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2005

### The Well-Tempered Savage: Albert Schweitzer, Music, and Imperial Deafness

Pim Higginson

*Bryn Mawr College*, fhiggins@brynmawr.edu

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#### Citation

Higginson, Francis. "The Well-Tempered Savage: Albert Schweitzer, Music and Imperial Deafness." *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 4 (2005): 205-222.

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## **“The Well-Tempered Savage: Albert Schweitzer, Music and Imperial Deafness”**

And so, let us all not forget, we who are together here today, that Africa also writes herself in music ...

*Assia Djébar*

In what follows, I propose to explore the treatment of music, mastery, and race in Cameroonian filmmaker Bassek ba Kobhio's 1995 film, *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné*, a revisionist biography focusing on the last twenty years of the long life of humanitarian and doctor Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). Schweitzer became famous as a theologian, philosopher, organist, musical scholar and physician; most notably, perhaps, for having opened a medical hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon in 1913 that still exists to this day. His legacy and reputation make him one of the great Western figures of the twentieth century. He is, in a word, an icon—and the hagiographic tone of most of the (Western) writing and film-work on him only confirms this.<sup>1</sup>

Given that ba Kobhio is neither simply or naïvely laudatory, nor exclusively critical, the first question it raises is how to approach it. Discussions of African cinema often rely on an oppositional reading of Africa's cinematic output in which, “Third World cinema is informed by several fundamental and dislocating factors.”(*Cinemas*, 2) In these readings, “the colonial process and the continuing neo-colonial status of the countries in which Third World filmmaking was developed,”(2) profoundly influence the final product. African films are shown to reflect “the enduring impact of Western culture” and the “determinacy of capitalist production and distribution practices.” (2) Manthia Diawara confirms this latter point in his *African Cinema*, arguing at length that conditions of production have almost as great an influence as any other factor.

In short, with such a technologically demanding form, funding becomes the primary concern. Capitalization and the counterdiscursive mode in which most African film find themselves locked means that many, if not most function dialogically, addressing simultaneously a white audience that pays the bills and an African audience that may or may not be the desired public. Following this principle, I would like to suggest that *Le Grand Blanc* functions in two very different ways: it is torn between on the one hand its address to a white audience whose presence speaks of the complex—not to say Sysiphan task of funding a movie, particularly in Africa; and on the other, the African audience for whom the film may or may not (ideally) be intended. In the process, as Elizabeth Mermin notes about Ousmane Sembène's *Guelwaar*, this kind of cinematic discourse “asserts its freedom...through its language and cultural jokes, while providing the foreign viewer with just the kind of exoticism that sells best as ‘African film.’”(Mermin, 212) This reading of *Guelwaar* suggests that the “eyewash” is reserved for the European audience while the true work of engagement, the disalienating agenda is reserved for the Africans.

In *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* this bisected address, or what Frank Ukadike calls a “bitraditional structure,”<sup>2</sup> is instead reversed: the real critical force of the film rests in its challenge to the historical, material, and individual factors whose concatenation fashion(ed) a Western icon. I will argue that this aspect of the film is accomplished by using music to access the inner-workings of Western epistemological assumptions about race and alterity. Where the film loses its critical edge, indeed, risks re-inscribing what it has deconstructed with respect to Europe, is in its failure (or refusal) to address the specificity of the historical and geographical context beyond its exclusive critique of the colonial mentality of its European protagonist. With respect to this historical evolution, what are we to make of the unproblematized evolution of the

“petit Koumé,” whose father was the doctor’s servant, into the political figure who stands up to the “Grand Blanc” as the film draws to a close?

First, however, the following will examine a critique that is ultimately addressed to its Western audience. I should state at the outset that what follows is not a study of Schweitzer, but of ba Kobhio’s film. In order to dissect precisely the confrontation of this towering icon, I will examine one particular feature of the film. Couched in an apparently simple—even classical—structure is an exploration of the relationship between film aesthetics and epistemology. More specifically, *Le Grand Blanc* underscores the ways in which traditional cinematic techniques naturalize alterity. In doing so, the film succeeds in integrating the oral tradition and music such that these participate in a heterologic medium, which accounts for cultural specificity without dictating or essentializing it.

Thus, through a famous European figure, *Le Grand Blanc* deconstructs cinema with respect to the relationship that exists between the various media that constitute its language as it was most powerfully established by the Hollywood movie industry in the nineteen-thirties and forties. As Claudia Gorbman states in her seminal *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, music in classical Hollywood film has several functions as well as a series of rules governing its participation in the constitution of the cinematic object. Its primary goal is to suture the seams of the narrative. The film’s continuity relies on musical “filler” that assures that there will be no dead air. Likewise, music also serves as what Gorbman calls “connotative cueing” (Gorbman, 82) whereby it provides a quasi-unconscious map of shifts, sequential patterns, and intensities as the visual and spoken narratives unfold. In short, “[c]lassical cinema, predicated as it is on formal and narrative unity, deploys music to reinforce this unity.”(90) While subsequent critics have challenged this interpretation of the Hollywood film score, it establishes a useful normative

model which suggests music's secondary status with respect to dialogue and images. Indeed, one of Gorbman's rules for music in classical cinema is that it "is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate itself to dialogue, to visuals—i.e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative." (73)

*Le Grand Blanc* forcefully challenges this classical model. Instead of relegating it to a supporting role, ba Kobhio questions orthodox employment of the musical by making it part of the narrative as a significant topic and as one of the primary vehicles by which meaning—about film in general and Schweitzer in particular—is conveyed. Contrary to the placement of music as a mood-inducing (or amplifying) soundtrack, here it narrates and enacts the restructuring of cinematic media. The result is that the film functions both meta-cinematically with respect to the overarching filmic enterprise; and it simultaneously weaves this aesthetic exploration into a historical revision of a "Great White Man." This examination of film, and the film's subject, in turn underscores how a naturalized order of expressive priorities surreptitiously participates in producing racial, ethnic, gender and class categories.

