

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, Edited by Martin Cloonan and Michael Drewett, Ashgate: London (2006), 228 pages, including index, Hardbound: ISBN-13: 978-07546-7291-5, ISBB-10: 0-7546-5291-2.

Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan have put together an important collection. With twelve essays covering 10 different countries, from Algeria to South Africa, *Popular Music Censorship in Africa* is without a doubt one of the most trenchant publications in recent years on the contemporary politics of music on the continent. Of course, as a number of recent ethnographies (for instance, Kelly Askew's *Performing the Nation*) have made clear, nationalism and the postcolonial state in Africa are intimately tied to exclusionary practices. Most African nation-states, at various points in time, have been based on a narrow definition of the public sphere, often limiting its scope by using such criteria as religion, ethnicity, gender or language to effectively bar minorities from access to this sphere. The repression of freedom of artistic expression within such partial public spheres thus has often been legitimized in the very name of an ideology directed against the divide and rule policies of the colonial powers. Of course, the essays in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa* reflect on the partiality of the colonial public sphere, even though they tend to overlook ethnicity, language or gender as part of the colonial and post-colonial state's broader strategy of silencing minorities.

Still, there is much in this collection that also deepens our understanding of some of these broader issues. Thus, one of the strongest points being raised by most contributors is that music censorship in Africa comes in many forms. Governments are not the sole agents of censorship; broadcasters, religious movements and liberation movements also seek to control the creative work of musicians. But even where governments seem to be the biggest stakeholders in controlling music, they often do so in subtle ways. In fact, as the editors argue, censorship may even be too broad and unspecific a concept to do justice to the many ways in which music comes under pressure in Africa. While from the vantage point of Western liberal democracies where overt censorship is virtually absent, African authoritarian regimes may seem to resort mostly to outright censorship, the articles in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa* demonstrate that such state power also draws on a much more diffuse range of repressive mechanisms. These range from the use of "traditional" musics as supposedly immune to subversion and open criticism of (chiefly) power in Malawi (in Reuben M. Chirambo's article "Traditional and Popular Music, Hegemonic Power and Censorship in Malawi: 1964–1994"), to the co-optation of musicians and audiences through government sponsored "galas" that Diane Thram describes in her article, "Zvakwana! Enough! Unofficial Censorship of Music in Zimbabwe" (71–90).

By contrast, a chilling example of how censorship of music and violence against musicians become a weapon against a government considered to be unresponsive to popular demands is provided by Malika Medid in her discussion of Algerian rai (199–

214). Already frowned upon by post-independence socialist-nationalist governments as backward, rai in the aftermath of the election victory of the Islamist FIS and the ensuing civil strife of the 1990s came to be seen as “immoral” and many of its prominent artists were killed or driven into exile by Islamists.

*Popular Music Censorship in Africa* also addresses what may be one of the most tricky issues in dealing with censorship; music as violence. In their contribution “Vocal Killers, Silent Killers: Popular Media, Genocide, and the Call for Benevolent Censorship in Rwanda”, (39–52) Dylan Craig and Nomalanga Mkhize for instance examine the onerous role popular singer Simon Bikindi played in the 1994 Rwandan genocide by spreading messages of hatred on one of Rwanda’s radio stations, RTL. While there can be no doubt about Bikindi’s overall culpability, the authors resist the call for what they call “benevolent” censorship of such incitement to genocide. Instead, they lay the blame for the massacres squarely at the feet of “politicians and power-brokers” who simply use musicians and the media to remain in power. Instead of curtailing artists’ freedom of expression, they argue, crises such as the Rwandan genocide can only be dealt with by attending to their root causes.

