, Ba-Lari* (1967). The

second, more recent release consists of recordings made by Benoit Querson in 1974 and published in 2006 by the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, on the CD *Anthologie de la musique congolaise (RDC). Vol. 7. Musique des Kongo-Mbata*.16

To the best of my knowledge, these are the only two recordings of masikulu released internationally. In both instances, the quality of the recordings, liner notes, and photographs are exceptionally high. But, oddly, neither of these recordings has been mentioned in any of the literature I have read on Konono. This is especially surprising considering that the first masikulu recording appears on the same label as Konono's first recording (Ocora), and that the recordings released in 2006 were made by the late Benoit Quersin, a mentor and friend of Konono's producer Vincent Kenis (Eyre 2006).

In Bas Congo communities where the members of Konono originate, masikulu is played to honor royalty and the dead. Although the name of the genre comes from the lead drum in the ensemble (*sikulu*), the instrumental melodies of masikulu are not played on likembe at all, but rather on horns made from ivory and wood. While the horns are referred to generically as *mpungi*, horns of various sizes and pitches each have their own names—*vounda*, *landi*, *sasa*, *tangi*, and *zenze*. Duvelle's liner notes include the following:

> This orchestra would seem to be unique in this part of the Congo. The chief of the Mandombe region obtained these instruments in about 1860 from the Ba-Congo people of Angola. In theory the "massikoulou" orchestra is heard when an eminent person has died. Nowadays it can be heard on other occasions, mainly during festivals or the visit of a notable person. (1967)

In this light, the influence of masikulu on Konono's likembe ensemble seems just as noteworthy as their electrification of likembe, and the recordings of masikulu reveal fascinating differences and similarities between its "traditional" and "tradi-modern" renditions.

Audio 4: Excerpt of "Orchestre de 'massikoulou' Ba-Congo" from *Congo: Musique Kongo: Ba Bembé, Ba-Congo, Ba-Congo-Nséké, Ba-Lari* (1967).

On the opening track of Konono's most recent album, *Assume Crash Position* (2010), a synthesizer briefly mimics the sound of the mpungi horns. Bill Meyer at *Dusted* notes, "The record starts off a bit scary, with a squelchy synth poking its damp nose out of the mix within the first 11 seconds of opener 'Wumbanzanga.' But after a few stabs, it disappears and stays that way" (2010). In this case, the song's thoroughly mediated musical reference to the village—an elliptical statement of continuity between "traditional" masikulu and Konono's "tradi-modern" sound—appears to have been lost in translation.

Audio 5: Excerpt of "Wumbanzanga" by Konono No 1. From *Assume Crash Position* (2010).



Figure 7: "Trompes et timbales de Mandonmbé" (Horns and drums from Mandombé). Bakongo masikulu musicians. Photo by Charles Duvelle from the liner notes to Congo: Musique Kongo: Ba Bembé, Ba-Congo, Ba-Congo-Nséké, Ba-Lari (1967). September 5, 1966.



Figure 8: Masikulu drums. Photo by Benoit Quersin from the liner notes of Anthologie de la musique congolaise (RDC). Vol. 7. Musique des Kongo-Mbata (2006). 1974.



Figure 9: Mpungi horns in masikulu ensemble. Photo by Benoit Quersin from the cover of *Anthologie de la Musique Congolaise (RDC).* Vol. 7. Musique des Kongo-Mbata (2006). 1974.

There are elements in Konono's representation and dissemination in the global marketplace that follow well-worn—and sometimes disturbing—paths of production, consumption, and representation. The ghosts of tyrants in the Congo—namely, King Leopold II of Belgium and Mobutu Sese Seko—and centuries of war and tragedy certainly hover in the background as sinister, phantasmagoric images that insist on a colonial and post-colonial frame for the Congotronics phenomenon.17 Although such an analysis lies outside the narrow scope of this paper, Congotronics certainly provides instances of "reinscription in new media and its discursive apparatus of colonial conceptions of otherness and difference" (Stokes 2004:48).18 At a less profound level, it seems safe to say that Konono offers European and North American critics and fans a fortuitous juxtaposition of familiar and exotic elements in near-ideal proportions. Mingiedi's adaptations of masikulu horn patterns to likembe are not, for example, fundamentally different from Thomas Mapfumo's adaptations of *mbira dza vadzimu* patterns to electric guitar.19 However, Konono's likembe-driven music certainly stands apart, if for nothing else, by virtue of its instrumentation.

