LEO PALAYENG: BRIDGING THE GAP FROM TRADITIONAL TO ELECTRONIC ACHOLI MUSIC

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Abstract: This article examines the historical and sociological processes that led to the electronification of traditional Acholi musical repertoires in the northern region of Uganda. Akena P'Layeng Okella, also known as Leo Palayeng, is presented as a leading figure in this transformation of traditional music to electronic music, which has become known as Acholitronix. Palayeng is also my main interlocutor. Through Palayeng's biography, the influence of digital technology in the production, distribution, and reception of musical traditions is discussed. The new, digitised repertoire was first integrated into wedding ceremonies, and then played in bars and clubs in the city. It finally reached the international, alternative electronic club scene. This process of transformation in the repertoire is part of a long history of local and international musical influences in Uganda. The extent to which information and communication technologies have played a decisive role in the dissemination of musical genres, the adoption or adaptation of musical instruments and techniques, and the creation of local, national, or even pan-African musical identities since the 1980s, is described in the article. The place that these forms of digital musical traditions have on online platforms is also discussed. Based on these observations, the contours of the transformation and switch from the acoustic to the electronic – while being considered by the actors as being the same music – are described.

Keywords: Acholi music, digital, electronic music, festivals, social networks, tradition, Uganda

Introduction

On 6 September 2018, the musician-singer, Otim Alpha, performed with his friend and producer, Palayeng, on the main stage of the Nyege Nyege festival on the banks of the White Nile in Jinja, Uganda (see Figure 1).

Following the release of the *Gulu City Anthems* album, which opened the doors of Europe's popular alternative clubs to Acholi musical traditions, the concert marked the climax of the band's tour. The performance was a success with the audience wearing the traditional *lawita* headdresses which were distributed by the artists. The Acholi musical tradition and house music became one in the ears of a public enthusiastically converted to these new sounds. This encounter of apparently opposite genres is the result of a history where musical creativity, expressions of identity and the use of digital tools are intertwined in a framework of localities that are increasingly connected via social networks.

Interest has grown in traditional popular repertoires played for mere entertainment (Aubert 2007; Charry 2000). These musical expressions are often studied in their national or even supra-national diffusion, where they have an almost patriotic role.

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Congolese Rumba, Ghanaian Highlife, and South African Afro-jazz are good examples of being more known for their place on the international music scene than for their underground character. These genres have often been linked to Western influences through a musical instrument, whether it be the saxophone of the brass band, the guitar of the rumba, or the keyboards of the *ndombolo*. One could add to this list the Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) used by producers to compose digital music (Bates 2016). DAW is a music sequencer software that allows for composition, arrangement and use in live sets. Echoing Kubik (1981), Martin (1991) pointed out decades ago that new arrangements of musical expressions, that is, "neo-traditional" or "urban" forms in which a Western influence can be heard, are those that will be marketed by Western companies.

The same commercial approach is evident in the Ngoma, Opika and Loningisa labels in the city formerly known as Leopoldville (Kinshasa). The fundamental role attributed to radio stations from the 1950s onwards for the dissemination of popular music in Central Africa, mainly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Stewart 2000; White 2010, 2012), is today taken up with the same continuity by platforms or sites such as Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Spotify or YouTube to digitally distribute music files. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the importance of Afro-American music in Africa in these musical expressions has been profound. It continues to have a particular influence on the artistic aspirations of musicians, from the great era of the Rumba to techno and House, through hip-hop in the 1980s. These commercially distributed popular music genres were then perceived first by the actors of the music distribution and the researchers as forms of "modernity" that expressed themselves in opposition to the tradition where a combination of pre-existing models is the norm.

Issues related to "modernity within tradition" are at the heart of Western culturalist, post-colonial and post-modernist theories (Amselle 1999; Appadurai 1996; Latour 2006, 2009). These theories argue that modernity is multiple and multi-sited, even if it was instrumentalised as a tool for domination during the colonial and post-colonial periods in which modernity could be the only salvation of the "uncivilised" world. However, modernity is not a notion that should be linked to progress. Instead, modernity is a temporality to which any cultural community can belong. Waterman pointed out in the early 1990s that modernity is a claim to cultural identity that "can be seen as relational and situational, rather than self-constituting and essential" (1990: 377). He based his argument on the Jùjú music through which he studied the technical, historical and social conditions that led Nigerian societies to develop popular music now known as "Yoruba music." He developed the idea of these conditions of the emergence of this music under the term, "context." For Waterman, "context" represents a form of a dialectic between practices, and a negotiation of interpretive power, which invites us to see music as an object that evolves in a context (Ibid., 214). He shows how Yoruba music is constructed, among other things, on the idea of an imagined community, where people identify themselves as "Yoruba only in inter-ethnic contexts and certainly not when they participate in communal ceremonial events" (Ibid., 371).

