

BOOK REVIEWS

African Music, Power and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe. Mhoze Chikowero. 2015. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 35 b&w illustrations, bibliography, index, 346pp.

It can be a very difficult task to carry out a critical review of a book that once passed through one's hands as a manuscript meant to be recommended for publishing. Now, Mhoze Chikowero's haunting manuscript on *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe* has come back to my desk. Today, the distillation of my contribution to the blurb stares at me as it pronounces judiciously, that this book "reveals the power of colonialism to infiltrate African culture and manifests how Africans were socially engineered to be complicit in the colonial project". This critical stance still stands as valid in my mind, but only to some extent. This is so because having re-read Mhoze's offering for the second time, and now in the form of a book, it sounds like my previous insights now reveal some staggering forms of my own theoretical blindness. For, as I have been reading around many works on music, power and humanity of Africans on both the African colonial and postcolonial context, as the editorial steward of *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, for over five years, it has dawned on me that Mhoze's book does not offer just a single narrative of political, cultural domestication of Africans or a 'totalistic' entanglement in colonial politics I had judged it to be or created the impression of.

This book uses the site of music to interrogate and then manifest the various narrative trends of African music even as this music was being reconfigured and branded with foreign values in the forge of Rhodesian colonialism. The dedication in the book is offered to a generation of the Chikowero family that is praised for teaching the author the "power of school, and the power of music". This recognition by the author that colonial school, and its modes of control were contradictory is one of the first manifestation of the "being" of Africans in a colonial context. There is appreciation of colonial modernity at one level, and yet scepticism of that modernity at another level. Colonial schooling aimed to create people who would not question the establishment, but the very acknowledgement of the nefarious aim testifies to the power of Africans' capacity to know how and where they were waylaid by the system that they hated and loved. This is empowering in a number of ways. Many desired goals of the colonial masters were realised, but some spiritual sites could not be patrolled, and ultimately Africans created alternative cultures from within the belly of the Whale. This complexity that the book alludes to implies that it was not entirely possible for the colonial masters to muster, direct and channelize every bit of African being to the colonial agenda.

For instance, it is true beingness of Africans as thinking humanity that was the first target of "missionaries and the state [that] had crusaded against African cultures unimpeded, seeking to supplant them with their Europeanized Christian doctrines" (1). Words like 'supplant' may even suggest that missionaries imagined a space where Africans could not at least exercise their beingness. This should not come as a surprise. In

1898, Father Biehler of Chishawasha mission wrote to Lord Grey arguing that the Shona people were the most hopeless of mankind that the only chance for moral regeneration of these natives was to exterminate women and men from the age of fourteen years. The “Christian” man imagined the possibility of a new cultural beginning if his program of cultural genocide had been given a go ahead. It was not. But the intent to annihilate Africans was expressed in no uncertain terms.

In the first four chapters of Mhoze Chikowero’s book what is dealt with is the criminalization of African creativity. Sometimes this arrestment of African cultural agency took the form of draconian laws; other times, missionaries implanted their values albeit using the African languages. Displacement of African beingness was guaranteed. Other times, missionary deliberately encouraged Africans to follow their culturally obscurantist values as long as these values did not seem to pose a threat to the values represented by the establishment. Songs that emphasised the negative aspects of Africans could either be discouraged or encouraged depending on the temperament of the native commissioners. In all these forms and colonial paths ways of transmogrifying African creativity, it is indeed the so-called African Christian converts who worked hard to change the cultural geography of African songs through infiltration, enforcement, and sanctions or even punishment if people sang songs that were considered discordant to the colonial civilizing mission. Thus on one level, it is indisputable that Africans were cultural vectors in their own colonization and this comes out clearly, in *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe*.

In the chapter entitled, “Architectures of Control: African Urban Re/creation”, Mhoze hones onto the dramatic shifts in the ways both the state and the missionaries sought to engineer African music to the benefit of colonial labour. Africans who were given the impression of being de-tribalized were re-assembled in the urban contexts of Harare. In these contexts, parties were organised for Africans, by colonial masters and this is how Harare became known as “synonymous with Mai Musodzi Hall and Stodart Hall in Harare, and Stanley Hall and McDonald Hall in Bulawayo”(113). Mai Musodzi was in fact an exception as she was tolerated since she began her career through providing services to the soldiers coming from the Second World War. Although important detail is not amplified in Mhoze’s book, in the early years of birth and development of Harare, African women were considered dangerous and were prevented by law from straying into Harare. This point is important because Mhoze’s book emphasises correctly, the patriarchal musical cultures of different African men who found themselves providing essential labour to the new urban settlement. The book also contains some fascinating descriptions of the chronology of moral decline of the African men who found themselves attempting to recreate portable aspects of their traditional African musical cultures in a hostile urban environment, ordered, planned and where in some spaces such as the bachelor quarters, African women were arrested on sight. This gave birth to the black policemen called Black Watch or “Bwakwacha” in local lingo. African men without safe venues to practise their beliefs strayed into tall grass, thickets and forests were all sorts of vices manifested.

