

“We’re Taking Africa to the World”: Commercial Self-fashioning as a Vehicle for Collective Aspirations in the 21st Century

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“It’s finally cool to be an ‘African’” (Kaumbutho). This 2017 blog post by Kenyan poet Kimathi Kaumbutho echoed the performative claims heard throughout the African middle class in the wake of the changing narrative about “Africa,” from “The hopeless continent” (*The Economist* 2000) to “Africa rising” (*The Economist* 2011). Elements and signs of “Africanness” have indeed been increasingly featured in “global” popular culture, from clothing lines to films, and even the practice of capitalism is rebranded with “African traditional principles” through the Africapitalist and Ubuntu “economic philosophies.” But as suggested by Kaumbutho’s list of achievements “Africans can take pride in,” one cultural medium has proven particularly instrumental to this new wave of positive identification with “Africa”: Nigerian music. As Nigeria was arguably entering a post-oil era in the 2010s (Burns and Owen), its renewed popular music industry benefitted from the development of digital technology and the expression of corporate interest by telecom companies, retail brands, and foreign-educated young professionals, making it an exemplary manifestation of a new pan-Africanism founded on neoliberal aspirations (Shipley *Living the Hiplife*).

Global professional services firm PwC announced that total revenue for Nigeria’s entertainment and media industry was expected to grow to US\$8.1 billion in 2019, calling it the “fastest-expanding major market globally” (Oxford Business Group). However, only a very small share of this revenue occurs from the actual sale of cultural products (PwC 22). Instead, revenues are generated by turning consumers into fans who can be monetized through corporate sponsorship. As

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power in Nigeria is traditionally defined by someone's capacity to maintain a broad network of willing support that can be mobilized for various forms of action (Barnes 7), Nigerians have rapidly seized upon the possibilities offered by social media to become "influencers." With Nigeria's "new retail economy" emerging as "Africa's growing giant," in the language of management consulting firms (McKinsey), music has accompanied the rise of consumer spending by serving as a vehicle for brand penetration.

The confluence of celebrity culture with the neoliberal requirement that everyone be an enterprise for themselves (Foucault 206), through the mediation of digital technology, is a widespread global phenomenon. Yet, the "sticky engagement" (Tsing 6) of neoliberal ideology and technological innovation with the historico-sociological configuration of Southwestern Nigeria's musical patronage (Alaja-Browne; Waterman), conspicuous status enhancement pursuits (Apter; Lawuyi) and Igbo entrepreneurship (Olutayo) evades a simple narrative of Western corporate expansion and requires an exploration of other operating forces.

Heeding the Jean and John Comaroff's claim that the history of the present may be more acutely grasped from the vantage of "Africa" ("Theory from the South"; see also Mbembe "Africa in the New Century" 326), this paper examines why neoliberal discourse and practices have been invested with pan-African aspirations in the Nigerian popular music industry. A discourse promoting individuated modes of wealth acquisition through engagement with technology and entrepreneurship of the self has indeed found great resonance in Lagos, serving explicitly as a vehicle for hopes to assert global membership. At the same time, music is seen as Nigeria's greatest export; while the proceeds of oil are perceived to only enrich a few, music brings joy and pride to everyone.

This paper is based on an ethnography conducted in June-July 2018 for a master's dissertation. The ethnography involved unstructured interviews with music professionals, including: commercially successful and aspiring artists, producers, and DJs; artist managers; radio hosts and other personnel; label executives and employees; marketers, media consultants, and bloggers; pirate mixtape producers and distributors; and other professionals working at organizations that contribute to revenue generation in the music industry (telecom companies, streaming platforms, financial institutions, and law firms). The study also included participant-observation at studio sessions, industry events, shows, night clubs, radio shows, private parties, and everyday life settings in Lagos, as well as on social media.

I first describe the recent context in which Southern Nigerians have engaged with what is generally known as “neoliberal discourse” in Euro-America, reconfiguring deep-rooted ideas that status advancement results from individual effort and that anyone may rise to prominence (Barber “The Generation of Plays”; Waterman) under a new terminology. As Michel Foucault explained, it is “completely impossible to deal with the diffusion of the German model in France and the American neoliberal movement at the same time. The two phenomena are not completely overlapping and cannot be superimposed on each other, although there is, of course, a whole system of exchanges and supports between them” (193). The development and naturalization of neoliberalism in Nigeria is similarly a complex process that cannot be reduced to an import from the United Kingdom or the United States, or a prescription by the International Monetary Fund. Attempting to describe the diffusion of a certain neoliberal discourse in Lagos and its music industry would be far beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet, certain factors and circumstances have had a notable impact on—or are revealing of—the enthusiasm around recent neoliberal trends that manifest in the Lagos music industry. This section is based on literature review and draws on remarks from informants showing the particular way in which Lagos music professionals have engaged with such trends. In a second part, I situate cultural production, and music in particular, in the construction of “New Africa”; that is, a continent firmly writing itself within a new, decentered but global world (Mbembe “Africa in the New Century”). This section builds upon James Ferguson’s observation that “a wide range of social actors on the continent understand their own situations, and construct their strategies for improving them, in terms of an imagined ‘Africa’ and its place in a wider world” (6). Finally, based on my ethnography, I argue that a neoliberal discourse, which promotes an unmediated link between the market and the self, can be attractive to those who aspire to categorical equality and the transformation of their condition. In erasing scale and structural factors, self-enhancement values restore dignity and a sense of agency that were robbed by colonization, failed post-independence state-led development, and the humanitarian discourse that followed since the 1990s. In particular, the practice of self-branding in the music industry allows for performative anticipation of full economic and cultural participation.

