Chapter 8
Majaivana and Protest Music in Zimbabwe: A Challenge to Political Hegemony and Marginalization

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates the appropriation of music by a marginalized minority tribe to challenge political authority in Zimbabwe. It examines how music is used to arouse the people’s nationalistic feelings; exploit their grievances through memory, collective identity, and emotions; and spur them to action against their local colonialists. Using cultural memory and subaltern public sphere theories, it examines how Majaivana’s music is utilized by the Ndebeles in post-colonial Zimbabwe to challenge authority and assert their minority, collective identity. Although this chapter does a critical discourse analysis of the IsiNdebele language protest music as a socio-political commentary and “weapon of the weak” for the Ndebeles in Zimbabwe, lessons drawn therefrom can be extrapolated to other countries in Africa where minority groups face the authoritarian force of the majority tribe in power.

INTRODUCTION

Most studies on the intersection of music and politics in Zimbabwe concentrate on the impact of music during the country’s war of liberation. This chapter, however, deviates from this “norm” and examines music as an instrument for marginalized members of society in post-colonial Zimbabwe, to challenge authority and assert their minority collective identities under perceived repression. Specifically, this chapter examined how ethnic subalterns used the IsiNdebele language protest music by popular musician, Lovemore Majaivana, for counter hegemonic purposes in Zimbabwe.

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BACKGROUND

Members of the Ndebele community in Zimbabwe largely feel excluded and marginalized in their country’s affairs. IsiNdebele language songs were therefore considered appropriate for analysis in this chapter. Their use and performance demonstrate how the Ndebele people articulate their grievances and how they challenge authorities in the country.

Even news about the ousting of former Zimbabwean dictator and long-serving president, Robert Mugabe, late in 2017 (celebrated countrywide) was largely received in the Ndebele community with much skepticism. Since Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980, the Ndebele people have always complained against their political marginalization and unfavorable resource allocation by the Mugabe government in capital city, Harare (Mhlanga, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009). This sense of exclusion gave rise to the notion of politics of marginalisation or the Northern problem (Mhlanga, 2013) in the country. Critics of the Ndebele people tend to categorize them as a disgruntled group with a peculiar history and identity in a country where the Shona are the dominant ethnic group.

The Zimbabwean government’s tight grip on the media, especially broadcasting, practically left the Ndebele people with no means to voice their grievances. The introduction of more stringent and draconian media laws in the country from the year 2000 further complicated the situation in the country. These laws include the 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Broadcasting Services Act (2001). These legislations made it even more difficult for the subaltern to express their views openly. In this situation of government clamp down on voices of dissent and harsh media laws, music and songs began to be used as platforms for contestation and agitation by the masses.

Over the years, some sections of the Ndebele people in Matabeleland have complained about both political and economic marginalization. The Gukurahundi genocide, where government soldiers killed an estimated 20,000 civilians mostly of Ndebele ethnic group between 1983 and 1987 has remained an unresolved issue in the country, with the government refusing to acknowledge or apologize for its role in the massacre. Several industries in Matabeleland region’s capital Bulawayo have closed down or are operating far below capacity. The term deindustrialisation has largely become synonymous with the city, and some politicians have used it to canvass for votes.

According to a survey by the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (2016), the manufacturing sector and industries in the region had reduced their capacity utilisation from 57 percent to 44 percent as of June 2016. The region continues to face a myriad of challenges including decreased foreign investments, limited long-term loans and huge energy deficit. At the peak of the economic crisis in the region (2011), the then “Inclusive Government” of the ruling party and the opposition in the country intervened and came up with the Distressed Industries and Marginalised Areas Fund (DIMAF) to assist and revive ailing companies in the region. This fund was launched with a government-orchestrated “Let Bulawayo Survive” campaign in an effort to provide working capital to ailing companies. However, the dire economic situation has persisted.

In national and party politics, people from Matabeleland region always occupy the position of “deputies,” not substantive heads, thus leading Ndebeles to believe that this is a deliberate strategy by the Shona-dominated government to subdue and further marginalize them. This perception of reality has compelled the Ndebeles to use various platforms to contest their marginalization. Music is one of those platforms.