



Against Ethnotheory

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In his 1990 book, *Music and Discourse*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez identifies “a new interest in ‘ethnotheories’” as “one of the great virtues of ethnomusicology’s anthropological orientation.” The very existence of ethnotheories or “conceptions that indigenous peoples form of their own music” suggests that “the ‘savage mind’ can also operate in the realm of music theory, with a precision that is a bit disturbing for smug western feelings of superiority” (1990:105). While Nattiez cites Hugo Zemp and Steven Feld as foundational figures in the establishment of ethnotheory, he himself does not offer a sustained demonstration of this apparent virtue; nor does he oppose ethnotheory to theory in order to dramatize their differences. My own interest in the topic stems from a curiosity about ways in which an ethnotheoretical perspective can illuminate the study of African music. For if ethnotheory is more than the mere demonstration to a skeptical western audience that the ‘natives’ too can and do theorize, we should be able to draw on it in a technical and comprehensive way to illuminate the objects of our analysis. Imagining such a project encounters a number of difficulties, however. First, the vocabulary isolated so far in the name of ethnotheory appears to be largely metaphorical rather than narrowly or specifically technical. If ethnotheory’s metaphors are to be useful in analysis, they will require technical designation. Indeed, Simha Arom for one is convinced that “African taxonomies, while adequate from a social and/or religious perspective, throw no light whatsoever on the systematic structure of the *musical techniques* employed” (1991: 215). Second, despite its origins in ideas promulgated by John Blacking (starting in the 1960s), Charles Keil, Ruth Stone, David Ames and Anthony King, Lester Monts, and Misonu Amu, among others, ethnotheory has remained an implicit rather than explicit discourse in African musicology. Its failure to reach the level of theory (“explicit discourse”) is one of its inherent limitations. Thirdly, ethnotheory’s aims seem to me to be ethically problematic and intellectually limiting. In a sense, they stand in opposition to one of the goals of this conference, which is to encourage and foster analytical engagement with all “world musics” and not--as ethnotheory is always in danger of doing--to confine such repertoires locally in the name of a constructed difference. For if translation is possible, then—and paradoxically--it is not immediately clear how ethnotheory can ultimately be the separate or separable discourse that it is sometimes held to be. I will suggest, in closing, that the fullest views of structure and expression in African music, views that enhance appreciation not only of what African music is but of what it could enable creatively, come from looking beyond the comforting specifics that ethnotheory celebrates to a larger theory.

References

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