Recent studies in musicology have shown that these transformations of inherited materials from the musical heritage were translated into a "creativity" (Olivier 2012) that was expressed through three central notions: the use of innovative technologies (Born 2005), globalised circulation (Feld 2000) and historical moments of political transition (Toynbee 2012). In the early twentieth century, few countries in Africa had record-producing industries and many musicians had to rely on self-production. The lack of infrastructure in the music industry meant that for many years it was difficult for artists to gain recognition beyond the styles promoted by the global music market, which is often divided into two main categories in the West as far as Africa is concerned: the so-called "traditional music" and the "world music" of the 1980s and beyond. Again, as Martin has observed, in Tanzania in the 1970s and 1980s, "this action unwittingly generated one of the most active and creative music scenes in all contemporary African urban society" (1991, 48). From the early 2000s onwards, the democratisation of digital communication tools has changed this reality. Today, the main function of the contemporary popular musician is to bridge the gap between the old world of oral tradition and the new world of "aural experience" (Ibid.). Contemporary forms of musical traditions are the continuity of inherent changes to social and living practices linked to orality. It is part of a continuity of transmission of traditional musical knowledge using digital tools.

In the northern region of Uganda, in the town of Gulu, the incorporation of electronic devices and sounds echoes the changes in Acholi society during the civil war which began in 1986 and continued for more than two decades.[1] The vision was to emerge from the economic crisis by investing in cultural tourism in the hope that peace would lead to the growth of the tourism industry and an influx of investors (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda. 3 Sept. 2021).

Palayeng's life exemplifies this phenomenon, in his journey from the creation of his first recording studio in the early 2000s to his European tours in the late 2010s. His recent productions show how the features of traditional Acholi music can be heard in electronic versions.

Popular musical traditions in a context of global connections

During the 1980s, a wide variety of popular music genres, supported by the democratisation of analogical media (tapes and LPs at the time), the development of distribution networks and labels, as well as the success of the emerging world music scene, emerged in African urban centres. From the 2000s onwards, innovative technologies emerged. The use of MP3 was commonplace, as was the creation of online platforms such as Napster or iTunes. This led to the emergence of peer-to-peer exchange modes, the collapse of the traditional music industry and the emergence of

[1] During this period in the north, Acholi populations experienced a war in which numerous atrocities were committed against civilians. Millions were displaced over two decades. Acholi populations who did not join the rebellion of Joseph Kony and the LRA were victims of the latter who kidnapped women and children and massacred entire villages.

new production modalities. As Venter and Vos[2] point out, MP3 in Africa changed the way music is produced and exchanged:

> MP3 functions as both a historical marker and a designated means of production. The history of electronic music in Africa is invariably also a history of power relations, of dynamics of creation and self-training, of the formation of new sonic, social, and political complexities and solidarities. MP3 heralds a true democratisation of sound, with means of production, recording and broadcasting that are less expensive and more accessible than before. In a post-MP3 world, economic and logistical barriers to access to instruments, sound recording equipment, studios and other means of sound production are easily forgotten (2020).

The specificity of MP3 is that it is an accessible audio format of superior quality and that it facilitates exchanges between people. Making music with digital audio recordings allows for today's common techniques of sampling and arranging. Furthermore, in the era at the start of social networks (Myspace in the early 2000s), MP3 files circulated easily on personal pages and became an uncomplicated way of meeting target audiences. Today, these practices have become common on platforms (Soundcloud, Spotify, Bandcamp) and social networks (WhatsApp, Tik Tok).

Two main categories can be used to classify the new electronic musical expressions emerging on the African continent: one could be described as a "top-down" dynamic where electronic artists tend to adapt and personalise mainstream musical styles such as House, Minimal-Techno or Electronica into a version that could be described as more local. Short recordings (samplings) of traditional music are grafted onto the formal musical structures of the above-mentioned genres, affecting the perception of the music by the social groups represented and facilitating an identification. There are also evocations of sounds, images or so-called traditional representations which are materialised by traditional or Afro-futurist stage dress. For example, an evolving artist such as Faizal Mostrixx on the Kampala vanguardist scene refers to Afro-futurism in his music in these words: "My focus and musical production are to give traditional Ugandan African instruments and organic rhythms poetic, electronic instrumentation. The motivation behind my work is to preserve and develop the African cultural heritage." In his album, *Tribal Match,* Faizal Mostrixx moves through House and Techno styles and adds to his live performance Afro-futuristic elements such as stage outfits and masks with an aesthetic of an imagined future. But he also draws on Burundian songs, Buganda lullabies, Ugandan fiddle repertoires and the yodelling of Baka women from the Central African Republic. Interviewed by *Pan African Music* magazine in 2019, he referred to his approach as a "question of reappropriation." Giving an African tinge to Techno sounds is his way of creating a link to the rest of the world: "Borrowing the cultural codes and rituals of my country is, above all, a way of celebrating them, but it is also a way of allowing my people to identify with them. Reinventing them with an Afro-futurist image is to propose a new mythology to Africa and invite the rest of the world to embrace a common future" (Lacaille 2019).

