

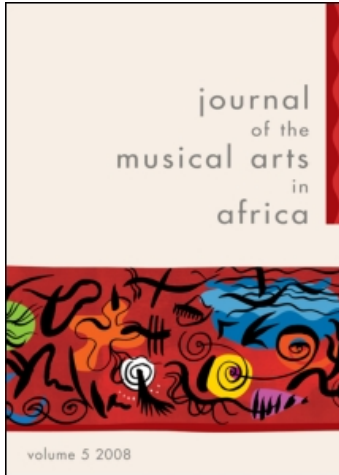
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Meki Nzewi and the discourse of African musicology: a 70th birthday appreciation¹

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Abstract

This article offers a critical appreciation of the contributions of Nigerian ethnomusicologist, composer and scholar, Meki Nzewi, to the scholarly discourse on African music. It identifies a number of recurring themes in Nzewi's work (notably the human-centredness of African music making), comments on Nzewi's language, method and manner (including the Africa-centredness of his overall stance), and points to the resonance of Nzewi's ideas and formulations within the context of postcolonial writing on Africa.

Meki Nzewi's turning 70 – being granted his 'three score years and ten' even though rumour has it that he has not seen the inside of a church in decades – is an occasion for celebration for anyone interested in the theory and practice of what he likes to call the 'musical arts' of Africa. Nzewi's gifts are many: choreographer, writer, musical dramatist, performer, composer, teacher and scholar. For me he is the most energetic and original thinker of his generation, one of the strongest voices to have come out of the African continent in the field of musicology. His voice is unique and uniquely textured, his manner direct and combative, and his thinking fuelled by an unshakeable ethical commitment to what might be called an African humanism. Nzewi inspires extreme reactions from those who come into contact with him and his work, ranging from those who think his ideas are overstated and unnecessarily provocative, to others who are moved by the subtlety, novelty and boldness of his interpretations and by the depth of his commitment to an authentic African viewpoint.

How does Nzewi compare to other senior scholars of African music? This is a rhetorical question, of course. Any such comparison is bound to seem subjective. No standard or objective criteria exist for valuing scholarly work; indeed, the academic study of music worldwide has in recent decades developed a startlingly diversified profile. Moreover, questions of value, be they about kinds of repertoire, analytical and critical methodologies,

¹ Editorial note: This article is a reflection on selected articles from Meki Nzewi's oeuvre. As part of celebrating his birthday, the editor has published at the end of this article a complete list of Meki Nzewi's book, chapter and journal publications, thus providing the reader with an indication of the scope of this scholar's output.

or standards of writing, are not answerable outside specific ideological contexts. One thing is certain, though: no one in our field has written with such (self-declared) express love for Africa and with such jealousy for the recognition of its endowments and potential in the face of a dominating Western discourse. The certainties and synthetic elegance of an Nketia, the ethnographic precision of a Kubik, the disarming directness of an Euba, and Arom's instinct for systematisation are well known and widely admired (see Nketia 1974, Kubik 1994, Euba 1989 and Arom 1991). Nzewi *can* be certain and elegant when he wishes to be (Nzewi 2003), or serious, systematic and ethnographically thorough when the need arises (Nzewi 1991). But his writings are marked by struggle, a strategic struggle based, above all, in a will-to-truth. A (self-confessed) proud son of Africa, Nzewi never tires of proclaiming Africa's historical achievement in the arts. Since receiving the mandate known as *ofò* from his Igbo elders in 1976, he has pursued the truth about African music as both doer and talker. And, necessarily perhaps, his mission obliges him to treat existing scholarship with extreme scepticism.

