

matter, White himself), future studies will have to pursue in greater depth the question posed at the outset: How can musicians under dire political and economic conditions provide sustenance and hope through beauty? How can music expand the networks of reciprocity that have been so blatantly abused by Africa's elites without becoming just another form of escapism?

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Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-Drumming Community in Ghana: Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit, James Burns, Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009, 199 pp., DVD, hardbound: 978-0-7546-6495-6.

In the introduction to *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, editors Jane Bowers and Judith Tick ask us “How musical is woman?” (1986:13). *Women Making Music* represented an early effort to address questions of gendered musical socialization, to re-examine historical analyses that have not included women, to interrogate the historical and social circumstances that guided women's musical lives, and to illuminate the processes that allow for the continual marginalization of women's voices in the scholarly literature. Since the publication of that seminal text, scholars have explored not only women's musical traditions, but also how musical spaces are the context in which gender ideologies and roles are created, performed, challenged, and embedded in the daily lives of the people who experience them. Drawing from anthropological theory, postmodern ethnographic techniques, gender and sexuality studies and queer theory, writers have addressed the role of the investigator as a subject, as a participant in the study, and as a filter through which culture is experienced. In this review I address a work that dialogues with these discourses and builds new connections between African music studies, gender studies and anthropology.

Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-Drumming Community in Ghana: Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit by James Burns represents over a decade's worth of field research conducted in Ghana. In this book, Burns addresses the lack of attention paid to Ewe female musicians through an ethnography of Dzigbordi, an Ewe dance-drumming club, or *habobo* in the village of Dzodze in Ghana's Volta Region. According to Burns, the female song leaders of the Dzigbordi *habobo* use songs to address contemporary social problems and to elucidate gender politics. Burns also shows how Ewe dance-drumming continues to adapt to the needs of multiple generations of women living in rural Ghana. Rather than portraying Ewe dance-drumming as ahistoric, it is seen through the eyes of the women in whose lives the musical community is an important contemporary social space; this also serves to demonstrate the adaptability, fluidity and performative nature of “traditional” drumming in Ghana.

Burns attributes the lacunae of studies on Ewe music that incorporate the voices of female musicians to the lack of female researchers conducting studies among the Ewe,

and to the privileging of “male” musical spaces such as “drumming and rhythm” rather than “dancing, singing, drama, and fashion” (11). The focus on male perspectives in the literature has resulted in a skewed interpretive lens, “highly one-dimensional, and even, regrettably, a conscious distortion of local music-making practice” (ibid.). Burns’ focus on female voices and on gendered musical spaces supports his assertion that although Ewe women are the repositories of culture, they are “not accorded their due respect both locally and in international scholarship” (12). His book is an attempt to bring their stories and voices into the dialogue. The book is accompanied by a DVD documentary about the women of Dzigbordi, which includes footage of musical performances, song translations, and interviews and provides contextual information about women’s lives, their work, and their music making activities. The emphasis on the individuality of the women foregrounds the importance of individual voices within communities.

In the Introduction, Burns writes that, when thinking about Dzigbordi women, one must remember that they “may outwardly appear to submit to male authority, but inwardly may be relying on spiritual power to bring about their will” (22). This statement illustrates a central theme of the book: “the teeth are smiling, but the stomach is different”. In other words, when considering resistance and empowerment, it is necessary to consider local meanings, contexts, and strategies.

Integral to the text is the binary that Burns sets up between *Culture* (Ewe traditional life including music and religion), which exists in opposition with the *West* (world). Culture, according to Burns, directly opposes Christianity and Western education, both of which have been “consciously antagonistic to Ewe Culture” (4). This analytical dichotomy runs throughout the book and informs the primary theoretical perspective of the author which extends to another binary: tradition and modernity. According to Burns, Culture is directly related to tradition, while the West and the systems of Western education and Christianity are associated with modernity. Writing about the implementation of these binaries, he states, “In conjunction with Christianity, Western education has employed a discourse of modernity to attack Culture as an embarrassing remnant of a primitive past; the future, in contrast, is identified with a new social identity that is the product of a Christian education” (5). Thus, participation in traditional religious or musical practices associates a person with Culture and in opposition to modernity. The disparities in educational opportunities between boys and girls and the “direct link between Western education and Christianity in Eweland” creates a connection between traditional religious practice and illiteracy, with women being the most numerous practitioners of traditional religion. Because of this, Burns argues, “women are the true nurturers of Ewe traditional music” (39) and Culture; they are “on the front lines of the struggle to keep Culture apposite to modern life” (8).

