

Highlife Music in West Africa: Down Memory Lane

Edited by Sonny Oti

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The creative industry in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has witnessed a resurgence in recent years, especially in terms of music and dance. From Nigeria and Ghana to Botswana, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa, and following in the footsteps of film, music and dance have now attracted global attention having featured prominently in Western media such as CNN and the BBC. Indeed, a recent BBC documentary “Best Nightclub in Africa” profiled Botswana as a country where the youth of SSA have found an alternative art form – i.e. outdoor music festivals such as the “car park pimping” arising from the restrictive government taxes on entertainment in that country – described as a “tax on sin”.

One unintended consequence of this has been the resurgence of alternative art forms – notably music and dance where young:

[...] people are dancing to live performances by local artists and showing off their latest dance moves – including the particularly impressive one of balancing bottles of beer on their bums.

Indeed, other previously unimagined patterns are emerging across SSA with DIY (do-it-yourself) artists springing up in every corner, and especially among the youth. In Mozambique and Kenya, for example, “new” dance forms have either cropped up or re-emerged (notably Marrabenta and Lipala) – thus putting the creative industry back into intellectual discourse and further accentuating the need for more scholarly attention, interrogation and research.

Sonny Oti’s *Highlife Music in West Africa: Down Memory Lane*, does exactly what is says on the cover – it takes the reader down memory lane. Spread across six chapters, the introductory Chapter 1 is befittingly entitled “Yesterday: the movement and the monument”.

Across the pages of the book, the sibling rivalry between two countries – Nigeria and Ghana – cannot be missed. While Chapter 2 talks the reader through Balladism, Pan-Africanism and Militarism, in Chapter 3, the focus shifts to Ghanaian influences, E.I. Mensah and Ghana’s Repertory. In Chapter 4, which is rightfully entitled “blowing their own trumpets”, Oti profiles a selection of artistes including the likes of Bongos Ikwue (see p. 118, para 2) and Prince Nico Mbarga – born to a Cameroonian father and Nigerian mother (pp. 142-150).

Bongos Ikwue is associated with the “rhumba rhythm” (see p. 118). His first album released in 1972 included hits such a “Cock-crow at dawn” signature tune to a TV series hit with the same title. Other interesting pages include p. 124 (paragraph 4) where there is some reference to Western musical influences and the resentment of traditional highlife artists to the dominance of the former on the radio and sometimes TV airwaves. On the last paragraph on p. 136 on highlife’s contribution to Nation Branding – notably Sonny Okosun’s “Which Way Nigeria?” That particular song characterises the current situation in that acclaimed “giant of Africa” as it struggles to find its feet in the international community – overreliance on oil in the face of low oil prices, poverty and corruption.

Chapter 5 is entitled “jottings from the Author’s diary” where Oti describes himself as the “occasional musician” (see p. 161). He also talks about his first single, “Installation Calypso”, which was released on Philip’s West Africa Records in 1963. The single, according to Oti, was “honoured by the World University Service in Geneva in 1965”.

Chapter 6 (pp. 171-182; see especially last para of p. 181) “To project highlife externally, E. T. Mensah toured England”. In this chapter also, other notable highlife artistes are profiled. For example, Victor Olaiya, by his coverage of Queen Elizabeth the Second’s tour of Nigeria, showed the same urge to build an image for Africa as early as 1956. By adapting highlife to compete in a European jazz festival, he already projected the elastic nature of highlife, pointing towards its growth (see p. 182). His song-texts also functioned as national unification tools. He composed songs in Igbo, Efik, Hausa and his own native Yoruba language to communicate more effectively.

Song-texts of African urban popular music rhythm could be entertaining, but they are functionally the voice of the community. They are equally the conscience of African societies; it is through these lyrics that African domestic and external politics can be monitored (Madichie, 2011). Song-texts act as the thermometer for measuring African political, social and economic temperature. Sex and love are never publicised, they are treated with reverence; and they are also regarded as trivial and incompatible with the [more] serious problems of Africa (see p. 182).