Then there are those producers who, due to technical constraints, have used digital

[2] Carina Venter and Stephanie Vos. 2020. "Africa Synthesized: Editorial Note." *Herri* 4. https://herri.org.za/4/carina-venter-stephanie-vos/

tools to replace musicians. In the process, they have created traditional digital music that embraced the musical codes of electronic genres. I call this second category the "bottom-up" dynamic. The primary objective of these artists was not to create a sound for the alternative clubs of the world's major capitals but to compensate for the lack of musicians for traditional performances by using digital tools. These new genres were often born at wedding ceremonies, which crystallised the need to combine respect for tradition with the desire for novelty in celebrating the betrothed, the family, and the communities. These phenomena can be observed in Mali with the Balani Show and the Singeli in Tanzania. I classify the musical production called Acholitronix in this category. The focus is on the musical and aesthetic criteria related to the use of DAW in music production and the way it transforms traditional repertoires into electronic repertoires which, in the case of the town of Acholi, has given rise to the Acholitronix musical genre.

Acholitronix from Gulu

The term, "Acholitronix", was born from the contraction of "Acholi" and "electronic." It has spread in alternative electronic music scenes worldwide mainly because of the two albums released on the Kampala-based Nyege Nyege Tapes label. These albums are Alpha's *Gulu City Anthem* (2017) and Electro Acholi's *Kaboom* (2019). The electronification of a musical style emerged from the specific need for the substitution of musicians with electronically produced sounds, as is the case, for example, with the *larakaraka* wedding songs of the Acholi people. The electronic re-interpretation of traditional Acholi repertoires started primarily in the cities of Gulu and Lira in 2003 when the area was mired in a brutal civil war. The Nyege Nyege Tapes label, which is behind the launch of the abovementioned publications, describes Acholitronix as follows:

> First performed at weddings, they replaced the much larger traditional *larakaraka* bands that under war-time conditions had become too costly for many newlyweds to afford (troupes could consist of up to 25 members) […] Young producers around the time using Fruity Loops formed recording studios that offered all-inclusive packages where they would write a song for a newly wedded couple and then film the wedding and perform the commissioned song at the ceremony. […] The sound these producers first made on their computers followed closely the traditional variants that were performed with a range of percussion, calabashes, ankle bells and call and response vocals, but the tempos were sped up with pounding drum machine polyrhythms in a sort of hypnotic, minimalist delirium. The sound quickly spread into the local nightclubs around Gulu. In Acholitronix, the traditional wedding repertoires are electronified and incorporated into the institutionalised rituals, having the same function as acoustic music (Acholi Traditional Music, Moroto Hvy Ind, 2019).

The conflict between Joseph Kony's Lord's Revolution Army and Yoweri Museveni's government for almost 30 years has been largely responsible for the disappearance of the traditional *larakaraka* wedding bands. This vacuum allowed young cultural entrepreneurs to replace these orchestras and provide more targeted services that included song commissions and audiovisual recordings of weddings. In these compositions, traditional musical instruments are imitated on synthesisers and digital

drums, giving them a particular aesthetic that has spread very quickly outside wedding ceremonies to reach bars and clubs.

Acholi traditional music

The Acholi people belong to the Luo linguistic group which extends from northern Uganda to southern Sudan and Kenya. Their territories are commonly called "Acholi land", a sub-region otherwise collectively known as the Agago, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Nwoya, Lamwo and Pader districts in northern Uganda. There are about 2.1 million speakers of the language.[3] Traditional Acholi music is used for socio-cultural, political, or historical events in traditional contexts. Connections with other kingdoms existed before the colonial period but intensified with the globalisation forced by the British Protectorate in the late nineteenth century and the militias in the late twentieth century. Today, social networks and online exchange platforms provide these connections. Through the dynamics of acculturation, destruction or resilience, these periods of historical, sociological, and technological change have had a strong impact on traditional cultures.

Several types of repertoires or dances structure age groups and gender. The *dingi* dance is reserved for young girls and is the most popular dance, according to Palayeng. It is entirely instrumental and characterised by the recurrence of the *olweto*, a flute made of stems of hollow, woody plants. Next in popularity is the *larakaraka* repertoire, a popular dance for social gatherings such as weddings. The characteristic instrument of this repertoire is the *awal* calabash which provides the basic rhythm.

