

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Precarity And Performance: The Production Of Ngoma Dance And Rooibos Tea As Cultural Commodities In The Post-Apartheid Heritage Industry

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Sarah Ives. 2017. *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea*. Durham and London: Duke University Press> xv +255 pp.

Louise Meintjes with photographs by T.J. Lemon. 2017. *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics After Apartheid*. Durham and London: Duke University Press> xii + 338 pp.

The heritage industry in South Africa, perhaps more than most places, relies on maintaining links to a troubled past, one wrought by conflict and conquest, racism and exploitation. In the post-apartheid era, in a context of a downward spiraling economy and the concomitant rise in unemployment and inequality, the commodification and monetization of cultural heritage has taken off, albeit in deeply ambiguous ways. Both Sarah Ives, *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea* and Louis Meintjes, *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics After Apartheid*, consider the origins, authenticity, ownership, and agency surrounding two important South African cultural commodities, rooibos tea and Ngoma Zulu dance performance. Both books explore efforts made by various actors and stakeholders as they construct and make claim to a positive, often idealized, nostalgic image of a cultural commodity, herbal tea in one case and “singing-dancing-drumming warrior” performances on the other. In so doing, the stakeholders seek to redeem each product from negative associations grounded in the colonial and apartheid pasts. Both products are also explained in terms of their “African-ness” by way of their natural origins in Africa among people with “African” identities and also a sort of uber-African essence whereby they gained added legitimacy through the representation of “authentic Africa” as exported to the world. Through often very personalized narratives, including first person observations, both authors raise compelling existential questions about the interplay among things, people, consciousness and identity, and illuminate the complex relations between production and consumption in a highly racialized capitalist context.

Ives, a Stanford-trained anthropologist, and Meintjes, a music and cultural anthropologist at Duke University, paint deeply intimate portraits of the people and places, geographic and temporal, involved in creating, developing, and deploying indigenous identities tied to specific commodities. Both authors write in a lively engaging style with

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a7.pdf>

well-organized and compelling narratives. They both also provide first-hand accounts and detailed field notes, in some cases even serving as participant-observers of activities related to the production and performance of the commodities—Ives attends Rooibos farmers' association meetings and Meintjes films helped in the promotion of the Zulu dance performances. A central concern of both authors is the context of profound, persistent precarity in South Africa. The authors emphasize the historical and current precariousness of the majority of South Africans who struggle to make a living in the country. In both stories, the cultural products are also associated with violence; direct violence committed by people, and the structural violence inherent in South African society, past and present. It is, for the authors, this very precarity that defines and makes possible the essence of the cultural resources that people draw upon.

As the authors highlight the continued acute poverty and inequality in South Africa, they illuminate the creative and marginally successful outcomes South Africans have achieved in the heritage industry, but which remain fragile and threatened by the vicissitudes of racism and global capitalism. It is, apparently, a key element of South African brands that the apartheid past and the struggle against it are seen as integral to authenticity. This dimension also accounts for the authors' interest in questions surrounding indigeneity in the heritage industry and nostalgia for cultural forms that can provide opportunities to make a living and hope for the future. In this regard, these two case studies complement other important recent works on culture, identity and history in South Africa including John and Jean Comaroff's *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009), Annie Coombe's *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (2003), and Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley, and Ciraj Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (2017.)

*Steeped in Heritage* focusses on the "highly racialized relations among plant, ecosystem, farmers and workers" (p. 23) in the Cederberg region of the Cape Floristic Kingdom—a UNESCO-recognized world heritage site—where hardy, deep-rooted fynbos, including rooibos, thrive. As Ives notes, this unique biome is home not only to the now globally recognized domesticated herbal tea, but also to native wild rooibos and, importantly, the original consumers of the plant, the San/Khoisan. Indeed, much of the mystique in the branding of rooibos for commercial sales, which seemed to emerge around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is associated with these earliest African people and their indigenous knowledge of the plant and environment. Rooibos then steadily grew to be an iconic South African brand with "a flavor as indigenous as licking the sweat from a Kudu's snout" (p. vii), boosted by the global celebration of the post-apartheid rainbow nation and its popular cultural exports such as music, wine, sport, and the Mandela icon. Ives argues that the wider use and then commodification of the tea was, if the pun can be forgiven, steeped in conflict as it coincided with the period of competition and conflict over land and labor in the Western Cape. It was from that point on that, following the well-chronicled white settler conquest of the Cape and the widespread annihilation of the Khoisan, they were marginalized from their ownership and control of productive resources in the region, including rooibos. And yet, the Khoisan still figured as central to the story as the truly authentic African culture that first discovered the remarkable beneficial properties ascribed to the tea.