Albert Schweitzer is an ideal candidate for an exploration of the role of music in film because, in a sense, he personifies the totalizing impulse of film so reminiscent of nineteenth-century opera; particularly the work of Richard Wagner—for whom he had enormous admiration. Wagner, in *The Art-Work of the future* states that "true Drama is only conceivable as proceeding from a common urgency of every art... In this Drama, each separate art can only bare its utmost secret to their common public through a mutual parleying with the other arts..." (Wagner, 184) This is the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total work of art" in which all media unite to capture the public's (or folk's) *geist*. What was then needed, according to Wagner, was a genius capable of mastering all of these forms; and of orchestrating them into a coherent and

overwhelming whole that would literally capture this national spirit. The racial subtext of this project, as well as the necessity for a god-like master who orchestrates and conducts the work, would become obvious in Wagner's recuperation by the Nazis.

It should be clear that the film does not suggest that the Alsatian doctor was a Wagnerian racist and/or anti-Semite. Nevertheless, the film does intimate that the former's universal humanitarianism demanded an absolute mastery that reproduced significant elements of the Wagnerian ideal.<sup>3</sup> In addition, like Wagner, he was a multi-faceted man: a writer, musician, philosopher and scientist, encompassing much of elite (Western) human activity. Each of these roles in turn occupied a particular place in his overall project; just as expressive forms occupy a specific place in the hierarchy of media that constitute film. For Schweitzer and for film, (and for Wagnerian opera) narrative, whether spoken, visual, or written, occupies the principal role. Writing was particularly important in that it consolidated and preserved his broad range of ideas; just as a film records visually, writing guarantees meaning and permanence. Both men explored a number of different media; and both ultimately conceived of their legacies as textual. Finally, their emphasis on the textual implicated race by situating the evanescent alterity of the musical in the face of the historical permanence, the inscription and iterability of the written (or filmic) document. While marshaled differently in each case, the racial subtext persists; and the (hierarchical) ordering of the media preserves and guarantees this differential imperative.

The reason for this comparison is to suggest the complex relationship that *ba Kobhio's* film has with its subject (matter). In some sense, just as the film critiques its subject and what he represents, it uses the medium which best corresponds to that subject, the Great White Master, whose own life became a kind of Wagnerian work of art supported by the structural frame of his writing. As Wagner, Schweitzer mastered (and "respected") music, but he excluded it from the

rational realm. Music could not play a role in the constitution of narrative logic; that responsibility fell exclusively to the scriptural. In turn, the reason that film reveals the metaphysical and ideological implications of music and literature's relationship is that, as in opera, the visual mediates between the two media: it stands in as the immediacy, the "real," to which language and particular writing aspires nostalgically; while also opening a temporal performativity characterized by symbolic opacity yet tempered by film's iterability. Thus, language provides the historical ground on which film bases its Force while the visual situates "the real." Music, on the other hand, hints at what language cannot express while remaining emotional, and therefore abstract in its effects. This relationship, broadly speaking, is the historical relationship between music and language in Western metaphysics, the relationship that Nietzsche describes as the encounter between Apollo and Dionysus as exemplified by Greek Tragedy and Wagnerian Opera.

The musical trope that the film exploits extends to musicological debates as well.<sup>4</sup> Schweitzer was a world famous scholar of the German baroque composer and musician Johan Sebastian Bach and was an accomplished performer of Bach's organ music. Bach, in turn, is famous for the mathematical quality of his counterpoint and for having firmly established the Western tempered scale, all of which he invested in the celebration of the Christian God. Within the realm of the spiritual, Bach's music functioned like film music as an enhancement of God's word. In this sense, he follows Bach in his conception of music as an emotional stimulant which guarantees the supremacy of the Word, and more specifically, as it has been handed down by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the letter.

Based on the logic implicit in this series of connections, I would like to propose that the Diasporic improvisatory music that *Le Grand Blanc* finally stages stands in opposition to this

conception by underscoring the ways in which this Western interpretation of music's place participates in the debasement and exploitation of the "other"—in this case, the African. In ba Kobhio's film, music is no longer simply a soundtrack but a discursive actor. This shift crosses (up) the boundaries that, following the mediatic categories constituting the larger aggregate of film as a genre, structure the medium's epistemologically motivated repetition of Western hegemony.

Several scenes in *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* use music diegetically, that is, where the source of the music is within the cinematic narrative. Three of these situate it as a medium through which Africa (more specifically Gabon) attempts to communicate with Europe. Each consists of a young boy (who, significantly, grows to manhood as the film progresses) offering to enter into a musical dialogue with the organ. The first sets the pattern for those that follow. After a series of sequences during which we witness the doctor caring for the sick, pulling teeth and managing his hospital, there is a cut to night and the exterior of a house. The camera then cuts to a close shot of Schweitzer playing the organ. The visual contrast between day and night suggests that the insistent reality of his activities as a physician gives way to an ecstatic communication with another world. Everything about the scene—its narrative discontinuity with respect to what precedes and follows, the subtle chiaroscuro lighting, and the intimacy of the shots—posit a radical dichotomy between serious work and play. He is, to borrow from Slavoj Žižec, tarrying with the negative, with something ineffable and altogether unreal.<sup>5</sup> The only element that disrupts this order is the initial overlap of the organ into his daytime activities as the camera cuts from day to night.

Thus, this scene, underscores the binary opposition between the (verbal-literary-rational) world of day and (musical-irrational) night, of work and play, of the concrete and the abstract.



These spheres are—albeit temporarily—neatly organized into discrete realms untainted by each other. The contrast reinforces this oppositional dynamic. In the first shot of the house, indoors, is separated from outdoors by the walls; but more vividly still by the bars over the windows that suggest a fence or prison; through them we see the lights of the interior. The interior in turn is, at least in appearance, a tamed alterity, which keeps absolute or unbridled night (and Africa) at bay. The doctor's musical activity, while standing in contrast to his rational work as a physician, nevertheless dallies with difference without abdicating to it. The organ, a fixed pitch and “orchestral” instrument underscores this “tempered” alterity. Between the keys, pedals and stops, it contains all instruments just as the performance on this elaborate instrument demonstrates total control. The sheet music that we see in this first shot sustains the necessary priority of the written as rationality over the irrational potential lurking in music.

