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Beyond the Dichotomy

Musical Relations between Africa and the West in the 1980s

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Dorsch, Hauke, Tom Simmert & Markus Verne: Beyond the Dichotomy: Musical Relations between Africa and the West in the 1980s

Abstract

The 1980s saw significant developments in African music and its relationship with the West. Not only became African popular musics part of the global music market through the invention of 'world music', but a whole range of new Western musics and styles also entered the continent, to which African musicians responded in highly different ways. While some modernized or traditionalized local genres, or modernized them by "traditionalizing" them, others adopted and creatively appropriated Western musical styles, while again others embraced foreign genres more or less unchanged, using them as a form of local escape. In this article, we consider musical innovations of the decade and their feedbacks using three specific examples: 'African' world music, heavy metal in Madagascar, and Nigeria's funk, disco, and developing hip-hop scenes. All examples address questions of technology, media, politics and belonging, allowing us to sketch some repercussions of an as yet little explored musical period and thereby contribute to the deconstruction of the African-European dichotomy, still characteristic of much literature on African music.

Zusammenfassung

In den 1980er Jahren fanden bedeutende Entwicklungen in der Beziehung afrikanischer Musik zum Westen statt. Nicht nur wurden durch die Erfindung der „Weltmusik" afrikanische populäre Musiken Teil des globalen Musikmarktes, auch hielten eine Reihe neuer westlicher Musiken und Stile Einzug auf dem Kontinent, auf die afrikanische Musiker*innen sehr unterschiedlich reagierten. Während Einige lokale Genres modernisierten oder traditionalisierten (oder sie durch „Traditionalisierung" modernisierten) übernahmen Andere westliche Musikstile und eigneten sie sich kreativ an, während wiederum Andere ausländische Genres mehr oder weniger unverändert übernahmen und sie als lokale Formen des Eskapismus nutzten. In diesem Artikel betrachten wir musikalische Innovationen des betreffenden Jahrzehnts und ihre Folgen anhand von drei konkreten Beispielen: „afrikanische" Weltmusik, Heavy Metal in Madagaskar, und die Funk-, Disco- und sich

entwickelnden Hip-Hop-Szenen Nigerias. Alle Beispiele thematisieren Technologie, Medien, Politik und Zugehörigkeit, und erlauben es so, die Nachwirkungen einer noch wenig erforschten musikalischen Epoche zu skizzieren. So tragen wir auch zur Dekonstruktion der stereotypen Afrika-Europa-Dichotomie bei, die in der Literatur über afrikanische Musik bis heute präsent ist.

Schlagwörter / Keywords

African music; genres: world music, metal, disco and funk; globalization / Afrikanische Musik; Genres: Weltmusik, Metal, Disco und Funk; Globalisierung

Introduction[1]

The 1980s are widely regarded a remarkable decade in the Western context, especially when it comes to music and popular culture. However, it is questionable whether it is conceptually useful to apply this timeframe to the African continent when looking at its music, given the heterogeneity of musical styles and the wide variety of political developments in different African countries during this decade. Nonetheless, we want to look at how this special period framed the musical feedbacks between Africa and the West. Given that we were asked to contribute to a catalogue about the 1980s in Africa that never saw the light of day, we felt that the challenge to discuss African music in such a supposedly arbitrary time frame actually made us rethink some important issues regarding popular African music, and took the opportunity to try and inspire a wider discussion about these issues. We will explore some of the specific musical phenomena culminating in this decade, in order to argue that there is, indeed, some reason to understand the 1980s as a historical period with a special character concerning these feedbacks between Africa and the West.

Our contribution bears a contradiction in its title. We are aware that by using concepts like "Western" and "African", we are at risk of perpetuating the same dichotomy we are claiming to go beyond. This dichotomy, however, is the focus of our contribution. Substantial musical exchange between Africa, Europe and the Americas has existed for centuries, yet until today, common essentialist conceptions of "African" music are widespread across the world, including the continent itself. "The West" is every bit as problematic as its other, as is the currently more fashionable "Global North". However, the latter would cover up the fact that non-African music consumed and adapted in Africa did not come only from Europe and North America, but also from Latin America and regions like India and the Arab Peninsula that are neither of the North nor the West. Given our trans-Atlantic focus we will nevertheless stick with 'the West.' In that sense, the 1980s are of particular interest, as the music of this era keeps transgressing borders while at the same time notoriously overemphasizing them, as we will point out in particular.

