



# God's Graffiti. Prophetic agency and the pragmatics of writing in Post-Colonial Gabon

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TESTAMENT

*A. Onso*

André ONSO MDA créateur God  
21 Août 2005







ON80 M6A Andre Khristos  
Cosmos  
Créateurs  
circoncis (pénis)  
aveugles, sourds, sourds,  
muets et lépres  
Résurrections  
les Zodiaques et  
les Horoscopes  
Résurrections  
la Vie, toutes les Vies  
etc...  
Jésus-christ  
INCIRCONCIS  
la mort, toutes les morts.



**God's Graffiti:  
Prophetic Agency and the Pragmatics of Writing in  
Post-Colonial Gabon**

Julien Bonhomme







The serious things hidden! The important things hidden! The supernatural things for all the living hidden!  
The things of the creator God of the sky and the earth hidden! The things of the Throne hidden! The things  
of life hidden! I have the right to write these on the walls and everywhere else to report them, and to call the  
attention of the people in charge! A worldwide responsibility for all the countries in the whole world!

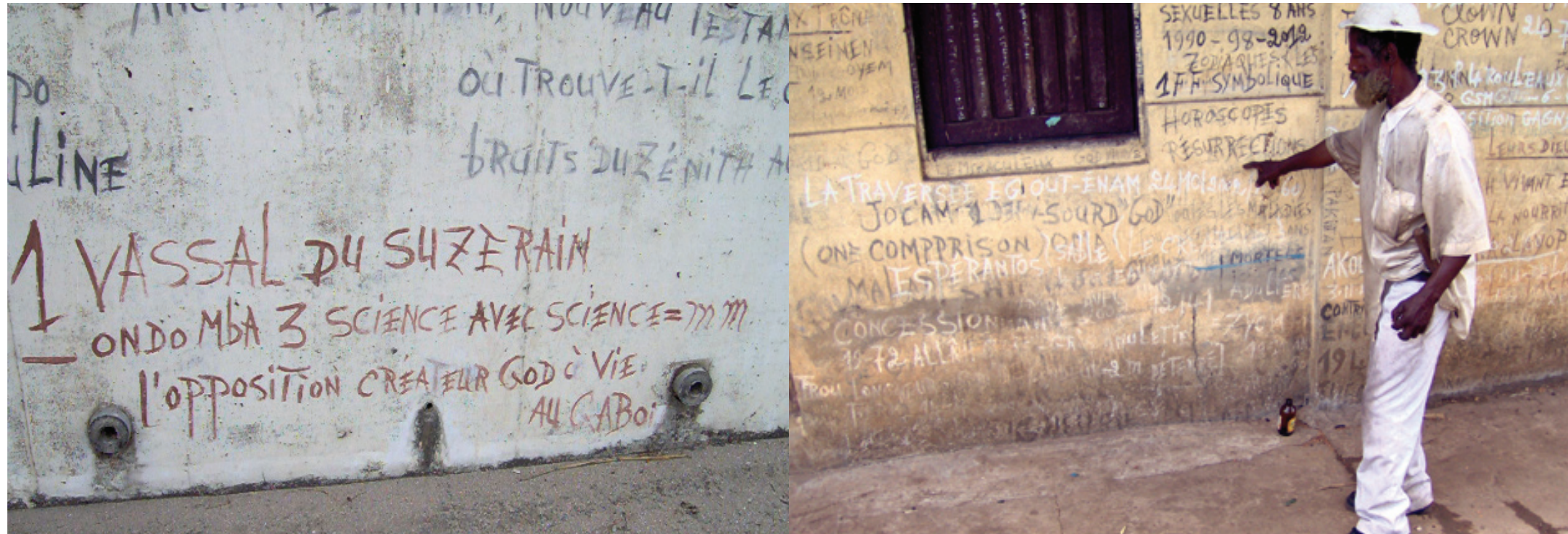
- André Ondo Mba

On my very first day in Libreville in May 2000, as I was wandering in a city that still looked to me like an  
urban heart of darkness, I came upon some strange graffiti. They were very distinct from the other urban graffiti made  
by Gabonese teenagers on the American model globalized in the 1970s (Vulbeau 1992). The handwriting was peculiar,  
and so were the messages: eccentric aphorisms blending mystical, sexual, and political themes, such as “Jesus closes the  
anus with his prayers. Punishment?” These graffiti could be found in many places in Libreville (and each message usually  
appeared several times). They were in fact written by God Himself. My first personal encounter with God took place  
five years later, in July 2005. I spent two months with Him, and two more months the next summer. Our relationship,  
awkward at first, soon grew to an odd but true friendship. Since He was almost deaf, we mainly communicated through



writing on notebooks. This written dialogue became the very substance of our relationship.