Importantly, Ives remains mindful of the context of racial violence, historical and current, literal and structural, which conditions the struggles of workers in their bid to claim ownership of the land and the tea. This is, perhaps, where Ives argument is most compelling and prescient, as she provides a nuanced understanding of Marxist theory, especially “species-being,” as it applies to the coloured workers in the industry separated from both the ownership of the farms and their connection to the indigenous identity associated with the tea. Ives is careful to point out that many people in the region, white Afrikaners and coloured Khoisan descendants alike, see the original San as a largely extinct culture now blended into the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking population both white and black. This is a narrative which leaves open the opportunity for white Afrikaners to lay claim to the plant and the product through the historical processes of conquest and absorption of the San, hence “Khoisan” and then “coloured,” even though the marketing emphasizes the authenticity of the original users. It also calls into question what can be meant by “indigenous” as the Afrikaner farmers assert their own right to this identity as “natives”, not settlers, albeit through the justification of the empty-land myth and the disappearance of the “original” San.

Having established who is competing for control of rooibos as an indigenous “African” branded product, Ives then explores the various dimensions of the race and class conflicts surrounding its production. In turn, she addresses the ways in which coloureds and Afrikaners wrestled over claims to the land and rooibos production in the context of still unresolved state interventions in redistribution question. Chapter two considers the ecological and political relationships of the people to the land and the ambiguities of coloured workers being dispossessed from the rooibos farms they now work upon yet claim as their heritage. Chapter three examines the significant demographic change that has come to the Cedarberg region in the post-apartheid period with the arrival of black Africans from other parts of the country and the continent beyond. The tensions surrounding this development highlight both recent concerns about xenophobia and the extent to which the Western Cape is demographically exceptional. Chapter four re-works some of the book’s major themes through an analysis of rumor and gossip surrounding both the origins and indigeneity of the industry and anxieties about neoliberal corporate and state control of it. The final two chapters return to the precarity of people’s lives and work in the industry in a region where everyday violence and structural inequalities persist. Unfortunately, *Steeped in Heritage* has only one general map of the wider Western Cape, only one black and white photo of a rooibos farm, which is largely superfluous, and there is rather less historical development of the rooibos story than the title may suggest. Nevertheless, in sum this is a fascinating exploration of the dynamics surrounding identity and its ties to things and places in a racist, capitalist context.

Louis Meintjes *Dust of the Zulu* leaps out at the reader with the same energy and passion as the Ngoma dancers themselves. It is uncanny how deftly Meintjes captures the vibrancy and rhythm of the performers and performances in her writing, and T.J. Lemon’s photos are the perfect complement to the descriptions of harmonized bodies and voices. Her longstanding work in the field allows her to immerse herself almost completely in the context of Ngoma performances to the extent that she occasionally blurs the lines between observer and co-producer. Meintjes, who’s earlier *Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (2003) examined the technical and social construction of Zulu music, explores the development of Ngoma dance-singing-drumming performances though an

analysis of performers from Keats Drift in the Msinga district of KwaZulu Natal, near the heart of the old Zulu kingdom. This region epitomizes the long struggle of white conquest and African subjugation in South Africa, and the ensuing forcible subjugation of African men into the wider, white dominated migrant labor economy. It is, as with the Cedarberg, a region of profound precarity, though, arguably with a more distinct sense of a singular cultural identity among the Zulu. As Meintje's notes Zulu identities and associated perceptions of their martial prowess have been long in the making, and are very much a product of the colonial and apartheid pasts. Appropriately, Meintje's work is well-grounded in the considerable corpus of writing on "Zuluness" including works by Ben Carton, Johnny Clegg, Liz Gunner, Carolyn Hamilton, John Laband, Paul la Hausse, Shula Marks, Harriet Ngubane, Tom McClendon, Jabulani Sithole, John Wright, and many others too numerous to mention here. Her analysis of the historical connections between conservative Zulu politics and Inkatha could, perhaps, have been enhanced by a close reading of Nicholas Cope's underappreciated *To Bind The Nation: Solomon KaDinuzulu and Zulu Nationalism, 1913-1933* (1993.) Still, Meintjes seems at pains to elevate Zulu cultural forms in Ngoma from the troubled past of Zulu ethnic nationalism and the political violence of the Inkatha Freedom Party during the transition to democracy and is largely effective in this.