Three events soon disrupt this established order. The first interruption consists of an inserted very close shot of a parrot pecking at manuscript pages. This rapid sequence initiates the debunking of mastery in the face of ineluctable opacity and difference that will follow. The subsequent cut to a mid-range deep shot with Schweitzer's wife Héléne in the foreground also reveals the terms of his authority. She interrupts his playing with her preoccupations about the difficulty of the writing she is doing:

Héléne-Ça serait infiniment plus facile avec une machine à écrire [It would be infinitely easier with a typewriter]

Albert-C'est trop cher. [It's too expensive]

He rises and moves towards her. An arc shot around Héléne relocates the camera so that we can see husband and wife facing each other in the frame with Albert standing over her. He rubs his eyes.

Hélène-Vos yeux? [Your eyes?]

A.S.- Ils se fatiguent. [They are getting tired]

Hélène-Vous devriez penser à engager un collaborateur. [You should think of getting a collaborator.]

A.S.- Quelle curieuse idée. C'est de médicament dont j'ai besoin. [What a strange notion. What I need is medicine.]

This brief exchange is about power. While the doctor cites fiscal concerns for not purchasing a typewriter, what follows suggests something else. Hélène is his extension when she writes by hand. The request is a demand for mastery, through the mechanical, of her own production of text, just as he tames the musical through the organ. His refusal is telling, just as is his reaction to his wife's suggestion that he hire a collaborator; both confirm his authoritarian impulse amply apparent in his running of the hospital throughout the daytime sequences of the film. The sharing of writing and the sharing of power with a collaborator run in parallel. The first part of this scene conflates the musical and the feminine such that mastery of the musical (via the technology of the organ) and the feminine (via the maintenance of his wife as an extension of his scriptural power) result from the same impulse.

The second part renders this dynamic explicit and extends it to racial alterity/Blackness. The conclusion of this exchange brings the most dramatic challenge to the Schweitzerian *Weltanschauung*. As Hélène and Albert continue to face each other, loud drumming comes from the darkness outside. While she barely reacts to this sonic interruption, he instead turns sharply towards it. The camera then cuts to a young boy playing a wooden drum. This instrument's apparent simplicity (it is a hollowed out log) contrasts with the technological sophistication of the organ. Further enhancing the distance between these musicians, the boy plays outside the

house, in front of the bars over the window reinforcing the symbolic distance between nature and culture as witnessed at the beginning of the scene. The wall of the house and the bars over the windows map out the chasm between the West and Africa.

He moves purposefully back to the keyboard. We hear him playing and the camera then cuts to his hands, then to his face. The parrot whistle in the background illustrates what he hears in the drums: the insistent invasion of alterity. The organ temporarily masks the drumming, but it there is a crescendo in the beat. A close-up reaction shot follows where the doctor turns his head suddenly and fearfully stares into the camera as the pulse continues. He resumes playing and the camera cuts back to the boy. Follows a close shot of the parrot seen earlier, shredding the manuscripts with its beak and claws, then Hélène writing and apparently unconcerned by the dramatic encounter taking place between the two musicians. The scene ends with organ playing and a pan right to the Parrot continuing to shred the pages of the manuscript.

Having provided this lengthy description, I would like to highlight a few significant details that suggest the ways this, and the subsequent two scenes between the white organist and the unnamed drummer, function with respect to the rest of the film. The first concerns clothing. As opposed to the doctor who is dressed in the quintessential white colonial uniform with a matching pith helmet, the boy is bare-chested and wears dark pants. In addition, he wears a dark hat that closely resembles the helmet (except in color). By dress and by his placement in the dark, he is a negation. In this he speaks to Olivier Barlet's description of the ways in which the Western camera produces the alterity of the African:

La Rhétorique du cinéma colonial découle d'un code proprement manichéen. Le cadrage de dos montre la puissance "puissance animale" et occulte le visage, symbole de l'être pensant. Le nu, "état de nature," s'oppose à l'habilité du colon,

“état de culture.” L’Africain est cadré à droite dans la partie négative de l’image, ou bien au sol pour exprimer son “animalité.”

[The rhetoric of colonial cinema stems from a truly Manichean code. The framing from the back to demonstrates the “animal power” and hides the face, symbol of the thinking being. The naked “state of nature” is contrasted with dressed/skilled colonizer, in a “state of culture.” The African is framed right, in the negative part of the frame, or on the ground so as to underscore his “animality.”]

All of these elements are present in this scene in one form or another. The semi-nakedness of the African in contrast to Schweitzer’s full dress; the head hidden in darkness of the drummer in contrast to the organist’s lit face; the framing of the drummer on the right side of the scene (though we never see the two characters together). This citational relationship with the Western cinematic tradition’s techniques of othering will be maintained throughout.

Just as significantly for this analysis is the contrast of instruments. What I have been calling generically a drum is more precisely a Nkul or Nkoul, a traditional instrument of the Fang of Gabon. One of its most significant features is that it is a means of communication. Thus, this instrument does not function (only) as a means of accessing the spiritual or transcendental as the organ does: the Nkul breaks down the boundaries between the musical and the linguistic to which Schweitzer appears to cling so desperately.

ba Kobhio’s use of the drum implicates an instrument that Clara Henderson shows appears repeatedly in Western cinematic representations of Africa as a frightening reminder of alternative modes of signification. Drums are integral elements of the Western cinematic rendering of “jungle scenes” where, just beyond the camera’s eye, savages wait for the first pink-fleshed white man to venture beyond the safe confines of whatever happens to be standing in for

civilization. In these movies, the drums always hint at the most barbaric acts of which cannibalism is the ultimate signifier in this cinematic rhetoric of othering.