In the engagement dance, *ajere*, the small axe made of wood held by dancers, is a symbolic object, reminiscent of earlier times when the man had to show his future in-laws that he would be able to defend his bride (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda, 9 March 2021). Among the dances that have been popularised on the radio and reproduced in electronic versions, there are also royal dances such as the *bwola* performed in front of the *ker*, the kings, or the *rwodii*, the chiefs. The *otole* is a war dance performed only in the presence of an authority which, much like the repertoires of the *mwel* funeral dances, is solely instrumental.

It is the latter repertoires that Palayeng uses most often in his electronic versions with a software synthesiser: "Because I wanted to convey a message about the plight of the people and how best to revive positive cultural ways of life." All these dances are accompanied by a traditional instrument or object whose presence characterises the different repertoires. Thus, the *awal* calabash and the *rigi* fiddle are specific to the Acholi collective and popular dances, while the *adungu* harp is reserved more for storytelling. In lyrical songs, family and clan relationships are the most common subject.

[3] *Acholi at Ethnologue* (22nd ed., 2019). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acholi_dialect#cite_note-e22-1. Accessed on 31 August 2021.

Alpha and Palayeng: The pioneers of this genre

The encounter between Leo Palayeng and Otim Alpha occurred one night when the electricity ran out. Palayeng went into the street with his *nanga* harp and met Alpha who had an *adungu* harp in his possession. At the time, Alpha was a former professional boxer and seeing him with a harp surprised Palayeng. They soon started playing and producing music together. These compositions were the beginning of Acholitronix. At the time, their compositions were broadcast on a local radio programme that carried "messages from parents who had lost their children in the war, as well as telephone or physical messages from rebels and others who had returned from the bush" (Hewlett 2021). Palayeng testifies to this experience:

> We continued until all the radio stations in the area were playing our music for peace purposes. Many local political leaders were using our music and the rich lyrical content, which was the voice of suffering. Many of our local leaders would even write their political manifestos from the messages we sang to capture the attention of local voters at the time of political campaigns (Ibid.).

Here there is a form of continuity of the traditional authority, the *rwot* (pl. *rwodi*), that persists in radio messages. This preference for transmitting messages through song recurs in interviews with Palayeng:

> The Acholi encourage and prefer that information or events are stored in songs rather than in books because it is easier for any uneducated or educated person to listen to the content of music than that of books (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu. Uganda, 3 Sept. 2021).

At the end of spring 2022, during fieldwork[4] on the *adungu* harps of the region, I visited the towns of Gulu, Kitgum, and Lira and their surroundings. In Kitgum, at a meeting with the managers of Radio Tembo (the elephant is "tembo" in Kiswahili),[5] I obtained a working copy of 880 MP3 files of acoustic or electronic artists that the presenters of this community radio station linked to the Acholitronix movement. The Acholitronix is therefore not a fad but a collective practice, as evidenced by another publication released on the Nyege Nyege Tapes label, *Electro Acholi Kaboom from Northern Uganda* (2019), which features the musical output of fifteen artists. Since these compositions are based on the same formal structures of traditional musical repertoires and are named under the same musical label by traditionalists, Acholitronix can be classified as a vernacular and musical category as described by Arom and his peers in musicology. Under the term, "Acholitronix", one finds musical productions that share common "parameters, criteria and features" such as orchestral formation, scales, metrics, periodicity, rhythmic and melodic structures, or mode of emission of voices (Arom et al. 2008).

From trad to tronix: Palayeng's journey

Palayeng started to play the *nanga*[6] zither when he lost his father at the age of six in

[4] This fieldwork was conducted for the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (France) in the frame ANR NGOMBI project: https://www.anr-ngombi-harpes.com/

[5] The elephant is a strong symbol of identity among the Acholi people.

[6] The Nanga harp is a seven-stringed zither tuned on a pentatonic scale proper to the Acholi people.

1986. His father was killed during the war between the government and various factions of armed forces in the northern region. Palayeng's musical journey is long and rich. Below is a summary of the high points of his musical career which are in resonance with the history of Acholitronix music.

His background as a musician is particularly illuminating on the issues of transformation of the musical traditions of a society and of a locality that has undergone traumatic socio-political changes during the colonial period as well as with the civil war that has plagued the region in recent decades. As an Acholi person and musician, Palayeng's life echoes all these periods during which the artist has been an actor of change.[7] At the end of the 1990s, he joined the theatre group, "Kids of Nature", with whom he gave dance performances to Rumba and Rap music. At the time, he recorded his first Rap songs and became a presenter on local radio stations in Gulu. He also experimented with sound software such as Fruity Loops 3.45, Adobe 1.0, and Logic 2.9 to produce his first Acholi Electronic songs. He created a mobile disco and video show business that schools rented out every weekend. This endeavour allowed him to give students a free microphone to sing at their parties (Hewlett 2021). In the early 2000s, he set up his first studio. Although he had to move several times, his studio is still active today in the city of Gulu (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Palayeng in his studio in Gulu in 2022. Photograph by Author.

