

Discuss the role of the popular music industry in West Africa. What effect has it had on local music making? Are traditional musicians 'selling out'?

West Africa consists of an area of fifteen countries that is situated beneath the Sahara Desert and to the west of the rainforest areas of Central Africa. This sub-Saharan area is home to numerous popular musics ranging from the Nigerian-Yoruba *Jùjú* to the Senegalese *Mbalax*. During the twentieth century, a number of these countries have produced genres, music scenes and performers that have come to global attention; these countries will be the focus of my essay.

Nigeria, Mali, Benin and Senegal are all the homes of artists such as Fela Kuti, Salif Keita, Angélique Kidjo and Youssou N'Dour respectively. These artists have all gained international attention, through academic writings such as *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, as well as in global popular culture. Whilst their home countries are not yet the physical base of an established local or regional music industry, many musicians have used the global reach of western music companies such as Decca West Africa (DWA) in the 1970s for Kuti, and MCA in the 1980s for N'Dour¹, to bring their music to an international audience.

The popular music industry in West Africa is very much tied to the region's colonial history, and the impact of foreign domination on African as a whole.

¹ Graham, *Stern's Guide to Contemporary African Music*, 146.

All but two of Africa's 53 countries, Liberia² and Ethiopia³, were "... under European control towards the end of the nineteenth century." Meaning that by the beginning of the twentieth century, "... the West was well placed to exploit and influence the evolution of African political, economic and social life."⁴

Coinciding with these developments was Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877, and the use of the gramophone from the 1880s. *Stern's Guide to Contemporary African Music* points out how after the introduction of the gramophone and its wax discs, "... new companies emerged to profit from this development,"⁵ and how further developments in radio, television, vinyl and cassette recorders, throughout the last century, has led to a "division of labour" that has created barriers between the performer and audience. These barriers were the manufacturers and marketers of music that formed the basis of an international music industry. *Stern's Guide* indicates that by the beginning of the twentieth century all leading industrialised nations (i.e. western) had established significant recording industries, and therefore controlled much of the global musical output.

By the 1930s, EMI and Decca controlled the British market and the British Empire; RCA, GEC, ITT and Westinghouse controlled the Americas; Pathe-Marconi the French and colonial markets; and the Dutch-based Philips

² Ibid, 110.

³ Ibid, 252.

⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁵ Ibid, 11.

controlled north and central Europe. These companies enjoyed great profits through the growth in popularity of music on the radio, the gramophone and later the 78-rpm shellac disc used on wind-up gramophones. As to Africa, colonial power meant much of the early part of the century was dominated by European anthropological recordings of 'traditional' African musics. Not until the hardier 78-rpm shellac was invented in the 1930s did "... the development of a music industry in Africa..."⁶ occur.

Ronnie Graham highlights how the introduction of radio brought about great change in the "diffusion and of both indigenous and international music."⁷ Initially radio was used as a propaganda tool in World War II but by the end of the 1950s, "the majority of Africans... had access to a radio."⁸ Graham cites the years 1930-50 as a period of great growth in Africa, yet this growth was from a western point of view and profit. Although Africa was now able to hear music globally, the stations and discs produced were created by their western controllers, not by themselves. *Stern's Guide* describes how:

"Lacking access to capital, African businessmen failed to capitalise on the opportunities opening up to the major European record companies who, through their African subsidiaries, monopolised the market for 78-rpms."⁹

⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷ Ibid, 17.

⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁹ Ibid, 17.

These subsidiaries, such as DWA, recorded much local music but again the profit from this was not reaching Africa, instead it was going back to Decca's head office in Britain. Colonisation had also limited the spread of electricity in the continent, so when the hand-wound 78-rpm disc was superseded by the vinyl disc (run on record players requiring electricity), it was not until years later, once colonial rule had ended, that electricity slowly came to Africa and the ability to play the new technology of the 33 and 45 rpm vinyl discs came about.

Africa's colonial period greatly limited its choice in technological and musical development, in essence Africa had no choice, rather its many countries became more technologically advanced when they were allowed to be. The historical role of Africa's music industry can be "... characterised as years of intense exploitation... by expatriate companies,"¹⁰ where music is produced without the typical copyright and royalty protection that is demanded by artists and writers in the West.