The Grand Blanc expresses *his* fear by returning to the organ to fend off what he interprets as an attack on his authority and sense of order. He believes that he can counter the impudent drumming with the spiritually empowered voice of Baroque liturgical music. His attempt fails; the drumming refuses to stop and the previous incursions into his world begin to ally themselves and to accrue in power. Now the parrot violently tears apart the manuscript weakening the neat orders of Nature versus science, Woman versus man, black versus white, writing/language versus music. This series of oppositions climaxes in the playing of the Nkul and in the figure of the drummer where very faint lighting accentuates the darkness of the boy's clothing and skin thereby reinforcing the sense of difference.

ba Kobhio's rendering of this scene offers the Alsatian doctor (and the European spectator) another series of possibilities whose sub-textual presence motivates the entirety of the film. In this scene, the European interprets every exchange as a potential challenge to his authority. In the case of the African, he might, however, have considered another possibility. Could the boy's playing be an invitation to dialogue? It appears, that the great white man refuses to hear the drum's musical offering; yet, the drum responds to the rhythm of the keyboard. Does he even, in some sense unconsciously react to the rhythm of the drum? I insist on the idea of dialogue for two reasons. The first is that the drum does not simply follow the rhythm mimetically. Rather, it elaborates on it, adding polyrhythmic accents to the original meter. Not only does it un-master the master, particularly since for this Bach scholar the foundation of Bach's organ music is rhythmic, but it un-masters the very idea of mastery as well. Thus, the boy's drumming is both an invitation to dialogue and a claim to independence. On closer

examination, the boy is not a negation so much as another person who seeks him out, as one human does another. Only Schweitzer (and the cinematic tradition that duplicates his sense of essential alterity) insists on the dialectical relationship.

The Grand Blanc's character, his will to power, makes this dialogue virtually impossible. As critic and organist Michael Murray notes in another context,

his recitals of Bach helped to fund the African hospital. And his knowledge of Bach doubtlessly reaffirmed for him the acceptability of certain character traits... [He was]... strong-willed, often short-tempered, and nearly always incapable of working under direction. ... (Murray, 40)

There was, in short, a significant relationship between his musical activity and his authoritarian impulse. Significantly, rather than being inspired by the communicative power of music, its ability to create the social, to speak across cultural boundaries, he instead found in it confirmation of his own righteousness according to "God's word." This "inability to work under direction" allowed the doctor to persevere in the face of grave adversity; but it also produces a kind of imperial deafness. Just as, in the film, he cannot stand the idea of a "collaborator," he also cannot cede control over the musical other: to do so would require that he recognize the equality of others, and particularly the people he treats.

The two subsequent scenes involving the boy extend the major themes of the first. The second, in particular, brings the question of dialogue to the fore while reinforcing the connection the film has already suggested between music and the sub-categories of alterity that are Blackness, the Feminine and Nature. It begins with the doctor writing at the desk. Shot from the side at mid-close range, he is in a halo of light. The camera faces the barred window that we see in the background. The sound of drums interrupts the silence and the scene cuts to the drummer.

The lighting once again underscores the difference between the two worlds separated by the window. The great white man basks in a light that accentuates his white clothing and hair. The drummer remains outside, only a sliver of light illuminating his side. Once again, he is dressed in dark ragged pants, no shirt, and his dark hat.

The camera cuts back to Schweitzer as he rises from his desk and then cuts to follow as he moves to the organ and sits at the bench. He begins to play. There is a cut to his hands as he plays and then, once again, to the drummer. Here, we sense that he may be attempting to communicate, has heard something of what the boy is trying to say. Nevertheless, the organ appears to drown out the sound of the drum; and its insistent counterpoint makes no concession to the boy's profoundly different musical discourse. This response fumbles to speak but evident stubbornness guarantees failure. They continue to play for a few seconds with shots and counter-shots between the musicians. Sensing that something is amiss, the organist stops playing, raises his head and looks out the window (away from the camera). He begins playing again but shortly thereafter, the boy falls silent and the organ follows suit.

Though we do not really see Schweitzer's expression, the stoop of his shoulders suggests an acknowledged failure. He returns to his desk, and begins to write again. As he sits there, a rock hits the side of the house, causing him to rise and look out the window. Here, the lighting serves as a cue. Darkness shrouds his figure as he crosses the room to look through the wooden bars. In the distance, we see, half hidden behind a tree, Bissa, the Gabonese woman who attempts to seduce him throughout the film. If H  l  ne was present in the earlier scene while the doctor's double was alone outside, there are now two such doubles. In contrast to H  l  ne's apparent prudishness, the black woman here appears to represent an un-constrained sexuality that easily finds its place among the interconnected alterities that I have discussed thus far. Her

conflation with Nature, Africa, drumming and night are evident through the composition of the scene in which she remains outside, barely lit and veiled in mystery and inaccessibility.

Nevertheless, these over-determined connections come not from her perspective, but from the great white man who, just as he fails to enter into dialogue with the drummer, refuses to acknowledge his attraction to an African. He is simply incapable of making the final gesture, of moving beyond the confines of his house.

This second scene is perhaps most vivid in its depiction of the lost opportunity that the film explores. It shows just how close the Grand Blanc is to making the necessary adjustments that would open his thinking to his patients and neighbors—that would allow him to concede his own frailty in the face of the world and to see Africans as fully constituted human beings. His inability to follow the drummer as he returns to the safe haven of his mastery of Baroque music illustrates the terms of this failure within the context of the musical. The musical is, at the same time, precisely where he and the boy might build a communicative bridge. It does not implicate the mastery of writing that is explicitly the doctor's domain throughout the film. Nor does it involve his authority over the hospital. It does demand that he relinquish some of his power in a realm that, because of his overarching control over Lambaréné, would cost him nothing. Even here, he cannot take this step.

Instead, before the final scene between the young drummer and the doctor, he latter sets about consolidating his hold. He begins at a Lambaréné Christmas party. This scene opens with a medium shot of a choir of Lambaréné children singing “O Tannenbaum” in four-part harmony as they clap-out a simple four-four measure. The performance, beyond its ironic reference to a Christmas tree, is the very antithesis of African music in which Western conceptions of harmony are absent and rhythms are complex and multi-layered. Immediately at the conclusion of the