In an interview with Pan African Music Magazine, Palayeng said:

> We started to record and customise some songs. For instance, you can let me sing about

The instrument differs from the *adungu*, an eight-stringed harp tuned on a heptatonic diatonic scale and whose origin is attributed to the Alur people from DR Congo or Lugbara from Uganda.

[7] This short biography of Leo Palayeng is based on direct interviews that I was able to conduct with the artist and on interviews on specialist websites such as Pan African Music.

> your grandparents, and the family would own the song. People could hear their names in the songs and wanted more for the next celebration. The demand became so high, and we ended up sharing the loops among the producers and the musicians. We empowered them. I have always been a little bit underground, so the studio grew up to use music positively. We were empowering anyone with a sense of creativity, like buying software and giving them, lending my whole equipment to them, and we ended up creating a group of musicians (Renoncourt 2020).

Since starting as a producer in the early 2000s, Palayeng has adopted a musician-researcher approach to his work. He records and archives the musical repertoires of various traditional Acholi instruments which he sometimes incorporates into his compositions. In 2019, in collaboration with Boutique Electronic of the Nyege Nyege Tapes label, Palayeng continued recording Acholi music cultures (Hewlett 2021). In the summer of 2021, Palayeng mapped and recorded Acholi musical traditions by travelling with his friend and producer, Emiliano Motta, to the outskirts of Gulu and Lira. They preserved the evidence of their traditions. This goal is of paramount importance to Palayeng, not only for the sense of pride it gives him in belonging to the Luo community but also as an inspiration for his future productions.[8]At this stage, the recordings will not be used as samples for his next productions but as a structural model for his compositions (Palayeng, Leo. Gulu, Uganda. 3 Sept. 2021).

Palayeng uses different music software, namely, Fruity Loops and Logic for creation or samples, and Ableton Live 10 for live performances (see Figure 2).

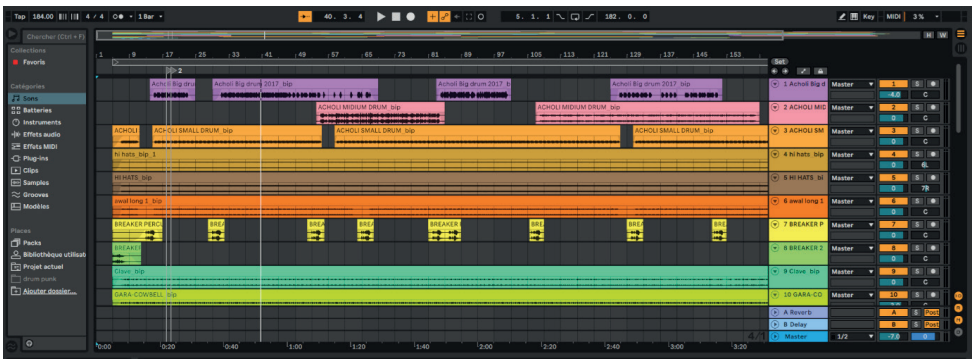

Figure 2. Screenshot of the Kodi Pa Ojwiny Ableton project of Palayeng. The tracks are made up of acoustic recordings of Acholi musical instruments. Photograph by Author.

He launches each loop he has composed (acoustic recordings that he made himself) with an Akai APC 40 MK-II controller which allows him to have 8 to 99 separate channels. He uses a Novation USB keyboard for transposing and composing his tunes while composing or performing live. He plays different harps: the *adungu*, an arched

[8] See footage of a recording session in Awach/Paibona Sub-County, Gulu District Northern Uganda: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI9v3-x56QI. Accessed on 22 September 2021.

harp with eight to 12 strings tuned on a heptatonic scale; the *nanga,* a zither harp with seven strings tuned on a pentatonic scale, and, the *nanga lyech*[9], which refers to his adaptation of the traditional Acholi *nanga*, to which he added more strings so that he can play on 13 or 14 strings in total and in other keys. In his composition process, Palayeng starts with a loop on the harp, then on a calabash or hi-hat and the kick, with a constant pulse of sound at 107 beats per minute (bpm) at the beginning. The pulse can be increased:

> After getting a tune that you are singing with the software, for example on an E key, you put words on it. If you are two singers, it depends on who is leading: the band or the choir. Then, it only stays to "polish the word" (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda, 3 May 2019).

