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Trends in modern and contemporary performance practice in the Central African Republic (CAR) have been eclipsed by those emanating from neighboring Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the West, the music of the CAR has mainly been understood through scholarly representations of traditional music of many ethnic groups that fall within the boundaries of this former French colony. Chief among these is the work of Simha Arom, whose analysis and recordings of the horn ensembles of the Banda Linda and various *pygmy* groups, such as the Aka and the Babenzélé, has made a significant impression of Western popular and art musics. Although these works have been important milestones in musical knowledge of African traditional music, they have overshadowed the study of modern forms that have played an important role in the CAR's social history.

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the line between modern and traditional music can be difficult to disentangle as both continue to coexist, influencing each other's evolution. Despite increasing urbanization and global cultural and economic flows, traditional music of the CAR remains central to daily life in the country and continues to shape contemporary practice. Modern and contemporary music of the CAR provide a unique viewpoint of larger musical and social trends across Africa, offering a window into the daily struggles of contemporary life. Considered together, they reflect broader social forces, such as colonial and neoliberal economies of extraction, evangelical movements, rural–urban and international migration, and violent internal ethnic and political struggles. This entry explores these trends, and how they have shaped the CAR's musical style and practice, examining the rise of national *orchestras* in the postcolonial period, the emergence of international recording artists in the diaspora, the burgeoning Bangui hip-hop scene and its voices of political dissent and social solidarity, and the negotiations of modernity through music by pygmy groups whose polyphonic singing continues to capture the Western imagination.

The Emergence of Modern Music in the Central African Republic

As in many sub-Saharan African countries, modern music in the CAR is inextricably linked to the arrival of European colonialism and the subsequent emergent nationalisms that propelled the wave of independence that swept across Africa in the early 1960s. Contact with Europeans opened up avenues for the spread of Western music through the introduction of radio and the establishment of a European-controlled recording industry. The colonial period also saw the spread of Western instruments throughout the continent, such as brass instruments, accordions, banjos, and most significantly, guitars.

The acoustic (or *Spanish*) guitar was central to the development of modern popular styles across Africa. It was introduced along the west coast by Liberian Kru mariners, whose thumb and index finger picking technique produced cycles of interlocking patterns over a simple tonal structure. This *palmwine* style, named after the popular beverage, spread along the coast, landing in multiethnic port cities before being brought back to rural villages and combined with local traditional musics. These new hybrid styles reproduced the sounds and timbres of indigenous plucked stringed instruments and were often augmented by a percussive accompaniment tapped on a glass bottle.

Central to the history of modern music in sub-Saharan Africa were the acoustic guitar styles that developed in work camps of the copper belt region of the Congo in the early 1950s. The guitar music made popular in these ethnic melting pots was decidedly modern, tuned in its lyrical and melodic content to the emerging urban working class. These artists were influenced by Caribbean music, especially Afro-Cuban ensembles, along with Ghanaian highlife picked up from recordings and broadcasts from the Radio Congo Belge. The playing styles of these early acoustic guitar song composers eventually spread across the region. These first modern Congolese guitar hits increased the popularity of the guitar, transforming the instrument into a status symbol and providing the foundation for the development of rumba, in both the DRC and CAR. Influential artists to emerge in the CAR during this period were Jean Marc Lesoi, Jean Mangalet, Dominique Eboma,

Bekpa (*Beckers*), and Prosper Mayélé, many of whom would go on to lead larger ensembles in the 1960s.

State Orchestras and Modern Traditional Music

As electric guitars became increasingly available, they were incorporated into the commercial big bands and state orchestras that were popping up across the region. The establishment of Radio Bangui in 1958 accelerated the diffusion of foreign music. By the time the CAR gained independence on August 13, 1960, the *belle époque* of Zairian rumba was in full swing, with a local recording industry firmly in place to promote large bands. These modern *orchestres*, such as the African Jazz and TPOK Jazz, were similar in instrumentation to Cuban ensembles, composed of drum kits, Latin percussion, double bass, guitars, and a prominent brass section.

The emergence of popular guitar-based orchestras coincided with a period of optimism surrounding the ostensible end of European control. Leaders of these newly independent nations sought to use the popularity of the modern orchestras to serve their nation-building projects. However, by the mid-1960s in both the DRC and the CAR, this mood was soon spoiled by political coups that installed corrupt and despotic rulers who would become personally and politically invested in the musical developments of their countries.

