


BOOK REVIEWS

Politics and Music in Colonised South Africa

The Spirit of Resistance in Music and Spoken Word of South Africa's Eastern Cape

By Lindsay Michie. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. 298. \$110.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781498576208); \$45.00, e-book (ISBN: 9781498576215).

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The Spirit of Resistance in Music and Spoken Word of South Africa's Eastern Cape explores the social history of Black South African musical and oral poetry traditions that emerged in the Eastern Cape in the context of colonisation, missionisation, and urbanisation. Michie historicizes these two auditory and oral forms as they evolved as transcripts of both Black protest and cultural adaptation in the wake of two centuries of dispossessive war and law in South Africa.

The book documents the Eastern Cape roots of South Africa's distinctive liberation and protest arts, as well as the country's globally recognised harmonics and melodies, which have become standard in the South African singing and creative canons. As with Black American music such as blues and jazz, the Black South African sound owed a good deal to the protracted daily struggles of colonial subjects, who over two centuries, vocalised their laments, celebrations, and protests through song and poetry. Michie focuses on the Eastern Cape's musical and cultural specificities as they shaped, and were in turn shaped by, the region's experience of colonisation, and especially Christianisation. The book shows how Eastern Cape indigenous music forms were transformed by the arrival of European Christianity as both a message and cultural genre, which also became in turn a path to economic advancement via the medium of Western education.

The Spirit of Resistance provides a comprehensive account of the long journey of African auditory response to the colonial encounter. Michie recounts the familiar story of the Christian impact on African life and the resultant emergence of indigenous African Christianity, and the musical lineages that it would give rise to during the nineteenth century and how these were transformed by the transformations of Black life by urbanisation in the twentieth century. This included the development of hymnal and, later, political 'standards', such as 'Nkosi Sikelela iAfrica'¹ in the tradition of Christian choral music, and the subsequent emergence of more modern genres such as kwela, South African jazz, mbaqanga, and the militant chants of itoyi-toyi², which were ubiquitous during the struggle against apartheid.

Michie's account is a cast of familiar players, for those who are acquainted with the story of the emergence of the class of African Christian educated elites and their role in the emergence of

¹Nkosi Sikelela iAfrica was composed by Enoch Sontonga in the late 1890s. It would be taken up as the anthem of the African National Congress during the anti-apartheid struggle and was adopted widely as a pan-African anthem. Several Southern African countries adopted it as a national anthem for a certain period after their independence. An adapted version is sung in postapartheid South Africa as part of the national anthem.

²Itoyi-toyi is a form of high-knee movement which are usually done when militant songs and chants are sung in protest. Itoyi-toyi emerged in the guerrilla military camps of the Zimbabwean and South African anticolonial resistance forces.

African nationalism. It recounts the stories of well-known Christian cultural leaders, including Ntsikana ka Gaba, Charlotte Maxeke, Enoch Sontonga, Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, and later, in the mid-twentieth century, Reuben Caluza, Vuyisile Mini, and Gibson Kente. Through her focus on music, Michie revisits the politics of the African educated classes and their complex engagements with their subjecthood through formal education, organised politics, and the constant attempt to assert agency and their forms of African expression into politics in the face of cultural colonisation. In that sense, the book revisits well-known terrain on the conquest of the Eastern Cape and the multifaceted role of educated Christian Africans in the making of the public politics of colonised Africans.

The Spirit of Resistance also details the context in which nineteenth-century Black South African Christian music would shape into a globally recognised form of universal Black political self-expression. Music was key to the forming of pan-African solidarities between Black Americans and Africans in South Africa. Michie argues that the intersections between African education, transatlantic Black solidarities, and Black religious expression in South Africa and the United States, as well as commonalities of oppression, led to musical connections. Michie notes the significance of the visit of Orpheus MacAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers, whose tour of South Africa in 1890 inspired many African Christians, noting:

The South African tours of the Jubilee Singers inspired South Africans in the Eastern Cape to form their own singing groups and their spirituals soon became standard in the performances of African choirs. The spirituals appealed to Africans because of their expression by fellow black singers from the U.S. of a striving for freedom and a looking back to an ancient time of justice and happiness. It was a music demonstrating a shared language among black people (63).