song, we get a mid-range shot of the Grand Blanc and his white entourage (Hélène, the nurses and the newly arrived assistant) in his now familiar position of authority (which the camera's angle upward emphasizes). He commands that the candles be extinguished in order to save them for the following year; and he turns to the nurse who is standing next to him while handing her a wrapped gift: "vous donnerez ça discrètement au fou du tam-tam." ["Give this discretely to the tom-tom nut"]. The "ça" ["this"] in question, we will shortly learn, is a trumpet. This particular gift and the expression "fou du tam-tam" that accompany it invite further investigation: Does he mean someone who is nuts about the tom-tom? Someone who is nuts and who plays the tom-tom, or even crazy *because* he plays the tom-tom? Or again, crazed by this irrational instrument? The answer could also be elsewhere, a displacement. After all, it is the doctor who is driven insane by the sound of the drum: noise but not noise, too musical to dismiss and yet not musical enough to understand. This would explain the gift of a trumpet—not percussion but a melodic instrument—whose single voice will not compete with the polyphonic organ. Having come as close as he could to entering into musical dialogue, he returns to the position that we see at the outset. Instead of conceding anything and/or trying to understand the place and meaning of music for his potential interlocutor, he instead enrolls the young man into his own musical practice. In doing so, he relegates him to a secondary role in the "orchestra" for which he is conductor, composer and primary performer.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the penny-saving gesture of extinguishing the candles precedes this gift suggests the extent to which this is more than a passing whimsy. Albert refuses to buy his wife a typewriter and does all of the building at the hospital himself to save money. At the same time, he decides to make the extravagant gift of an expensive instrument. The meaning of this symbolically charged gesture, while already apparent, is formalized in the final scene between

the young African and the “great white man.” The trumpet is the condition of possibility for any musical dialogue to take place between them. Yet, can we speak of dialogue at this point?

The third encounter between the two follows the departure of a young French doctor who had finally been hired as an assistant. The relationship does not last long. The young man is appalled at the conditions in the hospital and frustrated with the doctor’s refusal to use the latest methods and equipment on people the “Grand Blanc” calls primitives. Before leaving, the young man astutely notes, “si au moins vous écoutiez les gens” [if at least you listened to people]. The older man’s response, “j’écoute les gens que j’ai envie d’écouter” [I listen to those to whom I want to listen.], vividly illustrates his authoritarian impulse and his selective listening. By now the viewer has understood that among those he chooses not to hear are African. The conditions of audition are formalized in the subsequent scene where Schweitzer once again asserts his authority the film cuts to the now familiar exterior of the house from which light streams. We hear the organ insistently repeating a single note. There follows a cut to the organist’s hands as he continues to play this one note.

The simplicity of the gesture immediately contrasts with his earlier contrapuntal playing in which his musical dexterity was immediately evident. As the camera cuts to the outside, we immediately understand the apparent childishness of the melody. The musical interaction has changed. Having refused to compromise his own musical language, the organist now builds the novice trumpet player from the ground up. Outside the house, the student repeats the keyboard’s note a third up from the tonic thereby creating, in an echo of the earlier “O Tannenbaum,” the alien musical artifact of harmony. As with the preceding encounters, the ex-drummer remains outside. Yet, now a fire basks the young man in light. He has entered the beam cast by Western knowledge and technology. The instrument he plays, like the organ, is exemplary of colonial

mastery. Its valves function like a simplified version of the organ stops. He is apparently under the thrall of the Great White man as he tentatively sounds out the notes. The doctor has, it would appear, found the solution to his musical conundrum by ridding himself of the drummer and replacing him with a musician he can both understand and manipulate.

Now, all is well with the world and each thing is in its place. The white man dominates and instructs from the civilized space of culture (the interior of the house) while the black student remains outside, limited to the powerlessness and banality of the melodic, a natural world tamed by the fire which mimics the lamps of the house. A subsequent cut to the Grand Blanc's face captures his contentment. This will be the last instance of such control.

Historical forces soon take over. The next scene in which the two appear is no longer within the context of the teacher-student relationship; indeed, the dynamics of the musical now escape the confines of the nocturnal that had defined it to this point. It breaks into daylight thereby claiming its emancipation from everything that the doctor represents. Here, Gabon has gained its independence, something that Schweitzer remained opposed to throughout his life. Just as he loses his grip on "his" Africans, he also loses his musician as well. Having been indoctrinated into Western musical practices, the young drummer has now become an adult trumpet player. However, he does so against Western musical expectations. The scene of the independence party underscores this point.

At this crucial moment in the film, for the first time, we see African agency. The various characters who have been working in one manner or another at the margins of the white doctor's empire are now located at the center of power. At the podium are Mikendi, the radical and "le petit Koumba" who is now an adult, as well as other politicians we have not seen before. Here, the roles etched out at the earlier Christmas party are reversed: African characters rather than

European are on the dais. In addition, children no longer constitute the crowd, but adults who proclaim their emancipation with shouts of “Vive l’indépendance.” Significantly, there are white characters interspersed throughout the crowd who join the approving chorus. Their presence is significant in that it signals that the inability to hear Africans is a personal weakness rather than an essentializing racial trait. This event is not defined through differentiation but as a human victory over tyranny.

The musical strand that I have been pursuing throughout this essay comes to its climax at this moment in the film. Once the shouts of “Vive l’indépendance” have died out, the camera cuts to a close shot of a drummer at a Western trap-set who lays out a four-four beat by hitting his sticks together. Another cut follows of our trumpeter playing the first notes of the famous “Indépendance cha-cha,” a cult tune throughout Francophone Africa in 1960. This song links the individual experience of the trumpet player with the greater historical moment, not only in Gabon, but also throughout France’s other African ex-colonies. With this one song, the trumpet player frees himself from the Great White master, just as his country frees itself of colonial oppression. At the same time, and this ba Kobbio will continue to explore in a subsequent scene, the song pursues the trope of alternate discursive practices that the film has pursued to this point.

Having accepted to change instruments, the drummer-turned-trumpet-player now uses the musical language of the master to un-master him. He does this by taking the defining terms of Western music and displacing them. This deliberate distortion takes place at the very heart of musical practice: it functions rhythmically, melodically, and with respect to the social significance and place of the musical in Western “high” culture. “Indépendance cha-cha,” unlike Bach’s music, is not “high art” but popular. Those at the independence party do not listen to the music passively, they dance to it. In addition, the cha-cha is a Diasporic music of synthesis,

combining African and European elements. Originating in Cuba, the cha-cha also bears the message (and history) of successful revolution. Musically, it is a syncopated form in which melody and rhythm are elastic and improvisatory. Finally, it also confirms the argument offered by John Mundy in *Popular Music on Screen*. As he notes, “whilst it has seemed useful for some to argue for music as a rather mystical non-representational form...this is really to miss music’s social function. It is certainly not a fruitful approach to popular music and popular song, especially when contained and contextualized by the regime of the visual.”(Mundy, 74) In this scene, this point is particularly convincing as the music has become (and serves for the spectator of the film) as a reminder of the moment of independence. The cipher or signifier of that moment is the song.