A similar stance is taken by Gary Baines in his article on “Racist Hate Speech in South Africa’s Fragile Democracy: The Case of Ngema’s ‘AmaNdiya’” (53–70). In 1992 singer and playwright Mbongeni Ngema caused a tremendous stir with a song in which he blamed South African Indians for the economic hardship of Africans. The song was banned from airplay by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa on the grounds that it amounted to hate speech. Here Baines, much like the editors and most contributors to *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, argues against the ban, because it “is counterproductive to attempt to balance freedom of expression with the censorship of hate speech” (68). In his defense, Baines goes even as far as comparing “AmaNdiya” with some of South Africa’s hip-hop artists celebrating violence against women without meeting with the same censure as Ngema’s song.

One of the lessons one might learn from this criticism of double standards is that such criticism itself may easily slip into a form of double standard. The best illustration of this tendency may be the way some authors handle state censorship of pornography. Apart from several brief mentions of such censorship in John Collins’ article on “100 Years of Censorship in Ghanaian Popular Music Performance” (171–86) and Peter Muhoro Mwangi’s essay on “Silencing Musical Expression in Colonial and Post-Colonial Kenya” (157–70), the article that dwells most extensively on the issue is “And the Beat Goes On? Message Music, Political Repression and the Power of Hip-Hop in Nigeria” by Wilson Akpan (91–108). Here the author presents the pornographic dimension of Nigerian hip-hop as though it stood in opposition to what he calls “emancipatory message music” produced by the likes of Fela Kuti. But Afrobeat’s appeal rested on more than its politically outspoken lyrics and Fela’s defiant stance; it also consisted of the deft intermixture of overt political criticism, double entendre and suggestive lyrics, not to

mention Fela's openly staged semi-nudity and promiscuity. In fact, Akpan even goes as far as suggesting that it was the "lyrical and cinematic convergence of popular music and pornography (as well as power and drugs)" that constituted "hip-hop's principal contribution to the subversion and suppression of the emancipatory music genre in Nigeria" (95). At the same time, Akpan not only fails to specify what exactly he means by pornography and, more importantly, how obscenity (which is not a uniquely Nigerian "problem") may be intertwined with state power and what Achille Mbembe, in his *On the Postcolony*, has called the "banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity".

The same notion, that there are universally shared notions of obscenity, underpins the discussion of Zaïrean superstar Franco's detention on charges of obscenity in Graeme Ewens' essay on "Where the Shoe Pinches; The Imprisonment of Franco Luambo Makiadi as a Curious Example of Music Censorship in Zaïre" (187–98). Franco in 1978 had released a song which the Mobutu regime – which Franco supported throughout – deemed morally objectionable because the singer in it described, inter alia, a woman who feeds her lover feces in a bowl of soup. This, Ewens believes, is "disgusting".

Disgusting to whom? The censor, Mobutu, the "worldly Kinois" Ewen invokes or Ewen himself? And why was Franco thrown in jail, when other artists such as Wole Soyinka or Ayi Kwei Armah, both of whom deploy excremental language extensively in their novels, were not? In fact, as Mbembe has argued, is shit not systematically being deployed by the postcolonial state itself as part of its official display of power?

It may well be, as the editors argue in their "Concluding Comments" (215–20), that freedom of speech works both ways; it allows oppressive discourses to be heard, but it also allows for arguments to be made. But as the case of the censorship of sexually explicit songs and its implicit endorsement on the basis of unexamined moral standards suggests, supporting the rights of dissenting voices to be heard requires more than invoking the ideal of a perfect public sphere in which both politically correct hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions compete. It also requires the obligation to examine more closely the ways in which the "silent majority" may harbor genuine concerns about morality and social order that at times can even challenge repressive forms of governance such as in Algeria, for instance, while at the same time audiences may reproduce stereotypical notions of sexual propriety and hierarchical gender relations. More often than not, and despite most censors' focus on lyrics (and less frequently on the public performance by women and other aspects deemed offensive such as clothing, gestures, etc.), it is in the musical textures as such that the "aesthetics of vulgarity" intersect with the "banality of power". There can be no doubt that we need more work along the lines of the essays assembled in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, but perhaps a follow-up volume might explore how music in its innermost structure can be both a victim and agent of repression.

Veit Erlmann, University of Texas at Austin

\* \* \* \* \*