Following Achille Mbembe, who notes that the scope of research on Africa is often limited by a focus on “the problem of knowing whether or not the acts they describe and interpret are inscribed in a process of either resistance or

accommodation to the established order” (“Provisional Notes” 29), this paper focuses on the meaning that the studied agents give to their own actions. This approach is specifically important with respect to the study of popular culture, and youth-dominated cultural industries in particular. Karin Barber noted in *Readings in African Popular Culture* in 1997 that “cultural commentators have been so keen to valorize the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘traditional’ that they have simply ignored what most people are interested in” (7). Even while there is much focus on popular culture in contemporary scholarship on Africa, the efforts to emphasize new ways of “resisting,” through political and social critique, parody, or transgression—or often simply through poverty—have obscured major trends or recast them as the advancement of a commercial culture which does not deserve further analysis.

Yet, I cannot resolve myself to describing Tosyn, the Nigerian radio celebrity, singer, and social media influencer who I lived with, as well as all the African entrepreneurs I know who work tirelessly toward the transformation of the continent, simply as clueless agents in the expansion of a hegemonic world order. The perception of “Africa” and black communities in general as the last frontier of neoliberal participation tends to turn them into proxies for an ideological battle onto which Western hopes and anxieties can be projected, leaving little room for an elaborate understanding of how agents make their actions intelligible to themselves.

Backdrop to the Emergence of a Renewed Nigerian Music Industry

In the late 1980s, economic crisis and the rise of piracy caused foreign record labels whose structures had supported global acts such as Fela Kuti, King Sunny Ade, or Majek Fashek, to close their Lagos offices (Adedeji 252). The Nigerian government adopted a Structural Adjustment Program in 1986 under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and while it proved unsuccessful, it marked the commencement of an economic liberalization process with major consequences for the music industry. In 1992, regulatory control of broadcasting and telecommunications was transferred from government ministries to two new regulatory bodies, whose powers were extended in 1998 and 1999 to further liberalize these sectors, creating intense competition.

Privatization led to a proliferation of TV and radio channels hungry for new content (Akpan 98; Barber “Popular Arts” 7), resulting in a flow of foreign images, ideas, and narratives (Larkin). The forces of media, technology, and travel, as in the rest of the world, fueled consumerism and the craving for new commodities and

spectacles (Appadurai *Modernity at Large* 14). While exposure to “global” cultural content increasingly connected material inequality and stratification to questions of cultural difference (Ferguson), it also introduced channels for the expression of difference, promoting the idea of categorical equality (Wilk). In the late 1990s, popular music centered around rising private radio and television, heavily reliant on foreign content; however, ten years later, digital music production technologies and social media allowed local artists to create their own version of celebrity culture and completely eclipse foreign artists.

The new direction taken by marketing has supported this trend. Whereas earlier marketing techniques used the rhetoric of development to present the potential consumer with a teleological project (becoming “modern”), new brand marketing aims at insinuating itself into existing social structures to capture attention and insert strategically placed corporate signs (Bradshaw and Zwick). Drawing on ideas of governmentality (in the Foucauldian sense), this new marketing taps into existing cultural diversity with the aim of increasing exposure to a brand (Pier). Since the rise of new communication technologies in the late 2000s, telecom companies operating in Nigeria have established relations with local artists who bring their uniquely fashioned identities—as reggae singer, “indigenous artist,” cosmopolitan, etc.—to corporate sponsors. Through their association with brand ambassadors, companies draw new populations into global capitalism as consumers, regardless of their disposable income.

Writing about dance and beer companies in Uganda, David Pier has situated this phenomenon in the context of African clientelism, with its dense fabric of patronage networks through which wealth is redistributed. Indeed, the complex, shifting set of obligations maintained between artists and corporations is not wholly different from the relations traditionally entertained with a powerful patron. In Yoruba popular theatre and music, the “big men” gratified by a praise-singer would typically be expected to reward such artist with cash (Barber “Preliminary Notes” 351; Waterman). Today’s contractual relations between artists and corporations are also highly publicized and considered to be symbols of status, with the public scrutinizing the financial details through blogs and news websites.

Since the primary objective of biopolitical marketing is circulation, popular music’s function as a conduit for other forms of interaction has made it a medium of choice for marketers. In *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination*, Veit Erlmann explains that “music becomes a medium that mediates, as it were, mediation” (6). This is particularly true of African popular music, which Jesse

Shipley (“Transnational Circulation” 368) described as a primary mode through which African youths establish connections, and, increasingly, imagine more enduring linkages. My ethnography shows that a main focus for Nigerian commercial artists is to create memorable lyrical hooks using local slang and to feed dance crazes, both designed to boost circulation. Social media also has a multiplier effect, which artists have aggressively seized upon by engaging with their fans through challenges or controversies. Since telecom companies control access to the Internet, they have created an ecosystem where any kind of engagement with artists on social media or streaming platforms directly benefits them through the consumption of cellular data.

