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Karl Maier's Afropessimism Beckons to Apocalypse

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Essence of Soundscape

BY SOLA OLORUNYOMI

CONFRONTED with the urgency of fashioning a course outline for an undergraduate introductory poetry course, I found myself subconsciously returning to the pages of Kofi Agawu's *African Rhythm*. Poetry. Music. Rhythm. What's the connection?

I approached the course with maximum trepidation, unsure of how to navigate this dangerous strait of anxiety, of students who had anticipated a kick-off with "the characteristics of the ballad." But how could I intelligently discuss meter, the variegated layers of the rhyming scheme, or even cadence's lengthening into meaning without a sense of rhythm! That sure felt—not quite wrong but—like a sin to me. But I initially sounded the greater sinner—some sort of campus loony—once the class commenced trying to test diverse soundscapes from the heartbeat, pacing, to the crest and trough of the ocean surge, and the rhythmic, sometimes antiphonal, quality of the thunderclap!

Such can be the effect of the sheer novelty with which Kofi Agawu approaches the subject matter in *African Rhythm*. The author proceeds from a twin challenge: defining Northern Ewe perspective of rhythm within the matrix of a broad characterization of African rhythm, and negating the now familiar unitarist assumptions on African cultural production. These are the sorts of assumptions that gloss over the diversity in the continent's aesthetic production and invariably undermines its dynamism. In grappling with these, Agawu returns to the literature of the last four decades on African music and probes their assumptions. And, indeed, they are many as Agawu details, spanning Klaus Wachsmann's "there is hardly any music in Africa that is not in some way rooted in Speech", to John Chernoff's "African music is derived from language", and Francis Bebey's "vocal music is truly the essence of African musical art". Yet, there are others suggesting that its melodies are short and underdeveloped; it is rhythmically complex; and the feeling of its makers being naturally musical.

In charting the course out of an obviously intractable web of claims, Agawu begins by streamlining the diverse perspectives before engaging them. First is his observation of the dissonance in the claim that African drumming represents the site of "complex rhythm" and the view of specialists in the field that songs hold the key to understanding these musical cultures. He further avers by noting the centrality of language in the discourse, and thereby foregrounds his intervention on such claims that "without African languages, African music would not exist."

While affirming the broad universality of musical practices, he calls attention to some issues of overlapping taxonomy. An example is the absence of a single word for "rhythm" in Ewe which he says, does not imply the absence of the concept of rhythm. This phenomenon, he notes, is that "the semantic fields of the word are broadly distributed."

In this exercise of comparative musicology, the author resorts to a multidisciplinary approach. Chapter one references a fictional ethnography, two,

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Kofi Agawu, AFRICAN RHYTHM: A NORTHERN EWE PERSPECTIVE, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 216 pp.

Michael Veal, FELA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AFRICAN MUSICAL ICON, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2000, 313 pp.

<< linguistics and, three and four, oral literature. While chapter five veers in the direction of musical performance, and six, language and oral literature, the concluding chapter serves as a précis to the entire text. Agawu seems to be telling us that a holistic appreciation of music, i.e African rhythm, necessarily points us in the direction of our environment and the society; in its language, in its songs, its drumming and dancing, as well as its folktale and musical performances. The strength of the book is in locating the ubiquitous rhythmic pulse in these diverse sub-themes, while essentially, the basic thread that binds them all remains musicology.

A traditional African ritual drum

On the other hand, Michael Veal in *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon*, further intensifies the theme of rhythm, only differently, and spirits it into a much more destabilizing post-modernist context. Veal, an Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at Yale University, had played as guest saxophonist with Fela and his band Egypt '80. His rendering here eminently smacks of an insider's account, but we are little surprised because, as the blurb reads, he had conducted interviews with Fela (recently deceased), his colleagues, and other Nigerian musicians. Michael Veal's is an account of an iconoclastic musician who is also revealed to us through the author's research in three continents (Africa, Europe and North America)—places where Fela had either lived, studied or worked.