Burns recognizes that most people mediate Culture and the West by drawing from both. He constructs three categories of social identity in Eweland: Christian, Mediator, and Culturalist. He notes that the majority are Mediators, “who creatively mix Western

Christian norms with aspects of Culture such as rites for the ancestors, *Afa* divination and herbal medicine” (6). He also maps levels of education onto the three categories of people, noting that Culturalists will usually have the lowest levels of education, while Christians will have the highest.

In chapter one, “Daughters of the Drum: The Social Environment of Female Artists in Dzodze”, the author discusses the much-critiqued tendency in Western feminist discourse to represent African women as oppressed victims who are unable to speak for themselves (33). As several African and postcolonial feminists have noted, this approach results in the contrasting of Western, educated, “liberated” subjects to subjugated African woman (Mohanty 2003; Oyewumi 1997). The focus of studies conducted from this perspective is most frequently on women’s burden of labour, polygamy, lack of intimacy in marriage, and public life, which is read as oppression. Rather than examine the local constructions of these social conditions, African women are constructed as subjects prior to their entry into social relations, which renders them powerless, and without agency (Mohanty 2003).

Burns addresses these concerns by providing an examination of local Ewe gender conceptions. He accounts for the formation of gender differences and power asymmetries during extended contact with colonial administrators and missionaries in Eweland, while also noting how gender constructions formed during the colonial period developed into “traditional” Ewe gender roles and ideologies (32). For example, the Ewe associate masculinity with physical strength and femininity with coolness and wisdom. Possession and control are associated with masculinity while stewarding and nurturing are associated with femininity. This is manifest in divisions of labour such as the expectation that women attend to the needs of their husband such as cooking, fetching bath water, doing the washing and caring for the children.

Burns explores the social life of Dzigbordi women in regard to economic networking, resource building and spiritual powers, and investigates the practice of polygamy which, according to Burns, “pits women against each other in competition for limited resources” (23) and is a source of “growing resentment by women” (41). This practice, as part of Culture, is “incongruous with contemporary lifestyles that favour increased individualism in an environment of shrinking resources” (43). In the midst of the conflicts that Burns locates between Culture and Western lifestyle, he documents how the women of Dzodze are using economic and spiritual power to assert authority and control over their lives. As a source of economic empowerment the women of Dzodze are utilizing a practice known as *sodzodzo* in which each member of a *sodzodzo* group contributes a small amount of money on every market day. Each collection period the entire amount goes to one member and this pay-out rotates between members. In this way group members invest their money, protecting it from the needs of the extended family, and it serves as an “informal banking system” (45). These financial networks also lend credit and receive reduced rates for bulk items purchased by the group. Spiritual power is another means by which women assert authority in the community and control aspects of their life

otherwise controlled by men. By gaining access to powerful spiritual forces, women are able to earn prestige in the community. Access to economic and spiritual power prevents the women of Dzodze from becoming victimized and offers opportunities to assert their needs and desires (48). Burns argues that in order to critically analyze gender dynamics in Eweland, one must recognize “disparities between official discourse and actual practice” and be able to notice differences between surface appearances and deeper realities (37). Although the power that women wield may not be readily visible, their authority is no less diminished.

In chapter two, “The Dance Space: Music Associations, Territories and Events”, Burns introduces us to the gendered and musical spaces of Ewe performance. He notes that public dance-drumming events are both physical and conceptual spaces, and utilizes linguistic analysis to explain Ewe spatial construction. Within musical performance spaces, the Ewe perform gender constructions through assigned roles for lead drummers, lead singers, chorus leaders, response drummers, chorus singers, support drummers, dancers and administrators. While some positions are open to either male or female community members such as dancers, men occupy other leadership roles, such as administrative positions, disproportionately. Burns notes that while Ewe women are capable of playing the drumming parts, including the lead drum, they choose not to because “socially, drumming is a male space” (54). While women frequently occupy authoritative roles in musical performance spaces, such as lead singer, and have been positioned as the “nurturers of Ewe Culture”, the “voice of artistic authority is still monopolized by a minority of dominant men” (58). Through his analysis of the gendering of Ewe musical space, Burns elucidates the available range of performance options for the individual within community music-making activities. Through detailed descriptive analysis of District Funeral Ensembles, Sacred Music Ensembles, and *Habobo*, Burns depicts the variety of performance contexts among Ewe performing ensembles, and combats idealized notions of communal participation in Ewe musical spaces. In contrast, his analysis shows Ewe musical performances to be contextually located and fluidly constructed based on the specific and changing needs of the members of various groups.