In his view, the most important aspect is that it "suits the standards of my people" (Ibid.). The use of loops of ostinato recordings from acoustic instruments (see Figure 3) is a simple and effective way for Palayeng to conform to these standards. The addition of electronic sound elements is built on a solid, sonic foundation recognised by the elders as part of the Acholi musical tradition. Although Palayeng does not define them precisely, one can understand them as references to the regalia of the *rwot* and the Acholi musical repertoire. Palayeng has particularly vivid memories of his childhood when his teachers forced him to play Western music repertoires or diatonic scales instead of the traditional pentatonic scales. What he wants to emphasise in his compositions is the musical heritage that was passed on to him by his elders (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda, 3 May 2019).

Musical features and aesthetics of Palayeng's Acholitronix

The *Gulu City* album was recorded between 2004 and 2015 and mastered in 2017 by the musician, Matt Colton. The album includes eleven tracks with a standard duration of six minutes per track. The compositions are written in binary meter with 4 to 16-beat periods. The scalar system of the traditional instruments and solo vocals is pentatonic and follows the harmonic interval sequence written in semitones: 3-2-2-3. Except for the piece, *Agiki ne tye*, all of them start with a rhythmic formula supported by digital reproductions of the Acholi *bwul* drums and the *awal* calabash. Then the melody of the traditional one-stringed fiddle, *rigi-rigi*, or *kijira* ululations, is added. The use of the fiddle on the album stands out from the acoustic tracks played on the *adungu* harps that characterise each of their live performances.

For his albums, *Kono Wiye Ocung Otara* and *Elephant Dance*, Palayeng included tracks that he composed between 2014 and 2020. Both were mixed in Uganda and during his tours and residencies in Denmark, Belgium, and Mexico where his friend, Emiliano Motta helped him with the mixing. The album features ten tracks, including two acoustic mixes. For the eponymous track, Palayeng reads the lyrics in English and Acholi because he desires to pass on his message to as many people as possible. In his second version, the following statement can be heard and read on the Acholitronix:

[9] Lyech means "elephant" in the Acholi language. This reference is in line with the symbol of the Acholi people.

"This sound is my identity, this dance is my ability, my culture is my dignity when I elephant dance."[10] In this album, there are the same percussive introductions with samples of drums and calabashes but this time his *nanga lyech* harp replaces the fiddle. Palayeng provides translations and background information on some of the tracks such as *Nywalo rut ber*, which refers to a birth ritual for twins.

From the point of view of musical structure, Palayeng's compositions start the general pattern with acoustic samples to which he adds what could be called an electronic aesthetic which is defined by the addition of samples and MIDI instruments to the recorded ones. The main constitutive musical element of Acholitronix is call and response. One of the particularities of the transition from acoustic to electronic is the acceleration of the basic tempo, which rarely goes below 160 bpm. About this adaptation, Palayeng says*:*

> I decided to bring the traditional patterns to the electronic ones. The calculations to create the first *larakaraka* loops were not easy. This took me a long time. I started by hitting and recording traditional drums, and calabash, to get sound samples for Fruity Loops software add-ons which I would install into a computer. I got most of the true Acholi samples with quality work. Then one time after a long night in the disco hall, the club was closed and I thought deeply to make a simple project with a Fruity Loops sequence to hit loop play on 1, 2, 3; looping back again to 1, 2, 3. This later would make six bars and six would go in 12 bars, 12 bars divide both into three and four equally means an even on 12. I would hype the BPM to 158 to help drop the calabash samples in the midi sequence, hanging fast like being hit live on stage. Boom! I got it. The loops for wedding celebrations and other electronic Acholi tribal patterns that I practised from playing the Nanga instrument in those early days came back into my head. From the excitement, I made the craziest shouts that night (Hewlett 2021).

To understand the musical structure of these songs based on oral traditions, the focus is on the following criteria: the metric and the rhythmic formulas, the scale, the melodies, forms, and the parts. As in acoustic musical expressions where these criteria are applied to the different constituent parts, singers, and instrumentalists (Arom et al. 2008), in digital musical expressions, the criteria must be applied to the different tracks of the project.

A comparison of the musical structures of the piece, *Onyangaro*, by the Pawidi Drak group, which can be found on the *Tipu pa* Acholi album published by Joop Veuger in 1996, and the piece *Toni G* from the album *Gulu City Anthems*, reveals the same polyrhythmic formula as a rhythmic base for both pieces. The rhythmic base can easily be interchanged with others.[11]

The hemiola is a structuring element of Acholi music. As Veuger underlines in his production of Acholi traditional music,

> There are two hemiola styles: one horizontal and the other vertical. In the horizontal hemiola style, alternations in one musical line take place in one or two successive measures [pulse] with two groups of three, groups of two tones, and three groups of two tones of the same

[10] See https://leopalayeng.bandcamp.com/album/elephant-dance. Accessed on 31 August 2021.

