Carmen's Musical Existence in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa

Two film adaptations of Bizet's *Carmen*—the Senegalese *Karmen Gei* (2001), directed by Joseph Gai Ramaka, and the South African *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), directed by Mark Dornford-May—reinterpret the original opera in a sub-Saharan African context, presenting the original narrative through a contemporary, transcultural lens. Ramaka's heroine—a sexy, glamorous, "irresistibly powerful" Karmen—is a paragon in her community, a woman who strives to undermine the constraints that society imposes on her.[1] In contrast, Dornford-May's heroine is "a Carmen of the people", a middle-aged single mother in an impoverished community who struggles to maintain her voice in post-apartheid society.[2] In both adaptations, Carmen's music allows for communication of vulnerable emotions, strives for cultural integration, and symbolizes resistance against social orders. Her effort to preserve her musical autonomy is analogous with her struggle to maintain her cultural and sexual identities within contemporary Senegalese and South African society. In this essay, I will discuss the political implications of *Carmen*'s musical representation in sub-Saharan Africa, starting with an overview of the films' soundtracks and their relationship to Bizet's opera, followed by an analysis of the social and political functions of Carmen's music, both in the film world and the real, contemporary world.

Film Soundtracks and Bizet's Opera

Ramaka's and Dornford-May's adaptations of *Carmen* recontextualize the 19th-century French originals. Merimee's novella is a pastiche of Spanish culture from the perspective of a Frenchman, and Bizet's score further reinforces Merimee's already stereotypical depiction of Spain. In the opera, musical motifs reflect cultural assumptions about gender and race. Carmen's themes consist of descending chromatic lines and augmented 2nd motifs—musical features commonly associated with "exotic" feminine figures in 19th-century orientalist operas—whereas Don Jose's and Micaela's themes are composed in a more commonly Germanic style. Furthermore, Carmen's music in Bizet's opera is primarily diegetic; her most notable solo numbers, including the Habanera and Seguidilla in Act I and Gypsy Dance in Act II, are framed as performances within the opera. The diegetic function of her music and her association with "exotic" musical elements set Carmen apart as an Outsider.[3]

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[1] Prabhu, Anjali. "The "Monumental" Heroine: Female Agency in Joseph Gaï Ramaka's "Karmen Geï"." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 66-86. Page 69.

[2] Naomi André "*Carmen* in Africa: French Legacies and Global Citizenship," *The Opera Quarterly* 32 (2017), 54-76. Page 69. André's paper presents a feminist interpretation of the films. My essay will use musical examples to support many of the arguments she makes.

[3] McClary, Susan. *Georges Bizet: Carmen*. Cambridge Opera Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Director Ramaka was clearly aware of these musical elements of *Carmen*. To counter Bizet's problematic portrayal of his female lead, Ramaka replaces the opera score with traditional Senegalese music in the soundtrack of *Karmen Gei*. Ramaka's heroine is a sympathetic Outsider, one who sings melodies familiar to her Senegalese audience, both within and without the film. The story begins with Karmen in prison, performing a traditional Senegalese dance for her female warden, Angelique. The performance is a seductive act, and Angelique, one of two "Don José" analogues in Ramaka's film, releases her from prison. Immediately afterwards, Karmen seduces Lamine during his wedding ceremony. After she confronts Lamine's fianceé in a dance duet, he takes Karmen into custody, but later allows her to flee. Naomi André claims Karmen's bisexuality "opens up her character as an even stronger seductive and sexual presence," and her relationship with Angelique "destabilizes the dominance of the male lover in a hetero-normative patriarchal system."[4] Further, since Karmen is portrayed as a community leader, her disruption of Lamine's wedding represents communal resistance against social bureaucracy and the restrictive legal system.

In Ramaka's film, music communicates the personal, cultural, and national identities of individual characters and their communities. The soundtrack of *Karmen Gei* incorporates five distinct components: "Doudou Rose N'diaye's sabar drumming, Julie Jouga's choir, El Hadji N'diaye (Missigi)'s Afropop, Thomas Murray's jazz, and Yande Codou Sene's prophetic voice."[5] Each type of music corresponds to a specific character, scene, or plot development. N'diaye's drumming, for example, highlights Karmen's public display of her sexualized body. Julie Jouga's choir represents communal solidarity. Murray's freestyle jazz reflects the "improvisatory" lifestyle of the smugglers. Missigi (Escamillo)'s and Sene's Afropop comments on Karmen's fate during the course of the film. These traditional and contemporary musical elements function similarly to the leitmotifs in Bizet's score, but evoke different readings of the narrative.

