

# SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

*Piotr Cichocki*

Assistant professor, Institute of Ethnology  
and Cultural Anthropology  
University of Warsaw

## **Sound production as a cultural practice**

**Recording studios in the Northern Region of Malawi**

[www.soundeffects.dk](http://www.soundeffects.dk)



SoundEffects | vol. 9 | no. 1 | 2020

issn 1904-500X

## Abstract

---

*Referring to a notion of cultural practice understood as a constitution of social identity and meaningful everyday performance, this paper questions the practice of music production outside the technological centers of the global North. The author traces relations between the global standards of studio work and the case of “record culture” in Mzuzu, Malawi. On a tangible level, the production of sound and music in Mzuzu is bricolage, a creative combination of varied devices and means within an economy of scarcity.*

*However, sound production in its intangible dimension reveals itself as a practice of mediation between material and immaterial spheres. Spatially, it combines local aesthetics with globally unified technologies. This mediation gathers different temporalities (old, “tribal” rhythms and digital sounds) with cosmologies (i.e. invocation to holy ghosts with gospel music, in contrast to local possession cults). Moreover, people embody many of these practices as opposed to expressing them discursively. As an embodied practice, the production contains social, non-discursive memory while, at the same time, it has a potential for construction of social worlds. Hence, sound production constitutes a sense-making practice that establishes relations between musicians, listeners, and other social actors.*

---

The study concerns the relationship between sound production and the local social landscape of Mzuzu, Malawi. To understand these relations, I refer to the dual notion of “recording culture” (Scales, 2012). On the one hand, researching recording culture involves listening to the effects of the producers' work in a contextualized way. On the other hand, it requires tracing the work process in itself.

To produce an ethnographic description of the specific recording culture of northern Malawi and its relation to everyday life, I used a multi-vocal approach, putting together different perspectives of the problem. Therefore, a form of ethnographic “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) organizes the narration of the text, revealing how varied voices (e.g. of producers, listeners, artists, instrumentalists, choralists) interfere or converge in the emergence of new expressive means. The thick description reveals overlapping contexts. In the case of the Mzuzu producers, it also emphasizes the continuity between the tangible and intangible<sup>1</sup> as well as the human and non-human actors, and last, but not least immaterial beings that take part in the East African “socio-spiritual landscape” (Lubkemann, 2002).

The development of music production in the Northern Region of Malawi, which I have been studying since 2016 as part of an ongoing ethnographic research project, is as much a social as a technological phenomenon. In this article, I argue that the labor occurring within recording studios marks a cultural practice important for the identities of technology users and the local community. The technological

materiality becomes incorporated into the socio-spiritual landscape through everyday embodied practice.

The humanistic approaches to the social dimension of technology have oscillated between two poles. The first pole consists of descriptions of the human agency's ability to creatively intercept the technology provided by global corporations (Herzfeld, 2001, pp. 310-330). Human subjects gain a means of expression to perform an autonomous cultural identity. An example of a similar approach, or rather one of the founding theories behind the sociological interest in deeply human aspects of practices and meanings within the material sphere, is "a humanistic coefficient" (Znaniecki, 1927). The second pole emphasizes the global unification of cultural practices described with notions such as colonization, symbolic violence, or technological determinism. Examples of this approach are the works of Friedrich Kittler. The German media scholar argued that technologies are primarily subjects. In his view, social, human actions, individualism, and emotions are just effects of the technology (Kittler, 1999). In the extreme, such approaches reject the perspective of colonialism as too focused on the humanistic dimension.

In this article, however, I try to collate these two perspectives into one ethnographic description as suggested by the actor-network theory methodology (Latour, 2005). ANT researchers recommend following relations between things and humans by utilizing the method of ethnographic description (Latour, 1993, pp. 100-102). Nonetheless, I base this description not so much on the assumption of some previously undiscovered logic that links human agency with the technological hegemony. Instead, I emphasize paradoxes, because the understanding of technology must take contradictions into account. I suggest that ethnography generates knowledge about social life by confronting these discrepancies (Marcus, 1998). Such paradoxes are substantial to experiences of technology. According to Sherry Turkle, the technology "affects relationships and sensibilities" (Turkle, 2008, p. 3) "in ways that are highly particular, close to idiosyncratic" (p. 11). In the case of the African social landscape, the relationships concern not just human, but also immaterial beings. In the following pages, I sketch this social landscape, presenting the sound production as an entry practice that connects the economic, spiritual, and political aspects at the realm of everyday labor.

## Observing cultural practice

In this section, I describe the paradigm and the method of research among music producers in and around the Malawian city of Mzuzu.<sup>2</sup> I spent long hours in these more or less formal workplaces, which at the same time presented environments that were an excellent field for observation of "the imponderabilia of actual life" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 21).

The term that refers to this type of social relationship is “recording culture”, as proposed by Christopher Scales. The author defines it as twofold. Firstly, he describes how cultural phenomena gain the form of products in the process of sound reproduction. Secondly, the term concerns “the culture of recording” – the ideas and behaviors of particular social groups who engage in the practice of recording music (Scales, 2012, p. 3). Regarding the social aspect, the places I studied were remarkably open, crowded by relatives, passers-by, and clients, but due to the slight acoustic isolation of the spots, also open to sounds from the outside. Therefore, the local culture of the recording was the extensive, almost unlimited network. This everyday practice of signal registration included the range of social activities and relations.

