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EDITOR'S NOTE

This article was originally published in French: see Le Lay, Maëline. 2023. "L'art est mon arme': Slam et activisme politique à Goma, Nord-Kivu, RD Congo." *Multitudes*, no. 87. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2022-2-page-107.htm>.

- 1 In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, at Goma, the capital city of the province of North Kivu in the east of the country, a collective of slammers unleash "eruptions of words"¹ to salve the ills of the inhabitants whose lives are blighted by the state of permanent war and to make the population aware of their rights with regard to the political authorities. Their aspirations and their functioning are in phase with those of the militants of LUCHA, an important movement in Congolese civil society which—among other things—has played a role in curbing the *ancien régime* in power.
- 2 This story with its intermingling of slam and militant activism is the subject of the present article. In a town of the Great Lakes region, which for thirty years has suffered the impact of genocide and, subsequently, a series of innumerable wars and massacres, a collective of artists of the word, who are immersed in the social struggle for the respect of human rights alongside NGOs and other international lobbies, deploys its "*poelitical*" action (*poélitique*), in the sense intended by Enzo Cormann: "... which attempts to bind organically the construction of the assembly to the unceasing reinvention of drama—the political to the poetical" (Cormann 2012, 11). We shall see how the modes of constitution of an ethos of the politically and socially-engaged artist are thus redesigned in and by this singular context.

- 3 This article is based on several extended field studies carried out at Goma and in the Great Lakes region between January 2018 and 2021; a field experience that involved regular contact with slammers and constant monitoring of their activities as well as the development of joint projects.²

The rise of LUCHA and the origins of slam at Goma

- 4 2012. Around fifteen young people living in different neighbourhoods of the city of Goma took a stand against the lack of access to minimum services. At the time, only 20% of the population had access to drinking water. They got organised to reach out to the population, long since accustomed to their plight, to make them aware that this was neither fair nor proper in terms of human existence. They started cleaning the streets, filling in the potholes that exacerbated flooding and the related health issues, motivated by a sense of civic responsibility and, they said, to set an example to the politicians in the hope of encouraging them to face up to their responsibilities.
- 5 This was the origin of LUCHA, *Lutte pour le Changement* (Struggle for Change), which a few years later became one of the most important grassroots movements on the continent (in terms of impact on national politics), and the most mediated internationally. Let us cite the example of two French productions for the general public: the documentary film by Marlène Rabaud (2018), *Congo Lucha*, which came out in 2019, and the animated film by Justine Brabant and Annick Kamgang (2018), *LUCHA, histoire d'une révolution sans armes au Congo* (history of a bloodless revolution in the Congo).
- 6 2013. Ben Kamuntu, an active member of LUCHA, was a student at the Goma cultural centre in the drama section where Don Louis Abedi, also a member of LUCHA, was an assistant instructor. They met Ghislain Kabuyaya, alias Cœur Tam Tam, who was taking the course in poetry declamation. The following year, Don Louis met De Paul Bakulu, alias Sniper, at the Spoken Arts workshop. The four friends hit it off and found they had a common passion for slam discovered through the voice of *Grand Corps Malade* which was aired on local radio. Each of them began to "do slam in their rooms," learning this new spoken art by their own means, using whatever they could find on the internet.
- 7 In early 2016. Joseph Kabila was at the end of his second mandate at the head of the country where he had been "enthroned" following the death of his father, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, assassinated in 2001. At the end of their two mandates (which followed the terrible dictatorship of Mobutu), the economic and humanitarian situation in the country was deplorable. Under the regime of J. Kabila, there was alas no improvement in the quality of life for the Congolese population, and the record was fairly damning: the country was still stagnating in the bottom echelons of the HDI ranking and 72% of the population were living on less than 2\$ per day.³ Worse still: there had been a serious decline in civil liberties, with a surge in intimidation, threats and imprisonment of opponents and artists. The war in the east continued endlessly year after year under the control of groups that were more or less identifiable but some of which were suspected of being in the pay of neighbouring countries, in particular Rwanda and Uganda. The Congolese army was also accused by opponents and human rights activists of being infiltrated by foreign elements and defectors seeking to destabilise the country from the eastern regions to better exploit the mineral resources the subsoil the Congo abounds in.⁴ Many reports and news coverage offered evidence of an "economic" war⁵