The decade is also relevant from an academic perspective. For the first time, serious efforts were put into research and publications on popular music in Africa, overcoming the decade-long focus on "traditional" music. Monographs from David Coplan (1985), Wolfgang Bender (1985) and Christopher Waterman (1990) laid the foundation for the future research of popular music styles that had been ignored as former generations of ethnomusicologist regarded them as inauthentic because of their Western influences.

African musicians had reacted to these influences on music and the music industry in their respective countries in different ways. Some had responded to Western influences by stressing, modernizing or reintegrating local genres while at the same time using the infrastructure of the Western music industry to sell their music to a global audience. Others had welcomed a foreign genre as a way of escape out of local confinements and musical as well as identity restrictions. Still others had first copied then appropriated Western styles and thereby influenced local music scenes. That latter process, however, intensified only after the 1980s. In the face of the wide varieties of musical styles on the continent, we decided to concentrate on three examples that demonstrate these three reactions to Western influences:

[1] This essay was planned to be part of an exhibition catalogue titled "Feedback: Art, Africa, and the Eithties", which unfortunately was never published.

(1) The success of West and Southern African musicians under the newly introduced label of 'world music', (2) the heavy metal and rock music scenes in Madagascar, and (3) the funk, disco and early hip hop scenes of Nigeria. This selection does not only reflect the authors' research interests, but it also illustrates the diversity of issues connected to music and society: Technology, changing media, recording and production infrastructure on the one hand, political circumstances and questions of belonging on the other. This contribution deals with the feedbacks produced by the musical transgressions of the 1980s and their repercussions on music and society at large.

World Music: Marketing African Music in the West

The 1980s mark the beginning of an era that exposed more African musicians to a global audience than any earlier decade. Before independence, Western, or Northern, and other non-African audiences would have mainly listened to recordings of the *Missa Luba* from the Congo. From the late 1950s onwards, Keita Fodeba's *Ballets Africains* from Guinea-Conakry represented the newly independent African states in the global North, other groups were only known by insiders. In the 1960s, Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, after having been exiled from South Africa, represented the continent and its still repressed populations in Southern Africa, who still had to suffer from Apartheid regimes in South Africa, Southwest Africa and Rhodesia or were under Portuguese colonial rule in neighbouring Angola and Mozambique. In 1972, *Soul Makossa*, a surprise hit for Cameroonian saxophone player Manu Dibango, was the first African song that became a no. 1 hit in the US pop charts. Otherwise, mainly Anglophone West African musicians made it to the global stages in the 1970s. Nigerian Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Afrobeat went well with funk, soul and rock audiences. Ghanaian highlife, and its derivates, especially Osibisa's AfroRock, were hugely successful. In addition, traditional kora players like Alhaj Bai Konte or Foday Musa Suso from The Gambia were invited on tours to the US and Europe, presumably due to the success of the *Roots* TV series that featured traditional Gambian musicians (Dorsch 2006, 2011).

The 1980s were also a decade of increasing Third World solidarity and a growing support of the anti-apartheid movements in the global North, as Europeans and Americans became increasingly aware of the apartheid regime's brutality, due to the intensified struggle in Southern Africa. Within Africa, this awareness was of course not new, but only then did it translate into globally successful recordings, such as Senegalese Youssou N'Dour's album *Nelson Mandela* or Ivorian reggae star Alpha Blondy's *Apartheid is Nazism*. US-American Paul Simon's hugely successful album *Graceland* brought African music into Western mainstream media. His recording and performing with South African artists, at a time when an international cultural boycott aimed at the end of the apartheid regime, was widely debated in the media. However, his project received moral support from Miriam Makeba for exposing Southern African musicians internationally and it helped groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo gain international success (Taylor 1997, Hamm 1989).

