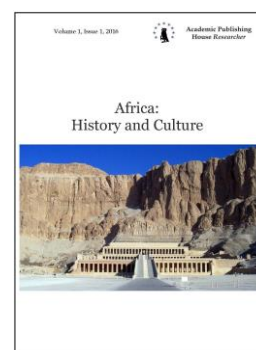


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The Mutual Influences of African Music and Politics

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Abstract

The article aims to look at the many genres of African music in a political context. The significance of music in African political movements is illustrated by a number of examples from Kenya, Senegal, Mali and other countries over the decades. Furthermore, political themes brought up by modern artists of African ancestry in their songs are discussed. From the analysis, music perhaps does not create political change as a solitary force; rather, it stirs a community into action, expresses and calls attention to oppression, and bridges the divide between people of different cultures. In times of conflict and uncertainty, culture is radicalised. Artists develop new muscles, and events radiate a higher sense of purpose. Music and artists descending from Africa suggest many examples of such phenomenon and its power in a political context.

Keywords: African Music, Apartheid, Conscious Hip Hop, Protest Songs.

Introduction

Many artists find inspiration in everyday life and write songs that reflect their views on modern problems, such as corruption, terrorism and violence. Africa has a long history of music in political realm on the continent and beyond, more recently with genres such as conscious [*or political*] hip hop becoming once again popular all around the world.

While it remains difficult to measure precisely how much influence musicians have on political issues, there are several facts that prove music has a certain power to be reckoned with. In some instances, it is used by government as a tool for propaganda; in others folklore, protest songs and pop music can spread awareness, boost the morale and unite communities to fight for a better future. Further in this article, some historical examples will be offered to highlight the role of African music in struggles for change, redemption or political power.

Method

This article is based on essays, books, scientific papers, various media archives and record label's press releases as well as artists' lyrics.

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Music and the Pursuit of Freedom

The pursuit of freedom over the world has always been complemented by music. Sometimes, the music has defined the cause, ignited the public's demand for progressive change and crystallized the ideology of the movement for reform. At other times, the music has sharpened people's understanding of the wrongs that need to be addressed; it has strengthened their resolve and sustained their anger and hope (Sibi-Okumu, 2013).

The Mau Mau songs in Kenya were the key in creating solidarity among the people in order to deal with the colonial onslaught. Christian songs were rewritten in order to deal with secular themes. Evangelising hymns were changed during the struggle for independence to speak about relations between the rulers and the ruled. If the role of Christianity in the colonial project was to pacify African souls, that did not happen in its entirety. In the post-independent Kenya, side by side with resistance songs, were praise songs by established bands and the Christian-dominated Muungano Choir which sought to valorise national leadership, as well as give their interpretation of patriotism. The post-colonial government sponsored choirs which composed music to perpetuate hegemonic normalcy and maintain socio-political status quo.

This interpretation of patriotism was naturally questioned by other musician, such as Joseph Komaru and D. O. Misiani, who aligned themselves with the needs of ordinary people. Sometimes musicians have paid a very high price for their criticism. D. O. Misiani braved the attentions of not one but three Kenyan presidents. He was imprisoned on several occasions for lyrics that were perceived as crossing the line into political criticism (Njogu, & Maupeu, 2007).

Music as a “Weapon of Struggle”

The Apartheid era drove its music and its musicians underground, and apart from fellow musicians, or into *“the banalities of commercial music-making”* (Olwage, 2008). The apartheid state prohibited broadcasting of musicians who went into exile or who sang in opposition to apartheid. The government destroyed archives of black music such as African Jazz, deeming them unworthy of a remembered past. Such a move proves that, the state understands the significance of music and its ability to undermine government's power. The formally recognised opposition to Apartheid known as the ANC began in 1912 when several hundred members of South Africa's educated African elite gathered to establish a national organization to protest against racial discrimination. The meeting opened and closed with the singing of *“Nkosi Sikelel'I Afrika”*, which was adopted as the ANC's official anthem (Vershbow, 2010).