God was born as André Ondo Mba in 1943, near Oyem in northern Gabon. He received primary schooling,  
and studied to become a teacher, but he became a prison guard and then a radio operator in the security administration.  
He settled in Libreville in the early 1960s, just after independence. He was married in the 1960s, had four children, and  
divorced in 1979. He was married a second time to a woman who left him soon after because of his mental illness. His  
hearing impairment started in the late 1960s, due (according to him) to battery acid poured in his ears by someone. His  
mental illness started in the early 1980s, during his initiation to Bwiti (which requires the ingestion of a massive dose of a  
plant hallucinogen). He was brought there by his second wife, who had difficulties bearing children (but became pregnant  
soon after the initiation). From then on, he suffered chronic psychosis (most likely paranoid schizophrenia) expressed  
through eccentric behavior and a very creative delirium. This led him to an early retirement in 1985-86 (he therefore  
earns a small disability pension). He began writing public graffiti in 1988-90, when his delirium became strongly  
religion-oriented. It is at this time that he became God. He reinterpreted his biography as a series of miracles: his birth;  
his circumcision in 1953; his Bwiti initiation (which enables him to “shake the sky and the earth”, to be in contact with  
his “miracle God,” to see “the rope of the creations” and to start his “mythology”); the birth of his youngest son in 1982;







his circumcision in 1993, etc. The short autobiography he wrote for me begins in this manner: “I have a supernatural miracle in my body since 1943, my year of birth, with the blend of the Khristos, Cosmos, and Creators. A creator God Ondo Mba André.” He also started wearing white clothes and a colonial helmet at that time. Since his helmet has been stolen, he wears a white hat. He let his beard grow long – a supernatural ordeal for him, but an obvious sign of lunacy for others (only men in mourning are bearded). The 1990s were a decade of heightened inspiration during which he wrote intensively every day, on notebooks and publicly. He has written thousands of pages in dozens of notebooks and on every piece of wretched paper he could find, such as cardboards for cigarettes or medicine, shopping bills, pension receipts. His public graffiti were first written on wooden boards (which he calls Ntsime in Fang – his native language) hung on trees and poles in Libreville. Then he started writing directly with water-based paint on public walls, parapets, crash barriers, and poles. He must have written thousands of graffiti in Libreville over the past 20 years.

Ondo Mba’s graffiti fascinated me since the very beginning. This fascination has slowly grown into a more elaborate research project. I have thus collected many different materials: interviews with his relatives and neighbors, written conversations with him, some of his notebooks, pictures of his graffiti, and hours of film footage. Only a combination of text and image can possibly account for the expressive dimension of Ondo Mba’s writing and for the

experiential dimensions of this ethnographic encounter. Nonetheless, writing about Ondo Mba and his graffiti is not an easy undertaking. When I was with him, I became tangled up in his very systematic delirium, trying to elicit its meanings. I believe I finally managed to grasp his peculiar way of looking at things. But it is hard to lay it out, because Ondo Mba’s many obsessive ideas (about illness, religion, sexuality, geopolitics, colonialism, writing, etc.) strangely intermingle with each other and with his own autobiography.

In this respect, Ondo Mba is a borderline case akin to Menocchio, the 16th century Friuli miller burnt by the Inquisition because he alleged the cosmos was somehow made of cheese and worms (Ginzburg 1980); but he is also akin to Tuhami, the Moroccan outcast married to a she-demon (Crapanzano 1980). Like them, Ondo Mba is a very atypical individual, living on the margins of normality. And yet, through these singular characters, one can understand a lot about their times, cultures, and societies. This article on Ondo Mba is simultaneously a life history and a case study. It moves back and forth between reality and fantasy, between biographical facts and autobiographical imagination, as Ondo Mba does himself. It thus raises the problematic of the “negotiations of reality” (Crapanzano 1980): how does Ondo Mba articulate his world and situate himself within it?

In this regard, I depart from any psychoanalytical or psychiatric analysis. Ondo Mba should not be reduced to his







mental illness, and his writing to a mere delirium. He most certainly displays all the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, but this is not what really matters. Ondo Mba deserves better than to become a new “Schreber case.” Daniel Paul Schreber was a 19th century German judge convinced that God was sending him supernatural rays to turn him into a woman. Confined for years in a mental hospital, he wrote the memoirs of his illness (Schreber 1955). Among others, Freud became interested in Schreber’s writings, and analyzed them in terms of paranoia and homosexual desire for the father (Freud 2003). It is certainly noteworthy that President Schreber and Ondo Mba share the same kind of systematic and creative delirium. Nonetheless, as Deleuze and Guattari note, Freud reduces a very rich and intricate delirium to a few weak psychological themes, mainly personal and family matters. Yet “every delirium has a strong historical, geographical, political, racial content; it involves and mixes races, cultures, continents and kingdoms” (Deleuze & Guattari 1972: 106). Ondo Mba’s obsessions are indeed political and geopolitical by nature: they deal with Gabonese politics, the UN Security Council, and the Pope’s death. His writing not only grants us access to his personal frame of mind; they also represent a magnifying (but also distorting) lens to understand the globalized imagination of postcolonial Gabon. Moreover, Ondo Mba is not just an eccentric; he is above all a compulsive writer, as was President Schreber (Mannoni 1969). Indeed, the countless graffiti that saturate the public spaces of Libreville strongly singularize Ondo Mba from the other lunatics and



dropouts who wander in the city. Hence our study must inevitably focus on these public writings and not only on the individual.

Therefore, I am not so much interested in the semiotics of schizophrenic delirium as in the pragmatics of unusual graffiti painted by a schizophrenic. The central question raised by Ondo Mba’s graffiti deals indeed with the pragmatics of writing. How does he build and perform his own agency through his graffiti? Ondo Mba is God creating the world through His writing. His prophetic (or supernatural) agency thus rests on the performativity of the writing on display. His graffiti are an appropriation of the power of the religious Scriptures, but also of the written practices of the postcolonial bureaucracy and Western science. In order to fully understand Ondo Mba’s graffiti, we have to take into account both their illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects. Ondo Mba’s communicative intentions as well as the readers’ interpretations of them. The public writing constitutes therefore the tangible link between Ondo Mba as an individual and the wider sociocultural context.