It was Nzewi's fate to have been born into a vibrant African (Igbo) culture and into an educational system and scholarly milieu dominated by forms of European protocol exported to West Africa as part of British colonialism. Formal musical education (he calls it 'literary music training') entailed, among other things, absorbing the (not necessarily correct or self-evident) conceptualisations of his native musical world by foreign others. Already as an undergraduate at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and especially later, Nzewi had begun to seek creative ways to resist the colonisation of our consciousness brought on by the colonial legacy. By the time he was granted the PhD at Queen's University in Belfast under the supervision of John Blacking in 1977, he had developed a distinct if unconventional voice as a student of African music (see Nzewi 2007:39–55 where he pays tribute to Blacking).

Nzewi's legacy is vast, potent and at the same time diffuse. Because it refuses conventional packaging, he seems to lose out to those of his competitors who have chosen more conventional paths to career success. But this is only a loss in the most superficial sense. Nzewi's appeal as a thinker will not be primarily to tourists and imperialists who are looking for quick and easy formulations about African arts in order to confirm deeply-held notions of superiority based on constructed differences, although the mystical turn that crops up occasionally in his writing will by now have gained a few adherents among communities that look to traditional African music for its huge spiritual supplement. His work is perhaps most meaningful to those who are willing to unlearn what they know already about Africa, are prepared to take nothing for granted, and are alert to the challenges of knowledge production in a complex post-colonial world. Not for him the settled generalisations about African music that circulate around 'world music' discourses. Above all, Nzewi continues to seek forms of ideational authority that emanate from authentic African archetypes expressed in a variety of media.

I first met Meki at a conference in Bellagio in Italy in 1991. I had only read a couple of his articles at the time, but a mutual friend, the late Robert Kwami, characterised him as someone who 'worked very hard'. This was not necessarily in evidence at a scholarly

conference in the luxurious Rockefeller conference centre on Lake Como in northern Italy, where communal meals featuring non-African cuisine and a certain monkish sleeping arrangement (no overnight visitors!) deprived us of the opportunity to judge how hard our colleagues normally worked. But what became clear even by the end of the first day of a gathering of some 25 scholars of African music and representatives of grant-awarding organisations was his uncommonly urgent search for the truth about African music. This search was expressed sometimes as polemic, as strategic contrariness or provocation, as elusive comment (in the spirit of 'a word to the wise is enough') and (with playful seriousness) as outrageous comment. A few years later, we would meet at a composers' forum organised by the International Centre for African Music and Dance at the University of Ghana, where we would spend evenings with the late Joshua Uzoigwe drinking far too much beer and arguing about the representation of African rhythm. As I got to know his other writings (including a number that remained unpublished until fairly recently), I was impressed by the massive scope of his thinking. Nzewi thinks across borders, always with an eye to illuminating what makes a particular event, practice or assertion *truly* (rather than uniquely) African.

Meki Nzewi's way of proceeding is not easy to encapsulate in a neat formulation. You can, if you so wish, find traces of intellectual regimes like Marxism, phenomenology, structuralism and even post-structuralism in his positions, but he himself almost never employs these labels. I suppose that the label that he would prefer is an all-consuming 'humanning', that is, an interpretive framework that ultimately privileges human actors and their actions and interactions (Nzewi 2007:39). Originating in part – and with only a whiff of nostalgia – from the communal ethos that conditioned his upbringing, the humanistic philosophy has become an urgent option for him today because of what he sees as the de-humanising effects of Western technology and colonization (seen most devastatingly in the spheres of education and religion). If the rhetoric with which he reminds us of our humanity and connectedness seems programmatic and repetitive at times, it is because Nzewi is convinced beyond redemption that the essential humanity of centuries-old Africa is under threat from the twin forces of modernisation and globalisation.

