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Sound production as a cultural practice

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Sound production as a cultural practice: Recording studios in the Northern Region of Malawi.

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Abstract

Referring to a notion of cultural practice understood as a constitution of social identity and meaningful everyday performance, this paper questions the practice of music production outside the technological centers of the global North. The author traces relations between the global standards of studio work and the case of “record culture” in Mzuzu, Malawi. On a tangible level, the production of sound and music in Mzuzu is bricolage, a creative combination of varied devices and means within an economy of scarcity. However, sound production in its intangible dimension reveals itself as a practice of mediation between material and immaterial spheres. Spatially, it combines local aesthetics with globally unified technologies. This mediation gathers different temporalities (old, “tribal” rhythms and digital sounds) with cosmologies (i.e. invocation to holy ghosts with gospel music, in contrast to local possession cults). Moreover, people embody many of these practices as opposed to expressing them discursively. As an embodied practice, the production contains social, non-discursive memory while, at the same time, it has a potential for construction of social worlds. Hence, sound production constitutes a sense-making practice that establishes relations between musicians, listeners, and other social actors.

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