On the other hand, creating an industry with global reach, albeit in the hands of foreign transnationals, has helped to disseminate African music globally. Whilst there has been great exploitation of musicians, one could not argue that foreign influence and infrastructure has not helped stars as N'Dour to achieve great success. What I find is that colonisation has created a music industry where a western invention has been transposed onto cultures and

¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

regions with different goals and attitudes. Whilst being aware of stating something entirely obvious, the very different nature of the western and African states of being should make any person realise the inherent differences between these cultures.

As readers may see, there is a need to step outside West Africa in order to explore the history and notion of industry, as well as musician or artist before stepping back into West Africa to deal with specific case studies. The very concept of music in Africa is significantly different to the western concept. The West works with the notion of the musician as an artist, and as someone who performs for an audience. As James T. Koetting would put it, we "... have become largely a society of musical spectators... considered consumers rather than producers of music."¹¹ Whereas in Africa such a separation has been non-existent for centuries, "although they [as in Africans] value music both as art and life, Africans are not obsessed with talking about their music. They simply make it and use it."¹² I find this idea relevant in order to understand how it might be difficult for an African to accept the notion of distance between performer and audience.

The concept of performer and audience is a western invention, and when put into the context of the music industry, implies a framework regarding performance, promotion and creation of music. Western music making also desires the selling and marketing of your product. Therefore, when

¹¹ Koetting in *Worlds of Music*, 69.

¹² *Ibid*, 67.

attempting to break through to the western market, musicians will have to adapt themselves to the 'performer and audience' notion, moving themselves away from their home traditions and to new ones where an artist will have to sell him or herself to succeed.

Further highlighting differences between the West and Africa, is the content and message of music produced. The West sells music telling the stories of the many forms of love, ethereal concepts that relate to emotion and not to the practicalities of life. On the other hand in West Africa music sings the facts of politics, social life and history. Timothy D. Taylor talks of Senegal's Youssou N'Dour as "a modern *griot*,"¹³ a musician who from the late 1970s and onwards, teaches his people about global issues, the need to "inform people, [to] give advice [about toxic waste disposal] that is not perhaps very acceptable because they are hard things."¹⁴ The griot is a historical role in West African society, a "... hereditary professional musician/praiser/historian..."¹⁵ whose role is to educate by "gathering the people together and g[iving] them the news, the information from the King. He helped them understand the world, he was their voice."¹⁶ Viewing himself as a modern griot shows how N'Dour is intent on educating and raising awareness of global issues. Music is not here to merely entertain, but to inform.

¹³ Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 127.

¹⁴ N'Dour cited in Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 130.

¹⁵ Knight, *The Mande Sound: African Popular Music on Records*, 373.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 130.

A further example of this is the music of Fela Kuti. From Nigeria, Kuti experienced imprisonment and persecution because of his criticisms of successive Nigerian military governments. Kuti is credited for creating the popular music *Afro-Beat* in the late 1960s, and spreading it throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s until his death in 1997 of AIDS.¹⁷ Based in the culture of Yoruba popular music, which I will expand upon later, Kuti's music was first centered on Soul, Jazz and Highlife. After a trip to the United States in 1969, Kuti "... changed his political orientation and his concept of the goals of music making".¹⁸ His work became increasingly political, "... attacking the excesses of foreign capitalism and Nigerian leaders"¹⁹ through works such as "... *Zombie* (ridiculing the Nigerian military), and *Expensive Shit* (recounting the efforts of police to recover drugs from Fela's feces".²⁰ Kuti's apparent lack of fear in criticising his government marked him out, like N'Dour as a West African who seeks to provide a message of politics, social life and history through his music.

Mainstream western popular music focuses very little on social commentary, N'Dour and Kuti among others are the mainstream artists of West African music, yet they have an entirely different concept of music's purpose.

Perhaps it is the lack of distance between musician and audience in N'Dour and Kuti's world that gives their music such relevance. The distance a music

¹⁷ Eyre, *Fela Anikulapo Kuti*,

<http://www.afropop.org/explore/artist_info/ID/19/Fela%20Anikulapo%20Kuti/>.

¹⁸ Waterman, *Yoruba Popular Music*, 181.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 181.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 181.

fan experiences in the West is perhaps why many artists do not address problems of unemployment or homelessness in their lyrics. The pattern of passive consumption and observation of music I eluded to earlier is extremely prevalent.