Mhoze extensively quotes Lawrence Vambe, one of the early African journalists who recorded and captured the morbid musical cultural expressions practised in places where anything could go; unbridled fornication, drunkenness, fights, violence etc. The African experience of European modernity was mediated through a sick and sickening musical culture.

Mhoze's book is also faithful to accounts of conventional history's recording of the dislocation and re-assemblage of African traditions. To this extent, it cannot be denied that missionaries and colonial native commissioners worked closely with the Africans they had trained to shape the trajectory of African music which celebrated white values and colonial outlook on life.

However, the significance of *African Music, Power and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe* would diminish if it is argued that all that Africans knew from their encounters with colonial and missionary narratives was subjugation of their being. For one thing, even those Africans co-opted to translate, change and undermine African cultures sometimes found themselves feeling empowered by the whole exercise of learning how to write and compose songs in African languages but with borrowed content. Therefore, the architecture of colonial control was never entirely absolute and Mhoze's book points clearly to this uneven development of cultural consciousness in the chapter entitled, "*Chimanjemanje: Performing and Contesting colonial Modernity*". In this chapter Africans are depicted as adopting different strategies to make colonialism work for them. The re-organisation of the urban spaces introduced some sort of resemblances of order, especially with the introduction of societies patronized mainly by black people. In these spaces, Africans also learnt to reconfigure Christian songs, sometimes reappropriating their melodies while making sure that their African content was secured. This was also the context in which the dance, previously called *Mbembe*, was transformed and renamed *Jerusarema*. Africans appropriated some imagery of colonial modernity and re-deployed these to make sense of their new experiences.

Chimanjemanje was an African expression of newly acquired mannerism emanating from colonial values. But *Chimanjemanje* was unfortunately, a mongrel cultural tradition. Mhoze notes in his book that that the new crafted *chimanjemanje* or *simanjemanje* may have given to Africans some sense of self-control, but in effect, this culture was the underside of the middle, and upper class, Victorian values. *Chimanjemanje*, or "new cultures of today" enabled "modernizing" Africans to internalize the "cultural self-contempt their colonizers inflicted on them and sought to cast the authorizing register of *chimanjemanje* as an empowering polar opposite of their *chinyakare*—traditional, *passee*, and therefore shameful cultures." (155). This characterisation of *chimanjemanje* reveals its Janus-face; looking in two different directions from which the 'new' African could not find a stable identity and feel welcomed. *Chimanjemanje* is an uncertain space, a zone of occult instability where one needs to command various, even contradictory identities to make it in the new environment that was still baffling to Africans. Hence, Mhoze registers the confusion in some Africans in a song entitled "*Maroro*" (173) in which the African voice prides

itself with going to traditional healers, to engage in occult practices so as to succeed economically, in a context not designed for the upward mobility of Africans. What's telling in this song is that the African voice in it acknowledges that a new situation demands new strategies, so that the question of whether this was flawed agency or positive agency is not the issue. The desire to succeed in a predominantly colonial context in which opportunities were limited can be re-interpreted as the first veritable evidence of how Africans fought colonialism through imitating colonialism's violent idiom of wealthy, and success that arises from exploiting others, hassling and gambling with life. It is in this context that the rest of Mhoze' book is dedicated to manifesting inchoate aspects of how Africans fought their limiting traditional context by fighting to embrace colonial discourses of authority, power and capitalist agency.

If *chimanjemanje* ushered Africans into a dual cultural economy, it is in chapter seven, entitled "The many Moods of 'Skokian': Criminalized Leisure, Underclass Defiance, and Self-Narration" in which Mhoze asserts that, "*skokian*" was "an underclass counterdiscourse that contested the colonial state's criminalisation of an emergent urban African cultural economy that revolved around music, dance, and the criminalization of their beer by concocting a rapidly brewed drink, *chikokiyana*, or *skokian* in ghetto parlance which they fortified with all manner of intoxicants." (186). Of significance here, which is not clearly articulated in Mhoze's book is that selling *Skokian* to old and new African arrivants to the city became one of the means through which Africans sought to accumulate capital. Since *Skokian* competed with European beer, colonial governments legislated against it. Thus, the potentially early African capitalists who had taken it upon themselves to fight colonial capitalism by emulating it, was scuttled.

But it is also important to clarify that *skokian* had negative health effects on the Africans who in the eyes of the colonial masters were useful sources of labour. In other words, Mhoze's book may project African agency through *skokian* as counterdiscourse, but this counterdiscourse was spoken to or influenced or deliberately allowed to flourish by the very colonial discourse that it sought to offend. Put differently, *skokian* also authorised its own discontents and neurotic behaviours amongst Africans and when these were linked with sexual orgies known as "*Mahobo*", describing the big butts of some few women who had stormed the city, what emerge are many moods of cultural defiance, but with some which worked to morally deplete Africans. *Skokian* culture was a double-edged sword in the hands of white colonials; in private the performance of *skokian* by Africans confirmed to Europeans that they were a better race. *Skokian* culture also affirmed race-based theories in which Africans were viewed as perpetual children needing the moral guidance of white people who looked at themselves as God's ministers on earth.

