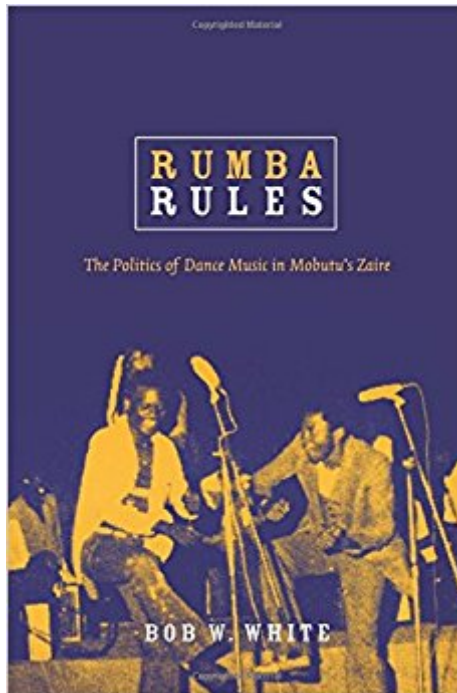




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Rumba Rules: The Politics Of Dance Music In Mobutu's Zaire



Synopsis

Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) from 1965 until 1997, was fond of saying “happy are those who sing and dance,” and his regime energetically promoted the notion of culture as a national resource. During this period Zairian popular dance music (often referred to as *la rumba zaïroise*) became a sort of *musica franca* in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. But how did this privileged form of cultural expression, one primarily known for a sound of sweetness and joy, flourish under one of the continent’s most brutal authoritarian regimes? In *Rumba Rules*, the first ethnography of popular music in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bob W. White examines not only the economic and political conditions that brought this powerful music industry to its knees, but also the ways that popular musicians sought to remain socially relevant in a time of increasing insecurity. Drawing partly on his experiences as a member of a local dance band in the country’s capital city Kinshasa, White offers extraordinarily vivid accounts of the live music scene, including the relatively recent phenomenon of *libanga*, which involves shouting the names of wealthy or powerful people during performances in exchange for financial support or protection. With dynamic descriptions of how bands practiced, performed, and splintered, White highlights how the ways that power was sought and understood in Kinshasa’s popular music scene mirrored the charismatic authoritarianism of Mobutu’s rule. In *Rumba Rules*, Congolese speak candidly about political leadership, social mobility, and what it meant to be a *bon chef* (good leader) in Mobutu’s Zaire.

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Customer Reviews

“Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu’s Zaire by Bob W. White should be a welcome addition to the library of any fan of Congolese music. This book has descriptive passages that give a delicious insight into the everyday workings of a modern Kinshasa orchestre. Furthermore there is some fascinating information and research that helps explain how Congolese music sits within the national culture and everyday social life of the Congolese people. The book can be justifiably described as an essential read for anyone wishing to gain an extended appreciation of the Congo, its politics and its quirky obsession with music.” - Martin Sinnock, *The Beat*

“White’s poignant research and heavily-referenced text showcases a rather complex and dynamic musical historiography and ethnography of Zaire’s (now Congo’s) musicians. . . . [A]n in-depth guide to the music and society of a people transformed and shaped by political policies and pressures. The text contains an extensive notes section, bibliography, small discography, and index. Scholars and students of African music with Congolese interests would benefit most from the text’s information. Yet, it is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in music.” - Matthew J. Forss, *Callaloo*

“[A] pioneering study of its subject.” - Ted Smith, *Montreal Review of Books*

“[A]n important source of information about one of the most celebrated genres of dance music in Africa. Highly recommended.” - Kazadi wa Mukuna, *Choice*

“[F]ascinating, even enthralling.” - Robert Christgau, *Barnes and Noble Review*

“Rumba Rules is a really exciting book, definitely worthy of the ‘groundbreaking’ and ‘sorely needed’ labels it is bound to attract. It is full of the basics and the nuances; deeply informative about a place, a scene, a local history, and lived realities; and deeply accountable to debates and discussions about how popular culture encodes a feeling of and for modernity.”

• Steven Feld, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Music, University of New Mexico

“Rumba Rules ties dance music to dictatorship, band leaders to politicians, in ways that are sensitive to the struggles of Congolese musicians and their fans in Kinshasa. Bob W. White neither diminishes the artistry and entertainment value of musical performances nor over-determines their role in political culture. This is a book that finely theorizes the relationship between aesthetics and political culture through vivid and often amusing storytelling.”

• Louise Meintjes, author of *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*

“What began with an extraordinary feat of immersion into

Kinshasa's music scene toward the end of Mobutu's regime has been honed and crafted into a study of Congolese popular culture and politics that is bound to become a classic. A feat of ethnography and a much-needed ray of hope in these messy and tragic times.

•Johannes Fabian, author of *Memory against Culture: Arguments and Reminders*

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Winner of the 2009 Leeds Prize in Urban Anthropology from the Society for Urban, National, and Transnational/Global Anthropology (SUNTA) section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Winner of the 2010 Joel Gregory Prize from the Canadian Association of African Studies

A very good resource for the post-T.P.O.K /African Jazz era. A rare expose of other Congolese musicians other than Franco, Dr. Nico, Tabu Ley, Grand Kalle, Wendo...to include the stars of the 1990s. A very compelling contextualization of the *atalaku* phenomenon in modern Congolese music.

This book does a decent job describing the music scene in present day DR Congo (former Zaire). It especially highlights the hierarchial nature of Congolese bands and the sorry plight of most band members who don't hold the title of band leader (*Le President*). It also reveals the unusual and intricate relationships between bands and their fans in the Congo Unfortunately the author is very

unconvincing when he delves into how Mobutu's political system helped define the Congolese music. Apart from constantly repeating the old and tired "Mobutu was a ruthless and corrupt dictator routine", there is no particularly revealing analysis of how Mobutu's system influenced music direction. His main assertion that Mobutu nurtured and propped up an unpopular school of Zairean music style (Odemba) over the more "independent and popular" Soukous comes out as lame and unresearched. All evidence cited to support this premise is curiously from "anonymous sources from the streets of Kinshasa." Overall this would have been a good book, without the author trying a bit too hard to politically endear it to a specific audience.

From the point of view of socio-anthropology, the book "Rumba Rules" written by the author Bob White demonstrates a novel approach to cross-disciplinary. It is part of the current debate in DRC: changes (mutations) and de-structuring of the urban society of Kinshasa. Prospects and results it provides can better help to understand the contemporary, its continuities and changes. The author explains how the Congolese crisis affects the world of music, deconstructing and reconstructions that are central to the turn of the 20th century. This book supplies the thoughts on this changing society.

Surely, Mobutu had some profound influence on Congolese/Zairean music. He courted prominent musicians such as Franco that would compose many songs in his praise. Ironically, the golden era of Congolese music ripened and declined during Mobutu's very long era in power. A much better book that describes this aspect is Gary Stewart's "Rumba on the River: A history of the popular music of the two Congos."

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