

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MUSIC AND MODERNISM IN AFRICA



Tsitsi Jaji

Africa as a sign of radical difference has been notoriously central to European and American formulations of modernism. Its complex role as antipodal instigator and antinomic exception is a critical commonplace. High modernism as an aestheticized encounter with the Other often drew upon Africa, whether in the negrophilic embrace of African sculpture by painters like Picasso and Braque, or in the negrophobic revulsion of Joseph Conrad's *Mr Kurtz*. As Simon Gikandi has explained, modernism's turn to Africa (whether as the primal, generative source material or primitive opposite of the modern) took the continent's cultural productions as an epiphany, but this turn was haunted by a contradiction: motivated by an impossible 'need to merge with the other as the most effective and instinctive rejection of previous forms of consciousness,' it also 'could only be represented through the imposition of a frame of reference and set of categories that preceded its discovery' (2006: 32). This contradiction makes it exceedingly difficult and yet essential to set aside such frames of reference and to reckon with what Africa's own definitions and contributions to modernism entail.

This essay takes an intentionally flexible approach to modernism, grounded in African aesthetic responses to the historical experiences of modernity. Susan Stanford Friedman notes that post-colonial critics 'often link modernity with imperialism and the national struggles for emergence within the contradictory conditions of hybridization and continued dependence on the colonial power' (2001: 500). Extending this, I argue that African modernism refers to aesthetic responses to the shock of modernity in the violent encounters with European colonization and the haunting histories of internal, Arab, and trans-Atlantic slavery. Conceiving this history from an African perspective, our attention should focus on the continent's long decolonizing process, beginning after the Berlin Conference of 1884 where the European nations negotiated how to divide and rule Africa, colonial cultural policies, and the significant cultural changes prompted by Christian missionary activities and continuing to this day. Accounting for modernism in Africa demands attention to the profound significance of African American (and, to a lesser extent, other diasporic) musical and cultural influences. African artists participated in these transnational cultural flows, embracing diasporic music for both its own intrinsic worth and its

symbolic value as emerging from a modern habitus already inscribed with histories of resistance to racism and the legacies of slavery. This kind of global circulation of black aesthetics, or ‘stereomodernism’ was multi-directional and multi-iterated (Jaji 2014: 1–22); just as diasporic blacks studied and laid claim to a heritage of African expressive cultures, so Africans took an interest in African-American literature, music and political organization.

In this chapter I emphasize African modernist musics in the period that overlaps with other global modernisms, particularly from the early twentieth century through to 1944, the date of the Brazzaville conference where the French colonies began agitating for independence, which would be largely granted in 1960. Among the social processes most influential in this period are rapid urbanization and the emergence of new gender roles relating to male recruitment into wage labour in mines, factories, and, to a lesser extent, civil service; transformation in religious practices and political authority anchored to customary law; a growing awareness of the local in relation to the global; and particularly, affiliation with black diasporic cultures involved in related struggles against colonialism and racism. Indigenous African aesthetic values in ‘traditional’ African music remain highly relevant. They include call-and-response structures, heterogenous timbres, polyphony and polyrhythms, participatory formats, and a close link to oral literature (proverbs, stories, histories, and poetry). However, to speak of ‘traditional music’ in Africa in this period is necessarily to speak of traditions in various processes of modernizing. How have African musical traditions been extended, elaborated upon and departed from? Whether in transforming purpose, adopting Western instruments or new materials for constructing indigenous instruments, or adapting imported genres like choral singing, jazz, or rumba to reflect local aesthetics, African music in the time of modernism was a crucial site for artistic experimentation and robust exercises in adaptation and transformation. It can be conceived as a call-and-response with indigenous historical musics and global musical currents, as the following interlinking case studies demonstrate.

