

*Music and Urban Youth Identities. A Study of Ghetto Youth Identities in Contemporary Culture and Politics in Zimbabwe.* Doreen Rumbidzai Tivenga. 2022. NISC. 3 b/w illustrations, bibliography, index, 172 pages.

This book deals with urban grooves in Zimbabwe, a fairly recent music phenomenon that is most popular among the youth. “Urban grooves” is an umbrella term for urban contemporary music in Zimbabwe, which consists of sub-genres such as Zimdancehall or hip-hop, and it is significantly inspired by music from Jamaica and the USA. The author recounts how urban grooves emerged out of an economic crisis, following a government decision in 2001, namely the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA), which after its implementation obliged public broadcasters and radio stations to fill the airwaves with 75% local music by Zimbabwean artists. The central aim was the construction and fostering of a Zimbabwean national identity, and an attempt to reduce cultural influences from abroad. This was only partially successful, as it resulted in a clash of generations. Particularly, a musician from the era of the liberation struggle, Thomas Mapfumo, critiqued the urban grooves’ digital productions full reliance on computer software with a supposed lack of creativity, and the prevalent music styles not originating from Zimbabwe. The author aptly deconstructs this argument in emphasising the hybridity of the musical forms such as those of Thomas Mapfumo that were molded into an essentialist, national Zimbabwean tradition. In addition, the implementation eventually backlashed on the government itself, as the music was used as a vehicle to express resistance against the regime, although in subtle and covert ways.

The author analyses the nuanced layers involved with respect to urban grooves and its impact on the construction, and deconstruction, of preconfigured notions of identity, with a clear focus on the youth, who clearly suffer the most from the economic crisis with a high unemployment rate, and who are furthermore marginalised in terms of political power. To achieve this aim, Tivenga focuses on spatiality, and how naming practices and territoriality are strategically employed in urban grooves. In addition, the phenomenon of celebrity culture, particularly in the context of social media, is analysed, along with lyrical feuds, more commonly known as “disses.” In all the chapters, Tivenga pays specific attention to the gender differences at play. These reflect a heightened awareness of the specific context urban grooves are embedded in, specifically its power dynamics within a patriarchal society, and in a tense political climate where ZANU, the ruling party, mobilised musicians to generate nostalgia for the liberation struggle and chimurenga songs. This occasional cooption of artists for political rallies might be the turning points of careers insofar as fans no longer support the artists as they feel they were bought as agents for propaganda, or as a result of being cancelled by the government when refusing to participate. The scope of this book falls at the end of Mugabe’s long leadership after a coup, which is a highly interesting case in point to see how urban grooves, while most often than not being not openly political, played

a key factor in conscientising the youth, while demonstrating both the producers and the consumers of the music as having a powerful agency. From production, consumption to the reception of urban grooves, this agency is reflected in a semiotic reading of the constricting environment in which they find themselves.

The book is a timely contribution to the study of popular music, youth culture and the important role digitisation and the global interconnectedness of social media act out on a societal level, particularly along the shifting lines of generational boundaries, identity constructions and gender expectations in a volatile country such as Zimbabwe. With its focus on Zimbabwe, taking into consideration the political climate and socio-economic contexts, it is an interesting case study for students and scholars whose research interests cover the popular culture of the Global South and its reactions and adaptations to a fast-paced, ever-changing digital world and its dynamic interplay with notions of tradition and nation-building. As part of the research methodology, the author conducted interviews with producers and promoters and held group interviews. While the interviews were qualitative in nature, they appear to be somewhat limited in number. With Zimdancehall being the most dominant music analysed, a deeper engagement with the relationship to the Jamaican blueprint would have been interesting. The strong focus on Zimdancehall also challenges the usefulness of urban grooves as a rather broad hypernym. The book is well-written, thoughtful, and engaging, whereas taking the reader by their hands with more smooth transitions would have profited the reading experience through the occasional swift changes in theme and focus. Whereas the different chapters speak well to one other, the broad coverage of topics feel slightly jammed together, which might be the result of compressing the outcome of a dissertation into a publication. This wide scope, ranging from naming practices to celebrity culture in the digital context, fan culture and youth resistance, with distinct and clear research questions that still leave room for further research, is, however, the definite strength of the book, as it will be attractive for a large and diverse readership.

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