CHAPTER 1

Introduction

History and Popular Culture in Africa

Popular culture in Africa is a product of everyday life. It is the unofficial, the non-canonical. It is usually taken to mean the culture of 'ordinary people': not the educated elites, politicians, military top brass and rich businessmen; not the people in power, the people who have legal or illegal bank accounts in Switzerland and send their children to boarding schools overseas; but rather petty traders, primary school teachers, taxi drivers, farmers, the unemployed, street children in the Congo and parents in Zimbabwe trying to feed their children when the inflation rate hit 79.6 billion per cent in 2008.

It is the dynamism of this culture that makes Africa what it is. But policymakers and media pundits looking at Africa from the outside give us very little impression of what everyday life is like. Apart from the occasional five-second sound bite from the man or woman in the street at a moment of crisis, we tend to be shown two alternative pictures: extreme images of famine and war, encouraged by NGOs that depend on them to raise funds, or a focus on 'tribal', 'traditional' cultures described as 'remote' and even 'exotic'. There are exceptions, of course, but in general, the Western media have not been particularly interested in the ordinariness of everyday life in Africa and people's resilience in solving ordinary problems – getting water every morning, paying school fees, mobilising hundreds of people in order to hold a suitable funeral for a respected relative. Nor do we hear much about their inventiveness and creativity, the hundreds of ways in which

people go beyond bare survival to make something new, make a mark, attract attention, offer an interpretation of experience, articulate communal concerns or protest against what's going on. When Paul Zeleza visits family and friends, he says, he sees a different Africa from the one that prevails in Afropessimist discourses of 'deprivation, disease, despotism, and destruction': he sees the quotidian 'small joys of living, the gaiety and drunkenness in the bars and clubs, the intoxicating ecstasy and rowdiness at football and boxing matches, the uninvited and unpaid story-tellers in buses and taxis, … carnivalesque crowds at political rallies or gathered on street corners watching and listening to some aspiring or accomplished comedian, preacher, and acrobat … families assembled at home telling stories, watching television, or listening to the radio' (Zeleza 2003:viii). Nor are the perspectives of the policymakers, cultural officials, educational authorities and media pundits within Africa generally very different from those of outsiders.

The idea of *A History of African Popular Culture* is that popular forms of expression – music, theatre, fiction, songs, dances, pictures, poetry, jokes, sayings – emerge from everyday life on the ground, and that new genres are precipitated by new historical experiences. Africa has undergone massive, cataclysmic, transformative changes over the past 400 years, changes that have continually thrown up new situations and encounters. As people have grappled with these and attempted to get something out of them, they invented new creative forms to comment on them and put them into perspective. We see seventeenth-century commoners in Gold Coast city-states satirising their exploitative overlords, whose power had been fuelled by the Atlantic slave trade; nineteenth-century Yoruba villagers sharing poignant witticisms on the turbulence unleashed by long-lasting inter-kingdom wars; Sotho migrant labourers on the journey to the South African mines creating a new poetic genre to describe their experiences of travelling and arriving at the fearsome mine compounds; Congolese artists after independence painting 'reminders' of Belgian colonial rule and images of fortune-bearing mermaids for the sitting rooms of aspiring urbanites; Tanzanian rappers seeking to reach new continental and diasporic Internet audiences for their Swahili compositions in the era after structural adjustment; and, everywhere in Africa, people using mobile phones to document events on the ground, share music, promote activist agendas, make money transfers and imagine alternative worlds.

New popular cultural forms not only emerge out of historical change, but also participate in it, embody it and comment upon it. They are part of history, in the sense that their production is a socio-historical fact every bit as empirical as agricultural production or patterns of trade. They are produced in specific historical circumstances and change with the times. They create new social and intellectual pathways and forge new kinds of social constituency, and these in turn shape historical developments. But they are also responses to history, interpretations of social reality from within and from below. For a historian, therefore, a new popular cultural form has a double life, as an object of historical inquiry and as one of its sources. And it is a unique source. The changing perspectives of ordinary people are rarely documented in official records. As Terence Ranger said in his pioneering study of the Beni dance, which swept Eastern Africa from the 1890s to the 1960s, popular culture gives unique access to the views of those people excluded from power and privilege:

> [S]tudies of popular culture are especially valuable for getting at the experience and attitudes of the "masses" and for giving expression to the reactions of the inarticulate … [T]he "masses" did not control formal means of articulating their desires – the universities, the pulpit, the press, the theatre, the political pronouncement – and … when spokesmen did emerge they were at instant risk. For this reason, we have to look at the informal, the festive, the apparently escapist, in order to see evidence of real experience and real response; to see how far "the people" have had to make use, even for this informal vocabulary, of the idioms of the masters; to see how far, on the other hand, creativity and spontaneity survive.
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> (Ranger 1975:3)

