

A History of African Popular Culture

Popular culture in Africa is the product of everyday life: the unofficial, the non-canonical. And it is the dynamism of this culture that makes Africa what it is. In this book, Karin Barber offers a journey through the history of music, theatre, fiction, song, dance, poetry, and film from the seventeenth century to the present day. From satires created by those living in West African coastal towns in the era of the slave trade to the poetry and fiction of townships and mine compounds in South Africa, and from today's East African streets, where Swahili hip-hop artists gather, to the juggernaut of the Nollywood film industry, this book weaves together a wealth of sites and scenes of cultural production. In doing so, it provides an ideal text for students and researchers seeking to learn more about the diversity, specificity, and vibrancy of popular cultural forms in African history.

Karin Barber is Fellow of the British Academy and Emeritus Professor of African Cultural Anthropology at the University of Birmingham. She was appointed CBE in 2012 for services to African studies. She is the author of a number of books and articles on African popular culture, including *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (2000) and *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel* (2012).

New Approaches to African History

Series Editor

Martin Klein, *University of Toronto*

Editorial Advisors

William Beinart, *University of Oxford*

Mamadou Diouf, *Columbia University*

William Freund, *University of KwaZulu-Natal*

Sandra E. Greene, *Cornell University*

Ray Kea, *University of California, Riverside*

David Newbury, *Smith College*

New Approaches to African History is designed to introduce students to current findings and new ideas in African history. Although each book treats a particular case and is able to stand alone, the format allows the studies to be used as modules in general courses on African history and world history. The cases represent a wide range of topics. Each volume summarizes the state of knowledge on a particular subject for a student who is new to the field. However, the aim is not simply to present views of the literature; it is also to introduce debates on historiographical or substantive issues and may argue for a particular point of view. The aim of the series is to stimulate debate and to challenge students and general readers. The series is not committed to any particular school of thought.

Other Books in the Series:

1. *Africa since 1940* by Frederick Cooper
2. *Muslim Societies in African History* by David Robinson
3. *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* by Michael Gomez
4. *The African City: A History* by William Freund
5. *Warfare in Independent Africa* by William Reno
6. *Warfare in African History* by Richard J. Reid
7. *Foreign Intervention in Africa* by Elizabeth Schmidt
8. *Slaving and Slavery in African History* by Sean Stilwell
9. *Democracy in Africa* by Nic Cheeseman
10. *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa* by Iris Berger
11. *A History of African Popular Culture* by Karin Barber
12. *Human Rights in Africa* by Bonny Ibaoh

A History of African Popular Culture

Karin Barber
University of Birmingham



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01689-7 — A History of African Popular Culture
Karin Barber
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107624474

DOI: 10.1017/9781139061766

© Karin Barber 2018

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barber, Karin, 1949– author.

Title: A history of African popular culture / Karin Barber.

Other titles: New approaches to African history.

Description: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. |

Series: New approaches to African history |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017044206 | ISBN 9781107016897 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781107624474 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Popular culture – Africa, Sub-Saharan – History. |

Africa, Sub-Saharan – Social life and customs.

Classification: LCC DT14.B355 2017 | DDC 306.0967–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017044206>

ISBN 978-1-107-01689-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-62447-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<i>page</i> ix
1 Introduction	I
2 Early Popular Culture: Sources and Silences	20
3 Mines, Migrant Labour and Township Culture	44
4 The City and the Road	73
5 The Crowd, the State ... and Songs	100
6 The Media: Globalisation and Deregulation from the 1990s Till Today	130
7 Conceptualising Change in African Popular Culture	164
BIBLIOGRAPHY	181
INDEX	195

Acknowledgements

Writing this book turned out to be an engrossing and demanding project, and it took much longer than I expected. I am very grateful to my editor, Martin Klein, for his saintlike patience and encouragement over the years. I would like to thank colleagues and research associates at the University of Birmingham for their careful reading and constructive comments on various draft chapters: Maxim Bolt, Reginald Cline-Cole, Juliet Gilbert, Jessica Johnson, Rebecca Jones, David Kerr, Saima Nasar, Insa Nolte, Katrien Pype, Benedetta Rossi, Keith Shear and Kate Skinner. Paulo Farias read every chapter, some of them in several versions, and as always illuminated them with his insight and erudition.

I received valuable feedback from postgraduate students too, chief among them Surayya Adam, David Coughlin, Shuo Li, Pernille Nailor, Amy Redgrave, Carmen Thompson and Ceri Whatley. Their exuberant interpretations of African popular culture genres will remain with me for a long time to come.

Seminar participants at the University of Cape Town and the University of Cambridge gave me valuable help with formulating the approach to popular culture that I have taken in this book. I am particularly grateful to Heike Becker, Andrea Grant and John Iliffe for their comments. More recently, I was fortunate to be invited by Derek Peterson to present my work at a series of seminars at the University of Michigan in April 2017. I thank all the participants who generously gave their time to read and discuss the completed book manuscript,

and I am especially grateful for valuable follow-up discussions with Kelly Askew, Gaurav Desai, Judith Irvine and Derek Peterson.

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues who generously provided photographs from their own collections: Kelly Askew, Lane Clark, Catherine Cole, David Coplan, David Kerr and Katrien Pype. The artist Victor Ndula kindly allowed me to reproduce one of his celebrated cartoons, and the South African rap star Zuluboy provided me with photos of himself in performance. I am grateful to Sapin Makengele for allowing me to use his brilliant narrative picture 'Examen d'un Polygame' for the cover of the book. I thank Chris Albertyn, Laura Fair, Dina Ligaga, Innocentia Mhlambi, Stephan Miescher, Duncan Omanga, Katrien Pype, Brett Pyper and Siphosithole for their advice on sourcing photos and help with contacts. I am grateful to 'Makali Mokitimi for permission to quote from her book *Lifela tsa Litsamaea-naha Poetry: A Literary Analysis* (1998) and her MA thesis, *A Literary Analysis of Lifela tsa Litsamaea-naha Poetry* (1982), and to Andy Chebanne and K. C. Maimane for helping me to contact her. The image of Barbot visiting the King of Sestro (Fig. 2) is reproduced, by permission of the Hakluyt Society, from *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712*, Vol. 1., edited by Adam Jones, Robin Law and P. E. H. Hair (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992).

Stephanie Newell has long been my ideal interlocutor on popular culture. I have enjoyed many conversations with her at different stages of the project – starting from her advice to take it on in the first place. I was given great encouragement by her generous initiative, with Onookome Okome, to convene a group of scholars in order to revisit, and take off from, my earlier efforts at conceptualising the field of African popular culture. Their contributions came out in two substantial volumes: a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (2012) and an edited book, *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (2014). This shows clearly that whether or not *A History of African Popular Culture* achieves any of its aims, there is an abundance of energy and talent out there. A new generation of researchers is coming into its own, and is already revitalising the study of African popular culture.