CONTINENTAL MUSICOLOGY: DECOLONISING THE MYTH OF A SINGULAR "AFRICAN MUSIC"

by

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Abstract: The musical identity of the African continent is sustained in the popular imagination by the idea of its unity. This identity emerges from a constellation of ideas about Africa's distinctiveness constructed by generations of scholars who have diminished its diversity to substantiate the claim that shared principles of musical structure and function in sub-Saharan cultures can be read as ideal types for the continent as a whole. The idea of a singular "African music" is predicated on the notion that African "traditional" music of precolonial origin in sub-Saharan Africa possesses a set of distinctive features that are essential to its identity. Musical cultures as diverse as Aka, Ewe, Shona, Yoruba, and Zulu are subsumed within a singular frame of reference; others that do not possess these features are, by implication, excluded. To make sense of this myth of a singular "African music" we must reckon with the universalising impulse that sustains it. This means interrogating the discursive formations out of which it has been fashioned. Whose interests does it serve? Taking a decolonial perspective on the power dynamics that structure global south-north relations in the academy, this article points to the ways in which the north perpetuates its authority and dominance over the south by subsuming others within its cultural and intellectual ambit. Decolonising "African music" means dismantling the hegemony of "continental musicology" and the myth of a singular "African music" that is its creation.

Keywords: Continental musicology, African music, singular, myth, decolonising, global south.

Continental Musicology

The musical identity of the African continent is sustained in the popular imagination by the idea of its unity. This identity emerges from a constellation of ideas about Africa's distinctiveness first constructed by European scholars working on African musics in the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries (Blum 1991). Hornbostel's influential essay on "African Negro Music" (1928) described some of the ideas that by the 1950s were being taken to represent "African music" as a whole. In *Studies in African Music* (1959), Jones wrote that "the music of Africa south of the Sahara is one single main system" (222), distinguishing it from what he regarded as the principal "external" influences of Islam and European colonialism.[1] This influential view came to be shared

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[1]   Jones claimed that his twenty-one years spent working as a missionary in Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia) were ideal for the study of African music: "[Northern Rhodesia is suitable] not only because it is free from the influence of Arab music, and until recently has been largely

by many subsequent critics and theorists of African musics. Merriam proposed that the excision of "northern" influence on a singular "African music" should extend further to encompass "Africa south of the Sudan" (1962: 120). In *The Music of Africa* (1974), Nketia pushed further still when he excluded parts of southern and east Africa because of what he perceived as the European influence on these regions. This diminishment of "African music" for the sake of its "purity" is an idea taken to its logical conclusion in Agawu's *The African Imagination in Music* (2016). It is a procedure that has been employed by generations of comparative and ethno-musicologists, and especially by music theorists, to substantiate the claim that shared principles of musical structure and function in sub-Saharan cultures can be read as ideal types for the continent as a whole. This idea is predicated on the notion that African "traditional" music of precolonial origin in sub-Saharan Africa possesses a set of distinctive features that are essential to its identity. Musical cultures as diverse as Aka, Ewe, Shona, Yoruba, and Zulu are subsumed within a singular frame of reference; others that do not possess these features are, by implication, excluded.

To make sense of this myth of a singular African music we must reckon with the universalising impulse that sustains it. This means interrogating the discursive formations out of which this myth has been fashioned. Whose interests does it serve? Taking a decolonial perspective on the power dynamics that structure global south-north relations in the academy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), this article points to the ways in which the global north perpetuates its authority over the south by subsuming others within its cultural and intellectual ambit. The frameworks of western music theory with their characteristic modes of containment and representation (Said 1978) figure "African music" within an intentionally circumscribed compass designed for the veneration of western art music, not African musics. Agawu (1995a, 2003, 2016) and Scherzinger (2001, 2003, 2010) have argued, in different ways, that the application of western theories to African music is a postcolonial intervention that admits Africans into global conversations and classrooms, and in so doing usurps the power dynamics of the academy. The argument leveled here is that such acts of admission do nothing to unseat the hegemony of the northern episteme; on the contrary, they serve only to reinforce its dominance. Decolonising "African music" means dismantling this "continental musicology" and the myth of a singular "African music" that is its creation.

