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Reflections on D.A. Masolo's "Presencing the Past and Remembering the Present: Social Features of Popular Music in Kenya"

Eric Akrofi

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Reflections on D.A. Masolo's "Presencing the Past and Remembering the Present: Social Features of Popular Music in Kenya."ⁱ

Eric Akrofi
University of Transkei (South Africa)

In their introduction of *Music and the Racial Imagination*, co-editors Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman assert that although music is "saturated with racial stuff" (p.1), "musicology – in its historical, structural-analytical, and ethnographic expressions- has sought to deny the racial dimension" (p.2). Much as I agree with them, I also think that racism or racial discrimination is a sensitive topic many scholars in the field of musicology or ethnomusicology are reticent to engage in. I believe that this is one of the reasons for the paucity of literature on music and race, a concern raised by both the editors and the authors of the essays in this book.

On the whole there are two remarkable things about this huge, 703-page book: it exemplifies interdisciplinarity which bears the hallmark of recent or current music studies (some of the authors of its 20 essays do not belong to the music profession but are experts in disciplines like Philosophy, History, Languages, Literature, Anthropology and Communication Arts); and the geographic spread of its twenty essays deals with three continents – North America (especially the United States), Africa, and Europe.

I also think that although *Music and the Racial Imagination* has not effectively dealt with all aspects of race in music studies (for example there is no mention of specific types of musical compositions and performances associated with race), it has, nevertheless, succeeded in getting its message across to the reader that race plays an important role in present day music and scholarly discourse.

As an African musicologist and music educator, I am especially interested in the two essays featuring the continent of Africa namely, D.A. Masolo's study of popular music in Kenya and Thomas Turino's paper on race, class and musical nationalism in

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Zimbabwe. However, I have elected to focus on a single chapter from *Music and the Racial Imagination*, D.A. Masolo's "Presencing the Past and Remembering the Present: Social Features of Popular Music in Kenya," in light of my experience with several of the socio-musicological issues he discusses which have relevance not only in Kenya but other African countries as well.

In this essay, I deal with two issues raised by Masolo, which are often debated by scholars in the fields of musicology/ethnomusicology and music education. They are: (i) the use of contentious terms or terminologies by scholars with regard to the categorization or description of types of music, philosophy, religion, arts and so forth; (ii) the influence of colonialism on music and cultural education at the formal scholastic level in Africa.

I

First, I dilate on Masolo's concern about the use of terminologies with the prefix "ethno" ("ethnic") such as "ethnomusicology," "ethnophilosophy," "ethnic arts," and his aversion to terminologies with the adjective "African" such as "African traditional religions," "African rhythm," and "African democracy," as expressed in his statement, "the adjective 'African' appears in these instances to have become the huge dumpster for things not quite acceptable within mainstream definitions" (360).

I argue that the terminologies Masolo expresses concern about, as well as other contentious terms like "African musicology," "African Pianism", and "ethnomusicology", have gained acceptance with regard to the scholarly study of the musical traditions of Africa or other non-Western societies and that there is, therefore, no harm in their use as long as the researcher gives an explicit explanation for using each of these terms. I return to this matter later on in this essay.

I dilate on the terms "African musicology", "African Pianism" and "ethnomusicology" because they have attracted the attention of many scholars in the field of musicology over the past two decades. I start with the term "African musicology".

In the early 1980s, African scholars at the University of Nairobi, Kenya decided to found a journal devoted to the scholarly study of African music and decided to call it *African Musicology* (Nketia 1998, 13). But the term “African musicology” was not invented by them. According to DjeDje and Carter, “... the term African musicology was coined in 1966 by Klaus Wachsmann [who] saw the field [of musicology] in a state of change” (DjeDje and Carter 1989, 39). They also observe that in the 1960s, there were remarkable changes in Africa and the approach that was used by Western scholars in studying African music:

No longer were African performers and listeners cast into a passive role on which Western attention and curiosity could focus. Rather, Africans had become more active in the study and destiny of their musical traditions. As administrators, researchers and performers, they made clear and thoughtful statements about their culture, giving greater insight to the workings of the society that few Westerners could ever hope to understand. The era of nationalism encouraged both critical thinking and experimentation in the performance and development of new musical forms (DjeDje and Carter, *ibid*).