Spearheaded by MTN, a pan-African telecom giant that started as a black-owned business in the wake of South Africa’s empowerment initiatives (Cotterill and Fick), telecom companies in Africa have conveyed a certain vision of art and success hinging upon celebrity culture (Halifu). Music is perceived as an important avenue of ostentatious social mobility, with sponsorship contracts reported to amount up to half a million U.S. dollars (Nairametrics.com), as well as talent shows that can position someone in the public eye seemingly overnight. Since the first season of MTN *Project Fame* in 2008 these competitions have proliferated, extending to other creative pursuits, and developing innovative formats specifically tailored for the African market. For example, First Bank Nigeria developed the online reality writing competition *The Writer*, and MTN launched a lottery in which MTN subscribers can participate using their phone credit, whose prize is a collaboration with any artist of their choice, as well as branding, promotion and marketing opportunities.

At the same time, the conjunction of the “Africa rising” narrative and 2008 the financial crisis convinced many Nigerians living in the United States and the United Kingdom to move to Lagos, where they brought a strongly afro-optimist vision, market-mediated identity politics, and entrepreneurial ambitions infused with neoliberal aesthetics (Shipley “Aesthetic of the Entrepreneur” 252). Since the early 2000s, the business world has indeed been celebrating Africa’s strong economic growth and hailing the continent as the next investment destination (Gabay). While this narrative has been somewhat qualified in recent years, by the early 2010s “Africa rising” had become a business mantra: the Economist used it as its cover page in 2011; followed by Time magazine a year later; and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank both used the slogan in 2014, as the title for an international conference (in Maputo, Mozambique) and a feature story

(Worldbank.org), respectively. The same rhetoric was ubiquitous in the world’s top universities, as illustrated, among others, by the 2014 African Economic Forum at Columbia University, titled: “A Continent Ascends, Emergent Perspectives from the Frontier.” Economic enthusiasm is now increasingly recast as cultural confidence, in a celebration of Africans’ potential in a globalized world. The conference “Creating Wakanda: Youth, Technology and Entrepreneurship Across Africa” held at Oxford’s School of Government in 2018, for example, was a celebration of what private enterprise can do for “Africa,” a private sector controlled by Africans.

These discourses have resonated with many members of the African diaspora who were eager to participate in the transformation of the continent, as my interviews and participant-observation (in Lagos and online) revealed. From record label executives and digital platform founders to radio station owners and even artists, some of the most influential personalities in the Nigerian music industry today are indeed “repats.” Convinced of the international potential of Nigerian music, foreign-educated entrepreneurs have been determined to bring African content and business practices on par with “international standards” to “put Africa on the map.” Presenting themselves as less focused on social ties (though well-connected) and more on market opportunities and efficiency, they have been instrumental in disseminating corporate values and a new outlook on how business should be conducted. These cosmopolitans emphasize the importance of attracting investors and opening up share capital, (in contrast to the traditional model which favors full ownership for control and prestige), building scalable businesses, and tapping into Nigeria’s cultural capital as a path to prosperity.

A separate force that brings together entrepreneurship, media, and the place of Africa in the world is the rise of the charismatic churches. Encouraging their members to seize the consumerist possibilities and media technologies offered by neoliberal capitalism (Meyer), the charismatic churches have provided moral justification for individuated modes of wealth accumulation and self-branding. Charles Piot (56) has described how the Pentecostal focus on the individual appeals to those who are weary of the old narratives that have for too long defined Africa as victim of forces and histories beyond its control.

The salvatory power of private enterprise and the belief in individual potential appear necessary in a context where the state is seen as incurably passive and predatory. From bus drivers to corporate executives, Lagosians express a lack of faith in state-led development and a sense of pride in achieving success without

government support. Government officials are considered so deeply corrupt and incompetent that the only state action which can be envisioned is that of facilitator. Several persons from different backgrounds casually explained during my fieldwork in Lagos: for the state to become a development actor, a revolution would be needed first. Since revolution seems a distant prospect in current day Lagos as most people see their countrymen exclusively focused on their individual issues and “hustles,” the rise of the private sector appears to be the only viable option to move forward.

In particular, ordinary people understand that a discrepancy exists between their focus and the interest of the government. Oil accounts for less than ten percent of Nigeria’s gross domestic product, but over two thirds of the federal government’s revenue are derived from it (KPMG 4), making the government appear disembedded from social reality. Far from being discouraged by the lack of government support, entertainment professionals commonly joke between themselves that the government does not understand the potential of music until they can profit from it and that, indeed, the entertainment industry may be successful because the government has not paid attention to it. In contrast, the Lagos State Government has been celebrated for its pragmatic and outward-looking policies in recent years, further marking out Lagos from the rest of the country. Notably, the Lagos Global initiative (which refers to the Office of Overseas Affairs and Investment established in 2015) has been largely met with approval and was hailed as a model of what the government should do by several music professionals I talked to. Its slogan, “Lagos to the World,” is a phrase frequently deployed by artists and commentators that regular Lagosians may also use in everyday speech. The “global” as a discursive element (Tsing) is used here strategically from the periphery in hopes of reaching the “global centers.”

