

BOOK REVIEWS

Mande Popular Music and Cultural Policies in West Africa. Griots and Government Policy Since Independence. Graeme Counsel. 2009. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller. 31 illus., 7 transcriptions. discography, glossary. 290pp.

Bamako Sounds. The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music. Ryan Thomas Skinner. 2015. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 22 b&w photos., index. 248pp.

Music Culture and Conflict in Mali. Andy Morgan. 2013. Copenhagen: Freemuse. 234pp. (ebook).

The following review examines three publications of the past five or so years that grapple with the crisis of statehood, cultural politics and musicianship that has gripped postcolonial Africa in the wake of the end of the cold war. All three are written in different discursive registers by people with varying academic and professional backgrounds and most likely also with different audiences in mind. But all are also centrally about Mali, one of a handful of Sahelian countries that has been hit hardest by the combined effects of authoritarian rule, globalization and, more recently, the fallout of jihadism and the “war on terror.” At the same time, all three are animated by a profound sense of admiration for Malian music and a deep concern for what is arguably one of the most resilient bodies of musical practices on the African continent.

Graeme Counsel’s *Mande Popular Music and Cultural Policies in West Africa* is a good starting point, because the book, although out of print, usefully reviews the cultural policies of the core Mande speaking countries Guinea, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia. As Counsel shows, from independence into the early 1980s all four countries adopted statist cultural policies that were designed to generate support for the postcolonial state and its elite leadership.

Counsel’s evidence is drawn from an extensive series of interviews with some of the leading musicians and music industry personnel of the 1960s and 1970s as well as a vast collection of 78s, LPs and cassettes produced during this period. (Some of those recordings have since been reissued on labels such as Stern’s or Soundway Records. Counsel himself also curates a website, radioafrica.com.au, that contains a wealth of information on the music of the “golden era” of music from the Mande-speaking world.). Yet apart from an extensive discography in the Appendix, supporting archival evidence is rather scarce. Although Counsel claims to have accessed the national archives of all four countries, the “rare documents” he unearthed there are few and far between.

Although the book is based on a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Melbourne in 2006 (and was only published as recently as 2009) Counsel’s theoretical framework is rather modest, not to say outmoded. It mostly refers back to the 1980s and early 1990s, to a time when popular music scholars were preoccupied with interrogating received categories such as “popular music” and pondered the question whether such categories were applicable to Africa; when ethnomusicologists worried about the emerging effects

of globalization on “traditional” music and the dangers of a global “grey-out;” when the growing global power imbalances were being subsumed if not erased under the rubric of “cross-cultural influences” or “cultural exchange.” Ultimately, it is the persistence of this important yet limited conceptual legacy that prevents Counsel from exploring the full potential of his rich empirical material. Thus, one wonders about the ready acquiescence of numerous musicians to the authoritarian cultural policies pursued by the likes of Sekou Touré and Modibo Keita. True, both regimes increasingly resorted to censorship, intimidation, and even incarceration of musicians to stave off mounting popular dissent, and Counsel does chronicle in considerable detail the pressure that was brought to bear, for instance, on Guinea’s premier label Syliphone and that, among other factors, hastened the label’s demise. Yet the hegemony of nationalist ideology among the early generation of Mande music makers such as Bembeya Jazz, Les Ambassadeurs or Super Rail Band, although in large part a reflection of the convenience and job security offered by government subsidies, was also due to a more complex articulation of various musical styles, ideologies, and political affects. As such this configuration calls for a more sustained analytical and ethnographic effort beyond dated models of acculturation or “exchange” and beyond routine incantations of key neo-liberal tenets such as “modernization” and “development” as the motors of musical creativity. Yet Kelly Askew’s book *Performing the Nation* (Askew 2002) and Thomas Turino’s work on popular music, nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Zimbabwe (Turino 2000)—both pioneering attempts at contextualizing mid- to late twentieth-century African popular music within postcolonial nationalism and nationalist/socialist cultural policies—are not even referenced.

Another shortcoming not just of Counsel’s book but of current ethnographies of musical nationalism more broadly is the lack of attention to what one might call everyday nationalism. While much past scholarship—and to an extent even current work—has focused on the high level stakes in—and less frequently mass support for—nationalist projects of identity formation, more work needs to be done on the more interstitial realm of petty bureaucrats, mid-level media personnel, local party officials, offices, city ordinances, zoning laws, musicians’ unions, and urban planners as both conduits, facilitators, modifiers and, more often than not, enforcement agents of state cultural policy. Concepts such as “cultural intimacy”—productively deployed in Martin Stokes’s work on Turkish popular music, for instance (Stokes 2010)—or “conviviality” may provide good points of departure for this shift toward the coproduction of multiple forms of identity and the tensions that inevitably arise from them. But more fine-grained ethnographic work on this in-between world of embarrassing, “carneavalesque” interdependence between the post-colonial state and its subjects will be needed if we want to truly grasp the nature of the challenges facing music in Mali—and indeed music everywhere—in the twenty-first century.