Regarding the music industry, the 1980s saw the invention of a new marketing tool: the category of 'world music'. Created as a means to sell non-Western music – including not only African, but also certain Asian, Latin American and Caribbean styles, music from Europe's peripheries and from rural North America – it helped making African music known to Western audiences and brought a constantly increasing number of African musicians to the global North. After the death of Bob Marley in 1981, Island Records tried to produce a second

global superstar from the South and signed King Sunny Adé from Nigeria, while Virgin followed with his fellow citizen Ebenezer Obey. However, they only succeeded for a short period, as did Congolese Kanda Bongo Man or Papa Wemba. Surprisingly, Congolese and pan-African superstars Franco and Tabu Ley Rochereau never managed to reach the global success of West African musicians. After having signed with *Realworld*, the 'world music' label newly established by British musician Peter Gabriel, Youssou N'Dour from Senegal turned out to be world music's first global superstar. However, N'Dour was in no way a ‚product' of Peter Gabriel or the British music industry, as he was already well established as a star in Senegal, being famous for reducing the Cuban influence on Senegalese music and establishing a more local, Senegalese pop genre called mbalax (Taylor 1997, 2012; White 2012, Shain 2002, 2009).

The dire situation of the music industries in many African countries brought an increasing number of musicians to the global North. Before the advent of digital recording equipment and the liberalization of the media in most countries, recording was an expensive and therefore risky business. Few African studios could keep up with the technological innovations in Western studios, former regional cultural and economic centres, like Abidjan, where musicians from neighbouring countries tended to record during the 1970s and early 1980s, lost their appeal in competition with Paris or London. Thus, for successful musicians, it was a must to go to Europe or the US to record state-of-the-art albums.

1987 was the annus mirabilis for the global presence of African music. Two West African musicians who had both played for the Malian Rail Band back in the 70s recorded hugely successful albums that established them as leading world music artists for the decades to come. Both had moved to Paris, and both recorded for European record labels. Guinean Mory Kanté recorded *Akwaba Beach* in 1987 on Barclay, including the hit single *Yéké Yéké* that topped the charts of many European countries in 1988 and would be among the best-selling African songs ever. Malian Salif Keita recorded his album Soro for Mango, the sub-division of Island Records that had marketed Bob Marley to the West. The album is regarded as a classic among world music productions. Keita invented a West African kind of pop music that was hugely influenced by the praise-singing styles of Mande griots, which he fused with experimental synthesizer sounds (Charry 2000, Dorsch 2006).

These albums had seemingly established the formula for globally successful world music albums: state-of-the-art production technologies, synthesizer sounds and dance rhythms for the hipness factor, combined with local instruments and lyrics in non-Western languages for the exotic feel. However, in 1989, a young female singer from Mali, Oumou Sangaré, published an album entitled *Moussoulou* that sounded entirely different, yet was again extremely successful. Including only acoustic and mostly local instruments, it sounded traditional; but in fact, it also broke with traditions, both musically – as it presented instruments in a pop context that were used mainly in ritual contexts – and in its lyrics, as women's issues were presented in an as yet unheard-of manner (Durán 1995, Dorsch 2006). In the decades to come, other female singers like Rokia Traoré or Fatoumata Diawara followed her and would likewise aim at an 'authentic' West African sound, while at the same time criticizing or questioning traditions that their *griotte* counterparts had kept alive. A seemingly traditional – and for Western audiences exotic – sound was combined with meaningful lyrics that would be appreciated by audiences in the respective African countries. Thus, in the 1980s, West African musicians had laid the groundwork for successful world music records for the decades to come, by using Western marketing infrastructures to sell music that used sounds and instruments as ethnic boundary markers to make it sound local to global audiences.