It was during this transition to violent resistance that music was often talked about as a *“weapon of struggle.”* A song called *“Sobashiy'abazali”* [*“We Will Leave Our Parents”*] became one of the most popular songs sung at the MK training camps. The lyrics evoke the sadness of leaving home, as well as the persistence of freedom fighters: *“We will leave our parents at home/we go in and out of foreign countries/to places our fathers and mothers don't know/Following freedom we say goodbye, goodbye, goodbye home/We are going into foreign countries/To places our fathers and mothers don't know/Following freedom”* (Olwage, 2008). Toyi-Toyi, thought to originate in Zimbabwe, a classic example of this shift and became a symbol of the apartheid resistance. Usually performed in a group setting, it is a dance consisting of foot stomping and spontaneous chanting. Toyi-Toyi was often invoked during the ANC's *“Amandla”* chant: in call and response, the leader of a group would call out *“Amandla!”* [*“Power”*] and the group would respond with *“Awethu!”* [*“Ours”*] (Vershbow, 2010).

A bright example of the role of music in political struggle can be found in Senegal. The country was ruled by the Socialist Party for 40 years until Abdoulaye Wade was elected president in 2000 after the *“sopi”* –movement [*“change”* in Wolof]. He was re-elected in 2007, but during his two terms amended Senegal's constitution over a dozen times to increase executive power and to weaken the opposition. Finally, his attempt to change the constitution in June 2011, and his decision to run for a third presidential term, prompted large public protests that led to his defeat in a March 2012 run-off election with Macky Sall. A prominent role in overthrowing Wade's regime belongs to *“Y'en a marre”* [*“Fed up”*], a movement started by Senegalese rappers and journalists that quickly gained followers all over Senegal. For example, to persuade people to register to vote, small groups went around the popular blocks in town, armed with a stereo playing the Y'en a marre single. As Dakar and Senegal has a lot of talented young rappers, the next step was to distribute flyers and rap about the country's situation and the importance to register to vote. Y'en a marre also collaborated with

the media and there were televised programs and shows to raise awareness. The news of the achievements of Y'en a marre have spread and the movement has reached Mali and Togo ([The Movement Y'en a marre, 2012](#)). Despite reaching the goal of ousting Wade, Y'en a Marre remains active, hosting meetings and shows, urging the new government to implement promised reforms, including reforms of land ownership, a key issue for Senegal's rural poor.

Y'en a Marre is particularly significant in Senegalese politics, because in his 2000 campaign, Abdoulaye Wade prominently featured the support of Senegalese rappers as a way of connecting with young voters. 12 years later, Y'en a Marre demonstrated that Senegal's youth were not unquestioningly loyal to Wade and were searching for a leader who could credibly promise reform ([KOLA, 2012](#)).

In Mali, music is a political language reflecting cultural changes, ideas of African unity, and issues of equality and rights. Musicians are present in many of the rituals of daily life in Mali. The traditional praise singers known as 'Griots' sing and play at weddings, birth ceremonies and funerals. But their role is not just to provide background entertainment. Yacouba Sissoko, a Malian Griot known for his mastery of the *ngoni*, a stringed instrument, and the "talking drum," which mimics human speech, says that the Griot is a "person who creates cohesion between people, a kind of cement in Malian society." Moreover, in Mali, where high rates of illiteracy mean that music – rather than newspapers or books – is a prime means of sharing information. Malian hip-hop artists in particular have tried to use their music to raise awareness about social issues. The Malian rapper Amkoullé addresses education in his song "Teaching, Studies," rapping in both French and his local dialect, Bamanan. He rails against corruption in the school system: "A place to teach should not be confused with a place to do business," and inequality: "private schools, so well-equipped / public education, neglected / the poor have no choice" ([Fernandes, 2013](#)).

Socio-political Oppression of Music

Mali is the only country in recent history where music has been banned by religious extremists, apart from Afghanistan during the reign of the Taleban. The ban became official in August 2012 when a spokesman for the jihadist group MUJAO went on the radio in the eastern town of Gao to proclaim that all 'Satan's music' – in other words, everything except Qur'anic chanting – was henceforward forbidden in the two-thirds of the country, then under occupation by armed jihadi groups. It officially came to an end in February 2013 when the north of Mali was finally liberated by the French army ([Morgan, 2015](#)). A 2015 documentary called "They will have to kill us first: Malian music in exile" follows musicians in Mali in the wake of a jihadist takeover and subsequent banning of music. The director Johanna Schwartz says, "They've been through hell, and survived to sing about it. Though the conflict in Mali is still far from over, with extremist attacks continuing in the north and south to this day, I have no doubt that these musicians will continue to stand up and fight for their right to sing" ([Schwartz, 2015](#)).

