

*Parading Respectability: The Cultural and Moral Aesthetics of the Christmas Bands Movement in the Western Cape, South Africa.* Sylvia Bruinders. 2017. Grahamstown: African Humanities Program and NISC. 17 figures, glossary, bibliography, index, 205pp.

In this book, Sylvia Bruinders, in her clear, articulate writing style intimately shares her personal experiences of, and research into, the Christmas Band Movement in the Western Cape of South Africa. Three interrelated disciplines (as referred to by the musicians themselves), namely, the Christmas Bands, the Malay choirs and the *klopse* (carnival troupes) take place during the summer months in the Western Cape each year. Although the Christmas band members are Christian and the Malay choirs predominantly Muslim, part of the ancestry of these performers can be traced back to the Southeast Asian slaves brought to the Cape during the rule of the Dutch East India Company. The *klopse*, influenced by the US blackface minstrelsy, consists of performers from both religious groups and are regarded in a more derogatory manner than the other performance cultures. As all three styles are characterised by a particular *ghoema* rhythm, Bruinders refers to the phenomenon as the “*ghoema* musical complex” (2017: 2). Documented evidence suggests that Christmas Bands have been in existence since the mid-1800s but Bruinders writes that the 80, or so, bands that perform now emerged during the 1920s and 1930s, coinciding with the two world wars. This military influence had a major role in the developing character of the bands and is discussed throughout the book (171).

In the Introduction, Bruinders delves into the history of the performers in Christmas bands, the “coloured” people from the region. An open and frank discussion about cultural hybridity and the label “coloured” shows how painful the impact of our racialised past has been and how important participation in groups such as the church, political organisations and the Christmas bands and Malay choirs have been “to counterbalance” the fact that “hybrid identities have certainly been imbued with feelings of shame” (13). However, Bruinders excludes creolisation as a theme for her book and rather considers subjectivity, respectability and gender as lenses through which to analyse the Christmas Band experience.

Discussing the history of the Christmas Band Movement through her personal experiences and relationships, and in describing the present circumstances of Cape Town bands including meeting times, discipline and federal structures, Bruinders paints a picture of a vibrant musical movement that “take[s] possession” of the communities around the City of Cape Town whilst ushering in the Christmas season (38). These areas are stretched over the greater Cape Town region and further into the province and include neighbourhoods from which coloured communities were forcibly removed during the apartheid era. The Christmas Bands hire buses to travel to “greet former neighbours on Christmas morning and throughout the season” (*ibid.*). I was moved by her description of the responses of the communities that were visited and where performances occurred. She writes of tearful and jubilant emotions from bystanders and writes of the reaction of former bandmen visited when they are no longer active or sick, that “They are ...overjoyed and quite emotional when the band does visit them

in recognition of their significant role in the band in their former active year” (*ibid.*). Key to her analysis, Bruinders states that Christmas Bands emphasise middle-class respectability and members value the social formalities and discipline that are part of the marches while the parade season can also be seen as a way of renewing community and family ties (46 and 51).

But what brings this all together? In Chapter Four Bruinders discusses the music and the band constitution and roles, practising schedules, musical transmission (via male members of families) and even ideas regarding music notation. The bands, although generally consisting of wind, string and brass instruments, are all unique in how they are constituted, comprising of whatever instruments are available. However, Bruinders writes that the sound is unlike the sound of a typical wind band and is characterised by the syncopated *ghoema* rhythm, as mentioned earlier, which gives it a distinctive character. The banjo also plays an important part in the music as its timbre and rhythmic drive (it plays the *ghoema* rhythm at times) are important to the music.

Competitions are an important part of the Christmas Band experience. Bruinders argues that, “it is through these activities that they enact a dignity and respectability denied them by history and still denied them because of their ongoing social and cultural marginalisation in the present” (112). She describes further the competitions (the solo; best-dressed band; grand march past), held between January and March every year, their history and current status while interspersing the analysis with personal narratives.

Bruinders touches on gender issues in Chapter Five, briefly discussing paternalism and masculinity in the Christmas Bands Movement but it is in Chapter Six that she focuses on women’s involvement in the Christmas bands. Her embodied experience of the deeply ingrained reaction to gender roles played out when she performed with the St Joseph’s Christmas band as the only woman instrumentalist. Her recollection of the reluctant change that took place over a number of years is expressive of the embedded history of male patriarchy in South Africa. However, Bruinders explores exceptions to this through her description of the Royal Crusaders Christmas Band, among others, which has a mixed gender membership.

This research addresses many significant issues, the most important being that it is the only complete documentation of the phenomenon that is the Christmas Band movement. Bruinders, in addition, addresses and analyses issues relating to gender and respectability (the theme cleverly embedded in the title of the book) through the “expressive practice that includes street parades and music making” (176). This approach leads to an insightful analysis of these subjects whilst remaining descriptive of the events. Her intimate knowledge of her study area and thorough field-research practice make for a fascinating and colourful read which is interspersed with real-life insights into a community institution that is an integral part of the Western-Cape’s cultural milieu.

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