Continental musicology is the product of a disciplined effort to write the history, theory, and culture of a continent as homogenous, singular, and distinct, and at the same time to eliminate from consideration those practices that do not conform to the essentialist vision of this effort. This systematic elimination must be taken much more seriously than scholars have heretofore allowed. Cultures from vast reaches of Africa have been dismissed from consideration on specious grounds. How do we justify the exclusion

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free from the influence of the music of the West, but also because it is an area where drumming is much practiced: for drumming is at once the most difficult and yet the best form in which to study the subject" (1959: 12). This passage fixates on two main characteristics of the continental discourse: first, the exclusion of "external" influence, and second the focus on rhythm (and drumming in particular) as a distinctive feature.

of entire nations from consideration as African? Acts of exclusion bear consequences, and so the processes of selection deserve scrutiny. Labels of identity pose essentialist scenarios that make urgent the debate on questions of race, ethnicity, culture, and language; especially so for cultures under threat. Today there are still far too many Africans who have been ostracized from their places of origin, who have been subjected to violence and derision for who they are and what they believe, and whose voices have been drowned out under the repression of the state. In many African universities students inhabit culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and nationally diverse classrooms where worlds framed by factors of poverty, inequality, and war encroach on their lives and learning. In contexts such as these there is an ethics to acts of recognition and inclusion, and to the choices made by scholars in setting the bounds on intellectual discourse.

There is also a theoretical problem. The inherent limitations on homogenising "African music" are evident in the failure of continental musicology to account for parameters other than rhythm, and for the reductive ways in which rhythm itself has been studied. One reason, perhaps, why rhythm has for so long been regarded as *the* distinctive feature of African music is that other parameters simply do not fit a similarly singular conception.[2] Efforts to find commonalities in other parameters, like melody and harmony, for instance, have failed to produce convincing results even for a smaller subset of sub-Saharan cultures. These failures are not limited to problems of metonymy and representation alone. This is not simply a question of whether or not, on a descriptive level, a unitary classification is possible across a region or set of regions. The point is also very much political: what does it mean to divide up the continent's cultures based on arbitrary categories of classification and authenticity? Whose ends does this serve?

The will to establish the essence of African music, even in cases where this essence so clearly escapes, shows that this effort is driven not so much by a rationalistic accounting for principles of cross-cultural commonality as it is by a desire to contain, control, and dominate a discourse that is wholly uncontained, open, and expansive. To claim authority over a body of knowledge, and a monopoly over its modes of representation, is also to deny its agency and claim to identity. When that body of knowledge escapes the manifold frames and discursive regimes that restrain it then only a last act of erasure can prevent it from breaking the paradigm apart (Kuhn 1968). Such last acts are signs of a failing discourse, one so caught up in its internal logic that it can no longer sustain the forces that have undermined its legitimacy and explanatory force. Continental musicology is no longer the measure of its object. It is sustained only by those whose power it maintains. Said observes that "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied" (1978: 5). So it is with "African music". Continental musicology is a discourse created largely by and for the global north. On

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[2]   Even rhythm's much-vaunted singularity turns out to be illusory: "The difference between African and Western rhythm, I would argue, is not categorical, not indicative of a radically different way of being the world. The difference is largely a matter of emphasis and idiomatic preference. The truth is that no device or procedure found in African music is unheard of in Western music, especially if we consider the musical practices of Medieval Europe" (Agawu 2016: 156).

whose terms will it be contested?

To contest the hegemony of continental musicology is also to contest its instruments. The discourse is made from metalanguages that have roots in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century technologies and economies of empire. The assemblages of African artifacts collected by explorers, missionaries, and colonialists in this period gave rise to the modern music disciplines of systematic and comparative musicology, and, finally, to ethnomusicology. One important purpose of twentieth century comparative musicology was to impose order and meaning on collections of objects that were partial, disembodied fragments of recorded, mediated sound. The metalanguage of continental musicology and its application to "African music" arose from acts of comparison and acts of differencing. But the substitution of regimes of difference with regimes of sameness will not do. Acceding to these metalanguages is the price of admission to the disciplinary regimes of the north and to the recognition these regimes afford. But such recognition is not global for it excludes the very voices of Africans themselves.

The first part of the article focuses on the myth of a singular "African music", considering how this discourse arose and what it contributes today. The second part introduces a series of postcolonial interventions in African music studies and discusses efforts by Agawu (2003, 2016) and Scherzinger (2001, 2003) to advance metalanguages conforming African praxis to western music theoria. The last part of the article engages with recent writing by Mbembe (2001, 2016) and Jean and John Comaroff (2012) to advance a decolonial paradigm for African music studies that grapples with the epistemic dominance of the north.