If popular cultural forms are both objects of and sources for historical inquiry, they are also bearers of their own past. Present-day popular cultural forms often advertise their own novelty. Part of their appeal is that they follow and create fashion, pick up or coin new formulations, and outdo their competitors with newfangled gimmicks. But they also often draw on long-standing traditions of expression, and the same motif or formulation may be recycled for hundreds of years. They embody historical memory and a consciousness of continuity with the past, as well as an orientation to what is new and changing in social experience. Apparently new forms may recapitulate or repurpose remembered precursors. A presentist view of popular culture misses

the inbuilt sense of where it came from and what it brings with it, which may constitute an important part of its meaning. Practitioners of relatively long-standing genres often have a keen consciousness of how these genres have changed over the decades. And when certain styles fall out of fashion, there may be pockets of the community who actively and nostalgically revive them. Themes and motifs may lie dormant and then crop up again. For all these reasons, a historical view is rewarding.

But there are two challenges for anyone rash enough to try to write a history of African popular culture. One has to do with 'popular culture': what we mean by the term, what baggage it brings with it, where its boundaries are, what it excludes and includes. The other has to do with 'history', with the temporality of cultural change in Africa, the immense variations in historical experience from one region to another and the mutability yet stubborn survival of cultural forms that, because they were unofficial, were rarely documented in detail until very recently.

Popular Culture as a Field

Popular culture has been audible and visible in Africanist research for many decades. Informal, unofficial performances, texts and artefacts have been ubiquitous and impossible to overlook. In the earliest African studies research, they were not conceptualised as a field of inquiry named 'popular culture'. But they kept cropping up, in the documentation of anti-colonial struggles or processes of urbanisation, migrant labour and industrial transformation. Anthropologists occupied themselves early on with everyday life and therefore with the expressive forms of ordinary people. Southern African ethnographies dating from the 1930s onwards, many of them associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, were particularly attentive to the cultural dimension of their subject matter (Becker 2012). There are Ellen Hellmann's vivid depiction of Rooiyard, a Johannesburg 'native slum yard', which she studied shortly before it was evacuated and demolished in 1934; A. L. Epstein and Hortense Powdermaker's Copperbelt studies, researched in the 1950s; and Philip and Iona Mayer's *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, documenting urban culture in East London. All these evoked the lives of urban migrant workers, including their recreations, tastes and ways of constructing a meaningful life.

Particularly noteworthy was J. C. Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance*, which, unlike the other Rhodes-Livingstone studies, took a specific popular performance genre as its central subject and described it in some detail, as a means of tracing ethnic and class relations in a Copperbelt town. In short, there is an abundance of material from early studies in African history and anthropology in which insights into everyday life and popular creativity are sedimented, but popular culture as a field had not yet come into its own.

One limitation of these early studies was that, though they drew on creative or expressive sources, they often did not attend closely to the forms themselves: they used creative arts as evidence of attitudes, beliefs and responses to experience, but without looking closely at *how* these arts express such things. They did not often seek to discover the nature of their constitution as creative forms – the conventions of the genre, the mode of composition, the internal structure, the intertextual allusiveness or the audience's ways of interpreting and understanding them. Yet it is only through their specific form, conventions and associated traditions of interpretation that creative expressions have meaning. What they say and do is inseparable from *how* they say and do it.

From the 1970s onwards, this inattention to 'the thing itself' began to change. There began to appear detailed, in-depth studies that made specific popular culture genres their central focus and attended closely to their properties as creative forms. In the 1970s and '80s, these studies included histories of Onitsha market literature, Ghanaian concert parties, Nigerian juju music and songs of protest and resistance in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa. There have also been studies looking at the history of a whole range of interrelated genres in a specific social context, notably South African township culture in the pathbreaking work of David Coplan and, more recently, the shaping of music genres by national cultural policy and local taste in socialist and post-socialist Tanzania in Kelly Askew's brilliant studies. Forty years after Hortense Powdermaker's pioneering fieldwork, there has been an efflorescence of new research on leisure, a key study being Phyllis Martin's subtle and original account of the way social activity shaped time and space in colonial Brazzaville. From the mid-1990s onwards, we have seen a flood of new work on contemporary mediatised genres, coinciding with major shifts in the media landscape in Africa.

