**Fighting Corruption with Rhythm: Political Music in Uganda, Senegal, and Nigeria**

On January 27, 2012, Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade was confirmed as a candidate for the upcoming election, despite his candidacy’s apparent unconstitutionality. Dakar erupted into violent protest. Months earlier, a new group of musicians and journalists had formed. They were called Y’en a Marre, and they were fed up. Y’en a Marre exemplify a new type of organization, which use popular music, mostly hip-hop, to fight authoritarianism and register people to vote. Their “NTS: New Type of Senegalese” movement gained traction with frustrated voters who were tired of the abuses of power the Senegalese government had been committing. Their songs “Doggali” and “Faux! Pas Forcé” became rallying cries against Wade, who was ultimately defeated, cementing Y’en a Marre’s role as protector of Senegalese democracy.

**Introduction**

The use of music as a political tool for fighting back against repressive and corrupt regimes can be an incredibly effective tool for implementing political change. Because of the way that music can spread through communities quickly, music with a political message can quickly reach a huge number of people, uniting them around a common message. Political music has a long history of creating effective mobilization of large peaceful protest movements (Martiniello 2008). This paper studies the ways that groups of musicians in three African nations have deployed their music to spread a message and take political action against oppressive and corrupt regimes. All of the examples considered come from diverse regions of Africa with deeply distinct cultures, but all are tied together through the use of popular music to inspire nonviolent grassroots political action in defense of civil liberties and against corruption. This paper will study these examples through analysis of music emblematic of each example, examining similarities between examples, and utilizing academic and media sources to situate each musical example in its culture.

**Social Context**

In Africa, there have been numerous examples of the use of music in this manner. Going back to the transformative period of the 1960s and early 1970s, when nearly all of the African nations achieved independence from colonial rule, music has been an integral part of communicating political messages and inspiring political action (Dorsche 2010). Later on, music that was traditionally apolitical has become more and more politicized (Steingo 2007). Many modern African popular artists (who are often politicians as well) have been deploying pop music with socially progressive, anti-authoritairan messages in order to spread their messages. Three especially powerful examples of the use of music in this manner come from Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda.

In Nigeria, political engagement of musicians has a long history. The Afrobeat genre, best exemplified by Fela Kuti, was mobilized as a political commentary starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fela released several albums criticising the actions of the government, ranging from oppressive military tactics to repression of civil liberties. After his residence was attacked and destroyed by the Nigerian military, he founded a political party called “Movement of People”, and ran for president in 1979. His candidacy was denied by the government (Grass 1986; Labinjoh 1982). Kuti continued to make political music despite being repeatedly arrested on politically motivated charges. Musicians have continued to make politically conscious music in Nigeria. A modern example of such music is the song “This Is Nigeria,” by Falz, which highlights Nigeria’s current issues with political corruption and civil liberties. “This Is Nigeria” and other modern Nigerian hip-hop music represent a spiritual successor to Fela’s Afrobeat.

Uganda has recently experienced significant progress in terms of economic development and quality of life. Uganda has developed infrastructure and provided increased public access to healthcare (World Bank 2019). Even though Uganda has made major strides in terms of livability, it still experiences problems related to political corruption and civil liberties. Uganda is understood by Transparency International to be one of the most corrupt governments in the world, and the World Bank notes that Uganda’s governance is in the bottom 12 percentile of all nations, in terms of corruption (Kaufmann 2011). The US State Department noted in 2012 that “indicators reflected corruption was a severe problem.” (US State Department 2012) Civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, are generally impeded by governmental use of violence and fear tactics. The situation in Uganda has paved the way for musician Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, to enter the political realm, both through political critique in music, but also as an elected official. Bobi Wine’s music has achieved global media coverage and enough local popularity to allow for the beginning of a successful political career.

Abdoulaye Wade, the third president of Senegal, was in power from 2000 to 2012. The Senegalese Democratic Party, which he founded and still leads, has been responsible for many anti-civil liberty policies (Kelly 2012). Wade created a constitutional amendment overturning term limits, which allowed him to run for office a third time despite his earlier claim that he would not (Resnick 2013). Wade’s abuse of power in deciding to run for office against his own word caused civil chaos and inspired violent protest. One of the most effective ways the opposition united itself through peaceful means was through a music group called Y’en a Marre. Y’en a Marre, which means “fed up,” is a group of rappers and journalists, established in 2011 with the two goals of protesting the Wade administration and mobilizing voters to register to vote and oust the incumbent party (Sajnani 2015). Y’en a Marre was a major success, and their music became a rallying cry against the Wade administration and in favor of peaceful protest and civil action through voting (Gueye 2013). Despite censorship and political arrest, Y’en a Marre became a key actor in the 2012 election in which Wade was ultimately defeated.