This social practice is not autonomous from other spheres of everyday life. However, it exceeds the immediate “here and now”. Josh Kun theorizes that the process of creating music and its effects can produce evocative “sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, and geographies – historically kept and mapped separately – are allowed to interact with each other” (Kun, 2005, p. 84). Recording affects the individual and common subjectivities (Sterne, 2003). This applies not just to new means of expression of old identities, but also to the re-shaping of these identities.

Thus, recording culture is a “cultural practice”. Pierre Mayol defines the term as actions that express the social identities of the human subjects involved in them. Apart from the literal meaning, the ways in which people produce music, listen to it, and exchange it are “practices [...] decisive for the identity [...] insofar as this identity is allowed to take up a position in the network of social relations inscribed in the environment” (Certeau, Giard, Mayol, 1998, p. 9).

These identities contain the aforementioned contradictions and incommensurability. It is a result of the fact that they emerge from individual decisions, local conditions (e.g. family relations), as well as global phenomena related to the cultural industry. An example of this is an identification with the translocal musical and cultural phenomenon of hip-hop or the connection to modern technological infrastructures, like the electrical grid. The combination of these factors and fractures makes the identities political in their nature. This political dimension manifests itself by its relation to not just what these identities historically result from (ethnicity, the history of global hip-hop). Moreover, as a kind of indirect political outline (more felt than expressed), it also projects the future.

In the case of sound recording, this political aspect relates to technology. Elsewhere, I have embraced the concept of “technography” as a perspective, focusing on how specific types of technology interact with the emergence of translocal homogenized cultural practices (Cichocki, 2013, p. 35). This perspective allows one to trace and compare repetitive forms of practice in distant localities. These repetitions result from the global unification of the digital and material tools used by



producers (programs, plug-ins, hardware). At the same time, these geographically isolated practices differ throughout the embodiment. The model also refers to the production of sound. Here, I utilize it to ethnographically describe the interaction with the technology as a spatially contextualized social fact rather than a local user's manual.

Why is this spatial aspect so crucial? The description of North-Malawian studios covers cultural practices that are simultaneously part of global networks and physical localities. The first relates to the development of technological tools or musical styles such as hip-hop, while the latter equals neighborhood and family relationships and determine the environment of everyday experiences (Hannerz, 1996). I argue that the ethnography offers a remarkable frame for understanding this double spatiality due to its focus on relativity and the emergence of knowledge through a social practice.

To ethnographically trace these relations, I use methods of open, recorded interviews and participant observations, which I am documenting in the form of field-notes<sup>3</sup> and headnotes.<sup>4</sup> Visual ethnographic methods,<sup>5</sup> internet research, and the collection of multimedia data complemented the fieldwork practice. I designed these activities to understand the social and technological patterns of the local know-how in regard to sound production and also to note individualizing features in the standardized practices of producers. As mentioned earlier, most of these research activities engaged local studios, also participating in the study, to learn the specifics of their craft. Thus, I aimed to implement the suggestions of Rice, for whom the requirement of field research was about learning local practices of musical performance and the embodiments of playing techniques (Rice, 2014). Sound recording and the development of signal processing, track editing, and mixing have long been considered as an art as well as tools for recording musical instruments (Eisenberg, 1987). Nevertheless, the individual use of technologies is a meaningful practice in which both the structure of the technology and the individuality of users are reaffirmed.

In this case, the researcher's task is to embody the technology and to consciously develop habits of the studied craft. In fact, during the fieldwork, I was constantly trying to understand the styles of the local labor. Aiming not to evaluate these styles according to the methods I acquired in European studios, I constantly questioned my own skills as an effect of another recording culture, perhaps with hegemonic status. This method required a critical reflection on my cultural knowledge (Olędzki, 1991) and prompted me to not consider European methods as a set standard. However, the experience that I have in the field of sound production has been helpful in recognizing some aspects of the labor. Avoiding threats of technological ethnocentrism, I tried to combine the competences of an active producer and become *le tiers instruit* an engineer-ethnographer (Serres, 1997), gaining a double *habitus* of an

ethnographer and a (local) technician. This approach established the possibility of understanding technology as a culturally related production. The immanent features of this practice are social hierarchies. In the next section I will address these asymmetries embedded in the everyday practice of studios.

## Multisensory accumulation of authority

During the fieldwork in Mzuzu, I was primarily interested in informal workplaces that were not under the auspices of the regional branch of the only state radio. From April to August 2016, I conducted regular participant observations in several music studios, which I describe in details two.<sup>6</sup> These locations represented a variety of forms: from well-equipped studios with professional (or semi-professional microphones), monitors, computers, and instruments, to meeting places without any equipment (apart from shared video games), or just residences of people who participated in the life of the local music community.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am presenting Kukaning'inako, oriented towards local dancehall/hip-hop music, and Pulikani M-zee Studio, specializing in the production of electronic gospel music. These two studios have focused on commercial and regular recording activities. Each studio focused on voice recordings and implemented the Cubase and Nuendo for the signal registration. The only instrumental music made in the studios were commercially produced beats traded or given to local rappers.

