

Music as Ethnography: Cultural Identity and Resistance in the Soundtracks of Third Cinema

Quanxin Zhang

Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge, London, UB8 3PH, United Kingdom

Abstract: This essay will use the soundtracks of African and Asian independent films as a form of musical ethnography to document and explore the music life of these communities. Building on Solanas and Getino's manifesto for a third cinema, Teshome Gabriel's aesthetics of liberation, Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity, and Michel Chion's theory of audiovision are used to treat indigenous music in these films as both evidence and a weapon, rather than as a local colour. Close Readings of Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*, and Dani Kouyaté's *Keïta*! L'Heritage du griot and Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* show West African filmmakers contesting who is counted as the nation through song and language. Readings of Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray and K. Hariharan's *Ghashiram Kotwal* employs raga, Tagore songs and Marathi folk forms to explore the themes of identity, memory, patronage and conflict in South Asian cinema. This music does not conform to the colonial habit of listening or the sonic demands of the postcolonial state, and it also does not spread culture universally; rather, it is a type of legible social behaviour.

Keywords: Third Cinema; Film Music; Cultural Identity; Musical Ethnography; Resistance; Cross-cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

In Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975), a Senegalese businessman sings a patriotic song of Senegal, and Gorgui, who leads the beggars camped at his gate, sings it back from the pavement in a mocking way. In the short time, however, this talk has provided me with some ideas for this paper. Music in the independent cinemas of Africa and Asia is rarely background music. It is also a place for the assertion and dispute of cultural identity.

Therefore, this paper believes that these soundtracks can be regarded as musical ethnography. The films use traditional music, and they do not simply add background music; they show the life of the communities in depth through music, and they even have disputes over ownership of this music and who is allowed to perform it. Therefore, at both levels of cultural identity as presented by Stuart Hall, there is operation: inherited essence, or "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (Hall, 1990, p. 225); and identity created through representation rather than existing independently of it. Where a Hollywood score is designed to go unnoticed in service of the story (Gorbman, 1987), the music of third cinema demands attention, and to learn why is to pay attention to this demand.

The three parts are shown below. First, Solanas and Getino put forward the idea; then, Teshome Gabriel presented his aesthetics of liberation, and finally, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam identified Eurocentric listening habits. Secondly, West African and South Asian soundtracks are closely integrated with Sembène, Mambéty and Kouyaté on one hand, and Ghatak, Ray and Hariharan on the other, to achieve the purpose of identity and resistance through songs, ragas and folk theatre. The third question is: What happens to this music when it is played at the festival, and, using Michel Chion's idea of the audiovisual contract, why can unfamiliar timbres still evoke emotions in listeners unfamiliar with the original context?

2. First Hearing: What the Manifesto Forgot about the Ear

Solanas and Getino wrote 'Towards a Third Cinema' in 1969 to advocate for films that would depart from Hollywood's spectacle and the refined despair of European art cinema. First Cinema first hoped to turn viewers into consumers; militant cinema sought to turn them into participants, and its natural location was the decolonised world mentioned in the movement's name (Solanas and Getino, 1976). The Manifestos are very practical. It is worried about projectors, clandestine distribution, and a short illegal life for prints. Do not list 'ear' in the list. Its audience is the person being addressed, spoken to, and debated with, and in the oral cultures these filmmakers considered their constituents, addressing is done as much in song as in speech. A typical representative is the film *Xala*. Its case against the neocolonial bourgeoisie is carried by what is sung, and in what language, as well as by any other information in the plot.

Teshome Gabriel built a system based on intuition. In *Third Cinema in the Third World*, Gabriel (1982) advocates for an aesthetics of liberation that returns to oral tradition: the way of telling by the griot, and in which song, proverb, repetition, and digression are the structure of the story rather than interruptions to it. Therefore, the music of a film should not serve the plot. It serves as the film's memory and often its teaching tool, and a place for the community to apply what it has learned and inherited. The organisation is significant for film studies because it reverses the traditional hierarchy of image over sound and, thus, also contradicts the hierarchy of oppositional film theory in European film history.