The graffiti that Ondo Mba compulsively writes on the walls of Libreville are revelations. These revelations are fundamentally linked to an obsession for hermeneutics. Ondo Mba lives indeed in a dense universe of signs waiting to be deciphered. He sees signs everywhere: in the natural environment, bodily sensations, other people’s behavior, but also in







playing cards, street signs, newspapers, or rubbish. These meaningful signs are interpreted according to a new language he calls “language Mibeghe” (one of God’s names in Fang), “language of the Creator,” or “language of the beyond.” This language is based on lexical substitutions: for instance, “Marshaley” means “navel”, “King-God” means “penis.” Hidden meanings are thus everywhere, and common language is misleading. This peculiar use of language renders conversation with him very difficult, since his words cannot be taken at face value. This anxious concern with language finds expression in an outstanding linguistic inventiveness. The poetics of his writings is striking: he plays with rhymes, homonyms, paronyms, polysemy, puns, repetitions, neologisms – a recurrent feature of the graffiti genre (Nilsen 1980), but also of schizophrenic discourse (Musiol & Trognon 2000). He also uses all the potentialities of the written space, notably lists, columns, and arithmetic figures (Goody 1977, 1987). Ondo Mba thus actively transforms the common language through writing.

Since God talks in many languages, this “language Mibeghe” is a Babelian polyglossy. Ondo Mba writes mainly in French (everybody speaks French in Gabon), sometimes in Fang (his native language). But he also uses many English words, often misspelled, such as “God in strut” for “in God we trust,” or “US Banger” for “US banner.” The names of God are his preferred topic of polyglossy: Dieu, God, Dios, Yahvé, Allah, Zame (in Fang) recur in his graffiti.



Ondo Mba thus dreams about a universal language – and he sometimes writes about “Esperanto.” This polyglossy is however a matter of great concern for him, because he cannot understand all the voices he hears. Quite often signs remain undecipherable. “This is other peoples’ language I don’t know.” When he writes down his dreams in his diary, he almost always adds the phrase “the explanations have been disturbed.” He even suspects people of “falsifying the common language” to hinder his hermeneutic work – a rather common paranoid suspicion.

Ondo Mba’s revelations are fundamentally religious. Ondo Mba sets himself in constant competition with other prophets, messiahs and religions. All previous prophets (there are 210 according to him) are false prophets, including Jesus. The death (and even “rape”) of Jesus is the evidence of his failure. Ondo Mba is his successful successor: one of his names is indeed Jesus 3 (Jesus 2 being an abortive attempt). Jesus is a “prophet to death all the deaths”, whereas he is a “prophet for life all the lives.” Ondo Mba’s graffiti thus proclaim the end of the old religion: it is now “forbidden to worship or pray everywhere beyond and here below.” Writing is an essential part of Ondo Mba’s mission: it is at the same time a central theme and the medium of his mythology. For him, the spoken word is not really the source of all creation (a trite African expression); it is rather the written word. There is indeed a strong historical link between monotheistic religion and writing (Ortigue 1981): the power of the written word is a classic Christian and Muslim theme. So there is a







widespread magical use of writing among marabouts and nganga in West and Central Africa (Tonda 1994). Ondo Mba's obsession for writing directly echoes this. His graffiti surpass the Scriptures: "The Holy Bible is no longer valid. Neither is the Koran."

Conversely, most of the inventions of indigenous scripts in 19th and 20th century Africa had a prophetic dimension (Dalby 1967, 1968, 1969): the inventor usually received a dream revelation of his script. "Scripturary prophetism" (Amselle 2001) is therefore a common feature of colonial and postcolonial Africa. On that subject, Ondo Mba is very much akin to Frédéric Bruly-Bouabré, the Ivorian inventor of a "universal" syllabary of 449 pictograms (Monod 1958) and failed founder of a prophetic cult named "the Order of the Persecuted" (Paulme 1998), who was recently "artialized" by Western critics as an "art brut" self-taught artist (Amselle 2005). Both share the same fascination for writing and science, and the same prophetic and universalist ambitions. They also followed the same path in late colonial Africa: both were schooled and worked as clerks in the security administration. Ondo Mba is therefore a sort of a scripturary prophet (even though he didn't invent a script but rather a new written language). In this respect, he is close to the Bwiti prophetic tradition among the Fang. Bwiti is a visionary initiation cult originated in southern Gabon (Bonhomme 2005), but borrowed in the early 20th century by the northerner Fang who turned it into a more syncretic



and prophetic movement (Fernandez 1982, Mary 1999). Ondo Mba was initiated to Bwiti in the early 1980s – the intake of the iboga hallucinogen being the major event that triggered his psychosis. Most tellingly, many of his mystic revelations betray widespread schizophrenic obsessions, but also echo Bwiti mythology (that's why Ondo Mba is not merely reducible to his illness).

Writing is linked to religion, but it is also strongly associated with bureaucracy and the State (Goody 1986). Ondo Mba's graffiti mime the Scriptures; but their performativity also rests on the hegemonic power of the written practices of the (post)colonial State. The colonized "natives" could indeed experience the very effective power of the written word through decrees and regulations, censuses and taxes, identity cards and passes, schoolbooks and blackboards, scientific surveys and medical prescriptions. These (post)colonial forms of knowledge and power are a major source of inspiration for Ondo Mba, who was himself a small clerk of the young postcolonial State in the early 1960s. Ondo Mba is for instance obsessed with numbers and accounting, and he usually writes on accounting books. He performs a supernatural accounting of days, years, people, and creations: "2400.000.000.000 creations for 29.000.000.000 years." This act of writing is a means to perform his agency as a divine creator. His writings are full of additions and subtractions: his age in 2006 was thus  $65 - 2 = 63$  years, the subtraction of 2 years being a supernatural reward. This obsession with