It will take considerably more than the space available here to do justice to Nzewi's ideas, but it might be helpful if, by way of orientation, I mention three books that capture central aspects of his thought. The first, *Musical practice and creativity: an African traditional perspective*, was published by Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth in Germany in 1991. The second, also published in Germany, is entitled *African music: theoretical content and creative continuum – the culture-exponent's definitions*; it appeared in 1997 on the list of the Institut für Didaktik populärer Musik of Oldershausen. The third and most recent (2007) is the fourth volume of a series of pedagogically-oriented books published by the Centre for Indigenous Instrumental African Music and Dance (Ciimda) based in Pretoria, South Africa <Ciimda>. Each volume in the series bears the title *A contemporary study of musical arts informed by African indigenous knowledge systems* followed by a subtitle. This particular volume, which also includes a compact disc of traditional music taken from Hugh Tracey's recordings at the International Library of African Music, is subtitled *Illuminations, reflections*

and explorations. It is not my intention here to reify the three books but to present them as representative moments in the evolution of Nzewi's life-long project.

Musical practice and creativity is a comprehensive study of Igbo traditional music, with separate chapters devoted to social context, musical instruments, musical practice, creativity, and the continuity of tradition in modernity. An ethnographically rich volume, it proceeds from the premise that 'music is a social fact', a premise that echoes positions promulgated by Alan Merriam (1964), John Blacking (1973), Jean Molino (1990) and others. Noteworthy is the emphasis throughout on Igbo language and conceptual categories, be they names of musical instruments (which the Igbo classify according to mode of sound production), terms to value and energise a performance, or folk terminology for classifying genres. Although the ethnographic material comes primarily from Ngwa, a Southern Igbo community, it is presented as the 'Igbo world view' (Nzewi 1991:122). In later publications the operative ethnographic reference is to a larger geo-cultural entity, 'African'. This progression from community to ethnic group to whole continent is strategic. It mirrors Nzewi's accumulating knowledge and experience, and reflects his strongly held and frequently asserted belief that there is an essential sub-Saharan African sound, one that is readily recognisable in juxtaposition with other world music. It is precisely this intuited coherence that justifies the paradigmatic status accorded the Igbo material.

There is much to admire in *Musical practice and creativity*, including the discussion of folktale songs, the elucidation of a compositional principle of variations as the core African-organisational principle, and the unveiling of indigenous values implicit in various classificatory schemes. The tone here is occasionally critical – of earlier scholars like the Englishman A M Jones and fellow Nigerian William Echezona – but it is not as strident as it will become in later works. The book is an example of good ethnomusicology of the 1980s (Merriam's and Blacking's influence is evident), with the added value of a richer conceptual base.

African music: theoretical content and creative continuum is an entirely different proposition. Originating in a rejected article, the tone is now sharper and more combative as the author rehearses the essence of African music with equal attention to the politics of knowledge ordering. My favourite chapter is the third, 'Theoretical content', which includes a concise statement about the elements of music (among them time, rhythm, texture, form and harmony), each element defined and described but also placed within a broader scheme of cultural patterning. When I introduced this book to students in an ethnomusicology seminar on theories of African rhythm at Harvard in 2001, they were much taken with the philosophical framing of musical procedures. One especially eager student asked me after reading the whole book, 'Why do we never hear of him [Nzewi]?' This provided a perfect opportunity for us to consider the place of institutions in the dissemination of knowledge, and to recognise the challenges that Africa-based scholars face in trying to place their work in international venues.

The pontification in *African music: theoretical content and creative continuum* is turned up a notch in the 2007 book, *A contemporary study of musical arts informed by African indigenous knowledge systems: illuminations, reflections and explorations*, whose embattled atmosphere may

lead one to wonder whether Nzewi needs (real and imagined) opponents in order to carry out his mandate successfully. The issues engaged in this volume are not different in kind from those engaged in the two previous books, but the purview of the discussion is much wider, extending beyond the boundaries of musicology to other areas of modern African life. Among the highlights are two essays offered under the rubric 'theoretical explorations', one of which is a sustained close reading of four flute tunes ('Analytical procedure in African music: sounding traditional solo aesthetic'), and should be of interest to students studying transcription and analysis. The volume also features an interesting discussion of 'Indigenous African dramatic theatre' and a fascinating debate with Anri Herbst on the topic of musical arts education in Africa. In recent years Nzewi has been much occupied with issues of pedagogy, especially with the challenge of providing materials for classroom learning by students *and* teachers. It will be interesting to see what impact these materials have in the coming years not only in South Africa but also in Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Namibia, where the Norwegian-funded Centre for Indigenous Instrumental Music and Dance (Ciimda), which Nzewi directs, is active.

