Chapter 3

Of Drag and Push Democracies: The Construction of Zimbabwe as a Failed–Partially Resuscitated State in Popular Songs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates political discourse in popular songs of Shona expression with a view to establish the nature of their evaluation of state performance in Zimbabwe in the period, 2000-2015. By analysing the themes and the language of the songs (verbal, nominal and other constructions and figurative language), we aim to demonstrate the extent to which the songs, composed and performed by pro-opposition artists, objectively assess the performance of the Zimbabwean state. We exclude songs of pro-state musicians for the reason that, their assessment of state functionality is pro-state and therefore explicitly biased. They largely function as a vehicle for state propaganda, employed for the political discursive domination of the citizenry. In doing so they ignore or even glorify state repression, political violence, electoral fraud, insecurity of citizens, lawlessness and human rights violations, as well as the general degradation of the state system. Our observation is that, anti-state songs’ depiction of the Zimbabwean nation-state as a case of death-resurrection is a more or less objective evaluation of the state’s functionality. In addition to that, we argue that a much more objective assessment of Zimbabwe’s performance should have been ‘a collapsed-and-partially-resuscitated state.’

INTRODUCTION

Nyangwe zvenyu muchidada neuzhinji muparamende, [Even if you boast of majority in parliament,]
Asi nhunzi nyangwe dzikawanda sei, hadzigadzire uchi [Flies will never make honey, even if they multiply to greater numbers]1
In this chapter we analyse the political discourse of anti-state popular songs of Shona expression, as it comments on state performance in Zimbabwe in the period, 2000-2015. We focus on the thematic pre-occupations of the songs, closely analysing their language – various constructions (verbal, nominal, adjectival, among others) and figurative language (metaphors, idioms, epithets, innuendos, rhetorical questions and interjections). That analytical approach will help in establishing the evaluative strategies the songs adopt in assessing the Zimbabwean state’s operational efficiency. The chapter’s objective is to ascertain the extent to which the songs, composed and performed by pro-opposition artists, realistically and objectively capture the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis and the nature of the state’s response to it. Compared to pro-state songs, opposition oriented songs construct a political discourse which is more representative of the real challenges confronting Zimbabwe. Consequently, we have deliberately excluded the songs of pro-state artists, because their assessment of the Zimbabwean state is tangential to the dominant adverse conditions experienced in Zimbabwe in the period 2000-2015. They depict as progressive, government policies such as the land reform. Uncritically they glorify the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) (and its leader Robert Mugabe) as the only party with the legitimacy to govern Zimbabwe. In doing so they turn a blind eye on state repression, political violence, electoral fraud, the insecurity and vulnerability of citizens, the disregard of the rule of law and respect for human rights. We proffer the argument that, the songs’ evaluation of the Zimbabwean nation-state as ‘death-resurrection’ is largely consistent with Zimbabwe’s political and economic realities during the period being examined. However, we further contend that a more convincing evaluation should have been ‘a collapsed-partially-resuscitated state.’ Although there have been some improvements in state functionality beginning 2009, Zimbabwe’s revival is still in its infancy. It is primarily handicapped by lack of re-capitalization, corruption, policy-making confusion, among a myriad of other challenges.

POPULAR MUSIC AND STATE PERFORMANCE IN AFRICA

In Africa, the intimate relationship between popular songs and politics dates back to the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s–1990s period (see Turino, 2000; Pongweni, 1982; Kwaramba, 1997 with respect to Zimbabwe; Maina wa Kinyathi, 1990 in relation to Kenya and Barber, 1987 in reference to West Africa), in which African countries fought and won their independences. With the democratization process sweeping across Africa in the 1990s, and even re-democratization in the post-2000 period, popular music became one of the key instruments in the articulation and popularization of political parties’ (democratic) ideologies. Throughout Africa, musicians are hired by political parties to compose and perform songs in praise of the state or parties’ leadership, values and election manifestos. As Nyairo and Ogude (2005) assert, in political songs we therefore come to terms with not only the political mood in a nation, but virtually every reality including such critical issues as the relationship between the state and its citizens, and the most sensitive socio-economic and cultural affairs of the day. Although several scholars have so far researched on Zimbabwe as a failed and/or collapsed state (see for instance, Kovacs, 2013; Brooks, 2005; Maundeni, 2002; Maclean, 2002), there is still a huge gap in studying state failure from the vantage point of political discourse analysis. What is more, there is still a paucity in previous popular music research, of studies which endeavour to come to grips with the construction of state performance as regards Zimbabwe. We feel that there is need to broaden the angles and fields from which we study state functionality. It is a critical area of academic inquiry in contemporary times as it is directly linked to nation-state development, state-citizenry interaction and the need for governments
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