Dornford-May's *U-Carmen* is closer musically to Bizet's opera than is Ramaka's *Karmen Gei*. The soundtrack uses Bizet's original score, and the plot closely follows the original libretto, translated from French to Xhosa. U-Carmen, a single parent who works at the Gypsy Cigarette Factory, becomes romantically entangled with police officer Jongikhaya (Don Jose), who ultimately kills her once he realizes that she does not belong to him. Unlike the Senegalese Carmen, the South African heroine "looks like a Carmen who could blend in with most groups of black women—in South Africa, other African countries, Europe, or the United States— today."[6] This Carmen is not an Outsider; her membership in a classical chorus makes her an integral part of a transcultural community. Her story epitomizes that of an everyday woman in Khayelitsha; her personal struggle represents the difficulties South Africans face adjusting to a post-apartheid world.

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[4] Andre, 64.
[5] *Karmen Geï*. Directed by Joseph Gaï Ramaka. Produced by Richard Sadler. California Newsreel, 2001.
[6] Andre, 69.

In order to reconcile the opera's musical numbers with the film's setting, Dornford-May uses instrumental interludes diegetically. The Toreador Theme in the overture, for example, is sung by U-Carmen's community chorus at their rehearsal; the same chorus provides music during U-Carmen's castanet dance for Jongikhaya. These musical alterations suggest communal solidarity and highlight U-Carmen's integral role in her community. Furthermore, the soundtrack intertwines the opera score with diegetic street sounds and traditional South African music. As the film begins, the overture layers with sounds of cars honking, dogs barking, and pedestrians conversing. During the factory uproar, the noise of people chattering obscures the opera's music. Unaccompanied spoken dialogues, which are not from Bizet's libretto, occur between musical numbers. To make various characters' stories sympathetic to a modern audience, Dornford-May gives both Jongikhaya and Lulamile (Escamillo) more elaborate backstories. The flute melody from the beginning of Act III becomes the underscore for the scenes establishing these backstories. Finally, the film often accompanies Lulamile's plotline with traditional Xhosa music.

The mixture of different musics and sounds represents cultural fusions in the contemporary world. Both *Karmen Gei* and *U-Carmen* portray a world in which different cultures coexist—"an integration of Western and traditional African elements without assimilation."[7] The African Carmens are no longer the exotic Other, though their stories now take place in a continent often exoticized in Western classical music. How should we therefore interpret Carmen's new identities? The very existence of Karmen and U-Carmen undermines the established gender and cultural biases inherent in Western culture and politics. On the other hand, neither adaptation can completely break free from the stereotypes reinforced by our Eurocentric conception of "world music". Hence, music plays a paradoxical role in both adaptations. In *Karmen Gei*, music both bridges and widens the gap between the revolutionary and her community. In *U-Carmen*, music serves both as a shelter and as a source of conflict between our sympathetic heroine and her society.

Karmen Gei

As *Karmen Gei* unfolds, Karmen's role as a performer renders her an outsider, despite being an active participant in her community. Her public performances distinguish her from the other community members, her audience. Missigi's song of her praise illustrates this distinction:

> Karmen Gei invites you
> To love and freedom.
> Massigi tells you,
> The winds that uproot the baobab

[7] Andre, 57.

Doesn't stop the bird from flying.
But be careful, for Karmen Gei is back.

These lyrics are *about* her but not sung *to* her. Referring to Karmen in third person, Missigi creates an artificial divide between Karmen and the chorus, thus framing Carmen as a performer, a player, and an outsider.