Here, the camera makes the final point about the trumpet player’s position. I have insisted in earlier scenes, on the bars over the windows of the house and the lighting used to symbolically articulate the relationship between the old European and the young African. These charged elements return at the close of the “independence scene.” The event takes place in broad daylight and the dynamics of differentiation so apparent earlier are no longer in play. Meaning is instead articulated spatially by the placement of the camera and the shots that are used to compose the scene. In this respect, perhaps the most telling moment in the film is the closing long shot in which, through the bars of a fence, we see Le Grand Blanc rendered miniscule by the distance, alone and looking towards the camera as the music continues to play. As he turns to walk away, his stooped posture betrays his defeat. Where he had always been indoors and the young man outside, the roles are finally reversed. The camera emphasizes his exclusion from the independence party. Yet, this alienation he has created for himself by his refusal or inability to listen. Rather than participating, he has chosen to remain apart. As the presence of other white

participants suggests, he could have remained but cannot bring himself to join the revelers: his sense of order, of the proper place of African and European in his segregated world view, will not allow it.

Just as importantly the musical must operate in a realm outside the verbal/rational. As we have seen earlier, music is a medium of the night in which alterity is brought forth in muzzled form. ba Kobhio's film, and this scene in particular, instead propose that neither music nor language is epistemologically stable, neither with respect to the other medium, nor with respect to any universal system of meaning, value and place. Conversely, for the white man, Nature and Culture cannot get along unless one dominates the other—unless rational language dominates music just as white dominates black. The drummer has continually challenged this absolute dichotomy, even forsaking his own mastery of the drum to engage in the white other's musical practice. The celebration scene offers the prospect of another use of practices inherited from the colonial experience. This is not a traditional (pre-colonial) African ceremony: the clothing is Western, the political structure adopted European and the event cosmopolitan. These alien influences on the ceremony suggest a non-discriminatory hybrid discursivity. The next cut to the doctor on a river-barge, writing, formalizes the conclusions the spectator has drawn from the independence party. He is now essentially locked in a solitude of his own creation.

While there are other moments that I could discuss with respect to the musical, for the sake of brevity, the following will conclude my analysis. In one of the final moments of the film, Bissa, the woman who had thrown a rock against his window is with Schweitzer in the now familiar house. He proposes to play a piece at the organ. At this moment, the tropes of language, music and mastery that I have been exploring throughout this essay are explicitly gathered together. Tellingly, an African woman makes these connections and provides the analysis. If the

Grand Blanc has conflated her with Africa and difference to this point, here she retorts with her capacity as a thinker. Just as the trumpet player had shown his ability to make use of the master's discourse, the black woman performs the same task. In the process, she assembles all of the elements that I have been discussing to this point.

A.S.: Je vais te jouer un de tes airs préférés. [I'm going to play you one of your favorite pieces.]

Bissa: Joue moi un air de Lambaréné. [Play me a tune from Lambaréné.]

A.S.: mais ils sont impossibles au piano, même à l'orgue. [But they are impossible to play on the piano, even on the organ.]

Bissa: Tu n'as jamais voulu apprendre à jouer les instruments d'ici. [You never wanted to learn the instruments from around here.]

He keeps playing.

Bissa: Me tondo... Ça aussi c'est étonnant... tu as soigné des milliers de corps dans ton hopital et tu ne comprends pas dix mots de notre langue alors que tu parle l'allemand, le français, l'anglais, l'alsatien, l'hébreux et que sais-je encore.

[Me tondo... That too is amazing...you have healed thousands of bodies in your hospital and you don't understand ten words of our language despite the fact that you speak German, French, English, Alsatian, Hebrew and who knows how many other languages.]

A.S.: Voilà la seule langue universelle; la langue la plus purement symétrique qui peut se jouer aussi bien à l'endroit qu'à l'envers... [Here is the only universal language; the most purely symmetrical language that can be played as well forward as backwards.]

She finally makes explicit the connection between the musical and the linguistic. He could/would not learn the musical language of Lambaréné precisely because he could not play this music at the organ, the only instrument he would allow himself to play. Likewise, he could not bring himself, despite his skill with languages, to learn any of the languages of the people he treated for over forty years. Bissa precisely situates the problem with which the film contends and which the white doctor incarnates. For him, Africa's languages and musics are essentially the same. Neither signifies, either musically or linguistically. To understand what either means would be to forsake the conditions of his mastery. More powerful still would be acknowledging that the separation between music and language on which his conception of the universe depends does not hold in Gabon. This would mean acknowledging that, as Anahid Kassabian underscores in *Hearing Film*, "the significant difference between words or pictures and music is...that music is *understood* as nonrepresentational...Certainly, most of the twentieth-century western art music composition styles...depend on the notion that music does not "mean" in any direct sense of the term."(Kassabian's emphasis, 6) In short, music's opacity is a convention. This, Schweitzer cannot bring himself to admit.

Sadly, he was perhaps best equipped to cross the boundaries established by a century or more of exploitation and abuse. He had pondered the question of his own place in the world; he was a world-renowned pacifist and theologian; and he recognized the crimes of the early colonizers—even if his presence as part of the "mission civilisatrice" served to justify the colonial process. Despite all of these qualifications, he refused the compromise that would give him access to the voice of the other. As she notes shortly thereafter, "tu étais si près du but Grand Blanc; la piste qui mène au cœur de ce pays t'était largement ouvert. Et tu as préféré le bord de la piste." [You were so close to the goal Great White Man; the path that leads to the heart of the



country was largely open to you. And you preferred to linger on the side of the road.” Bissa explains why Schweitzer is, historically speaking, a tragic figure: to the extent that he was not able to understand Africa and Africans, no white man was going to accomplish the feat. His failure here is epistemological, ethical and historical. He could not break from the parameters that constituted his conception of the world and his own place and value in that world. Ultimately, according to the film, this was the manifestation of a form of cowardice.