The myth of a singular "African music"

The genealogy of the myth of a singular "African music" can be traced at least as far back as Hornbostel's essay (1928) in which he conflates racial distinctiveness with musical uniformity. Hornbostel's comparative method necessitated a metalanguage for the analysis of similarities and differences across large culture-areas. He was among the first to exclude "the Islamic North" in studying the distinctive features of African music: "for, although it shows traces of negro influence," he said, "it belongs to the Arabic Persian civilization" (1928: 39). He also excluded from consideration "the music of the Pygmies" due to a paucity of data. Reliant on a collection of recordings rather than his own experience of fieldwork (he did not once venture to the continent), Hornbostel derived three common features which he understood as indicative of all the continent's "true" musics: antiphony, part-singing, and highly developed rhythm. European music, he said, was characterised by its idiosyncratic use of harmony. Each one of these observations has maintained its currency.

The advent of ethnomusicology in the late 1950s and 1960s saw similar efforts to explain the "African idiom" in music. Merriam (1959, 1962, 1977) pointed to rhythm as an essential feature. "The principle of the importance of rhythm in the music of Africa south of the Sahara, is unquestioned; it seems clear that to a considerable extent this geographic area is made a cohesive unit set off from other music units by the use of

rhythm and rhythmic devices as key concepts" (Merriam 1959: 15).[3] Merriam focused his efforts at classification on "those characteristics of African music south of the Sahara which apply more or less equally to all areas and peoples; special traits of special areas are not noted" (1959: 13). Traits and areas that do not fall within this "common practice" were excluded as "special," and yet others, like handclapping and polymeter, for instance, were taken as normative. This method of classification excluded non-essential features and focused instead on shared traits. Merriam later introduced a racial dimension to his classification when he emphasized the differences between "the Sahara Desert region and the entire area of North Africa," and "the southern fringes of the desert and all Black Africa to the south" (Merriam 1977: 137). The remnants of these classificatory schemes became paradigmatic of efforts to essentialize sub-Saharan African musics within a unified schematic. In making such large-scale designations Merriam relied on his own fieldwork, but also the evidence accrued by others. Lomax's Cantometric project was a "scientific" effort devised to identify and compare large-scale "culture-areas" (Lomax 1968 [2017]) using quantitative methods. The scientific basis for this project has been called into question (Averill 2003), but the universalising rationale is consistent with a continental musicology that craves the ever-elusive pan-African essence.

Chernoff described constructions of African unity in music as "a political and historical problem. Among the metaphors of African unity," he said,

> racial ones are spurious; geographical ones omit the African peoples spread throughout the Americas; historical, political, and economic ones are unrealized; and cultural ones are often vague or inaccurate. Discussing 'African' music, therefore, we must recognize that, academically, we are examining music as potential evidence for a conception of Africa (1979: 29).

These observations cut to the heart of the identity problem, and yet this did not deter Chernoff from pursuing "a model, an abstracted and composite description of those features of the music which appear *more or less in common* in the various musics of African cultures" (1979: 30). This model, or "ideal type," would be used for purposes of comparison. What African musical traditions share, wrote Chernoff, is "the depth of their integration into the various patterns of social, economic, and political life" (1979: 35). It was this very diversity that, paradoxically, pointed to an African unity. "The aesthetic principles of African music are to an extent dependent on how the music can become socially relevant. In fact, these principles are more uniform than the apparent and culturally idiosyncratic differences in such 'musical' factors as scales, vocal and

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3   Merriam described several other features as characteristic of African music, including: "an emphasis on rhythmic and metric complexity expressed throughout the musical system; the use of extended syncopation, or off-beat phrasing of melodic accents, as a melodic device; the antiphonal call and response pattern with overlapping between the parts; the presence of two-part formal structures; the use of improvisation; the presence of the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches; a wide variety of tone colours and ornamental devices, including rising attack, falling release, glissando, and bend and dip; and probably a scale approximating the diatonic" (1959: 17).

song styles, and instrumentation" (*ibid.*).[4] The focus on *aesthetic principles* rather than "culturally idiosyncratic" musical features point to the challenge of delimiting a singular field of study without recourse to the social, ethical, or aesthetic dimensions of African music-making.

