

Making History with Music: Miriam Makeba in Guinea

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Listening to music is not the action most commonly associated with the work of the historian. While the history of music is certainly studied in musicology departments, music is rarely considered a legitimate source for studying non-musical social and cultural dynamics. After all, music does not convey meaning in the way words do: it often does not seem to have a concrete message beyond the lyrics of the song. So, what kind of historical work could music do that texts cannot?

In a forthcoming article in the journal *Social Dynamics*, I attempted to address this very question by demonstrating the utility of the practice of close listening to the study of history, where close listening involves eliciting an interpretation focused on the social and cultural meanings that are embedded in the music. Using this approach in addition to conventional textual sources, I suggest, can help us to decipher cultural spaces and social dynamics that are only partially accessible through other means. In my article, I apply this practice to a critical yet understudied chapter in the cultural history of post-colonial Africa, namely the long engagement of South African singer Miriam Makeba with the national culture of the West African country of Guinea from the late 1960's to mid-1980's. My intervention follows the lead of Louise Bethlehem whose paradigm of "Apartheid—The Global Itinerary" tracks the outward trajectories of anti-apartheid cultural agents and works of expressive culture into the world beyond South Africa's borders over the course of the Cold War.

If in recent years Guinea captured the attention of the international media primarily around the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic, in previous decades the country had a unique role in the modern history of Africa for entirely different reasons. Part of the federation of French West Africa, under the French empire, Guinea became the first territory to gain independence from France in 1958, anticipating the major wave of decolonization in the rest of Francophone Africa in the subsequent two years. However, besides its pioneering role in African political history, Guinea was notable for another domain, that of culture. Under its authoritarian president Ahmed Sékou Touré, the country embarked on an ambitious cultural project sometimes referred to as *authenticité*, which aimed at developing a modern national culture.

This endeavor was intended, on the one hand, to depart from the destructive legacy of colonialism, and on the other hand, to unify the different ethnic groups in the country under a single national ethos. To that end, the country invested considerably in creating a hierarchical cultural system, comprised of theater, dance and music groups that operated in national, regional and local levels

and were administered by the state. Inspired by socialist ideologies, Guinea saw in expressive culture an effective tool for promoting state objectives, national cohesiveness and in general, a revolutionary spirit. Artistic groups were required to fully conform to the state ideology and to promote values and ideas dictated by the ruling party. Nonetheless, Guinean artists were recognized for their high artistic level, which was reflected in the many prizes Guinea gained in pan-African festivals and competitions and in the fact that other African countries drew on the Guinean model in developing their own respective national cultural policies.



Together with dance, music was the art form for which Guinean culture was noted throughout Africa and beyond. An indication of the involvement of the Guinean government in music is evident in one of the first resolutions adopted following independence. The Guinean state gave the directive to disband existing bands that played foreign music genres and to form new bands that were instructed to create modern music inspired by the various local ethnic musical traditions. At the time of independence, Africa was swept by the sounds of Cuban music, and in Guinea one could listen to music groups playing versions of popular Cuban hits like *El Manisero* and *Guantanamera*. While explicit state policy rejected foreign genres, in practice Cuban music remained highly influential in Guinea. Thus, even when groups composed new songs based on local traditions, it was the sounds of Cuban music that often dominated the musical arrangement.



National Guinean band Balla et ses Balladins playing a Cuban-inflected version of a traditional Maninka song *Kémé Bouréma*

At the same time, tolerance towards foreign musical genres was not consistent. In contrast to Cuban music, African-American music was not very prominent in Guinea in the initial post-independence period. This was not just a matter of musical taste. In fact, Guinean musicians indicate that they admired popular African-American musicians such as James Brown and Wilson Pickett; however, it was far less acceptable to play this music, not to mention to make recordings in this style. While Guinean musicians would sometimes play versions of American soul hits in clubs frequented by foreign audiences to cater to their musical taste, the influence of American music is largely absent from recordings of Guinean bands during this period. The reason for the differential attitudes towards Cuban and American music is primarily political. Against the backdrop of Cold War rivalries, Guinea, which was much closer to the Eastern bloc, could accommodate the music of a politically like-minded nation like

Fidel Castro's Cuba much more easily than American music. Additionally, the US was often portrayed negatively as an imperialist force which made American music far less acceptable. It did not matter that many African-American musicians were highly critical of the US presence in Vietnam and its cooperation with the apartheid government in South Africa. From a Guinean socialist perspective, the culture of a given nation was identified with the state.

This was the cultural and political climate facing Miriam Makeba, when she relocated to Guinea in 1968 after a prolific career in the US. During her heyday in the US, where she resided since leaving South Africa in 1959, Makeba became the single most recognized face associated with African music in the West. Managed by American calypso singer and actor Harry Belafonte, Makeba performed in prime venues in the US and around the world. Together with Belafonte, she won a Grammy award for their concert album at Carnegie Hall. Gradually after the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, she began to be more outspoken about political issues including apartheid. In fact, Makeba made two appearances before the UN Special Committee on Apartheid. Concurrently with her success in the US, she became increasingly known throughout Africa, and established herself as a pan-African icon. While she could not return to South Africa, she performed in key events around the continent and maintained close relations with leaders of African countries, many of whom granted her passports. It was in 1967, during a one-month visit to Guinea under the invitation of Sékou Touré, that Makeba met Stokely Carmichael, a prominent civil rights activist who was seen as a radical in the eyes of the American establishment. The couple's marriage, five months later in New York, marked the beginning of the decline of Makeba's career in the US. She came to be associated with Carmichael and was also tagged as a radical by the mainstream American music industry. In 1968 the two decided to relocate to Guinea following an invitation by Sékou Touré.

