



**Minette Mans.** *Music as an Instrument of Diversity and Unity: Notes on a Namibian Landscape.* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2003. 55 pp. EUR 10.00 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-510-0.

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## Music and Namibian Nationhood

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This research report from the Nordic Africa Institute offers an overview of the musical cultures of Namibia and their relation to the Namibian nation. The author started the research with the aim of contributing “to the development of a nation with a positive self-image” (p. 15). She is especially concerned with the tension between diverse musical traditions in the regions and the drive toward national unity.

In the report, Mans proposes a division of the Namibian musical landscape into three broad bands. The Northern band is characterized by a combination of music and dance that features drumming as well as singing in call and response form. In these Northern musical forms ritual is important. The Central band links global and regional styles to the strongest extent, while in Southern Namibia, choral forms, the waltz, partner dances, and keyboards are crucial ingredients. Within the broad regional bands, further distinctions can be made according to language and regions. The author furthermore points to differences in musical styles from the urban environment and from the rural areas. Mans continues by outlining the background of what she calls the Namibian patriarchal state, that seeks to overcome the legacy of the Apartheid era. During the Apartheid era, cultural isolationism and the impact of the Christian missions led to a devaluation of African musical traditions. According to the author, this process has not been countered after independence: the postcolonial attempts to forge

national unity often lead to a denial of the existence of diversity within the borders, or even to explicitly negative assessments of such diversity. Mans emphasises the difference between diversity and division. She argues that music may “sow the seed of divisiveness” as well as “create unity” (p. 7).

Mans proposes to seek national unity not only through liberation songs that exalt the nation in general terms, but also in the local music traditions. After all, she argues, while Western classical music is based on specialized exclusion, African musical traditions are based on inclusion: while some people are known to be good performers, everybody can participate (pp. 43-46). Only when acknowledging difference will Namibian national identity no longer be “rooted in an equation of State with either dominant majority or a mono-cultural ethnicity, but truly united in diversity” (p. 51).

In many instances, the report shows contradictions between a theoretical position and the detailed arguments elaborated in relation to it. For example, the author explains that music is more than expression alone and that it may divide or unite people. Despite this stress on the politics of music, Mans still upholds a division between the “political landscape” and the “cultural landscape” (pp. 6, 17). This problematic position leads the author to create an opposition between politics and national identity, on the one hand, and culture and individual identity, on the other. There is no reason to assume culture to be more individual than politics, nor national

identity to be other than cultural. Especially in a report on the politics of music, the author should have paid more attention to the consequences of a separation of culture from politics.

Colonialism in the book is viewed largely in terms of hegemonic practice: for more than a century the colonized were taught that their own cultural traditions were inferior and those imposed by the colonisers civilized and superior (p. 15). This reader wondered whether such ideas were not contested by the colonized, and whether missions really aimed at “killing the culture” (p. 36). This lack of attention to African initiative also shows in the conceptualization of change. Although the author notes that culture does change not only due to external factors, she defines change due to internal factors exclusively in terms of “strategies for survival” (p. 36), thus leaving very little space for internal dynamics as such.

Many statements in the report leave the reader puzzled. An example is the thesis that urban environments are less ethnicized than rural environments (p. 12), an analysis that does not take into account the vast body of literature on ethnicity in Africa and does not discuss the thesis that links urbanity and ethnicity in Africa. Instead of carefully avoiding the term “ethnicity,” the author would have been better advised to address these debates head-on. On the next page, Mans postulates a relationship between a “Bantu philosophy and holistic approach to music” (p. 13). It is entirely unclear what is meant by Bantu philosophy and, in view of Apartheid history, such statements would need to have been qualified. Similar romantic views of a pristine Africa can be found in the opposition of exclusive Western classical music and inclusive African musical traditions. At times this romanticism takes on dangerous proportions. Thus there is the remark that “there is a tendency for the nat-

ural landscape to be inscribed upon bodies and revealed in dance and its music” (p. 9). Apparently the author is unaware of the risks that such a position entails. Especially in view of Namibia’s history, an interpretation that links landscape and body, identity and place needs to be treated with far more care than the author does.

Finally, a search into the possibilities of music in contributing to national culture runs the risk of reducing musical cultures to a state-applauding ensemble, appropriated and dominated by state discourse. The author is aware of this problem. In the conclusion she states: “The call for unity and nation-building could be interpreted as obedience of a kind, leading to politically correct, nationalistic music” (p. 50). Mans does not exclude the possibility of “even disobedience” to the state, but on the whole the report does not provide enough insight into the resistance potential of Namibia’s musical traditions.

The author clearly writes from within the Namibian context of musical art forms; she is not only a dancer and musician herself, but was also involved in formulating the first draft of the “Policy on Arts and Culture” that was finalized in 2001. It is from this perspective that the most interesting remarks of the report stem. Thus Mans mentions that the entire group involved in drawing up the first versions of the “Policy on Arts and Culture” criticized a distinction between “arts” and “culture.” The group felt that such distinctions would lead to an elitist formal sphere called “art,” excluding other expressive forms, that could easily be dismissed as “mere culture.” Despite the unanimity on the subject, the suggestion elicited little reaction as to how to protect the two directors functioning within one directorate (p. 24). Such footnotes provide a look behind the curtain and underline the importance of studying the politics of music.

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