Nketia's *The Music of Africa* (1974) is the first major survey of music on the continent published in English. In it he propounds a deep structural unity obtaining over the music of sub-Saharan Africa while explicitly excluding parts of northern and southern Africa from consideration. The logic is consistent with Hornbostel, Jones, and Merriam. Ethnic archetypes are stressed: "North Africa is inhabited by societies whose languages and cultures are very closely related to those of the Arab world of the Middle East, while the southern portion is dominated by settler populations from Europe" (1974, 3). "Arabized" communities belong not to Africa but to "the Oriental family of modal music," writes Nketia:

> When we turn to the rest of Africa, we find African societies whose musical cultures not only have their historical roots in the soil of Africa, but which also form a network of distinct yet related traditions which overlap in certain aspects of style, practice, or usage, and share common features of internal pattern, basic procedure, and contextual similarities. These related musical traditions constitute a family distinct from those of the West or the Orient in their areas of emphasis (*ibid.*: 4).

Nketia reinforces the West-Orient-Africa trichotomy by stressing the distinctiveness of sub-Saharan Africa. This vision is shared, too, by Kubik whose conception of "African music" excludes the practices of "Arab-speaking North Africa" because of it "belonging to a Euro-Asian rather than African culture world. For similar reasons the music of European settler communities particularly in southern Africa, is not included" (Kubik 1994: 9). Kubik emphasizes that Khoisan and "pygmy" cultures are in fact quite different from those of their Bantu-speaking neighbours (1994: 13). In Nketia and Kubik's accounts of "African music," then, distinctions between culture-areas are based at least in part on ethnicity. But they also rely on close description and analyses of specific musical practices, and efforts to extract shared principles from these practices.

Blacking took a different view. He recognized context as essential to understanding "humanly organized sound" (1967: 5). There are many "musical traditions," he wrote, "in which systems of sound organization are entirely artificial products of culture" (*ibid.*: 6). The emphasis on a socially constructed reality was indicative of a generation of music ethnographers who would emphasize a relativist understanding of music in and as culture (Titon 2009). Blacking's later work gestured toward the universalising tendencies of generative thinking while stressing the specifics of cultural manifestations. The reflexive paradigm that emerged in ethnomusicology of the 1980s and 1990s addressed questions of difference and representation (Kisliuk 1998) in the midst of the postcolonial moment. Identity politics were foregrounded in ethnographic studies

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4   Nketia points to the self-same principle of unity in diversity when he writes: "The study of African music is at once a study of unity and diversity, and this is what makes it exciting and challenging" (1974: ix).

conducted *in situ*. Context-sensitive approaches rejected unifying frameworks, and set up a debate on the nature and purposes of music theory and analysis in ethnomusicology.

Postcolonial music theories

Since the 1990s, Agawu, Scherzinger, and several other music theorists have advanced positions defending the autonomy of formal music analysis in opposition to the rise of reflexive ethnography and postmodern contextualism in Africanist ethnomusicology (Agawu 1992, 2003, 2004; Scherzinger 2001, 2003, 2010). In 1992, Agawu wrote that one of the most striking developments "since 1965 is the movement away from earlier generalizations about African music toward regional and subregional characterizations (Venda music, Yoruba music, Kpelle music, Ganda music, and so on). And with this obsession with specificity comes a sometimes numbing situating of scholarly constraints" (1992: 256). *Representing African Music* offers a trenchant attack on ethnomusicology as a discipline beholden to the ethnographic imagination and a contextualism that estranged scholars from the music itself. In his most recent monograph, *The African Imagination in Music* (2016), Agawu offers a much broader review of scholarship on African music, and makes the strongest and most carefully balanced case yet for a singular "African music".

Agawu makes two important rhetorical moves in this book. First, he argues more forcefully than ever for a singular conception of African music by pointing to an agglomeration of factors, including principles of musical structure and practice that bind African peoples together under a single sign. "African music retains a level of procedural sameness based on certain broad organizational attitudes and propensities," he says. "It subtends a palpable essence that indexes a deep-level expressive coherence" (2016: 14–15). He adopts this essentialist position ostensibly for political reasons. "While not necessarily reducible to a single formula, the essence of African music originates in a will to communal truth that is incorporative, generous, and inviting" (*ibid*.: 15). Agawu emphasizes the social and ethical dimensions that contribute to the sense of this singular practice, including its participatory nature. Musical features of an African essence include "a series of cycles, circles, grooves, and ostinatos upon which African music is based. Recurring patterns inscribe 'different qualities of sameness'. They function at a variety of structural levels and in several simultaneously unfolding dimensions, thereby guaranteeing the inner life of African music" (*ibid*.). Agawu warns against forcing the comparison with other musics suggesting "common affinities" should not be "ruled out" (*ibid*.: 19). There can be no doubt that important similarities exist between *some* African musics, and with other world musics, too. But this does not answer the identity problem.

