

Chapter 10

Musical Messages: Framing Political Content in Sudanese Popular Songs

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the political content in Sudanese music. The aim is to scrutinize and interpret the meaning of such political content and to place it in a historical context of the country's post-independence history. The songs of some of Sudan's most respected musicians of the current era such as Mohamed Al Amin, Abdel Karim Al Kabli and Mohamed Wardi are examined. Guided by framing analysis, the study employs six framing devices: nationalist/patriotic, responsibility, loyalty/allegiance, assimilation, ethno-centric and superiority frame. The aim of the investigation is to deconstruct the content of nationalistic songs to fully appreciate the roles they play in both popular culture and in the political arena. Results suggest that Sudanese popular music is high in nationalistic/patriotic and loyalty/allegiance but low in assimilation content. Results also indicate that Sudan's post-independence history is rich with songs that reflect the country's political situation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This chapter is an analysis of political content in Sudanese popular music. More specifically, songs with nationalistic fervor will be assessed. Songs carry significant meaning and Sudanese musicians have historically used this medium to convey a wide range of messages. Traditionally, Sudanese music has been heavily laden with political rhetoric both before and after the country's independence from Britain in 1956. Street (2012) commented that politics and music are two distinct elements since one "is concerned with the organization of public life" while "the other with the creative use of sound and the appreciation of its beauties and meanings" (p. 1). While music's role has always been perceived as an instrument for entertainment this chapter will highlight the close connection between the use of music as a medium for both entertainment and the dissemination of political messages.

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Although this chapter will examine the lyrics of some of the works of Sudan's most prominent and respected musicians in recent times such as Mohamed Al Amin (b. 1940) Abdel Karim Al Kabli (b. 1932) and Mohamed Wardi (1932-2012), it will also incorporate the works of other popular musicians in the country. Nonetheless, the overriding objective in this study is to pinpoint the political messages embedded in the works of these musicians, and to examine the motivation behind such messages in the Sudanese context. Thus, one of the important aims of this investigation is to deconstruct the content of some of Sudan's nationalistic songs in order to fully appreciate the roles they play in both popular culture and in the political arena. Emphasis will be placed on how the lyrics of the songs examined connect words to politics in the interest of the country's national unity.

Music plays a central role in Sudanese culture. Browsing through the country's television channels, one cannot help but notice the predominance of musical content during most parts of the day. Most often than not, Sudanese tend to be musically-savvy and are inclined to know the lyrics to many popular songs by heart. One therefore senses an appreciation for this art as well as a gratitude for the presence of music during economically and politically difficult times.

The study is guided by framing analysis and provides an illustration of ways in which framing can be used to study media content. This is particularly relevant since music is an important medium that offers a link between culture and politics (Elavsky, 2009). The framing devices employed in this study will be used to demonstrate how musicians deliberately employ lyrics in order to contribute to Sudan's national harmony. These framing devices or frames are as follows: the nationalist/patriotic, responsibility, loyalty/allegiance, assimilation, ethnocentric and superiority frames. Through these frames, the study aims at deconstructing nationalistic songs in order to appreciate their value and the role they play in society.

Beyond the entertainment content in music lies one of its essential and important components: meaning.

As Wall (2003) noted, finding meaning in songs is crucial and involves a number of factors such as how we value the music, how we relate to it, how it makes us feel and what kind of significance it has to us. This combination of factors is necessary for the study and understanding of music since music is engrained in culture, and songs have to be studied in the cultural context in which they exist.

This chapter is also about analyzing some Sudanese popular songs in relation to the country's socio-political and economic history. Since gaining independence in 1956, the country has been through turbulent times and tremendous hardship. Over the years, Sudanese citizens have had so much to complain about. Issues related to unity, development, healthcare, education among others have plagued Sudan's history over the past 60 years. Many attribute these problems to the military's domination of everyday life and point to the fact that never in the country's post-independence history has one democratic government handed over power to another.

Perhaps, the most problematic issue faced by Sudan is relationship between the northern and southern parts of the country. The Sudanese civil war actually started in 1955, just before independence the following year, and was to continue on and off until the south split to form South Sudan in 2011. The country's north-south civil war and its consequences are well-documented in studies such as Deng (2010); Jok (2001); Khalid (2003); and Daly and Sikainga (1993). Although several studies have characterized the hostilities in Sudan as a religious war, it is also incontrovertible that the war was equally precipitated by ethnic and racial differences. Sudan is a mosaic of different ethnic and racial groups and tensions have existed between and among some of these groups for decades.

Over the years Sudan's military rulers – who all came to power by force and were themselves removed by force – have tried and failed to overturn the country's misfortunes. Since 1989, Sudan has been ruled by Omar Al Bashir, an army officer who seized power from a democratically-elected government. As

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