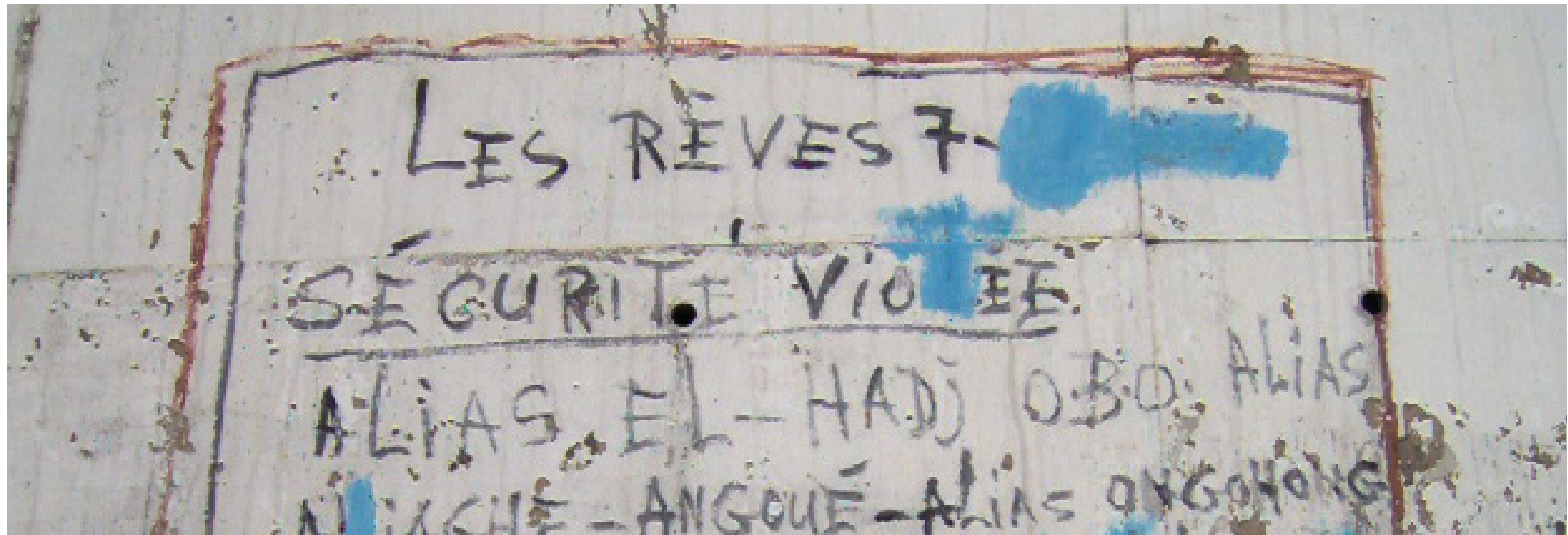


punishments and rewards, but also with official complaints, courts, and arrests is an obvious recollection of his past career in the penitentiary administration. His clothes and hat express the same fixation with colonial “commandement” (Mbembe 2000) – the colonial helmet is still a coveted attribute in contemporary Gabon. So do the military ranks, which are omnipresent in his writings: marshal, general, officer, etc.

Ondo Mba is also obsessed with science. His graffiti are scientific as well as religious. Science and religion are indeed similar, since the true object of science is God, “the creator looked for by all the scientists.” He himself is a scientist: “I am sent by others for the scientific clues.” He has even devised a special ideogram to express the scientific nature of his work: *////* means “scientific clue” or “science with science” (whereas */////* means “science without science”). Science is a question of deciphering signs and clues, an undertaking he aptly calls “semiologies.” This scientific task involves the recurrent use of abstract terms (such as anthropometries, ontologies, anti-anthropology, paronyms, eponyms – note the systematic use of the plural) and the compulsive use of a dictionary he used to carry everywhere (before his elder son threw it away in anger). Ondo Mba often checks words in the dictionary and even copies definitions in his notebooks. He therefore masters a very elaborate vocabulary and makes almost no spelling mistakes – a truly impressive skill.

The Whites are the main actors of this semiology. They are the ones who set up the signs and entrusted him

with the scientific task of deciphering them. My personal relationship with him is therefore cast in these terms. We are doing a scientific survey together: the title he gave to one of our dialogic notebooks is indeed “The scientificities.” As he put it to me, I have to organize my semiology with his own and report our collective work to the other White scientists (my work on him is indeed part of Ondo Mba’s global communication strategy): “Make the connections with the scientific clues, so that all the other Whites can be thrilled for years.” As our relationship strengthened, he started asking me questions about the true meaning of his scientific revelations. This betrays the overall ambivalence of his own status: sometimes he is a seeker tirelessly trying to elicit the signs of God’s semiology; sometimes he is God Himself, the creator of the signs sought after by the scientists. One day I was filming him, he bluntly told me: “You, Whites, are looking for God in your machines that see beyond when you are here below. This is how you see me in your walkie-talkies like a creator God.” The “supernatural lines,” which delimit his neighborhood and enable him to make his “creations,” also constitute an important chapter of this scientific semiology. “The supernatural lines for the limit of the life and death of the prophet are created beyond. If the Whites find them, it is a great scientific discovery, controlled by the other Whites, the scientists, in order to fit in the boundary stones and build their semiologies.” These supernatural lines and stones allude to the cadastral survey and register of the boundaries of a plot of land – a key feature of bureaucratic power in







postcolonial Gabon. Ondo Mba’s semiology thus replicates some of the most important bureaucratic forms of knowledge and power: accounting, measurement, survey, register, etc. The performativity of his writing directly derives from the authority of official documents, such as the cadastre.