This rapid survey of three of Nzewi's texts can do no more than suggest the multi-faceted nature of his thinking. Greater familiarity with his work will confirm his willingness to transcend and transgress conventional academic boundaries. A checklist of issues that have engaged him as a writer would run to several pages, and any attempt to unpack the individual ideas will extend even further; indeed, such an attempt is likely to encounter a series of aporia before long. I will leave this larger project to Nzewi's future intellectual biographer. It might be helpful, however, if I highlight a few aspects of his work for the benefit of students of African music.

One stance that is evident throughout Nzewi's work is a profound mistrust of non-Africa-centred views. (Please note that 'non-Africa-centred' is not the same as 'non-African'.) This is a complex position that has undergone redefinition in the course of many writings, and will no doubt continue to be modified with the accumulation of new contexts and experiences in coming years. Nzewi's rejection of non-Africa-centred views is not reducible to a banal us-versus-them dichotomy; nor is it one of those let-us-study-ourselves positions. It is not a culture-bearer-can-do-no-wrong kind of view; it is not a crude embrace of blackness and a principled resistance to whiteness. Indeed, Nzewi is equally critical of African and non-African writers. He is critical of those African writers who accept unquestionably a Western epistemological framework, as well as those non-Africans who refuse to be instructed by indigenous African perspectives and who insist on imposing Western categories on African music. His positions stem from a belief – hardly controversial – that a prerequisite for writing about a musical culture is that the researcher know that culture from the inside, from the perspectives made available by culture bearers. While no one would pretend that the boundaries that separate an outsider's perspectives from an insider's are firm, it is somewhat disquieting when one routinely encounters publications on African music that proceed with little or no reference to culture bearers' knowledge.

What I am calling 'Africa-centredness' in Nzewi is not merely ideological but specifically ethical, for only by denying or underplaying the significance of the twin tragedies of slavery and colonialism (as well as their profound impact on the institutional discourse on Africa) can one openly advocate, say, a European-centred view of Africa, or worse, recommend that emancipated African scholars adopt such a view. Nzewi's stance, then, demands that a counter-discourse evince an explicit ethics. Indeed, he may sometimes be heard taunting those who prefer to sit on the fence while functioning comfortably within a Euro-American field of knowledge production. It is a not inconsiderable part of Nzewi's achievement to have laid bare this ethical imperative.

Africa-centredness also entails a deep and profound *advocacy* for Africa – its people, its arts and culture, its physical and mental health, and its future. There are doubtless people for whom Africa is nothing but a career. Indeed, not so long ago I met an American in my part of West Africa who told me that he was 'looking for a second book,' having worked previously in a different part of the continent. While there is no *a priori* reason to doubt the noble intentions of people who are looking for second books, it is perhaps not altogether absurd to suspect that such people may not love Africa in the way that we are enjoined to do so by Nzewi.

To love Africa is to seek to rid the discourse surrounding the continent of the conceptual contamination that others – notably Europeans and (increasingly) Americans – have brought to it. This has been one of Nzewi's principal concerns throughout his teaching and writing. Elaborating this strand in his work would be a project in itself, but let me suggest the terms for such an elaboration by mentioning three lexical items that embody resistance in his work: melorhythm, spirit-manifest and the musical arts.