Music against Culture: Heavy Metal in Madagascar

Malagasy heavy metal emerged on Madagascar's cultural screen the moment the socialist "Second Republic" effectively came to its end. In the mid-70s, after years of struggle (to put it mildly), Madagascar's socialist interlude started, led by general Didier Ratsiraka and based on an anti(post)colonial, anti-French and generally anti-Western ideology (Ellis and Randrianja 2009). Not even ten years later, however, the system ran completely bankrupt and, after times of severe hardship, agreed to "structural adjustments" in order to get funds by the World Bank and the IMF (Ellis and Randrianja 2009: 199). As a result, Madagascar not only immediately overcame its isolationist policy toward the West, but also shook off its anti-Western attitude – which by many highlanders was only feigned anyway – which is why this moment is remembered by Madagascar's metal heads of the time as both a return to normality and the time when heavy metal emerged on the Malagasy stage. At last, they were able to engage in music again instead of spending their days standing in line for groceries; they could easily buy records and cassettes, even instruments which had not been available for years; and the one-sided support for political songwriter-music was replaced by public appreciations of all kinds of popular music (Rakotomalala 2003: 164-168). In 1985/86, some of Madagascar's most influential and quite successful metal bands first emerged on stage. Apost, a classic heavy metal band, famous to this day for both its heavy sound and its beautiful metal ballads; Tselatra, a hard rock musician with a characteristic rough and bluesy voice; Green, a light metal band the music of which was, and still is, deeply inspired by its lead guitarist's love for Van Halen; Kiaka, the metal band that scored Madagascar's first no. 1 metal hit with a song about poverty ("ilay mahantra"), today one of the hymns of Malagasy metal; and, last but not least, Kazar, Madagascar's first thrash metal band, soon to become widely known for both their heavy music and their impressive leather and rivets outfit.

When these bands, besides a range of others, invented the metal genre in Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital city, they sure did not do so from scratch. Metal records were hard to come by during the socialist period; still, Madagascar's metalheads had been listening to metal for years, thanks basically to family members living in France, who brought records along when they visited or sent them with others who did. Some bands had even begun to compose songs and to rehearse them, if only in private and with little equipment: some used cartons drums, old guitars and their mouths to compose and rehearse songs. In doing so, they could draw on a local history of beat and increasingly harder rock music that dated back to the late 1960s, to a time, thus, when Malagasy dance bands began to include songs by the Beatles or the Rolling Stones first, then by Jefferson Airplane, Creedence Clearwater Revival or Jimi Hendrix into their Saturday night 'bal de jeunes'-setlists. When, during the mid-1980s, Malagasy rock music reappeared in public, it did so in quite a new outfit: sounds were heavier, dresses were darker, songs were generally self-composed, and musicians were eager to contribute to what today is considered a "global metal world" (Wallach, Berger and Green 2011). Metal musicians performed metal music because they were excited by it, because it was so incredibly different to what they already knew, and certainly of what they knew from Malagasy music. Therefore, they wanted their music to sound exactly the way it sounded on the records they listened to, and they took pains trying to succeed, even if they soon had to accept that, given their highly restricted means and metal's high demand for sophisticated sound technologies, this goal was beyond their reach. Thus, for years, the ascription "metal gasy" not only referred to metal made in Madagascar but was also used to point to the fact that local metal often did not yet sound the way that it should (Verne 2020).

To this day, ethnomusicology as well as the anthropological study of music follow the basic premise on which these disciplines had been built, which is that music needs to be studied "in culture" (Merriam 1964; Nettl 2005). Even though, today, we are no longer likely to put it this way, because of the essentialism implied in the notion, we still follow the program in doing what we do, which is, as Agawu put it in his critique of Africanist ethnomusicology, dwelling on difference (Agawu 2003: 152-155). Madagascar's metal musicians who established this musical genre during the second half of the 1980s challenge this perspective in a highly obvious way: They loved this music exactly because it was nothing like what they already knew, they tried to perform it in exactly the way they heard it on records, and they did not try to fuse it with local sounds or styles (even if this in fact often happened, not least due to an encompassing lack of materials and technologies). In their musical gaze at the world, Malagasy metalheads took part in the country's reorientation from a politics of seclusion, musically performed, toward a renewed, if enforced, alignment with the West.

Feedbacks and Flashbacks: Nigerian Disco-Funk and the Aftermath

Over the last decade, the Western world has experienced a new hype around 12" vinyl records. Ever since, West African dance music records from the 1980s have become commodities of significant value for DJs and collectors, both in the sense of cultural and economic capital. But many of the records had become rare and expensive, so Western music labels began to re-issue them. Two of the genres that have seen an increase in re-issues are Nigerian funk and disco, originally released from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s.