Even when western artists deal with social injustices, i.e. the re-recording and release of the 1984 Band Aid single in December 2004, these injustices are still dealt with from an extremely western point of view. As altruistic Band Aid's efforts are, would it not be more relevant to its African cause if some of the artists singing *Do They Know It's Christmas?* were from Africa itself? Would not the inclusion of N'Dour make the record less Anglo-centric? Granted the record is aimed at the British record-buying public, but not using African artists might imply that Africa cannot help itself or that there are no successful African musicians. You could ask, is a western world and industry again imposing itself on an apparently helpless continent?

Much of this essay so far has focused on the West and its influence on Africa. The reasoning behind this it was not until the end of WWII, only 59 years ago, did colonial rule start to diminish from over 90% of Africa's 53 countries.²¹ Many areas are still trying to deal with "... threat[s] from war, famine, invasion and western cultural imperialism".²² Therefore, an established music industry of Africa's very own was perhaps not as important as trying to create stable governments that addressed issues of health,

²¹ Gardner, *Reader's Digest Atlas of the World*, 57.

²² Graham, *Stern's Guide to Contemporary African Music*, 15.

education and infrastructure. Of the fifteen states in West Africa, I will discuss one that since independence has established strong traditional musics as well as modern styles, and one that has naturally fostered a significant music industry, Mali and Nigeria respectively.

Mali is the ancestral home of the Malian/Manding Empire that flourished during the thirteen and fourteenth centuries. The Malian Empire 's influence "... spread through much of today's West Africa,"²³ and is the region where the griot (or *jali* in the Bambara language dominant in Mali), as the "... maintain[er of]... oral literature... including the histories of the ancient empire and family genealogies"²⁴ came about. When Mali gained colonial independence in 1959, the country's first President Modibo Keita created a "... national system of state-sponsored bands and traditional ensembles."²⁵ He encouraged the Mandinka sound, which consisted of the use of the twenty-one-string *Kora* lute, the *Balo* Xylophone and Islamicised (Islamic influence being common in Mali) vocals, in combination with the sounds of "modern urban pop."²⁶ In 1970 the Rail Band of the Buffet Hôtel de La Gare de Bamako became one of the most famous state-sponsored bands, and helped to launch the career of the previously mentioned Salif Keita. Manding music today influences the music of Senegal, the Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea Bissau through the griot traditions.

²³ Eyre, *Mali*, <http://www.afropop.org/explore/country_info/ID/2/Mali/>.

²⁴ Graham, *Stern's Guide to the Contemporary Music of Africa*, 125.

²⁵ Eyre, *Mali*, <http://www.afropop.org/explore/country_info/ID/2/Mali/>.

²⁶ Impey, *Popular Music in Africa*, 118.

Nigeria on the other hand has "...consciously... fostered the preservation of traditional cultures," whilst still possessing one of the largest music industries in Africa. Nigeria has also managed to move away in part from the western-dominated market of colonial times. Graham points out:

"By 1974... Nigeria was supporting a record market of ten million albums... could boast three major record companies, twelve recording studios, two major indigenous labels, two pressing plants and over fifty small local labels producing a variety of music reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Nigerian society."²⁷

Releases in Nigeria have ranged from the indigenous Yoruba musics of Highlife, Jùjú, Fùjí and Afro-Beat (of artists such as Kuti and King Sunny Ade), with these genres having great success on a world stage throughout the 1970s and 80s. A negative effect on the industry has been the introduction of the cassette tape and the ease of copying and distribution that the medium has. The oil boom of the 1970s "... permitted almost every household in the country to own a cassette player."²⁸ This has affected the legal distribution of Nigerian music, and all musics, in the same way that the MP3 has caused great problems for the western music industry.

After independence countries like Nigeria and Mali have gained a degree of musical autonomy from the western world, yet at the same time have

²⁷ Graham, *Stern's Guide to the Contemporary Music of Africa*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

furthered their links with the West. There is a strange dichotomy in the idea of independence and the desire to succeed on local and global scales.

Countries round the world wish to have an individual identity yet desire to benefit from global culture. There are mutual benefits and losses from being part of a global music industry, and the effect this has on music making at local and global levels are ideas I will explore next.