It has been over thirty years now (1974) since Nzewi introduced the term 'melorhythm' into African musicology. His aim was to counter the then dominant view that what drums played were mainly rhythms rather than melodies. Quite a few publications referred to African drums as 'percussion' – a term that Nzewi dislikes – and ignored their tuned or pitch-differential aspects. Nzewi himself is a skilled performer on a set of *Ese* tuned drums, so he may well have cultivated a heightened sensitivity to the melodic dimension of drum language. But it does not take much probing to see that, strictly speaking, no drum lacks a melodic dimension, even if some drums – like the Yoruba *dùndún* – are more obviously melodic in their mode of enunciation. The melorhythmic corrective was introduced quietly and without much fanfare in a journal that is now defunct, the *Black Perspective in Music* (Nzewi 1974). This may partly explain why, despite echoes of it here and there in Nzewi's other writings, the concept of melorhythm has been slow to become standard. It surely deserves serious consideration from all who write about drumming in Africa.

A second example concerns the term 'masquerade', a staple of the colonial literature on drama (Nzewi 2007:119–38). This term was used to describe a widespread practice in which human actors wearing disguises projected a certain mythical or farcical face to a knowing public. Colonialists taught us that those figures inhabited by humans – whose identities we all knew, anyway – represented other figures; they were masquerading as

other things. In this sense, connotations of bad faith, deception and childish disguise accrued to the term 'masquerade'. Nzewi's preferred term is 'spirit-manifest', his reason being that what is captured in the enigmatic structure is a notional spiritual being, one whose symbolic purview is necessarily greater than that of any individual impersonator. Properly understood, 'masquerades' are 'conceptualizations and objectives, practised as tangible manifestations of extra-terrestrial and supernatural beings. They are effective and affective embodiments of the imaginations informing various physical features and interactive behaviours' (Nzewi 2007:121). The idea of spirit-manifest thus restores a spiritual dimension to the practice, points to its relevance for the community rather than to individuals, and sends a cautionary message to social actors who encounter it that the border between life and art can sometimes be fragile.

A third example, indeed one that is evident in a number of book titles and in the very name of this journal, is the term 'musical arts', which Nzewi prefers to 'music' (see Herbst *et al.* 2003). The point is often made that many indigenous African languages lack a single word for 'music'. We also know that if you start to probe the connotations of the kind of thing that is called 'music,' you will find a diffuse semantic field in which dance, drumming, poetry and song play equal or nearly-equal roles. Now, it is true that the term 'musical arts' can feel somewhat clumsy, just as 'spirit-manifest' is a shade clumsier than 'masquerade', or 'melorhythm' less smooth than simply 'rhythm'. But Nzewi is not bothered by the presumed aesthetics of terms that originated in European thinking; his aim is to rid them of incorrect connotations and to redirect the thoughtful student to an original African perception. Again, some might argue that Nzewi has under-complicated the European terms, that 'music', for example, does indeed carry wider connotations even among European cultures. (Not very many people are persuaded by this counter argument.) Nzewi's marked alternatives force us to rethink conventional designations and to consider the kinds of conceptual violence that they are liable to perpetuate. Indeed, the more we think about these and other terms used regularly in ethnomusicology – names of instruments and instrument types such as 'membranophone,' 'thumb piano' and 'hour-glass drum' are among the most egregious – the more we are likely to shudder at the layers of incorrect attribution that an uncritical dependence on European terminology has produced.

The metropolitan reaction to Nzewi's exemplary resistance has sometimes been to suggest that his formulations are not grammatical, or that they harbour infelicities, or that the writing is odd. Reviewing his 1997 book, *African music: theoretical content and creative continuum*, for example, American ethnomusicologist Eric Charry noted that '[Nzewi's] writing can be occasionally difficult for a native speaker of American English not used to idiosyncratic Nigerian English filtered through a German institution of higher education (Bayreuth University)' (Charry 2003:158). But the spirit of Nzewi's writing and the not-so-hidden authorial intentions invite a different interpretation, namely, writing as a form of resistance. Instead of dismissing the writing in *African music: theoretical content and creative continuum* as 'idiosyncratic Nigerian English,' one could read the text in terms of its motivating linguistic forces in order to lay bare those truths that lie somewhat awkwardly

in English, but hardly do so in their linguistic universes of origin. Language is not – and has never been – a transparent window onto a pristine reality, and those readers who approach Nzewi's work with such an expectation will miss out on the worlds of poetry and imagination that his expression sets in motion. Indeed, a proper appreciation of Nzewi's writerly instincts will eventually be crucial for a balanced view of his musicological work.

