Hugh Tracey, authenticity and (African) popular music

PAULETTE COETZEE
RHODES UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT
Hugh Tracey (1903-1977) positioned himself as a discoverer of African music. His dominant representation constructs authentic African music as traditional folk in opposition to Westernised “town music”, often portraying popular urban-based forms as degenerate and inferior. Nonetheless, Tracey recorded hits in partnership with Gallo Records and helped set several artists on the road to commercial success. This paper offers an exploration of the complex relationship between Hugh Tracey and popular music.

KEYWORDS: Africa; tradition; colonialism; modernity; world music.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY
In 1921, Hugh Tracey (1903-1977) moved from England to Zimbabwe, where he developed an interest in indigenous music. A successful career in radio broadcasting followed relocation to South Africa in 1934. Tracey made African music his main occupation from 1946. He undertook a series of recording expeditions in central, east and southern Africa, founded the International Library of African Music (ILAM) as an independent organisation in 1954, amassed and arranged a substantial archive, published and disseminated recordings in two major series, founded and edited the journal African Music, published books and articles, and presented numerous talks and broadcasts promoting his subject.
CANOLIC AUTHENTICITY, MODERNITY AND THE IDEAL AFRICAN

Tracey’s dominant representation of African music constructs the “authentic” product as traditional folk music and places it in opposition to Westernised “town music”, which he generally portrays as inferior. His construction of authentic African music is nuanced, however, and recognises social complexity and geographical and temporal variation. He speaks, for example, of “a great variety of music in Bantu Africa, from the simplest flute tune to the most complex ensemble playing” (Tracey 1954a, p. 238; italics original). Languages and environments influence musical styles and the types of instruments commonly used. Further divisions exist within each local variety: the Catalogue to the Sound of Africa series lists “types of performance” under twenty-five main headings, ranging from songs “for children and young people” to “instrumental tunes without words”, including songs related to love, death, religion, work, drinking, politics and war (Tracey 1973, v. 1, pp. 19-45). Tracey was unusual in allowing for indigenous composition, at a time when many ethnomusicologists spoke only of improvisation. Noting music’s social importance and participatory emphasis, Tracey’s work also admits that African music-makers sometimes perform alone. It does not subscribe to the myth that all Africans are equally musical, but regards the leading musicians as a minority in any time and place. On tour his approach was primarily aesthetic, not anthropological; he took pains to identify the recognised musicians in any community and considerations of assumed musical value played a large role in his selection criteria.

Tracey (1954a, p. 235) states emphatically that “African music is not a museum piece” and that “[oral] music evolves, all the time – it can never be static” (italics original). He analyses the musical effects of colonialism as resulting in the contemporary co-existence of

three facets of Bantu music side by side: the original folk music [...] still the music of the great majority, [...] far more active than some would have us believe; music in decay, eclipsed both by foreign prejudice and by indigenous gullibility, and thirdly, music in reconstruction, a state of affairs in which the melting pot is throwing up new forms of music, good, bad and indifferent, all of them strongly coloured by intrinsically African characteristics. (Tracey 1954b, p. 32; italics original)

Tracey thus recognises “traditional” music as diverse and complex in itself and locates this prior complexity in dialogue with influences of colonial modernity. He even accepts the possibility of positive combinations of African and foreign influences. The negative characterisation of urban-based popular forms persists nonetheless. He expands on “music in decay”:

Wherever this process [of Westernisation] has most succeeded there is a sorry state of affairs. Original forms of music and dancing give place to imitations of foreign styles, the arts lose their meaning and their contribution to social integration is wasted. Taste is destroyed and licence extolled. Violence is the
quality in a ‘cowboy’ film which is most admired and the songs of the bawdy house eclipse all others. (ibid., pp. 34-35)

Tracey did not set up a simple binary in reverse, marking African music superior and Western music inferior. He certainly appreciated Western classical and folk music, while disparaging mass-produced forms aimed at the “lowest common denominator”. The idea of popular music as a field for serious musicological study would probably have been rather strange to him and he would not necessarily have been comfortable with the current marketing of African music as world music within the popular industry. The rhetorical tone of some of the writing about Tracey on the web, in the wake of Michael Baird’s compilations, is thus rather ironic. For example, George De Stefano referring to a concert by Amadou and Mariam in Central Park, New York, says that “Hugh Tracey would have dug the Malian couple and their high-powered band” and “shook his English hips to their dance beats” (De Stefano 2006). From my reading, Tracey would have been appalled by the notion of shaking his hips in any public situation and would certainly never have admitted such a thing. Aural, written and photographic records of his interactions with African musicians suggest that a level of ease and rapport was accompanied by the maintenance of a certain polite distance and general tone of formality throughout.

Tracey (1961, p. 158) believed that “foreign” influences might “destroy [Africans’] ability to make effective music” and bemoaned the fact that “commercial records” were strongly influenced by “converted American Jazz and so on”. Yet he also recorded and helped promote examples of the same types of popular African music he spoke negatively about. What exactly was going on?

There were certainly pragmatic imperatives. ILAM was not associated with a university until after Tracey’s death. He had to manage his research enterprise largely without support from academia, and partnership with commercial enterprises such as Gallo Records was crucial in getting and keeping it going. There was also the motivation of documentation. He was interested in collecting examples of all types of music performed by Africans, while also promoting certain forms as more authentic and of greater musical interest and social value than others.

There are also indications that Tracey enjoyed some of the music he argued against, whether or not he swung his hips to it. For example, his description of an East African dance band, recorded in 1949 (Tracey 1950, p. 41), reads: “The general effect was what Americans would call ‘corny’, but so vital and full of rhythm that it raised everyone’s immediate enthusiasm”.