A key effect on the modern popular music industry in West Africa is the idea of competition in all tiers of industry, how the region is not isolated and has to compete and market itself. Marketing West African popular music in a western sense is the heading 'World Music', coined in 1987 by a group of "small, independent British labels"²⁹ who were keen to provide a space in record store categories for the many genres of African and non-European popular musics that were proliferating at the time. This idea of world music was an umbrella term that sought to cover all global musics that had no traditional genre to be housed in. Whilst in West Africa there are likely to be far more specific categories, contemporary griot music from Mali for example, in the western industry this generalised heading was and is one of the simplest ways for western music buyers to find non-mainstream records.

This generalisation of foreign musics shows how compromises have been made to fit into the western music industry. Further pressures to conform are outlined by Angela Impey, "... African pop is packaged as *traditional*,

²⁹ Impey, *Popular Music in Africa*, 116.

*authentic, roots music*³⁰ even when the pop in question is as modern as any western record. There is a desire for 'roots music' even when there is a simultaneous desire for the music created to be recognisable enough to be palatable to western audiences. Impey further comments on roots music's "... appeal to western[ers] whose need for roots reflects their own sense of communal loss."³¹ Also how "the growing demand for 'authentic' African music... has profoundly affected the nature of the production of music."³² The implication being that African's are possibly creating music to appeal to westerners and not themselves.

When producing music in West Africa there is a push-pull nature to the issues musicians face. In one direction musicians are being pushed to create music that reflects their roots and authenticity, but they are also being pulled and told to come into the modern world. The West often claims that Africa needs to modernise, but as Impey shows they still want Africans to play music with their concept of roots and authenticity. N'Dour finds his music questioned in the same way:

"Prominent world music commentator Brooke Wentz... criticised N'Dour for sanitising his music in *The Guide (Wommat)*... N'Dour's music, writes Wentz, 'is at its most spectacular when soaring over the

³⁰ Ibid, 116.

³¹ Ibid, 116.

³² Ibid, 116.

rhythms of his native country, in native language, over his native rhythms."³³

The idea being that N'Dour is not allowed to absorb influences from round the world in the same way that western artists such as Paul Simon, on his 1987 *Graceland* album, has done. Also that N'Dour should have to be 'native' to be creative in his music. N'Dour defends himself to the same critic by saying:

"In Dakar [Senegal's capital] we hear many different recordings. We are open to these sounds. When people say my music is too western, they must remember that we, too, hear this music over here. We hear the African music with the modern."³⁴

The global industry means musicians like N'Dour are faced with greater criticism than before, and even though the above shows much of the negative side, there are a great deal of benefits. Particularly with the rise of N'Dour and his bands Etoile de Dakar and Super Etoile during the 1970s and 80s, West African's have benefited from the western interest in their music. Since his move to Paris, France in 1983 he and Super Etoile have made "... substantial inroads into the international market, touring in the UK, Holland and the USA."³⁵ Angélique Kidjo has also benefited from Paris, her home

³³ Wentz cited in *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 135.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 135.

³⁵ Graham, *Stern's Guide to the Contemporary Music of Africa*, 145.

from 1983. From Ouidah in Benin, she has been on the international scene a shorter time than N'Dour but is "... one of the stars of Afropop, world beat, and Afro-Beat."³⁶ With their popularity comes the opportunity to spread West African issues and ways of being to a wider audience. One of the ways N'Dour and Kidjo do this is by singing in their local languages, Wolof and Fon respectively. Lucy Duran speaks of N'Dour really taking the lead in "... going back to local musical styles and instruments, and singing in your own language."³⁷ In particular, the musical styles of the griot - what N'Dour views himself as, as 'a modern griot."³⁸ I spoke of the purpose of the griot earlier, but also here to reinforce that as a famous musician, N'Dour can spread the ideas of his profession and land further.

Kidjo also uses her position in a positive way, choosing the recurrent theme of "social change" and the desire to help others. The aforementioned Timothy D. Taylor suggests both artists as "postcolonial critic[s]," and I would further add Fela Kuti to this list. They all have used their positions in music to raise the profile of their countries at an international level. Even the label of world music, and its western genesis has merit in Kidjo's eyes. To her, "it expresses an open outlook, a lack of musical sectarianism"³⁹ that is very widespread in the catalogued market of the West.

³⁶ Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 136.

³⁷ Duran, *Key to N'Dour: Roots of the Senegalese Star*, 276.