The book is rendered in eight chapters starting with the introduction: "Abami Eda." This is followed with "Abeokuta" (1938-1957), "Gentleman" (1958-1970), "Africa Message" (1970-1974), "The Black President" (1974-1979), "A Serious Cultural Episode" (1979-1992), "Fear Not for Man" (1985-1997), and the conclusion: "Look and Laugh". There is also a comprehensive discography and an appendix section detailing the different phases of Fela's musical career from the days of the "Koola Lobitos", to "Nigeria 70", Africa 70, and "Egypt 80".

Style and content is fused in an interesting manner by the biographer. For instance, the narrative is rendered in some measure of flashback, it does not proceed from subject's youth, rather we encounter Fela, from the outset, at his "Afrika Shrine", playing and punning. In the latter part of this introduction, he is foregrounded against the context of his musicianship, after which we get a glimpse of the artistic and musical milieu of the earlier decades preceding Fela's emergence as a confident musician. The reader is also well-served with a précis on the social history of his composition, after which we get a chip of the family history.

It is only after this that the author begins with the Fela story proper. And even this is amply buttressed through a narrative technique that keeps historicizing all contexts, such that even here Michael Veal first locates the musician's emergence within the general context of the socio-political development of Nigeria and West Africa, and the role of Fela's family in this development.

As from "Abeokuta", the Fela story begins in earnest. This details Fela through elementary formal education under disciplinarian parents but, again here, we are also given a prism into the heady days of the protest era of Egba women and the leadership role of Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Fela"s mother) in those events. "Gentleman" further takes us through Fela's musical formative years in terms of professional musicianship. Part of this period allows us to see Fela in England and his exposure to diverse music traditions, and the particular influence of Ambrose Campbell.

Then we have the radical turn of the early seventies in "Africa Message". This coincides with what observers have generally identified as the turning point, with the album track *Jeun K'oku*. The increasing role of the "Afrika Shrine" constitutes part of this section, so also does Fela's encounter with the police. But after this (through the remaining sections), we get the essential Fela, a truly counter-hegemonist activist musician. Whether in Nigeria or while traveling overseas, the new afrobeat perspective seems to have become Fela's passion as he begins to style his music "African Classical", while also emphasizing the spiritual dimension to the message. This takes us to the final phase where the author re-examines the musical heritage of Fela, both from a purely technical musicological reading and the political and cultural inflections that it carries. In the context of a continent yet to give voice to its cultural producers, here is a most welcome contribution. To my mind, the ultimate beneficiaries of this book, no doubt, are the teeming scholars of African cultural studies, musicians, the general reader, and a continent shying from confronting its truths.

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Extending Boundaries

WITH the collapse of 'cultural economies' across significant portions of Africa in past years, there has been the virtual absence of critical fora which engage the diverse trove of books written by Africans, or on Africa and its diasporas, as validly essential forms of cultural representation.

Glendora Books Supplement has, consequently, taken up the challenge posed by this unfortunate and yet disturbing chasm in criticism. It presents an intellectual platform motivating the cultivation of a culture hinged on the evaluation of books.

Although its crucial territory is defined as an engagement with books written

by Africans and about Africa, alongside those from, and about citizens of, its diasporas, it is not limited by these but extends to embrace other modes and geographies of representation inscribed as published forms.

Importantly, *Glendora Books Supplement* supports the book industry in the exhibition it affords titles that are accorded review space, as much as in the cultural conversations it enables through the facilitation of discourses around books. Its style is predicated on an *interrogation* of evolving knowledge forms, while the critical topography it expands toward accommodates books encoding diverse epistemologies traversing creative arts, humanities, cybernetics and numerous other fields.

The *Glendora Books Supplement*, ultimately, encourages the contribution of those who desire to probe texts and representations in efforts to extend the boundaries of what is known.

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Bad Times for Two Bards

THE spate of censorship unleased by the education department of Gauteng province in South Africa seems to brook few bounds, as even the 'classics' are taken to cleaners. In efforts at 'tidying-up' and 'sanitizing' the school curricula, a sizeable volume of works by Shakespeare and Jonathan Swift are being shoved towards the door for recently proclaimed sins. Shakespeare is claimed to be "boring, unlikely and ridiculous", while Swift is replete with humour regarded as "foreign" to South Africans.