Most of the recording studios I visited in Malawi operated in tin or wooden cubicles and, less frequently, in brick annexes. Among them, Pulikani Mzee operated a prestigious location in a ground floor office building adjacent to a noisy photocopy office on one side and an equally loud church on the other. The building stood near the market square in the center of Mzuzu, close to the station from which the buses to South Africa departed. The location within the commercial center of the city corresponded with the relatively high-class equipment (in comparison to other places in the vicinity of Mzuzu). Among



Figure 1 – A choir from a Presbyterian church in Mzuzu waiting for the recording session (photo – Piotr Cichocki)

the devices, there were rare external multi-output audio interfaces, a vocal booth with cabling systems between rooms, and a set of musical instruments (electric bass guitar and solo guitar). Most of the equipment that comprised the Pulikani Mzee setting came as secondhand equipment from South Africa (like most new bicycles, TVs, or home appliances attributed to local high and middle class aspirations). Temporary emigration to South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century played a key role in the emergence of social relations with modern Malawi, where the long-term separation of families and the enormous economic impact of finances and goods sent by migrants are common. These transnational networks also made it possible to provide equipment for Malawian studios. Producers benefited from the help of relatives living in Johannesburg. Very often migrating local musicians or specialized dealers collected orders from Mzuzu residents interested in certain products prior to commercial travels to the south.

Like other studios, Pulikani Mzee offered multimedia production. Apart from the equipment for the production of music, the studio also possessed computers for graphics work. In addition to commercial orders (everything from wedding invitations to product labels), two visual designers contributed to the production of music publications. They designed covers and created music videos for songs recorded in the studio. In fact, the most important orders received by the studio, and therefore the most prestigious and the highest paid orders, concerned the production of DVDs containing about ten separate videoclips for musical works produced by the same company. Releasing a DVD, usually in the form of a so-called launching (a concert repeated in various cities and towns that is combining live music with panel auctions, speeches, and prayers) reaffirmed the artist's status. The road towards the goal of DVD production led through successive stages, requiring the procurement of appropriate funds. In the case of the gospel, the churches from which the artists originated financed the recordings. The recording of parish choirs was also seen frequently (likewise financed by contributions from the entire congregation). Most often, neophyte artists started with the recording of one song. If the church elders accepted the first recordings, or, much less often, the artists themselves organized the funding, the producer was contracted for the entire CD making. Naturally, a DVD edition represented a proportionately larger expenditure. The production included travelling with a two- or three-person camera team, artists, and dancers to a location for an outdoor photo shoot. Virtually every DVD produced in Mzuzu contained a video clip shot on the shores of Lake Malawi, several dozen kilometers away, along with no less frequent frames executed in the artist's hometowns and places of "traditional culture", i.e. small open-air ethnographic museums with "African huts". In addition to footage shot by the crew, videoclips often included cut fragments of religious or even nature films, illustrating the text. As an example, in two music videos, parallel to the word "Satana" sung by an artist, a snake appeared. When the vocalist

preached about the responsibilities of wealth, the assembler visualized banknotes and coins (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 – a. film frame from Maria M. Nundwe's music video directed by Alwyn Kumwenda

The other important elements were the choreography and costumes. Due to the prevalence of the format, I argue that this integrity to the visual form is a continuation of multi-sensory performance, specific to African music, as claimed by Ruth Stone. The author remarks that “the expressive acts [...] are related and inter-linked. The visual arts, the musical arts, the dramatic arts: All work together in the same domain and are conceptually treated as intertwined” (Stone, 1997, p. 7). These words adequately explain the multimedia projects of the Pulikani Mzee Studio, where “the production line” consists of cooperating sound and video producers. These segments of the production process were grouped in sequences, and only the overall work consisting of the initial audio and the subsequent video were regarded as a real business and artistic achievement.

The second work environment, the Kukaning'inako studio was located in one of the rooms of a house rented by three brothers. Its equipment included two speakers from a music center (and two others which were not working), a sound card, a computer, a microphone on a tripod, and a MIDI keyboard. For soundproofing isolation, there were two curtains in the windows while some light material hung on two walls. Opposite the desk reserved for the gear and for the producer, a wide couch gave comfort to recording vocalists and their accompanying friends. Other



rooms were open to numerous studio contributors, at the same time functioning as the living space of the brothers (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3 – the everyday activity in the Kukaning'inako studio. Behind the desk sits Twiggy (one of producers).*

The compound was located in the relatively rich neighborhood of Katoto close to the center, where one-story houses surrounded by small gardens stood along the asphalted lanes. This was a clear contrast to districts with gritty beaten roads and houses separated not by gardens, but by stacked corn plots or piles of rubbish. Many rappers, whose vocal parts were recorded by brothers, lived in these impoverished quarters of Chibanja, Sozbelain or Chiputula.

If the purchase of studio hardware depended on luck, wealth and connections, the access to the software was a result of participation in the social network and a system of informal exchange of gifts, favors, and recognition. According to my interlocutors, the programs circulated without directly enunciated economic expectations, between people involved in music production. In the case of studios that were not the main subject of my research, it implied cracked software. Neither of my interlocutors saw any problem in relation to digital piracy, and, due to the research

method, I did not imply a doubtful legal status, instead trying to find out how they organized the means of production. The problem of unauthorized software remains an interesting research problem on a broader scale of relations between global economic centers and unprivileged people from postcolonial countries (Larkin, 2008). Jean and John Comaroff comment that “teenagers have access to the gap between globally tweaked desires and local scarcities” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006, p. 14). Quoting Siegel, they add that these practices “are not about defying authority, [but] about creating a sort of authority for oneself.” (Siegel, 1998, p. 57) I assume that “transparency”, meaning the naturalization of cracked software in everyday work, indicates that power relations associated with global networks of musical production are embodied rather than pronounced. The free access to paid applications, obvious to my interlocutors, indicates not only the remoteness from the center, but also local producers' identities. Mzuzu producers ignored the economic domination of production technology centers and subversively defined their role in this globally linked process of technology and music production. Almost all my interlocutors used the same software, including similar plug-ins. These were not the latest state-of-the-art programs from 2016, but still, the majority of the software was products within the worldwide standard of production. Interestingly, Digital Audio Workstations applied in the production were rigidly assigned to genres: all gospel studios utilized the earlier version of Reason, and hip-hop and dancehall ateliers – the Fruity Loops. After describing the social and political context of technological production, I consequently turn to the type of work performed at the studios.