Despite the ingenuity and novelty of Konono's musical technology (Mingiedi's electrified, distorted likembe), tension between the band's "traditional" and "modern" elements is largely superficial, functioning as a type of noise that threatens to obscure the processes of musical change and creativity out of which Konono's style grew, as well as the particular local and national histories of urbanization and modernization in which the band is located.20 Even some of the most obvious, straightforward questions regarding the history and cultural context for Konono's music presented some gaping lacunae: for example, an attempt to clarify the meaning of the ubiquitous catch-phrase "Bazombo trance music" reveals a vacant disconnect between rhetoric and substance.

Among ethnomusicologists, a fine line is implicitly drawn between commerce and exploitation; the ethical differences between these distinctions are often difficult to agree upon, yet they tend to polarize opinions. Likewise, the amount and type of context necessary to distinguish schizophonia21 or musical tourism from ethically sound dissemination of exotic music is a subtle, nuanced proposition. Ethnomusicologists' attention to these complex issues is also colored by an apparently prevalent aesthetic predisposition that favors acoustic, non-commercial music over modern, electric, and commercial music. Put another way, it seems clear that—their compelling arguments regarding ethical and political issues aside—Meintjes (1990) and Feld (1994) probably prefer listening to Ladysmith Black Mambazo without Paul Simon, and that Zemp (1996) would not mind if Deep Forest had never existed at all. In the case of Konono, however, it is noteworthy that a gap between its electrified, European-mediated antecedents remained obscure years after the band had achieved international prominence: six years later, it appears that this article is the first English-language effort to fill in some conspicuous gaps left by Konono's characterization as "Bazombo trance music."

My efforts to learn more about Konono and the other groups featured in the Congotronics series have served as a powerful reminder of the value of *Afropop* and similar media in disseminating accurate information about lesser-known music: a handful of exceptionally well-researched articles provided indirect references to a connection between Bazombo and Bakongo ethnic distinctions, then—by extension—to the masikulu tradition. Contributions like those by Banning Eyre at *Afropop*, Nick Richardson at *The Wire*, and Mike Powell at *Stylus* offer fans of Konono many of the same indispensible qualities as academic music scholarship: accurate and detailed information, a depth of context, and critical insight. During hours of library- and Internet-based research, I began to feel like I was exploring a dimly lit corner of the musical world. As Kazadi wa Mukuna eventually said to me during a conversation about Konono, "The Bazombo are not from the moon!" (p.c. 2007). And he was absolutely correct. But I will confess to thinking, at the time, that at least I could use binoculars to see the moon's surface. The urban sprawl of Kinshasa and the rural Bas Congo region at the border between the DRC and Angola seemed, in some ways, even farther away, and harder to see.

In the era of the Long Tail, characterized in music publishing by increased profitability and diversity for niche products, as well as a decrease in the monolithic market share held by multinational producers and distributors, I suspect that Konono's story will soon seem less unusual.22 Since the first *Congotronics* album by Konono, Kenis's work at Crammed Discs has continued to expand, including notable releases by Kasai All-Stars (2008) and Staff Benda Bilili (2009), as well as a more rural variation on the Congotronics theme called *The Karindula Sessions: Tradi-Modern Sounds from Southeast Congo* (2011).23 Among several examples, the recent popularity of the Malian group Tinariwen (2007 and 2009) suggests that they share a great many fans in common with Konono, and their representation in the North American and western European media also resonates with that of Konono. Local, electronically mediated music will surely continue to make its mark on an increasingly diverse, complex, and global marketplace. As exotic, electrified music—the sounds of "rooted cosmopolitanism" (White 2008)—continues to make its mark on listeners in Europe and North America with increasing frequency and force, the 21st century seems likely to transform the story of Konono's transnational success from an extraordinary anomaly into a useful model for understanding some of the future forms and dynamics in the global dissemination of music.

