

# Music, Identity, and the Postcolonial World: A Comparative Analysis

Music is a key element of culture that both creates and expresses identity (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 31). As such, studying music in its cultural context reveals information about the identities of the musicians, audiences, and mediators involved. In this essay, I will describe how music and identity are connected in the postcolonial world. I seek to emphasize the different roles that music can play in identity formation and articulation in the modern world.

Colonialism emerged in the sixteenth century as European nations launched expeditions to explore and extend their sphere of influence beyond Europe. Over the next few hundred years, European expansion reached across the globe, with what we now know as the "West" formally claiming power in Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the twentieth century progressed the costs of empire combined with resistance from colonized people resulted in independence for much of the globe (Young, 2003, pp. 6-8). The postcolonial era in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries still carries echoes of colonialism, which can be heard in music as people define themselves and their place in a shifting world order. In this shifting order, culture has increasingly revealed that it is not "an autonomous and politically innocent domain of social life" and should not be treated as such (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 5). Instead, culture should be considered within wider global processes including politics.

Though decolonization was actively sought by subjugated people, its eventual occurrence left certain areas politically unstable. As a result, authoritarian regimes emerged. One such regime was in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, under the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko. Mobutu is notable for his use of music, especially *animation politique*, to manipulate the political identity of Zaire. *Animation politique* as a genre was used to promote Mobutu and publicize his political policy and ideology. By the 1980s, *animation politique* reached all aspects of life in Zaire. People were forced to dance to show political support and companies and organizations were required to host performances. As Bob White observes, "the presence of [*animation politique*] musicians and music constituted an important part of constructing an illusion of consensus" (2008, p. 80). Music's central role in constructing this illusion marks it as a definitive policy tool to be used for altering political culture in Zaire to Mobutu's favor. As Mobutu and his ubiquitous self-praise singing and dancing regime shows, the political void left by decolonization was at times filled with authoritarian rule under which music was mobilized for political purposes. Music connected social and political culture and was used to manipulate the identities of the local people.

Across the Atlantic, music and government intersected in a different way. Cuba, once a colony of Spain and informal "sugar colony" of the United States, stands out in the postcolonial era for its open defiance against imperial powers. Yet certain elements of "imperial" culture have come to be accepted and integrated into Cuban identity. Hip hop is one such example. "Old school" or conscious hip hop that began as an artistic medium for social critique among marginalized African-American communities, found wide reception in Cuba in the early 1990s. (Baker, 2005, p. 382). In 1989, the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto is noted for saying that rap was "an authentic expression of Cuban culture" (Baker, 2005, p. 369). Though seemingly

incongruent with Cuban policy owing to its American roots, Hip-hop as a genre became nationalized as a cultural institution within the Cuban government and wider society. The rationale behind this move is that Hip-hop can be interpreted as music of the African diaspora; thus it is not American per se. Besides, Cuba is another central location within the African diaspora and the island throughout history has incorporated influences from abroad into its psyche. Additionally, Cuban hip hop artists present their music in a way that is accepted by many in the government as espousing revolutionary ideals. Musicians' criticism is directed toward social injustice, not the system itself, which align hip hop and rap with the lofty, egalitarian ideals founding Cuba's post- and anti-colonial government. Rap is viewed as "constructive radicalism" that stimulates "distinct, progressive cultural movement within Cuban society" (Baker, 2005, pp. 378, 387). Through nationalization, the Cuban government legitimized the roles that hip hop and rap play in shaping and reflecting cultural identity.

It is useful to note that the political appropriation of Hip-hop in Cuba is markedly different than that of *animation politique* in Zaire. Though in both cases music is used as a tool to generate support for the government in power, the way in which this appropriation is initiated differs. In Cuba, Baker stresses that the nationalization of Hip-hop was not a top-down process in which the government seized the genre for use as a political tool. Rather, it was the artists who first approached government officials for support (2005, p. 375). The subsequent nationalization, done by creating government agencies such as the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* (AHS) and *Agencia Cubana de Rap* (ACR), was thus an expression of agency on the part of the artist.

In Zaire, by contrast, musician Wendo Kolosoy remembers "political men at that time wanted to use musicians like stepping stones... they wanted musicians to sing their favors" (White, 2008, p. 246). Musicians in this case were stripped of agency, turned into objects ("stepping stones") that could be used as political tools in support of the regime. Deprived of their agency as artists, many singers and dancers report that they did not believe in the message they were spreading. For example, some now admit that they performed because they wanted free drinks or other favors, not because of a sense of conviction (White, 2008, p. 76). As this comparison demonstrates, music can be connected to politics in the postcolonial world, though the ways in which connections form and consequently impact identity vary. The agency of the musician in forming these connections is critical and impacts the extent to which their music influences identity.

