

The 1970s Nigerian Music Scene

Nigeria's music scene in the 1970s was an unusually fertile period in which older forms absorbed a variety of influences (some Western, some from other indigenous traditions) to create a mosaic of sounds whose influence continues to be felt today. Though Ben Okri's "When the Lights Return" uses this era as setting-- the musician Ede functioning as Orpheus in this retelling of the myth-- Okri does not provide the sort of context that would make the musical backdrop accessible to a non-Nigerian reader. The purpose of this post is to do some of this work for those who are interested, discussing the sample tracks I have included on my web-site.

These musical selections are intended to give a sample of some of the diversity of popular music-making from this period, but they are merely representative, not exhaustive in their scope. If you are interested in exploring this music further, I would start with Fela Kuti, the artist most widely available outside of Nigeria or Nigerian communities abroad, as he has demonstrated the most cross-over appeal (in Britain he enjoys a fame comparable to Bob Marley's in the U.S.). One can also find high quality, professionally re-mastered selections from King Sunny Adé, as he enjoyed a brief vogue in the early 1980s. The rest are largely unknown outside of Nigerian communities (whether in Africa or abroad), though amateur transfers of old records from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s are widely available for download (to the point where it is almost an embarrassment of riches).

In general, this is dance music-- perhaps most analogous to the performance tradition of American groove bands of the 1970s, like James Brown's touring band or George Clinton's Parliament, in which the arrangements are loose enough to accommodate vocal and instrumental improvisation and indeterminate performance lengths that can last as little as a few minutes or stretch out to well over half an hour. More specifically, three different traditions are represented in the sample recordings: West African highlife, Fela Kuti's Afro-beat, and Yorùbá *jùjú*.

The origins of both *jùjú* and highlife date to early 20th century adaptations of palm wine drinking songs. Highlife, however, was more influenced by the colonial experience, being (at first) an indigenous reworking of British military brass band music in colonial Ghana (Plageman 15). Originating in segregated clubs in the 1940s, early highlife featured fairly extensive horn and wind sections, and was played to accompany the ballroom influenced dance styles of the period. Perhaps given its origin in African adaptations of a Western dance scene from which the native population was deliberately excluded, highlife's song lyrics have always tended toward the political (Plageman 19), and this didactic element developed into one of the defining features of the genre-- a unity between "sound" and "message" in which each was equally important (Oti 126)-- even as other defining features (like the original band instruments) became less pronounced or disappeared altogether. In practice, the term "highlife" came to describe a wide array of different sounds, as the music evolved in the 1950s and 60s; the instruments were increasingly amplified; and the electric guitar became more prominent (Waterman "Yorùbá " 19). What these increasingly diverse highlife bands retained in common, though, is the use of

simple, repetitive rhythms over which are overlaid more complex percussive and melodic improvisations (a legacy of the syncopated dance rhythms of its origins) (Plageman 14).

Dr. Sir Warrior's (Christogonus Ezebuio Obinna : 1947-1999) "Onye Huru Chi M Anya" is representative of the sort of highlife music he was producing during the 1970s. The repeated drum pattern grounds his guitar improvisations, over which he engages in a series of call and response choruses with his Oriental Brothers International Band. Both the repeated drumming patterns and language reflect his Igbo tribal heritage, for the lyrics are religious in nature-- proclaiming the power and glory of God (Oti 121). In general, Dr. Sir Warrior's music and message were highly influenced by the gospel music of Igbo Christianity, both in terms of song structure and its call for unity and brotherhood (he was less political than most highlife musicians). Unlike the other artists in the sample selections, Dr. Sir Warrior was almost completely uninterested in foreign influences, looking for inspiration squarely within the Nigerian tradition (Oti 124).

Sonny Okosun's (1947-2008) "Fire in Soweto" illustrates the diversity of sounds that were lumped under the umbrella term "highlife" during this period. Like other highlife songs, the melody is grounded in a repeated, syncopated rhythm-- in this case a reggae beat, an interesting case of cross-pollination between related cultures, for while the Caribbean's ska, rocksteady and reggae developed from the West African musical heritage of its (primarily) Yorùbá slaves, the influence worked in both directions, as Okosun was known as an Afro-reggae artist, working with musical peers such as Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley, and Peter Tosh (Nelson). Lyrically, the song (Okosun's biggest hit) describes injustice throughout the African continent at the hands of colonial whites-- in line with both Okosun's pan-African sympathies and highlife's tradition of political critique (Oti 28).

Though Fela Kuti (1938-1997) began his career as a highlife band leader (Falola 176), he was galvanized by his experiences on tour in the U.S. during the late 1960s and early 1970s, where he encountered African-American musicians like James Brown and revolutionary political thinkers like Malcolm X. When Fela returned to Nigeria (like Elvis or Madonna, he is almost universally known by a single name), he called his new sound "Afro-beat"-- a synthesis of jazzy, West African highlife, American funk and soul sounds, and radical politics (calling for pan-African unity; taking pride in one's identity as African; and raising awareness about social injustice, inequities, and corruption) (Falola 177). The multi-lingual lyrics of "Igbe" (literally "excrement") describe false friends as something one wishes to excrete or expel, sung over Tony Allen's repeated drum patterns and a recurrent horn chorus. Overlaid over this rhythmic foundation are Fela's improvised scat choruses, his electric piano solos, and Igo Chico's tenor sax solo. Like most of Fela's work, there is a jazzy, propulsive quality that is highly danceable.