[11] I thank my friend and colleague, Basile Koechlin, for his mix of two tracks from Palayeng and Veuger which he sent to me an lie at the heart of this article.

> length and the same tempo. In contrast, in the vertical hemiola style, these alternations take place in combinations rather than in the succession of two musical lines (1996).

The binary meter of the two pieces forms the common basis on which the melodic and rhythmic phrasing of the acoustic instruments in both cases, such as the *rigi-rigi* fiddle, *bul* drums and *awal* calabashes, can be developed. In both cases, the melody of the fiddle is also the melodic layer from which the pattern of the song will develop. In the electronic versions, the fundamental beat is given by the kick and then subdivided by the hi-hat and bell.

Olivier stressed,

> Particular attention must be paid to the digital audio effects, like dynamics compression or reverberation, since some are determined by musical aesthetics, economic constraints, or equipment limitations […] analysis of these digital audio effects leads to the question of the sound signature (2019).

Palayeng's digital signature sound lies in the samples of traditional string instruments such as the *adungu* harp or *nanga lyech* zither, which he loops in most of these compositions, in addition to the ululations at the beginning of the piece and the regular punctuations of the *bila*, a whistle often performed on stage. However, if one looks at the arrangement of the tracks of the piece, *Kodi pa Ojwiny*, the rhythmic part comes first.

The first ten tracks are about the arrangement of the three *bwul* drums, and the *awal* percussion calabashes, to which he adds drum set tracks (hi-hat and tom-drums), claves, and bells. Then comes the tracks of melodic instruments, harps, fiddles, and flutes which gives way to the MIDI-synthesised instruments that punctuate the track. Speaking about his digital creation process, Palayeng says:

> I know some audio will not sound the same because the applications to make it sound smooth have remained in my setup here. I hope it sounds better. For some bits of it, I had presets I have been working on. I may sometimes make the same vocals and plan to make the sound warmer .... the thing I like is how it is easy for me to normalise the live recording or merge them in the same track to keep the whole project organised (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda, 3 Sept. 2021).

About ten tracks devoted to the vocals are distinguished between choruses, verses, and announcements such as, "This is Leo Palayeng." His digital, audio effects are small and are limited to a balance of highs and a slight reverb.

Palayeng attaches significant importance to the message he wishes to deliver in his compositions. The lyrics are often available on his personal Bandcamp account and frequently deal with the question of Luo or Acholi identity and broader social issues. For example, about the track *Labal Wai Kongo*, Palayeng provides the following information:

> It's a song composed to fight gender-based violence in the community, drunkard men who become violent on their family and when they're put to question by the clan leaders all their excuse turns and blame it on alcohol (Palayeng on Bandcamp).

Finally, stage attire is also particularly important to Palayeng. Since 2020, he has been proudly wearing his elephant outfit at his concerts; a suit whose top represents the shape of an elephant's head which was made for him by stylists in the town of Gulu.

Previously, he wore the *kono* feathers on his head, which were worn by Acholi warriors in ancient times. All these artefacts are references to Acholi royalty and their qualities such as the strength of the warriors and the wisdom of the elders as well as messages such as the avoidance of gender-based violence or bloody conflicts from which the Acholi society has long suffered (pers. comm. Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda, 3 May 2019).

Clubbing, labels, digital platform, and musical traditions in Kampala

In the Ugandan capital, Kampala, electro, and electro-traditional artists flock to the city's bars and clubs at various times of the day and night to make a name for themselves. There are bars in the city that are specifically dedicated to alternative music; they are the concert halls which host the weekly performances of artists performing traditional, electro-traditional, and electronic musicians who perform acoustically or digitally.

The development of avant-garde music in Uganda and its alternative music communities is through self-production, independent labels and especially through the promotion that is made individually or collectively on social networks and platforms. In 2021, the Soundcloud platform partnered with the Nyege Nyege Tapes label to produce a short musical documentary that underlines the East African alternative scene in general and the label's artists:

> East African Underground introduces you to the niche communities that are driving music culture on SoundCloud and around the globe. In this episode, you will meet the artists leading the East African Underground sound and be taken on a journey from Kampala's music scene to the world stage (SoundCloud newsletter, 31 August 2021).[12]

The democratisation of digital art promotion tools is a particularly important economic and cultural lever for young musicians in the sense that they allow for lucrative business activity. They also allow for the rise of emerging music genres that usually fly under the radar of global music production players. As Derek Debru, the co-founder of the Nyege Nyege Tapes label, observed.

> It's important to note that on all the global music streaming platforms and any other major music platform where you can pick a genre category, from copyright companies to The Wire, from Womex to Apple music, these genres [Singeli, Kadodi or Elone, for example] are never present (pers. comm. Derek Debru, Brussels, 29 Sept. 2021).