Agawu has a very specific notion of "African music" in mind in *The African Imagination in Music*, and he makes this explicit in his discussion of the different contexts of traditional and popular musics. The essence of "African music" is for him traditional music vested in its pre-colonial origins and marked by its relative stasis. To construct a singular vision requires a radical demarcation separating traditional

from popular. Hybridity, the marker of modernity, is denounced in a blistering critique of colonial and Christian impacts on indigenous customs and a focus on traditional rather than modern elements in urban musics. Agawu's invention of tradition vaunts its "mythical grounding" and how it "indexes the precolonial". Traditional music has authenticity as "a symbol of true Africa, as old and ostensibly resistant to change in its essential aspects. This is because its sound environment contains some of the most distinctive traits associated with African music, including its polyphonic and rhythmic principles, linguistic and temporal structures, and manipulations of timbre" (*ibid*.: 49). Agawu's singular African music reifies tradition as the source of its identity and power with rhythm its distinctive feature.

The second rhetorical move that Agawu makes is built into the very structure of the book, and is treatise-like. In a sense this move is not new in that it elaborates arguments propounded in his earlier books, *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (1995a) and *Representing African Music* (2003). The difference is that in *The African Imagination in Music* (2016) there is now a more systematic and encompassing approach to the problem, and he demands that "African music" be understood and appreciated using the self-same theoretical regimes as western art music. On the face of it, *The African Imagination in Music* offers an accessible introduction to African music; but it is also a treatise whose ambition is to show by rational means how the complexities of African music are readily intelligible in terms of the same paradigms and parameters used to study western art music. In fact, African music is fitted to the parameters of music theory, not *vice versa*. The structure of the book points to this determination with its chapter by chapter review of topics that include, inter alia, melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. Agawu contends that the "deep structures" of African music are reducible to the same structural hierarchies and terminologies as western music; it is the framing that is universal. Agawu is well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. He points out in his chapter on harmony, for instance, that western terminologies sometimes fail to account for the specifics of African tone systems; and he finds innovative ways in which to rethink these terms, or borrows new ones. But the rationale is always the same: to bring African musics into a western epistemic frame.

This effort is made concrete in Agawu's use of staff notation, and, in a more substantial way, in his application of theory. "Surely," he says, "both staff notation and tonic solfa are so widely used by literate or semi-literate African musicians that, despite their manifestly 'foreign' origins, they can no longer be dismissed as inauthentic ways of representing musical relations" (1995: 186). He points to its utility in accounting for rhythmic complexities that are not well-served by other notations, here again pointing to the singularity of African music. "Often associated with dance, rhythmic patterns are elaborated in ingenious and sophisticated ways not matched by any world music. Rhythm may well manifest the continent's most distinctive modes of rhetoric and expression. […] Rhythm, more than any other parameter, makes African music distinctive" (Agawu 2016: 155). African rhythm, he says, is characterized by its *rational complexity* and musical notation is capable of rendering this complexity in terms of

familiar on and off beats, meter, and periodicity. Notation represents a step toward theory. The generative approach advanced in *African Rhythm* depends on it. This application of western music theory is justified because

> there is essentially […] no difference between the organizing principles of African rhythm and those of Western rhythm. […] African rhythm indeed manifests the same kind of hierarchic patterning that one finds in Western music, namely, an elaborate surface and a simpler subsurface, a foreground and a background (*ibid*.: 193).

Differences in "surface" features are attributed to culture-specific "idiomatic and aesthetic choices". The coherence of these prescriptive accounts of African rhythm seems to emanate less from the specific musical devices found in African musical systems, than they do from the methods imposed to order them.[5]

Scherzinger questions the "musical cost" of Agawu's "theoretical assumptions" in applying generative approaches to African music. In a review of *Representing African Music*, he argues that Agawu "does not recognize that it is precisely this sort of Western theory of rhythm and meter that lays the conceptual foundations for the fantastical views of African rhythmic and metric complexity he aims to critique. Unfortunately, most of Agawu's analyses bear the mark of this deep contradiction" (244):

> While the strategic use of Western methods for the study of African music should be vigorously supported on political grounds, the epistemological dimensions of the inquiry should be deeply interested in the moments that do not quite fit the theoretical archetypes. These are the moments where a consideration of African rhythmic processes may force a revision of *general* theories of rhythm and meter in genuinely global terms. For, taken in the context of its broad implications, this is the hope that Agawu's inquiry inspires (245).

