

Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times, Marissa J. Moorman, Ohio University Press, 2008, 320 pp., CD, Paperback: 978-0-8214-1824-6.

Angola is one of the largest countries in Africa. And yet, by modern standards, it has remained what Charles Piot has called a “remotely global” place for decades if not centuries. The same cannot be said for the country’s capital city Luanda. Founded in 1575, Luanda has been firmly integrated into the global economy from the first days of its existence; first via the slave trade, more recently through the export of the country’s rich natural resources, the import of weaponry and the immigration of large numbers of people from Portugal and the rural hinterland. Even during Angola’s 27-year civil war when much of the rest of the country was cut off from outside observation, Luanda remained fairly accessible. Surprisingly, however, unlike other major African urban centres such as Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi or Dakar much of the city’s vibrant, cosmopolitan culture, such as its popular music, has escaped scholars’ attention. Moorman’s book is the first major attempt to chronicle the development of popular music in the capital after World War II.

Nationalist politics in Angola, thus the author’s argument, was not a matter of guerilla warfare and politics alone. The practices and sounds that permeate everyday life of the *musseques* (popular neighborhoods) of Luanda were just as important. In fact, popular music forces us to reconsider the dominant nationalist narrative of Angolan history in which independence was the outcome of political decisions and military action while culture, at best, was read as “immature politics” (57). Moorman anchors her counter-narrative in two concepts. Parallel to Benedict Anderson’s influential concept of “print capitalism”, she sees Angolan nationalism as having operated to a large extent through what she calls “sonorous capitalism”. It was through music and dance that Angolans came to accept the officially sanctioned narrative of a politically united, independent Angola as part of their identity. At the same time, a key element of this process of moving “intonation” was a sense of “cultural sovereignty” that urban Angolans experienced through music; a sense of autonomy that inflected or “intoned” the MPLA’s and subsequently the independent state’s monolithic definition of Angolan national identity.

The story of these series of “into-nations” and “intonations” unfolds over six chapters, each dealing with specific historical periods and within these, issues such as gender relationships, song lyrics, mass media and state politics. Much of this narrative is captivating reading, conveying vivid pictures of Luanda’s complex social structure, performance venues, and political and cultural debates. Yet as fascinating and crucial as all this undoubtedly is for any attempt to understand the role of popular music in late-colonial and post-colonial Angolan politics and culture, the “sonorous” component of this story remains somewhat elusive. There may be three reasons for this relative absence of music. The first is of a conceptual order. The capitalism in Moorman’s sonorous capitalism is insufficiently theorized. Other than being labelled a “motor” disseminating new sounds and sensibilities throughout Angola, and apart from occasional references

to musicians' "entrepreneurship" and audience choices, there is no attempt being made to elucidate the term "capitalism" in a country which for the past century or so has seen a great deal of forced labour and nationalization projects but little of the kind of things usually associated with capitalist development, i.e. industrial production, a large industrial labour force or, for that matter, consumerist practices and ideologies.

The second problem preventing her from exploring the full potential of the notion of "sonorous capitalism" might be Moorman's limited understanding of symbolic practice as a form of blurring ethnic and regional identities, clearly one of the main topics addressed by ethnomusicologists working in Africa and elsewhere. While Moorman often invokes the intertwining of Kimbundu, Kikongo and other regional styles in *semba* and other forms of popular music, these claims are hardly ever substantiated analytically, at times leading to rather flat statements such as the following: "Music was an experience of collectivity" (87).