Chapter three, “We are a Community Dance-drumming Group: The Dzigbordi *Habobo* of Dzodze”, is an account of the formation of the Dzigbordi *habobo* including the adaption and development of their repertoire, style, drum language patterns and dance choreographies. Burns provides a description of a Dzigbordi performance at a local funeral and reflects upon the meaning of “tradition”. He notes that although Ewe music has historically been portrayed as static and monolithic, the actuality of Ewe musical styles and performances reveals tradition as a creative, transformative process. His research illustrates that in “Ewe musical discourse, antiquity is not privileged over innovation” (77). As such, Burns grounds his description of the Dzigbordi *habobo* in historically and contextually located descriptors in which individuals assert agency

in musical performance. This is an important shift in Ewe music scholarship, as it connects Ewe musicians to systems of thought and action that extend beyond passive re-performance of tradition, and into a global network of musical creators.

The voices of five female Dzigbordi women are presented in chapter four, "Doing it for Everyone to See: The Oral Artistry of Dzigbordi Performance". Here, these women recount their life experiences and share their perspectives on musical life in Dzodze. The author combines the narratives of the five women with an analysis of each of their dance styles along with their accompanying song and drumming patterns. Each of the interviews and the women's dance performances can be viewed on the accompanying DVD. This approach combines an analysis of song, drum language patterns and dancing with the interpretive lens of the creative artist. By integrating the various sonic and visual stimuli of performance with the voices of the Ewe women, Burns looks into the relationships formed between individuals with personal histories, needs and motivations, and musical and visual signifiers. This approach effectively reveals the creative process of musical performance, as well as the power of the individual in shaping their dance styles in response to personal needs and desires. The various narratives resist essentialized notions of Ewe femininity; although all the women belong to the same group and live in the same community, they show us that Ewe women are multi-faceted, evolving, complex human beings. This integration of the text and DVD is particularly significant in its contribution to ethnomusicological methodologies and theoretical paradigms.

This study illustrates the capacity of Ewe women to be empowered through song and dance performance to address social issues such as polygamy. The author neglects, however, to critically analyze the operative power structures that reinforce gender constructions over time. We are not provided with accounts of how men and women in Dzodze perceive gender roles, or what changes they hope to see in the future. The text would be strengthened by further elaboration upon the incongruities between female power and male authority, as well as critiques of the systems of valuation that grant legitimacy to certain speakers, and restrict cultural authority to others.

Burns seeks to contribute to the ongoing attempts by ethnomusicologists to find new ways to weave the "texts" of research into a final product. He likens himself to a DJ, taking the various products of research: the interviews, audio and video tapes, experiences, photographs and international scholarship, and mixing them, as a DJ mixes records, allowing him to produce a "multivoiced text" (14). Despite this theoretical position, apart from the narratives in chapter four, the voices of men and women from Dzodze are noticeably absent in the ethnographic material. Additionally, despite the author's statement of positionality in the introduction, Burns does not allow himself to become one of the voices of the text. Instead, he is most frequently obscured, and we do not come to understand his process of learning or representation.

Finally, Burns relies upon the binaries of Culture and the West, which he mobilizes throughout the text. He claims that women are "on the front lines of the struggle to keep

Culture apposite to modern life” (8). Within this binary are other binaries that he teases out: community/individualism, illiterate/educated, traditional religion/Christianity, and tradition/modernity. Although he recognizes that there are a group of Mediators who move between these categories, he repeatedly reinforces the polarities of Culture and the West. This is problematic because it allows the concept of Culture to remain outside the purview of modernity. In a text that so thoroughly claims the contemporary relevance of Ewe traditional drumming and the re-signification of musical and social meanings by individual Ewe creative artists, it seems extreme to prevent these individuals from claiming modernity. This raises the question of to whom modernity belongs. Is it possible to reformulate the concept of tradition as modern in order to rethink exclusionary labelling practices? Do the women who perform with Dzigbordi consider themselves to be in opposition to modernity? The evidence seems contrary; the women of Dzigbordi are critically addressing their social lives and asserting contemporary needs, desires and hopes for the future, some of which run in opposition to Culture (such as polygamy). Are women struggling to keep Culture on the opposite side of the binary from modernity, or are they struggling to reach across the binary and modernize Culture? By creatively addressing their concerns in a public forum and acting to positively change their lives and the lives of their families, they constantly reformulate the concepts of tradition and modernity.

Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-Drumming Community in Ghana by James Burns is a significant contribution to the fields of ethnomusicology, African studies, and women’s and gender studies. This text effectively combats many of the worn notions of Ewe traditional dance-drumming as static and passive. Instead, Burns relates the creative process of Ewe artists in constructing musical performances. The inclusion of the voices of Ewe women is a noteworthy addition to the body of literature on Ewe music and dancing. This text reveals how Ewe women innovatively strategize for empowerment and create resources for themselves and their families.

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