In Nigeria, the 1980s began in what appeared to be a promising socio-economic climate. With the election of Shehu Shagari in 1979, the period of the Second Republic had just broke dawn. Even more important, during the second half of the seventies, the oil price was on a constant rise, at continuously growing export rates, resulting in high revenues for the state and a few years of unforeseen prosperity, despite the corruption that made substantial share of the revenues 'disappear' (Falola & Heaton 2008:201). The urban youth of the time was exposed to plenty of Western popular culture. Radio stations gave airplay to funk and disco music from labels like Salsoul and Solar Records, and the latter even had a branch in Lagos. Those lucky enough to take part in the financial upturn were able to buy records and turntables, enabling them to listen to even more of it, and soon the triumph of VHS tapes brought the most recent Hollywood movies to Nigerian homes. In the cities, and especially in Lagos, the nightlife was vibrant. Musicians could finally buy instruments, since income increased in the 1980s, making them less dependent on bandleaders who used to own the equipment for entire bands. Some of them brought the first synthesizers into the country, altering the sound of music and everyday life. Going to the clubs, dressing up, being in style, spending money and showing off – *shakara* – became the desirables of the hour.

Musicians like Christy Essien, Dizzy K. Falola, Peter Abdul, and William Onyeabor released their own disco-funk albums between the end of the seventies and the mid-1980s – the single-format had become abandoned during the late seventies already, due to cost-effectiveness. Onyeabor, one the most exceptional musicians of his time, produced and self-published eight albums of synthesizer-heavy funk music, manufactured in his own pressing plant. Apart from his unique and pioneering way of playing synthesizers, he employed other new recording techniques like layered voice recordings on tape and other sound effects, distinguishing him

from the majority of recordings done in Nigeria at the time (Guardian Music 2017). Yet, the general sound of the Nigerian disco-funk records largely lived up to their Western role models.

However, the Nigerian funk and disco scene did not emerge out of pure economic opportunity. It was also the will of the prosperous parts of the young generation to create something new and distinct from the mainstream; from highlife to *jùjú* and *fújì* music celebrated by large parts of the population in the 1970s and 1980s. Of course, that also included a counter-revolutionary aspect. For years, every Nigerian had been able to witness how Fela Anikulapo Kuti was severely punished for his open opposition towards the government. The disco-funk youth had no interest to take part in this fight, deciding for entertainment and enjoyment instead. The obvious criticism towards the movement thus focused on its hedonism and Western-ness. In the liner notes of a compilation released on the British label Soundway Records called 'Doing it in Lagos: Boogie, Pop & Disco in 1980s Nigeria' (2016), Uchenna Ikonne paints a bright picture of this generation: "We glimpse a vision of Nigerian youth that is cosmopolitan, optimistic, sexy, hip, prosperous, romantic, glamourous, witty, ambitious – a sharp contrast from the pathos-ridden images commonly trafficked to represent life in Africa" (Spice 2017).

Unfortunately, the golden days did not last long, as the oil price dropped massively in 1981, starting a chain of events that ultimately resulted in an eleven-year-long recession. The economic crisis was one of the factors leading to a political one: In 1983, the military landed a coup and Major General Muhammadu Buhari became the Head of State. His main political campaign titled "war against indiscipline" initially set up the decline of urban nightlife culture. In Ikonne's words: "There was a bit of a belt-tightening after 1983, and a return to more conservative values. The flashiness, the flamboyance, the glitziness — all of those things were just swept under the rug by the mid-80s. You saw religion becoming more of a force in society, taking the place pop music and film and art had held earlier in the decade" (NPR 2011).

Although some of the disco-funk records had sold well, the genre was never able to capture the mass market. The bad state of the economy of course affected the music industry, as did the shift from vinyl records to cassette tapes that facilitated an emerging music piracy from the mid-1980s on. The music market was still dominated by *jùjú*, *fújì*, and closely related genres like yo-pop (Yorùbá-pop) and afro-*jùjú*. Reggae was on the rise, as was gospel music that benefited from the spiritual climate. Some of the former disco-funk musicians like Essien adapted to these genres and continued their careers until the end of the decade, or even beyond, while others – like Abdul – never recorded music again. The aforementioned William Onyeabor ended his music career in 1985 and, identifying as a born-again Christian, would rather talk about his faith than his music for the rest of his life (Guardian Music 2017). Onyeabor's name was widely forgotten until the rerelease of a selection of his songs in 2013 on the Label Luaka Bob, owned by the British-American David Byrne, who is mostly known as front man of the new wave band Talking Heads.