There is also a colonial habit of obedience that needs to be broken, according to Shohat and Stam. For a long time, European and Hollywood media have used non-Western music as a symbol of the exotic, such as the jungle drum for barbarism and the sitar for mystery. It is a vocabulary in which African and Asian sounds are heard but never listened to, and they are collected as specimens rather than used to build

arguments (Shohat and Stam, 1994). They are wary of the label 'Third World' itself because it can reduce the large differences in history to a single political bloc; therefore, the term is used here tactically, and they propose that it can be seen as a position in the world system rather than an inherent trait. The films mentioned below are not in the style of ethnography. They are ethnographies conducted from within a community to explore its own musical life: who sings, in what language, under whose patronage, and for whom. That inward direction is not the tradition of observation proposed by Jean Rouch, which shows a community's music to strangers through an external camera. Therefore, Hall's distinction between the two kinds of cultural identity is necessary. Take only the essence of these films and keep the roots of music, epics, ragas, and folk forms. Production reads as argument and stages identity through making and recreating in the act of representation (Hall, 1990). The first is one of the most well-known soundtracks in this group, and the next two will be introduced now.

3. West Africa: Song against the State

Xala has made the neocolonial elite known long before its famous final collapse. Sembène directed the film mostly in Wolof, and this choice was also a political move: in the 1970s, French was still the language of the government and opportunity, but a movie was made in Wolof to show that the nation's people, not the festival, came first. The movie highlights the problems in the family. El Hadji, the man of business, speaks French to his daughter Rama; she replies in Wolof. When he is in a bad mood, he tells her to speak French and she tells him to have a good day in Wolof. Language is already music in this movie. The music of honour and disgrace is a duet, and Sembène has turned it into a song; the patriotic anthem that began this essay has been adapted by Gorgui from the beggars' hut and now returns to the sender in a new way. Manu Dibango composed the music for the film in a blend of Makossa and jazz to create a contemporary African style. Nothing in Xala is a story of identity for the masses; there, the sound of a live competition is hailed as the new national treasure.

Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) is also offered in two versions of the soundtrack. Mory, a young herdsman with a motorcycle decorated in the shape of zebu horns, and Anta, a student, both dream of Paris, and their dream has a theme song: Josephine Baker's "Paris, Paris", which flows through the film like a siren call from another continent. Mambéty is a high-pitched electronic instrument that, along with the street noise of Dakar, consists of shouts from market vendors, Wolof music and the slaughterhouse where the film starts. Chants provide the introduction and conclusion for movies, and thus, the trip to France can be presented through such music. The End will organise the music. Anta boards the ship in France; Mory has left his motorcycle on the quay and gone to France for a song. According to Hall, the construction of diasporic identity is not inherent but rather the result of position within the competition of discourses (Hall, 1990). Mambéty turns the figure of identity into a radio connecting two stations, and the soundtrack is the dial.

Twenty-two years later, Dani Kouyaté's *Keïta*!. *L'héritage du griot* (1995) is about the transmission of culture, not choice. Djéliba, an elderly griot played by Sotigui Kouyaté, arrives in a middle-class courtyard in Ouagadougou to tell the schoolboy Mabo Keïta the story of Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Empire. The sound of the film is organised around

the griot's voice and kora phrases; against this is the schoolmaster who teaches Mabo for the exams in French and mocks the ancestral fairy tales. There would be more competition than ever. It is the oral archive of written curricula, and Kouyaté provides a study of it. There is no triumph in the poem; instead, the elder singer turns from the youth to look at the camera and asks if we are still listening. The instruction is for Mabo and for the audience at the cinema together, and it positions the film itself as the new griot, exactly the guardian of popular memory that Gabriel proposed for third cinema (Gabriel, 1982). Ethnography functions as public pedagogy in the city centre.

Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* (1987) was selected for the Jury Prize at Cannes and brought Malian cinema to the world. Salif Keïta's music uses patterns of the kora and balafon instead of Western harmony to express the Bambara cosmology of fathers, sons, and stolen knowledge in a story that a non-Malian audience cannot fully understand but does not need to. The score also has a structural function; it can indicate the stages of the initiation and help listeners who are unable to follow all the exchanges in Bambara perceive the transitions between these stages. Thus, the music takes on the task of cross-cultural communication for the film and provides a starting story for listeners who are unfamiliar with it.

4. South Asia: Raga, Refugee Memory and the Folk as Weapon

The Bengali case is an accident. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) is about refugees from the Partition on the outskirts of Calcutta, and in their crowded home, there is a sense of order in the music: Shankar, the older brother, studies classical singing under a guru's supervision, and Nita, his sister, quietly manages the family's finances to support everyone else. Jyotirindra Moitra's composition of Tagore's songs in Raga style evokes a sense of a lost Bengal, a place that is no longer a political entity but remains an intangible cultural heritage. The most famous sound in the film is not music, but Nita's cry to her brother, "I want to live", as she is thrown over the hill at the end.

Ghatak had come to film from IPTA, the people's theatre movement, and he views song as a collective asset; his troupes sing because, by singing together, the displaced people can find solace in unity. The wedding songs and work songs in the film are social phenomena with their own occasions and functions. Next, there is a movie called *Komal Gandhar* (1961). The flattened third is a type of note in Indian classical music, and it is used here to express the yearning of the travelling theatre troupe in the film after Partition for resolution at the end. In these films, identity is Hall's ancestral essence heard precisely as loss (Hall, 1990); the raga has outlived the country.

Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958) is a typical case because both the film and its music are outstanding. Ray cast real classical musicians, the sitar of Vilayat Khan, the shehnai of Bismillah Khan, a song by Begum Akhtar, as performers in the chandeliered music room of Biswambhar Roy, a zamindar spending his last money on concerts, and the parvenu Ganguli across the river throwing electric-lit parties. In *Pather Panchali* (1955), with the music of Ravi Shankar, he had already shown that Indian music could convey emotions in storytelling without exposition, and *Jalsaghar* is an exploration of the cost of preserving such music. The classical performances are filmed with reverence but are also part of a

picture of feudal vanity; the music of new money is vulgar and lively. Ray is not nostalgic or despotic. Who pays for the musicians matters to the film as much as what they play; identity is also presented through the theme of patronage rather than repertoire. A viewer trained in Hollywood to hear non-Western music as background has not been taught how to listen politically through Jalsaghar.

G. Hariharan's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1976) is a folk-style work with a political theme. Made in Bombay, it is an experimental adaptation of Vijay Tendulkar's play on eighteenth-century Pune and is almost entirely sung. It begins with a devotional chorus and then tells the story of Ghashiram, a Brahmin who purchases power over the city by paying the price of his daughter's life, through a Marathi folk ballad and the earthy swing of the lavani, whose numbers multiply until governance itself becomes a spectacle the city cannot turn away from. The chorus that narrates the story is both in and out of the play, and according to Brecht's ideas, sings about its own history and criticizes the behaviour on stage. That is why the movie exists. Ghashiram Kotwal makes any romantic story of 'traditional music' an act of rebellion; the folk form here is also the sound of caste oppression, and the film's power comes from having the community turn its own singing against the men in power. Identity built on folk roots is also a place of conflict. Hall's two registers work together here to transmit the original spirit of the folk song and decide which edition will be presented to the public by those in power.