being carried on unimpaired in the east, investigations publicised by NGOs and other international lobbies which have attempted to make a broader public aware of the scandal of the “*minerais du sang*” (“blood minerals”). Kabila turned a deaf ear to the attacks by his detractors, in the Congo and internationally, and made it clear that he might seek a third mandate at the head of the country. The climate was tense, a groundswell of anger began to be heard and the civil society began to get organised.

- 8 November 2016. LUCHA launched the “Bye-Bye Kabila Campaign” to put pressure on public opinion and on the political leadership. The militants were demanding that the constitution, which only allowed two mandates, be respected, and organised peaceful marches in the major towns throughout the Republic. There then began a long series of intimidations, police repression, arrests and arbitrary imprisonments which soon became the common plight of the members of LUCHA and of the rest of Congolese civil society which mobilised in peaceful marches organised in the main towns throughout the country.
- 9 June 2017. The four apprentice slammers, three of them LUCHA militants (De Paul had in the meantime joined their ranks) decided to set up the “*Communauté des slameurs de Goma*” (Community of Slammers of Goma), an artists’ collective determined to build a collective space for free and democratic poetic expression, with an organisational model copied from LUCHA. With the other members, they wrote and produced a collective slam entitled “*Mon vœu pour le Congo*” (“my wish for the Congo”), in which they express their desires for change in the society and democratic renewal. We are now at the end 2017, the country was still under tension, pending electoral outcomes. This slam, marked by militant overtones and which clearly called on the president of the time to quit, marked the kick-off for the collective which was then renamed “*Goma Slam Session*” (henceforth GSS).⁶

Goma, epicentre of the troubles and simmering volcano of words

- 10 When you ask them about their vocation, most of the people who define themselves as “children of the war” (most of them born in the early 1990s) explain that their inspiration naturally drives them to condemn the wars and other massacres that afflict their region. This argument to justify their commitment is word-for-word the one used by LUCHA, as is evidenced by the “*Manifeste pour un Congo nouveau*” (“Manifest for a New Congo”) displayed on their website.
- 11 The slammers constantly castigate the criminal indifference of their rulers with regard to the crimes committed with impunity in the eastern region. As ordinary citizens, they also feel concerned by (and worried about) the mismanagement and corruption of the elites which impede the establishment of institutions capable of guaranteeing the security and wellbeing of the public. The abysmal incompetence of the authorities was recently shown up with brutal clarity during the disastrous mismanagement of the eruption of the volcano Nyiragongo on 22 May 2021, giving rise to a blossoming of artistic expression of all genres: slams, collective and individual songs, exhibitions and the like.
- 12 Through their mobilisation as artists in response to the political turmoil, they mean to counteract the poor image their town suffers from. Goma was named “world rape

capital” in 2010 by the representative of the United Nations for sexual violence during conflicts, Margot Wallström. Furthermore, like most Goma artists, they work together to show in a favourable light the dynamism and the beauty of their region and its inhabitants, looking beyond the underlying conflicts that still sporadically affect the region. More broadly, many slammers in the collective sing the praises of their country, moved by a desire to play a role in winning back Congo’s lost dignity, trampled underfoot by decades of corrupt and authoritarian regimes of the neopatrimonial type, with the support of foreign powers.