Both as a symptom and as the crux of his failure is his inability to relinquish control. The ordering of the media is one of the primary ingredients that constitutes his mastery and gives it its legitimacy. Within that system, music is radically opposed to language. For the doctor, music is an abstract and universal realm. The organ exemplifies and sustains this conception of the musical because it places the musical universe (the whole orchestra) at the musician’s fingertips. Organ music embodies and communicates Spirit and inhabits an ethereal realm in which communication remains tied to the quest for the absolute—absolved of thinking. For him, the work of science (in the broadest sense), the only real work, remains scriptural and scripted. As we have seen underscored by the scenes discussed earlier, he believes in the power of the rational which language vehicles and writing preserves. Music, remains play, a toying with, but not an abdication to incomprehensible alterity. This cleavage between the media is irrevocable and absolute. He simply cannot hear a musical or linguistic form that does not adhere to this first principal. His deafness to Gabonese musical discourse was precisely the problem he faced with the drummer.

Just as importantly, this same logic explains the Great White Man’s inability to learn the language of Lambaréné. Bissa brilliantly collapses the inability to play the tunes/instruments of the people that he has worked with for over forty years into the inability to speak their language.

In a sense, he could not hear their difference... He gathers musical, linguistic, and racial alterity into an inchoate totality. In this haze, the other fades from view as a legitimate interlocutor. The other's language is too musical and his/her music too verbal. As a result, neither an African language nor an African music can constitute humanity. This explains why the people he treated, as the film notes (and as is amply confirmed by his writings), remained, for him, primitive children. The Great White Man thinks of music as universal; there is no need to learn the musical discourse of the other. For him, the object of music is that same universality, the elaboration of a mathematical precision and complexity, which will be equal to the complexity of the universe itself. His claim that music retains its effectiveness whether played backwards or forwards can only suggest the palindromic Bach fugue.

Yet, an African woman—the person least likely to be able to produce such a truth in the white man's world—makes him face this failure. What Schweitzer has been incapable of understanding is the intimate bond that exists between music and language and particularly writing; and the extent to which the precise nature of that bond is fluid and performative. He sees music and language as discrete media that have radically different functions in the constitution of Western being. Bissa, in contrast, notes his refusal to learn the music of Lamabaréné despite his expert training as a musician; and his concomitant refusal to learn the language of the people that he treats. In so doing, she confirms the slippage between the two media that he has been incapable of acknowledging; she then underscores the relationship between this deafness and the dehumanization of the Africans he has been treating for so long. This scene concludes with the Great White man finally inviting Bissa into his bed. It is during this night that Schweitzer dies. The film remains illusive as to the meaning of his final gesture. Perhaps he has in fact understood her. Perhaps it is this understanding that ultimately kills him. Hearing her would certainly mark

the end of the Great White Man as he has been constructed this narrative. Whichever alternative we choose, the film clearly demonstrates that, historically, it is too late.

In conclusion, an overview of African cinema suggests that it expends most of its energy on “locating” Africa (whether culturally, historically, politically or esthetically) by considering the pre-colonial past, the events and repercussions of the colonial period, or the post-colonial present. In addition, in these films, the focus tends to be exclusively on African communities. White figures, when they appear, play minor and/or almost exclusively negative parts.<sup>7</sup> As Manthia Diawara notes,

These films position the spectators to identify with the African people’s resistance against European colonialism and imperialistic drives. The stories are about colonial encounters, and they often pit African heroes and heroines against European villains. They are conditioned by the desire to show African heroism where European history only mentioned the actions of the conquerors, resistance where the colonial version of history silenced oppositional voices, and the role women in the armed struggle. For the filmmaker, such historical narratives are justified by the need to bring out of the shadows the role played by the African people in shaping their own history...(Diawara, 152)

To the degree that these films delve into positive historical figures, they tend to be Africans. *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* is, at the very outset, a departure from mainstream film, even within the realm of African cinema. Here we have an African story largely constructed around a white man, albeit a significant historical figure. Ba Kobhio’s intervention in the Western historical record, and his willingness to place a white character at the center of his narrative, suggest a meaningful challenge to current cinematic practices. The fact that he performs this critique

through a deconstruction of filmic paradigms of media organization adds to the effectiveness of the gesture. Indeed, *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* denaturalizes the role of music within cinema and underscores the ways in which music's posited opacity serves to maintain relationships of center and periphery, sameness and difference, black and white.

In addition, the film follows Frank Ukadike's definition of the postcolonial African documentary film. While not specifically a documentary, but rather a fictional biography, the film nevertheless adheres to stipulation that, opposing the colonial cinematic representations of Africa "implies the demystification of colonial histories exposing their method of reification, objectification, and representation of the 'Other.' Hence, the quest for African cinematic reality (the image) in film has produced a genre of social documentary meant to combat the false image presented by traditional cinema." (*Focus on African Film*. Françoise Pfaff editor. "The Other Voice of Documentary: Allah Tantou and Afrique, je te plumerai". N. Frank Ukadike. 160) This is all the more true that one of ba Kobhio's principal models for the film was the 1957 *Albert Schweitzer* which won the academy award for best documentary.

Having stated this, I would nevertheless like to unsettle my own optimistic interpretation by returning to a scene I posited as central to understanding the role of music in this film. During the independence ceremony, the band strikes up "Indépendance cha-cha." This tune speaks to a historically charged moment in African history. At the same time, this moment potentially marks the limit of ba Kobhio's critique. My positive reading of the scene followed the way that the film invites its Western audience to view it: it gently guides its Euro-American audience away from outmoded attitudes towards Africans and Africa (there are white people shouting "vive l'indépendance" in the audience) by deconstructing European epistemologies producing (and

dependent on) difference. The scene also suggests an evolution beyond the colonial period for which the West would no longer bear any responsibility.

African viewers might view this scene altogether differently. To them, “Indépendance cha-cha” could just as easily reverberate with a bitter irony. After all, the promises of 1960 have withered on the vine; and since then, the white revelers in the audience appear to have returned to the dais.<sup>8</sup> Thus, what is lacking in *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* is a historical specificity that will provide it with a true ideological charge. This lack of historical and ideological material (which was already evident in ba Kobhio’s first film, *Sango Malo*) is ultimately problematic. While the Alsatian doctor is drawn with clear and precise strokes, the two characters destined to replace him, Mikendi and Koumba, are sketches, not to say caricatures. While the film is not about them, by appealing to the independence ceremony in general and “Indépendance cha-cha” in particular, it reads Schweitzer around a historical paradigm shift. At that moment, Africans supposedly take over for the synecdochal “Grand Blanc.”