An appointed committee of teachers who arrived at these conclusions decried the purported failings of the English bard, Shakespeare, as including a lack of "cultural diversity", predilection with "unhappy endings" and failure to "promote the South African constitution's rejection of racism and sexism." Based on the criteria appealed to by the committee, *Julius Caesar* could not survive an enshrined sexism as it "elevates men", while the *Taming of the Shrew* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were not only undemocratic, but also racist. *Hamlet* was claimed to lack optimism as much as it is not "uplifting", *King Lear* is "too despairing", violent, "unlikely and ridiculous".

Interestingly, *The Merchant of Venice* slipped through censorship, even when many observers of the fare wondered how its thinly-veiled anti-semitism could pass for anything other than racism. Equally, surviving the shove are *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* which must have been judged by standardsprecluding the declared criterion of "unhappy endings." Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* journeyed out of reckoning by reveling in alien humour.

Nadine Godimer

Gordimer's Leash

PERHAPS in an ironic twist of circumstance, South African liberal intellectual, essayist, and 1991 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Nadine Gordimer, who has spent most of her adult life and career in the strive against racism and apartheid in South Africa, both as writer and African National Congress (ANC) activist, had to bear the brunt of certain 'transformations' laying hold on the South African educational system. Her 1981 novel, *July's People*, has become the fourth in a 22-book oeuvre to slide into the grip of censorship.

Described as a "political novelist celebrated for her grasp of history and delicate sensitivity to the human tensions of apartheid", and proponent of the "essential gesture" that merges the role of literary and political activists, Gordimer who has reiterated her belief in South Africa's post-1994 democracy, is the most recent victim of the ethos she warred against for over four decades.

In April 2001, the education department of Gauteng province, the most important in the country, declared Gordimer's book as flawed, "deeply racist, superior and patronising", which means it has to be removed from school curricula. And, this consolidates an earlier position in which three of her books had been censored by the apartheid regime.

The wave of reactions issuing from this act of censorship has prominent South African writers, who have written to protest the Gauteng province's education department's decision and are planning to write the ruling ANC about this act of "political correctness gone mad", rallying to her defence.

In her career as literary artist, Gordimer's contemplation of South African society as 'deformed' in the various imbalances and distortions it engenders among races, examines the delusions evident in white society, the ignorance pertaining to the black folk and their ways, and depicts with supreme understanding, the workings of the master/slave relations that has riddled the country for so long.

July's People, now regarded as having an improbable plot and reinforcing a questionable past, deals with a revolutionary moment when a reversal occurs and a white household seek refuge with their black servant. This is when some of the latent dictatorial attitudes of the servant starts to evolve.

The shock attending this latest censorship of Gordimer's book by the Gauteng education department, as related to by sections of literati and readers seems to be the deliberate, if willful, attempt at perpetrating silence by knocking off the chronicle of a reality now considered 'racist.' Even then, the reality under representation, if not a slew of interpretation, could be preserved as testament of what is undesirable about the past, and what needs to be desperately forestalled.

Born in Transvaal, South Africa, Nadine Gordimer won the Booker Prize in 1974 for her narrative work, *The Conservationist*, and rejected the prestigious women-only Orange Prize in 1988.

Gathering Tongues

A throng of voices seem to be re-focusing and lending remarkable verve to the growing corpus of recent African literary writing. Apart from Tade Ipadeola, whose newly published collection of poetry *A Time of Signs* is regarded as a triumph of exquisite crafting, some of these purveyors of the written word - having undergone considerable literary exposure, even when some of their works have not been published - include the South African civil activist/ writer, Nomboniso Gasa. Her prose writings, *Dancing with Grandmother* and *In the Heart of My Song* are set to be released by Cape Town publishing firm, David Phillip.

Equally, award - winning Nigerian poets, Angela Agali and Emman Usman Shehu are about coming out with their poetry collections, *Waking Dreams* and *The Blue in My Blood*, while Helon Habila's "Love Poems" made the shortlist for the 2001 Caine Prize.