Meintje's tells the story of Zulu Ngoma dance performances as a creative struggle for both artistic recognition and economic survival through the experiences of the Umzansi Zulu Dancers from Msinga. She notes the tradition of Ngoma, though tied by the dancers to a nostalgic past and connected to a Zulu warrior pride, had its origins in a defensive competitive ethnic traditionalism. This was wrought in the oppressive South African migrant labor regime where it reflected the bifurcated lives of Zulu migrants as they operated in both rural communities such as Msinga and the male migrant labor hostels in Johannesburg. In this regard, it served to support ethnic associations needed to find work and survive in the hostile white-dominated capitalist industries of mining and plantation agriculture.

For those unfamiliar with Ngoma, Meintjes provides a detailed and captivating explanation of the physical—dance moves, styles of synchronization, bodily movement, martial movement; musical—singing, drumming, orchestration; spiritual—ties to cosmology and ancestors, emotional support, community unity; and ethnic—Zulu aesthetics, isiZulu language, political associations, heritage- dimensions. In the first three chapters, Meintjes considers the social and cultural meaning of Ngoma in gendered terms. She notes that Ngoma performance is primarily a male domain and an expression of men's prerogatives, including those over women. She describes how Ngoma performances are central to courtship between men and women, and that they are especially important in establishing attachments in rural areas where predominantly male migrant labor persists. Meintjes also considers how Ngoma reinforces Zulu concepts of masculinity associated military aesthetics. In chapter four, she tackles the thorny problem of the relationship between culture and political violence during the transition period and acknowledges that while Ngoma dance is not itself violent, it was clearly implicated in IFP-ANC violence across the country. Here, she begins to show how Ngoma performances reached beyond the confines of rural communities and the migrant labor compounds of Johannesburg to the wider context of national political conflicts and then to the global culture market.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter, five, explores the complex relationship between an iconic South African figure from the world music scene, Johnny Clegg, (and his successive bands Juluka and Savuka), and Ngoma in general and Umzansi Zulu Dancers in particular. Meintjes rightly credits Clegg with an impressive understanding of and commitment to “deep Zulu” culture, including his remarkable expertise in Ngoma dance, honed in rural KwaZulu-Natal and urban migrant labor hostels. He established his legitimacy with a fluency in the language, writing a number of well-received academic articles on the topic, and building an impressive catalogue of Zulu inspired music and performances. Umzansi Zulu Dancers and rural Zulu musicians such as Clegg’s collaborator, Siphso Mchunu, for their part, played a critical role in inspiring and teaching him, but as Meintjes shows, it was Clegg who took his interpretations of this Zulu cultural form to the global stage, and had impressive commercial success. Here she challenges us to reconsider who has ownership of the cultural commodity, and who indeed can claim authentic ethnic status associated with an indigenous identity since Clegg became known popularly as *le Zoulou blanc* in France. She further shows how Umzansi Zulu Dancers, in turn, sought to build their own performance careers as their art gained popularity through Clegg’s global success returned to South Africa.

Meintjes then revisits the question of precarity for both the cultural form of Ngoma and the people who struggle to make a living from it. In chapter six, she chronicles the ways in which the brotherhood of Ngoma accommodates and supports those suffering from the impact of HIV/AIDS. While this chapter diverges from the main narrative of identity and performance, it resonates with the larger argument about the resilience of people who deploy the positive spiritual and social supports to be found in Ngoma culture. In the remaining chapters, Meintjes emphasizes that Ngoma both operates in, and is inspired by the violent, precarious nature of life in South Africa. Following the world’s waning interest in South Africa, and the ebbing wave of struggle music and culture, Umzansi Zulu Dancers ‘hover[ed] beneath the radar of the national culture industry, hustling for performing and recording opportunities (p. 213). This is part of a larger pattern of the paradox of post-apartheid South Africa where the lifting of apartheid and the rise of a more open political space has coincided with diminishing opportunities on the global stage for many South African artists, in part because of the streamlining of the global music industry and also, perhaps, in part because of the loss of urgency and currency in the political struggle.

As the urgency and excitement over the struggle and ending of apartheid as well as the initial euphoria of the immediate post-apartheid period recedes into the past, South Africa and its brands have, perhaps, lost some of their luster. Following Nelson Mandela’s death and as the scandals of the Zuma years and state capture are further revealed, it would seem that marketing South Africa’s cultural heritage will become both more challenging and more needed for the artists and producers of the country. As these books show, their success will depend on engaging in complex and nuanced ways of embracing, rejecting, and reconfiguring select parts of the past to serve at once both as authentic sources of indigeneity and as the foil to the evils of the colonial and apartheid pasts against which the truly indigenous can be contrasted.