Anthropologist Karin Barber, extending the work of political theorist Jean-François Bayart, has characterized a key element of African creative practices as ‘extraversion’ or the ‘ability to draw in and creatively absorb materials from outside in order to fuel local contests and projects’ (Barber 1997: 6). Put another way, the famous Poundian injunction to ‘make it new’ has long motivated the transformation of imported sonic material into grist for locally conceived organized sound. While musicology of Africa long emphasized traditional musics, an attention to urban and popular forms has revealed how music responded to dilemmas across the modernist world. Scholars note:

the dynamics of urban-rural transformation and the articulation of heterogeneous worlds, the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernization, [...] questions of race and ethnicity [...] the relationship between social structure and culture, between historical process and consciousness as it is dialectically constituted in performance.

(Erlmann 1991: 2).

Because of its rapid growth as a capitalist, modernized society driven by a mining and agricultural economy that entailed dramatic population migrations, South Africa

offers a particularly useful site to consider trends that applied to other parts of Africa as well. A broad range of (primarily) protestant Christian missions in the nineteenth century combined proselytizing with education projects. Music education was crucial in such projects because of the role played by congregational and part-singing in religious worship. As Grant Olwage notes, the first published piece of notated music by a black South African was a hymn, John Knox Bokwe's 1892 setting of a Xhosa hymn by Cape missionary J.A. Chalmers *Msinidisi wa boni* (*Saviour of Sinners*) (Olwage 2006: 1). Choral singing remained an important pastime, which mission-educated black elites considered central to performing the habitus of the modern black subject. When black South Africans began to teach in mission schools and open their own institutions, music was core to the curriculum. Music also played an important role in the black internationalization and indigenization of Christianity in South Africa. It reflected the influence of the European and American mission societies, of touring African American performance groups, and of cosmopolitan musical practices that incorporated Dutch, Malay, and other influences.

A rapid overview of the various forms of elite and traditional music incorporated into modern popular music in South Africa from the 1890s to 1950s might look like this: audiences became familiar with vaudeville repertoires through local and international troupes ranging from Christy's Minstrels to the Virginia Jubilee Singers. Many of the best-trained musicians had learned sol-fa notation and harmony in mission schools, although often a good musical ear outweighed knowledge of notation for securing work. Among those who read sol-fa notation, a repertoire developed merging local part-singing aesthetics, Victorian choral traditions, and eventually a range of instruments. While there were numerous religious songs composed by black South Africans, John and Nokutela Dube's *Zulu Song Book* (c.1911) was an important innovation as it collected and arranged a body of newly composed secular Zulu-language songs, and was envisioned as a prompt for more Zulu compositional activity. A student of the Dube's, Reuben Caluza, took this work even farther. His double quartet recorded 53 10-inch double electrical records for the Zonophone label, featuring original ragtime or syncopated music, folk songs, and vaudeville songs that addressed topical political matters (such as the Natives Land Act of 1913), as well as a school fight song praising a zebra mascot. At the same time, labour conditions in the mines left many mining directors anxious about managing (or moralizing) their workers' free time, and competitive dance and song such as the *isicathamiya* became widely popular. A similar phenomenon appeared in East Africa in *mashindano*, or competitive musical performances, in Kenya and Tanzania, where teams were often linked by age group, status, etc., rather than by workplace (Gunderson and Barz 2000). The combination of music and dance was codified in the concert and dance format of most early vaudeville and jazz in South Africa.

Concert and dance included many ingenious adaptations to the constricted legal environment of segregated South Africa. Because of pass laws, night curfews, and poor transportation options, an all-night indoors event was preferable to one that would leave listeners stranded in the dark after it ended. Venues were often at shebeens; the format typically included a vaudeville concert from 8 p.m. until midnight, then a dance that ran until 4 a.m. The music played was originally *marabi* style, although it evolved over the years. The melodic material was surprisingly

limited, drawn largely from African Christian hymns, and a mixture of Sotho, Xhosa, and Zulu songs. As Christopher Ballantine describes it, *marabi* structure was

cyclical repetitions of one melody or melodic fragment, yielding eventually, perhaps, to a similar treatment of another melody or fragment, and perhaps then still others, each melody possibly from a different source. [Musicians could play for hours non-stop]. Throughout, a rhythmic accompaniment would be provided by a player shaking a tin filled with small stones.

(1991: 135).