Two propositions in the landmark work of the 1970s have the potential to be taken further than they have been so far. One is the regional

approach in Terence Ranger's 1975 history of the Beni dance. He sees the dance not only as an expression of ideas, but also as an organisational form, with a characteristic hierarchy of participants modelled on colonial military and civil officialdom. He is able to trace the spread of this organisational form over sixty years – coinciding almost exactly with the period of colonial rule – from Kenya into Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, taking on different names and local characteristics in each place. (The Kalela dance was one such variant; it will be discussed in the next chapter.) This shows the advantages of a comparative approach based on material interconnections on the ground, rather than a parallelism based only on similarities perceived by the observer. Tracing the movement of cultural forms across wide areas presents formidable challenges to researchers, but it is crucial if we are to form an adequate picture of the mobility and dynamism of popular culture – or, to put it more accurately, the long-standing readiness of cultural practitioners and audiences to access and adapt new things from elsewhere.

The second is the proposition in Johannes Fabian's 1978 article 'Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures', that ideas and creative energy may jump from one genre to another. He observes that the 'loud and colourful bursts of creativity in music, oral lore and the visual arts emerging from the masses' were ephemeral and volatile: genres would come suddenly into being, enjoy a period of efflorescence and as suddenly decline. But their animating themes were not necessarily thereby lost; rather, they might reappear in another form in a different context. His example is the topic of male – female relationships in Katanga, DRC (formerly the Belgian Congo, then Zaire): a focus of intense interest and anxiety in the context of migrant labour, urbanisation and increasing inequality. Fabian shows how this theme was elaborated first in popular songs, then in the Christian Jamaa movement and later in popular painting. This suggests that we need to look not only at how one genre mutates over time and spreads over space, but also at how different domains of social life may successively become the site where creative work on a dominant popular concern is concentrated.

Thus there is a lot of empirical and conceptual work still to be done to constitute popular culture as a comprehensive, comparative research domain across Africa. Nonetheless, it can now be said that African popular culture is a recognised subject – taught in university undergraduate and postgraduate courses and researched by an

ever-growing and diverse cohort of scholars based within Africa as well as outside it.

If African popular culture has become a field, however, it's not really clear where that field's boundaries lie or by what criteria certain forms are included or excluded, and this is because of the ambiguities of the term 'popular'. It's a slippery, disputed term wherever it is used. In Africa, there is the added unease that a category shaped essentially by the class relations of the industrial West should be applied to the incommensurable historical experience of Africa. Some influential scholars therefore use the term more or less under protest, in quotation marks, for want of a better one.

At first, the term 'popular' was used in African studies to refer exclusively to new cultural forms created in response to colonisation and post-independence experiences. This category of genres, texts and performances does have a kind of intuitive coherence: observers have noted the upsurge during the twentieth century of new styles of music, painting, theatre and fiction, which all shared key aesthetic features, including a self-conscious differentiation from longer-established and more prestigious cultural repertoires. The new forms were identified as predominantly urban, syncretic, quickly changing, oriented towards modernity, often pursuing novelty and often commercial and produced by young, self-taught entrepreneurs working alone or in small groups. Fabian drew attention to this energetic creativity in the rapidly expanding African cities of colonial sub-Saharan Africa, and distinguished it from older oral traditional culture, on the one hand, and the European-inspired culture of the educated elites, on the other. In some of my own previous work (Barber 1987, 1997), I associated this type of popular culture with the fluid and emergent new urban intermediate classes who had left the culture of their fathers' farms and villages but had not been able to join the ranks of the new urban white-collar professional classes. While the longer-established 'traditional' cultural forms and the elite 'modern' forms associated with European models were recognised by cultural and educational institutions within and outside Africa (preserved in museums, put on university syllabi), the interstitial 'popular' forms were disregarded. The popular was a residual category, defined by what it was not. To give a theatrical example: a 'traditional' ancestral masquerade would be valued as cultural heritage, and a play in highly complex English by Wọle Ṣoyinka would be celebrated as the greatest of 'modern' written works, but a 'popular' improvised performance by a Yoruba travelling

theatre company would be left out, despite the enormous and long-lasting impact of the travelling theatre genre in western Nigeria. But while this kind of colonial and post-independence popular culture was very striking, remarkably dynamic and well worth exploring as a category – all the more so because, as a category, it had previously been overlooked – it is a strange limitation to use a conception of popular culture that excludes everything that was produced before the onset of formal colonialism. It may suggest, though unintentionally, that African culture before colonisation was homogeneous, static and communal, as if everyone in a given society shared the same experience, perspective and means of expression. This, of course, was not the case, as the examples in Chapter 2 illustrate.

The very concepts of 'traditional' and 'modern, Europeanised' culture in Africa were a product of colonialism. And because the 'popular' was conceptualised by scholars as an interstitial category – neither traditional nor modern, but hybridising both and constantly inventing new things – it too became associated exclusively with the colonial and postcolonial periods. Perhaps we do need a label for the new, primarily urban, consciously novel but lower-class forms that began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But to look exclusively at this category, whatever we decided to call it, would be to condemn us to a history that goes back barely more than a century.