In a more recent piece, Scherzinger points out that,

> [a] framework grounded in cultural sameness, one that selects only those features that render the commonplace banality of African rhythm, will thereby hyperbolically domesticate what was elsewhere all too exoticized. In other words, a detailed close engagement with rhythmic phenomena need not recapitulate generalized exotic *topo*i about African music just because it demonstrates unique modalities for patterning time. The point is neither to *aprioristically* celebrate African rhythmic complexity nor to recoil from it in alarm (2010, 3).

This position achieves a balance that resists the regime of difference that Agawu (1995b) carefully rebutted, but it does not do away with difference altogether. Scherzinger situates his own analysis of *mbira* music within a universalising frame, arguing that

> close formal analysis of the African case may contribute to an understanding of perceptions of meter and rhythm *in* general, that the analysis may inform the way Africans hear music

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5   Temperley's (2000) article on meter and grouping in African music demonstrates the problems with applying western theories to classify, contain, and explain African music. In step with Agawu, Temperley argues that African rhythm "can be accommodated within the same basic model" as Western music. Not content to point to "a convergence in the conclusions of theorists and ethnomusicologists," he claims that music theory provides "a deeper and more explanatory understanding of how African rhythm works than has previously been available. There are also important differences between African and Western rhythm, but I will argue that these differences, too, are greatly illuminated by the music-theoretical view of rhythm" (2000: 65–66).

(or indeed the way Africans hear Western music or *vice versa*) and, above all, that the African case may contribute to an understanding of the way Westerners hear Western music (*ibid.*, emphasis original).

Scherzinger's aim, in the end, is "to Africanize those theories that are cognitive or universal" (2010: 4), performing a political reversal of the north-south theoretical axis. But are such theories cognitive and universal, or is not that the very ideology that sustains their currency? Notation is no neutral party. It is the invisible bridge that makes possible the systematic abstraction of theoretical principles from a common practice. Where no common practice exists it imposes one.

Music theory and the limits of postcolonial critique

The purposes of music theory and analysis, and the ends to which it is put, matter. Some music theorists have defended the discipline against charges of universalism, arguing instead that the application of formalist music theory to African music offers an opportunity for postcolonial critique. Scherzinger, for instance, claims that for many ethnomusicologists "all African music is irreducibly embedded in its social dimensions and hence all methodological abstractions therefrom constitute a fundamental epistemological breach" (2001: 7). Arguing to the contrary, he says that ethnomusicological work that advances a politically motivated contextualism "curtails important socio-political aspirations for African music" (2010: 12). Western music has the benefit of "multiple institutional perspectives and African music only an ethnomusicological one" (2001: 12). Scherzinger "questions the political stakes involved in the desire to 'see Africans thinking [only] African thoughts (Agawu 1992: 261)' (2001: 16)". This evokes, for him, "an implicit desire to wish away two centuries of colonisation and decolonisation as if cultural products could be figured apart from this intervention; but, more importantly, it evokes the desire to exclude the African from a broader global debate" (*ibid.*). But how current are theories of western music in Africa? The uses of staff notation, though widespread, are far from a common practice, and *theories* of western music— like Schenkerian analysis, set theory, semiotics, generative theories of tonal music, and the like— are rarely practiced by scholars working *in* Africa. Is there a currency to these ideas? For the study of art music, perhaps there is, but for the study of popular and traditional musics there seems no ground for such claims. Analysis may be an instrument of postcolonial reason, but it need not be deployed as a western instrument. What is troubling is the prescription that staff notation be fashioned as the lingua franca of a hermeneutic practice in Africa, and that western music theory be its master.

