Book Review


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Perhaps there is no other study that takes more seriously the task of exploring the intricate ways in which music and ethics go hand in hand in contemporary urban Africa than *Bamako Sounds: The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music* by Ryan Thomas Skinner. Focusing on musical activity in Bamako, Mali’s capital city, and based on long-term fieldwork, the book deals with the intersection between music, urbanity and morality through an exploration of different facets of the Malian music scene. To that end, the book engages with the concept of “Afropolitanism” and applies it to the domain of music in contemporary Mali. In recent years “Afropolitanism” (a compound of Afro and cosmopolitanism) has gained high currency in contemporary Africanist discourse where it is often used to describe multiple identifications of modern African subjects. At the same time, the concept has been criticized by some scholars who have associated the term with an African elite living outside of Africa (for an early definition along these lines see Selasi 2005). While Skinner views Afropolitanism as a term that “locates Africans' global routes and local roots within a postcolonial and diasporic geopolitical framework” (2), the book focuses primarily on African musicians who reside and act in Africa. It thus applies the term to contexts that are not necessarily related to translocation. Another aspect of Skinner’s understanding of the term is its association with the moral sphere. Skinner, following social theorist Achille Mbembe, understands Afropolitanism as “an ethics of urban African being-in-the-world” (11). Under the assumption that music is “the privileged mode of moral expression in Bamako today” (1), music is examined as an expression of Afropolitan ethics. And while the fact that the book is based on a single concept runs the risk of portraying a superficial image of the Malian music scene, the book manages to present...
the Afropolitan ethic in its multiplicity and does not reduce musical activity to a single morality.

The focus on urbanity is another central methodological heuristic that underlies the book, and to that end Skinner engages with theories and concepts from urban geography. It is true that modern African music was always tied to processes of urbanization, but scholarship has often failed to take the city as a serious object of scrutiny and left it as a self-evident component of musical life in Africa. In Bamako Sounds the city does not act as merely a transparent stage to the musical activity but as a key object of investigation. The city is presented vividly throughout the book in a way that illuminates the constant dialogue between Malian music and other aspects of the multimodal urban environment.

The book is divided into six chapters (in addition to the introduction and the conclusion); each is dedicated to a different aspect of the Malian music scene. Taken together the chapters gradually unfold to reveal the broad spectrum of Afropolitan ethics. The first chapter deals with the song ‘Bolibana’ by the hip hop group Need One. Through rich analysis of the lyrics, Skinner illuminates the dialectic between wildness and civility that is central to local imaginaries. While the genre of hip hop might suggest a notion of modernity and cosmopolitanism, the analysis highlights the embeddedness of hip hop within “moral structures of the Mande society” (44), thus resisting a simplistic binary of cosmopolitan musical genres versus traditional structures.

The second chapter examines the position of the Artistiya, a status of artists that emerged during the time of Malian independence. It is the most historic chapter in the book. A special emphasis is placed on economic and governmental transformations that shaped music practices in respect to state sponsorship versus privatized activity. Plurality again is stressed, with a broad range of attitudes to the limiting economic conditions being presented. In contrast to Afro-pessimistic attitudes that tend to view the post-independence state through a negative lens, Skinner brings voices that demonstrate the possibilities of the neoliberal period, primarily by pointing to tactics and strategies that are employed by musicians in order to gain from the present state.

In the third chapter, the ethical spectrum is further explored through a practice of close listening to two performances. In a somewhat Adornian fashion, Skinner equates certain musical structures with social structures, such as collective identity and individual subjectivity as well as the status of women within Mande society. These analogies are based on deep engagement with local social thought and with the local Bamana language.

In the fourth chapter, musical expressions of Islam are examined in Malian music. Invocations of Quranic verses and Islamic themes are explored
in three different genres: jeliya, hip hop and Afropop. This makes the book a great contribution to the relatively small scholarship on Islamic expressions in popular West African music. For Skinner, the expression of Islamic elements “positioned [subjects] within an ideological system (Islam)” (109). Drawing on Althusser’s concept of “interpellation”, he illuminates the myriad ways in which Islamic elements serve as means to invoke a “locally salient moral community” (118). The last example, however, is the most compelling one. It presents the incorporation of a tune by kora master Toumani Diabate and his Symmetric Orchestra into a Sony PlayStation game. The objection of non-African Muslims who conceived this as an act of heresy is analysed in a way that highlights the problematic of circulation within a heterogeneous Islamic sphere.

The fifth chapter examines the impact of unstable economy, shortage of money and music piracy on the lives of Malian musicians. The concept of copyright is discussed in relation to the state and its inability to enforce laws against piracy. Treating music as labour uncovers interesting dynamics in the Malian music scene, especially in regard to waves of musicians migrating in the 1970s to countries with more stable economies and a developed music industry, primarily, Cote d’Ivoire.

The last chapter deals with the recent crisis in Mali in 2012 and examines the role of music in this conflict using two key terms in contemporary social theory, Foucault’s biopower and Mbembe’s necropolitics. It addresses the gap between musicians who are connected to transnational networks and those who work solely on a local level and suffer directly from the consequences of the crisis. The discrepancy between these two classes of musicians demonstrates how musicianship in Mali is served as a form of biopower “through which populations...assert their right to live in the world” (157).

Skinner’s promise at the outset to explore Afropolitanism in its multiplicity is indeed fulfilled throughout the book. While it might have been possible to view the ethical dimensions as separated, Skinner is at pains to stress how these dimensions more often than not converge and operate concurrently in the urban setting. The focus on urbanity, however, runs the risk of portraying the city as a self-contained unit that is separated from rural spaces. Research on African music in other contexts has shown how the urban and the rural are in constant cultural dialogue through migration (see for example Erlmann 1990). This kind of dialogue is absent from Bamako Sounds, and the rural, if mentioned, is only implied through its association with the concept of wildness according to the Mande cosmology and as opposed to the city that stands for civility (26). It would have been interesting to know if such cross-fertilization between musicians from Bamako and from other places exists and what is the nature of these connections. In the case of Mali this
question is relevant when considering that top Malian musicians, such as the jeli Kassé Mady Diabaté, originated from villages and often acknowledge their home village publicly. Lastly, considering the long interest of ethnomusicology with ethnic traditions, it would have been interesting to account for the diverse ethnic traditions in Mali and to relate them to the urban context. What happens when diverse ethnic traditions share the same urban soundscape? Do inter-ethnic tensions arise? Do new musical avenues for ethnic collaboration open up due to the urban properties? These kinds of questions are not discussed in the book. Having said that, the book is a welcome addition to the growing bookshelf on contemporary African music. It would also be relevant to scholars and students who are interested in the connection between ethics and music.

References
