

It sounds like a fiction calculated to mock liberal anthropologists and political correctness. Forty years after the Congo's independence, the main expression of popular culture in the desolate ghetto of Kinshasa, and more so in the Congolese *banlieu* of Paris, is the worship of high-fashion designer labels. La Sape, the name of their cult – which stands for La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes – has been elevated to a religion by its followers. “Kitendi” is its other name, the religion of the cloth. You see Sapeurs on the streets of Paris around Château Rouge or the Gare du Nord, or in Brussels in the district of Ixelles – young Congolese males dressed extravagantly in Cavalli, Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake. In the *boîtes*, they flash their labels in ritual dances and mount challenges, label versus label.

The goal is to be deemed a “Parisien”, the equivalent of a *grand* – a great man. Paris or Brussels are the sacred places of pilgrimage. If you return to Kinshasa, your only lasting proofs of status are your title and suitcase of designer clothes. “Lola”, their name for Brussels, means “paradise”.

Sapeurs are followers, indeed almost subjects, of Papa Wemba, the most globally successful Congolese musician and one of Africa's biggest stars. He nurtured La Sape in Kinshasa in the days of President Mobutu in the 1970s, as a form of rebellion against Mobutu's uniform dress code, but mainly as a “trick”, as he once admitted, to draw support from other bands. But it flowered unimaginably among the illegal immigrant communities in Paris and Brussels. Wemba enticed his followers to “realise themselves in Europe”. Instead of slogans, his “ideology” chanted fashion labels.

One of Wemba's hits of the 1980s has a Sapeur telephoning Kinshasa from the top of the Eiffel Tower, telling his girlfriend to wait for him. “On our wedding day,” he sings, “the label will be Torrente/The label will be Giorgio Armani/The label will be Daniel Hechter/The label for the shoes will be JM Weston.” One of his albums is called simply *Place Vendôme* – the most expensive shopping square in Paris.

Yet it's exclusively an African affair, nothing to do with emulating Europeans. Despite the ostentation, it is a clandestine world mostly of illegal immigrants and scams. If only for crimes committed to raise money for clothes, most Sapeurs do stints in prison. They speak a slang incomprehensible to other Congolese and eavesdropping officials. To have penetrated their defences is the remarkable feat of two documentary makers, George Amponsah and Cosima Spender. The result, *The Importance of Being Elegant*, which took two years to make, is fascinating, unsettling and at times hilarious. It is broadcast tonight on BBC2 as part of the *Storyville* strand.

Amponsah, who had the idea, is a British-Ghanaian specialising in the African diaspora, “of such people trying to carve out an identity for themselves – the central question of my life”. Cosima Spender, granddaughter of the poet Stephen Spender and the abstract expressionist painter Arshile Gorky, studied art and music in West African societies at SOAS.

Getting the trust of the participants and delays with the French funding ate up many months. But when Papa Wemba went to jail in Paris, accused of importing 350 illegal immigrants (at €3,000 each) posing as members of his band, it was a godsend to a



Papa Wemba on stage: somehow he can be forgiven almost anything for his music

# Pop star, people smuggler, jailbird, demagogue - and all in a coat that cost £15,000

James Fox looks at the bizarre life of world music star Papa Wemba

potentially plotless documentary. The film opens with his release from prison, carried shoulder-high by his fans, the streets packed. Musicians have always been powerful in Africa and there were riots in Kinshasa when Wemba was jailed, and intercessions from presidents of both the Congos and of Angola. His own government (Democratic Republic of the Congo) paid the bail. “He is president of an invisible nation,” said one of his followers.

Wemba is an extraordinary figure. He has taken his style of demagogue-speak directly from Mobutu – the hectoring, the platitudes, the empty moralising. His system is essentially a pyramid-sell to his impoverished

followers. Despite having recorded with Peter Gabriel, bootlegging means that he depends for income on “dedicaces” – whereby, in the tradition of praise singing, he charges in excess of £1,000 for a personal mention in his recordings. At the microphone he shuffles the names thrust into his hands by lobbyists. “If you're in Kinshasa and hear your son's name sung in a Papa Wemba song, you feel proud because your son has made it in Europe and has become a Parisien,” says Spender. He bestows status on his ministers, sings their names, so they can strut in the nightclubs.

In exchange, says Spender “they give him lots of money and lots of clothes. It's very clever. He has created a mini society and solid structure in which he can survive elegantly.” A concert is coming up – but what to wear? A fawning salesman shows him a floor-length Cavalli fur coat for £15,000. He tries it on. “See how noble it is,” he says, “it weighs more than 15 kilos. It's very imperial.” When one of his ministers tries on a similar coat, the fur this time reversible, he reflects that it would buy half a house in

Kinshasa. But it is tempting to forgive Wemba almost anything for his music, which pulses through the film – his magical falsetto voice, the lovely guitar figures and vocal harmonies. At its best, like this, Congolese music has a power and sexiness which has made it the unrivalled dance music across Africa.