³⁸ N'Dour cited in *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 130.

³⁹ Kidjo cited in *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 141.

The technological advances of the West have also been of great advantage. Even with Nigeria's fair number of recording studios, much of West Africa has few recording studios up to western technological standards. Not to say that West Africa should be beholden to technology, but a professional recording studio enables musicians to record albums at a high degree of quality. It could be argued that the reason Kidjo, N'Dour and Salif Keita have all moved to Paris (Keita in 1984), is because Paris has an international reputation for producing albums. For example, the "Paris-based West African producer Ibrahima Sylla,"⁴⁰ who has produced records by Keita and N'Dour. These artists have been able to take advantage of foreign technologies for themselves, and with his success N'Dour has built his own recording studio in Dakar, named Xippi.

With success, many artists are accused of 'selling out', but is this merely a criticism? Is becoming successful not allowed, so therefore artists have had to have sold out to achieve success. If you believe in the concept of selling out, then it is applicable to every musician. However, I will argue its nonsensicality. Selling out is in theory when you lose touch with your roots or make decisions based on a situation's monetary value as opposed to musical value. Immediately contradicting this is the building of Dakar's "state-of-the-art recording studio"⁴¹ Xippi by N'Dour. N'Dour is investing in his hometown, and in the future of Senegal's music industry. Impey suggests that such moves "are testing the dominance of European production centers... thus

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *World Music and the Popular Music Industry: An Australian View*, 313.

⁴¹ Impey, *Popular Music in Africa*, 135.

assisting in the development of an infrastructure of local production."⁴² I would further add that N'Dour's very actions fly in the face of accusations that critics like Wentz would throw.

Wentz suggested an inferior quality to N'Dour's *The Guide (Wommat)* because it had become westernised. Yet I would argue that in developing as a musician the natural process is to evolve, to change. If a consequence of growth is change, then so be it. In addition, Taylor reminds us that Wentz is again:

"demanding local, premodern cultures of Africans. [Peter] Gabriel and Simon (or whoever) are allowed to work with N'Dour and 'Africanise' their music, but... N'Dour is not permitted to work with them and 'westernise' his music."⁴³

Here, the idea is one set of rules for westerners, and another for Africans. Kidjo faced similar accusations, also in Taylor's book, of not being "an authentic African"⁴⁴ and she answers her critics by stating:

"I won't do my music different to please some people who want to see something very traditional. The music I write is me. It's how I feel. If

⁴² Ibid, 135.

⁴³ Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 135.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 140.

you want to see traditional music and exoticism, take a plane to Africa... I don't ask Americans to play country music."⁴⁵

Kidjo, N'Dour and a sympathetic Taylor all understand the criticisms leveled at their music, but argue as to why their music should stay the same because of western concepts of authenticity. Ultimately, you would sell out more if you let other people's judgements change your work.

Perhaps if West African musicians decided to not sing in their native language, or they removed all African instrumentation from their work then they would be deemed as sell-outs, as turning away from their culture. However, this is not the case as shown through my studies of Malian and Nigerian efforts to retain traditional instrumentation and sound in modern popular musics. N'Dour demonstrates the same through his use of the percussive rhythms he calls *mbalax*. His use of the *sabar* and *tama* drums are all Wolof instruments and words, and as N'Dour says, "... the rhythm of the griots."⁴⁶

Ultimately I find that music in the twenty-first century is syncretic, and in turn the idea of traditional or pure music is unrealistic. The world is in a state of continuous flux, thus there are very few areas of the world that have not been influenced by others. West African music in itself has always been influenced by colonialism, trade (many states like Benin having capitals as

⁴⁵ Kidjo cited in *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, 140.

⁴⁶ N'Dour cited in *Key to N'Dour: Roots of the Senegalese Star*, 277.

ports), Islam and since the invention of the global music industry - numerous styles, genres and sounds from all over the globe. Yes the industry has had positive and negative effects on West Africa, but to say musicians are selling out through adaptation and growth would defeat the point of music as an art to challenge and excite.

The key idea to realise is how different the nature of West African musics are to the West. Not particularly in a musical sense, but in the sense of history, education and respect for the past. Regardless of the soundscape of mbalax or Afro-Beat, I feel that West Africa will always represent a unique combination of the modern fused with the traditional, and an understanding of how to combine the two in the modern world.

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