Despite these lacunae, however, Counsel’s book remains useful as a sourcebook on the tremendous outpouring of musical energy during the early phase of independence. Faithful though it is to the spirit of this pivotal moment in chronicling the “invention” of

national styles, the book ends on an ambivalent note. Noting that the “modernization” of Mande music has continued in the present era, Counsel is confident, perhaps a little prematurely and in too undifferentiated a way, that tradition remains vital in the repertoire of dance bands and as a result of the rise of digital media—a fact that he attributes to the “changes wrought by government policy over the last 50 years”(194).

In contrast to Counsel’s somewhat unidimensional narrative Ryan Skinner’s *Bamako Sounds* introduces the reader to a more complex soundscape. Long having been held up by both Malians and the outside world as an expression of an inclusive and tolerant brand of (Islamic) morality rather than a less noticed and decidedly more local site and signifier of social hierarchy, “Malian music” is being opened up in Skinner’s account to a more nuanced analysis. Going beyond past constructions and privileging (over other Malian musics of Dogon, Fulbe or Tuareg origin, for instance) of Mande music as resonating with supposedly universal ideas of aesthetic and moral value, Skinner’s point of departure is the failure of modernist, cosmopolitan ideals to capture the hearts and minds of Africa’s rapidly growing young, urban population looking for alternatives to seemingly never-ending privation, rampant social injustice and life-threatening insecurity. Can one, he asks, “affirm an ‘ethics’—an existential project of self-making—when the moral foundations of society seem to be in ruins?”(68–69). The key to this conundrum is what Skinner calls, echoing a phrase coined by Nigerian-Ghanaian writer Taiye Selasi and since popularized and expanded on by, amongst others, philosopher and cultural critic Achille Mbembe, an Afropolitan ethics (Mbembe 2001). Such an ethics, Skinner contends, rejects the imperatives of a cosmopolitanism that is increasingly being perceived as moralizing and Eurocentric. But it also disengages itself from an ethos grounded in essentialist notions of African identity. Emerging amid endemic abuse and instability such an ethics rather imagines Mali and the Mali-ness said to be inherent in Mande music as situated at the intersection of the nation-state (however shattered by the rise of jihadism), Africa and the world at large as a new sphere of shared moral concern.

The cultural and musical practices that are reflected in and enabled by this Afropolitan stance are diverse. In chapter after chapter, case study after case study, Skinner parses an impressively wide-ranging set of issues, musical genres, creative artists, performance spaces and media. Thus, the first chapter sets the stage in Bolibana, a popular *quartier* at the edge of the capital city Bamako and a sociospatial point of reference for artists who in their work (in the instance a hip hop track entitled “Bolibana” by a crew called Need One) explore the potential for crafting new forms of civility, friendship, kinship and empathy—in short, morality—amid urban “wildness.” In Chapter 2, the author complicates the (Western) stereotypical view of Malian musicians as “*griots*” and as bearers of timeless social, cultural and aesthetic values by suggesting that, rather, a broad shift has been underway since the early years of independence from more hereditary forms of music making and patronage rooted in *jaliya* (the art of the “*griot*”) to new models of creative identity based on notions of “free” entrepreneurship, exchange value and profitability that are called *artistiya*.

Such shifts, however, have not necessarily led to a decline in the moral and ethical grounding of music making. Rather such new identities draw on the Western image of the “griot” as the quintessential Malian, if not African musician tout court, as a generic resource granting non-griot artists the authority to stake claims in a world of fluctuating moralities.

