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Metal Music in Africa

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Once referred to as metal music's 'last frontier',¹ Africa's entry into the heavy metal dialogue is reflective of this genre's universal appeal. Its arrival in the African continent has come as no surprise to headbangers, who have grown aware of the genre's reach in recent decades through internet chat rooms and social media platforms that have allowed for an international dialogue between fans. But how has metal music been able to successfully establish itself in the African continent?

This chapter will discuss sub-Saharan Africa's entrance into the rock and metal world. Because heavy metal's presence on the nations of North Africa has been detailed elsewhere,² I have chosen to focus my work primarily on sub-Saharan Africa. Whether in Madagascar, South Africa, Kenya or the budding scenes in West Africa, African metal stories reflect economic and political challenges that Westerners have likely never encountered. Metal's expansion into Africa has not only been validated by fervent fanbases in at least a dozen countries, but it has also been solidified by the establishment of national scenes producing bands, original recordings, record labels and media that cater to this specific industry, as well as the ever-increasing presence of metal festivals.

Overview of Metal in Africa

The countries where metal has found itself situated are those with strong colonial experiences and where connections to the former colonial country remain by way of imports of goods and culture. Though I would not argue that the colonial presence introduced rock music into Africa, what connects the threads more apparently is the direct link that colonialism has established to Europe for Africans in the form of stronger expatriate communities within and outside of Africa and the linguistic links that stem from this era.

Before metal scenes were born, a culture of rock music established itself quite well in the African continent. Different regions, in fact, had budding

scenes that began to form after the Second World War in the lead-up to the continent's independence movements. Notable scenes sprouted in Kenya, South Africa, Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Guitar-driven music, whether infusing the revered tones of American blues or the 'fuzzy' psychedelic sounds that enamoured Western audiences in the 1960s and 1970s, was nothing out of place in a continent that has long celebrated chordophones. As Michael E. Veal notes, 'sub-Saharan Africa has in fact been one of the world's richest spheres of guitar playing since World War II',³ adding the instrument's history in the continent⁴ 'has been a prismatic, syncretic dialogue between Western popular music and indigenous musical traditions'.⁵

Whether it was through the exposure to the music that Africans who served in the war brought home, or by way of imports and radio play, American artists such as Bill Haley, Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley were introduced to the continent to the same fanfare they enjoyed at home and in Europe. Perhaps the continent's most recognisable rock and metal scene today belongs to South Africa, whose introduction to rock music came by way of media exposure – with one exception: Black artists were not granted the same exposure as white artists as a result of the nation's policy of segregation known as apartheid. Thus, some of rock's notable artists that preceded the names mentioned above, such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard, did not enjoy the same success in South Africa as their white peers.⁶

Elsewhere in Southern Africa, the nation of Zambia enjoyed a successful psychedelic-inspired rock scene that emerged in the years following the nation's independence and was known as Zamrock. This style of 'fuzzy-rock', also known as *kalindula*, is a 'distinct musical style, (that) typically features a lead funky/fuzzy electric guitar and a rock/rumba beat mixing English and local languages'.⁷ Following an economic crisis that hit Zambia during the late 1970s, Zamrock left the collective conscious until a rejuvenated interest sparked by the re-releasing of the seminal albums of the era and a feature documentary in the 2010s reignited this music's memory.⁸

In Kenya, too, during the decades that followed the Second World War, the country was enjoying a rich array of guitar-led music.⁹ Further, musicians in the country enjoyed the opportunity to perform and release original music through a budding recording industry that included famed labels His Majesty's Voice and Equator Records. Noted musicians from this era included guitarists Daudi Kabaka and Fundi Konde – often cited as the first electric guitar players in East Africa – and later the fuzzy, psychedelic sounds of Black Savage, one of the country's earliest rock bands.¹⁰ However, the government's grip on political subversions, along with economic

difficulties that plagued the country throughout the 1980s and 1990s, greatly affected the aspirations of musicians.