This implied restriction on the temporal reach of the concept of the popular was accentuated with the new wave of work on African media genres, which has been so buoyant in the last twenty years and is much influenced by media studies approaches. It is now sometimes assumed that popular culture as a whole is synonymous with mass media, that the widespread use of media in Africa is new, and that therefore popular culture itself is a very recent phenomenon going back only thirty years or so. These assumptions – all of which are wrong – throw all the attention onto the immediate and excitingly rapid developments in the African digital revolution, and tend to overlook the previous history of media in Africa and their entanglement with the profuse production of still-vital non-mediatised popular culture.

All popular cultural forms have a past. What did the new colonial, postcolonial and post–digital revolution forms come out of? What were the precedents, models and resources their creators drew on? In precisely what ways did changing circumstances foster the generation of new forms? To what extent were these forms in continuity with

what went before, to what extent a departure from it? These questions all solicit a longer historical view.

But pushing the idea of the popular back into precolonial times raises other conceptual problems. 'Popular' is usually taken to mean 'that which pertains to the people' – the 'common people', as distinct from the economic, political and social elites. We might ask whether common or non-elite people in precolonial Africa had distinctive cultural forms of their own. It is fair to say that in most African cultures, past and present, there has been a huge bedrock of shared forms, cultural expressions which people of all social levels would recognise and relate to. But there are also ways of treating these shared forms – realising them in performance or framing them in relation to other activities – which make social differences apparent. And in some well-documented cases, there were distinctive forms that belonged only to certain social strata. In some precolonial societies, there was such steep vertical stratification that royal, aristocratic and noble strata evolved cultural traditions inaccessible to commoners, and commoners evolved a repertoire unknown to, or avoided by, their social superiors. But inequality is a matter of degree. All societies, even the most egalitarian, make differences of status between categories of people, and these differences are marked and enacted through cultural means. It doesn't really make sense to say that some precolonial societies 'had' popular culture while others did not. To complicate things further, when twentieth-century popular cultural forms incorporated and recreated older oral forms, they often drew on genres previously associated with the privileged strata. Modern Malian popular music raids the griots' oral repertoire of aristocratic epic and praise chants to speak to a new and much broader national and international audience. Thus a history of popular culture needs simultaneously to recognise the many instances of cultural expressions of protest, satire and self-assertion by disadvantaged and oppressed strata throughout history, and to keep in view the porousness of cultural boundaries, the substratum of shared forms and the repurposing of genres over time.

A sociological definition of popular as 'pertaining to the common people' also has its problems for more recent periods, right up to the present day. It remains an open question to what extent elites are culturally distinct from non-elites in any given social setting, and in what ways. Cultural differentiation changes over time, for example when the cultural markers of an elite's privilege become more widely available and lose their leverage. In Nigeria, early in the twentieth century,

a school education was a powerful mechanism for social advancement; in the second half of the twentieth century, the expansion of the primary school system meant that one had to go to grammar school to gain any social advantage; and today, there is a jobless underclass in Lagos made up of university graduates. Cultural differentiation also varies over space, because of different histories of class formation. Industrialisation in South Africa, for example, makes it possible to talk about a distinctive 'working-class culture' in a way that would seem inapplicable in many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Everywhere in Africa, social mobility, aspirational self-positioning and the uncertainty and fragility of economic and occupational status all mean that neither the elite nor the non-elite are ever boundaried, empirically enumerable categories. Members of an elite group almost always have poor relatives; the most disadvantaged often have pathways to the better-off though clientship or communal solidarity. Subjectively as well as objectively, the boundaries of social strata are fluctuating and indeterminate. Neither elites nor non-elites are a monolithic group; rather, they are often unstable congeries of social groupings, between which there are many fault lines as well as shared interests.

The culture participated in by privileged sections of society, no less than popular culture, has been volatile and shot through with cross-currents; not a mere clone of metropolitan models, but 'groping toward alternative forms of cultural and political expression' (Erlmann 1996:60), a process which has often involved incorporating popular materials rather than holding them at arm's length. And conversely, forms initiated by elites were often taken up by non-elites and popularised. The concert party in the Gold Coast began as an expensive entertainment in English, accessible only to the educated coastal elites; by the 1950s, it used Akan and a smattering of other Ghanaian languages, incorporated highlife bands rather than Western-style dance music, expanded comic sketches into full-blown dramas and travelled the country playing to rural as well as urban audiences. The *taarab* music of East Africa, similarly, was an Arab-inspired genre performed by male orchestras for the elite of Zanzibar; it was taken up on the mainland, popularised and indigenised initially by a woman of slave origin, Siti binti Saad, who became a highly influential star in the 1920s and '30s (Topp Fargion 1993). In an influential early critique of the concept of 'the popular', Stuart Hall argued that in British social history there is no fixed category of cultural form or content that can