The power of western music theoretical discourses in the academy overwhelm what is still a piecemeal effort to forge a field of study for theorizing African musics on their own terms. This returns us to the problems of classification identified earlier: we need to pause before using terms like "African music," "African rhythm," or "African tone" unreflexively. Pluralise African musics instead. An analogy may be drawn with other fields in which theory is granted autonomy from the contexts to which it is applied. Mbembe's discussion of the universalising impulse of social theory and the predicament

of the African scholar offers a striking parallel:

> Social theory has always sought to legitimise itself by stressing its capacity to construct universal grammars. On the basis of this claim, it has produced forms of knowledge that privilege a number of categories dividing up the real world, defining the objects of enquiry, establishing relations of similarity and equivalences, and making classifications. It has equipped itself with tools to ask questions, organize descriptions, and formulate hypotheses. But this same social theory has defined itself, above all, as an accurate perception of so-called modern Europe. When examined, it turns out to rest on a body created, for the most part, at the time of the first industrialization and the birth of modern urban societies; modernity itself as a phenomenon has been primarily understood in the perspective of Western rationalism (2001: 9–10).

Music theory makes similar demands in shaping knowledge production to fit the conceptual domains of the northern academy. If theories of western music have been used to establish and legitimate the dominance of western musics in this academy then there can be no place for these theories in dismantling its hegemony. To make a singular "African music" the object of western theory is to maintain the epistemic dominance of the north.

There are alternatives to formalism that *do* take account of the specific features of African music (Grupe 2005). Kubik (1994, 2010) has made creative use of notations to recognize differences that could not be accommodated within the common practice of staff notation. This is not to ignore the utility of modified staff notations. Rycroft (1967) and Tracey (1970) have demonstrated how notations can be adapted for parameters of pitch and rhythm in ways that illuminate the specifics of a practice. There are other novel approaches. Berliner's (1993) method of transcribing mbira music enables performances from notation and has no need of the staff. Koetting (1970), Pantaleoni (1972), and Locke (1978) devised new systems and symbols for notating rhythm in West African music, and Knight (1971, 1973) developed a tablature for the tonal and motional aspects of kora music. But in his review of all these practices Grupe claims that "a truly universal system of notation is nowhere in sight" and describes a debate in which idiosyncratic systems are pitted against the conventions of western notation. This points to the problem: universalism itself.

Agawu is the foremost advocate for staff notation, and he dismisses many of these original notations saying that most have "fortunately fallen by the way side" (2003: 64). Although he does not reject the innovative approaches developed by Serwadda, Pantaleoni, Green, and others, he considers these "fringe activities":

> It only means that, as a communal practice, we should train our efforts toward the superior and extensive use of staff notation so as to make African music unavoidable in scholarly circles. Empowerment through scholarship comes in a variety of forms, and one way is to speak a language of which Westerners cannot feign misunderstanding. Is there not, in any case, something suspicious about Westerners telling Africans to use new notations for their music? Beware when the Greeks bring you gifts…(2003: 66).

In a highly specialised field it is hardly surprising that a common practice has failed to take hold. The test for the utility of a theory or notation should not then be

its currency but rather its utility in explaining the features of a given practice in ways that are clear and contextually salient. The *ad hominem* argument against westerners assumes a privileged, even authentic voice in accounting for the features of African practices. At the same time, it ignores the fact that some of the voices finding African solutions to African problems are indeed African. But there is no good reason to ignore the insights of scholars from anywhere who have good ideas about how to analyse and represent African musics. A decolonial musicology rejects the purview, not the person. By conforming to western conceptual domination how are Africans escaping its hegemony?[6]

Decolonising African music

The time has come for scholars of African music to reject the domination of the conceptual imaginary of the global north. Theories predicated on the normativity of western music and its modes of representation are tied to discourses of power that make claims of (and for) Africans, and that render their words and worlds inferior. A decolonial musicology moves beyond the idea that Africans should conform to "superior" modes of representation imposed on them by the northern academy. Making normative a western frame of reference sustains its dominance. The use of western instruments to describe and interpret African musics *in* Africa is antithetical to a decolonial movement which seeks African solutions to African challenges, which finds African ways of theorizing and appreciating African cultures, and which engages with the specifics of African musical realities today. The appropriation of tools developed in the global north is necessary because these tools are as much a part of everyday reality in Africa as they are in Asia, Europe, or Latin America. But we should be wary of adopting Western tools that situate African cultures within what Mbembe calls a "Eurocentric epistemic canon" (2016: 32). This canon "attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions. It is a canon that tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression" (*ibid*.). Mbembe recognizes, in particular, the threat of canons that exploit their objectivity and universalism to achieve domination:

> Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower. They rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological *a priori*. They are traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself

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[6]   Agawu argues that "A postcolonial transcription, then, is not one that imprisons itself in an ostensibly 'African' field of discourse but one that insists on playing in the premier league, on the master's ground, and in the North. From this point of view, an ideology of difference must be replaced by an ideology of sameness so that—and this is somewhat paradoxical—we can gain a better view of difference. In other words, only if we can proceed from a premise of what he describes as this sameness and grant difference in the unique expression of that sameness are we likely to get at the true similarities and differences between musics" (67–68). Erlmann was critical of this "disturbingly under-theorized" "marriage of universalism and Africanism" (2004: 293) in *Representing African Music.* Why accept a master in the first place? Why pay dues to a premier league unless one intends to make a career in that league?

and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context (2016: 32).