In other words, *marabi* was both participatory and competitive, associated with a social sphere in conflict with the state. This tension with the state distinguishes *marabi* from a mass-culture form and supports considering it as musical modernism, where repetition stylizes constraint and creates a space of radical sonic (and political) possibility. With the popularity of *marabi* came an opportunity to specialize and develop the music. Members of well-known ensembles like the Merry Blackbirds, Jazz Maniacs, and others became fixtures through advertising in modern media formats like the black newspapers *Bantu World*, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, and the like.

Black South African musical modernism coincided with what Ntongela Masilela has outlined as the New African Movement and its inheritors. One way to periodize it would mark its end in 1948 with the National Party's election, formal legislation of apartheid, and forced removals of residents of neighbourhoods like Johannesburg's artistically vibrant Sophiatown and Cape Town's District Six. Yet the beginning point is less well known. Charlotte Manye (later Maxeke) provides an excellent object lesson here. Manye Maxeke is best remembered for her role in facilitating a link between her uncle, Revd J.M. Mokone (who had pioneered formation of a black denomination), and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (which took Manye Maxeke in after her manager went bankrupt and educated her at Wilberforce College). However, her musical experiences have much to teach us about musical modernism in Africa.

As a young Xhosa woman in Kimberley, Manye Maxeke performed contralto solos in local concerts, making her debut in 1890 in a city awash in new sounds. As David Coplan describes it, the musical environment of turn-of-the-century Kimberley was highly cosmopolitan and deeply marked by a transforming labour market following the discovery of diamonds (Coplan 2008: 13–73). In the mix were Afrikaans *vastrap* (fast-step) ensembles including guitar, concertina, banjo, cornet, violin, and piano; Khoisan who improvised new melodies on homemade violins; American honkytonk players (both white and black); and Cape coloured musicians who specialized in the *tickey draai* (threepence) guitar style. The musical world of Kimberley was produced by cultural encounters among variegated classes and races, and innovations arose out of novel juxtapositions.

In this context the sisters Charlotte and Kate Manye were recruited to perform in the South African Choir (African Jubilee Singers) touring England in 1891. The group was advertised as raising funds for education in South Africa, and in this respect resembled the Fisk Jubilee Singers who had famously raised money for Fisk University by performing concert arrangements of African-American spirituals. The African Jubilee Singers presented a programme that placed modernity in the spotlight,

performing ‘native songs’ for the first half of their programme while costumed in putatively traditional dress, including some rather unlikely animal skins, and then making a quick costume change to English Victorian garb for the second half which presented Western choral repertoire (Erlmann 1991: 48).

Their performances were controversial in part because audiences found the South Africans’ performances of Western repertoire unsettlingly accomplished. In many ways, the programme’s exposure of malleable aesthetic standards and the conventions of ethnographic display remained crucial elements of African musical modernism for decades. The plot of Senegalese novelist Ousmane Socé Diop’s 1937 *Mirages de Paris* imagines what the colonial subjects who were hired to perform in the Paris Colonial Exhibition’s African village tableaux did to entertain themselves in the evenings. The protagonist, Fara, is housed at ‘Le Modern Hôtel’ in Paris-Orsay. Its very location spells Socé’s appraisal of colonial urban modernity as alienation: the hotel is

dans une rue transversale qui n’aboutissait ni à une grande place ni à un édifice public important; on y était à l’abri de la tyrannie des klaxons et du halètement des moteurs. [on a cross-street that opens onto neither a town square nor an important public building, but even indoors, one cannot escape the tyranny of honking horns or the fumes of running motors].

(Socé 1964: 28, my translation)

The space in Socé’s novel most alive with the energies of modernism as an aestheticized response to the experience of modernity is the Cabane Cubaine. Here Fara passes time deciphering the array of nationalities and skin-tones circulating through the space – Africans, Haitians, Mauritians, and Martinicans. For Socé, music is the great equalizer: French, Americans, Germans, Brits, people of colour all submit to

la tyrannie du rythme; l’orchestre les maniait à sa guise, il le rendait tour à tour trépidants, rêveurs, amers ou ivres d’allégresse! [the tyranny of rhythm; the orchestra manipulates them at will, it renders them by turns fearful, dreamy, bitter or drunk with happiness].