The irony is that colonial officials felt that they needed to stem the tide of *skokian* culture in order to demonstrate how progressive Europeans were, and show the extent to which they had succeeded in taming African bestiality and re-channelled it into productive labour that at most benefit the new owners of the means of production.

Mhoze is of the opinion that “Skokian... [and its] carnivalized public drinking, dancing, sex and raucous socializing...engaging in transgressive “disorder” was a way to defy the expensive, politically constrictive municipal superintendence and to generate life and thrill.”(212). It may be so, but this could only be said so at the deleterious expense of African being. If African being manifests in acts which are less than what an average African could today be judged by, then there is something wrong about Africans agentive potential.

It is crucial though, to indicate that Mhoze’s book does not celebrate the ugly in the vulgar aesthetics of skokian culture. In the same contexts, discourses that inclined towards creepy ideologies of African nationalism were often born. In the chapter entitled, “Cultures of Resistance: Genealogies of Chimurenga Song”, there is an intimation that the detritus of vulgar African culture was eventually refined and registers itself through different Chimurenga musical voices. Significant in this chapter is the detailed and yet nuanced ways in which Mhoze differentiates the registers and the politically imagined communities contained in African nationalisms. The complexity of musical nationalism is not represented as authorising a monological voice; the true identity of African nationalism it’s the eclecticism of its lyrics and the diverse backgrounds of its singers and patrons. There are artists singing from inside Zimbabwe such as Thomas Mapfumo whose proximity to the colonial masters forced such arts to adopt hidden melodies, tunes, lyrics and voices. These artists are deftly contrasted to the Chimurenga singers at the frontline such as Comrade Chinx, well-known for composing most of what is known as the corpus of Chimurenga music from outside the country. Mhoze’s scores an important point by also including Ndebele voices which the author discusses under cultural resistance. Unfortunately, nearly just like Pongweni’s inaugural book, *Songs that Won the Liberation War* (1982), there are few voices of female singers who are discussed in Mhoze’s book. This gives the impression that African women were totally de-voiced by African and colonial patriarchy to a point where their musical contributions are absent and, therefore, could not be included into the pantheon of what is called *Chimurenga* music. One of the possible reasons for this omission is probably reflecting the rigid, hierarchy of the organisation of the armed struggle in which even women who were at the war front and could sing, would not do so without a mediating male voice.

In short, Mhoze Chikowero’s book, *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe* is indeed a phenomenal text, and a welcome contribution to the growing scholarship on African music and human agency. The book stakes its own space, particularly in a masculine context in which the works that comment mostly on the written music are given pre-eminence. Furthermore, although it may be too late in the day to complain about the invasive nature of western scholarship on Africa’s lived experiences, Mhoze simultaneously complements as well as complicates works by foreign scholars. But the ultimate significance of Chikowero’s book is its capacity to hold in balance the delight and dole experienced by Africans through performance and music in a changed and changing colonial context. The power of music is presented as

inherent in narrative because to narrate is to tell of one's own story even when that story contains some contradictions that may seem irreconcilable but had to be lived through to further deepen the idea of African beingness.

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References

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Marabi Nights: Jazz, 'Race' and Society in Early Apartheid South Africa. Christopher Ballantine. 2012. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press. 16 b&w images, bibliography, index, CD, 247pp.

There is no doubt that Christopher Ballantine's 1993 book, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville*, published in Johannesburg by Ravan Press with an accompanying cassette provided a timely and significant intervention in the scholarly creation of a narrative of South African jazz. There were few other South African jazz histories available at the time, outside of David Coplan's *In Township Tonight: Black South African City Music and Theater* (1985); a short piece by Mary Rorich (1989) on women musicians in Johannesburg's slumyards and shebeens; Veit Erlmann had published his extraordinary volume of black South African performance history, *African Stars* (1991); there was an important piece by Dale Cockrell (1987) on the impact of American minstrelsy on black South African urban culture, and work by Charles Hamm (1995, See collection of essays in *Putting Popular Music in its Place*). While the volume was slim, in 1993 *Marabi Nights* was important not only for carving a space for South African jazz in the shadow of the American narrative, but like Coplan and Erlmann before him, Ballantine insisted on the crucial work of politics and culture in both the making and understanding of South African jazz. For musicology as a field, such contextualization was pioneering, following in the epistemological footsteps of anthropology and ethnomusicology.

Marabi Nights: Jazz, 'Race' and Society in Early Apartheid South Africa (2012) is an expanded and slightly modified second edition of the 1993 publication, published this time by the University of KwaZulu Natal Press with an accompanying compact disc. What has changed from the first to second iteration of *Marabi Nights*? This is the core question addressed here. The 1993 Foreword written by Darius Brubeck, who established the Center for Jazz and Popular Music Studies and a pioneering jazz program at the University of Natal from the mid 1980s, has been replaced with a foreword by the gifted jazz and opera singer Sibongile Khumalo. Khumalo locates the work in terms of her own experience growing up in Soweto, under the musical leadership of her father, Khabi Mngoma. She writes about choirs, musical mixing, urban and rural connections,