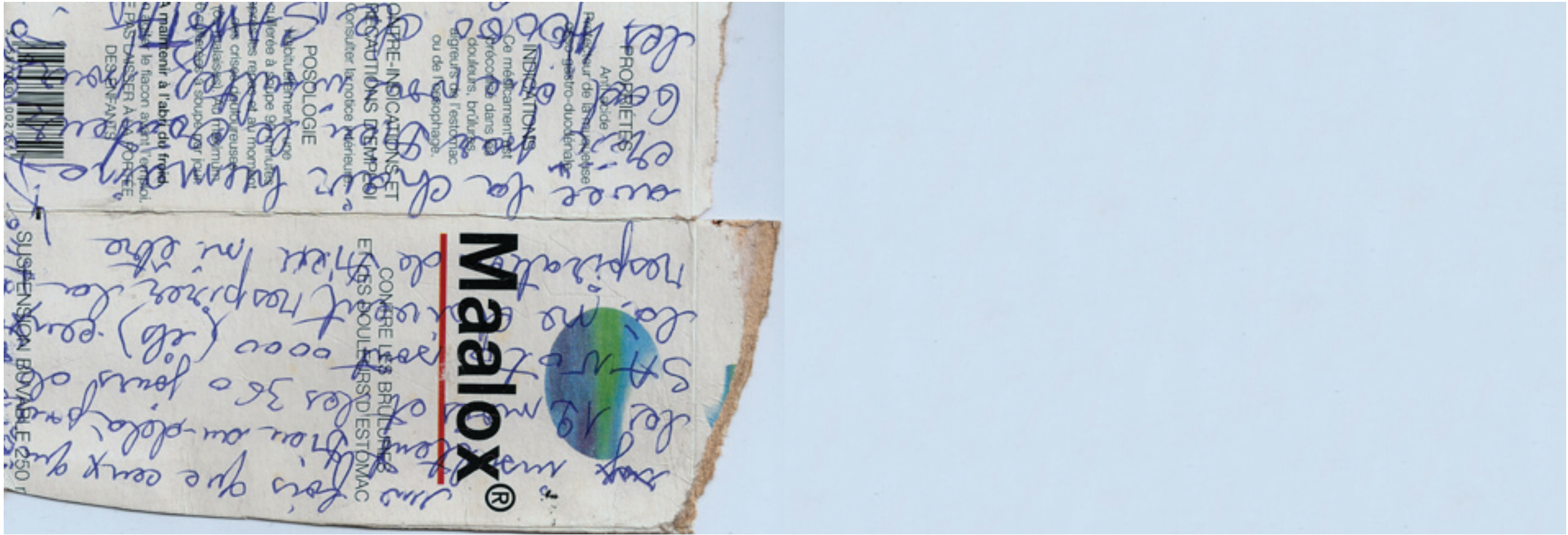
Indeed, Ondo Mba is a divine creator by official decree. He carries a copy of his former penitentiary security pass, on which he added “Decree of 1977” and “Captain – General – Marshal.” This 1977 decree is a critical event in his autobiography: it allowed him to begin his mythology. It is noteworthy that this is an international decree: “This law comes from the great powers which had set up the work of the mythologies I am doing now: China, the USSR, the USA, France, Great Britain, Spain, and, with all reserve, Japan and India as observers.” The divine creation is, in fact, nothing but an international decree: “All the creations made by the creator God are inside, with all the days, dates, years, unless mistaken. In a word, everything God will make is in the decree of 1977 or the papers for the mythologies.” Ondo Mba’s graffiti enact his creations as by law enacted.

Ondo Mba’s imagination is thus a truly globalized imagination. His mythology is a geopolitics or, one should rather say, a cosmopolitics. Besides Gabon and France, his graffiti also involve the USA, China, Iran, Lebanon, the Soviet Union, Italy, Israel, Brazil, Great Britain, Spain, Japan, India, Malaysia, Argentina, Iraq, Indochina, Yugoslavia,



Cameroon, Morocco, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, the Suez canal, and so on. All these nations are key actors of his mythology. Queen Elizabeth and President Lincoln are his interlocutors. He must go to Paris and Washington to build water closets, in order to allow the resurrection of punished beings jailed in supernatural cages. And many of his revelations are directly validated by resolutions of the UN Security Council. Ondo Mba thus imagines a globalized power, which relies on the written word and merges religion, science, the State, and international governance.

Ondo Mba’s imagination is globalized and parochialized at the same time. Indeed, the global scale of geopolitics is replicated on the local scale of his neighborhood. A neighbor’s house is the Cameroonian embassy; another one is the Greenland; a wrecked minivan is the Moroccan embassy. “All the countries are here,” he told me. This strange geopolitics of neighborhood is an expression of a more general principle of his mythology, which we could call “fractal analogism”: the whole creation replicates itself at different scales, and is ultimately to be found in Ondo Mba’s own body. This schema is pregnant with Bwiti symbolism as well: Ondo Mba indeed builds on local religious traditions to invent his own identity. Gabon is nothing but a fetus. And Ondo Mba is the whole world: “The whole creation is in my body.” He also claims, “I am San Francisco” – a particularly relevant analogy since it is at the same time the Spanish name of a Christian saint and an American city. Besides, the scar under his foot is the “Horn of Africa” – a pun on the French word







“corne” which means horn but also a patch of hard skin. Consequently, all the people in the world are his children, or rather parts of his supernatural body. He is therefore in direct communication with them: “God Ondo Mba. I am the one you see in your dreams,” he told me.