Chapter 3 takes the reader deeper into musical structure and performance as one, albeit not the only foundation of Afropolitan ethics. Using the introduction, the *kunben* or “meeting at the head” to the well-known kora classic “Kaira”—performed by his mentor Toumani Diabaté—as an example, Skinner explores the patterns, forms and metaphorology of kora performance as an embodiment of a moral and ethical aesthetics that indexes both a social position within a tightly knit network of family allegiances and the tension arising from the desire to articulate a distinctive subjectivity beyond traditional patterns of patronage and patrimony. This figuration of instrumental performance in the terms of the human body—head, feet and hands—and the constraints this embodied fusion of aesthetics and ethics puts on performers’ ability to carve out new spaces of innovation is contrasted in the second half of the chapter with an analysis of a rehearsal by the all-round band Triton Stars and the iconic role of vocal performance within Mande verbal and musical arts generally. Marked by long-standing resentment that had been simmering among some band members, the rehearsal only gets off to a good start once the female vocalist “quietens the strings” and starts to intone an impassioned plea for moral community and reconciliation. The ethical efficacy of such musical strategies, as one might call it, is embedded in what Robert Farris Thompson famously termed an aesthetic of the cool. Calming down the kind of altercation that threatened the coherence and very existence of the band with the help of such an aesthetics, thus Skinner’s argument, involves a subtle interplay between “hot” instrumental passages such as improvised solos and vocal injunctions accompanied by a *kunben* ostinato pattern.

Chapter 4 explores Afropolitan ethics as a religiously motivated project. Drawing on various forms of “Islamic popular music” and pious genres such as Qur’anic verse and sermonic speech Bamako musicians seek to enhance their popularity. Typically, such forms of what Skinner calls “Islamic interpellation” share certain features with hip hop and dance band lyricism such as the juxtaposition of sacred verse with public praise mediated by call-and-response of classical Arabic and Bamana; the use of Qur’anic recitation to speak to broader themes; or the incorporation of lyrical passages. And they provide hip hop’s more subversive strains (and even Afropop’s gentler cadences) with the aura of an Islamic counter-public posed against the evil and perils of an unethical life.

Chapter 5 takes us back to the Triton Stars and their and other working musicians’ attempts to counter music piracy from a “moralizing social position” (134) by exhorting audiences to refrain from purchasing pirated cassettes and, in a more hands-on way, by using cassettes as promotional material. Yet by framing his discussion of piracy in cultural terms, that is, with copyright law and piracy being

reduced to merely representing the “normative and aberrant forms through which culture is produced and policed in Mali,” (134) Skinner rather summarily subsumes what is a much more variegated assemblage of canonic texts, ideologies and practices under the rubric of governmentality, that is, the disciplinary politics of population management operating “under the global sign of neoliberalism”(134). It is thus that the “habitual problem of piracy is rooted in the paradigmatic and hegemonic habits of neoliberalism: divestment, deregulation, and discipline”(145). To be fair, on a more practical level, however, the chapter also usefully charts the history and current state of Malian copyright policy.

In Chapter 6 Skinner’s tour de force comes full circle, focusing on a new brand of Afropolitan music makers whose work displays a kind of moral pluralism that Skinner calls, drawing on Paul Gilroy’s notion of a “cosmopolitanism-from-below” and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s idea of “cosmopolitan patriotism” or “qualified cosmopolitanism.” Such a globally conscious yet locally invested stance, in evidence during Mali’s 50th anniversary celebrations, more or less openly flirts with the kind of clientelist, laudatory nationalist rhetoric that Achille Mbembe castigates as an “aesthetics of vulgarity.” Skinner is clearly uncomfortable with this retro-Afropolitanism as one might call it, struggling to reconcile it with the more Utopian, critical strand espoused by many hip hop artists and critically applauded by Skinner himself. Eventually turning, in the second half of the chapter, to the events of 2012 when Islamist insurgents aided by disgruntled Tuareg separatists brought the Malian government to the brink of collapse, this sense of uneasiness becomes even more pronounced. As the country witnessed an unparalleled outpouring of patriotic fervor, finding musical expression in songs calling for national unity, peace and tolerance and, occasionally, even songs urging Malians to take up arms against an enemy spreading terror and death, Afropolitan musical ethics acquires a more problematic timbre. Yet as Skinner shows, not all artists heeded those calls. Those eking out an existence on the margins of the global music industry by playing for local ceremonial and recreational events “had enough of songs of Mali,” as one of them put it, “enough of dressing up the shameful state in rags” (175). It is those less fortunate artists that lead Skinner to remain “cautiously critical” of the forms music takes in Mali today—and may take in the future. Such artists, he argues in rather grand, Foucauldian terms, despite their claims of political neglect and hardship may yet emerge as a potent force of ethical renewal, shifting the terms of engagement from the necropolitics of national elites and jihadists toward what he calls a biopolitics of culture; a biopolitics not of political belonging *to* and music making *for* Mali, but an open and inclusive biopolitics.

