

BOOK REVIEW

Tony Perman. *Signs of the Spirit: Music and the Experience of Meaning in Ndau Ceremonial Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 269 pp. Maps. Photographs. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.86. Paper. ISBN 978-0-252-08517-8.

Music has the capacity to affect the people who play it as well as the ones who listen to it. It is a vehicle that can carry us over time and space, bringing back past events, both as memories that come across our minds when we listen to certain musical pieces and as histories that the music narrates. It also has another important dimension, which is ubiquitous in societies all over the world; it facilitates or enables contact with the spirits. This is, obviously, a fundamental part of musicking, a social moment where several important things happen which contribute to the overall musical experience. In his new book, *Sign of Spirit: Music and the Experience in Ndau Ceremonial Life*, Tony Perman presents a detailed case study of one of the ceremonies of the Ndau people from Chipinge District of southeastern Zimbabwe, focusing on musicking and analyzing music to show “how meaningful Ndau musicking can be spiritually, socially, and emotionally, and how effective a semiotic ethnomusicology can be in illuminating those powerful meanings” (5). Conscious of the difficulties of expressing the power of music and musicking in words, Perman chooses the semiotics and phenomenology of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) as his theoretical basis, using them as a starting point to structure his analyses. His intent is to “push past the limits of language and explain how musicking contributes to powerful emotional and spiritual experiences” (4).

The book is comprised of two main parts, each divided into six chapters, all of which are composed of smaller subchapters and additional short sections. This format is worth highlighting, as it underlines crucial issues in the text. In the first main part, the contexts—the information about the community and the ceremony, as well as the theoretical proposal of the author based on Peirce’s semiotics—are presented, providing the background for the analysis which follows. In the second and larger part, Perman provides an extremely detailed description of the event and the interpretation of its four main parts using the basic elements of semiotic theory. The appendices—a ChiNdau glossary and a semiotic glossary—provide an

explanation for the words, expressions, and theoretical concepts presented in the text. The book is full of rich empirical material, demonstrating the author's impressive capacity to register and keep in mind even the smallest details of an intense and overwhelming event.

During the ceremony itself, which Perman assisted in 2005 and described in his book, the living community meets the *madholzi*, "outsider spirits," which are significant for the history and identity of the Ndaou people. Four groups of spirits, from distinctive historical periods, appear in different moments over the event's several hours of duration. They are present in the bodies of the mediums, people who are born with a certain kind of spirit that is reflected in a person's skills or personality traits (104). The author also presents the historical background, which is important for understanding the meaning of each group of spirits and, at the same time, the historical events that have marked the Ndaou people. Although music is a fundamental part of the ceremony and the musicological analyses are central in each chapter of the second part, the author's description is much broader and brings to light numerous details that compose each moment of the ceremony, accounting for the spirits' appearance and performance. He shows us how contact with the spirits—which are connected to the past, to the history—is fundamental for the present and the future of the people. Throughout his interpretation of the four parts of the event, Perman conveys what he deduced during his fieldwork and shows how emotions can be collectively felt, and how collective experience is meaningful for the community.

Although this analysis is based on one particular event, interpreted through well-defined theoretical frameworks rooted in concepts from a distant time and place—the options of the author, which can be questioned—the book is a valid contribution to the literature on music, musicking (social interaction), emotions, and identity aspects. Interconnecting "Ndaou spiritual life, semiotics, and studies of emotion and affect," Tony Perman provides a possible proposal of "a theoretical model for exploring emotional experience in ethnograph terms" (19).

Magdalena Bialoborska 

Centre for History, School of Arts and Humanities

University of Lisbon Lisbon, Portugal

magdalena.bialoborska@gmail.com

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.31

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

Ampene, Kwasi. 2021. "Power and Responsibility: Royalty and the Performing Arts in Asante-Ghana." *African Studies Review* 64 (3): 523–46. doi:10.1017/asr.2021.13.

Förster, Till. 2019. "The Invisible Social Body: Experience and Poro Ritual in Northern Côte d'Ivoire." *African Studies Review* 62 (1): 99–119. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.10.