

Highlife Saturday night: Popular music and social change in urban Ghana

Nate Plageman, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis,
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Dr. Plageman has written an excellent book. While economists would not typically give attention to a book on music, this publication does more than merely document the features of highlife music in urban Ghana: it also investigates the material basis and the political import of this genre of music.

The book is divided into five chapters, looking respectively at popular music, political authority and social possibilities; urban social clubs and the evolution of highlife music between 1915 and 1940; negotiating nightlife from 1940 to 1960; politics, culture and the making of a national music in the period, 1950–1965; and the promises and pitfalls of being a bandsman. These chapters are encased in a lively introduction and an epilogue that provide a sense of completeness. For economists, perhaps, the most insightful will be chapter 5, that deals with the material conditions of highlife musicians and their economic strategy for success or financial independence. Plageman shows that highlife musicians of the past attained national and sometimes international acclaim, but were hardly ever part of the *nouveau riche*. Their incomes were low and those who composed music worked within an exploitative royalty system that offered lump sum compensation, but nothing more. The demands by their families and friends – who expected that they would have a steady stream of substantial income consistent with their fame – further reduced the social comfort of these musicians. In turn, some talented people faced familial barriers when they decided to become career musicians. Paradoxically, the music industry experienced a long period of boom. Live brass band music flourished, especially in nightclubs and hotels. A combination of personal interest, the desire for fame, and the endorsement of highlife as *the* national music accounted for this growth in interest, according to Plageman.

To navigate this competitive environment, musicians adopted a combination of strategies. Some would perform free of charge to showcase their skills to hoteliers, while others used rehearsals to court popular support. Distinctive dress and dance styles, along with mastery of different genres and repertoires, were used to entertain and compete. The most effective strategy, according to Plageman, was for musicians to partake in highlife competitions – the National Highlife Competition in particular. So intense were such competitions that some musicians even tried bribing officials to manipulate results in their favour, providing a glimpse into the structural basis of corruption in the neoclassical economic theory of ‘free markets’.

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Highlife Saturday night, however, does more than document the economics of highlife. As a political economist, I was also interested in the book's analysis not only of how music was used as a forum of protest and dissent, but also for suppression and consent at different times. The book eloquently shows the multiple uses of music first by Gold Coasters to highlight their opposition to colonial rule, next to criticise the comprador traditional elite, and then to expose cankerous social problems. Simultaneously, highlife music was also appropriated by the coloniser to inculcate colonial, but supposedly pristine, attitudes. It was deployed by the postcolonial state as a vehicle to showcase a proud new Ghana, a proud African, and a proud set of cultural ethics and ethos. So powerful and influential were the various uses of music that different power groups would act to support or suppress highlife music, depending on what the lyrics said about their class position. Highlife music, the book shows, was also used by obscure groups to propel themselves to social and political prominence, as was the case of the small, but obscure, *akrakyefo* of the Gold Coast.

As a document of urban history, this book is brilliant. It is a major addition to the small collection of books on the history of urban Ghana. In particular, it adds to K.A. Busia's *Social survey* (1950) and *Walk with the Devil: My endless struggle against the cunning and traps of the Devil* by Zakariah Ali (see review in this issue). In addition, it significantly extends existing work because it takes an urban-wide view and substantially analyses youth culture in terms of its political, historical, social and even economic dynamics. The book's description of urbanisation is, in my opinion, a bit too simple, as it ascribes total explanatory power to rural–urban migration (e.g., p. 103), without any careful analysis of different types of migration: northern to southern Ghana; southern to northern, secondary to primary city, primary to secondary city, stepped migration, and others once described by the Australian demographer, J.C. Caldwell, in *African rural–urban migration: The movement to Ghana's towns* (1969) and recently extensively analysed in a special issue in this journal (vol. 5, no. 1). So, in this sense, the book has similar weaknesses as *Arrival city* – a review of which has also appeared in this journal (see Obeng-Odoom, 2013). However, as Plageman was more concerned with music, we can accept this downside as a mere intellectual slippage.

We may not be as understanding of other weaknesses. For instance, Plageman tries to do a gendered analysis of music, seeking to show that music marginalised women. This is one of the most unconvincing arguments in the book, although the phrase, 'gendered, generational, and social hierarchies' (e.g., pp. 125, 137) is consistently used throughout. I failed to see how merely showing difference in terms of the roles of women, and depicting how women were perceived on the dance floors prove that highlife music gave a masculine privilege, especially when male musicians were also perceived as problematic for being abusers of alcohol, womanisers and smokers, according to the text. The book showed some differences, but not social differentiation. Besides, Plageman himself reified these constructs by consistently

writing ‘he’ and ‘she’; and ‘husband’ and ‘wife’, rather than ‘she and he’ and ‘wife and husband’.

I read the entire book quite quickly as I was spurred on by its engaging writing style. The photos are an additional strength, since they provide a picturesque presentation and demonstrate the industry that went into compiling the book. The transformation in state attitudes about highlife was a most fascinating part, as was the reason: that the administration had changed and with it views about highlife and how it could be appropriated for more propitious ends. Highlife, then, is a meme with many parts and sides.

The organisation of the book works well, but if I had the privilege to meet Dr. Plageman and he were so minded to ask me what he could do to improve his book in a second edition, I would offer three recommendations. First, I would ask that he spreads the chapters across ten rather than five chapters, as I felt the individual chapters were too long. Second, while I like the quotations of the ‘greats’ of highlife as they give the book a stamp of originality and a feeling that the reader is in conversation with the real highlife musicians, I would suggest he reduce the length of some of the quotations, notably the one by Nana Kwame Ampadu, which extends across four pages (pp. 197–200)! Finally, chapter 3 is very informative, but I am unconvinced why a book on the entire urban system in Ghana would suddenly focus on Accra, especially when the chapter goes on to discuss anticolonial episodes not confined to that city.

Otherwise, this is a great book. I have benefitted immensely from reading it and I hope it will be read widely beyond the circles of African studies, history and cultural studies, which seem to be the primary targets, to economics, political economy, political science, urban studies, geography, sociology and, of course, musicology. It reminds contemporary hiplife music lovers, for whom Jesse Weaver Shipley’s *Living the hiplife: Celebrity and entrepreneurship in Ghanaian popular music* may be a first reading, that before hiplife there was *Highlife Saturday night* and *everybody liked Saturday night*.

Biographical note

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