North of Kenya, the nation of Somalia also enjoyed a vibrant music scene between the 1960s and 1980s, highlighted by the vibrant nightlife and venues that featured an array of funk, jazz and rock artists in what was known as the country's 'golden age'.¹¹ Sadly, the nation's perilous fall into a failed state has provided deleterious and nearly dangerous conditions for a rock or metal scene to exist in the country today. However, with regional shifts toward democratisation, only time will tell if the conditions for a new cultural revolution are in place.

On the opposite side of the continent, the region of West Africa has also seen once vibrant scenes disappear as a result of political and economic matters. Nigeria once housed a rich rock scene that saw acts such as Semi Colon, The Funkees, The Hykkers and Grotto¹² garner national fame. With rock's introduction to Nigeria in the 1960s by way of the film *Rock Around the Clock*,¹³ the scene continued through the nation's civil war before fading from collective memory in the late 1970s.¹⁴ Psychedelic rock also influenced acts in Ghana in the years following independence, notably the band Magic Aliens,¹⁵ who drew influence from acts such as Jimi Hendrix and Cream.

Metal's entrance into sub-Saharan Africa in many ways follows the genre's trajectory in the West and was itself a natural evolution out of national rock scenes that were well-cemented in the 1970s. The music spread through an array of international magazines or cassette trading that circulated throughout Africa by way of expatriate and 'pen pal' exchanges, which was a common practice in the 1980s and early 1990s, allowing fans the opportunity to hear the music of Western bands. In the following decades, the internet and file sharing replaced this practice, greatly accelerating the spread of metal into new countries.

With the establishment of scenes throughout various periods of development and political uncertainty in Africa, a diverse swath of acts has been able to navigate through an assortment of troubled waters and have survived dictatorships in Zimbabwe, authoritarian rule in South Africa and Kenya, overwhelming poverty in Madagascar, and a brutal civil war in Angola. Other nations with well-established metal scenes also include those with varied political circumstances, such as the single-party-led Togo, war-torn Mozambique and the African success stories of Botswana and Mauritius.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, metal has placed itself prominently within four regions: Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa and the Indian Ocean islands. Though the continent's Sahel regions boast of a proud history of

guitar-driven music within Tuareg communities, the existing scene in the region sees only a handful of acts. Further, the region of Central Africa, which includes the nations of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), have little rock or metal to report as of this writing, likely because of ongoing conflicts in the region, infectious poverty, derelict living conditions and ever-present low levels of health and education. Rock and metal scenes are likelier to be found within a 'metacultural context of modernity'¹⁶ in nations that enjoy better political and economic stability,¹⁷ and support an infrastructure that maintains an exchange of goods between Western countries, as well as steady electricity and internet connection.

But, as I note in the following sections, rock and metal's arrival into the African continent is not uniform throughout as the genres unfolded during different periods in different countries under different circumstances. And many scenes have come to life in spite of the various difficulties that citizens in African nations face, both political and economic. Metal's reach has shown that this music can speak to anyone, regardless of identity, because of its own brutal honesty and the unquestionable fervour that it invokes among its fans.

Southern Africa

The nation of South Africa has established a powerhouse scene that includes international touring acts and is also steadily receiving professional touring acts from the West. As a result of this country's success with rock and metal, regional nations, including Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe, were able to benefit from South Africa's musical infrastructure, as acts from the country were able to influence others in regional states through various transmissions, notably radio signals and expatriate communities that tethered to South Africa's economy for employment and educational opportunities. South Africa's metal scene, however, ascended through one of the more tumultuous periods in modern history: apartheid.

A policy of racial segregation that was implemented in 1948, apartheid saw the nation's white minority population control the nation's economy and land ownership. South Africa's non-white majority were not granted the same rights of citizenry as their white counterparts, nor did they benefit from the economy equally, which is still felt today, as the country remains one of the more unequal societies in the world.¹⁸ Authoritarianism affected

musicians and artists through an aggressive police state and a censorship board that monitored what music was being consumed and imported into the country through the Publications Act of 1974.¹⁹ Apartheid further ostracised the country politically and economically through the various sanctions by the world's economic powers.

