

AFRICA

JESSE WEAVER SHIPLEY:

Living the Hiplife: Celebrity and Entrepreneurship in Ghanaian Popular Music.

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Hiplife is a relatively recent development in Ghanaian popular music growing, as the name suggests, from a confluence of the older Ghanaian Highlife and American hip-hop styles. In eight substantial chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion, Jesse Weaver Shiplely traces the evolution and development of the genre. This is located within the social and economic changes in Ghana, mostly during the 1990s, as the state gradually relaxed its hold on the media and many other aspects of life. He then presents several case studies, considering particular artists or groups of artists as exemplars of this fast-changing world, mostly in Ghana, but also with a telling extension into the diasporic community in the USA. Shipley is very much at home in this world and many aspects of the book show his long-term engagement with the music, the musicians and their cultural world. He is clearly a participant observer, contributing mostly his expertise in management and documentation that is valued by his artist friends.

The book has a logical structure, as Shipley describes it: “[The first] four chapters [sketch] a broad picture of how Hiplife emerged as a genre and became significant to national discourse. The second half of the book examines how the genre takes on new forms of urban and transnational media circulation in shaping an entrepreneurial aesthetic” (p. 133). This raises an interesting conundrum for any author of a study of this nature: how much time do you devote to describing the significance of all manner of events, statements and lyrics that derive their meaning from the Ghanaian rather than a more cosmopolitan context? Shipley generally gets this about right for the general reader although there were moments where my experience is different from Shipley’s, and I felt that some aspects of complex meanings or issues were lost. An example might be the use of the verb “to chop”. At its simplest, this is a Ghanaian pseudonym for eating but it is used with a variety of other meanings. Shipley provides a good explanation of the multi-vocality of the word (p. 141) but underplays one important usage in connection with corruption, when money given by government or authority for a specific purpose fails to reach its intended recipient and is “chopped” by someone further up the food chain.

Throughout the book, there are many excellent examples of engaged writing where Shipley presents either classic “thick description”, offering a personal narrative of events relating to a particular artist set within a detailed theoretical and cultural context, or a detailed discussion of an issue, focused on an artist and interspersing his narrative with relevant interviews. The best of these, for me, is the chapter, “Ghana@50 in the Bronx: Sonic nationalism and new diasporic disjunctures” – although the title is not the snappiest. It is almost as if the author, finding himself on his own territory in the USA, is most able to observe and comment on the changing factors through which Ghanaians create diaspora. Shipley often takes specific examples then extrapolates them to a general principle. These can be insightful but are sometimes less persuasive, for example, “Hiplife music and fashion entail

reflexive debates about meaning and misinterpretation as they circulate through urban spaces and technological media” (p. 180).

Hiplife is, of course, an urban music, and in Ghana, as in other places throughout the world, many young people aspire to an urban rather than a rural life and are physically moving into cities at an increasing rate. In this account the vast majority of Ghanaians, who live outside the capital, Accra, and its second city, Kumasi, are largely ignored or unrepresented in the focus on artists mostly based in Accra – where the main gravitational pull of resources and facilities is located, of course. Shipley observes (p. 148) that “Even the poorest youths listened to songs on their mobile phones”, but the poorest youths in rural subsistence areas are often pleased to have clothes and food, let alone a phone, and this is probably still true for a majority across the country even though the situation is changing rapidly.

As a musician, my main area of concern about this book was the lack of unpacking and explication of the sonic elements of Hiplife. The analysis of words, shifting between English, pidgin and Twi (mostly) is thorough and the cultural theories are all clearly laid out, but the actual music receives less attention. Rappers rely on musical scaffolding to give their words a hook and an edge in a highly competitive environment. There are some brief deconstructions of musical elements (e.g. pp. 118 and 124) but there are many musical stylistic differences between the artists and sonic references (such as the classic Hiplife 3 + 2 bell used in one) that do not receive any comment. Some of the musical statements are at best incomprehensible. What is a “light melodic rhythm [...] Aimed at an eclectic audience” (p. 219)? Then there are basic factual statements that could use more detail, such as the “typical sparse electronic beat” (p. 140) that is the only sonic component in several pages of excellent analysis of “Vote for Me” by the Native Funk Lords. One that actually made me laugh was a reference to “morally titillating rhythms” on page 268 – I might like to learn how to play those. Shipley is astute in his observations that rapping is about verbal eloquence and poetry. Specifically, “Hiplife rhythms and fashions are assessed in a rapper’s ability to shift between the indirect, proverbial persuasiveness of Ghanaian speech culture and the direct in-your-face bravado of American hip-hop” (p. 268). This detailed exposition is partly undermined by his lack of attention to the sonic components and quality of sonic analysis that does not match the verbal and cultural.

This is a thoroughly researched and engaged volume that is enjoyable to read and communicates clearly, adding another specific area to the collected study of African hip-hop recently edited by Eric Charry (Indiana, 2012). I am probably wanting it to do too much in addressing so many elements, but I regret that the excellence of the analysis in many areas is not carried through into the sonic arena.

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