A once-popular solution to the challenge of terminology in ethnomusicological writing was to look within individual African languages for terms that might be essentialised for analytical purposes (see, for instance, Ames & King 1971 and Monts 1990). Although Nzewi, like other African authors, is keenly aware of the signifying potential of certain terms (the polysemic Igbo word '*egwu*' is one example), he has resisted the temptation to reify African terms for the purposes of analysis. (This practice was especially popular with (mainly) non-African authors.) Africa's linguistic pluralism is well known, and the politics of it somewhat delicate, therefore the exercise of assembling, say, African-language equivalents for the English word 'play' to be used as the basis for a theory of meaning would have to be undertaken with care. The privileging of individual terms by ethnomusicologists began in part as a token attempt to acknowledge a tiny bit of the territory of the indigenous imagination, but it represented a partial and provisional solution to an enduring and somewhat complex 'political' problem. Unfortunately, it has had the effect of reifying certain terms, names of ethnic groups, names of instruments, and so on, thus unwittingly elevating some groups above others in Africa's complex musico-linguistic map.

Nzewi's refusal to join the ethnomusicologists in propagating such acts of reification is instructive. Throughout his writing the sense of a coherent Africa is paramount, and although this is never pursued at the expense of a firm recognition of idiomatic expressive differences, he has never stooped to the level of 'exoticising' its defining features. Indeed, it is this stubborn refusal to succumb to the anthropological pressure to reduce our huge continent (over 900 million people) to a collection of 'tribes' that simultaneously marks his later work, while irritating those of his critics who subscribe to a Jamesonian imperative to 'always historicize!' (Jameson 1981).

In countering his principled distrust of non-Africa-centred discourse, Nzewi has been at pains to argue the notional self-sufficiency of African critical discourse at specific historical moments. By this he does not mean that there are hidden volumes of text waiting to be retrieved from this or that Igbo village, or that such texts can render the aesthetic, formal and structural principles of Igbo music as a replicable discourse, or that they can be translated immediately into English or French for those unfortunate enough to be ignorant of Igbo. Or does he? No one has been a greater advocate of the holistic nature of African cultures, and no one has been as anxious to demonstrate the embeddedness and coherence of their enabling structures. The insights that flow from this attitude are instructive. Take, for example, the idea of Call and Response. Countless writings have told us that this is the dominant formal principle in African musical forms. Although most evident in song (including solo song), it is also exemplified in drumming (ensemble as well as solo). Enter Nzewi to remind us of the importance of the chorus:

The chorus, when present, is the structural foundation of composition. It builds the confidence of the soloist. The philosophy of a solid, reiterative and supportive chorus consolidates the metric and basic form of a piece. It conveys a basic lesson that applies to life as well as music on the importance of a structural base and order for personal negotiation of life and music. It further translates into the community as the foundation for secure performance of self. (Nzewi 2003:28)

Why do we need this reminder? Quite simply because far too many interpretations of Call and Response read the Response as necessary but banal, whereas the Call is figured as the site of individual creativity and imaginative action. The temptation to privilege individual over community in interpretation is strong for those who have grown up thinking 'I' rather than 'we,' or for those whose musical traditions lay great store by soloists, virtuosi, divas and other big men and women. In an African context, as Nzewi reminds us, these big men and women are 'sent' by the community; their ultimate allegiances are to the said community. Indeed, if they misbehave, they can be undone by that community. It is this kind of explication of the social motivation for musical action that Nzewi has sought to capture in his writing. To be sure, such explications are products of literary exegesis, and they do not necessarily alter our understanding of the morphology of the technique in question, but they enrich our appreciation of the meaning of performance.