While drawing connections between what was common and shared with Black Americans, the book demonstrates how South African sound formed its own distinctiveness. Michie devotes part of the analysis to the unique evolution of Black South African choral music through cooptation and subjugation of the Western tonic solfa notation and singing form into an indigenous vocal form. What was originally introduced as a method to curtail and discipline indigenous harmonics and tonality became so highly indigenised that this mission school form of choral music is today considered 'African music' by white South Africans. Michie argues that 'tonic solfa was able to adapt to this tradition by creating a standard relationship of notes regardless of key... it provided a degree of flexibility that helped to preserve African melodies, musical structures, and performances' (67). She goes on to document how the adoption of tonic solfa as a method of training in Black choral music became ubiquitous in Black singing culture:

The use of tonic solfa parallels the spread of Christianity in the Eastern Cape and southern Africa as a whole, as both were used as mediums for harnessing African culture to European management, yet both these were eventually used to reinforce African purpose and identity. Tonic solfa developed into a medium for thousands of indigenous compositions for the next 150 years, and at the turn of the century, this phenomenon meshed with the growing influence of African American spirituals, creative combination of influences that was especially prevalent in choirs of those churches that broke away from white control (68).

This is wonderful analysis.

Yet at other times the book hews very closely to prior interpretations of the Eastern Cape past. This is to a significant extent because the book draws extensively — one might say, relies — on the Jeff Opland collection. Opland's work, along with co-editors such as Peter Mtuzze, Wandile Kuse, and Pamela Maseko, has been an important resource to academics interested in the contributions of late nineteenth

and early twentieth century writers to the intellectual and literary traditions of South Africa.³ In some sense, both the Opland collection and prior work by historians like Jeff Peires have created a paradigmatic Xhosa history. Thus Michie's narrative in *The Spirit of Resistance* tends to reproduce a Xhosa history that fixates on Ntsikana as a figure that breaks with the past, leading to a rivalry with Nxele, which leads towards that narratological culmination of Nongqawuse and the Cattle Killing. This telling has, to some degree, become fixed as the standard history of Xhosa people from conquest to assimilation.

Because she sticks so closely to this script, for all its merits, Michie's book recalls the usual suspects, and is thus limited historiographically. It does not consider how indigenous expression recalls the internal politics and machinations within Xhosa communities themselves. What do the songs of Ngqika or Ndlambe people tell us about their royal courts and their perceptions of colonial encounters in the internal politics of the time? What protests did indigenous song express, besides what Ntsikana produced? What did indigenous Xhosa music lament, beyond the traditions that Ntsikana coopted for his community? The Peires-Opland narrative structure that sets up 'Ntsikana to Nongqawuse' curtails the possibility of asking questions of Xhosa and Eastern Cape history that go beyond these historical figures.

Where Michie considers less well trod territory, the book shines. Chapter Five details the Eastern Cape urban milieu of the 1950s and 1960s in Uitenhage, Walmer Township, New Brighton, Mthatha, Duncan Village, and other townships, where cultural life and the politics of defiance were enabled and engendered within music, as well as the dramatic arts.

Because the book is an exploration of two oral/aural forms, the author weaves an account of the history of the music on one hand, while on the other providing a running analysis of the poets whose art commented on the politics of their political times between the segregation era in early twentieth century and the bantustan era of the 1970s and 1980s.

The uniqueness of Michie's approach analyzing *iimibongo* (indigenous oral poetry) alongside the musical forms is fascinating, because unlike the mission dominated musical genres, traditional praise poetry operated more within the domain of Black independent control. Michie thus points out the significance of a figure like Mqhayi — both a composer and a poet — who brought African language praise poetry into the colonial public sphere through the act of publishing in newspapers and in public performance.

Drawing from Archie Mafeje's seminal *Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community*, Michie emphasises the role of iimbongi in defying bantustan governments and leaders.⁴ She notes that with the introduction of the Transkei bantustan, 'imbongi Mbutuma spoke out against the process and against Mathanzima's role in it... Mbutuma made clear his opposition in a praise poem delivered in 1963 in which he condemned Mathanzima for his power-grabbing participation in the process' (158). Overall, the uniqueness of *The Spirit of Resistance* is in how it brings together two genres of sound — music and traditional poetry — treating them as part of the collective 'auditory archive' of indigenous orality that are often not analysed alongside each other in relation to the history of protest in South Africa. Its reliance on preceding work to set up the bulk of the narrative makes it more a work of synthesis, which will be useful to students of South Africa's political and cultural history seeking a properly periodised and comprehensive account of the roots of the musicality of South African protest traditions.

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³The Opland Collection is a published series of compiled late nineteenth and early twentieth century isiXhosa texts, with annotations and translations. The collection emerges from the archive of the early African press as collected by Jeff Opland over decades. The texts include poetry, histories, letters to the editor, and other writings by key African intellectuals such as S. E. K Mqhayi. The collection spans several volumes and has become a key resource for students seeking primary source African writing.

⁴A. Mafeje, 'The role of the bard in a contemporary South African community', *Journal of African Languages*, 6 (1967), 193–223.