Overall Oti’s main emphasis throughout the book has been on song-texts, the meaning of the lyrics behind the music. He discusses names such as Fela, Sonny Okosun, I.K. Dairo, Bongos Ikwue, Celestine Ukwu, Bala Miller and His African Pyramid band, Zeal Onyia, Rex Lawson, Victor Uwaifo, Bobby Benson and ET Mensah (Ghanaian). Overall, the highlight of Chapter 5 is the demise of Rex Lawson in a ghastly motor accident. Indeed, the 2nd Rex Jim Lawson International Highlife Music Conference and Festival is being hosted by the University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria) in October. See the link here: http://allevents.in/port_harcourt/2nd-rex-jim-lawson-international-highlife-music-conference-and-festival/1771775213041753

Alternative music genres such as Hip life (Ghana) and Afro hip-hop (Nigeria) – rooted in highlife – and Rex Lawson is renowned to have filled a vacuum created in the political tensions between Nigeria and Ghana and its effect on Sigma Club’s Havana Nite (Oti, 2009, p. 8). Sigma Club’s Havana Nite is a Classique attributable to Broadway – a festival of music, song and dance.

In all these, however, a “new wave” gathers momentum; international or sub-regional collaborations have become more prominent with artistes linked with Afro Hip-Hop in Nigeria rubbing minds with artistes of Hip-Life in Ghana – notable examples being the collaboration between Nigeria’s Flavour and Ghana’s Asem in

“waka waka baby? Ashawo!” While in the case of Ghana, hip-life is the mantra, where the alternative style combines hip-hop and other genres such as highlife with notable acts such as Asem (who has collaborated with Nigeria’s Flavor), Obrafor and Jay Q are household names. Not to mention cross-border collaborations between MTV Award winner, TuFace Idibia and US hip-hop artists Wyclef and R Kelly; D’Banj with Snoop Dogg; and more significantly the rise of music producers such as Don Jazzy rubbing shoulders with Kanye West.

It would be persuasive to argue, therefore, that while many SSA countries have been classed as developing countries, recent trends within the creative industry of these countries arguably surpasses that of their counterparts in the developed countries due to the role of innovation and creativity (Okpara, 2011). For example, both Ghana and Nigeria have rebased their economies in recent years leveraging the economic contribution of their respective nascent creative industry

Generally speaking, while the creative industry in SSA has been predominantly fragmented as movies versus music, the two have now become more blended than ever – thanks to Oti’s (2009) ground-breaking work on Highlife Music in West Africa, which has been cited three times (Chattalas and Koles, 2016; Allen and Veal, 2013; Schmidt, 2012; Opara, 2012); the development of that music genre between the 1950s and 1970s can now be recounted. While movies, notably Nollywood, the Nigerian Movie Industry (Madichie, 2010), are fast becoming based on SSA novels as is the case with Chimamanda Adichie’s book, “Half of a Yellow Sun”, being turned into a movie and more diaspora crossings attributable to the Bollywood phenomenon which transcends movies to music. A similar trend is being witnessed in SSA, and a realisation of the role played by highlife music cannot be overemphasised. This book would appeal to students of events marketing/management and even business students studying entrepreneurship.

Nnamdi O. Madichie

London School of Business and Management, London, UK

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About the reviewer

Nnamdi O. Madichie is currently Director of Research & Enterprise at the London School of Business and Management. His research interests straddle marketing in its broad sense (including consumer behaviour, events markets, music and film) and entrepreneurship (diaspora, ethnic minority and social entrepreneurship) with a focus on emerging markets in the Middle East, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. He is the author of “The Nigerian movie industry ‘Nollywood’ – a nearly perfect marketing case study” [*Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 28(5):625-649], and “Marketing Senegal through hip-hop-a discourse analysis of Akon’s music and lyrics” [*Journal of Place Management and Development*, 4(2): 169-197]. Nnamdi O. Madichie can be contacted at: nnamdi.madichie@lsbm.ac.uk

Book review