As such, the film commits itself to pursuing its own logic, that is, in continuing to deconstruct epistemes of difference and overdetermined racialized dichotomies. While it had done so earlier in the film (particularly through the figure of Bissa), the fact that it leaves the space of African leadership blank is troubling. The film ultimately loses considerable legitimacy by failing to acknowledge that will to power is not exclusively European. To ignore this is to leave the way for Eyadema (Togo), Sekou Touré (Guinea), Senghor (Senegal), Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast) and so many others. Indeed, Gabon (where the film is set) and Cameroon (ba Khobio’s homeland) are both essentially dictatorships ruled by men, Omar Bongo and Paul Biya, who have been in power for decades and whose political standing depends in large part on their collaboration with Western neo-colonial interests. When Schweitzer

skeptically notes that Koumé has been elected by than an eighty-percent majority the latter simply replies that he is popular. This will be the limit of the films critique of this new generation of African leaders. Coming from this source at such a late moment in the film, it has virtually no weight.

In his critique of Ousmane Sembene's authoritarian didacticism in "The Failed Trickster," (*Focus*, 124-142) Kenneth Harrow suggests that Sembene ultimately substitutes the phallic voices he critiques with his own. In *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné*, something slightly different occurs. Where Sembene's imposition of his own definition of African authenticity quashes the free play of social signifiers, ba Kobhio exposes European mastery while letting homegrown dictatorship operate undisturbed. Tellingly, in ba Kobhio's first feature film, *Sango Malo*, the schoolmaster, Malo Malo Bernard emphasizes much of what Schweitzer does: the importance of manual labor, the dangers of material wealth, the uselessness of intellectual knowledge for peasants etc. Likewise, he is self-righteous and dictatorial. While he is gently chided for the latter, Malo Malo is ultimately represented positively for much of what Schweitzer is denounced.

In closing, throughout this essay, I have argued that *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* uses music to critique the colonial relationship. Music serves to underscore how the apparently benign organization of the media surreptitiously reinforces paradigms of difference. To the extent that ba Kobhio's film addresses the connection between music, writing, race, and agency, it represents a powerful critique of the means by which Africans' voices are weakened, co-opted, or ignored. This aspect of the film is all the more effective in that it demands a meta-critical examination of musical practices within the cinematic medium itself. The film thus performs a complex critique of an iconic Western figure while also deconstructing the medium in which that

critique is articulated. In this context, a piece such as “Indépendance cha-cha” demonstrates some of the ways in which, within the musical medium, modes of resistance can and have been articulated throughout Africa. At the same time, the film consistently argues that music’s effectiveness fundamentally depends on a dialogic open-endedness, an ear to future possibilities and other voices. Musical reification would (re)vitalize and/or legitimate differential paradigms and their attendant modes of oppression.

Yet, while perhaps novel to the European viewer, for the African viewer, “Indépendance cha-cha” precisely risks being a musical cliché or worse still, a bitter joke. Within the context of its critique of Schweitzer, the song represents an epistemic challenge to Western thinking about the relationship between the various media. But the choice of this precise song also signals another phenomenon: the post-colonial deafness of Africa’s leaders to the demands of their own people, a deafness that has also facilitated the return of a neo-colonial Great White Shadow that has been cast across the African continent. Thus, “Indépendance cha-cha” is also a troubling reminder that the “Grand Blanc” of the title will be repeatedly replaced throughout Africa with “Grands Noirs,” the various “Presidents à vie,” “Guides éternels” and so forth, who have occupied the African political landscape since independence.

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<sup>1</sup> The Following titles provide some sense of this treatment. It should be noted that considerably less is published on Schweitzer after 1970: *Pacifists : adventures in courage* (1971), *The life and thought of Albert Schweitzer* (1964), *The ethical mysticism of Albert Schweitzer* (1962), *Albert Schweitzer, a study of his philosophy of life*. (1960), *Days with Albert Schweitzer: a Lambaréné*

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*landscape* (1959) *Albert Schweitzer, the man and his mind* (1956), *Albert Schweitzer : the life of a great man* (1956), *Pathways of the inner life : an anthology of Christian spirituality* (1956), *The animal world of Albert Schweitzer: jungle insights into reverence for life* (1961), *The theology of Albert Schweitzer for Christian inquirers* (1951) , *Albert Schweitzer, life and message* (1950), *Prophet in the wilderness; the story of Albert Schweitzer* (1948), *Albert Schweitzer: Christian revolutionary* (1945)

<sup>2</sup> Ukadike states that “what is typical about this genre (bitraditional structure) is the choice of a universalist theme distinguished by hybrid conventions, which targets foreign spectators for material ends. (Ukadike, 262)

<sup>3</sup> Just as there are, as Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler so insistently posited in their seminal *Composing for Films*, significant differences between film and opera, particularly through intervention of the high-capitalist culture industries, film nevertheless follows opera by encompassing virtually all of the arts that constitute the Western aesthetic tradition: the literary (the script), the visual (the work of the camera), the verbal (the dialogue), the plastic arts (the sets), and the musical (the “soundtrack”).

<sup>4</sup> In particular, the model proposed and discussed at length by Theodore Adorno, of “high art music and all the rest” (see for example his *Introduction to a Sociology of Music*) and the significance, perhaps most eloquently elaborated by Carl Dalhaus of Absolute music (in *The Idea of Absolute Music*).

<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer’s conception of the musical is decidedly Kantian (not surprising given that he had studied Kant extensively) and thus he sees the musical as providing access to the sublime, a realm beyond words.



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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in an echo the expression “fou du tam-tam,” when Schweitzer pretends to conduct on the beach his wife says to him, “merci d’avoir joué le fou pour moi.” This expression suggests a folly to his will to power that resembles Prospero’s madness at the conclusion of Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*.

<sup>7</sup> Ousmane Sembene’s films are a particularly striking example of this representative single-mindedness. This is particularly evident in *Camp de Thiaroye* but also in such films as *Xala*.

<sup>8</sup> . This, I believe is the use that the Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck makes of the song in his *Lumumba*. There, the tune is not meant to stir nostalgia, but a sense of loss and bitterness The original words of “Indépendance cha-cha” specifically mention Lumumba.