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CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND UNETHICAL ADAPTATION OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND ITS ARTEFACTS

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ABSTRACT

Historically, African music's rhythm, intricate melodies, and syncopated musical nuances have always found their way into the musical styles and forms of other world cultures. However, these were through natural and unnatural mediums like migration/slave trade, trade, and other forms of inter-cultural human relationships. Styles like jazz, blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, reggae and some Latin American styles have always been known to intricately incorporate core African music nuances and idioms into their styles. As a result, these idioms, nuances and elements have become core signatory elements of the aforementioned styles and genres. However, we could (to a great extent) agree that these borrowed and infused African music elements found their way rather naturally and passively into the DNA of the aforementioned foreign styles. What this means is that they were not typically “forced” into these styles; the migration was natural; the incorporation was not exactly deliberate.

This grossly contrasts the contemporary approach by global music professionals, which seems to be rather forced, consciously and deliberately exploitative/milking. As a result, there is always a case of cultural misinterpretation, cultural insensitivity; unethical diluting, usage without proper recognition, and somewhat prostitution of core cultural musical symbolism. For example, the pioneers of blues like Lead Belly, Mississippi John Hurt, Red Nelson, etc., did not actively think of African music when they were creating and propagating this art form. We can say that this was the case even to the point when “Blues began taking shape right around the year 1900”. What this means is that, by being not so desperate to infuse these musical elements and rather allowing them to show up naturally in their arts, there was a somewhat sense of natural fairness, equity, and respect in the way they made use of these

musical and cultural elements. However, just like I said before, the approach to marrying African musical elements into other musical styles has recently changed; it has changed in such a way that it has raised global and continental concerns about cultural appropriation and some very unethical practices. Foreign musicians, music producers, and sound designers across the globe and different cultures have adapted African musical elements into their productions. They have done this without giving proper recognition or even truly understanding its core cultural significance.

For the most part, they do this for mere profit making and selfish artistic relevance. Although the discussion of cultural appropriation can be very delicate sometimes, it is also worthy of note that I do not in any way insinuate that people of a certain color (in this case, black people) have the express “usage right” to the arts and practices of “their people.” For example, a black American, black German, or a black European artist who has no connection to, or refuses to create any connection with Africa or its art/music is no different from a Caucasian or Asian person who chooses to exploit the music of Africa for merely selfish reasons, if he (the black person) also chooses to exploit the music of Africa. You are not entitled to black music merely because you are black; this can also be said of other races. The entitlement should emanate from deep connection, respect, and deeply-rooted understanding, or, at least, a true longing to understand. This paper will address the dynamics of cultural appropriation and unethical adaptation of African music. It will further shine a light on the harm of African music, misinterpretation, unethical repackaging, and commercialization in such a way that the music is stripped of its original meaning, significance and true identity. Above all, this paper will highlight the need for and ways to equity, fairness, cultural respect, and proper compensation/usage of African musical elements across

diverse styles, cultures, and musical forms.

INTRODUCTION

Using African musical elements and other cultural artifacts without permission leads to a complex cultural appropriation problem since outsiders lack understanding of their cultural importance. The cultural appropriation process results in turning original cultural elements into commercial products while misrepresenting their true owners which ultimately causes cultural context loss and disrespect towards the original culture bearers. Cultural appropriation provides a safe domain for learning the contemporary nature of inter-group relations, as it involves the perceived trespass of people boundaries and the theft of cultural products that separate “insiders” from “outsiders” [1]. Understanding differences in people's definitions of appropriation highlights the contexts that lead a person to ignore, deny, and perpetuate ongoing racial continuity, thus facilitating inequality [2].

The appropriation in the act of African music and its elements is a significant point of discussion, particularly on the side of global media, entertainment, and the arts. This issue is compounded by historical exploitation, colonialism, and the repeated lack of recognition, nonrecognition and misrecognition. Let me narrow it down more specifically into music and artists [3].

Appropriation of African Music

African music has been a major influence on global music production, particularly in genres like jazz, blues, hip-hop, pop, and electronic music. However, many times, these influences are taken and commercialized without giving proper credit to musicians or the artists who created the music.

Sampling and borrowing of music elements without credit:

Artists from outside Africa often sample or incorporate African rhythms, instruments, and melodies into their music without acknowledging the origins of these sounds. For instance, Westerners, including black western artists who often incorporate African beats or vocal styles into their tracks without crediting the real owners of those elements. In most cases, these sounds are used as mockery or trendy elements in music to attract listeners or mockers, without understanding the cultural harm of what they are doing. The genre is often heavily marketed in the Western world, but African owners or artists who pioneered this sound continue to remain invincible in the background, struggling to break into the western mainstream or the major market, even to the point of facing challenges of fair compensation [4].

Exploitation of African Talent:

African producers and musicians who are often underpaid or fail to receive appropriate credit for their contri-

butions is another form of cultural appropriation. International collaborations or partnerships are often one-sided, with artists mainly from the African communities not receiving their equal share of royalties or visibility, despite their critical role in shaping contemporary music [5].