The Role of Cultural Production in New Africa

In addition to being celebrated from an investor perspective because of its huge “untapped markets,” Africa’s “potential” is also a source of hope at the beginning of the twenty-first century because of the particular brand of creativity and cosmopolitanism that the continent generates. Characterized by hybridity, transnationality, and mobility, the African identity as defined in the Afropolitan movement (Eze; Mbembe; Mbembe and Balakrishnan) is well adapted for today’s de-territorialized world. These “comparative strengths” find particular expression

in the artistic domain, where an orientation to being-in-the-world, to appropriating and constantly assembling different signs and registers meets the possibilities offered by new communication technologies. Mbembe argues indeed that, increasingly, the term “Africa” tends to refer to a “geo-aesthetic category” (“Africa in the New Century” 322).

This is certainly the case when it comes to Nigerian pop music. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a “Nigerian” song to be the result of the collaboration between a beat-maker in London, a rapper in Lagos, and a video director in Atlanta, all attentive to infusing their craft with “Africanness.” Far from the attempts to provide an essentialist view of Africa, Nigerian artists showcase instead the dexterity with which they wield multiple influences, transforming them into flattened out symbols that can be juxtaposed. A public relations professional explained: “[artists] often wear a locally made dress but will accessorize it with a Gucci bag.” Accordingly, musicians embrace the idea developed by Richard Wilk that “the global system is a common code, but its purpose is not common identification, but instead the expression of distinctions, boundaries and disjunctures, in ways that subtly serve particular groups and interests” (124). Rather than rejecting this common code because it originated elsewhere, media-savvy Nigerians try to make sure that their interests, as well as those of the “Continent,” are served by the insertion of upwardly mobile Africans in this system.

Shiplee argues on the basis of his study of Azonto, a musical-dance craze that originated in Ghana and was later taken up by Nigerian pop stars, that mobility itself is a sign of Africanness and personal success (“Transnational Circulation” 363). Popular culture has become a primary means of managing meaning in the formation of globalized identities in an interconnected but culturally diverse world (Hannerz), and young Africans are very much aware of this. While economic needs and personal preferences are certainly relevant to individual aspirations, Arjun Appadurai has drawn attention to the cultural processes through which “collective horizons” are shaped, pointing out that they form the basis for collective aspirations (“The Capacity to Aspire” 67). In Nigeria, as in much of the continent, world-making projects that fantasize Africa on a global scale are very much in the minds of everyone. Brad Weiss has noted the “ordinariness of extraordinary aspirations” in the streets of Arusha (38).

In Lagos at the end of the 2010 decade, with 60% of the population under 25 (CIA.gov), these extraordinary aspirations are personified by two names in particular: Wizkid and Davido. Having racked up international awards and world-

famous collaborations, these poster boys of Afropop are constantly praised both in the media and informal talk for presenting an image of African success to the world. I could observe (on social media, in the bus, at restaurants, and a variety of other casual settings) how the pride and sense of possibility conjured by these two names cut across social class, occupation, and, to a large extent, tribe. At a panel on “Musical Culture and Identity Formation” at the University of Lagos as part of the 2018 Conference of the Lagos Studies Association (LSA), a student explained to the enthusiastic applause of the audience: “Last month Wizkid walked the Dolce & Gabana walkway in Milan. Twenty years ago the most famous artist, Daddy Showkey, was showing *us* the ghetto, bare chest. We have come a long way” (emphasis added). Daddy Showkey belongs to a generation of reggae artists hailing mainly from the overcrowded Ajegunle neighborhood of Lagos, singing bouncy songs about a variety of topics that aimed to be relatable for the average Nigerian. In contrast, through their material success, pop stars provide a path for the negotiation of a self-conscious “Africanness” in a globalized world. Such sentiments are frequently expressed on social media as well, with one Twitter user praising artists for “showing us class, money, style, freshness. Not [...] rough hair.”

Artists also have the potential to project a certain image of places under-represented in the “global imagination,” as emphasized by another LSA panelist: “New media relies on iconic visual cues. Lagos can provide that: the Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge, the mansions in Banana Island. The visual elements that exist in Lagos could be harnessed more effectively.” Thus, beyond individuated modes of success, music’s multiple mediations can also apply the signs of prestige and cool to the motherland to transform its perception outside. This what Wizkid did when describing his hometown to fashion magazine *Vogue*:

New York style is very, very similar to Lagos style. Because New York is a cosmopolitan city, you have so many different people from different parts of the world, just throwing on whatever they like, whatever they think looks good. Lagos style is the same; when you stand on the street, that is like a fashion show on its own. (Houghton)

The capacity to export cultural products is widely recognized as a crucial strength that needs to be leveraged, including through neoliberal strategies, for Africans to become actors and shapers of globalization. Addressing African artists at the Johannesburg Goethe-Institut’s African Futures Festival in 2017, Mbembe explained: “Our major cities must set up metropolitan cultural districts with tax benefits for artists and purchasers. We have to tap into the growth of African

diasporas and the way in which this diaspora has historically contributed to the expansion and export of African-hybrid forms of popular culture.” Lagosians will notably present their cultural production and entrepreneurial mentality as Nigeria’s competitive advantages in the contest for a “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 6).