**Uganda: Musician as Politician**

Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1984. His regime has been noted as one of the most corrupt and repressive in the world (US State Department 2012). Even so, Uganda has recently made progress in terms of quality of life and economics (World Bank 2019). In Uganda, because civil liberties are so repressed, one of the ways that politicians spread their messages is with music. Bobi Wine is a musician, but he’s also a politician, activist, and elected official. He’s been critical of the current Ugandan regime on issues of corruption and freedom of speech, while also being a member of parliament and taking part in the wholesale economic reforms that Uganda has been going through recently (Ssentongo 2018). He has been using his platform as a musician to criticise the regime and share the message that it is time for Ugandans to demand more civil liberties and a government that makes fighting corruption a central part of its administration. His songs have faced harsh criticism and censorship from the Ugandan government. He was arrested and later released several times, having been violently assaulted by police officers. One of the crimes he was charged with which makes it most obvious that the arrests are politically motivated was "intent to alarm, annoy or ridicule" President Museveni (Simon 2019). Bobi Wine currently serves as the MP for the Kyaddondo East Constituency in Central Uganda. He’s announced his candidacy for the Ugandan Presidency in the 2021 election (Okello 2019).

Bobi Wine’s 2018 song “Tuliyambla Engule” (Ssentamu 2018) has gone viral on the internet and has become emblematic of his fight against corruption. His work is directly critical of the current regime and has been controversial due to the political climate in Uganda. The song’s structure and content are such that it has spread extremely quickly and widely, reaching and resonating with huge numbers of people in Uganda and around the world. The song’s title translates to “We shall wear the victor’s crown.” The song is in strophic form, with a simple and upbeat melody and chorus. Most of the lines first discuss a change that Uganda needs to see, followed by the phrase “tuliyambla engule.” One example of this structure is “when discrimination is over, we will wear the victor’s crown.” Most of the verses end with the line “when the struggle is over, we will wear the victor’s crown,” followed by “and walk with a new swag in Uganda.” Later in the song, after a key change, Wine’s guest artists take over and sing in the same structure, but about different things. One of them encourages people to sign up for a national identity card and vote, while another promises that farmers will have a market to sell their produce. The music’s focus on positive messaging and its upbeat, catchy nature serve it well. It’s easy to sing along with, even without knowing the language in which it is written. The emphasis on what life will be like after “the struggle is over,” rather than focusing on what needs to change inspires a sense of optimism and encourages grassroots participation. The music video of “tuliyambla engule” is also full of imagery. Many of the characters are dressed up as working-class people: farmers, construction workers, university students, and nurses. Bobi Wine has several costumes, including that of a minister at a church. Several people wear a kind of hat which has since been banned in Uganda, because Wine’s supporters frequently wear them as a peaceful form of protest. Bobi Wine’s creative use of political music with a positive, action focused message has resulted in international attention and national action, including his own election to Uganda’s Parliament.

**Nigeria: Musician as Commentator**

In Nigeria, political action and commentary through music has a long history. Going back to the initial independence movement, music has played a significant role in creating political unity . In the post-independence years, Nigeria has experienced several periods of civil war and military rule. Even after military rule ended for the last time in 1999, Nigeria has faced problems with corruption and human rights issues (Falola 2008). Nigeria’s is also the largest economy in Africa, and Nigeria experiences challenges with distribution of wealth. One especially notable Nigerian musician who was also an activist is Fela Kuti. Kuti’s pioneering of the Afrobeat genre was not only influential in terms of popular music, but also in terms of political action through music. Fela used his music to sharply criticize the military government, despite their continued efforts to silence him, including an attack that nearly took his life (Grass 1986; Labinjoh 1982). Nigerian artists have continued to live up to Fela’s example and critique the government through their music. One song which can be considered a spiritual successor to the work of Fela Kuti is “This is Nigeria,” a parody of Childish Gambino’s “This is America,” by Nigerian artist Folarin Falana, better known as Falz. Falz is a Nigerian rapper who has been influenced by American hip-hop as well as Nigerian music including Afrobeat. His use of satirical lyrics and comedic tones to make his points clear has been lauded by critics.