## Technological bricoleur

In this section, I aim to reflect on the constant adaptation to the changing context as a feature of the producers' creative labor. I will explain it with an account from a recording session I participated in. I proposed to the producer, George Msukwa, working in the studio Pulikani M-zee that I might lend him a microphone (Rode NT-4), one of a bit higher standard than those he had (already one copy of Shure-57<sup>8</sup> played a distinctive role in the studio). I believed that in the circumstances I would be able to participate in the recording process. Before that, the production of records was rare due to high expenses for musicians. I only saw the producer preparing beats and arrangements in Reason for further recordings. (Listen – sound 1)



*Sound 1 – George. Msukwa demonstrates how to produce vimbuza beat and improvises on the guitar (rec. Piotr Cichocki)*

It turned out that the producer wanted to use the stereophonic microphone to record a part of the voice from a close shot, despite the gear destination for record-

ing instruments or ambiances. On this occasion, I learned that the studios registered almost no instrumental parts. No drums which, after all, are the main and often the only, musical instrument, and in many neighboring villages, only vocals. This surprised me, perhaps because of my socialization within the modern music market. This virtual environment shaped my preconceptions of African music. Within its paradigm and through the practice of colonial listening – as Louise Meintjes writes – African art primarily associates with rhythm. “African tonal systems [...] have on the whole been characterized as simple [...]. Juxtaposed against a perceived simplicity of African tonal systems, the focus on the rhythms has facilitated the characterization of Africans in terms of a primacy of body and intuition” (Meintjes, 2003, p. 119).

At the studios, the entire rhythmic design, often referring to local dances, was built by programming virtual drum machines and sequencers, always using sound from barely processed factory settings. To record just meant to register a human voice.<sup>9</sup> Other contexts that I observed also emphasized the fundamental role of the voice. My interlocutors synonymously used the terms “singer” and “artist”, while rejecting the artistry of musicians-instrumentalists. The latter were hired by the most prospering “artists” to perform live music composed prior to the studio work. On the other hand, a lot of interviews I conducted, covering the production and the composition, often turned to the subject of texts, or “messages”. The message defined the role of the artist as someone who turns to the people and to God who, at the same time, listens to the song as a prayer. In the case of the gospel, artists and listeners compare the message to the testimony of a miracle or a personal experience during church service (I elaborate on the religious aspect of music in next section).

Returning to the example of the session, George decided to use the microphone for the recording of an artist whom he highly valued because of the message and artful references to both psalms and local tradition. Charles, who a dozen or so years earlier, sang in a band that was successful at international festivals, was only visiting Mzuzu at that time, living permanently in Johannesburg. However, it was not the music, but paid work – that like many of his countrymen – drove him to South Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The recording session, scheduled for Saturday, the day on which the loud nearby workshops were closed, began with George's long hours of delay. Surprisingly, Charles was the most irritated by the lack of punctuality, on the phone urging the producer show up. He emphasized, however, that also the *mzungu* (the white ethnographer) was getting anxious. After a few hours, when the producer showed up, opened the studio door, turned on the computer, and plugged in the microphone, the recordings finally started. The work followed standardized international procedures: listening to tracks, several bars of prerecording, take one, take two, “let's try this part again,” etc. (see Figure 4).

Then, this fast flow of the work was being disrupted by frequent power outages. Blackouts stopped the recordings several times for a short period until the power died permanently. Everyone engaged in the sessions – George, a graphic designer sharing the workspace of the studio, Charles and his two choristers expecting to record afterwards – went looking for the source of the problem. It turned out that one of the power distributors shared by several workshops had exceeded the pre-paid limit. The group found a number of extension cords and splitters and tried to connect to another power source on the other side of the building. When that did not work, George started to check each of the connected extension leads. He cut the cable in a place what appeared broken and twisted the cables, connecting the circuit with his bare hands.<sup>11</sup> Charles, on his side, added that Satan wanted to thwart artists' plans. "But I have something more for him!" he shouted, threatening the demonic spirits whom he blamed for disruptions (see Figure 5).



Figure 4 – Charles records the voice  
(photo – Piotr Cichocki)



Figure 5 – Producer and artists attempt to deliver electricity to the Pulikani M-zee studio  
(photo – Piotr Cichocki)

This ethnographic event<sup>12</sup> shows the entanglement of creativity and determination as well as the interaction with material technologies, immaterial objects, and beings – which together created the social landscape of the studio work. This form



of the practice, facing practical problems, and brainstorming for new ideas by the producers are symptomatic of the notion of *bricolage*.

