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Rumba Rules: the Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire

Bob W. White

Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press,
2008. 300pp. illustrs, bibliog., discog., index.
ISBN 978-0-8223-4112-3. Price US\$23.95 (Pb)

What an enchanting ethnographic study! This book deserves to be widely read. I say this as a reviewer who is a complete outsider to African studies. Since I have little first hand knowledge concerning the ethnography or even the music of this part of the world, my comments on this book are based on my understanding of its significance in terms of the contribution it makes to debates within the field of cultural anthropology, in particular the anthropology of performance, the anthropological study of music, political anthropology and the anthropology of popular culture. My particular interest is in its contribution to the comparative study of links between power and performance, as the main aim of the ethnography is to explore 'the links, both material and symbolic, between the performance of popular dance music and the emergence of a particular type of political culture in Mobutu's Zaire' (p.24).

This book was my introduction to popular Congolese dance music and the social and political context of its production. The ethnography is very helpfully supplemented by a website (www.atalaku.net) to which the reader is directed at various places in the text by cues to audio and video material stored on the site. If one follows the cues one can hear the music and follow the dance rhythms as one is reading – a delightful sensory treat. I could not resist jumping out of my chair in front of my computer to dance along to the *cavacha* rhythm and the call of the *atalaku*, both of which are described by White as contributing to a distinctive Zairian sound (Chapter 2). In order to develop an ethnographically rich understanding of the relationship between power and performance, politics and popular culture, White immersed himself in the music scene in the city of Kinshasa by joining a local dance band. He describes this process in a humorous and self-effacing manner in Chapter 5. I would recommend this chapter as a good reading for anthropology students on the adventure of ethnographic field work. Given that he had been playing the guitar since he was 13 years old, White thought he should try out as a guitarist for the band. However, after struggling for some time to master the polyrhythmic elements of the music, without success, he suggested to the band manager that he instead train as an *atalaku*. According to White, the role of the *atalaku*, which is associated with traditional music forms, has become an integral part of modern Congolese dance bands. An *atalaku* is a kind of on-stage 'trickster' who plays the maracas and enlivens the performance with shouts, dance steps and various antics. It seems his switch to training as an *atalaku* proved ethnographically fruitful for White as the *atalaku* role of *animation* is central to understanding the system of praised-based performance and cultural policy that was fostered by the Mobutu government in support of its regime (1965-1997).

White develops his discussion and key points about the relationship between political and popular culture during Mobuto's rule mainly in the final three chapters of the book (Chapters 6-8). While Chapter 4 provides a captivating analysis of on-stage performances and draws the reader into sensory experience of a live concert, White focuses in Chapter 6 on the songs texts themselves as a means by which musicians 'mediate between the people and the state'. He describes a kind of praise singing called *libanga*, which became an important part of the structure of popular dance songs during the Mobuto regime. Any member of the band with access to a microphone might be paid or sponsored to weave the names of particular people into the song, either through the verse itself, inserted between the lines of verse or between the verses and the chorus. The *atalaku* plays a key role in this phenomenon, which is a way for musicians to create and maintain a network of reciprocity with local elites in an environment of political oppression and economic crisis. I particularly like White's analysis of the lyrics of love songs as songs of hunger, poverty, inequality, isolation and abandonment that, through a discourse of romantic love, comment on 'the effects of the economic and political crisis of the Mobuto years' (p.179). Here White clearly draws on Abu-Lughod's interpretation of Bedouin love poetry for inspiration. However, he argues that these popular Congolese love songs are less songs of resistance than of suffering. 'Musicians' criticisms of people in positions of power take the form of requests for political and financial protection, but never of political reform' (p.192). This leads White, in his final chapter, to consider the nature of leadership and cultural expectations of political 'big men' and their social and moral obligations (Chapter 8). He shows how popular music in Mobuto's Zaire was implicated in 'a uniquely modern tradition of authoritarian rule' (p.249) and approaches music not simply a reflection of politics but as 'a complex field of action in which popular culture and politics prop each other up and fix each other into place' (p.250).

Perhaps, where I found the ethnography a bit unsatisfying was in relation to the analysis of Mobuto's rule. As a complete novice before reading this book, I would have liked to have learned more about some of the actual practices of the regime that were otherwise only hinted at. On the other hand, I have been inspired to go and do some further reading on this matter. Another aspect, I would have liked to have seen further developed, is the politics of gender relations as expressed in the song lyrics and also as practiced, especially the role of the female dancers. Perhaps it is telling that 'gender' is not a term to be found in the index of the book. Other than this, I have little to say that is negative about this ethnography. It was indeed a joy to read, and I feel it would be nice to meet the author one day. Right now I am going to go out to buy a Congolese music CD to dance to!

Rosita Henry
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
James Cook University