- 13 There is thus within the collective a clear sense of patriotism which is furthermore broadly shared by most of the artists working in the Congo. What is specific to GSS is its particular human-rightist sensitivity in the human rights register of the struggle for human rights and the focus on education for civic responsibility, both in their writings and in the very functioning of the collective.
- 14 The situation of ongoing war is the basis of the claims over human rights. The GSS slammers constantly denounce the impunity over war crimes committed in the Eastern Congo: “*L’art est mon arme*” (art is my weapon) declared Ben Kamuntu already in 2017. In March 2021, he brought out a clip entitled “Bosembo” (“justice” in Lingala), during the campaign *#DeboutRapportMapping* launched in October 2020 at Kivu, ten years after the publication of the UN report of the same name, as a reminder that this urgent issue is still on the agenda.
- 15 This 550 page report, written by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued in 2010, was the result of an inquiry mapping the crimes committed in Eastern Congo between 1993 and 2003.⁷ The report catalogued 617 “events” including war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by armies and armed groups, Congolese and foreign, that to this day have gone unpunished. The report also made recommendations regarding the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or a criminal court for the Congo.
- 16 Ten years later, nothing has been done. In the face of this evident inertia, a range of actors from Congolese and international civil society have jointly launched this advocacy campaign. There is the *Fondation Mukwege*—named after Dr Denis Mukwege, the gynaecologist working at Panzi hospital in Bukavu, mediated under the name “The man who repairs women” (victims of sexual violence), and who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize Prix in 2018—and the network of survivors in the Congo DR, all supported by LUCHA, numerous local associations and several international organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the IFHR. Led by a citizens’ collective, “*Memorial RD Congo*,” united under the leadership of Dr Mukwege, who called for a memorial for the victims of wars in the Congo, this mobilisation gathered force during the year 2012. Following the campaign *#DeboutRapportMapping* in March, the French translation of the Nobel Prize winner’s book, *La Force des Femmes*, was published in October (Mukwege 2021), followed in November by the film by Thierry Michel, *L’Empire du Silence*, documenting the wars in the east over the past twenty-five years. This film triggered the launch of a new mobilisation campaign, *#JusticeForCongo*.
- 17 Ben Kamuntu, who had long been nourished by the content of this report, well known to Congolese human-rightist activists, has played a two-fold role in these campaigns: as LUCHA activist and as slammer artist, with his two roles overlapping in this latest production. This twin identity is even highlighted by the content of his slam

“Bosembo” where the first part follows the structure of the Mapping report listing the dates whereas the second part presents an accumulation of terms derived from the vocabulary of transitional justice and the peace-building NGOS or institutions that proliferate at Goma. The slammer calls for “resilience, justice and reparations, truth and reconciliation, remembrance of the past” while castigating the “the business of violence, rape as a weapon of war, the child soldiers.”⁸ The clip which came out in July 2021, “*Parlons peu*,” by the slammer Byemba Leader, also a member of GSS, deplors the pillage of mineral resources as a mechanism of conflict.⁹

From *Luchologie* to “slamology”?

- 18 The ideology of LUCHA and its functioning have profoundly influenced those of GSS. LUCHA’s mode of organisation and the precise definition of its principles according to its manifesto for a “New Congo” are the foundation stone of “*Luchologie*.” For the militants, this term designates at once the identity card and the operating manual of the movement, in other words the frame within which each militant should operate. The new recruits are taken in charge by older activists, but the mode of governance is resolutely horizontal.
- 19 Goma Slam Session is a collective, just as LUCHA is a movement. By opting for these non-institutional forms, these two organisations claim a mode of organisation that is the reverse of those already tested by the political parties and associations, which encourage, according to the militants, personality cults and corruption. The aim is to introduce a collective mode of operation that will break with customary modes of functioning, based on an ethical foundation of respect for the individual and an enhanced sense of responsibility in its members.
- 20 GSS advocates as absolute principles the total freedom of expression of its members and non-violent communication which implies respect for the opinions of others, an attentive ear and the free circulation of opinions. When anyone does not act according to the principles of non-violence and attention to the opinions of others, they are allowed to have their say and are then called to order by reminding them of the mode of operation of the collective which they have joined by signing the GSS charter of engagement, a charter which is explicitly a carbon copy of the LUCHA charter. Any slammer wishing to join the collective is obliged to sign this charter and adhere to it, on pain of suspension or exclusion, exactly as in LUCHA which justifies the need for a charter by the fact of its attachment to the National Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This text is the legal basis upon which LUCHA, aware of the gulf between the text and its application, demands the respect of the elementary rights guaranteed in the constitution. The LUCHA slammers and sympathisers are also voluntarily aligned with this principle of a charter, a replica at the scale of their collective of the national constitution.
- 21 Thus LUCHA and GSS see themselves as schools of good citizenship which inculcate in their members, society and the public who listen to them their faith in social justice for the future of the new Congo which they dearly wish for. This ideal of good citizenship is constructed on the basis of a historical referential conjured up by repeated reminders of exemplary figures of the history of the DRC, the first among them being Patrice Lumumba. Invoked in numerous slam texts, his name is also cited on two occasions in the manifesto of *Congo Nouveau* on the LUCHA website.

