

Beyond the Days of Fasting

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The ever-spouting information cookbook that is the web 2.0, in this era of social confinement and delocalisation, re-evidences an interesting paradox at play in the contemporary territory of culture and knowledge. If personal gratification for our intellectual craving and curiosity has never been so easily obtainable, it is also true that our indulgence is oddly mutating – in a sort of collective bulimic consumption of interests, values and ideas that energises the physiological function of the industrial machine. Because the nature of the internet has reformulated collective memory as a marketplace, where the exchange of experiences and realities is based somewhat on their marketability and transactionality, the content we digest is also increasingly conceived in those terms.

Textured action tracks reflecting on sounds of the city in my wanderings:

I was born in a city wrapped in the juggling echo of multicosms, where sound and noise signalled the complexity of the cultural architecture. My young imagination was oriented through the pulse of intricate socio-economic landscapes in which aural signs of expression preceded my presence and my vision of the world. It was a city intertwined with the blaring voices of matrons exchanging cordialities and Bible quotes on their way to the market stalls, interlaced with sweet Soukous guitar riffs and the warp of talking drums serenading from distant courtyards, while roaring taxi motorcycles transited the daily affairs of a young nation in search of its soul and in contemplation of economic modernity and an earthly sanctity announced by the calls to prayer of local muezzins.

Everyday life, then, as a packaged and trending product. Among all the cultural structures and systems that have completed their migration towards digital plateaux in light of the recent Covid-19 crisis, sound systems and systematics too have found a way to redistribute their content and their functions in the digital square. Public space, markets and exchange, now digitally repackaged, have always been elements that have sustained and helped carve out the rise of sound system in urban Jamaica, given they represented in many instances for local businesses the main or sole instrument of publicity and socio-economical relevance (Stanley Niaah 2010). So, you would understand my excitement and sense of intrigue when platinum-selling hip hop producers, Timbaland and Swizz Beatz, who among many things is also of Jamaican descent, decided to introduce their contest of clashing melodies and riddims to the land of algorithms (Instagram). I found it significantly important for many reasons, beginning with delocalization. Locality and territory in African and diasporic spectacles and recurrences are so important, and very much part of the performances themselves, because they reassert the rethinking of the public scene as a level field where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended to give prominence to cohesion, context and interplay (Miller Chernoff 1979). With Swizz and Timbaland sharing wit and commentary on a digital platform to suggest a sense of mutuality, the departure from physical territories rejuvenated and reinforced the understanding that the musical clash or sound culture at large was no longer a Jamaican cultural expression but a prime exemplar of the so-called Black cultural inventory called for by James Baldwin five decades ago even as scepticism around the idea of a universal Blackness entered the room of Pan-Africanist agendas and utopias (Baldwin 1985).

Porto-Novo, capital of a tenderfoot Republic of Benin which had just gained its independence, was my first exposure to sound as a structure capable of binding and revealing the substance and the

subtleties of a community, despite the deafening vapidness of homogenised commercial music and noise. The counter-sovereignty of sound as a source of social literacy was not limited solely to the lawless cacophony of the public space, it also penetrated the more orchestrated perimeters of my private sphere in which my grandfather jealously curated and fenced a vinyl collection of Juju, Cuban-Yoruba Apala, Highlife, Calypso and Chanson Française from our graceless fingers. While running frantically around the maternal house with my cousins, impersonating heroes of our day – at times subversive vigilantes fighting for the ‘revolution’, or flamboyant entertainers chronicling the vicissitudes of the times – the accompaniment of music erupted discreetly from the speakers of a high-fidelity sound system implanted in a large colonial wooden sideboard which dominated the living room and the acoustics of the house. Inevitably sound always meant home to me, and in sound I always searched my space, my angle and my understanding of reality.

My reflections on the newly digital reach of sound came to a curious peak with the echoing of a clash between Vybz Kartel and Wizkid, possibly two of the most iconic musical figures in contemporary Black British and Nigerian music, which was arranged by a rising young Black web-radio based in London. Despite the ephemerality of the event, which didn’t necessarily follow the usually accepted rules of a clash – transcending music genres and culture scenes to start with – I nonetheless understood the contest, in this era of transitions, as a sort of handover for cultural leadership in young Black Britain and the dawn of a new era in Black British sound and culture. Quite frankly, I initially found it, and perhaps still find it, quite far-fetched to even associate the two artists, given the individual contributions both have

made to their respective contexts and environments. Kartel represented and perhaps still represents the archetypical voice of the oppressed that traces its line of origin and inheritance from the calypsonian callers: an objectification of social harmony through confrontation, revolution and revival (Philips 2006). Wizkid, on the other hand, represented a new idea of Africanness and Blackness where tropes of hedonism, marketability, and a syncretism of conflicting philosophical ideas around personal gratification create quite an increasingly complex vision of the world. Don't get me wrong, all these elements are equally present in reggae dancehall and contemporary sound culture, but we can still trace a clear distinction between the people and musics and what they represent. Through Wizkid and the Afrobeats generation, the horizon between the oppressed and the oppressing becomes extremely blurry, reframing completely the generational manifesto of universal Blackness. Therefore, from my perspective, that clash was not merely a musical or regional rivalry, it was a generational one, a ceremony where the digital public space and the dynamics of sound system culture were utilised to formalise an important changeover in young Black British culture in London. I was interested in the underlying narrative of the event that was also driven by the position often assumed by a good majority of Caribbean listeners who perceive Afrobeats as imitative of reggae dancehall culture. Many tend not to know much about Afrobeats, and few know the kinetics of African music in general, especially across the abstract trading route sociologist Paul Gilroy dubbed as The Black Atlantic (1993), including the emergence of Afro-Cuban and Latin rhythms, the evolution of jazz and the proliferation of the modern genres arising in Africa, the US, the Caribbean and Britain.