Karmen uses Senegalese music and language to differentiate herself from a society with mixed African and Western influences. Unlike her dance performances, Karmen's singing is intended solely for a private audience. These intimate moments, including her seduction of Lamine, her duet with Samba, and her musical monologue at Angelique's funeral, illuminate a different facet of Karmen's character—her vulnerability. Karmen rarely speaks of love without resorting to music. Most of the spoken dialogues between community members and the authority occur in French, whereas all the songs use Wolof, a traditional Senegalese tongue. Carmen's seduction of Lamine provides a particularly illustrative example. When she orders him to let her go, she addresses him in French. However, once she confesses her love, she sings in Wolof, with lyrics adapted from Bizet's Habanera:

You won't let me talk
I won't talk anymore
Love is a vagabond child
A child who knows no law.
But if you don't love me,
I love you anyway!
And if you love me
Be on your guard!

The use of the Senegalese language reminds us of "exotic" motifs associated with Bizet's Carmen. Even in a contemporary Senegalese setting, in which both "Carmen" and "Don Jose" belong to the same racial and cultural community, their language usage highlights fundamental differences between their social positions. Karmen sings in the traditional tongue because she is unable to express herself otherwise. She assumes an intrepid outward image, which both empowers and restrains her. Private musical moments allow her to express her vulnerability, which can only be articulated in a language closely linked to her cultural identity.

The intersection of language and community also informs the presentation of Angelique's funeral. Karmen's physical and emotional separation from her community culminates during this scene in a heartfelt song for herself. The lyrics—"A star is born; the moon met the ocean…"—are borrowed from the song of a blind singer, who predicted Angelique's death. While chorus members and police officers sing praises to Angelique in French, Karmen hides

behind the altar and witnesses the ceremony through a small crack in the door. In this scene, the musical coincidence between Karmen's soliloquy in Wolof and the harmonious chorus represents conflict rather than integration. As Angelique's suicide symbolizes her final submission to a society that condemns her sexuality, Karmen's refusal to musically blend with her community illustrates the tension between her social and sexual identity and the societal expectations placed upon her.

Therefore, Karmen's music is the music of solitude. She is the "vagabond" in her own song, a woman who sings to an absent audience. Among her lovers, Lamine hinders her pursuit for freedom, Missigi is an ostentatious "rooster", Angelique commits suicide, and Samba is no more than a father figure. Eventually, Karmen's music makes her realize that those whom she loves have all succumbed to social conventions, save for Samba. The duet they sing towards the end of the film speaks of Karmen's innate hopes and fears:

> The day begins.
> The child leaps up and then goes off.
> Child, where are you going?
> Mother, I am going to see where the sun is.
> Because if it shines we'll all be happy.
> Child, tell me where it is.
> Tell me that all will be well today.
> Or once again our hopes will be disappointed.

Evidently, Karmen is the Child, and Samba is the Mother. The sun symbolizes love. As the last line suggests, the Mother and the Child have been consistently disappointed. Furthermore, the Child's pursuit of the sun is innocent but perilous, as her happiness depends upon an object beyond her control. An honest expression of her ultimate vulnerability, the song summarizes Karmen's experiences over the course of the film; music allows her to communicate her feelings and desires to her community, yet this communication is only one-way. In the end, she is a performer before the public, a revolutionary within her community, and an enemy to the established social orders. Ultimately, music is the only thing that still belongs to her.

U-Carmen

Music plays a contrasting role in U-Carmen's character development. Unlike Karmen Gei, Dornford-May's South African heroine is inconspicuous. Over the course of the film, most of U-Carmen's diegetic performances are forced upon her. For example, a group of male police officers coerce U-Carmen to perform the Habanera. They intrude upon her personal space while she is peacefully enjoying a cup of coffee, disturb her by slamming on her barred windows, and demand that she sing for them. U-Carmen then reluctantly puts on a show of subdued singing.

Both her seduction of Jongikhaya and her affair with Lulamile are questionably consensual undertakings; the former is an act of desperation, and the latter is a passive development, in which Lulamile, enchanted by U-Carmen's lullaby to her child, initiates the budding romance.

On the other hand, Dornford-May stresses the importance of music in U-Carmen's community. The Gypsy Cigarette Girls' Choir, of which U-Carmen is a member, engages in both Western classical and traditional South African singing. This community is a bridge between two cultures; it explores music from European culture, while still preserving traditional cultural practices. Lulamile, an international opera star native to the township, exemplifies this dichotomy. The townspeople welcome him by performing traditional Xhosa music, even though he grew up in the United States. Furthermore, the community consistently shields U-Carmen from her morally-degenerate lovers. Near the beginning of the film, the community of female workers joins her performance of the Habanera to support her in the face of the police officers' harassment. Subsequently, they closely monitor her affair with Jongikhaya, and accompany most of their love duets. In the drug trafficking scene, community members even throw Jongikhaya into the water after he reveals his violent tendencies towards U-Carmen.