Africans actively and significantly engaged in studies of their musical traditions have included George Ballanta of Sierra Leone; Ephraim Amu, J.H. Kwabena Nketia and Seth Cudjoe of Ghana; Joseph Kygambiddwa of Uganda; and Ekundayo Phillips of Nigeria (DjeDje and Carter, *ibid*) – all regarded as innovators and representatives of their communities because of their research experience. They are also regarded as the pioneer black African researchers of African musicology. One of them, Kwabena Nketia, was personally involved in the evolution of the term “African musicology,” as can be seen from the following statement:

It was Wachsmann who was interested in the term “African musicology” because he thought there were parallels between African musicology and African linguistics, African history, and a whole range of area studies, so that as soon as you have the term “African”, you can put the “ethno” away. “Africa” takes care of “ethno.” That was the view of Wachsmann, and he tried to push the idea of African musicology. We met early on at Northwestern, and we both tried to push the term “African Musicology,” a term I am happy with. Because when I see that term, no one will say, “This is the study of the ‘other’” or whatever (Nketia 2001, 154-55).

Another eminent African musicologist who argues strongly in favour of the term “African musicology,” the Nigerian Akin Euba, says:

We do not need in Africa a field which is called ethnomusicology while it is really a branch of anthropology. We do not need in Africa a field in which music has been literally squeezed out. Take the music out of ethnomusicology and what you have is ethno--ology Ethnomusicology is irrelevant to African culture. What is relevant to African culture is African musicology (Euba 2001, 39).

Unlike Euba, Nketia does not oppose “African musicology” to “ethnomusicology.” In fact, his professorial inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ghana in 1969, was on *Ethnomusicology in Ghana*. He switches between the two terms: “I use the term African musicology when dealing with African material within the frame of ethnomusicology” (Nketia, personal communication December 2, 2004). He adds that he also uses the term “African musicology” when dealing with research among or by African scholars. Indeed, Nketia agrees with DjeDje and Carter who state that “... ethnomusicology is the parent discipline of African musicology” (DjeDje and Carter 1989, 43).

Although the term “African musicology” has been in existence for four decades, it has not gained wide acceptance. Most university music departments in Africa, especially South Africa, offer courses in ethnomusicology that include studies in the music of Africa and other non-Western societies. I also found out in a survey I conducted recently that most of the current leading researchers of African music in South Africa feel more comfortable with the term “ethnomusicology” than “African musicology” in describing their fields of specialization (Akrofi, 2004).

Another term with the adjective “African” is the concept “African Pianism,” pioneered by Akin Euba, who opines that techniques used “in the performance of (African) xylophones, thumb pianos, plucked lutes, drum chimes ... and the polyrhythmic methods of African instrumental music in general would form a good basis for an African pianistic style” (Euba 1989, 151). He also explains that the ingredients of “African Pianism” include: thematic repetition; direct borrowings of thematic material

(rhythmical and/or tonal) from African traditional sources; the use of rhythmical and/or tonal motifs based on traditional idioms; and percussive treatment of the piano (ibid.152). Nketia is one of the African art music composers who has endorsed this term and has written piano pieces in this vein entitled *African Pianism: Twelve Pedagogical Pieces* (1994). Other African composers of “African Pianism” music are Gyimah Labi of Ghana, and Ayo Bankole and Joshua Uzoigwe of Nigeria.

Christine Lucia questions the “Africanness” of the work of all composers of African Pianism with the remark, “There is teleology and hierarchy in their writing that is essentially Western, regardless of how many African aspects (notably rhythmic) contribute to the material. The prevailing percussiveness in textual treatment could just as easily have come from Bartok as from an African percussion culture” (Lucia 1999/2000, 133). Kofi Agawu (1999) also questions the essence of “African Pianism.” Among several of the questions he poses is: “How is it that we [Africans] who contributed nothing to the development of the piano, we who played no role in its scientific history, have suddenly emerged as keen exponents of the instrument?” (Agawu 1999, 1). These criticisms show that the term “African Pianism” is contentious. Furthermore, it is a term used mainly by West African composers from Ghana and Nigeria, a fact that leads Lucia to suggest that a more appropriate term would be “West African Pianism” (Lucia 1999/2000, 133).

Of the three terminologies I have mentioned (“African Musicology”, “African Pianism,” and “Ethnomusicology”), the last has gained the widest acceptance. The Society for Ethnomusicology, established in the U.S.A. in 1955, is very much alive and attracts membership from all over the world. Its journal, *Ethnomusicology*, publishes research and essays by some of the finest scholars in the field of ethnomusicology. And in South Africa, a “Symposium on Music”(ILAM), is held annually for scholars to present papers on their research, especially in African music. Papers presented at such a gathering are published in proceedings that can be used as reading material for students and researchers in the field of ethnomusicology.