In the CAR, this period saw the emergence of the first popular orchestras based in the capital, Bangui. These groups imitated the Latin sounds and instrumentation of the first generation of Zairian orchestras, while adding local rhythms and vocal styles. A traditional influence particular to the wider Bangui region comes from the ubiquitous harps and xylophones found across the country. Harps are also particularly significant in the region for their role in ritual and as an accompaniment to oral poetry and satire. The timbres and interlocking high and low pitch lines of these instruments were imitated on guitars. In the context of the large orchestras, multiple guitarists could re-create their dense polyrhythmic textures as exemplified in the climactic sections of the Bangui orchestras songs, consisting of rolling grooves that serve as extended dance interludes to the vocal sections. Lyrics were sung in Sango, a regional creole and an official language of the CAR. They provided social and political commentary, treating themes relevant to contemporary life, such as relationships and the tension between notions of tradition and modernity.

The output of Bangui orchestras spans six decades, beginning in the mid-1950s and extending into the early 21st century. Their evolution is characterized by a continual process of splintering, with members of popular orchestras founding their own groups after internal disagreements, or sometimes as a result of political manipulation. The Tropical Jazz, Bangui's first modern orchestra, was founded in 1954. The group was founded by guitarist Mayélé, who was inspired by his filling experience with the African Jazz while they were on tour in Bangui. Despite its popularity, by 1963 the group had dissolved. Its saxophonist and principal songwriter Bekpa subsequently founded Vibro Success, and Mayélé would go on to form the influential group Centrafrican Jazz.

The period between the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s was a prosperous time for Bangui's orchestras and a golden age of musical life in the CAR. The overthrow of President David Dacko by Colonel Jean-Bédél Bokassa on December 31, 1966, marked the beginning of a period of government patronage of Bangui musicians. The newly installed Bokassa was extremely fond of popular and traditional music, supporting their diffusion over radio and national television. He provided instruments to his favorite orchestras, who previously had been forced to share between themselves. Bokassa was also influenced by the *authenticité* campaign of the then president of the DRC, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, which partly consisted of an official policy of replacing European names (Mobutu would change his name to Mobutu Sese Seku, and that of the country to Zaire). To this end, Bakossa intervened directly in shaping the public image of Bangui's orchestras. For example, after a financial contribution from Bakossa, the group Los Negritos Makembé removed the Spanish words from their name, shortening it to Makembé (a type of bell used in traditional music).

Bokassa's patronage of orchestras also mirrored Mobuto's. Popular groups were required to literally sing the praises of their leader. Bangui's chosen orchestras became emissaries for the Bokassa government, touring internationally throughout Central and West Africa as well as Europe. This support came at a cost, however, as the viability of a group became dependent on the whims of an increasingly erratic and unpopular leader. The Centrafrican Jazz was disbanded in 1975 at the height of its popularity, allegedly over a quarrel between Bokassa and his wife, who favored the group. Mayélé was subsequently sent to the army and assigned to the Commando Jazz, a military orchestra under Bokassa's control. Vibro Success was then promoted to official state orchestra, but the increased security at their concerts kept patrons away. The group would eventually take advantage of a tour of West Africa in 1976 to flee the country. The group Tropical Fiesta was the last official national orchestra of the Bokassa era. Their song "Révérence à Nos Souverains" commemorates Bokassa's self-coronation on December 4, 1977, as Emperor of the Central African Empire. Bokassa was eventually deposed by French forces on September 1, 1981, and was briefly replaced by the previous president Dacko, who was soon after deposed in a coup by General André Kolingba.

The end of the Bokassa's years and economic downturn left many of the most prominent Bangui orchestras without financial support, leading many bandleaders to try their luck abroad. This left a vacuum that was soon filled by Zokela, a group of young musicians who had grown up imitating the rumba styles of the Bangui orchestras. The group distinguished themselves by their ability to convincingly convey the affective qualities of traditional ceremonial music and dance. Echoing once again musical trends in the DRC, where tradition-influenced *soukous* had become popular, Zokela dubbed their style *modern traditional music* (*musique traditionnelle moderne*) reflecting a more conscious incorporation of the traditional vocal and instrumental elements of their native Lobaye region. Principal among these influences was the BaAka and Mbaty pygmies' yodeling techniques, the *n'gombi* (a 10-string harp) and the *montengene* dance. Their music is characterized by the rhythm section (drum kit, bass, and glass bottle) working together to imitate the sound of traditional percussion, while the contrasting dynamic range and two-handed attack of the harp are imitated by the interlocking guitar parts.