Black Music and Stereotypes:

The commercialization of African music arts sometimes reduces it to a simplistic or exotic stereotype that is detached from its cultural and historical significance. For example: African rhythms and instruments may be used in a manner that distorts or generalizes African music, failing to capture its diversity across different regions and communities. The music may be sold or repackaged in ways that cater to Western fantasies of Africa, instead of recognizing the depth and variety of African traditions [6].

The harms of cultural appropriation in African Music

The harms which I will discuss below are interconnected, though not necessarily identical, and often reinforce one another. I have separated them for proper understanding, as they cannot be reduced to a single issue. Specifically, the exploitation faced by cultures is not only the result of nonrecognition or misrecognition. That is to say, nonrecognition or misrecognition may occur without leading to exploitation. By differentiating between these different harms, we can better assess the potential impact of cultural appropriation.

Recognition

To know why nonrecognition and misrecognition of African musical elements can be harmful, it's important to first grasp the concept of recognition and what it entails. Philosophers of recognition often draw on the ideas of Hegel. Contrary to a view that sees these owners of appropriated elements as formed prior to using their identities, Hegel suggests that identity is shaped in dialogue with others. He argues, “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’” [7]. Hegel highlights that self-knowledge is partly dependent on recognition from others. Therefore, it is through engagement with insiders and their participation that an outsider comes to understand. However, this doesn't mean that others or the outsiders' perceptions entirely define the people. Rather, the people interact with these perceptions, actively shaping their identity. Hegel's political theory emphasizes that individuals are not isolated; they are shaped through their interactions with others.

Nonrecognition

Nonrecognition involves two key processes: voiceless-

ness and invisibility. Voicelessness in the context of nonrecognition, can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice. In this scenario, African artists' contributions to the understanding and ownership of their culture and its elements are systematically disregarded or ignored [8]. Invisibility, in contrast to voicelessness, deals with the total erasure of African musicians and producers in the media and society at large. Nonrecognition happens when a culture is silenced or made invisible through structures of power. A typical example of this is Shakira's 2010 World Cup song, "Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)." She borrowed the song from its original African creators, initially denying that it was taken, but later acknowledging it. While many Africans were excited about the hit and its representation, it doesn't change the fact that the appropriation of the song was an infringement, even though it's an offense that is difficult to enforce.

Misrecognition

Misrecognition happens when a particular culture or in this case, the African is reduced to a set of simplified or tribal traits, often manifesting as stereotypes. These stereotypes, when widespread, are particularly challenging because they appear natural and therefore go unnoticed. Daniel Hausman argues that: Stereotyping harms members of certain groups primarily by shaping the beliefs and actions of those outside the group. it affects the African musicians internally by exposing its members' attitudes or by changing the material conditions they face [9].

The consequences of stereotyping harm: (1) Can lead the outside individuals to view the African music through a stereotypical lens, (2) It influences uninformed African artist to internalize and adopt stereotypical views of themselves and their musical elements, and (3) It alters the socio-political arena in which these minorities of musicians operate.

Frantz Fanon also discusses the psychological harm that occurs when minorities are ignored or demeaned. This lack of recognition or distorted recognition can become internalized, leading to self-loathing and damaging self-concepts [10].

How to avoid Cultural Appropriation in African Music

The question of whether African musical appropriation and its associated harms can ever be fully avoided remains open. One notable approach is to seek permission before using cultural property of a group of people. However, seeking permission is not going to fully address the harm of exploitation. While it can help ensure that cultural property is not misused, it doesn't necessarily involve the sharing of economic benefits, which could mitigate exploitation.

1. *Fair Compensation and Collaboration*: Ensure African creators and communities are fairly compensated for their contributions. Collaborations should be built on mutual respect, understanding, and equity [11].

2. *Education and Awareness*: Encourage cultural sensitivity and education about the historical and cultural significance of African music, art, and artifacts. This includes understanding the impact of colonialism and the importance of cultural ownership [12].

Conclusion

I have addressed the question: does Africa music appropriation cause harm to the real owners? It identifies three relatable forms of harm: nonrecognition, misrecognition, and exploitation. Cultural property is commodified for merely the financial gain without regard for the wishes of the culture, with the profits going to those outside of it. These three potential harms provide a framework to understand and evaluate instances of cultural appropriation, ultimately leading to the conclusion that cultural appropriation is harmful, despite claims that it demonstrates recognition or appreciation of cultures.

Addressing the harms caused by cultural appropriation in music necessitates broad social, political, and economic reforms. African cultures must fight against nonrecognition, misrecognition, and exploitation by holding-on to their self-determination [13]. This can include a variety of strategies, such as awareness campaigns, intellectual property rights, and activism. For those practicing or planning to avoid cultural appropriation, there is a need to collaborate with the cultures in question. As demonstrated, these collaborations are key to preventing the harms already mentioned.

While African culture has had a significant influence on global music and art, the appropriation of their musical elements without respect, acknowledgment, or fair compensation perpetuates the marginalization of African communities. It's crucial to recognize the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation, aiming for collaboration and respect while ensuring that African creators are empowered to share their stories in their own ways.

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