Labels are important in the promotion of these emerging music styles. If for some years now, reissues of sound publications by African artists from the first decades of popular music have been commercialised online,[13] others have been profiled as promoters of "endogenous music" (Ibid.). This is the case of the Nyege Nyege collective based in Kampala, which has engaged with the capital's alternative music community as an artistic incubator through its activities as an independent label and an annual music festival, the first edition of which took place in 2015. The promotional activities of this label, which is highly active in the sector, have made it visible. Derek Debru, defines the term, "endogenous music", as follows:

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[12] See the video on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zZZ3DS8XAQ.

[13] See for instance the platform, Analog Africa: https://www.analogafrica.com. Accessed on 28 September 2021, or Awesome Tapes from Africa: https://www.awesometapes.com/.

> I think it's important to note that a lot of these artists were either outsiders in their communities, or it was a sound that was shared by that said community but did not go out of it nor tried to export itself or enter into conversation with other sonic communities. That's the meaning of "endogenous." We don't even think about who else exists outside of our community, unlike trying to make Trap or Techno, we don't even know Trap and Techno exist and so we also don't care about it. Access to others comes later, but initially, people are happy to have a sound that reflects their identity. Those sounds are always part of a greater sonic and cultural lineage; with the arrival of new technology as a big factor of disruption, along with other factors like economics, for example, or simply one outlier musician who creates the new genre and others copy and follow (pers. comm. Derek Debru, Brussels, Belgium 29 Sept. 2021).

According to Palayeng, the collaboration with the Nyege Nyege label created momentum for the Acholitronix genre and moved it out of the city of Gulu into the global market to reach the most exclusive alternative music scenes. The label is a platform that allows endogenous musicians to disseminate their productions on a large social network and their artists to make themselves known for it. For Acholitronix, this has resulted in the second release on the label, *Electro Acholi Kaboom*, from northern Uganda, where names of new Acholi artists were discovered.

The collaboration between the label, Palayeng and Alpha, was not permanent. It ended after the success of the *Gulu City Anthems* record and the two world tours that followed. According to both Palayeng and Derek Debru, the label is in line with a logic of promoting emerging musical genres and always looking for new music, whereas Palayeng is in line with a continuity of reproducing traditional repertoires. The encounter took place through the digital forms of Acholi repertoires that were unknown to the general public, but they did not continue, mainly because of the very nature of the musical tradition. As innovative and varied as it may be, it must correspond to certain immutable forms to be recognised by the supporters of the tradition.

In May and June 2022, during surveys conducted in the towns of Gulu, Lira and Kitgum in the Acholi territory, it became apparent that the Acholitronix music of Palayeng, as well as that of many other undiscovered artists, was being widely played in bars and public spaces such as bus stops, on the radio or through the direct broadcast of commercial recordings. For example, Tembo Radio in the city of Kitgum, where I collected several hundred tracks classified as Acholitronix, broadcast several dozen artists who had been performing for several decades.

On 17 September 2022, Acholitronix was proudly represented on the main stage of the Nyege Nyege Festival held near the Itanda Falls in Uganda. This time, Alpha was accompanied by the Odoko Lit group of traditional musicians and dancers from the Purongo-Lawora district near Gulu. As in 2018, the performance started with an interpretation of Acholi songs accompanied by acoustic instruments, including the *adungu* harps, and then continued with the electronic versions of these repertoires. Following a disagreement between the artists, it was no longer Palayeng who launched his productions from his laptop, but another DJ who played the songs saved on a USB stick.

Conclusion

Electronic music in East Africa is a social pact where engagements with labels, online platforms and social networks are as important as musicians' engagements with the public. Since mediation through online networks are direct and, paradoxically, more physically disconnected from the audience, they invite musicians to develop strategies to inscribe their musical heritage in a rapidly changing temporality to meet the assumed expectations of the network. Within this general framework, Acholitronix fits both as a global music that could be a sub-genre of House-techno and as a contemporary repertoire specific to Acholi weddings in the towns of Gulu and Lira.

The historical origin of Acholitronix is that of a bottom-up process that started more than 20 years ago; that of the re-integration of so-called traditional music into the social institution of Acholi weddings using digital tools to compensate either for the lack of musicians or the prohibitive costs of their performances. This new and popular music quickly became a symbol of resilience by drawing on the musical life of the Acholi people in a context where the civil war had eroded all cultural practices. It was on this redefined and transformed cultural base that the Acholitronix genre was formed as a "music in an electronic fashion for the whole world" (Palayeng, Gulu, Uganda. 3 Sept. 2021). Palayeng's musical innovations offer a new lease of life to the Acholi musical traditions of the post-civil war era. If their place in the alternative club scene depends on the fashions that come and go, their place in the Acholi musical traditions seems secure.

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