The book’s prose is dense throughout and awash with all sorts of borrowings from late twentieth-century Western philosophy such as the vaguely Heideggerian sounding “being-in-the world” or, more nebulously, “ontology.” Readers less familiar with the intricacies of phenomenological and existentialist thought should not be deterred though by such verbiage or by rhetorical excesses such as this: “Part of what I hope to accomplish in this book is to identify and elaborate certain salient modes of being

and the moralities they encode as existential frameworks for the *habitus* of musical artists in Bamako today”(7). Nor should they put much stake by Skinner’s all-too frequent references to an all-powerful yet hardly ever empirically traced force called “neo-liberalism.” What makes the book one of the most important contributions to Africanist (musical) scholarship of the recent past is rather that it has much else to offer of a more locally grounded, intellectually astute and at the same time culturally conscientious kind. For instance, an important feature of Skinner’s account is a representational ethics or “embedded criticism”(184). Such writing, while unsettling normative, “modernist” narratives of Africa’s place in the global order as a “partner” or as “cultural Other” adding value to an otherwise abstract “world culture,” seeks to instantiate a new poetics and politics of representation rooted in and in dialogue with the experiences of Africans eager to make their voices heard. While such a poetics and politics are being articulated within a complex assemblage mingling nationalist, Islamic, traditional Mande, black diasporic, and Western liberal-democratic idioms, they do form the ground for the emergence of what one might call a post-political project, one in which the possibility for forging subjective positions transcends conventional divides of (in descending order of significance) class, race, ethnicity, religion and gender.

In *Music Culture and Conflict in Mali* journalist Andy Morgan not only covers a narrower geographic area than either Counsel or Skinner he also tackles a more specific set of issues: the fate of music in northern Mali in the wake of the 10-month takeover of the region by jihadist forces in 2012. The book is published by Freemuse, a Danish NGO, funded in part by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that describes itself as an “independent international membership organisation advocating and defending freedom of expression for musicians and composers worldwide” (<http://freemuse.org/archives/4> [accessed 21 August 2015]) This broad, human-rights centered agenda also informs Morgan’s approach to the plight and struggles of predominantly Tamashek (Tuareg) speaking performers. Having long been marginalized within the broader fabric of Malian culture and in many cases sympathetic to the secessionist tendencies among the Tamashek population of Mali’s remote desert regions musicians, these musicians came under further attack when al-Qaeda type fighters imposed a ruthless regime of shari’a law on the territories under their control, banning any form of music making as *haram* (unlawful). In some cases musicians also received death threats from the terrorists, while others fled to Bamako or to neighboring Algeria and Niger. In centers such as Timbuktu and Gao, the assault on culture also hit mosques, the shrines of Islamic saints and the world renowned libraries and manuscript collections found throughout the area.

The book takes the form of some twenty vignettes, each a handful of pages long. The first ten or so of these short pieces feature topics as diverse as the hardship of musicians persevering in refugee camps in Niger; the closing down of the famed Festival in the Desert, a wildly popular showcase for Saharian music; the burning of music equipment in Gao at the hands of jihadists; the protest of musicians against

the government's feeble response to the terrorist onslaught and the state of emergency it imposed on artists; or the attempts by hip hop artists such as *Les Sofas de la République* to use social media in mobilizing a counter-public among Malian youth against government negligence and empty rhetoric of national unity. The remaining chapters in the second part of the book are about the destruction of monuments and libraries and the responses to the crisis articulated by Malian writers, poets, actors, and movie directors. In the end, Morgan argues, it is the determination and resilience of Malian artists of every background and description that will set the country on the path of recovery and what he calls a "third way." This alternative to colonialism, post-colonialism and globalization differs from Skinner's plea for an Afropolitan ethics in that it reinstates the very dichotomy between the local and the global, between democratic governance and "old tribal" allegiances, Western education and local languages and culture that five decades of Malian independence failed to transcend.

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Brass Bands of the World: Militarism, Colonial Legacies, and Local Music Making.

Suzel Ana Reily and Katherine Brucher, eds. 2013. Surrey: Ashgate, illus., index. 268pp.

Reily and Brucher have assembled a valuable collection of nine essays focusing on the brass band tradition as it finds itself embedded within contemporary societies around the world. As the subtitle suggests, the articles deal with militarism (particularly its social effects on the musical environment), colonial legacies and local music-making techniques, with a strong sociological emphasis. Charles Keil proves an enthusiastic advocate of brass bands in his engaging foreword. In fact, Keil's foreword sets the tone for the entire collection, and it is abundantly clear from the outset that the authors are