As the group progressed into the 1990s, its songs began to incorporate thinly veiled political commentary addressing the effect of an increasingly volatile political and economic situation. Motivated by a desire to reach a growing international audience for world music, their concerts in this period emulated the format of global pop spectacle. Ethnomusicologist Michelle Kisliuk, who followed the group closely during this period, describes its concerts as consisting of a charismatic front man supported by choreographed backup dancers along with folkloric aspects such as stylized traditional dress and decontextualized performances by pygmy groups.

Diaspora Artists and the Emergence of Bangui Hip-Hop

From the 1980s onward, increasing economic and political instability and a lack of a distinct cultural policy in the CAR made life as a musician increasingly difficult. Many artists left for Paris, France. This included former bandleaders Charlie Perrière (Tropical Fiesta) and Laskin Ngomateke (Canon Star) as well as notable solo artists such as Baba By-Gao, Léa Lignanzi, and Léonie Kangala. The democratically elected government of Ange-Félix Patassé (1993–2003) did little to improve confidence in the country's leadership, and the era was defined by rising sectarian tension and violence. By the late 1990s, promotion of local music had sunk to an all-time low. Musicians were again forced to share instruments. By the early 2000s, the economy had improved slightly, and local orchestras began to perform on a semiregular basis; however, from 2004 onward, the country became increasingly embroiled in civil war.

The decline of the popular bands and the politically charged atmosphere of the period provided the conditions for the emergence of a local hip-hop scene, mirroring similar trends across the continent. The seeds of the movement were planted in the early 1990s with a performance by the visiting popular French rapper, MC So-laar. In 1997, the CAR's first rap festival was organized following the release of the first commercial rap album

by the group Sewa Soul. The album's title track, "Baissez vos armes" ("Lower your weapons"), responded to the violence of the Patassé era. In the early 2000s, the Bangui hip-hop scene gained visibility through the compilation entitled "Bango's rap 1" introducing principal artists such as Le Staff, Black Bino, Secteur O+, Sons of Sun, Kotangbanga, Bravo, and Mac Siot. This burgeoning scene was interrupted by the Central African Republic Bush War, which lasted from 2004 to 2008.

With the instability at home, popular music of the CAR was increasingly produced by a new generation of emigrants in the Francophone diaspora. Idylle Mamba and Laetitia Zonzambé are representative of this trend. Both artists combine traditional rhythms and melodies with a pan-African aesthetic, incorporating blues and jazz elements. Mamba began her career in 2004 and gained visibility through her collaboration with Senegalese Reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly. After studying in France, she settled in Cameroon, where she released several albums, notably *Sango et vous* in 2010. Zonzambé first made her mark with vocal contributions to the aforementioned Bangui rap compilation. In 2007, she represented the CAR at the pan-African Music Festival in Brazzaville before taking up residence in Montréal, Canada, where she released the album *Sanza* in 2014.

In response to the reescalation of the civil war in 2012, both popular artists of the diaspora and local rappers have since used their music to promote solidarity within the CAR. In 2014, Mamba collaborated with Senegalese star Yousou N'Dour to produce an antiviolence anthem entitled "One Africa." Bangui's hip-hop artists fill stadiums, providing an avenue for disaffected youth to denounce the political class and relay their own message of peace.

Modern Pygmy Music, at Home and Abroad

Since the release of Arom's recordings of pygmy groups in the 1960s, their musical output has continued to evolve as modernity has encroached on their traditional lifestyle. Deforestation by logging interests has depleted their hunting territory, and missionaries and increased contact with commercial radio and recordings have left their mark on their musical traditions. However, as Kisliuk has noted in her work on the music of the BaAka pygmies, the incorporation of musical elements from outside was adapted according to the patterns and necessities of pygmies themselves, helping them forge a new sense of identity in the face of change.

If pygmies of the CAR have been able to mitigate the ways modernity has transformed their musical performance at home, they have had little control over how it has been manipulated abroad. Stephen Feld traces the various appropriations of pygmy music, beginning with Arom's 1966 recording of the BaBenzélé pygmies of the CAR, through Cameroonian musician Francis Bebey, to Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man," Madonna, and various lucrative transformations by folk musicians and electronic music producers. Feld demonstrates how the complex and diverse repertoires of pygmy music have been reduced to their distinctive yodel, sonically fixing a utopian view of pygmy culture as static and pure in the minds of Western listeners sympathetic to their plight.

See also [Africa, Central](#); [Congo, Democratic Republic of: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#); [Highlife](#); [Rumba](#)

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