Arguing that ethnic studies are part of colonial discourses (376), Masolo questions the use of terms like ethnophilosophy and its musical counterpart ethnomusicology. He advocates alternatively the term “neo-ethnomusicology” – a somewhat awkward designation with which I am unfamiliar. The prefix “neo” has its uses, of course: Euba (1993), for instance, uses the term “neo-traditional music” to describe Nigerian popular music (such as *Juju* and *Akpara*), and the term “neo-African art music” to designate solo/chamber music (like that discussed under “African Pianism” above). Of course, the fact that I have not encountered the term “neo-ethnomusicology” does not mean it is not fitting, useful or apt; and Masolo, a philosopher, makes a reasonable philosophical case for its use. He allows, however, that despite philosophical acceptance of this appellation, he is “. . . not aware the same has happened with the study of musical traditions of Africa or most other non-Western genres . . .” (376). I am not entirely convinced that musicologists will find Masolo’s arguments, reasonable though they are, sufficiently compelling to adopt his recommendations.

At this juncture, I return to the statement I made earlier to the effect that I see no harm in the use of the terms mentioned and discussed above as long as those who use them give explicit explanations for doing so. I obtained the following apt statement from Andrew Tracey (personal communication, 20 January, 2005) of ILAM when I asked him to express his opinion on the use of the term “African musicology”:

I have long found it a waste of time to hassle over the choice of terms. How much energy has been spent in conferences on this! As long as everyone knows what they are doing and why, what does it really matter what you call it . . . African Musicology, African Music, Ethnomusicology, Afromusicology? On the whole I just tend to say that I study, teach, archive and publish African music, and why should anybody object to that? Inflexibility in the use of terms is a sure invitation to unnecessary conflict.

I couldn’t agree more with Tracey.

II

My second reflection is on the following assertion by Masolo:

At the formal scholastic level, traditional music and dance have been made part of school curricula in several African countries, with annual national performance competitions among schools and performing groups (368).

I want to examine this statement with reference to four African countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) whose school music curricula I have been familiar with since the 1980s.

In Ghana, the Ministry of Education launched a Curriculum Enrichment Programme (CEP) in 1985, designed to guide the content and conduct of, among other things, cultural education.

Among the areas and activities listed under Cultural Education in the CEP are

- African music – including drumming, dancing and singing;
- Open Day; School Festivals and Exhibitions;
- School Assembly; and
- National Day

(CEP 1985, 3)

The CEP has influenced music education in Ghanaian schools over the past two decades. However, concern has been expressed about the tokenist and superficial approach to the teaching of traditional Ghanaian music and dance in schools. Tokenism, as Nketia puts it:

. . . runs through many facets of our society, including the education system where, until, recently, a course in cultural studies or some African topic was added as a cosmetic change, just as these days choral groups whose preference is for Handel's Messiah and similar great works and English anthems include one or two Ghanaian compositions in their repertoire as a token of their response to the quest for something indigenous (Nketia, n.d.).

The form of music teaching in Kenyan schools is spelt out in the Report of the Presidential National Music Commission (1984) which makes a vague recommendation with regard to the performance of traditional African music and dance: "Music syllabuses

should emphasize the theory and practice of traditional African music, with an awareness of cross-cultural interaction” (Oehrle 1989, 50).

Lucy Kilonzi has observed that music teachers in Kenyan schools are handicapped as far as the teaching of Kenyan traditional music and dance is concerned because they are not skilful on traditional instruments and also find it difficult to demonstrate dances. “When it comes to the indigenous music, first there is the assumption that is simple, and since it is also local it is taken to be of low standard and one does not need to spend time on it to pass” (Kilonzi 1998. 275).

The study of traditional music and dance does not appear to be given serious attention in Nigerian schools. Nzewi complains that studies in African music in modern African schools and higher institutions emphasize primarily contextual features, and he calls for the availability of

competent staff to teach meaningfully the theoretical content of African music, that is, the composing rationalizations of textual structures and performance practice; also the crucial philosophical foundations from which creativity derives, in addition to how music structures transact non-music objectives (Nzewi 1999, 77)

Lucia comments on South African music education as follows:

South African music education stands in sharp contrast to music education in most other countries in the world, where the local musical culture is (in varying degrees) reflected in educational programmes at all levels. Our music programmes, on the other hand, reflect almost exclusively the cultural tradition of Western Europe, and even that tradition is not adequately represented, in that early music, jazz, popular music and post-war classical music are largely excluded (Lucia 1986, cited in Hauptfleisch 1997, 110).