Shortly after her relocation, Makeba began to be actively involved in the Guinean music scene. She was backed by a Guinean band known as the Quintette Guinéenne whose members were recruited from the esteemed national band Balla et ses Balladins. Together they performed in Guinea and abroad, serving as cultural ambassadors of Guinea and affirming Guinean commitments to the anti-apartheid struggle and pan-African solidarity.

In terms of music, Makeba did not simply replicate her repertoire from the US; in addition to her mostly South African hits, she added songs in various Guinean languages to her repertoire. These were primarily songs on nationalistic themes, praising Sékou Touré and his regime (*Maobe Guinée*) or concerting political events, such as the 1970 Portuguese-backed invasion of Guinea (*Djuiginira*).

miriam makeba - ma...



Maobe Guinée

Miriam Makeba - Dju...

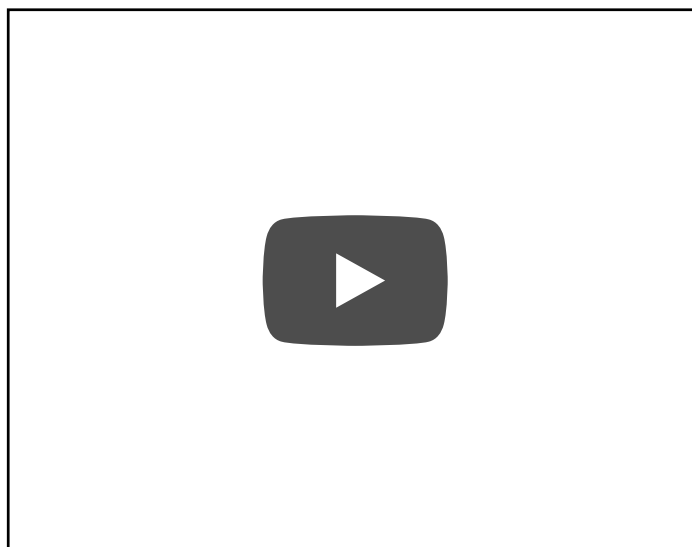


Djuiginira

Her ability to sing to the Guinean people in their local languages won her significant admiration and was often seen as an expression of fraternity and pan-African solidarity. At the same time, Makeba's position in Guinea was somewhat ambivalent. While fully participating in the national music scene according to local cultural-political conventions, the fact that she was a South African could not be dismissed. It was this very position that allowed Makeba to inject new creative meanings into the Guinean music scene.

When we listen to Makeba's music from her Guinean period, it is evident that she was far from being an imitator of local genres. Even when she was singing Guinean songs, her personal journey was clearly heard in the music. Growing up in urban Johannesburg where African-American jazz culture was blended with local musical traditions to create new genres such as *marabi*, *kwela* and later *mbaqanga*, Makeba was strongly influenced, directly and indirectly, by African-American genres. These influences were further amplified during her years in the US when she befriended and collaborated with American musicians such as Harry Belafonte and Nina Simone.

Take for example Makeba's version of "Touré Barika" (Blessed Touré in the Maninka language), a praise song for Sékou Touré. Previously recorded by "Balla et ses Balladins" in a Cuban-inspired arrangement, Makeba's version takes the song to a different musical universe, that of American soul music. While the lyrics remain intact, the musical arrangement changes tremendously: A soul backbeat rhythm backs Makeba's soulful singing, complemented by a solo guitar that evokes American blues guitarists.



Touré Barika - Balla et ses Balla



Touré Barika - Miriam Makeba

The difference between the two versions is striking. Against the backdrop of the music recorded in Guinea at that time, Makeba and her band brought distinctive musical expressions to the Guinean scene. Makeba's unique status allowed her and her Guinean band to creatively stretch the boundaries of state cultural policy. While it is tempting to interpret such moves as an act of resistance to authoritarian government, this would be exaggerated. Makeba enjoyed the patronage of Sékou Touré and so attributing her with an intention to destabilize Guinean hegemony would be erroneous. Instead, we should focus on the potential effects such sounds might have had on Guinean audience. Guineans may have been momentarily liberated from the cultural grip of the regime by listening to an African-American beat, even if played as a background to a praise song for the president. Through the mediation of Makeba it was possible for them to experience a form of cosmopolitanism, unstructured and unexplained by the seemingly transparent logic of Guinea cultural ideology. Reading, or rather listening, to these slight musical deviations against the overtones of Guinean cultural ideology, reveals a gap between official ideological scripts and cultural reality. Makeba's musical practice uncovers zones of musical flexibility that evade rigid national agendas in a country once called, "the prison-house of Guinea."