

AFRICAN MUSICAL EXPRESSIONS: POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL STAKES

Rather than considering music (whether popular or elitist) on its own unique and essential terms, music has been grasped as a springboard to give account of some philosophical discourses. According to Gary Zabel, “The role allotted to music in the history of Western philosophy has been exceedingly thin. When philosophers have attempted to make sense of aesthetic experience, they have turned far more frequently to visual and literary works of art” (Gazel 198). Contemporary critique of popular culture and folk music tends to tie its negationist attitude towards the masses/folklore to Theodor W. Adorno who purportedly rejected a-heap popular culture on account of its lack of finesse and high aesthetics.

Besides, to the Frankfurt theoreticians, with Adorno at the top of the pack, it has been attributed the fact that jazz was to be lodged in the same quarters as popular “aesthetic” expressions. Whether this stance is Eurocentric or not, the truth remains that the Frankfurt critic has background in music; he learned and played piano. He musically worshipped Western iconic figures like Beethoven, among others. Consequently, any other musical expression not falling in line with his sensibility has been filed along the not serious aesthetic expressions usually on the ground that such expressions fail to effect change socially. Considering the history of jazz and its practitioners, it is highly incorrect to advance that this particular musical expression is less society-affecting than playing or listening Beethoven or Mozart. It all depends on where one hails from. Sensibility and judgment are always, and irretrievably so, subjective. What is good music for a Westerner cannot be absolutely so for a non-Westerner.

Perhaps for reasons related to intellectual elitism or simply because of the lack of an effective means of analysis, African popular arts (Modern African music in particular) keep on being pushed to the margins of academic discourse on postcolonial cultural identities. Downplaying other people’s forms of creative/aesthetic expressions as has been the case throughout history and Theodor W. Adorno’s critiques attest to this, is elitist and Eurocentrist, hence must be taken down with a strong and valuable metacriticism (critique of a critique) radiating from the people and cultures targeted.

To this day, and more so than not, in classroom discussions on African culture(s), a place of pride is ascribed to literature (at films at times) despite the high rate of illiteracy and difficulty distributing them, which makes these products utterly inaccessible to the masses. Music (whether popular or elitist) is relegated to the secondary layers of the work of the critique. More surprising is even the harsh judgment leveled against some “popular” and putatively noisy music produced by the youth. Visibly, such critique eludes the ideology and agency of the youth and their dissatisfaction with what the critics consider to be serious aesthetics.¹ And yet, in terms of their production and consumption, however, popular musical forms have an absolute impact on African populations. These forms are transfigurations of the people’s daily life experience in that they bring together and crystallize the identities of the musical forms in question more than any other artistic expression. Characteristically, they are lodged in *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (community-music) and *Gebrauchsmusik* (utility/useful-music), which do not fall in keeping with the music type dear the Frankfurt theorists; they happen in a community which knows their meaning and use.²

Speaking on the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have it that “Today works of art, suitably packaged like political slogans, are pressed on a reluctant public at reduced prices by the culture industry; they are opened up for popular enjoyment like parks. [...] *The abolition of educational privilege by disposing of culture at bargain prices does not admit the masses to the preserves from which they were formerly excluded* but, under the existing social conditions, contributes to the decay of education and the progress of barbaric incoherence” (Horkheimer and Adorno 130-31)[Emphasis mine]. Clearly, the work of art has been eliticized and its commoditization in order to let in the so-called masses

¹ Some intellectuals have been taking jabs at zougou in Cote d’Ivoire under the false pretense that this musical expression was not refined, aesthetical and serious enough. Self-flogging with Frankfordian uncton, and using Western tools to critique African culture, are evident here.

² See Elizabeth Janik in *Recomposing German Music: Politics and Musical Tradition in Cold War Berlin*. In Chapter Two (Music in Weimar Berlin) Janik explains the evolution and consolidation of these types of musical expressions in Weimar Berlin at a time when people were asking questions about the use of art.

supposed to be under the control of the elite draws frowning from the elite. Arguably, when the masses realize their agency through the so-called “culture industry”, this raises a barrage of opposition as can be seen in the acerbic attacks by critics like Adorno and his fellows of the Frankfurt School.