Consumer-facing multinational corporations have taken heed of Nigerians’ ardency for the arts and striven to be perceived as supporters of local artistic industries, especially music. The fantastic expansion, over the last decade, of the telecommunications industry in particular cannot be separated from its involvement with popular music (Osumare). MTN, which was arguably the largest source of revenue for Nigerian artists at a point in time, used the 2018 World Music Day to celebrate its role in the “transformation of the African music industry” (Businessday.ng). Emphasizing a national and African artistic identity, and linking it to neoliberal values of individual aspiration, competition, and consumption is a way for multinational telecom companies operating in Nigeria to reinforce their “proudly Nigerian” selling point while reshaping this very identity. Hailing from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, they offer an aspirationally global discourse: “We are creating cultural platforms to develop African culture” (personal communication with a former Marketing Manager of two telecom companies). Through this process, individual and corporate aspirations appear tied into a broader movement of African emergence. Such a project also offers motivation to those, mostly Nigerian, who manage those corporations. When a Nigerian executive at the Lagos office of a multinational music TV channel expressed what he saw as the mission statement of his job: “We’re taking Nigeria to the world, we’re adding that new color to the palette of ethnicities/genres,” this was seamlessly connected to the social values he holds. From telecom executives to corporate lawyers or investment bankers, the passion is palpable when they discuss their involvement in the music business: “When it comes to music, our artists can sit at the table,” one explained.

Engaging with local artists was initially a cost-efficient strategy for multinational companies tapping the Nigerian market in the early 2000s. The amount of pride elicited by the development of the Nigerian popular music industry into the “new cool,” with Wizkid and Davido often hailed as the ambassadors of Africa, is a self-fulfilling prophecy of neoliberal discourse on opportunity and value creation. Through the rags to riches and “Africa to the world” stories told in and around the music, the periphery is projected as a site of possibilities in the 21st century, no longer to be defined in collective consciousness only through its

limitations. Popular music in Africa presents an image of the individual fluidly moving across social and geographic boundaries, erasing structural inequalities. Since Davido is the son of a billionaire and most Nigerian stars come from the middle class, the narrative told in corporate offices as well market eateries often focuses on Wizkid and Olamide instead, who both grew up in the overcrowded residential areas of Lagos Mainland. In the absence of basic infrastructure, cultural products are easier to export than other commodities, and the presence in global charts and international award shows creates a much-celebrated categorical equivalency (see Wilk on beauty pageants). “African” and “international” become different “standards” within a single framework. As the head of a leading African streaming platforms put it, regarding his efforts to negotiate the rights of international artists in spite of the current lack of demand: “We want to also have foreign artists on the platform, so you can have Wizkid next to a Beyoncé and people will see that they are on the same level.”

The Negation of Scale as a Pre-condition for Hope and Action

A characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity is that the agent evolves in a society in which the political, social, and economic structures are taken for granted (Türken et al.). In this context, a discourse promoting work on the self appears empowering, since it emphasizes the transformation of what the agent has control over. An individual is responsible for the development of her own self, managing it as though it were a business (Gershon), and limitless possibilities are supposed to ensue. As Foucault observed with regard to human capital theory, just as neoliberal thought was gaining ground, economic science shifted its focus in the relationship between worker and capitalist to the standpoint of the former (224). This change of paradigm has had dramatic consequences in Africa, where, as Pier described about Uganda, “development” is now less associated with top-down government projects, and more with individual efforts to attract investors, expressed through words such as “mobilizing,” “promotion,” and “exposure,” with entrepreneurialism promoted as a moral and spiritual activity (416) (see also Piot for a similar argument about Togo).

The reconfiguration of subjectivity called for by the neoliberal conception of agency is supported by positive psychology, a transformative work on emotions that Sam Binkley has described as a “work of governmentality” (48). Happiness or confidence thus become means to achieve success that the neoliberal subject can

choose to strategically deploy by working on herself. Taking human capital theory to another level, positive psychology achieves a radical transcendence of the classical capitalist disjunction between work and consumption, the latter being traditionally associated with a future moment of satisfaction and happiness (De La Fabián and Stecher). This discourse is self-reinforcing among Nigerian entertainment professionals, who consistently celebrate and reward “leadership skills.” As a female DJ and record label executive said to an audience of aspiring artists: “When you enter the room, you are a product first, you need to be seen as a bankable individual.” Here, “bankable individual” means someone who exudes confidence. Another Nigerian record label executive lamented to me that: “In Nigeria they make music like they’re pleading, in the US they make music like they’re an authority, even if they are from the hood!” He knows that there is a diaspora market ready to buy “with pride,” and, accordingly, he encourages his artists to change their subjective perspective on themselves to become successful. In addition, since it has been widely assumed at the highest echelons of the Nigerian music industry that “good music is music that makes you happy,” artists are expected to radiate positivity so as to allow the public to forget the issues they are faced with.