5. Listening Across Cultures

Michel Chion's *Account of Audio-Vision Explains Why This Music Endures in Translation*. According to Chion, what is called synchronicity in one perception involving both sound and images is a soundtrack, which adds to the meaning of the images that cannot be conveyed by the pictures alone (Chion, 1994). Added value in cross-cultural viewing does not disappear; it is transformed. A first-time viewer in London may not be able to understand the phrases of the kora in Keita, or know that Begum Akhtar was a great thumri singer of her time, but the griot's voice speaking to the camera still organizes the film's hierarchy of authority, and a sitar emerging from a dark music room still names the class that owns it. Subtitles are also in this system. Words are secondary; the phrase of the kora, or the change from a diegetic song to a score, is presented to the viewer through images and offers an interpretation prior to the appearance of a translation. *Music Spreads Where Subtitles Cannot*. It is the part of these films that festival audiences experience directly and are likely to remember for a long time; therefore, it is worth asking who is responsible for the reception.

The mechanism has also exceeded the time since it was developed. Decades later, these soundtracks have spread independently of their films through retrospective screenings, restorations and streaming playlists, and thus the discussion of identity is now often introduced before the movie itself, carried by a kora phrase or a Bengali raga that viewers have heard as music.

Thus the circulation is reduced. Shohat and Stam called this risk "re-domestication" of the films being celebrated through the festival circuit by transforming 'the exotic' into texture and a world-cinema mood (Shohat and Stam, 1994). The *Filmmakers Have Answers*. Kouyaté's first self-reference is that: by having a griot teach a child how to listen, Keita offers

a way for foreigners to learn about the kora. Hariharan's chorus makes the listener work; there is no ease of a self-narrating story, and in both cases, the music is the space for the work because neither a griot nor a chorus rewards inattentive listening. And in the absence of Gorbman's silent Hollywood music, sound takes center stage here. The narrator of the story is off-screen and speaks directly to the audience, making them feel as if they were at the scene of the events (Gorbman, 1987; Chion, 1994). That place is the centre for cross-cultural communication aesthetics. The cliché of the 'universal language' of music has gone astray; what is truly cross-cultural are social phenomena that still warrant our attention and study.

6. Conclusion

This essay has proposed that the soundtracks of third-cinema films function as musical ethnography; by studying the musical life of a particular community, these films have begun to address questions about the identity of that community. It is relevant to the study of world cinema history to show that the history of postcolonial film is also rich in images. A large part of what these films did for their audiences was to give them a name and talk about them in music. Hall's two Registers are the Support Structures. At its core, music has roots: the Sundiata epic is carried by the kora, the ragas of divided Bengal, and the patriotic song in Senegal is better known by a beggar than by a businessman. Identity of Production Stages as Argument: Touki Bouki's Two Radio Stations and Ray's *Compromised Patronage*, the Chorus of Ghashiram Kotwal Singing Against Itself. Music is contained in both registers. It counters the colonial habit of reducing Africa and Asia to drumbeats and sitar doodles, and it also addresses the postcolonial state's demand for French, English and amplified pop music.

Two defects will be accepted. The celebration of ancestral songs can be used to promote nationalism, but Ghatak's lament for an undivided Bengal risks romanticising a time when the division was not only due to colonialism. Most of these films also have a male-oriented musical theme, and women are often depicted as passive objects of the men's performances, such as Ghashiram's daughter and the performers at Jalsaghar; thus, their identities are sometimes expressed through silence. However, the achievements continue. The soundtracks mentioned here quietly did what Solanas and Getino required of cinema. They remember it publicly and quarrel privately; when they travel, they bring to the festival a dispute over who should be named the culture and set to music that refuses to go unnoticed.

References

- [1] Chion, M. (1994). *Audio-vision: Sound on screen* (C. Gorbman, Ed. & Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- [2] Gabriel, T. H. (1982). *Third cinema in the third world: The aesthetics of liberation*. UMI Research Press.
- [3] Gorbman, C. (1987). *Unheard melodies: Narrative film music*. Indiana University Press.
- [4] Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- [5] Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. Routledge.
- [6] Solanas, F., & Getino, O. (1976). *Towards a third cinema*. In B. Nichols (Ed.), *Movies and methods: An anthology* (pp. 44–64). University of California Press. (Original work published 1969)