- 22 The memory of the obscure circumstances of the death of Lumumba—an affair that is still very much an issue today¹⁰—which earned him the status of national and even Africa-wide martyr, was vividly reactivated at the time of the death in June 2018 of Luc Nkulula, an emblematic militant and founder member of LUCHA, in a fire at his home. This tragic accident, in circumstances which have still not been elucidated, is considered by militants as a targeted assassination. Nkulula explicitly defined his combat, and that of LUCHA, as following in the footsteps of Lumumba. We can hear him laying claim to this legacy in the video of his interview posted on the home page of the LUCHA website.¹¹
- 23 Yet Nkulula (and through him, Lumumba) is not LUCHA's only martyr; the movement has also adopted other less well-known activists such as Obadi Muhindo, Freddy Kambale or Colonel Mamadou Ndala, of the FARDC, who in 2013 victoriously repelled the M23, a rebel movement on the rampage in the region between around 2010 and 2014. Ndala was caught in an ambush a few months later and died burned in his jeep, also in disturbing circumstances.
- 24 We might see here through the construction of a mythology of the revolutionary struggle a romantic image of the combatant—here the pacifist militant—and of the poet both at the same time, devoted body and soul to their cause, consumed by the sense of political action and by their vocation, might we say their sacred mission, as avenger before the Eternal. In these two collectives, there is a kind of collectively maintained complicity, a galvanising motor, to follow in the wake of the martyrs, to brandish them as a standard, as a yardstick for moral and human values. Their WhatsApp and Facebook posts display a staging of scenes of violence undergone by militants and a determination to penetrate into places redolent with grim memories, such as the Muzenze prison where certain militants were imprisoned after arbitrary arrests. They nonetheless return there several times to organise slam workshops there with the imprisoned children.
- 25 The slammer militants are at ease in this sacrificial combat; the gauge of their commitment is that of sweat, sacrifices and blows received but never given, remaining true as they are to their principles of non-violence. In that respect they appear as a contemporary incarnation of the writer-activist harassed by the authorities and imprisoned, whether we think of the Nigerians Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wole Soyinka or the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. We see replayed by them a whole repertoire of actions of the revolutionary struggle in Africa, carried by the great literary voices of the continent. Their discourse, their referential horizon and their mode of operation reflect the idea that it is necessary to be consumed in order to give life to the hope of a reset of society and to achieve greater justice. Since Lumumba, there has been in the Congo a great deal of vitality in the Christ-like figure, naturally invoked to designate a hero of the nation as well as other activists and other avengers. This dimension appears word for word in the extract from the film by Marlène Rabaud.¹²
- 26 The Christ-like dimension of Lumumba has furthermore been extensively demonstrated by several researchers, and till this day is still valued, as evidenced by numerous contemporary pictorial and literary works.¹³ It would thus appear, more than half a century after the bloody independence of the ex-Belgian Congo that continues to be written about extensively, the "*Luchéens*" (LUCHA activists) mobilise this legacy, even laying claim to a historical continuity for their struggle and that of their historical martyr, considering that the motives behind the combat remain unchanged. In fact, it

is fundamentally a struggle for a real emancipation of the Congo, for the unification of the nation and social cohesion, by collectively standing up against the separatisms of identity and ethnic origins which fester in Congolese society. Such ideas, manipulated by politicians from Lumumba's time up until the present day, have led to conflict and various atrocities that have regularly plunged the DRC into mourning.