(58, my translation)

Fara associates jazz with an electric drive measured in kilowatts, while the rumba echoes more in the heart. Jazz stands in for a technologically overwhelming present, and the rumba for a more affectively dynamic, human-centric elsewhere, evoking ‘une fille noire se balançant, dans son hamac, à la tombée des soirs, bercée par la complainte d’une guitare’ [‘a black girl balancing in her hammock at eventide, lulled gently by the plaints of a guitar’] (Socé 1964: 62, my translation). Consuming popular diasporic music like jazz and rumba was not merely a way to critique the Colonial Exhibition’s farcical demands upon colonial subjects to perform an anachronistic primitive in the heart of the French empire. Popular music did more than subjugate the listener to rhythm; it elicited musical taste and critical discernment, making the Cabane Cubaine an important scene for enacting modern subjecthood. The narrative of encountering diasporic music in France is historically accurate, and, as Tim Mangin (2004) has noted, the large numbers of Senegalese (and other West African) soldiers who served during the world wars, as well as students who studied in France

in the interwar years, were among the first to encounter jazz, long before the US occupation of Vichy-controlled Dakar in 1942 brought significant numbers of Americans to Senegal. In the years after, military bands would follow their official performances with jazz sessions, and jazz music played increasingly on the radio, thus making stereomodernist musical taste, that put Africa and the diaspora in conversation, more widely accessible.

This theme of musical discernment also arises in Léopold Sédar Senghor's poems, whose titles indicate their accompaniment with kora, balaphon, or jazz ensemble. Senghor ascribed emotion to négritude with the reason ascribed to Hellenic civilization. However, his deployment of music shows that musical reasoning is at the core a modern black subjectivity. Consider his 1956 poem 'Teddungal (guimm pour kôra)' ['Honour (*guimm* for kora)']. 'Teddungal' transforms the praising functions of a master of oral poetry, the griot, into the diction of post-Imagiste French:

Sall ! je proclame ton nom Sall ! du Fouta-Damga au Cap-Vert
Le lac Baïdé faisait nos pieds plus frais, et maigres nous marchions par le
Pays-haut du Dyêri.

[Sall! I proclaim your name Sall! From Fouta-Damga to Cap-Vert
Lake Baïdé freshened our pace, and frailly we walked through the
highlands of Dyêri.]

(Senghor 1956: 20, my translation)

For Senegalese literary modernists, music could flexibly accommodate and reconfigure relations between 'traditional' and innovative poetics. There was no dichotomy between them that would cordon off indigenous poetics as inassimilable to modernity, let alone modernism.

As already suggested, African musical modernism is best understood in the context of trans-national black cultural flows, or stereomodernism. An interest in African music was a key element of African-American modernism, and philosopher Alain Locke, composers William Grant Still, and musicologist Shirley McCann (later married to W.E.B. Du Bois) keenly noted adaptations of African material in contemporary compositions. Du Bois famously included musical extracts from ten spirituals as the incipits accompanying epigraphs as chapter headings in his highly influential 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*. While he saw the spirituals as sorrow songs emerging from centuries of enslavement, he was also interested in how music proffered an unbroken link to Africa, and found in his family history an intimate example of this:

My grandfather's grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus:

Do ba – na co – ba, ge – ne me, ge – ne me!
Do ba – na co – ba, ge – ne me, ge – ne me!
Ben d' nu – li, nu – li, nu – li, nu – li, ben d' le

The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children.

(2008 [1903]: 123)

Guthrie Ramsey has traced how the modern interest in science as an authoritative epistemological approach drove an early African-American commitment to musicology, and notes James Trotter's 1878 *Music and Some Highly Musical People* as a groundbreaking text. Even in this proto-modernist moment, the status of notation as an element of modern musical practice was significant, for Trotter notes that his aim is

not only to show the proficiency of the subjects of the foregoing sketches as interpreters of the music of others, but, further, to illustrate the ability of quite a number of them (and, relatively, that of their race) to originate and scientifically arrange good music.