When the unexpected turns of life took me to Italy while still fairly little, I wandered enthusiastically and tirelessly across the four corners of Black sound in search of cues and clues for a self-identification that could alleviate my ambivalent sentiments of alienation and offer me a new sense of belonging through modern constructions of Black expression. Soon enough, subversive vigilantes and imaginary heroes were replaced by prophetic rappers and dangerous street storytellers, who offered me a set of visions of the world that were not available in the dominant discourses of society. Me and my peers didn't look at prominent hip hop figures necessarily as role models or leaders, we were more fascinated by the imaginary that swaddled their craft and demeanour, and even more by how sound as a structure was able to demarcate a territory that justified and validated the existence of our alternative sensorial experience. And oddly enough, we understood them without speaking an inch of English. We resonated with the sound and the systems it upheld. Systems that crowned to some extent the idea of otherness and emancipated the spirit of the voiceless.

For me, Caribbean listeners tend to lose sight of a critical aspect of West African culture which is integration and fusion. All West African cultural innovations are fundamentally syntheses of cultural expressions that are perceived as continuities of existing African practices (Miller Chernoff 1979). Which makes Afrobeats a perfect child of its times, being able to amalgamate spiritual elements that have traditionally being praised in Black music, as well as materialistic and industrial ideas that find great continuity on the internet and its ability to package and market life. In a logical sense,

Afrobeats, then, is still a purely African product, in the fact that it is conceived for the space and context in which it is intended to be experienced, as a form of digital hedonism. It is the reacquisition of the Black narrative operating through ideas of liberty and happiness.

Wizkid won the contest, largely because of the disproportionate presence of a Nigerian crowd in the digital square, but also because songs were voted for based on popularity and Wizkid is popular for singing of the good life. It would be simplistic and plainly wrong to frame Wizkid simply as a mundane crooner. The song that cast aside any doubts across all networks and signals was *Ojuelegba*, a song in which Wizkid voices his struggle, his resilience and his success. A well-fitting anthem for all Africans who left their homeland with hopes of affirmation and prosperity. And that's where the problems start. The assimilative dynamics of the internet in contemporary culture have used the liturgy of the sound clash to introduce a conversation that doesn't really belong to the clash. The clash as an expression of sound system culture is ultimately an expression of anti-system, where the crowd feuds to establish who better embodies its archetype of anti-culture, or counter-culture (Stanley Niaah 2010). The victory of Wizkid was determined, instead, by his ability to better fit the dominant narrative of our times. Afrobeats is certainly not to blame for this. Wizkid and Kartel themselves didn't comment or personally participate in the event, and Wizkid constantly acknowledges reggae dancehall as a major inspiration in his composing process. Us, the crowd, global Black listeners, have a responsibility to demand and maintain the authenticity of our customs. For the sake of discernment and, more importantly, authenticity – in an era of ubiquitous fakes, whether they belong to our immediate community or not. In long gone days, our ancestors used to pay tribute and respect when relocating to a foreign territo-

ry. They accepted to do so because they knew it maintained social harmony and strengthened mutual appreciation, much needed qualities in any quest for the shared acceptance preceding any notion of universal Blackness.

To close, a pivotal element in Afrobeats is its relationship to other West African music in terms of themes and techniques. Nigerian Afrobeats, for instance, has an interesting correspondence in terms of lyrical content with Fuji music, a genre that was used to invite Yoruba Islamic followers to join and enjoy feasting during the Ramadan period (Banning 2017). The genre has now been secularised and has lost its religious connotation and can be experienced during any public occasion. Nonetheless, it has maintained an attachment to the very idea of enjoyment and could be heard, for example, in London's Notting Hill carnival. Now, if a time has come for a new generation to develop our customs in order to 'chop life' and forget times of strife, it is only respectful to not forget the practices we cherished in days of hunger and reflection, and pause before commencing to stir any new ingredients in the pot.

Uprooted and deprived of my native tongue, sound – as a language and territory – encouraged my journey into what has been dubbed sound system culture, and unexpectedly that journey brought me back home, right into the courtyards of the West African metropolis where the streams of Afrobeats arose. The matrons are still blaring proverbs, although the atrocities of post-colonisation have made their faces exhausted, the motorbikes are still transiting but the sweet riffs of Soukous are almost vanished, disappeared in favour of synthesised arpeggios and a new idealised approach described by Afrobeats pioneers Don Jazzy and DJ Jimmy Jatt as the 'cool fac-

tor'. According to them, the concept was discovered and borrowed from sound system culture while they were attending dancehall parties during their stay in London. The concept intends to offer Afrobeats a discourse of lifestyle marketing, making African courtyards no longer an exotic haven from the exigencies of the modern world but a new district of the global market. It represents a new idea of Africanness and Blackness in which tropes of hedonism and a syncretism of conflicting philosophical ideas around personal gratification create an increasingly complex vision of the world. Perhaps the calls to prayer after the fast, having almost vanished too, have left space for the proclamation of a new system to come.

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Mike Calandra Achode's work focusses on musical spaces that emerged and matured across communities of the African diaspora, exploring themes of representation and cultural economy at the intersection of music, vernacular and lifestyle.

He considers music not only an echoing literature that reveals nuances of everyday life, but also a superstructure that anticipates historical developments, to foreshadow new social formations in a prophetic and declarative way, as enunciated by French economist Jacques Attali.

Moved by a passion for African and Black subcultures at large, he founded Crudo Volta, a visual collective that documents the development of contemporary African music and lifestyle across the diaspora. Crudo Volta's most popular format is the Taxi, a documentary format where contemporary music scenes are explored through the expedient of a taxi ride.

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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