Or consider a specifically technical issue such as cross-rhythm, which Nzewi explains in terms of bounce-off relationships in space:

[The term 'cross-rhythm'] is antithetical to African social and, therefore, ensemble philosophy. A community/family/team does not work together at cross-purposes [as the term 'cross-rhythm' implies]. This musical structure, which has depth essence, derives from the African philosophy of inter-dependence in human relationships. Personal/group identity and strength develop through structures of physical and emotional tension and catharsis. Motive as well as emotive suspense is generated when two moving entities which are at the point of colliding with each other unexpectedly veer off. A bounce-off affect is generated. The entities in missed-collision retain their individuality as well as motive or emotive energies/directions. When anticipations that develop in a motive or emotive relationship are not resolved or neutralized by actual contact, there is energy tension, a suspension. But a merger, subsumption or submersion of independence is avoided. In some African societies the bride price is never settled in full; in love relationships there is more emotional intensity when resolution is not attained through marriage or physical consummation. Thus the different energies and qualities of the mutually relating entities are preserved. (Nzewi 1997:36–38; further discussed in Agawu 2003:91–93)

This is an excellent example of the kind of interpretation that Nzewi gives to familiar elements, in this case the three-against-two pattern that is a nugget of African rhythmic identity. Musical procedure is located in social action, and he speculates on the motivation behind particular features and techniques. Philosophical ventures of this sort dot the pages of Nzewi's texts, treating of issues like music and healing, theatre for development, and

humane living. The underlying impulse seems to be in direct opposition to a documentary or ethnographic one, and yet it is strangely sanctioned by documents and ethnographies. Nzewi's belief, then, is that a notionally sufficient but largely implicit discourse exists within African communities, and that one of our tasks as modern scholars is to make it explicit or – more radically – invent or reinvent it.

A third feature of Nzewi's work follows from the previous one and concerns a certain practical holism that he refuses to relinquish in theorising Africa. As mentioned earlier, he has remained active as performer, writer, composer and scholar. These various activities mutually inform one another, and they reinforce what and how he writes about music, although such influence is not necessarily evident at a surface level. It is no wonder that he almost never misses the social energy that makes even the most technical procedure possible. We can say with some confidence, I think, that Nzewi's practice-inflected theories represent a search for a certain kind of truth, specifically the truth of performance, which, as an instance of truth that emanates from doing – the ultimate site for truth-seeking, perhaps – lends a certain authenticity to his interpretations.

A tiny anecdote may help illustrate this point. In 2002, while attending the South African Musicological Congress in Pretoria, I heard Nzewi give a paper. It was a dry, analytical paper on music recorded by Hugh Tracey. (This paper is now published in Nzewi 2007:95–115.) He began by playing us a recording of the first of the flute tunes he was going to analyse. A few seconds into the recording, and quite unexpectedly, Nzewi started dancing. From where I sat towards the back of the hall, I could not see his feet, but the upper torso moved in a gentle and graceful manner. To my eye and ear, the dance explained the music, in particular its metrical and rhythmic structures. I wonder how many people in the audience that day appreciated the depth of semiotic understanding that enabled Nzewi's physical movements. This is precisely the kind of supplementary but at the same time constitutive knowledge that Nzewi's ethnomusicological critics have not always valued. The potency of that moment of performance in 2002 stemmed further from the invitation it issued to those of us who study other African repertoires: join the knowledge-producing game with your own search for truth by dancing your own dances.

Nzewi's love for Africa, his sacred obligation to speak the truth about African music and cultures, and his appreciation of the dimensions of musical practice, be they narrowly technical or social and therapeutic, enjoin us to ask, in closing, what this 'Africa' is that means so much to him. Since the publication of V Y Mudimbe's influential *The invention of Africa* (1986), we have all become alert to the influence of notions of invention on our conceptual schemes. And for a writer like Nzewi, whose writing is not only narrowly academic but includes fiction as well, the lure of inventing is very real. But the distinction between that which we invent and that which is real is fragile, for it is in the nature of language to do things that we did not ask it to do in the first place. The driest, most technical academic writing is, at least notionally, every bit as fictional as the most fantastic novel with a plethora of self-consciously 'literary' devices. This fictional element assumes a profound role in the work of an author who insists on the coherence – at least at an expressive