Provided the difficulties of forming a metal scene under an authoritarian rule that monitored the activities of musicians no longer a part of the nation's identity, post-apartheid South Africa has now become home to the largest and most successful metal scene in the African continent, which boasts of acts that have not only released albums internationally but also performed outside of the continent, including Groinchurn, Voice of Destruction and Vulvodynia. South Africa has also benefitted from an international touring economy, allowing local bands the opportunity to engage in the transfer of musical and industry acumen between Western acts.

One nation that has become synonymous with metal music in Africa is Botswana. This sparsely populated, landlocked nation that borders South Africa has benefitted from the access provided by that nation's radio stations and accessible border crossings. It has become home to a metal scene that is the most documented of all of Africa, receiving coverage from media outlets such as *CNN*,²⁰ *The BBC*,²¹ *The Guardian*,²² *Metal Hammer*,²³ *The Wall Street Journal*,²⁴ and has been the subject of various documentaries.²⁵ Much of the attention focused on this scene, though, is on the local fan culture, which is marked by the presence of leather and outrageous – at times gaudy – props that include swinging chains, wooden guns, animal skulls and head-to-toe studded leather dresses. Fans in Botswana are also known to display hyperbolic behaviour, whether through their full-body handshakes or exaggerated sauntering that has been the focal point of the international press.

Much like their southern neighbours, the scene in Botswana traces its origins to the 1970s with the formation of the country's first rock band Nosey Road. By way of this influence, Botswana's first metal act, Metal Orizon, formed in the early 1990s, followed the path set by Nosey Road and performed original music marked by their heavier European influences. In the years since, acts such as STANE, Remuda, Dust N' Fire, Raven In Flesh, Overthrust, Wrust, and Skinflint have helped put Botswana's metal scene on the international map – with the latter three having performed outside of the continent, in both Europe and the United States.

With the international imprint being made by these two nations, nearby nations have also seen metal scenes come into existence to varying degrees,

regardless of their political and economic circumstances. Known for its stability, Namibia's scene has kept a low profile in relation to its neighbours. Highlighted by two seminal acts, subMission and Arcana XXII, as well as rockers Penilane, the country has hosted various touring acts from within and outside of the continent, even staging its own metal festival in the national capital, the Windhoek Metal Festival, which attracted bands from neighbouring countries and the United States.

The nations of Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique highlight metal music's tenacity as the preferred music for those reaching for an art form that best articulates their lived experiences through tumultuous circumstances, notably the latter two, whose scenes have come into being on the heels of devastating civil wars. Though the two lusophone nations are on opposite sides of the continent, both experienced similarities between their conflicts, leaving an emotionally scarred generation to navigate a new identity. Angola's civil war ended after 27 years in 2002, leaving over half a million dead, according to the United Nations.²⁶ It was from these ashes of devastation that a generation searching for their own hope gravitated toward heavy metal as part of their efforts to confront their new post-war surroundings, including the pummelling metalcore of Before Crush and the thrash-tainted sounds of Dor Fantasma. The country's first-ever metal festival was documented in the film *Death Metal Angola*.²⁷

Mozambique's nascent metal generation also grew up sheltering from the sounds of gunfire and bombs and has adopted the thunderous sounds of metal to best reflect the process of healing. The civil war that ravaged the country for fifteen years officially ended in 1992, having taken nearly one million lives,²⁸ yet sporadic conflict did not see the warring factions reaching peace until 2019.²⁹ Under these circumstances, which are documented in the film *Terra Pesada: An Unexpected Documentary*,³⁰ bands such as the extreme Morghelaris, groove-influenced Mikaya and the metalcore act Damning Cloudiness have performed and recorded original music, with some acts garnering exposure in neighbouring South Africa.

Formed in 2012, the Afro-groove of Zimbabwe's Dividing The Element has ignited this country's small metal scene. What sets them apart from other regional acts is their alacrity in performing in the dominant local language Shona,³¹ an indication to metal fans that they are a band riding their Western influences while paying respect to their nation's musical history. Dividing The Element's existence in a country that has suffered through one of the more nefarious leaderships in the twentieth century, marked by record-setting inflation, disastrous poverty, nefarious land grabs and a well-documented intolerance for political dissent, has proven

a remarkable resilience for a band existing in a country whose musicians are better known for their lives in exile than in their home.