On the one hand, we have Tracey offering nuanced readings of African musical practices, in variety and specificity. On the other hand, we find frequent generalisations about “the African” which reify racial difference and hierarchy. Tracey’s brand of exploration differs from that of the earlier colonial explorers with whom he identifies. His “discovery” is cultural, not geographical (Tracey 1961, p. 156). He affirms the value of authentic indigenous music both for “the African” and for humankind as a whole. Such recognition of the value of African cultural products contrasts with the completely dismissive attitudes of some colonialists. It none-
theless portrays blackness as deficient, and whiteness as superior, in the sphere of cultural knowledge production and reception (Tracey 1954b, p. 32): “We have found that the African is pathetically incapable of defending his own culture”. In a symbolic reversal of actual population demographics, “the African” is outnumbered on “his” own musical ground and found wanting with regard to its upkeep. For Tracey, Africans are cultured but not yet civilised; they produce art, but do not understand its value (ibid., p. 34). They, and their music, require intervention.

One could argue that Tracey practices a form of strategic essentialism in his construction of “African personality”, to entrench rather than subvert imperialist power. His “essential African” is a prescriptive as much as a descriptive construct. Addressing members of the Royal African Society, a British colonial establishment body, in 1954, he argues that “homemade African music is one of the most important […] integrating factors in their social life”; its promotion, he clearly implies, can aid in the “practical administration” of human capital in an era of industrialisation and intensifying political resistance (Tracey 1954a, p. 235; italics original). Tracey’s ideal traditional African is far from the “primitive” stereotype associated with sexuality, violence and witchcraft. Instead he depicts tribal life as simple, cohesive and apolitical, with strong social sanctions for those who flout moral norms. The promotion of traditional music in contexts such as factories and mine compounds, as in ILAM’s scheme for corporate members which supplied recordings to be played to black workers, would ideally recreate the qualities of the rural village and provide protection against the pleasurable and political dangers of urbanisation. Authenticity is thus constructed as happily subaltern, compliant and domesticated – a desirable stereotype for a ruling minority dependent for its prosperity on, but also threatened by, the presence of an oppressed majority.

Popular “town music”, by contrasting implication, is associated with problems of drunkenness, crime and sexuality which complicate the management of urban spaces, and also with

hypothetical political questions which are the urgent concern of a small but vocal section of the African public who may, however, be able to coerce the simple-minded into supporting their cause with local acts of enjoyable irresponsibility. (Tracey 1958, p. 1)

CHEMIROCHA – JIMMIE RODGERS

My closing example complicates Tracey’s binary between the authentic and the popular. It also shows him simultaneously acknowledging and attempting to smooth over the complication. In 1950, he recorded in East Africa, from May to November. In an article on the tour, he writes that the

Nandi on their grass-covered hills, and their cousins, the Kipsigis, on the hills on the opposite side of the great Kavirondo valley which separates them, were two of the most attractive and cheerful of all the African communities
we have had the pleasure of recording [...] their performances were simple, unpretentious and pentatonic [...] we experienced the full charm of their little wishbone-shaped lyres played softly to songs of unusual poetic virtue. (Tracey 1951, pp. 47-48)

An African Eden, untouched by Western modernity, is evoked. Yet, no less than three tracks recorded among the Kipsigis, all sung to the accompaniment of a chepkongo lyre, have the same strange title, “Chemirocha” (ILAM 1973). Tracey’s notes explain that the song title stands for “their pronunciation of ‘Jimmie Rodgers’ [sic] whose gramophone records were the first to be heard in the district. It is now synonymous for anything strange or new”.

The first “Chemirocha” song is performed by Bekyibei Arap Mosonick with Cherwo Arap Korogorem. Like other recordings by Tracey, it warrants further analysis supported by knowledge of its language. Although Tracey (1973, v. 2, p. 371) asserts that the “main theme” is “affection for the Kipsigis country”, the song seems to contradict an apolitical rural stereotype, since it “asks why the whitemen should have taken over the country”. How, we may ask, is Jimmie Rodgers invoked in connection with a statement on white occupation? Did the composer(s) view Rodgers as a colonial symbol or appropriate references to his sound as part of their expression of resistance?

The next two tracks are two versions of another song, sung first by young men and then by young women. The commentary offers the following translations or interpretations:

Chemirocha the mystical singer [...] is at Kericho, they say [...]. He is said to have visited a friend of his at Ituna! The similarity of the two instruments, the guitar and the local lyre has given rise to the legend of this wandering player whose records have been heard but whose presence is a mystery. [...] The mysterious singer and dancer, Chemirocha has been turned into a local god Pan with the feet of an antelope, half beast, half man. He is urged by the girls to do the leaping dance familiar to all Kipsigis so energetically that he will jump clear out of his clothes. (ibid., v. 2, p. 372)

Tracey implies that a synergy between the sounds of Rodgers’ guitar and the chepkongo lyre has allowed the “mysterious singer” to be thoroughly incorporated into indigenous mythology. This transformation of Jimmie Rodgers to Chemirocha involves more than a representation of pronunciation. It minimises the impact of global modernity and preserves Tracey’s idea of the traditional. Yet the very variation in pronunciation means that knowledge of Chemirocha’s origins – as a popular American country singer – could only have come from the Kipsigis themselves. The choice to indigenise (or exoticise) the spelling of Rodgers’ name was Tracey’s, however. His text elides the implication of his own decision and naturalises his construction of African authenticity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to Diane Thram and the ILAM staff for their generous assistance in accessing material for this paper and the thesis of which it forms a part.

REFERENCES


