

Heartbeat

by T. David Brent

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African Rhythm and African Sensibility by John Miller Chernoff became a classic of ethnomusicology and African Studies almost immediately upon its publication by the University of Chicago Press in 1979. Why then had the manuscript been rejected by another leading American university press before it came to Chicago?

Sheer short-sightedness? Fear of the new? We do know that despite the fact that the other press had received at least one quite positive pre-publication review from a leading ethnomusicologist, the overall reaction of specialists was mixed. Chernoff was trying something new for the field, and it was bound to provoke somewhat defensive reactions, couched in the concerns of the day. "Inadequate research methods," "naive discussion of fieldwork problems," "not about Africa, but a part of Africa," "reads like a travelogue," all these and more were the tools by which senior scholars attempted to cut down a beautiful tree to the ground. Ironically, the field of African ethnomusicology was fundamentally transformed by the book, and time has decisively proven all such reactions completely wrong-headed. The work has been cited as one of the finest early exemplars of the contemporary trend of reflexive ethnography in general¹ and it has appeared in a German translation (*Trickster*, 1994), an honor reserved for very few American ethnomusicology books.

Still, in one form or another, expressions of resistance to Chernoff's work have continued to surface over the years in spite, or in some instances because of its status as a classic. Although I believe the book today has many more admirers than detractors, I would venture to say that it caused and continues to cause such reactions, not merely because of the petty turf wars and politics of academia, but for a much deeper reason.

I was fortunate to have been a junior editor at the University of Chicago Press when the work arrived "over the transom" in the summer of 1977. I was a recently consecrated Ph.D. in Philosophy who had studied as much History of Religions (with Mircea Eliade), Symbolic Anthropology (with Victor Turner), and Depth Psychology in the works of C. G. Jung as I had Heidegger and hermeneutic philosophy with Paul

Ricoeur, my mentor. I also had very specific musical tastes. Something called “70s music” had completely passed me by and I do not have the slightest idea what it is or was to this day. For whatever reasons, and I am sure there were many, the only music that appealed to me, aside from the Western classical tradition, was the Blues, the Chicago style electric blues in particular, and the University of Chicago's Southside location made it easy to hang out at numerous Blues clubs, several of which I continue to visit on a regular basis.

If my ears had been captivated by a particular kind of African-American music, they had still not been opened to Africa itself. Yet my peculiar academic and musical tastes could not have been a better background for appreciating Chernoff's manuscript. My broad interdisciplinary background with a strong leaning toward interpretive approaches to meaning was very similar to Chernoff's. We had read many of the same books. Moreover, in retrospect, my early days hanging around Blues bars, getting to know the musicians, owners, waitresses, bouncers and patrons had something in common with what Chernoff was doing in Africa. For both of us, “observations” were always participation, and getting high with people from different ethnic and social origins was really the only way to get to know them, if you wanted to get to know them that is. While, unlike Chernoff, my experiences were not directly related to my doctoral research, they did give me something of the same musical and ethnographic sensibility: an understanding of apprenticeship, of the importance of group as opposed to virtuoso musical production, of audience and dancer participation in the music itself, of the importance of music to the life of a community, of the notion of coolness, of call and response, and even a comparative sense of what happened to the music when it became popular on the white yuppie-infested Northside of the city.

My immediate reaction to the manuscript was sympathetic. This soon gave way to amazement, which in turn led to awe. By the time I reached what later became page 9 of the Introduction, I was thoroughly hooked. “To arrive at the point where one sees the life of another culture as an alternative is to reach a fundamental notion of the humanistic perspective, and to accept the reality of one's actions to the people who live there is to understand that one has become a part of their history. This insight can become a pathway to responsibility and an opening toward one's own human love.” It was, I think, these two sentences in particular that convinced me not only that I was reading a major work, but that the author had to be a very cool guy. Here he was connecting Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* with African music, fieldwork methodology with love, social science with ethics and aesthetics. I could almost audibly hear Mircea Eliade's voice as he spoke, in his thick Romanian

accent, about the “New Humanism” (I still cannot think that phrase with the aspirated ‘h’). To my astonishment, Chernoff had found what I was prepared to think was the exact right way to solve the dilemma of “incommensurability,” or “untranslatability” of cultures and languages associated with the work of Sapir, Whorf, Quine and others.