Metal's place in Southern Africa shows that through resilience and determination, metal can reach fans longing for a voice that pushes down restrictive barriers because 'heavy metal can promote values in opposition to dominant power structures and damaging hegemonies such as oppression, restricting freedoms of expression, racism and sexism and thus also addresses political issues',³² that would need to be addressed for the sake of building not only a scene but also a nation.

East Africa

Much like their counterparts in South Africa, Kenyan metal fans have similarly seen their scene develop while confronting authoritarianism and state-sanctioned censorship. For Kenyans, the 2002 election, the first to be held without Daniel arap Moi, the strong-armed president who had led Kenya since 1978, set the country free of its authoritarian leadership. The scene, primarily centred in the capital city, Nairobi, had previously stumbled forward with a small number of acts, including Rock of Ages and the punk acts Class Suicide, Impish and Bloodshed, who were able to access rock and metal through motion picture soundtracks, expatriate connections and local black-market record shops. Though these acts, mainly formed at universities, were performing do-it-yourself (DIY) styled shows, the overreaching police and military were not far behind threatening scene participants and their families. Once Moi's party (KANU) was voted out, economic and democratic liberalisation brought forward more fans, as acts were now able to perform openly without fear.

Since multi-party elections have taken hold, Kenya's metal scene has been able to make a global imprint with acts such as Last Year's Tragedy and Duma garnering international press³³ and even an annual metal festival, the Nairobi Metal Festival.³⁴ However, performers in the scene today are not without their difficulties. Subsequent elections have seen the country spiral into ethnically motivated violence following contested results, having personally affected the identity of local metal fans who have embraced this identity as one without the onus of the ethnic cleavages that remain a vestige of the country's colonial legacy.

The Kenyan scene's imprint and continued success is necessary for regional nations to step up, including neighbouring Uganda, whose rock scene came to light during the late 2000s and early 2010s, and includes the

'African doom' duo of Vale of Amonition and alternative-metal rockers Phyv5. Elsewhere, atmospheric black metal act Nishaiar and 'Ethio rock' act Jano have stepped forward as the only two acts performing electric guitar-driven music in Ethiopia. Though this represents only a handful of acts in the region outside of Kenya, it is clear that the presence of acts, albeit in modicum in the region, signals a shift in the right direction for electric guitar music to once again return to prominence.

Indian Ocean Islands and West Africa

Another country in Africa that attributes the formation of its rock and metal scene to a political transition is Madagascar. The island nation that is home to over 25 million – primarily descendants of Austronesians and Black Africans – has since the early 1990s embraced aspects of Western life, including the public enjoyment of rock and metal, which had already found a small audience in the country by way of migrant workers and expatriates.

This reach westward came via the government's termination of a national policy of seclusion that was necessary for Madagascar to be able to 'obtain credit from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund' after the country found itself bankrupt during its Second Republic.³⁵ These expansions allowed for rock and metal to reach an even larger audience and for the prospective musicians to access instruments and other Western goods previously unavailable to them. Early bands in the country include Apost, Green and Kazar. The sound of these acts was in line with their Western influences yet is distinguished by the use of the Malagasy language in place of English and French, the former being rock and metal's primary language, and the latter being the nation's colonial language.

Since its inception, the rock and metal scene in Madagascar has grown to be one of the largest in any African country in terms of the number of acts, based on my personal observations, with a very diverse metal scene that features a wide array of styles and sees the nation's most popular acts enjoying wide levels of success nationally. This is the only scene in the entirety of Africa where hard rock acts are not only performing on national television but also in front of stadium-sized crowds. Further, what is remarkable about this particular scene is that musicians in Madagascar have carved out this scene in one of the poorest nations in the entire world. The World Bank estimates that 75 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, and only 13 per cent of the population has access to

steady electricity.³⁶ Internet service remains feeble, the equipment necessary to perform metal is financially out of reach for many, as evidenced by the fact that musicians here routinely share equipment, and political strife has continued to plague the country in the early decades of the twenty-first century.³⁷ Unlike their counterparts on the African mainland, the Malagasy metal scene lacks an international presence; bands are not receiving international press like others in Africa, and acts from the country are seldom afforded the opportunity to embark on performances outside of their island, nor are they presented with the fortunes of being able to release music by way of international labels.

