



Mai Palmberg, Annemette Kirkegaard, eds. *Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordic African Institute, 2002. 182 pp. \$27.90 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-496-7.



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Forging Identities in Contemporary African Music

Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa is the second in a series of books on a research theme, “Cultural Images in and of Africa,” by The Nordic Africa Institute; the undertaking aims to analyze and increase awareness of the sources of the images of Africa in the Nordic countries, and to encourage studies of how culture and cultural creativity in Africa contribute to self-images, that is, to building identities, and expressing the agonies, visions and endeavors in society (p. 5).[1] The chapters in the book, however, represent a sample of papers that were presented at a conference in Abo (Turku) Finland, a collaboration between the Nordic African Institute, the Department of Musicology/Sibelius Museum, and the Center for Continuing Education.

Two theorists came to mind when I read the different chapters in the book: Stuart Hall and George Lipsitz.[2] Hall’s recommendation that we should think of identity as a “‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, and outside, representation” is relevant to the discussion of this book because the authors examine the different ways in which identity, collective and individual, is negotiated and con-

structed in African societies—societies where the masses, especially the youth, are becoming increasingly voiceless, invisible, and powerless; societies that, despite rich human and natural resources, are plagued by poverty, disease, famine, brain drain, unemployment, and homelessness brought on by drought, corrupt governments, prejudiced international trade policies, and IMF/World Bank programs that contribute to currency devaluation.

George Lipsitz’s observation that popular music is “nothing if not dialogic, the product of an on-going historical conversation in which no one has the first or the last word” is also appropriate for this collection of essays. The authors, in their various articles, have done an excellent job by showing how the “traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not just juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition.[3]

The book comprises eleven chapters, each of which examines a specific country. A reader looking for a

history of contemporary African music may be disappointed, though most of the authors do a fine job of providing some historical information. John Collins's essay on Ghana and Ndiouga Adrien Bernga's paper on Senegal offer quick overviews of the different styles in the two countries. In his discussion on *taarab* and multipartyism in Dar es Salaam, Siri Lange traces the evolution of *taarab* from its beginnings as a Muslim-elitist style for a listening audience to the numerous variants including one that incorporates mainland *ngoma* rhythms and styles from modern dance music for a participating audience.

On the other hand, a reader seeking a discussion of music and politics would be pleased since this theme runs through the various essays. Simon Akindes's chapter on Cote d'Ivoire deserves particular mention. It examines how the urban youth adopts and relocalizes reggae and diasporic forms to forge a composite identity. He argues that together with *zouglou* and *mapouka*, these styles have the "potential for making the youth, the poor and the voiceless, visible and heard" (p. 101). Siri Lange looks at the rivalry that exists between *taarab* bands as they compete for visibility and economic support from the ruling political party once multipartyism was instituted in Dar es Salaam.

Other authors discuss how individual artists use music to redefine themselves in relation to the larger society. Christopher Waterman's article examines the performative personas of three Nigerian artists: the one who "conflates and shifts the contrasts between patron and client to produce his own celebrity" (King Sunny Ade, p. 23); the one who conflates the "inner" and "outer" surfaces of his identity while he presents himself as a model for his audience (Fela Anikulakpo-Kuti, pp. 25-26); or one who evokes the transformational powers of the *Eg̃ng̃ñ* "to create a polyvocal celebrity self to embody diverse stylistic references, discourses, and voices to reveal a public, a social body made up of vividly diverse individuals" (Lagb̃j̃j̃, p. 31).

The issue of gender is addressed most strongly by Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza in her analysis of *Kayanda*, a Kadongo-Kamu song from Uganda; and Jenks Z. Okwori and Mai Palmberg examine how music is used for group solidarity in the essays about the Idoma and Ogoni of Nigeria and the people of Cape Verde, respectively. Besides issues of identity, others examine the shifting dynamics and definitions of modern and traditional—David Copland on South African Maskanda and Johannes Brusila on *mbira* music from Zimbabwe. Annemette

Kirkegard addresses the collaboration between two Tanzanian *taarab* groups and a Norwegian techno group, and its implications for a discussion of world beat/world music and fusion/fission music.

I was eager to read about how African women are using popular music to redefine themselves, especially in this age of globalization when pressure to conform to western standards of beauty is at its peak. I wanted to also read about how female African popular musicians (Oumou Sangare, Brenda Fassie, etc.) redefine themselves by responding to, critiquing, and rewriting expectations of women. This was a wonderful opportunity and an appropriate forum for a brilliant discussion and analysis of the voices of individual women (Angelique Kidjo, Lady Chiki, etc.) as subjects (as occurs in Waterman's essay) and as agents whose works and perspectives challenge attempts to homogenize the experiences and conditions of the women of Africa across time and culture. Such attempts have tended to present African women as a "homogeneous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of their traditions, culture, and beliefs." [4] Popular music has become an important platform for women of Africa and it is a rich place to understand their consciousness (even if all their music is about romance); therefore, collections like this do well to solicit and include such perspectives.

The book would have profited from a more even distribution of research across male and female musicians. Still, it remains a wonderful collection of articles that should interest both specialist and general reader. The essays read very well and the authors bring to the narrative perspectives that are scholarly, engaging, and critical.

Notes

[1]. The project published a first book in 2001 entitled, *Same and Other: Negotiating African Identity in Cultural Production*.

[2]. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 233-246; and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

[3]. Lipsetz, 99.

[4]. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Dunham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 192.

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