Participation. Love. Openness to Difference. To the Other. Some thirty-five years later, I would recommend this Introduction to anyone who suffers from acute deconstructionitis. In fact, at one point in the process of reprinting the book (it has been reprinted at least fifteen times by the way), I attempted to convince my colleagues to put a label on it:

“Warning! Multiplies when deconstructed!” Contrary to the nature of much current scholarship, even in inherently “humanistic” disciplines such as anthropology and ethnomusicology, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* can actually make a difference in the reader's life.

I would suggest it is precisely this aspect of the work — its challenge to readers to alter attitudes and even to undergo a certain transformation of character — that makes it hard to swallow for some. It is important to recall what the book is about on the simplest level: drumming by Africans. In the 70s, and even today in numerous quarters, drumming by Africans was and is considered one of the lowest, if not most despicable, arts. In the closed minds of the Allan Blooms of this world, it is a co-conspirator, with its offspring such as rock-and-roll and other forms of noise too vulgar to mention, like rap, in the decline of Western civilization. The job of humanizing African drumming, of comparing, without hyperbole, the traditional drumming of the Dagbamba of Ghana with the Western classical tradition, will always appear preposterous to those unable to achieve the insight Chernoff speaks of in his Introduction.

Equally uncomfortable for many is not the mere fact that Chernoff had a lot of fun doing what he loved — after all, so did Picasso and Einstein for all we know — but that he appears to advocate fun and love as methodological virtues. Like Bill Clinton, most academics swear they don't inhale, and probably most of them don't. For Chernoff, on the other hand, there was no other way to get the data. One has to step inside a tradition in order to understand what the people who are already inside it have to deal with and how they themselves see things. One sometimes has to act the fool in order to learn, a fact that pith-helmeted Oxford trained anthropologists never got despite the fact that they appeared ridiculous to the people. Even worse, perhaps, than the defense of fun or love as a research method, is the fact that the author is placing a certain ultimatum on his reader. In this respect, one could argue he is no different from the run-of-the-mill postmodern “theorist” who automatically makes the reader feel guilt about hidden vestiges of

racism, sexism, political incorrectness or mere lack of sophistication about hegemonic forces. The truth is that Chernoff is just the opposite.

His book is not primarily about trying to make the reader feel guilty about a lack or a defect. It's about giving the reader a new experience of a magnificent art form and the tradition that nurtures it. He is saying in effect, "my love for this tradition should be the basis for your love of this tradition, and even for me as the one who brought it to you."

Love the author? Just from his writing? I have to say, back in 1977, I was fully prepared to do so. It took almost a year to meet him, however, since he was still in Africa. Whatever I knew of him as a person came through his lengthy (up to twenty page) handwritten letters and the book itself. During that year the book had, of course, been accepted by the University of Chicago Press, and my colleagues had decided to give me and my enthusiasm for it the benefit of the doubt and launch the book as a "trade" book that might appeal to the "offbeat" (i.e. remnants of the "beat" generation) intellectuals interested in jazz and blues (the Press had of course published Charlie Keil's *Urban Blues* way back in 1966 with great success, and Keil was one of Chernoff's mentors), in addition to its perhaps dubious appeal for scholars. When the author returned to the States, we established telephone contact, and he kindly sent me my very first tastes of contemporary African music: not only the incredibly powerful drumming from Ghana (a sample of which can be found on the CD that accompanies the book), but Sunny Ade's original Festac recordings, Sam Mangwana and the African All-Stars International, and Fela's outrageous Afrobeat. I felt like I was the only person in the Western world besides John to have heard such sounds, and I was deeply grateful. By the time we met in October of 1978, I already considered him one of my best friends even though I didn't know what he looked like.

I was thus fortunate in more than one way. Not only did I have the privilege and satisfaction of launching a great book for my employer, I also gained a close friend. I hope it is not out of place to conclude by dwelling briefly upon yet another thing that links me to this book and its author. In the career of publishing, particularly in scholarly publishing, it is all too easy to be serious. It is, after all, a serious burden to serve as the guardian of culture and authority (if books in fact still serve that function). And it is a miserable business where barely breaking even often constitutes success. The antidote to all this seriousness is enthusiasm, and I often tell my junior colleagues that without enthusiasm there is no real publishing. Enthusiasm — or love, or fun if you will — is the intangible that makes the difference between just binding a manuscript between two covers and putting it in a warehouse, and

changing people's lives, getting them fired up, giving them experiences of new worlds, new potentials. *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* gave me one of my first chances as an editor to prove my theory about enthusiasm, and for that I will always be eternally grateful.

Note:

1. Marcus, George E, Dick Cushman. 1982. "Ethnographies as Texts." In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11:25-69.