- 27 The expression "*Luchologie*" speaks for itself. It seeks to systematise the principles of the movement as an ideology whose definition becomes more precise and firmer year by year, but the fact that it is matched with a range of rituals associated with the investiture of a new member (communion circle, performative declaration of commitment of the new recruit before the group, attribution of a scarf as a sign of belonging to the group, etc.) also echoes the functioning of a religious institution.¹⁴

Conclusion

- 28 What is remarkable in the LUCHA movement is on one hand, the fact that it is a non-violent movement, which seems normal seen from Europe, but which is exceptional in a region that is prey to permanent insecurity (manifested by very frequent atrocities, mass crimes, targeted assassinations or "ordinary" violence), a region where arms are easy to get hold of. And in a town where the least manifestation of protest in the public space is feared since it gives rise to suspicion of infiltration by armed foreign groups or equally brutal local militia (Mayi-Mayi rebels).
- 29 The rejection of a supreme authority and a personality cult is another strong position that sets apart LUCHA and GSS. This principle is nevertheless not without ambiguity as in parallel, LUCHA validates its own existence, justifies and valorises its combat by the constitution of a pantheon of heroes. But these are always heroes posthumously, that is to say martyrs. The Christ-like figures are then messianic, as is evidenced by the words of Luc Nkulula, recorded on camera by Marlène Rabaud: "*J'ai peur de venir trop tôt*" ("I'm afraid of coming too soon"). This phrase which today sounds tragically premonitory, contributes to enhancing the perception of Nkulula as a misunderstood Messiah. In the light of this, it is interesting to observe a certain distancing of GSS in relation to LUCHA in the way heroes are treated. In 2019, during the latest edition of the major music festival Amani, the GSS slammers came on stage. This performance was the outcome of a residence organised by René Georges, a Belgian director. Taking inspiration from the British slammer poet Kae Tempest and her famous work, "Brand New Ancients," R. Georges had them work on the notion of the ordinary hero. They composed a collective slam with the chorus: "*Les héros, c'est nous; les héros c'est vous; le héros c'est toi, le héros c'est moi*" ("The heroes, it's us; the heroes it's you; the heroes, it's me").¹⁵
- 30 When all's said and done, if we consider that GSS is at first glance part of a genre which in itself has nothing original about it in the Congo, art with a social purpose (which aims to play a role in changing society) being the dominant perspective since the birth of modern literature in the Congo in the 1950s, the slammers have nonetheless done their part in inculcating a value that was lacking in the Congolese artistic milieu, and which tends to be a weak point: team spirit, and the sense of collective endeavour. They are thus moving away from individualism and the personality cult, responsible for innumerable schisms among groups of artists, hamstringing any chance of permanence in their activities.

- 31 Although they are aligned with activist movements across the continent which advocate for social justice and the respect of human rights, by their eminently *poétique* mobilisation, they mark their difference from both groups close to the peace-building NGOs and development-focused NGOs (with which most of the artists in the region work closely) and groups of the Christian faith.
- 32 These slammers perceive their combat as being in the line of descent from all the combats against injustice and the instrumentalisation of the weakest of which they condemn the political and economic mechanisms and the machinations of the local and national authorities in cahoots with the international superpowers. Their discourse is in phase with a critical theory of globalisation and neoliberal global policies based on economic exploitation and extractivism. For the most part, they lay claim to a universal vision, thus marking themselves off from the Afro-centrists who are numerous and dynamic on the continent. Their vision of the universal is that of a Souleymane Bachir Diagne from whom they could no doubt adopt for themselves this definition: “(...) *l’universel n’est pas donné, il s’éprouve dans les luttes multiples, et la manière, encore à déchiffrer, dont elles convergent et se mènent ensemble, solidairement, dans la visée d’un horizon commun d’émancipation*” (“The universal is not granted, it is experienced in numerous struggles, and the way, still to be decoded, they converge and are undertaken together, in solidarity, in the hope of attaining a common horizon of emancipation”) (in Diagne and Amselle 2018, 85).