Moves to de-couple theory from context advance the interests of subjects who occupy positions of power in the global north. The veneer of objectivity masks a project of universal ambition. Mbembe observes that the hegemony of western traditions "make it difficult to think outside these frames," and, worse, "actively represses anything that actually is articulated, thought and envisioned from outside of these frames. For these reasons, the emerging consensus is that our institutions must undergo a process of *decolonisation* both of knowledge and of the university as an institution" (*ibid*.: 32– 33). This argument about decolonisation fits with recent efforts to rethink north-south relations through an inversion of the colonial axis. Theory from the south, as Jean and John Comaroff neatly describe this politics, aims to situate Africa as a generator of theory rather than as a source for the exploitation of "raw materials":

> Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, uppercase; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West—variously known as the ancient world, the orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and now the global south— primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths, its axioms and certitudes, its premises, postulates, and principles. Just as it has capitalized on non-Western 'raw materials'—materials at once human and physical, moral and medical, mineral and man-made, cultural and agricultural - by ostensibly adding value and refinement to them. In some measure, this continues to be the case. But what if, and here is the idea in interrogative form, we invert that order of things? What if we subvert the epistemic scaffolding on which it is erected? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? That it is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, is and ought to be coming, at least in significant part? That, in probing what is at stake in it, we might move beyond the north-south binary, to lay bare the larger dialectical processes that have produced and sustain it (2012: 1–2).

The insistence that African musics conform to western epistemological regimes is an idea tone deaf to the realities of which African voices sing and speak. These regimes maintain a status quo that does nothing to further the interests of Africans on their own terms. Theorists who insist that analysis be context-neutral, or who absent context altogether, claim that "knowledge" is universal and should not unsettle the paradigms of western thought. This renders Africa a place comfortably familiar. It is a modus of control, a means of containment. But Africans have no need of a northern academy that dictates how and what they publish, what theories and methods are most appropriate, or which discourses are most authoritative. On the contrary, it is time to reject essentialism, anachronism, authenticity, stereotype, and the entire mythology that props up the study of a singular "African music". It is time to reject the narratives of the global north that

set constraints on what it is we do, how it is we tell our stories, and who may or may not speak. We will not play on a master's ground, or be cowed by a master's voice. We will build our own grounds, fashion our own theories, and construct our own image of practice in ways that serve African futures. The riotous denial of northern dominance through epistemic rupture and renewal, and the destruction of the image of a northern master and intellectual habitus is what is happening on African university campuses right now. This is part of a larger intellectual awakening, decades in the making, that has culminated in efforts to decolonise the mind. It is a project and a struggle that questions the strides that have been made post-independence. Why, decades on, are we still saddled with the consequences not only of inequality, landlessness, and poverty, but also with the consequences of a constricting intellectual hegemony that diminishes our humanity, our individuality, and our communality?

The task of decolonising African music begins, then, with the unlearning of "African music". It is the task of a new generation to decolonise the hegemony of continental musicology. We must unlearn the reductive habits of mind that return us always to a northern normative. We must guard against discursive formations that eat away, piece by piece, at the very grain of the African voice. We need to recognise the conceptual violence perpetrated in the name of universalising schemes of classification and subjugation, and reject the essentialism that is their root. Let us embrace the contexts out of which African musics are made, and the fact that these contexts are increasingly plural, diverse, and hybrid. Let us move beyond circumscribed imaginings of African pasts to a critical engagement with African presents that we may build African futures. Let us engage in rethinking pan-African relations and continental interrelatedness. Africans need to come to terms with their diversity and their difference to address problems of ethnocentrism, racism, genocide, and the many challenges that encumber the postcolony. These tasks are challenging enough without the unwelcome weight of a global north bearing down on our scholarship. The task of decolonising "African music" is the task of a generation whose hope is tied not to the regimes of the north but to the future of the African continent itself.

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