Thus, music serves as a force that both causes and mediates discord within South African society. One such conflict arises from the gender stereotypes presented by Western classical music practices. As the film's soundtrack primarily derives from Bizet's score, we might expect the characters of *U-Carmen* to adhere to gender roles implied in this music. However, neither U-Carmen's physical appearance nor her behavior fit the archetype of the *femme fatale*. Consequently, the male characters' relentless harassment and abuse of U-Carmen reflect the disconnect between her persona and their expectations of her. Their actions, however, make us sympathize with U-Carmen completely, reframing the conventional narrative scheme of the opera within a new, contemporary, feminist interpretation.

Lulamile, on the other hand, provides a purely mediating force. In *U-Carmen*, he assumes a compound identity that assimilates Western and traditional South African influences. In a flashback scene, we witness his parentless childhood and subsequent upbringing in the United States. After his rise to fame in New York, "dreams of his father" bring him back to the township, where, drawn by her voice and kindness, he takes an instant liking to U-Carmen. Towards the end of the movie, his performance of the sacrificial ceremony not only alludes to Escamillo's bullfighting scene in Bizet's opera but also stages a ritual synonymous with South African culture.[8] The soundtrack accompanying this scene is a mixture of the Toreador's Theme and traditional music performed by the chorus. Hence, the music suggests that peaceful integration of cultures is not only desirable, but viable.

[8] Viljoen, Susanna Isobella. "The Articulation of Context and Identity in U-Carmen EKhayelitsha." PhD diss., North-West University, 2012. Page 186.

Final Scenes

In the final scenes of both *Karmen Gei* and *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, the use of music remains consistent with its function throughout the rest of the films. In both adaptations, Carmen's murder takes place alongside diegetic performance. In *Karmen Gei*, Bizet's bullfighting scene is replaced with a staged musical performance by the blind singer, Yande Codou Sene. As Missigi leads a communal celebration of the new year, Carmen foresees that her life is in peril. She arrives backstage, where she encounters a disillusioned Lamine, who blocks her way to Sene's performance. She then sings her last lines: "Love isn't a business deal. If you want to kill me, do it quickly and do it well. Tomorrow's another day." Lamine responds to Karmen's final declaration only with silence, before unceremoniously stabbing her to death. Missigi and his chorus remain completely unaware of the situation. Evidently, Karmen is an Outsider with respect to Missigi, Lamine, and their community. At the end of her life, music becomes an impossible pursuit; Karmen is killed while literally physically separated from a musical performance. Without music, Karmen loses her agency and her only connection with her community.

The final scene of *U-Carmen* is strikingly similar to that of *Karmen Gei*. The final duet takes place while Lulamile performs for the township with the Gypsy Cigarette Girls' Choir. In order to prevent U-Carmen from performing side-by-side with the opera star, Jongikhaya physically drags her out of Lulamile's performance venue to confront her. After U-Carmen rejects him one final time, Jongikhaya slams her head into the electric barbed wire fence and slits her throat. Her death is witnessed by a shocked Lulamile. Not only is she removed from a musical performance, she is also deprived of her voice. Therefore, her musical connection with her community dies with her. After the final musical number ends, the camera pulls back for a long shot, and the image of U-Carmen's body becomes indistinguishable from the garbage and debris scattered along the fence. The final chord of Bizet's score blends into the street sounds, suggesting U-Carmen's story is completely inconsequential.

Concluding Thoughts

Thus, Carmen's life ends with her complete alienation from music. Without music, there is no Carmen. Her struggle to maintain her cultural, personal, and sexual autonomy, both in 19th-century France and in 21st-century sub-Saharan Africa, reveals that peaceful cultural integration and social equality remain elusive. Nevertheless, the intervention of *Karmen Gei* and *U-Carmen* provides a new perspective on Bizet's controversial masterpiece, proving that established cultural and gender stereotypes are not immutable.

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