(qtd. in Ramsey 1996: 17).

Du Bois's contemporary, composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, received a thoroughly British musical education, studying with the dean of Victorian choral music, Charles Stanford, and gaining the encouraging notice of Edward Elgar, widely considered a founding figure of British modernist music. However, Coleridge-Taylor expressed his Afro-British identity by turning to the dialect (and standard English) lyrics of African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in the late 1890s. As he continued to reach towards what Paul Richards calls pan-African composition, and to connect to his father's Sierra Leonean heritage, the new scientific discipline of ethnomusicology offered the necessary resources (Richards 2001). His *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* (1904), published only a year after *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), presented virtuosic arrangements of melodies from published spirituals, Henri Junod's path-breaking collection *Les Chants et les Contes des Ba-Ronga* (*Songs and Tales of the Ba-Ronga*, 1897), and a West African song collected by Victoria Randall. While often overlooked in light of popular musics like jazz, the blues, and gospel blues, ethnomusicology remained an important strand of African-American musical modernism, particularly in the work of scholars including Maude Cuney Hare, Camille Nickerson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Shirley Graham Du Bois. The intersection between ethnomusicology and composition was most markedly present in Graham Du Bois's opera *Tom-Tom: an Epic of Music and the Negro*, which was staged in Cleveland, with one performance broadcast over radio on 26 June 1932. Graham scored the piece entirely for voices and percussion, reflecting her interest in incorporating research on African instruments and timbres into her own compositional language. Like other concert music composers of her day, such as Nathaniel Dett and William Grant Still, Graham Du Bois used vernacular folk music melodies and timbres to vivify, modernize, and appropriate a seemingly Western idiom. However, she turned to continental Africa where others borrowed from African-American spirituals, which were often noted for being autochthonous to the United States. A crucial parallel to this marriage of ethnomusicology and composition manifests in the concert art music of West African composers. The comparatively long history of Western music in Nigeria (the Handel and Haydn society in Lagos sponsored performances of Handel's *Messiah* in the

nineteenth century) and Ghana, and the work of scholar-composers like J.H. Kwabena Nketia and Akin Euba, has enabled a robust critical debate about how African composers should see their relation to African musical practices and repertoires.

Later in the century, the jazz world took the lead in incorporating sonic material from Africa. Duke Ellington's 'jungle music' of the 1920s and 1930s trafficked in primitivist negrophilia to apply an exotic patina to sonic innovations like flams that 'dirtied' the attack on brass notes, multiple lines soloing simultaneously, and the use of wa-wa and other mutes to alter timbres. However, with the 1947 release of 'Manteca', a collaboration between Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo, jazz began incorporating African-based elements of Cuban rhythms, particularly the clave, into its repertoire. African influences on jazz took many shapes in the next decades. One could see the direct influence of African repertoire in the tune 'Skokiaan' by Zimbabwean saxophonist August Musarurwa, and recorded with his Cold Storage Band by South African ethnomusicologist Hugh Tracey in 1951. 'Skokiaan' was adapted by a number of American jazz musicians, with iconic versions by Johnny Hodges, Herb Alpert, and Louis Armstrong. Armstrong met Musarurwa during his State Department-sponsored tour of Africa in 1960, illustrating the kind of feedback loops John Collins associates with trans-Atlantic black musical exchange (Collins 1987). A related dynamic manifests in the careers of African musicians who worked closely with American jazz musicians, such as Ghanaian drummer Guy Warren and South African singer Sathima Bea Benjamin. Contrastingly, some left the United States to adopt African music, such as Randy Weston, who embraced Moroccan Gnawa music after departing from the United States and settling in Morocco in the 1960s. In all cases, a stereomodernist connection between continental and diasporic musics extends beyond a narrowly conceived modernist historical period and reveals that modernism in African music is conceived of as a set of inter-cultural aesthetic strategies.¹

NOTE

1. For more on Warren, Benjamin and Weston see Kelley.

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