Consisting of four “sources of competitive advantage” that can be cultivated—confidence, hope, optimism, and resiliency—“positive psychological capital” (Luthans and Youssef) is characteristic of the conception of people as owners of skills and traits, in which they are expected to continuously invest. But while this theorization of neoliberal governmentality captures the autonomy and agency embedded in market rationality, it does not fully break away from the possessive individualism that was central to the liberal perspective. Yet the social contract model of personhood fails to account for the determining role of audience perception in the definition of the self in the context of the new economy—which can be described as a virtual, reflexive and networked economy (Adkins 111). Rather than the accumulation of embodied skills and traits as properties of the self, it is the effects produced by the performance of the self on the intended audience that is characteristic of the neoliberal self. This model of self-conscious or reflexive management of appearances was originally developed to describe the transformation of cultural production from a system organized around the author and the embodiment of her creative expression to one governed by branding and simulation (Lury). Adkins argues, however, that as the distance between

production, products, and consumption is erased, the new economy as a whole is organized by the cultural principles of the brand.

In contemporary Western societies, the entrenched conception of the corporate form as a separate, bounded entity led to considerable resistance against the current phenomenon of self-branding. As a contrast, in Lagos the concept and practice smoothly integrated into the dominant model of sole proprietorship and “building oneself up.” Furthermore, Barber described already how the advent of videos in Nigeria meant that the youth were able to witness their own activity of conspicuous consumption writ large, to the extent that in consuming video dramas, they were mimicking the process of big men’s self-creation displayed for them (“Preliminary Notes” 359).

As notions of ownership and the workings of property rights are being significantly reconfigured all around the world, the case of Nigeria’s music industry may show that, in the words of the Comaroffs, Africa is “running ahead” of Euro-America (“Theory from the South” 32). In the absence of a robust intellectual property regime to cling on to, Nigerians have rapidly embraced a system in which claims to ownership may be indirect; instead of rights attached to creations, ownership exists via the negotiated interactions between audience and brands. In this new framework for economic activity, the neoliberal subject invests in themselves and in the audience by constantly focusing on building, educating, and entertaining a public for her brand. Indeed, it is crucial to develop the audience’s ability to decipher the signs that the neoliberal agent creates, reworks, circulates. The radio personality I was living with would spend day and night working on her media and entertainment brand, and, outside of her three-hour show, that work would consist in engaging with her audience from home: drafting captions for her social media posts and catchphrases she could use the next day on her show, interacting with fans and celebrities on various social media platforms, keeping up with the latest trends, creating five-minute podcasts, writing on her blog, etc. Since most of her revenue comes from endorsements, her outfits and general appearance also require careful thought. Several aspiring artists explained to me that most of their efforts are spent on social media, since creativity is not about the music’s quality but about targeting the right market and positioning.

In the new economy—and in Lagos in particular, where traditional revenue streams are often inadequate—an engaged audience is used as a basis for recognition and rewards of one’s work. The audience thus becomes a key intermediary in economic relations. But as Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian

Longhurst note, “the essential feature of [the] audience experience is that, in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time” (68). While measures of “intangibles” such as customer loyalty and satisfaction are used by management consulting and accounting firms for calculations of economic value (Adkins)—or audience ratings for cultural goods (Lury)—the diffuse nature of contemporary audiences and the flexibility of neoliberal corporate relations means that the only constant is the individual. While this phenomenon is visible in the United States as well, with business empires being built on communication strategies centered around one person, who can then apply their brand to various products and services—as is the case with influencers and pop stars, but also with Donald Trump or Elon Musk—for cultural and structural reasons this practice is an integral part of Lagosian life.

Far from being limited to artists’ marketing strategies and deals with corporations, the idea of coding attributes of personhood as part of the process of branding oneself extends to all social relations. Entertainment lawyers will cultivate their own brand of cool, showcasing an aspirational lifestyle of professional success. Pirate mixtape sellers in Alaba market emphasize their ascension in the face of hardship, with thousands of social media followers. Seen as a democratic means of empowerment, personal branding is also in line with the particularization of prosperity brought by God’s blessing which is encouraged by the charismatic churches (Meyer 19). A woman with an amputated arm thus turned her plight into a brand with her “1armwarrior” signature and 21,000 followers on Instagram, allowing her to convert her positivity and faith into tangible consumer items.

The theoretical framework that focuses on the performance of the self renders visible the negotiation involved in the self-fashioning that permeates the Nigerian entertainment industry. Under the coded terms “confidence,” “pride,” or “happiness,” people understand that a certain narrative is expected to be presented. In the words of an artist manager: “if you walk proudly in your slippers in Bariga [an overcrowded Lagos suburb], there’s no way they [music video channels] will take it.” Conversely, a social media influencer and radio personality who is also a recording artist was careful not to promote her music in the mainstream, as it would risk confusing her brand. Indeed, one of her songs is called “Fimisile” (meaning “leave me alone”) and describes the emotional labor that she performs to always appear “upbeat,” “happy,” and “fresh” on her show, social media content, and during social events.