The remaining three recordings are examples of jùjú (distinct from *juju*-- a term used to describe any West African fetish idol).

Like highlife, the origins of jùjú lie in popular folk melodies with a tradition dating back to amateur performance competitions in the early 20th century. Jùjú, however, is indigenous to

Nigeria and is specific to the Yorùbá people. Rather than finding inspiration in military bands (why there is never any brass or woodwind), jùjú's origins lie in Yorùbá Christian and syncretist-Christian hymns (that is, Christian doctrine blended with native animist beliefs, like Caribbean voodoo practices-- a synthesis of the religion of the Yorùbá slave population and Roman Catholicism). Like church hymns, then, the actual melodic structure tends towards the simple in jùjú, and like Nigerian church hymns, harmonies tend to be in thirds (Waterman "Yorùbá" 24). Lyrically, jùjú gravitates toward Yorùbá proverb and myth, and because early professional jùjú bands were often sponsored by wealthy patrons, there is a tradition of jùjú lyrics in praise of wealth and prosperity-- or even to the wealthy individuals themselves. Jùjú, then, tends to embody the societal norms of Yorùbá ethnic identity, rather than challenging or critiquing social structures (as in highlife) (Falola 174). The most obvious distinction between jùjú and highlife, though (aside from tempos, which tend to be more languid in jùjú), lies in the jùjú incorporation of so-called "talking drums."

Hourglass-shaped pressure drums of variable pitch are common throughout West Africa, but to the Yorùbá, they hold special significance, having come to symbolize their unique ethnic identity (Waterman "Jùjú History" 61), and their incorporation into jùjú performance helps explain the genre's continued popularity, despite its tendency toward political conservatism (Omojola 166). The drums themselves (especially the *dùdún*, *gàngan*, and *àdàmọ̀n*) are thought by the Yorùbá to be imitative of speech (with their ability to rise and fall in pitch) and have long been a feature of Yorùbá syncretist Christian services and animist ritual dances (Waterman "Jùjú History" 61). Jùjú bands usually appropriate these traditional percussive patterns, employing a chorus of drummers (as in Yorùbá Christian or animist ritual) to create layers of intricate polyrhythmic effects-- the musical performance itself responsive to the actions and moods of the audience and dancers (Omojola 167).

Chief I.K. Dairo (1930-1996) & His Blue Spots Band's "Fonon Mi Hanmi" is the representative track for the first jùjú superstar. A barber turned bandleader (Waterman *Jùjú: A Social History* 100), he first rose to prominence in the late-50s-- playing marriage, naming, and funeral ceremonies. After a well-received 1960 Independence Day gig for a wealthy patron, Dairo and the various configurations of his Blue Spots Band were in high demand throughout the 1960s and beyond, his rise in popularity coinciding with the growth of indigenously owned Nigerian radio stations (Waterman *Jùjú: A Social History* 101). In many ways he was a pioneer, expanding the number of talking drums and deliberately looking toward traditional Yorùbá sources for lyrical and melodic inspiration, but he was also acutely aware of the musical world around outside of Nigeria, integrating Western instruments and Latin American rhythms into the music he created over a decade's long career. The distinctive choral sound of "Fonon Mi Hanmi" is typical of his style, based on Christian hymn harmonies (Waterman *Jùjú: A Social History* 102).

King Sunny Adé and Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey were musical rivals in the years after I.K. Dairo's peak in popularity in the mid-1960s, and the competition between the two band leaders pushed jùjú even further into new directions over the following decade and a half. Both highlighted the electric guitar to a much greater extent, and both integrated a variety of Western

instruments into their sound (Falola 174), but each band also expanded the number of talking drums as well (Omojola 167).

Of the two, King Sunny Adé (born 1946) was probably the more popular, forming his first band in 1966 (Waterman "Yorùbá" 25). Adé's extended guitar solos on "Baba Orun A Mbe O"-- the lyrics are in praise of God-- are innovative in context of jùjú, as is the use of electric bass to ground the tonality. Adé also popularized the use of the LP to document more extended performances (as they would have been performed live), bending and shaping the material according to the inspiration and reception by an audience. By the 1970s, Adé's band comprised sixteen full time musicians and singers (his rival Obey had a 13 piece band during this period).

If anything, Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey (born 1942) was even more eclectic in his borrowings-- looking toward American blues, soul, funk, and country, as well as Congolese guitar for new sounds ("Eyi Yato" means *something new*) (Waterman "Yorùbá" 27). Obey's skills as a soloist are on full display in "Eyi Yato / Elere Ni Wa" (prominently employing slide for the last third of the cuts as if he were an American bluesman), following an extended iyá'lù hand drum solo-- the old juxtaposed with the new.

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