level – of Black African culture, and who scoffs at the injunction to crassly specify one's ethnographic sources. Is it possible – we are bound to ask – that the 'Africa' that appears in Nzewi's writings – the Africa that is figured variously as indigenous, old and original – is itself an invention? Or perhaps a *reinvention*? If this is indeed a case of reinvention, it tells us something about the confluence of desire and knowledge. It reassures us that our desire for Africa, or rather Nzewi's desire for Africa, rooted as it is in an idealised pre-colonial society, runs the risk of becoming real by the sheer force of repetition.

Indeed, repetition is central to Nzewi's entire project. His writings on music are more repetitive both thematically and rhetorically than those of his peers. He is not unaware of this. His method involves recycling, repetition, recharging and variation; he says that he subscribes to a 'regenerative philosophy of growth' and a 'cyclic developmental ideology' (Nzewi 2007:v-ix). And he offers an intriguing justification, which I simplify as follows: whereas the (essentialised) European manner is goal-oriented and linear (and presumably male), the essentialised African manner is incorporative and circular (and presumably female). We are almost embarrassed nowadays to make such distinctions, afraid that we might be accused of essentialism, racialism or sexism, and afraid, above all, that we will be seen to reproduce some of the very attributions that enabled the brutality of slavery and colonialism. But the expediency of politically correct discourse will not erase the common-sense intuition that differences exist, and that difference, indeed, is meaning.

So how do we come to terms with repetition in Nzewi? If we compare, for example, the topics exposed in the third chapter of *African music: theoretical content and creative continuum* with those rehearsed in the essay 'Theory and cognitive research of African musical arts: critique and poser' (included in the *Illuminations, reflections and explorations* volume mentioned earlier), we notice immediately a significant overlap in content. Granted, both titles announce a concern with music theory, but this does not in and of itself justify the degree of repetition. Terms like rhythm, phrasing, pulse, form, texture and harmony are given separate but similar discussions in both essays. The method is thus repetitive and circular; it involves going over the same ground in the same way that philosophers have debated such basic issues as life, matter, God, truth and the arts for centuries now. But we know that as origins and destinations change, as contexts are altered, the ostensible sameness of a given ground is placed under erasure. So, even if one begins a new Nzewi essay with a yawning sense that one has heard it all before, one often discovers by the end that one has *not* heard it all before. And it is in this uncanny ability to illuminate a theme by varying it, this ability to continually recompose certain basic archetypes of African creativity, that Nzewi's genius is manifest.

In closing, I would like to pay tribute to Anri Herbst on behalf of the larger Africanist musicological family, first for her tireless efforts (as editor of this Africa-based journal) to ensure that the standards for discourse about African music remain high, and second, for her early recognition of the uniqueness of Meki's voice and her subsequent efforts to aid its institutional visibility by both exposing some of his work in earlier issues of *JMAA* and, in 2003, co-editing (with Meki and myself) the collection *Musical arts in Africa: theory, practice*

and education. And in a more specifically African spirit, I would like to pay tribute to the owners of the land we now know as the Republic of South Africa for providing Nzewi with several extraordinarily productive years. In addition to teaching at Pretoria University, he has directed Ciimda, organised any number of workshops throughout South Africa, has been involved in many outreach programmes, and has been in demand as a speaker at numerous international conferences. His pedagogical writings have been published in several volumes (see the complete list elsewhere in this issue), and he has even found time to write an award-winning work of fiction, *Okeke* (2006), a work in which the mythical story of music is told freshly and engagingly from an African point of view. Could it be, then, that his best years still lie ahead? May Professor Nzewi continue to inspire and challenge all of us who hold dear the musical arts of Africa as performers, composers and scholars.

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