The use of the *bricolage*-concept in anthropology began with Claude Levi Strauss. He used it to refer to certain perceptual patterns of thought described as “savage” (Levi Strauss, 1966), although after Biakolo, I prefer to designate these patterns as “unscientific” (Biakolo, 1998, p. 13). Thinking dynamically of *bricolage*, it denotes a situationist entanglement of at-hand available elements (Peletz, 2013), resulting in the emergence of new imaginary worlds. In contrast to scientific thinking, these worlds focus on ordering and reorganizing preexisting knowledge (Biakolo, 1998, p. 13). *Bricolage* also means the inclusion of all useful resources and the expansion of the symbolic world through practice (Peletz, 2013, p. 491). After Levi Strauss, the term spread to other disciplines and, generally, it denotes a certain approach to inventive labor. As the anthropological definition suggests, this approach values assemblages more than orthodox purism within certain categories of materials, ideas, or skills. The term *bricolage* may also specifically describe the practice of sound production, but it is likewise embedded in the context of the social environment of Malawian music studios.

In a place like Mzuzu, which obtained city rights in 1985, and thirty years later continued to be the space of existence for several hundred thousand people (I expect numbers supplied by the statistic<sup>13</sup> are imprecise), the environment is in a process undergoing constant change, e.g. with respect to the access to technological devices. This situation also requires the restless reconstruction of the immaterial world. The relations between the technological and the immaterial have inspired the next section of the paper.

## Devices and imaginaries

As I presented above, the production work in the studios is often entangled with tentative material infrastructures. However, material and immaterial conditions also refer to the invisible sphere of human experience and sociality. To describe this reference, I will navigate with the description, starting from the notions of imaginary global relations to the substantial positioning of subjects within the “socio-spiritual landscape” (Lubkemann, 2002). I argue that sound production in Mzuzu is a practice that mediates between the modern and the local set of relationships. The character of this technological embodied mediation, experienced in a prediscursive rather than a discursive manner, is thoroughly questioned below.

The means of sound production interfere with subjective identities and social imaginary. In this respect, specific products of the recording studios are evocative objects that enable a perception of other possibilities of how the world might be organized and felt. Songs might also be sonic visions of social realities that are organ-

ized in different ways (Kun, 2005, p. 69). This imaginary reorganization concerns both the political and religious dimensions as in the example of gospel music. Kun, who put forward this argument, used protest songs as an example, but also – less obviously – political pieces of music that allow people to imagine a space through the experience of sound. Through the division of labor in the studio and musical arrangements, people involved in the production of sounds and musical objects can design an imaginary social system. It is prediscursive practice, and unspeakable in other contexts. However, it is also urging to be implemented in real life. I argue that the materialization of these imaginaries may happen within the process of embodiment and interactions with the technology, described below.

The understanding of this intangible level of practice by the ethnographer results from the intersubjective knowledge acquired during the fieldwork. The acquisition of this knowledge remains complicated because it arises from invisible spheres of social experience – shared ways of thinking, feelings, affects, ideologies, and imagination. Ethnographic research allows for an understanding of this sphere through participation in everyday local reality and meaningful relations – e.g. during collective work.

One of the intangible aspects emerging from local structures of thinking and feeling is the imaginary connection of technologies with other places. Through the shared research practice, ethnographers may acquire knowledge of how the production of sound establishes social worlds. These worlds emerge through the process of mediation between temporalities, spaces, and cosmologies.

To give some examples of this imaginary organization of the space, I describe in detail the doings of both studios, related to hip-hop and gospel, respectively. The products of their work (songs) stay in close relation with the social identities of producers and listeners. An equally important focus, also understood as an identity-related cultural practice, is the organization of the work.<sup>14</sup>

Each of the three brothers from the Kukaning'inako studio participated in both production and singing. Together, they formed the BlackFace Family band, whose recordings relate to the dancehall style, although the musicians described their music as *Kukaning'inako* as well. This style eclectically combines hip-hop, R'n'B, dancehall, reggae, house, kwaito, gospel, and many others that are recognized by my interlocutors as “black music”. Therefore, the notion of “blackness” is an example of the aforementioned indirect political stance which adds a sense of unity between African, Caribbean, and Afro-American musicians through their shared practice of sound.

The only common denominators of the various tracks were mixed jingles with the shouted name of the style/studio and the characteristic voices of rappers, often processed by the auto-tune effect, employing a blend of English, Chichewa, and Chitumbuka. I argue that the Phiri brothers' style has become a form of practicing the

cultural identity of young aspiring residents of Mzuzu. The name (and the jingle) *Kukaning'inako* soon became a common sign for other local artists. Nonetheless, performers rarely referred directly to pre-colonial past or tribal identity, instead singing about dance, fashion, money, and desire.

The production of music as an embodied practice stretches between non-discursive memory (Connerton, 1989) and the construction of social worlds. The emergence of these worlds does not occur through narratives, but rather through bodily and sensual practice. Moving back to historically earlier phenomena described by anthropologists, can help to explain this relationship. Paul Stoller, reflecting rituals of Hauka from West Africa, wrote that embodied practices played a key role in this social phenomenon. Stoller theorizes that through the bodily activity, gestures, smells, textures, views, sounds, and flavors, rituals form relationships with the cultural environment, the future, and the past (Stoller, 1994, pp. 638-641). In this respect, the embodied practices of residents of Mzuzu related to modern sound technologies resemble the performative enactment of own identities described by Stoller and Connerton. However, in regard to the sound production, these enactments are more connected to technology and differentiate groups of producers, artists, and listeners. The manners of performing, producing, and experiencing music in the age of technological mediation almost always involve bodily interaction and an activation of the senses – including touch, sight and hearing. Bodies of producers clinging to the computer keyboards, their eyes staring at the monitors. Artists gesticulate, playing out messages of songs they sing, sometimes dance in the vocal booth. Songs, which in the eyes of their authors played the role as mainstream hip-hop or dancehall music tailored for local audiences, reveal a non-linguistic dimension of identity and imaginary. As such, I argue that people embody rather than express these identities discursively.