This analogy between body and world is the reason why Ondo Mba can work miracles: everything that happens to him also happens in the external world. “When mosquitoes bite me, it is a great miracle, they bite as well all men at the Zenith beyond in their supernatural and natural bodies.” Ondo Mba is thus the creator of an ever-ongoing creation. “When I light this fire, it blazes at the Zenith too. When I cut the grass and the bush, I make God’s creations, one God-Dios at the Zenith and here below. That’s serious!” This Zenith is one of the most intriguing notions of Ondo Mba’s mythology. It designates a liminal space at the same time inside and outside his body. It is also the limit between “the beyond” and “here below,” and between life and death. This transitional space is the topical source of Ondo Mba’s revelations.

“The secret of our cœur-à-cœur [heart-to-heart – a very poetical neologism derived from the French expression ‘corps-à-corps’], when we speak with our mouth shut and listen there beyond, is called the Zenith. At the Zenith, we hear the creator Dieu God who speaks to us, as well as our friends, our immortals, the living, the animals, the birds, the reptiles, the worms, the ants, the insects, the fish, who all speak as we men do. My voice is thundering “Jupiter”. I speak



publicly and the whole world hears me at the Zenith. A great miracle of God (a creator God Ondo Mba).” When Ondo Mba is “listening at the Zenith,” he thus hears voices speaking to him in the language Mibeghe (auditory verbal hallucinations are a standard symptom of paranoid schizophrenia). But he must constantly struggle against the “noises of the Zenith” that hinder him from hearing and understanding these voices.

These voices “from the beyond” are not the only source of his revelations. Dreams as well as bodily communication also play an important role. Messages are sent to him through supernatural shivers (Gabonese traditional divination, too, relies on bodily sensations such as shivers or throbbing – see Bonhomme 2005): “All my body shivers beyond with God vivant André Ondo Mba, with Dieu-God-Dios here below.” A breeze sensation is also a meaningful message. The wind is indeed a central theme in Bwiti: it represents the speech as well as the Holy Spirit. When “the wind is in [his] left hand,” Ondo Mba’s body “sings.” He also plays silent music by tapping his fingers, and this music speaks at the Zenith. In sum, the Zenith enables him to be directly connected to God. This liminal space also involves an equivocation between hearing and speaking: sometimes Ondo Mba hears the voice of God; sometimes he is God and speaks to all men through a “supernatural loudspeaker.” This ambiguity derives from Ondo Mba’s split personality, the very core of his supernatural agency: he exists here below but also beyond. His cherished double who “dictates” the mythology to him; he calls him “my immortal,” “my immortal God,” “my supernatural friend beyond,” “Ondo Mba of dreams,” or “my spiritual homonym” (homonymy is a very meaningful relation in Gabonese anthroponymy). This explains why he often speaks and writes about himself in the third person. Schizophrenia indeed involves a disorder of the sense of agency and of the ownership of thought (Frith 1992): patients perceive their thread of thought as alien to them, and have difficulty in monitoring their and others’ intentions.

At the Zenith, Ondo Mba is thus Almighty God, the creator of all things. This wishful thinking about all-powerfulness however coexists with an anguish of death. Ondo Mba is haunted by the perils of annihilation: “zero-nothingness,” “wasted,” “busted,” “wrecked” obsessively recur in his writings. His mythological work is indeed a dangerous “ordeal.” Obedience and disobedience are keywords here: he has to make strenuous efforts to obey to his supernatural friend God, otherwise he could die. Until now he has been saved by periodic “resurrections”; but an intense feeling of imminent threat remains. The burden he must endure by God’s decree mainly deals with sexuality, a life-threatening topic for him: he must go through several “circumcisions” (the cutting of his umbilical cord at his birth, his real circumcision at 10, the circumcision of his youngest son in 1993) as well as years of chastity (Ondo Mba has been living alone with his two sons for years).

The public display of graffiti in the city is the key element of Ondo Mba’s divine creation. “The Ntsime wooden boards [on which he first wrote his graffiti] are natural objects which create supernatural things.” Indeed, writing means performing a supernatural agency. The graffiti are an index of Ondo Mba’s demiurgic agency (on artifacts and agency, see Gell 1998). The proliferation of graffiti in the city is the visible expression of the ever-ongoing creation he is responsible for. On that topic, a comparison between Ondo Mba and Ekang Ngoua is telling. Ekang Ngoua (1925-1977), one of the many minor prophets of Bwiti, invented a script to write down his revelations (Swiderski 1984). But his writings on notebooks were secret and cryptic: they were not intended to be read by others (Bonhomme 2006). Whereas Ondo Mba’s graffiti are public by nature: they are written to be read by as many people as possible. This opposition between





secrecy and visibility is decisive to understand Ondo Mba’s undertaking. Indeed, Ondo Mba is neither an initiate nor a prophet, and doesn’t consider himself as such: he did not found a cult, does not perform any collective ritual, and has no followers. However he is not a failed religious entrepreneur. Here, creation matters more than conventional transmission. Ondo Mba’s religious ambitions fully express themselves through the public writing of graffiti. He is God creating the world through His writing on urban walls. The public display is thus a crucial dimension of the illocutionary force of his writings. Focusing on the performative function of graffiti as a scripturary genre (Fraenkel 2001, 2002) enables us to elicit the pragmatics of Ondo Mba’s writing acts.