Buhari was peacefully overthrown after just one and a half years and later followed his predecessor Olosegun Obasanjo in his democratic catharsis, eventually becoming president in the elections of 2015. The short-lived Second Republic was the last democratic period until 1999. The long-lasting military regime affected the cultural landscape of 1990s Nigeria drastically, and the memories of previous, fruitful times faded. Nevertheless, the relatively short era of disco and funk still had some impact on further developments. *Rapper's Delight* by the Sugar Hill Gang, commonly regarded the first recorded rap song ever, was released in 1979

and hit Nigeria in the same year, introducing the youth culture of hip hop to a Nigerian audience. Featuring the catchy bass line of Chic's *Good Times*, the song and many of its follow-ups were based on disco and funk music, except for the innovation of rapped vocals. The already existing scene had a notable share in the foundation of Nigerian hip hop; disco and funk artists were free to try to rap without taking big risks, like Ron Ekundayo, who released the first Nigerian rap song *The Way I Feel Rap*, on an album which otherwise featured him singing (Ikonne 2009). Rap soon became an essential performance technique and in the course of the 1980s, rappers began to strip off the disco-funk legacy from their craft. The vocal technique, as well as surrounding aspects of hip hop culture, like clothing, remained a vital part in creating new Nigerian genres in the course of the following decades, from rap and *fújì* crossovers in the 1990s (Klein 2009) to the contemporary genre of Afrobeats that has been dominating the Nigerian music market more recently (Simmert 2020, Ugor 2021).

Disco and funk were means for urban Nigerian youth to express Western-ness and prosperity in the early 1980s. Just like Madagascar's heavy metal musicians, they were exposed to a new style of music, and copied it. Unlike them, they also experimented with it, localized it by singing (or rapping) in native languages, employing locally specific instruments or even going across the borders of existing genres like William Onyeabor did. The overall familiar sound, combined with some minor, seemingly "exotic" peculiarities, however, is the reason for the genre's recent popularity among Western DJs and record collectors. Thus, most likely unintended by the ones who recorded the music back in the 1980s, the contemporary reissue market for Nigerian disco-funk follows a comparable formula as world music marketing once did.

Conclusion

When talking about "Africa" – in the realm of music, but also beyond – Western as well as many African authors had, and still have, the tendency to focus on Africa's 'African-ness' and thus creating a dichotomy between Europe and its African 'other'. At first, they did so by neglecting the existence of popular musical styles, digging into "traditional" African musics instead; and later, when pop music had become an issue – and, in fact, replaced the study of "traditional" musics almost entirely – they did so by focusing on processes of "appropriation" (or "localization", or "indigenization", or "folklorizations", etc.), on ways, that is, in which Africans render "global" music "African" by translating them into "their" "local" contexts, whether social, political, or aesthetic. With regard to themselves, Westerners consider music and the arts in general as spaces where boundaries are transcended, which is why they can *of course* engage in non-local kinds of music. With regard to Africa, they still tend to do the opposite: understand music and art as something that only speaks within defined spaces, even in cases where global musical styles are embraced. This, however, seems to be the hidden assumption behind approaches that generally understand global musics in Africa to be "African" global musics.

There is a growing awareness that this approach in fact says more about Western clichés of Africa than about a general African attitude, following Kofi Agawu's powerful critique of African music's representation (Agawu 2003). And while a closer critical look on established pop-musical genres like 'world music' will no doubt help clarify things in this respect, the study of forms of popular music that has so far not been explored – because, we would argue, it did not fit with the abovementioned assumptions – is another strategy to overcome existing

stereotypes. Much music of the 1980s is no doubt perfectly suited to do so, underexplored as this musical period in Africa still is. Of course, even during the 1980s, global music was fused with local styles in order to meet with existing demands, as the development of Nigerian disco and funk music shows that we briefly sketched. Still, this perspective, as we argue in our short outlines above, characterizes only one of the many sides of the African-Western musical entanglements of these times. Like musicians everywhere, African musicians may engage in global musical styles regardless of their cultural heritage and put their creative energy into transcending the local conditions, as in the cases of world music, Malagasy heavy metal and the early Nigerian disco-funk.

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