As part of this reflexive management of appearances through self-promotion and branding, ethnic identity has come to play a strategic and complex role. Since many mid-level actors in the Nigerian music industry have been trained by returnee entrepreneurs with a strong Afro-optimist consciousness, an explicit discourse of “strategic cosmopolitanism” (Mitchell) is deployed as part of business savvy. During a filmed discussion intended for his YouTube channel, an artist manager explained to me: “We have things to offer them [foreigners] that they can’t find on Google.” Anna Tsing has shed light on such global connections, deconstructing the “global” to expose it as the process of finding new sites of engagement. She explains that the appropriation for capital of the value produced in unplanned patches is what makes the concentration of wealth possible. Lagos entrepreneurs display a clear understanding of these mechanisms of capital accumulation under global capitalism, using their Africanness as a differentiating factor to attract investors. “Africa is a thing now, so we have to pre-package our products as African,” the artist manager added.

The fact that twenty years ago American music was blasting throughout Lagos is something people like to recall—and probably exaggerate—to contrast it to the situation today. Foreign labels left Nigeria at the turn of the 1980s, following the end of Nigerian music’s golden age, and the lack of structure and financial backing caused the local music industry to almost collapse amidst rampant piracy and ongoing political and economic crisis. Today, any American superstar is eclipsed by local artists, with pirated mixtape sellers not even bothering to add international songs to their compilations anymore. While Nigerians all celebrate this general evolution, public debates surround the terms on which Nigerian culture is commercialized. As Nigerian popular music has decidedly moved away from replicating American hip hop and has found its own successful voice, many Nigerians are suspicious of the exoticizing efforts of certain industry professionals. These tensions are reflected in the ongoing discussion about the appropriate naming of the genre.

The debate surrounding how to market Nigerian popular music internationally is indicative of a subtle understanding of the dynamics of global capitalism that Nigerian professionals intend to deploy with respect to their cultural production. They embrace the promise of universal recognition embedded in a neoliberal discourse that allows for the misrecognition of scale (see Gershon) but refuse to simply serve as the foot soldiers of global capitalism. Conscious that difference is an intrinsic feature of the global economy of music (Erlmann), they are keen to

cooperate through self-presentation and self-differentiation, but in a rather different way from the *Ethnicity, Inc.* model described by the Comaroffs. Instead of providing a reified version of what the Comaroffs call the “simulacra of ethnicized selfhood” (*Ethnicity, Inc.* 139) to fit a predefined category of otherness, Nigerian ethno-entrepreneurs—in the same way as Africans elsewhere throughout the continent—want to promote a dynamic version of their “culture,” reflecting the syncretism and constant innovation that constitutes their lived experience.

Barber noted with regard to African popular culture in general, “performances constitute audiences, and vice versa” (“Preliminary Notes” 353). Live performance no longer lies at the center of Nigerian public’s engagement with popular music; yet, as digitally circulating songs have become the primary mode of informal connections for Africans born since the 1980s (Shipley “Transnational circulation” 368), audience-hood is a renewed dynamic, an interactive force. Interaction is a feature of the new economy and the audience is now the primary corporate measure in the Nigerian music industry, regardless of any monetary transactions, since financial rewards will often come from other sources. As a result, “engaging” with the right audience is essential, even when using platforms that give access to a limitless range of audience. Barber has described how, in Yoruba popular theatre, while the performers and the audience share the same plane in space, the audience is treated as internally differentiated, with its own foci or centers of attention that the performers acknowledge and address (“Preliminary Notes” 351). In particular, the gratified addressees would be expected to reward the praise-singer.

As Nigerian popular music is offered an increasingly international platform through global promotion and inclusion in top playlists on streaming websites, the question of audience representation is problematized. The rise of private radios and Internet broadcasting, the spread of mobile phones to every corner of Nigeria, and the wide distribution of pirated mixtapes (including to the diaspora with the advent of digital download websites) had made more palpable the imagination of an atomized, dispersed but coherent “Nigerian” audience. This notion is, of course, not meant as an analytical category, but is an ideological trope that people in Lagos resort to (erasing, for example, the Northern states where the application of Sharia law makes the distribution of party music more complicated). Nigerians express tremendous support and gratitude to artists for putting Nigeria “on the map,” thus viewing artists as “ambassadors” of the country—sometimes even suggesting (only half-jokingly) that they could replace current politicians in certain positions.

As the renewed interest in Nigerian music by international media and music corporations grew and tempted artists who had already achieved fantastic success throughout the continent to set their eyes on new horizons, different projections of audience-hood started to emerge. The two biggest stars in Nigeria (and arguably Africa), Davido and Wizkid, signed worldwide deals with Sony Music in 2016 and 2017, respectively, as the record label was launching an office in Lagos. While these moves were initially widely celebrated as further evidence that Nigerian artists can “sit at the table,” the enthusiasm soon gave way to disappointment, in the face of growing indications that the collaboration with the Japanese-American behemoth was not merely facilitating the export of Nigerian music, but instead was reformatting some of Nigeria’s favorite cultural products to tailor them to new markets. As is often the case, the expectations were eventually frustrated since the anticipated public did not respond favorably at the time, despite considerable marketing efforts in the United States and the United Kingdom (Born 382). Meanwhile, the Nigerian public perceived that it had been overlooked.