Signature is the main element of graffiti: teenage graffiti carry no messages but the display and repetition of pseudonyms. Signatures are also central to Ondo Mba’s writing. He very often signs his graffiti (but also his notebooks), so much so that his names proliferate everywhere in the city. The many names he signs with (besides André Ondo Mba or AOM) are a way to empower his writing. “Le Maréchalat du Roi-Dieu” (The Marshalcy of King-God) conveys military, political, and religious connotations, but also alludes to the Maréchal Mobutu Roi du Zaïre (himself a baroque despot with many names), even though in Ondo Mba’s peculiar language it refers in fact to his navel and circumcision. Thus, Ondo Mba combines several identities through his signatures. His and God’s names are frequently merged – an apposite fashion to publicly assert his supernatural identity. “God vivant André Ondo Mba” is indeed one of his preferred signatures. It is often condensed with the acronym GVAOM, or on the contrary, exaggeratedly expanded into something like “Le créateur God vivant AOM 1 créateur God-Dios à vie toutes les vies.”

Location is another key aspect of graffiti: graffiti serve as territorial markers to appropriate urban space (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974). The places where Ondo Mba writes are carefully chosen, as the map locating the main sites of his graffiti proves (see map below). Besides his house and close neighborhood, Ondo Mba’s favorite site is the Bord de mer: the seashore is the historical district of Libreville, deeply associated with the colonization and the Whites (hence one speaks of the “civilization of the seashore”). The most saturated walls are around Sainte-Marie, one of the oldest and main churches in Libreville, where Fort d’Aumale, the first colonial building, was formerly located. The Presidential Palace neighborhood is also filled with graffiti, even though Ondo Mba does not write directly on the Palace walls (he is eccentric but not reckless). Boulevard Triomphal Omar Bongo and Boulevard de l’Indépendance are interspersed with inscriptions. The heart of religious and political power is thus his main target. Ondo Mba also chooses the most visible and busy places to display his graffiti: around the Gare routière, on the main crossroads, and all along the Voie express (the expressway semi-circling Libreville), especially around the interchanges. His graffiti cover more than 16 miles from the Airport in the north to the Owendo port and railway station in the south. On the other hand, he avoids the enclosed residential districts where his graffiti would not be as visible as in the downtown area. Ondo Mba is indeed aware that visibility is power (but readability is also essential for him, unlike teenage graffiti). In short, the locations of his graffiti map out an urban geography of power and visibility.

Urban graffiti are memories on the wall (Plesch 2002). This is particularly true in the case of Ondo Mba. The urban display of his graffiti represents an enormous external memory of his life and creation. He uses the city as a diary to keep track of every supernatural event happening to him. Indeed, besides his signature, he systematically adds dates to his graffiti. In this respect, Ondo Mba is akin to Rétif de la Bretonne, the 18th century French writer who engraved



hundreds of inscriptions on the Parisian parapets during his night walks (Rétif de la Bretonne 1889). Rétif de la Bretonne turned Paris into a “private diary,” and merged his own identity and memory into the urban space. Thus his daily walks became a way to “commemorate” the dates and events of his life. In the same way, Ondo Mba’s graffiti and his notebooks are intimately connected. The notebooks represent a space where he can articulate the transition between his self and others, between writing for himself and writing for others (the limits of the self are often blurred among schizophrenics). They are a diary in which he writes down his dreams and their interpretations. But they also serve as drafts for his public inscriptions: before writing anything publicly, he copies in his notebooks tireless repetitions of the same sentences with only minor variations, until he finds the correct wording. He often ends these drafts with the phrase “to be revised.” When he is satisfied with the formulation, he indicates the location where it should be publicly written. The notebooks also keep track of the places and dates of the graffiti removed or spoiled by other people. The walls of his house constitute a mediating space between these notebooks and the public area: every revelation is written on them, so much so that they look like a strange palimpsest (some years ago his sons repainted the whole house to erase his bothersome graffiti). Ondo Mba uses them as a mnemonic device: when we were together, he would often go out and check the exact wording of a phrase.

Through his public graffiti, Ondo Mba thus turns his personal memory into a collective memory (and vice versa since he is the city and its dwellers are parts of his body). The intended readership of his writing is indeed universal: “I write for the 5 continents in virtue of the 1977 decree for the world-wide mythology.” And so are the senders or patrons of his mission: Ondo Mba is sent by “all the countries from the 5 continents all over the world” to write in Libreville. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the public display of official records (especially laws) on city walls was a ritual of exhibition constitutive of democracy (Fraenkel 1994). This “textual genealogy” saturating the city was the visible expression of people’s sovereignty, the collective fictitious author of the law. The public display of laws was therefore an essential part of the political collective memory (on collective memory, see Halbwachs 1997). In the same way, the public display of graffiti enables Ondo Mba to assert his demiurgic agency by its objectification into collective memory. Here the written word is more efficient than speech (since Ondo Mba is deaf, he cannot really preach). The graffiti are therefore a very real transposition of the “loudspeaker” through which Ondo Mba supposedly speaks to all men. They are the tangible connection between him and Libreville (and, according to him, the whole world).