The third reason, finally, for Moorman's failure to take the concept of "sonorous capitalism" to a higher level, is the lack of a technical language to describe the music itself. Moorman frequently invokes words such as "sound" or "beat" to describe the new music streaming forth from the homes, bars and public spaces of the *musseques*, but what exactly these terms mean and how such a "sound" might relate to other "sounds" – the Congolese rumba, the musical styles brought by scores of Cuban expatriates or various "indigenous" traditions come to mind – remains a mystery. With regard to the latter, Moorman makes much of the colonial government's, MPLA's and the newly independent state's attempts to legitimize their respective agendas by drawing on African musical traditions or what she calls an "African aesthetic" (61). Yet, other than broad categories such as "local" or "folklore" what precisely constitutes the "Africanness" of such traditions is unclear. For instance, it would have been helpful if Moorman had at least provided descriptions of some of the African instruments used in Angolan popular music like the *dikanza*, which is a bamboo scraper rather than merely a "local instrument".

The terminological confusion is also evident in terms like "musicalize" instead of "compose". Similarly, the present reviewer is puzzled by Moorman's claim that by connecting people in the *musseques* to people in other parts of the country, radio "serialized" music (141). And I am at a loss grasping the terms "cultural nation" (2) or "palimpsest" used to denote a practice combining verbal expression and performance as sound (114).

Equally problematic is Moorman's apparent distance from the existing ethnomusicological literature, here especially the work of Gerhard Kubik, arguably the most accomplished expert on Angolan music. For instance, the *umbigada* dance Moorman briefly mentions in her discussion of *rebita* is described in great detail in Kubik's article "Muxima Angola", which also contains a wealth of information on Angolan popular

music in Luanda and other Angolan provinces during the 1980s.¹

On a more positive note, Moorman writes in an accessible style and the book comes with a CD containing some 15 songs. Yet while the lyrics of many of these are usefully discussed in chapter four, discographic background on these tracks is sketchy or missing entirely. Thus the reader has to turn to pages 257–59 of the book to obtain more information on the various titles contained on the CD and listed on p. xi. And even then, some of the song titles are either missing from the bibliography or spelled differently.

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Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire, Bob W. White, Duke University Press, 2008, 300 pp., paperback: 978-0-8223-4112-3.

How could a garbage can produce something so full of power and beauty? This is the question Bob White, arguably the leading scholar of Congolese popular music writing today, asks in *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire*. The garbage can is of course Kinshasa, the capital city of Congo, and like many other African urban centres a festering wound on the continent's body. But White's concern is not with sanitation (or not solely), but with a larger conundrum for which the contrast between Kinshasa's decay and the inexhaustible creative energies of its musicians serves but as a metaphor. It is the intimacy, not to say complicity, of scores of underpaid and disenfranchised musicians with the authoritarian, rapacious regime of Sese Seko Mobutu, who ruled Congo for more than 40 years. But in contrast to Moorman's book, White is not content with locating this uneasy alliance of beauty and brutality solely in propaganda, coercion and nationalist rhetoric. The articulation of power, pain and pleasure is above all felt, experienced and lived in musicians' mundane interaction among themselves and with their audiences.

Three key aspects illustrate the deep and ambiguous ties linking the Congolese popular music of the past half century to Mobutu's regime: *libanga*, *atalaku*, and *ambiance*. The first of these refers to what, at first glance, appears as a specific form of vacuous, spoken flattery musicians pepper their songs with. Yet, although primarily aimed at the rich and powerful, *libanga* are not only a steady source of income for musicians, many of whom depend on commissions from a wealthy clientele and on the practice of "spraying" (gifts of money placed in their pockets or stuck to their foreheads during live performances). In its sheer obsession with and acquiescence to power such verbal flattery also goes beyond the regime's top-down *animation politique* it is modeled on. As White observes, *libanga* are far from being a degraded form of repetitive language. Rather they must be understood as being embedded in a wider moral economy as "a way for musicians to urge those in positions of power to act in socially responsible ways, since *libanga* aims

¹ Gerhard Kubik (1991) "Muxima Ngola – Veränderungen und Strömungen in den Musikkulturen Angolas im 20. Jahrhundert", in Veit Erlmann (ed.) *Populäre Musik in Afrika*, Berlin: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, pp. 201–72.