What has likely contributed to the lack of international attention toward the scene is the use of the Malagasy language, which is prominent among acts in the country. Madagascar's metal scene is the only example of an African nation where metal bands perform primarily in their national language. Yet this metal scene's embrace of their cultural roots has also separated metal bands here from their African contemporaries. Utilising a pre-Francophone style of speech known as the *hainteny*, an ornamented form of speech laden with metaphors gifted from their ancestors³⁸ alongside traditional time signatures, acts here have distinguished themselves in ways that place their culture and history at the forefront of what they do.

Elsewhere in the Indian Ocean islands, near Madagascar, sit Reunion Island and Mauritius. Both islands have benefitted from a strong economic and modern infrastructure and have continually maintained a close relationship with the European continent, notably Reunion Island, whose status as a French overseas territory benefits its populations with the privileges of French citizenship. Both islands' scenes exist with similar access to goods and Western musical resources and have been closely linked since their inception in the late 1950s.³⁹

The region of West Africa is among the continent's quietest with regard to rock and metal. As alluded to earlier, the nations of Nigeria and Ghana at one time enjoyed vibrant rock scenes and are both slowly seeing a resurgence, with Ghana's Dark Suburb and Nigeria's The Isomers stepping forward. Regionally, nearby Niger and Mali are known for their 'African rock' scenes that are dominated by internationally known artists such as Mali-based Tinariwen, Nigerian bands Group Bombino and Group Inerane, and the Western Saharan band Group Doueh. While these particular acts owe more to the 'rawness of garage rock'⁴⁰ than their predecessors of the 1950s and 1960s, they have also welcomed traditional infusions into their music.

The lone heavy metal band in the nation of Togo, Arka'n Asrafokor, also converges local musical proclivities of the members' native Ewe sounds by including a traditionally-trained musician in their band, blending this aspect effortlessly alongside their Western influences into a hybrid sound best described by the band's vocalist as 'metal in our own language'.⁴¹ Though rarely performed, a few other bands throughout the continent have begun to incorporate local sounds into their brand of rock and metal, including the previously mentioned act Dividing The Element from Zimbabwe, who lean on Shona influences for their sound, and Botswana's Wrust, who have incorporated a few aspects of Setswana clapping, call and response and 6/8 time signature with their brutally aggressive sound. What these infusions have allowed is for Africans to share their locales, their origin stories and their lived experiences through an already familiar style while paying homage to the sounds that are seeped into their consciousness. This approach serves to enhance the listenership of local fans who may otherwise be put off by the genre's abrasiveness.

Conclusion

Although various African metal scenes have been recognised through a variety of press outlets and publications in recent years, metal in Africa has become a curiosity because it is the last place on the planet that metal fans, musicians and academics alike would have expected the genre to blossom. Yet, African metal's existence should not be treated differently.

African metal stories speak of a genre that is empowering performers and fans alike. Metal has been able to elevate this platform because of the honesty this music provides, one that Western acts have also embraced by highlighting social and political issues in challenging the status quo through metal music. As Niall Scott states, '[h]eavy metal, both its music and culture, are in a position to resist the popular where the popular in music is an infantilized submission to sameness'.⁴² It is precisely for this reason that metal's arrival in the continent has been embraced by a generation eager to perform a soundtrack that reflects their lives.

However, for African metal acts, an overwhelming challenge remains: validation from their Western peers. How could their efforts be compromised by way of their geographic origins? And how would 'othering' affect the manner in which their work and contributions could be valued with the same dignity and respect that Western contributions are held? Only time will tell. It is not up to Africans to change their image, their sound or their

location in order to succeed. It is up to the Global North to open their ears to an already familiar sound from an otherwise unfamiliar continent for the sake of truly embracing the ultimate panacea of a collective global metal scene that many fans have long proclaimed exists, yet with little inclination to invite members of the Global South to the table. Heavy metal's presence in Africa serves to embolden fans and empower performers in a manner that could ultimately provide the necessary validation from Westerners and send a signal that Africa is now this genre's ultimate frontier.

Notes

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