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- 1. Some notable examples of ethnomusicologists’ engagement with these issues in the context of World Music industry include Feld 1994 and 2000, Guilbault 1997 and 2006, Meintjes 1990, Taylor 1997, 2001, and 2007, Théberge 2002, and Zemp 1996. For a review, see Stokes 2004.
- 2. See Kubik 1999 for a detailed discussion of African and African-American lamellaphones, including likembe. See Tracey 1970 and Berliner 1993 [1978] for seminal discussions of mbira.
- 3. The term tradi-modern (usually spelled “tradi-moderne” in French) appears to have been used in the Congo since the 1970s, but it has recently become much more prominent through the Congotronics recordings.
- 4. See Bemba 1984, Mukuna 1992, 1999, and 2005, Stewart 2000, and White 2002 and 2008.
- 5. Clave is a Spanish word with numerous, related meanings. Literally, clave means key, code, or keystone.

In music, however, it refers variously to a pair of wood sticks used as a musical instrument, fundamental rhythmic patterns, and the structural basis of music based on these patterns. For a valuable recent study of clave, see Peñalosa 2009.

- 6. Notably, Appiah also cautions that “there can be an easy and spurious utopianism of ‘mixture,’ as there is of ‘purity’” (2006:112).
- 7. Moon is referencing the music “mockumentary” This is Spinal Tap (1998 [1984]).
- 8. Recorded November 18, 2005 at World Café Live and broadcast by WXPN radio.
- 9. “Distortion.” Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. Accessed July 6, 2006. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/distortion.
- 10. Examples include the parallel, metallic sounds of bells along the rims of bàtá drums in Nigeria and Cuba (Marcuzzi 2006, Klein 2007, and Villepastour 2010), rattles worn on the wrists of bugarabu (Font-Navarrete 2011) and tantango (Knight 1974) drummers in the Senegambia, and—most obviously—the buzz of metal rings, bottle caps, and other materials attached to other African lamellaphones such as mbira dza vadzimu (Berliner 1993 [1978]).
- 11. For a recent and unusually elegant synthesis of these issues, see Schippers 2006.
- 12. Another, similar authenticité policy was pursued simultaneously by Sékou Touré in the Republic of Guinea. cf. Authenticité: The Syliphone Years (2007).
- 13. In a noteworthy instance of Information Age feedback and redundancy, a more recent Google search for the term “Bazombo” returned Powell’s article as the first of 17,700 results.
- 14. From a Euro-American scholar’s perspective, Judith Becker’s seminal study of music and trance summarizes the matter in stark terms: “The history of trance in our civilization is the history of a perversion” (2004:13).
- 15. Also spelled massikoulou, masikoulou, etc.
- 16. See http://www.africamuseum.be/research/publications/rmca/music/kongo-mbata/.
- 17. See the Bolia We Ndenge video in Congotronics 2, in which the group reenacts the introduction of the accordion to the Congolese by way of the Belgian Force Publique.
- 18. cf. Twain 1970 [1904], Hochschild 1998, and Thierry 1999.
- 19. Among many other examples, see the recent re-issue of Mapfumo’s first two albums, Hokoyo! and Gwindingwi Rine Shumba (2009 [1978/1980]).
- 20. In an otherwise glowing review of the latest Congotronics release, The Karindula Sessions: Tradi-Modern Sounds from Southeast Congo (2011), Richard Miller takes exception to the use of the term “tradi-modern”: What exactly this neologism is supposed to mean is unclear, but none of the possibilities are particularly palatable. The idea that the traditional is not modern, that modernity is not itself a tradition, that this set of amazing performances is somehow unusual in its interplay of these two supposedly opposed practices—these ideas detract from the musicians and their community. Yes, Kenis has done all of us outside Lubumbashi a great favor by bringing us these marvelous performances, but in his drive to marry Europe and Africa, his breathless celebration of hybridity sometimes pushes Africa back into the arms of primitivists. This clearly is not his intention, but when one constantly remarks on the modern-ness of African music, it is hard not to read as a subtext the notion that this modern-ness is somehow remarkable given its location” (2011).
- 21. Schizophonia is a term introduced by R. Murray Schafer to describe dissociation between the source of a sound and its reproduction. See Schafer 1993.
- 22. See Anderson 2004 and 2006, as well as http://www.thelongtail.com.
- 23. See http://www.crammed.be/index.php?id=37&rel_id=366.
- 24. “Local music fans still talk about a summer 2006 show Konono No 1 played at the Black Cat, where the club's air conditioner conked out mid-set. The band played on, but the hot July air and the group's fiery performance made for a physically intense concert experience” (Rickman 2010).

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