In this section, I will examine two different approaches to negotiating the inevitable foreign influences on music that occur in the postcolonial world. Hybridity in music creates hybridity in culture and identity (and vice versa) in a process that Agawu deems to be "one of the enduring effects of colonialism" (2003, p. 15). Other enduring effects that underlie these processes of influence and exchange are the residual power structures and sentiments that fostered colonialism in the first place. Musical influence certainly does not flow in one direction from the West to the rest, though the power structures behind flows of influence tend to favor the West. This creates hybridizations of music and culture that are, more often than not, to some sort of benefit to the West. To expand upon this point, I will compare Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the Nigerian musical icon noted for his zealous promotion of African authenticity, and the spirit songs of the Temiar people indigenous to the Malay peninsula.

For the first: Fela. Fela is a notable figure in Nigerian and African cultural history. Having spent time abroad, perhaps most formatively in the United States among members of the Black Power movement in 1969, he returned to Nigeria in 1970 with a goal of revitalizing the music scene by imbuing it with an African authenticity free of colonial baggage. To this end, he pioneered Afro-beat as a "progressive music of the future" in an attempt to "redress the psychological damage of colonialism to the African self-image and aesthetic" (Veal, 2000, pp. 80, 85). He sought to "Africanize" music, rejecting many Western styles and genres. In this way, he sought to limit colonial traces in music culture and thus identity.

However, Fela was not immune to Western influence, and was directly inspired by James Brown, as well as other jazz and psychedelia musicians in general. During this time, Fela also agreed to collaborate with Ginger Baker, the drummer from Cream, in the creation of the album *Stratavarious*. As is the case in other forms of cross-cultural collaboration, *Stratavarious* was created under the auspices of unstated but noticeable power differentials. Baker was interested in African music, though the feasibility of creating a collaborative album rested entirely on the power structures behind him. Namely, his connection to EMI Records, which manifested in the building of a Western-style recording space in Lagos. On the final product, Baker is credited as the sole producer (Veal, 2000, p. 92). *Stratavarious* was the first recorded collaboration between a high-level star from the West and an African musician. Fela was influential in his own context but, lacking leverage in postcolonial power structures, his influence was trivialized and exoticized in the West.

On the Malaysian peninsula, Temiar people face different influences on their music and react to these influences in a different way. Though no longer a colony under foreign rule, Temiars, as a minority, are subject to what Roseman calls "internal colonization" perpetuated by the Malaysian government (2000, p. 48). For example, in the 1970s Temiar people were resettled into government housing projects, which increased their contact with the world beyond the rainforest. This contact is reflected in changes in the spirit songs sung by the Temiar. Songs come to musicians during sleep from spirits they have encountered during the day. Dream songs "have long provided a way of marking [Temiar] engagement with their physical and social environment" (Roseman, 2000, p. 36). As such, music is a medium for fostering communal identity and solidarity in the face of changes brought to their culture by outside forces. Temiars, by interpreting these changes and the people who bring them through song, retain power over how their culture is influenced. One type of song that exemplifies the way in which Temiars choose to interpret and navigate their own situation is the music given by the Spirit of the Woman of the Marketplace. In these songs, global power and processes as seen in the marketplace are named as part of the Temiar world. These songs exemplify one way in which music asserts the identity of Temiar people as actors with the power to define their own world and not let it be defined by or lost in global processes (Roseman, 2000, p. 50).

In these two examples, music is the stage on which culture and identity are articulated in the increasingly global postcolonial world. Foreign influences, especially those with colonial origins, are treated differently in different contexts. People in the colonized culture have power over how they interpret the musical traditions of their others, though the power imbalances that persist as a result of colonialism underlie such interactions in a way that cannot be controlled by previously colonized subjects. Fela and the Temiars both find outside influences being woven into their music. Fela's reaction is to look inward, toward what is authentically African, and

reject cultural expressions reminiscent of the colonial era (Veal, 2000, p. 83). Temiars, on the other hand, adapt to foreign influences as they have done since before colonial times. They recognize that their world and, by extension, their music, shapes and is shaped by the world beyond the forest. Residual power structures in the postcolonial world underscore the context in which encounters and hybridization take place, but the people involved use music to assert and adapt their identity regardless of power considerations.

Music, as an essential way of articulating social identity, is important for understanding how people find their place in the postcolonial world. Whether affected by politics and its interplay with artistic agency, as seen in Zaire and Cuba, or influenced through increasingly common global encounters occurring under old power structures, as is the case with Fela in Nigeria and the Temiar people of Malaysia, music's role in culture is inextricably bound to postcolonial identity.

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