There are many practices that illustrate this argument. For example, in Mzuzu, almost all of the public musical performances I observed were associated with dance. Moreover, producers emphasized that above all, local listeners appreciate the punching volume. One of my interlocutors also examined the possible presence of a distortion in a mix, putting an ear down to the loudspeaker: if it did not cross the threshold of pain in his head, it meant that it was sufficiently smooth. The workflow of the production (including fixing amplification equipment and DIY construction of devices) and dance in its various – more or less mediatized forms (such as music videos) – employed non-verbal references to the presumed common past. In these practices, bodily gestures are allowed to play, visualize, and shape the sound of a relationship with an imagined past through the use of a specific attire, rhythm, or movement. Gesture also refers to the desired future, the individual and collective becoming. Thus, music production remains an example of a practice that allows for multi-layered references between the imagined past and the future.



Sound 2 – a fragment of song “African Drums” produced and performed by BlackFace Family (courtesy of 1000HZ Records)

The above phenomenon emerges through the relationship between technological production of music pieces and the verbally articulated sense of belonging, coupled with attachment to tradition. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that for *Kukaning'inako*, artists' reference to the imaginary past was performed by rhythmic arrangement (Cichocki, 2018, pp. 426-427). The basic pulse of songs utilized a rhythmical beat from reggaeton, but also included an additional digital snare or an “ethnic” drum. The timbre and/or backbeat refer to the generalized idea of Africanness. That was the case with Twiggy, one of the brotherly trio, who often added electronic percussion instruments, “breaking” the typical hip-hop or dancehall genre, in such a way that he was considered to be African or local.<sup>15</sup> Another way to highlight locality through musical arrangement is the practice of using sampled congas, rattles, and other African or Afro-Latin percussions, which are regarded as local due to identification with global “black music” (listen – sound 2). *Kukaning'inako* producers did not source these samples, but applied the factory sounds of programs like Fruity Loops or similar. Obviously, these were not local tools – they were globally available technologies utilized by Malawians to craft a sense of locality. These songs reverberated in local discotheques where dancers turned the rhythms into other bodily practice.

The *Kukaning'inako* studio traded the beats produced by the three brothers to vocalists who could add their voice and publish the music as their own songs. However, a more frequent method of sourcing, especially for neophyte singers who could not pay much for the original music, was ready beats from the Internet. Rappers used e.g. the youtube.com service, utilizing simple free ripping applications. Signers were not concerned with differentiating between free or commercial beats and sometimes even ripped the instrumentals off of the global hits by Justin Bieber, Adele, and the like (listen - sound 3). Less known beats were sourced from countries with greater access to digital studio technology, mainly Europe and North America, but sometimes also from Nigeria and Ghana. The latter were appreciated because of the “African flavor”. However, rappers did not comment much on the features of these instrumentals, rather they focused on the message. They perceived the text as the essence of the recorded musical work. Only a few times, they added, not without gasconade, that the beat was made by an American producer.



Sound 3 – remake of Justin Bieber's song in Chitumbuka language “Sorry wachitumbuka”, singer unidentified, source – WhatsApp forum.

The studio Pulikani Mzee utilized a slightly different procedure for gospel music production. A number of singers (like Maria Nundwe, with whom I had the longest

conversations on this subject) informed me that the songs they perform have spiritual origins. Nundwe described her working process in terms of receiving a message in her dreams from the Holy Spirit. The melodic lines of the songs use religious or local themes transformed due to the metrics of the spiritually inspired texts. An example is a melodic line from one of Maria Nundwe's most celebrated songs "Urwirwi" (Chitumbuka word for "suffering"), omnipresent on the streets of Mzuzu during my research in 2016. I was very surprised when, three years later, I heard it during a ceremony of local cult *vimbuza*. I was told that the same melody is a church song, probably borrowed from local music. Maria took it from her Christian congregation, only changing its words.

Perhaps because of this link between local and studio music, listeners referred to the style of Maria Nundwe as "deep Chitumbuka". She utilized the local language of the Tumbuka ethnic group, spreading ethical guidelines. Moreover, the producer of Maria's albums, George Msukwa, intentionally used regional rhythms (mainly *malipenga* and *ingoma*, because local *vimbuza* associated with the cult of possession was often disregarded as "satanic"), emphasizing the music's connection to the everyday life of the Northern Region.

Technological mediation joins the gospel work just after the divinations. The producer's input consists in composing musical arrangements to melodies crooned by vocalists. The humming of the theme into the ear of the producer is the beginning of studio work on the song or maybe even the entire album. After that initial work, the producer designs increasingly more parts of instruments, after which the singer adds the recorded voice. Most famous artists can arrange this electronic song for a live band to organize a promotional concert (DVD launch). However, this required additional financial means to pay the musicians, and for this reason it was the domain of the richest.

The case of gospel work begins with the spiritual sphere. In subsequent stages, producers transferred this spiritual and ethical practice into the sphere of technological mediation. Despite the obvious differences in the content and sources of these two styles, the producers played similar roles. They establish the transfer of practices and objects between different domains. It can be either the spiritual domain or the international hip-hop music market, within which north Malawian artists remained peripheral. The producers have to merge sounds and messages from different spheres into song that is several minutes long. In this sense, production is not only a technological process, in which a new musical entity emerges, but also a social mediation (Cichocki, 2018).