Both Fela Kuti and Falz have made multiple popular songs which have spread throughout Nigeria and shared an anti-corruption message. In his 1979 song “V.I.P., Vagabonds In Power,” Fela directly addressed people in power in Nigeria, criticizing their inaction on economic inequality and pointing out their pocket-lining and generally self-serving behavior. Uche Onyebadi describes “Fela twisted what the acronym stood for (*Very Important Person*) to*Vagabonds In Power* to show how detestable people in powerful positions and authority appear to him, and how they corruptly enrich themselves and care very little for their constituents.” (Onyebadi 2018, 7) The lines “him no know suffering people” and “Him go dey ride best car… Him go dey steal money. Na ‘Vagabond in Power’” exemplify the sentiment of the song. V.I.P. and the Afrobeat genre in general utilize a free-flowing, open-ended structure with a strong pulse and groove to keep listeners’ attention and allow listeners to lose themselves in the music. Demonstrative of Fela’s commitment to his political agenda is the fact that this song and many others came out after the attack which nearly ended his life. Falz’s “This is Nigeria” critiques the government in general but doesn’t specifically mention crimes, rather describing ways that Nigerian society is problematic and repressive. Many important aspects of “This is Nigeria” come from its music video, which is also a parody of that of “This is America.” Falz is depicted bribing a police officer trying to arrest him without cause, which is something that ideally shouldn’t occur. His lyrics discuss politicians embezzlement of public funding, like Fela’s do: “When looter and killers and stealers are still contesting election o/Politicians wey thief some billion and billion e no dey go prison o. (Falana 2018)” Falz chose to use the opposite strategy from Bobi Wine’s, opting to utilize an already popular beat and rewriting lyrics to describe the negative reality of the situation, as opposed to the optimism of Bobi Wine’s lyrics. Falz is also not directly engaged in politics the way that both Fela was and Bobi Wine is. Falz’s music and humor is critical of the government, but he has not yet tried to run for office or otherwise engage directly in politics.

**Senegal: Musician as Protector of Democracy**

Senegal is considered one of the more successful African postcolonial democracies. Senegal’s president is elected every five years, and unlike many African democracies, there have been several transitions from one party to another. Still, Senegalese democracy has had its share of controversy and abuses of power (Resnick 2013; Kelly 2012). Notably, the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade was particularly controversial. Wade, who was initially elected in the 2000 election, was limited by the constitution to serving a maximum of two terms as president. In 2008, under the leadership of Wade, the Senegalese National Assembly (legislative body) passed a constitutional amendment allowing future presidents to serve up to three terms, with the explicit condition that Wade would not be permitted to seek a third term. Despite this, Wade announced in 2009 that he would plan to run for a third term as president. In 2012, after Wade was formally confirmed as a candidate for the race, citizens engaged in violent protests throughout Dakar (Babou 2016). Ultimately, Wade was defeated in the election, at least in part because of a hip-hop group called Y’en a Marre.

Y’en a Marre, which is French for “Fed Up,” is a political and musical organization formed in 2011 with two main goals: registering people to vote and opposing the abuses of power on the part of Wade. Y’en a Marre is made up of rappers and journalists. Their music was especially helpful in mobilizing the youth vote during the 2012 election. Young people, who voted overwhelmingly in favor of opposition leader Macky Sall, helped to turn the tide against the abuses of power that Wade committed. The Y’en Marre agenda is also notable because their methods encouraged peaceful action, exclusively through the electoral process, and denounced violent protest. The song “Faux! Pas Forcé” became a rallying cry among the opposition, and especially among youth. “Faux! Pas Forcé’s” title in English is “[Abdoulaye,] don't force it, give up.” Rapper Djily Baghdad, member of Y’en a Marre described "We have this slogan called NTS: New Type of Senegalese," he says. "That's what Y'en a Marre is trying to build, but [to] do it in the most peaceful way." (Quist-Arcton 2012) “Faux! Pas Forcé’s” title and lyrics purposely violate the rules of French, and the lyrics are in both French and Wolof. The lyrics directly address Abdoulaye, telling him “don’t force it,” and calling him a liar. (Gueye 2013, 28-29) Y’en a Marre were extremely successful at building a sense of unity among people who were fed up with Wade’s abuses of power and spreading the message of peaceful resistance through the legal process in a situation which easily could have become incredibly violent.

**Conclusion**

Musical artists take an incredibly important role in the political process, especially in terms of bringing awareness to abuses of power, human rights, and political corruption. Nigeria, Uganda, and Senegal are three places where music has been used this way to great effect. Many modern African popular artists (who are often politicians as well) have been deploying pop music with socially progressive, anti-authoritairan messages in order to spread their messages. In Uganda, Bobi Wine, who is a musician, politician, and activist uses his music to spread his message and support his political ambitions. He’s gained worldwide support for his music and his progressive, anti-corruption agenda. In Nigeria, the work of modern pop artists like Falz mirrors the political commentary created by Fela Kuti and other Afrobeat artists. They criticize the government’s abuses of power and make sure the public knows of the government’s mistakes. In Senegal, the group Y’en a Marre were instrumental in preventing an abuse of power by president Abdoulaye Wade. Y’en a Marre are strong proponents of legal action and peaceful protest, and are incredibly influential, especially among young people, who have become more politically engaged because of them. All of these musicians come from distinct cultural and political backgrounds, but are tied together by their commitment to furthering political activism and fighting corruption, even at the expense of their own physical safety. Musicians like these are important guardians of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties, and these specific musicians exemplify the values of progressive society and protect free speech.

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