

BOOK REVIEW

Louise Meintjes. *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017. 352 pp. 142 Illustrations. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$28.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6265-4.

One of the most persistent stereotypes in the South African imaginary to this day is that of the fiercely traditionalist, violent, Zulu-speaking male. In *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid*, Louise Meintjes deconstructs this image by unpacking the complex articulation of violence, ngoma dancing, aesthetics, and ethics in the Msinga area of KwaZulu-Natal, one of the most impoverished regions of South Africa. Meintjes shows that this region from the early nineteenth century has been the site of a steady decline in men's sense of dignity and patriarchal entitlement, wrought by a combination of colonial conquest, labor migration, interethnic strife, and, not least, the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Ngoma, she argues, reflects this history of impaired masculinity and in part continues to be implicated in the persistence of violence across numerous spheres of life in an environment of state neglect and "bare life." But it is also an attempt at repairing bruised male psyches (and bodies) and distressed community relations by rendering violence into an aesthetic register or, what Meintjes calls "mediated violence."

Concretely, this mediation operates on several bodily, affective, and ethical levels. Noted for its bursts of manly prowess, ngoma's combination of forceful, improvised, playful dance moves and rhetorical eloquence projects a sense of energy and power that has been drained from bodies exhausted by labor migration and scarce resources. The affective correlate of this kinetic poetics and rhetorics is "ulaka," anger. Historically assigned value as a constructive rather than destructive force, ulaka does cultural and ethical work by restoring manhood in socially responsible ways. One of the most moving parts of the book is an episode that narrates the conciliatory efforts at diffusing long-running tensions between two rival dance teams over the murder of one their members.

The violence-diffusing function of ngoma is an argument that was advanced in the 1980s by Johnny Clegg, an anthropologist and later "world music" star and expert ngoma dancer, possibly with the intention of debunking the notion that being Zulu, male, and violent form an inborn, indivisible

triad. Clegg offers a more nuanced reading, attuned to the demands of the anti-apartheid “struggle” and the mounting disparity between the ANC-led, interethnic umbrella mass movement UDF (United Democratic Front) and the growing muscle of the predominantly Zulu, ethno-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party. Meintjes recognizes this tension and details its manifestation in the ngoma dancers’ everyday lives, as an expendable “labor reserve” shuttling between the killing fields of migrant hostels and the Msinga area in the transitional period from 1989 to 1994. At the same time, this reader wonders to what extent this hypothesis may ultimately end up reproducing the narrative of nation-building, ubuntu, and social cohesion under which the ANC, long having disregarded traditional cultural expressions as retrogressive and inimical to the “struggle,” not only marginalizes ostensibly unprofitable and parochial practices but also seeks to regiment the arts in general as subservient to its agenda.

Dust of the Zulu is written in the signature cadences of Meintjes’ earlier trailblazing ethnography of a recording studio, *Sound of Africa!* Its eight chapters are connected by a narrative strategy that seeks to replicate ngoma’s improvisatory flow and eruptive intensity in short sentences interspersed with numerous, often reiterated quotations from song lyrics and, above all, over 140 stunning screen shots of videos and photos taken by Meintjes herself and photographer T J Lemon. These shifts between mimetic and analytic style registers certainly help decenter Meintjes as the sole source of analysis, commentary, and sensory engagement with what is an exceedingly many-voiced, multi-layered art form. Additionally, in drawing on video as an essential component of its ethnographic grasp, the book provides a refreshing counterpoint to the scarce and often reifying representations of dance, especially on the African continent. But at times, I struggled to relate the vivid language to these images, mainly because the narrative frequently comes across more as a second-order retelling of the content of the videos—which the reader does not see—and less as a poetic engagement with them, as Meintjes intended. In the interest, then, of letting Meintjes’ formidable poetic skills do their work *and* of furthering the rigorous analytic stance that ngoma deserves, it is to be hoped that some of the video material will eventually become available online.

Other than these minor reservations, *Dust of the Zulu* is a critical and welcome addition to the rich body of scholarship on cultural production in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, scholars interested in performance, violence, and masculinity will find the book illuminating and providing new direction to the study of these issues in the postcolony more generally.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.67

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Chanaiwa, David Shingirai. 1980. "The Zulu Revolution: State Formation in a Pastoralist Society." *African Studies Review* 23 (3): 1–20. doi:[10.2307/523668](https://doi.org/10.2307/523668).
- Dolby, Nadine. 2006. "Popular Culture and Public Space in Africa: The Possibilities of Cultural Citizenship." *African Studies Review* 49 (3): 31–47. doi:[10.1353/arw.2007.0024](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2007.0024).
- Ojaide, Tanure. 1992. "Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity." *African Studies Review* 35 (3): 43–57. doi:[10.2307/525127](https://doi.org/10.2307/525127).