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NOTES

1. Thus they call their slam sessions “*muripuko*,” “eruption” in Swahili, a nod towards the volcano Nyiragongo which looms over the town and which erupted in 2021.
2. An anthology of slam at Goma is in preparation (to be published by *Izuba éditions*, Kigali, 2023).
3. World Bank: <https://www.banquemonddiale.org/fr/country/drc/overview>.
4. See for example the discourse of Dr Mukwege, interviewed here by Sonia Rolley for RFI regarding the 10 years of the *Rapport Mapping*. He refers extensively to the atrocities committed by officers of the Congolese regular army: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu8YnCR5aLU>.
5. See Stearns (2012); Brabant (2016); Raeymaekers (2014).
6. See too “*Lettre au president*,” a collective rap and slam by Pac Mesrimes, feat René Byamungu and MC Don Louis Abedi, 30 June 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIN7C6RY3c0>.
7. 1993, start of civil conflict in the East–2003, Sun City Agreement.
8. Ben Kamuntu, “Bosembo”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAZp81DqJsg>.
9. Byemba Leader, “Parlons peu”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCnWi4LxQd8>.
10. As evidenced by recent news coverage of the emotions triggered by the return to the Congo of the scant remnants of Lumumba’s remains: https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/une-dent-contre-lhistoire-les-restes-de-patrice-lumumba-retournent-en-rdc-20210613_3MY7QMPPTZG5LL626E5H7EWNAE/.
11. <http://www.luchacongo.org>.
12. We see a militant handcuffed, surrounded by soldiers, who speaks (in Kiswahili) to the film maker, face to camera: “*Na Kama Nina pigwa, njo ninapigiwa! Na Hata Mungu anayua. Yesu alikufwa bure!*” Translation: “If they’re going to beat me, let them beat me! Even God knows it. Jesus died in vain!”
13. See de Groof (2020). See too the first novel by Annie Lulu, *La Mer noire dans les Grands Lacs*: “*Tu ferais mieux de te calmer, Makasi, mon fils, ce que tu fais est dangereux, on ne veut pas de problèmes, les communistes sont finis en Europe, ça ne sert plus à rien de t’agiter ici, au lieu de venir prier avec nous pour que le pays s’arrange. — C’est le moment de s’agiter justement ; — Mon fils, c’est le moment de prier Jésus-Christ ; — Mon Jésus-Christ à moi c’est Lumumba! Lumumba: si ça ne te dit rien, quitte cette maison*” (Lulu 2021, 126–7). Translation: “You’d better calm down, Makasi, my son, what you’re doing is dangerous, we don’t

want any problems, the communists are finished in Europe, there's no longer any point in stirring things up here, instead of coming to pray with us that things will settle down in the country. —It's just the right time to stir things up, in fact; —My son, it's the right time to pray to Jesus Christ; —My own Jesus Christ is Lumumba! Lumumba: if that means nothing to you, get out of this house.”

14. If the predominant religious influence seems to derive from the Christian legacy, one might also suppose that the work of the slammers is, like that of many Congolese artists, also tinged with pre-Christian influences, as Bogumil Jewsiewicki shows in his brilliant analysis of the work of the sculptor Freddy Tsimba (Jewsiewicki 2016).

15. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h6r5SSXizA>.

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Maëline Le Lay is a CNRS research fellow in literature at THALIM (Sorbonne Nouvelle/INHA). Her main research focus is on the literary and theatrical dynamics in the Great Lakes region of Africa, in the context of (post-)conflict and post-genocide (Eastern Congo, Burundi, Rwanda). Posted for three years to IFRA-Nairobi (2018-2021), she has carried out numerous field studies in the sub-region.