Looking back, Kenyan music has a long history of protest music. In the compilation album *Retracing Kenya's Songs of Protest*, Ketebul Music traced the history of the country through its protest music during the 50 years from independence until 2013. The dramatic end of Daniel Arap Moi's 24-year rule in Kenya happened to the sounds of 'Yote Yawezekana.' Indeed, the creative energy with which protesting marchers at Nairobi's Uhuru Park changed the lyrics of 'Yote Yawezekana' from their original Christian message of hope in divine deliverance to one of political protest and economic reform shows music's defining role in the struggle for freedom of expression ([Sibi-Okumu, 2013](#)). According to Kenyan hip-hop artist Abbas Kubaff, "There are many musicians in Kenya that sing against corruption, terrorism and violence. One of the strongest responses from artists was in the wake of the post-election violence in 2007. A group was set up called Pamoja Amani Upendo [PAU], which translates as Togetherness Peace Love. PAU is a community-based organization which utilizes music, musicians and dance to promote peace and unity within Kenya, and regularly puts on concerts and shows to spread this message to the people" ([Solés, 2015](#)).

Kubaff supports the idea of music as a tool for social and political change. He says, "...there is no greater group of people than musicians for reaching out to large numbers of people, across age groups and tribal boundaries. Musicians are able to set an example of unity to the rest of Kenya and show that tragedies such as Garissa can be mourned in a way that does not cause further divisions within Kenya's diverse ethnic communities. When terrorist attacks occur in Kenya, there is often a wave of anti-Muslim or anti-Somali sentiment that spreads throughout the country.

Musicians are able to remind Kenyans that whilst terrorism is abhorrent, it is not the Muslim or Somali community as a whole who is responsible for such evil acts. There is a deep mistrust of politicians and other leading figures within Kenya, but music is a uniting force that Kenyans pay attention to."

Many Kenyan hip hop artists come from low-income areas of Nairobi, where they have been most affected by the corruption and poor governance that has slowed development in Kenya. For this reason, many hip hop artists feel a responsibility to use music to secure a better future and open people's eyes to the reality of everyday life in Kenya. Some of the more mainstream artists would be afraid to speak out in such a way against corruption or the government, for fears of repercussions or that prominent people could begin to interfere in their careers. In general, hip hop artists are not afraid to speak out and would rather suffer the consequences of their actions if they are speaking out for the right reasons (Solés, 2015).

Political or conscious hip hop developed in 1980s as a subgenre of hip hop music. Themes of conscious hip hop include afrocentricity, religion, aversion to crime and violence, culture, the economy, or depictions of the struggles of ordinary people. Conscious hip hop often seeks to raise awareness of social issues, leaving the listeners to form their own opinions, rather than aggressively advocating for certain ideas and demanding actions. Inspired by 1970s political preachers such as The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, Public Enemy was the first predominately political hip hop group. They are known for their politically charged lyrics and criticism of the American media, openly speaking and rapping about frustrations and concerns of the African American community. Public Enemy was one of the first hip hop groups to do well internationally and influences many musicians with their sound collages and skilled and poetic rhymes (Fox, 2014).

Recent Trends of the Mutual Influences

In the last three years, mainstream artists are increasingly including elements of conscious hip-hop in their songs. Today popular rappers such as Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Talib Kweli, Saul Williams and others help to spread awareness on problems shared by African people, and their message reaches listeners all over the world. Hip Hop music has grown to be such a large part of mainstream culture that The Washington Post wrote *"The Politician's Guide to how to be Down with Hip Hop."* The criticism of hip hop that was considered patriotic or even moral, some generations ago can make a politician seem *"out of touch"*, especially with young voters (Schwarz, 2015).

Kendrick Lamar's song *"Alright"* was inspired by his trip to South Africa, witnessing other people's problems in the country: *"their struggle was ten times harder."* Both the track and its music video received acclaim from critics, highlighting their message in the social context of the time. The song was associated with Black Lives Matter after several youth lead protests were heard chanting the chorus, with some publications calling *"Alright"* the "unifying soundtrack" of the movement (Coscarelli, 2015). Lamar was featured on Ebony Power 100, annual list that recognises many leaders of the African-American community, emphasizing *"how the chorus of his song "Alright" became a chant for Black Lives Matter protestors"* (Ebony, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper looks at the reciprocal influences of African music and politics. From the analysis, music perhaps does not create political change as a solitary force; rather, it stirs a community into action, expresses and calls attention to oppression, and bridges the divide between people of different cultures. In times of conflict and uncertainty, culture is radicalised. Artists develop new muscles, and events radiate a higher sense of purpose. Music and artists descending from Africa suggest many examples of such phenomenon and its power in a political context.

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