While both Wizkid and Davido have their own labels via which they can release new songs for the Nigerian market, the local public and artists do not envision a two-track system in which Nigerian tastes and practices would remain cut off from the international market. It is exactly the opposite view that motivates artists and the millions of people who stand behind them locally. Rather than presenting a edulcorated version of their culture to a “global” public to apply the *Ethnicity, Inc.* model (Comaroff and Comaroff), Nigerians have embraced the concept of ethnoscape (Appadurai *Modernity at Large*) and intend to leverage it for global access. After largely unmet expectations of global reach for his Los Angeles-recorded album under Sony Music, Wizkid came back to Lagos and released hit after hit, in collaboration with the best Nigerian talents. He announced that his forthcoming album will be titled “Made in Lagos,” a marked return to the register of local pride, in contrast to the album recorded under Sony Music’s patronage which was titled “Sounds from the Other Side” and may have appeared to dismissively present some exoticism to the Global North. Davido has similarly reframed his ambitions and asserted the centrality of his “African” public in a communication stint with *The Guardian*:

They [Sony Music] tried to fix me up with a producer and I decided to come home, but I’m still signed to them, it’s going good. They have realized how much potential is here because even when I am all over the world it is my African songs that even the oyibo [white] people fuck with. (Porbeni)

Using “Back to Basics” as a slogan for his brand, Davido went on to win the Best International Act Award in June 2018 at the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards in Los Angeles, one of the most important awards ceremonies in the global music industry—an information that flooded the social media feed of Nigerians for days.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how most Nigerians at every echelon of the commercial music industry have adopted a neoliberal discourse postulating that the branded, enterprising, and commodified self can performatively transform its circumstances and contribute to changing Nigeria’s—and Africa’s—“place-in-the-world.” The premise of commensurability offered by neoliberal ideology is fueling performative anticipation among Lagos youths when other options seem too distant. Using the frameworks laid out by Celia Lury and Lisa Adkins, I have shifted the focus from the cultivation of the self to the performative possibilities of such discourse. With this study of young, upwardly mobile Lagosians, I have described a subjectivity which is significantly orientated towards the needs and desires of an audience which is ever present, real or imagined.

Young Nigerians want full participation in “global” culture and economic networks. But while this accession to global membership involves external recognition, the discourse of entrepreneurship allows for the assertion of agency in recasting the external gaze as a consumer to win over. An artist manager explained it in those terms: “Our music needs to be pre-packaged for the global market, we can’t wait for Sony or Universal to do the work for us.” Rather than “yearnings for cultural convergence with an imagined global standard” (Ferguson 20), this paper has attempted to show that it is a claim to categorical equivalence that drives the cultural and economic endeavors of young Africans. As Wilk has theorized with respect to Belizeans and international beauty pageants, they want to participate in the “global” contest, or, as Lagosians say instead, with business always in mind: “sit at the table.” A music executive thus posted a picture of himself literally sitting around a conference table with the representatives of a Chinese investment fund captioned: “Never stop dreaming and believing!” But in contrast to the Belizeans described by Wilk, Nigerians intend on winning. As I have shown with the examples of Wizkid and Davido, the two emblems of the “Lagos to the World” slogan, while Nigerians’ world-making projects certainly fantasize a global scale,

it has to provide more benefits than nominal membership. Furthermore, “global” here is not a euphemism for Euro-America but needs to be understood instead as the opposite of “bilateral,” a refusal of dependence to a metropole.

Of course, social networks, on which much of the movement described in this paper relies, magnify a sense of reach and the importance of a trend. In spite of the celebrated “global connectedness,” one is primarily exposed to content originating from one’s direct and indirect social circle—which, in the case of Nigerians, reaches to every continent through ethnoscape—thus amplifying the effect of performativity. The requirements of self-branding also bring about a high level of conformism which leaves little room for political debate or collective action, and can even weaken social ties, as I was able to witness with my host, whose self-fashioning caused to shun unplanned social interactions.

Yet, when a situation is dire, what are the alternatives to reconfiguring structural forces as individual and cultural challenges capable of resolution? Could it be that the restoring of a sense of agency and pride is a priority? Isn’t it what the regional head of Sony Music, a “repat” from London, is attempting to do when he declares at a party with upcoming artists: “This is just the beginning, I can predict that in 2021 it will really explode.” Is it very different from Mbembe writing: “The typically “African” idea of art fully resonates with the digital spirit of our times. This is why there is a good chance that the art of the twenty-first century will be Afropolitan” (“Africa in the New Century” 322). In the same way in which Mbembe acknowledges that “there [is] a moment when French, English, or even Portuguese are no longer foreign languages, [but] African languages” (Balakrishnan and Mbembe 35), one can argue that capitalism—and even neoliberalism—are not necessarily foreign to Lagos.

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