Ondo Mba’s enterprise thus involves a communicative paradox: efficient pragmatic means contrast with unintelligible semantic content. On the one hand, the illocutionary force of his messages is based on their public display. This ingenious communication strategy is clearly intended by Ondo Mba. On the other hand, Ondo Mba, like all schizophrenics, is not aware that his writings are largely impenetrable to others. So how do other people really perceive his graffiti? This issue of readers’ reception (the literacy rate in Gabon is about 65-70%, and certainly higher in Libreville) must be addressed in order to answer an important question: are these graffiti more than the delirium of an old man? Libreville is a small city; therefore everybody has already seen Ondo Mba’s graffiti and knows him by sight or by reputation. He is usually identified by his public signature (as “le Maréchalat du Roi-Dieu”) or by his clothes (as “the man dressed in white”). The “salad of words” of schizophrenic discourse resists interpretation and triggers endless endeavors for interpretations. Indeed, Ondo Mba’s writing provokes much perplexity and questioning: is he a lunatic, a prophet,

a scholar, a political opponent, or all these at the same time? Yet most people carefully remain aloof to him (except his relatives and close neighbors), because every disturbed person is suspected of possibly being a witch. Nevertheless, according to his relatives, several journalists and even “Grands types” (Big men, such as politicians) have come to ask him for the true meanings of his writing. His graffiti and his figure are now part and parcel of Libreville’s patrimony. A friend of mine, a Gabonese sociolinguist fascinated as much by Ondo Mba as I am, has even written a play about him (Moussirou-Mouyama n.d.). In a way, Ondo Mba’s attempt to turn his personal memory into collective memory is a success, even though nobody clearly understands what this collective memory really means.

The reputation of Ondo Mba as a political opponent is particularly interesting. His graffiti indeed possess a ubiquitous political dimension – like most African prophetisms (Sinda 1974, Dozon 1995). Besides, graffiti are often used as political manifestos (Deniers & McMurray 1990). Ondo Mba takes a strong stance against politics. He ridicules the chauvinism of Gabonese politics: “‘Gabon d’abord’ or the fetus called Politics by the foreign countries.” He opposes “the things Dieu-God” (his mythology) and “the things President of the Republic” (politics). Politics is a dupery for “prophets without prophets.” Ondo Mba sometimes claims to be apolitical: “No one can catch God vivant AOM with politics.” But he also often sides with the Opposition. Most tellingly, Ondo Mba started his graffiti in 1988-90, just before the new era of Democracy and Multipartism in Gabon. During the very contested 1993 presidential election (it is said Mba Abessole, Bongo’s political challenger, had in fact won the election), he would write everywhere in Libreville: “Two kings struggle for the throne in Gabon” or “The Opposition wins in Gabon” (the headline of a foreign newspaper censored in Gabon). In fact, Ondo Mba identifies himself with the true political opposition: “The opposition creator God for life in Gabon.”

Ondo Mba has a grudge against President Bongo. He sees Omar Bongo (in power since 1967) as his personal rival: “After Bongo of the Presidencies, this one God vivant AOM must rule now.” The rivalry is strengthened by an unexpected paronymy: in 2003 Bongo decided to add the name of his father to his own and became Bongo Ondimba. The paronymy between Ondo Mba and Ondimba proved to the former that the latter is an unproductive fraud who tries to steal his creations. “Ondimba is a false God who always wants to fight people for their thrones and creations without even making some for himself.” Ondo Mba’s public graffiti boldly mock President Bongo: “Bongo Ondimba = Bongo Zero”, “Bongo Omar Ondimba El Hadj former President of the Gabonese Republic.” Life President becomes “Death President.” He claims Bongo is nothing but “a limb of his uncircumcised body,” in fact the hymen! He went so far as to write him a public epitaph in Libreville: “Here lies Ondimba. 1st/2/2005.” Ondimba even becomes a common noun with a plural form (antonomasia and the meaningfulness of names are indeed central in Ondo Mba’s writing): Ondo Mba leads a cosmic battle against thousands of Ondimbas who try to kill him and destroy his creations (a persecution syndrome common among schizophrenics).

Strangely enough, even though he untiringly defaces the public walls and ridicules the President, Ondo Mba has never been arrested nor bothered by the authorities. Like the king’s fool, he can utter the violent truth without even being threatened. Let us not fool ourselves however: this is first and foremost because Ondo Mba is nothing but a harmless lunatic whose wild political protest cannot seriously threaten the regime. Nevertheless, his tireless struggle against annihilation and the authorities is not a mere fantasy. Though he is not physically threatened, his graffiti are. In

some areas, his writings are systematically censored with blue paint (though I ignore by whom and why). Moreover, the City cleaning services periodically erase his graffiti by applying a new layer of white paint on public walls. This usually happens before Independence Day (on the 17th of August), when a hurried and superficial cleaning operation takes place to renovate the public façade of the regime. That’s why Ondo Mba takes offence at Independence Day: “Why is the celebration for the 17th of August against my public writings?” His creations of paramount importance are “spoiled by the sect of the 1960 Independences.” He therefore wants to file an international complaint to require the Gabonese regime to “pay a fine of 300 000 US\$ at the Zenith.” The urban public space is thus a palimpsest on which his graffiti have been written, erased and re-written for almost 20 years. It is a contested space on which a struggle for collective memory takes place. His graffiti, political posters during elections, but also murals against AIDS, advertisements, and more and more religious posters (notably Pentecostal posters announcing “festivals of miracles”) compete on the walls of Libreville. “They erased many of my writings and wrote fake dates and fake messages,” Ondo Mba complains. What is at stake here is the shaping of the “lieux de mémoire” (Nora 1984), the locus of collective memory in Libreville. With his graffiti, Ondo Mba tries to subvert the blank façade of the regime – a locus of amnesia – in order to impose his own sense of what is postcolonial reality. And who better than an old lunatic wearing a colonial helmet to tell us what that reality is?

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