

Barber, Karin: *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018. ISBN: 9781107624474; 201 S.

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Africanist scholarship took an exciting turn in the late 1970s when researchers began taking more of an interest in forms of cultural expression that did not necessarily fit into bounded systems of „official tradition.“ From mural paintings lining streets, to concert parties featuring electric guitar music, the emergence of the field of African popular culture compellingly allowed for an engagement with what people themselves expressed about their lives, as well as with experiences of social change across different temporalities and geographic spaces.

Karin Barber is an early scholar of popular culture in Africa, who has devoted much scholarship (including several seminal monographs and edited volumes) to this dynamic field. Her vibrant ethnographic work on Yoruba theatre has yielded theoretical insights about audiences and participation, inspiring a new generation of scholars. Barber's latest contribution, *A History of African Popular Culture*, expands on some of her previous work by emphasizing the particular historical backdrops that provided the fertile grounds from which creative popular expression springs. This monograph, held to a manageable 200 pages, is a synthesis of her previous research. Similar to the African *bricoleurs* that she describes, Barber remixes poetry, novels, songs, plays, and descriptions of performance – the result is a compelling example of how history can be told by „the people.“

Theoretical discussions about popular culture as a field of inquiry sets the stage for the book, followed by a chapter relating to the challenges this field presents within the *longue durée*. This chapter attempts to rescue popular culture in Africa from being equated to periods of intense social change, particularly during the colonial era, by highlighting the ways in which creative art forms interacted with precolonial social hierarchies.

Readers are left to ponder the contours of what can be defined as „traditional“ and „popular“, especially since, though versions of these concepts might have existed in pre-colonial time, an emphasis on continuity carries risks of its own (p. 43). Indeed, theoretical attempts to categorize, and unpack of the term „popular“ brings forth, what Barber has previously called, a „hydra“ – with every head that is cropped, new ones are reared in its place. In other words, the job is never done.

In chapter three, the author focuses on the constellation of labour, mines, and township culture during the colonial period which generated African socialities, and consequently new audiences. Readers get a sense of the ethos that arose from situations of harsh human exploitation – vivid images of African men's bodies crushed and buried under the leviathan's machinery. Oral poetry reveals how extractive technologies are conflated with the human body, to show that „The mine became a beast, and human beings became parts of its machinery“ (p. 50). Cities and townships grew in tandem with migrant labor, and the rhythms of the cities, both literal and figurative, inspired a new sense of urban identity, one that could be characterized as multi-ethnic.

Chapter four is organized around colonial transport networks, partly to illustrate how the spread of early urban popular culture reached rural areas, piquing young people's curiosity about city living, and the associated leisure activities. The author considers the ways in which, colonial agendas were encouraging of leisure entertainment, while offering diverse examples of how Africans themselves appropriated and invested new forms of entertainment with their own meanings, often innovating on them to produce something altogether different. Here, Barber touches on the powerfully ambiguous relationship between mimicry and mockery, and the different satirical cultural forms it produces. She also gestures towards the global historical connections, particularly with regards to America's 1920s Harlem Renaissance and the resonance it had with peoples' experiences under the South African apartheid system (p. 71).

Popular music performed in nightlife

venues, and later broadcasted through radio, expressed new gender dynamics around the entanglements of love and money. These dynamics were also echoed in popular pamphlets circulating in Ghana which pointed to moral anxieties associated with urban experiences. Barber draws a connection between pamphlets and other popular forms of textual literature and the spread of literacy to show that popular text-based creative outlets generated new participation and cultural production. Given that literacy was only acquired by certain people, later becoming an aspirational marker of class, further attention with regards to the relationship between the colonial education matrix and popular culture would have perhaps imparted more nuance and complexity to what is termed „the popular.“

The intertextual elements within certain performative genres such as the Ghanaian concert party, vibrantly illustrate how the space of the stage brought with it new audiences and consequently new modes of participation. These themes are further elaborated on in chapter five fittingly entitled „The Crowd, the State, and Songs“ in which she delves into the ways in which creativity has been utilized by different actors. From political activists seeking to inspire people into action, to politicians driven to secure votes, popular culture is indeed a potent vehicle for appealing to people. The author contends that popular culture is simultaneously a historical archive – a contemporary space where issues are worked out and expressed by people themselves – as well as a generator of future forms of collective expression.

Signalling an era of global circulation, the 1990s brought deregulation of national media in many African countries, and an increase in digital technology which pushed creative expressions into new domains. Chapter six is devoted to this period, featuring literature about film, mobile phones, and music – with a particular emphasis on rap. Interestingly, popular dance is only considered in passing, which is perhaps a missed opportunity especially since it is a realm where young people, who have limited access to technology, have become visible participants in creating urban African popular culture. Further, while „the

youth“ is a term employed throughout this book, the extent to which generational struggles are played out in popular culture is not directly addressed, nor is it clear who is considered to be a part of the youth, and whether they are the main drivers of popular culture in Africa. Indeed, elaborating on categories such as „the youth“ presents more heads on the hydra.

Similar to how roads in the colonial era became rhizomatic networks facilitating the dissemination of everyday cultural expressions, the internet in Africa has become yet another channel for cultural encounter. Barber’s contention that the process of consumption becomes part of production itself, perhaps best resonates with contemporary internet culture, which has been likened to the symbol of the *ouroboros*. In contrast to Barber’s mythical hydra, the *ouroboros* offers another vision of regeneration – that of a snake devouring its own tail. With online sharing platforms such as YouTube, popular culture produced by Africans circulates across far beyond the African continent, inspiring new creative expressions at both ends.

Readers will benefit from Barber’s history of popular culture in Africa and the attention she pays to the interplay of the texts and performances she culls from across this lively field of scholarship. This book, broad in its scope, is an invaluable resource particularly for introductory classes relating to the creative forces associated with social change in Africa.

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