The music education curriculum in South African schools has not changed much since Lucia’s comments (made some two decades ago), despite attempts by the national Departments of Education and of Arts and Culture since the demise of apartheid in 1994 to incorporate traditional African music and dance into the school music curriculum. The current government of South Africa, cognizant of

the country's multiracial population, had proposed a multicultural music education programme which embraces the "custom, tradition, belief, religion, language, crafts and all art forms like music, dance, the visual arts, film, theatre and oral literature" of all its people (African National Congress 1994, 69).

However, the teaching of Western music is still prevalent in South African schools and the serious study of other types of music, especially African music and dance, only takes place in higher education, especially in the universities.

It is evident that in all four countries mentioned above, and several other African countries, traditional African music and dance have been made part of school curricula at the formal scholastic level. However, the performance of African music and dance is treated more as an extracurricular than as a curricular activity with the focus on participation in festivals and competitions. This is mainly due to the fact that teachers in most Sub-Saharan African classrooms have little or no background in traditional African music and are therefore reticent to teach it. Where there are qualified music teachers, especially in the senior secondary schools, they are Western-trained and have good knowledge of Western music but little knowledge of African music. Many schools, therefore, hire local expert musicians to teach their pupils African music and dance especially after school hours. Thus, the time allotted to the teaching of music in schools is devoted to Western classical and theory of music whereas participation in traditional African music and dance has remained under the category of 'extra-curricular activities'. This state of affairs has been a source of controversy between curriculum planners and music teachers in some African countries.

The Ghanaian music educator James Flolu has observed that music education in Ghana is in a state of confusion – curriculum planners (who are bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education) emphasise social and cultural values and therefore want traditional African music and dance to dominate school music education whereas music teachers (mostly members of the Ghana Music Teachers' Association, are committed to maintaining the academic tradition based on Western classical music) want the details of

the theory of Western music to be emphasised in school music lessons. This has been the dilemma of music education in Ghana since the 1970s. (Flolu 1993, 112)

My dilation upon the status of traditional African music and dance in the school curriculum of several African countries is at variance with the rosier picture painted by Masolo with his statement (368) I quoted earlier. As I have asserted elsewhere, African music still plays second fiddle to Western music in the school music education programme of many African countries; and in South Africa in particular, traditional African music has not yet been included in the curriculum of many schools, even black ones (Akrofi, 1998, 46).

Conclusion

As an African musicologist and music educator I have tried to deal with two issues discussed by Masolo which have relevance in my fields of specialization, namely the existence of contentious terminologies in the discourse of African and non-Western music, and the place of traditional African music and dance in the curricula of African schools. I argue that these issues have come about because of racism which bears the hallmark of Christian missionary activities and colonialism in Africa.

Most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have a history of European missionary and colonial activities. Before Europeans set foot in Africa in the 15th century, education was informal in African traditional communities and was carried out by the community as a whole, with the family playing the most important role. Music was practised as an integral part of social life and it served primarily as a means of teaching the values of the society as well as an avenue for literary expression, and a means of social cohesion. Formal education established by the missionaries and colonialists aimed at changing the African's way of life. Its primary objectives were to convert Africans to Christianity and to inculcate European tastes and habits among the people of Africa. These objectives were achieved by discouraging or banning the practice of traditional African music,

which was regarded as primitive. This racist attitude towards African music would continue for centuries. Curt Sachs, one of the pioneer scholars of ethnomusicology used the term “primitive” to describe African music (DjeDje & Carter 1989, 10). The term was used as such by other early musicologists until the 1960s when new contentious terms “African music,” “African musicology,” and so forth gradually replaced it. Klaus Wachsmann, for example, felt there was the need to use the term “African musicology” – he lived in Uganda where he researched African music in the wake of the independence movements in Africa during the early 1960s. He was therefore sensitive to the need for an African point of view with regard to the scholarly study of African music.

Masolo has not discussed the issue of race or racism in connection with the two issues he raised upon which I have dilated from both a musicological and an educational perspective. What I have tried to establish in this essay is that racism has played an important role with regard to the existence of contentious terms in the discourse of African and non-Western music and the lowly position of traditional African music and dance in the curricula of present day African schools.

Notes

¹ In Radano, Roland and Philip Bohlman, eds. *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 349-402.

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Biographical Information

Eric Ayisi Akrofi holds an EdD in Music Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is currently Professor of Music Education and Acting Dean of Research at the Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha campus, South Africa. He is also Co-Leader of the Swedish-South African Research Network on Music and Identity (SSARN) and Assistant/Chronicle Editor of the South African Journal of Musicology.