Every musical form has its ideological, political, and aesthetic worth to be apprehended and assessed on its own essence and terms. In order to allow space to a multiplicity of voices through means other than the traditional channels of expressions –literature in Africa, for example – we decided to welcome contributions looking at musical forms in Africa along the same line as analytical approaches taken to African literary productions in African national languages and/or in French taking into consideration the contribution of these forms to the making or framing of postcolonial African identities. Thus, the contributions serving this purpose are various and interesting in their own fashion.

The first contribution is penned by Rita Keresztesi. Titled “Hip Hop Politics: Agitation through Film and Music in West Africa,” Keresztesi’s paper discusses the revolutionary role of the arts, music (reggae and Hip Hop), cinema and new social media (Facebook and text messaging), in recent political debates and youth movements in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire, as well as Nigeria. Considering those young activists involved in the entrenchment of democracy in their country, one can figure that their artistic moves steep very deep into ideology and politics.

The second contribution by Babacar M’Baye is titled “Resistance Strategies in African American and Senegalese Hip-Hop.” This article deals with the use of hip-hop among African Americans and Senegalese people as a means of ideological resistance against racial and economic oppression. According to Babacar M’Baye, this musical expression deploys narrative tactics as well as cultural and political concepts that annihilate local and transnational forms of subjugations faced by the two people of African descent from the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The author reviews and critiques such specific hip-hop songs by African American and Senegalese artists as Dead Prez, Tupac Shakur, Xuman, and Bibson.

The contribution by Zorobi Philippe Toh takes the following title: “An Enunciative Analysis of Musical Discourse in Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans: A History Based on Benveniste’s Theory of Music.*” This paper coming in three parts will discuss the overlapping of music and utterances will be discussed. The first part will address the primordial character or the primacy of enunciative music. The second part will cover the importance of playful music as opposed to “serious music”. Finally, the third section will deal with deitics or improvisation in African musical expression. The main question asked by the author is “can music help construct one’s identity?” In order to answer this fundamental question, Zorobi Toh focuses his analysis of African American musical discursivity on chapter two of Eileen Southern’s book –namely the chapter titled “The African Legacy”–and reveals how, like in Africa music plays a tremendous role in society, among Blacks in the United States.

The title of fourth article is “La musique moderne à N’Djamena (Tchad) : représentations et sociabilités plurielles” (Modern Music in Ndjamena: Plural Representations and Sociabilities) and is authored by Jean-Pierre Kila Roskem. The author attempts to show that music, like other artistic means of expressions available in Africa, and in Chad in particular, may serve as a means of reading the social text of an African city (Ndjamena) as well as contemporary Africa. Resting his analysis of representations and sociabilities on ethnographic angle, and by means of interviews with musicians, the author offers a perspective on how music helps express identity politics and how music becomes a space of expression thereof.

Ultimately, the last contribution by Dr. Flora Amabiamina is titled “L’ethos de femme libérée dans la chanson féminine camerounaise” (Ethos of the liberated woman in Cameroonian women’s songs). Dr. Amabiamina’s analysis focuses on Cameroonian songs produced from 2000 to 2015 and deals with the image of the free(d) woman in Cameroon through the display of sexual desire, supposed expertise in sexuality and the freedom of women to use their body as they please without regard to male-made rules and considerations thereof. Though these women seek liberation, their attitudes contribute to their very subjugation to the patriarchalist and man-made rules that objectify women. To know how this paradox deploys, the author uses Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of masculine domination to enlighten her readers.

As always, our journal endeavors to offer a palette of works showcasing new directions to and novel approaches on contemporary issues to ensure the plurality of voices necessary to have attempts at imposing one-dimensional thinking fail. Clearly, *CIEC/IJCS* aims to bring diversity forth to a wider readership and partake in the dynamic and changing world of what used to be called Comparative Literature, and whose boundaries are being shaken and expanded. Therefore, our invitation to readers, editors and writers to ensure academic conversations is renewed.

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