Wemba's “ministers” willingly buy into the illusion. “Oh la vie... Ah la Belgique,” one of them sighs on a motorway near Brussels. Sapeur dressing is highly charged, the clothes barcodes of information instantly scannable: how much, which label, how exclusive in the collection. That is the aesthetic. In the lowest echelons, labels are stitched into high-street clothes and flashed all the same. In one scene we see two Sapeurs comparing the waistbands of their underpants. “I can win many battles in this,” says another as he pulls on a Dolce e Gabbana jacket. “It's not an embracing of colonial domination,” says Amponsah. “It's all about grandiosity.”

A show beamed live by satellite to

Kinshasa from Paris and Brussels each Saturday, a kind of Sapeur catwalk, attempts to maintain the illusion. But it's a huge struggle to keep up the pretence. There are overwhelming demands from Kinshasa for money, the myth of Eldorado taken for fact, yet many in Paris struggle to feed themselves. “No one wanted to show us their tiny bedsit where they lived with five people,” says Spender. And that's the bad part says Amponsah, “people perpetuating a lie, deferring responsibility. Europe is not what they thought it was but they have to assure folks at home that the dream is real. How are they going to afford the Cavalli jacket? They're going to have to turn to crime. It's a vicious circle.”

Only an archbishop breaks rank. He sees through it but can't renounce the Sapeur lifestyle. “It takes many years to get recognition as a top Sapeur,” he says. “You can only get a name through Papa Wemba. He's brainwashed everyone. This is not paradise, it's hell. How can a musician have more power than a president? Papa Wemba is a big manipulator.”

It may soon be over. There are still charges against Wemba and he may be exiled from Europe, in which case his return to Kinshasa will be less than glorious. If this happens, he may even be relieved. He tried to disengage at one stage, thinking the beast he had created had spun out of control.

That the Sapeurs have swapped one hell for another is the palimpsest of the film. Their origin is the true heart of darkness. The endemic corruption and violence in the Congo stretches in a line from King Leopold of Belgium through Mobutu, under whose rule the infrastructure collapsed and the state ceased to exist, returning the country to something nearer the 15th than the 19th century, while he pocketed \$45 billion. In the past five years, between three and four million have died. A “second economy” developed in the 1970s, encouraged by Mobutu. Based on networks of kinship and loyalty, it simply bypassed the state, the global economy and all institutions that had excluded and impoverished its citizens. It required the kind of courage and initiative at which the Congolese excelled.

Music was the only surviving heartbeat and it has always been attached to clothes. (In the 1940s there were even “Les Existos” who looked to Paris existentialism.) La Sape – fashionable dressing – began before Wemba, among the disenfranchised and unemployed, resistance groups whose flamboyance was evidence of success against competition and overwhelming odds.

“The difficulty with this film is that it never goes to Kinshasa,” says Amponsah. “Once you understand truly the context of where people are coming from, the phenomenon isn't as absurd as it seems at first glance. There's a kind of logic to it. Where there is criminality, it has to be seen in a wider context of that state-sponsored system of corruption. These guys have grown up knowing that and nothing else. Then they come to Europe and find themselves marginalised in society, victims of racism and hostility towards immigrants, and find they have to apply the same sort of survival techniques. What we've done is to get into this world and get up close.”

*The Importance of Being Elegant* is on BBC2 tonight at 10pm.

Europe is not what people thought it was, but they have to tell folks at home that the dream is real



‘I’d be standing  
in front of an  
orchestra asking  
them if they could  
play more rudely,  
or make section  
seven sound more  
like blueberries,  
please’



down to devising material for *Medúlla*, on her own, she found it difficult.

‘It’s weird what the baby does to your head. It’s like you have to train a muscle again. Nature is great at making you think about your baby 24 hours a day but when the baby doesn’t need you so much, it isn’t great at teaching you to look after yourself.’ Working in 10-minute bursts, she found, wasn’t getting her very far.

She finally hit her stride in January 2004 when she flew alone to La Gomera, one of the least visited Canary Islands, to meet up with a Canadian Inuit throat singer who had appeared with her briefly during the Vespertine tour. Tanya Taqwa, in Björk’s opinion, is ‘like the Edith Piaf of throat singing. She makes those abstract noises passionate.’ They worked on a song, *The Pleasure Is all Mine*, in which Björk celebrated her newfound independence. After that, she found that the rest of the album came quite easily, thanks to the help she received from two choirs, the English pop maverick Robert Wyatt, and a human beatbox, Rasel, whom she first heard performing a cappella versions of Kraftwerk songs and who can apparently imitate every sound in the known universe. ‘Ask him to do a soap bubble and he can do it.’

The result of all this extraordinary vocal manipulation is another outstandingly original album from a woman who seems incapable of playing by any rules other than her own. For those who love music for its compelling strangeness, Björk is still the boss. And for those who love music to comment meaningfully on the world around us, well, she’s trying. ‘This album was supposed to be a response to 9/11 and all this rubbish and me thinking about a time before religion and patriotism. I wanted to show those gentlemen that there are still insects crawling, people jumping in swimming pools, building houses, having children, making songs and having abstract thought processes or whatever. That’s at least 98 per cent of what humans are doing out there.’ Björk obviously includes herself in this informal census of everyday normality; it seems churlish to disagree.

*‘Medúlla’ is released on August 30.*