The common feature of hip-hop and gospel production is thus the mediating role between the social landscapes (Cichocki, 2019). The process of production gives a new form to the results of communication between subjects (other producers, technologies, musicians, spirits, ancestors – when referring to the past) and spheres

(geographical, ontological, social). At the same time, it reflects the geopolitical relations with centers of the music industry, and also the socio-spiritual landscape which, according to researchers of Eastern Africa, consists of living people and spirits (Thornton, 2008; Lubkemann, 2002). As in the case of acoustic ritual and religious music that connects the worlds of people and spiritual beings (Cichocki 2018; Eisenberg 2013), the electronic sounds connect the social and the invisible throughout the momentary embodiment of dance. The north Malawian music reverberates through this semi-virtual geography of distances and landscapes. The work of the producers is to balance the voices from different social realms.

## Conclusion

In this article, I used an ethnographic method to describe sound production as a way of performing authority and identity. This performance takes place due to the skills in combining tangible and intangible elements. In this process, the *bricoleur* skillfulness establishes the reputation of a given producer. As a result, a number of sound makers play a key role in connecting the imaginary, yet embodied world with the invisible world that may even be perceived as substantive (as in the case of spirits).

I aimed to examine how music production is a cultural practice in which the identity and social relations play out. This practice is based on the tension between the local music scene and the global standard of music production. Sound production in Mzuzu is immersed in the local social landscape and its power relations. Its other important characteristic is the embodiment which means that it occurs “here and now” as the constantly updated expression of the social subject. On the other hand, through the global range of musical inspirations or, more directly, through samples, sounds, programs and devices, it remains part of standardized labor. Thus, studio technology shows its dual properties – always locally anchored and no less unified.

## References

- Biakolo, E. (1998). Categories of cross-cultural cognition and the African condition. In Coetzee, P.H., & Roux, A.P.J. (Eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, (pp. 1-14). London: New York: Routledge.
- Certeau, M. de, Giard, L., & Mayol, P. (1998). *The practice of everyday life. Volume 2: Living and cooking*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cichocki, P. (2013). *Sieć przyjaciół*. Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press.
- Cichocki, P. (2018). Wybrane aspekty społecznego krążenia dźwięku w Tanzanii i Malawi. Wybrzmienia etnograficzne. *LUD. Organ Polskiego Towarzystwa Ludoznawczego i Komitetu Nauk Etnologicznych PAN*, 102. <https://doi.org/10.12775/lud102.2018.15>
- Cichocki, P. (2019). Production of sound, production of knowledge. *Seismograf (In Printing)*.



- Cichocki, P., & Plińska, W. (2016). *CARGO/(nie)materialność. Katalog; CARGO/(im)materiality. The Catalogue/ CARGO/*, Warsaw: Asia Pacific Museum.
- Cichocki, P., & Ząbek, M. (2018). Introduction. In *Cultural Shift in East Africa: Developments, Biographies, (Im)materialities* (pp. 7-29). Iringa, Warsaw: University Dar es Salaam, University of Warsaw.
- Clifford, J. (1990). Notes on (field) notes. In Sanjek, R. (Ed.), *Fieldnotes: the makings of anthropology* (pp. 47-70). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J.L. (2006). *Law and disorder in the postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226114101.001.0001>
- Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226114736.001.0001>
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenberg, E. (1987). *The recording angel: explorations in phonography*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Friedson, S.M. (1996). *Dancing prophets: musical experience in Tumbuka healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hannerz, U. (1996). *Transnational connections: culture, people, places*. London: New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131985>
- Hastrup, K. (1995). *A passage to anthropology: between experience and theory*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203352250>
- Herzfeld, M. (2001). *Anthropology: Theoretical practice in culture and society*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Kittler, F.A. (1999). *Gramophone, film, typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kun, J. (2005). *Audiotopia. Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002743210609300212>
- Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Retrieved from <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1169917>
- Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lubkemann, S. (2002). Where to be an ancestor? Reconstituting socio-spiritual worlds among displaced Mozambicans. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15(2), 189-212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/15.2.189>
- Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an account of Native Enterprise and adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.
- Marcus, G.E. (1998). *Ethnography through thick and thin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Meintjes, L. (2003). *Sound of Africa: making music Zulu in a South African studio*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Olędzki, J. (1991). *Murzynowo: znaki istnienia i tożsamości kulturalnej mieszkańców wioski nadwiślańskiej XVIII-XX w.* Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press.
- Peletz, M.G. (2013). A Syariah Judiciary as a Global Assemblage: Islamization and Beyond in a South-east Asian Context. In Boddy J., Lambek M. (Eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, (pp. 489-506). Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.
- Pink, S. (2001). *Doing visual ethnography: images, media, and representation in research*. London; Thousand Oaks: Sage. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857025029>
- Rice, T. (2014). *Ethnomusicology: a very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. 10.1093/actrade/9780199794379.001.0001
- Sanjek, R. (Ed.). (1990). *Fieldnotes: the makings of anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696\(199207\)28:3%3C274::AID-JHBS2300280319%3E3.0.CO;2-K](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696(199207)28:3%3C274::AID-JHBS2300280319%3E3.0.CO;2-K)

- Scales, C.A. (2012). *Recording culture: Powwow music and the Aboriginal recording industry on the Northern Plains*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Serres, M. (1997). *The troubadour of knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Siegel, J.T. (1998). *A new criminal type in Jakarta: counter-revolution today*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sterne, J. (2003). *The audible past: Cultural origins of sound reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stoller, P. (1994). Embodying colonial memories. *American Anthropologist*, 96(3), 634-648. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1994.96.3.02a00110>
- Stone, R.M. (1997). *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 1: Africa*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Thornton, R.J. (2008). *Unimagined community sex, networks, and AIDS in Uganda and South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01589\\_16.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01589_16.x)
- Turkle, S. (2008). *Inner history. The Inner History of Devices*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Vail, L. (1989). *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa*. London: Currey.
- Znaniecki, F. (1927). The Object Matter of Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 32(4), 529-584.

## Notes

- 1 Elsewhere, I discussed the connection of these two spheres, referring to “the importance of mediated and technologic elements in the network established by religious rituals and communities, [...] and an active role of imagination and spiritual phenomena” (Cichocki, Ząbek, 2018, p. 10).
- 2 The capital of the Northern Region of Malawi is the largest city in the area inhabited by a population of diverse ethnic identities, using many languages. Since Mzuzu is mainly inhabited by migrants from smaller towns and villages, one can easily hear constellation of local languages, such as Chitumbuka, Chitonga, Chinyanja and – less frequently – Kingoni (the group, describing themselves as Ngoni that gained political control over this area several dozen years before British colonization, quickly adopted the language and many customs from the local Tumbuka people): national Chichewa, but also very often English (education from the second grade in Malawi uses this language), Arabic, Chinese and Urdu (among Asian traders). Mzuzu is a commercial, administrative and educational center of this mainly agricultural region. Despite the lack of major industrial plants, multiethnic newcomers from the region and entire Malawi stimulate the constant growth of the population.
- 3 In the simplest form, fieldnotes rely on the daily recording of observation and participation. James Clifford writes that this systematical research tool combines the forms of recording, transcription and personal journal, to achieve the ideal of being “serious, truthful, factual, thorough, scrupulous, referential” (Clifford, 1990, p.68).
- 4 Roger Sanjek writes about headnotes as the most important aspect of acquiring ethnographic knowledge, which involves remembering experiences in various forms. Headnotes should “evolve and change as they did during the time in the field” (Sanjek, 1990, p. 93). At the same time, Sanjek assigns the authorship of the term to Simon Ottenberg.
- 5 Sarah Pink defined the goals of visual ethnography as the process of acquiring the competencies of local visual cultures. Part of this process is also the visual output of research produced following local conventions (Pink, 2001). I refer to this proposal also regarding the sonic aspect of the research.
- 6 During the writing of the paper, I had not yet finished the research project.
- 7 During comparative research conducted in south-western Tanzania (September-October 2017), I also observed work in a total of six music studios. Despite some similarities, I did not include this material in this analysis. I assume that the combination of materiality, practices, and social context comprises significantly different network. One example of these



differences is the role of the Swahili language in Tanzania, which, due to the state cultural policy during several decades, became a common tool for communication, also in the field of popular music. On the other hand, in northern Malawi, the local tongues of Chitumbuka and Chitonga play an important role. It undoubtedly connects with a different way of practicing ethnic and local identities as well as the ways in which the states shaped the policies of these identities (Comaroff, Comaroff, 2009). Another significant difference is the economic contexts in which my interlocutors obtained access to musical equipment. In short, for centuries, the Tanzanian interior has been oriented towards trade routes leading towards the Indian Ocean coast, which conditioned the circulation of technologies, goods, and people. In turn, from the 19th century Malawi became connected to a territory economically centered around current South Africa (Vail, 1989). One might say that in spite of the language similarity between groups of people inhabiting both sides the Malawian-Tanzanian border, it is a line separating two historically shaped political and economic territories.

- 8 I considered my proposition in an ethical dimension. I realized that manifesting technological superiority corresponds to a demonstration of political and economic strength, inherent in post-colonial hierarchies. However, research (e.g. on technology) in Malawi could not bypass this power performance in everyday dealings. In fact, the producers often recognized me as an authority in new studio technology and possibly the owner of high-end gear. On the other hand, I realized that in order to interest them in my study as well as appreciate the time given to me, showing appreciation in some form was proper. Therefore, I prepared a set of freeware programs and plug-ins, which they gladly copied to computers, and they also borrowed the equipment I brought, mainly the microphone and sometimes a camera.
- 9 A separate case was the part of the bass guitar, recorded in the studio Pulikani M-zee by George who has been a bassist for many years. He connected the guitar directly to the audio interface, obtaining an electric sound by using two VST amp-simulators. In another studio, I have heard about recording an acoustic guitar to use as a sample.
- 10 There was a clear similarity between life experiences between George and Charles (at one time, they had both played in prosperous bands, both had experience in labor migration) as well as their group identity. They both referred to themselves as Ngoni, and George's arrangements for Charles's songs utilized the *ingoma* dance rhythm considered as part of the culture of this ethnic group.
- 11 I have observed such operations many times – whether at concerts with improvised current outputs or when a befriended photographer repaired cables at a session.
- 12 Kirsten Hastrup defined the ethnographic event as a one-off social happening that, due to the participation of an ethnographer, allows for the understanding of its cultural meaning (Hastrup, 1995).
- 13 <http://citypopulation.de/Malawi-Cities.html> (accessed 01.12.2019)
- 14 The following argumentation and examples were presented in other paper published in polish (Cichocki, 2018).
- 15 One of method of this local emplacement was a shifting backbeat and syncopation of the snare accent in several ways, each of which was described for certain styles of the beat (e.g. Zambian, Zairian). Another practice was the combination of a dual meter for kick drum and a triple meter for other percussion instruments.