

**Askew, Kelly M. 2002. *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. xvii, 417 pp. CD included.**

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If the last few decades of postcolonial critique have accomplished anything, it has been to cast a bright light on certain elephants that have too long resided, invisible, in cultural anthropology's living room. The largest of these has been, of course, the nation-state. It took years of searching critiques, but citizenship, nationalism, and state fetishism have finally become stock anthropological topics. The evidence of this shift may not yet be fully felt in the academic publishing world; however, if the list of dissertation topics in North America's top anthropology departments is any indication, an "anthropology of the state" is no longer an arcane idea.

Ethnomusicologists have been full participants in anthropologizing the nation-state (e.g. Stokes 1992; Slobin 1993; Sugarman 1999; Turino 1999), but no musical ethnography has gone quite so far in this regard as Kelly M. Askew's *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*. This is perhaps because Askew has seized upon a question well-tailored to ethnomusicological methodologies. She asks: if a nation is a social construct, an "imagined community" (Anderson [1983] 1989), then how and by whom is it imagined (Askew 2002:14)?<sup>1</sup> In approaching this question, Askew follows in the footsteps of her teacher, Michael Herzfeld, who has argued for the importance of examining nationalism and the social construction of the nation state in various discursive fields—not just in official language, but also in everyday discourse and expressive culture, including music (Herzfeld 1997).

Askew chooses to focus on the ways the Tanzanian nation has been (and continues to be) imagined through musical performance. She deals with three musical genres, *ngoma* (performances of competitive dance organizations), *dansi* (urban, Congolese-influenced popular music), and *taarab* (sung Swahili poetry),<sup>2</sup> which are all national in scope, largely because they are sung in the Tanzanian national language of Kiswahili. Her aim is to examine these "Swahili" genres as spaces where ideas about the Tanzanian nation are made manifest and negotiated. To this end, she creatively draws upon direct observations, archival records, and a range of secondary sources (both Western and Tanzanian).

It is evident that great care was taken in shaping the overall structure of *Performing the Nation*. Askew treats an immense amount of ethnographic

and historical data without ever losing sight of her core research problem. She begins with a masterfully composed introductory chapter that sets the physical scene with descriptive passages and the theoretical scene with a lucid literature review. It is followed by a brief history of Tanzania, focused metonymically on the small but historically important coastal town of Tanga, a crossroads where autochthons, migrants, refugees, colonizers, and settlers from Africa, Arabia, and Europe have for centuries interacted and become socially intertwined. This section offers a necessary contextualization of the hybrid Swahili ethnoscape so central to Tanzanian nationalism.

By the third chapter we have entered familiar musicological turf, with a "limited musical ethnography and social history" of *ngoma*, *dansi*, and *taarab* (121), focusing on the inseparable relationship between the musical and the political in Tanzania. Askew also uses this chapter to position herself as the ethnographer in her study, a necessary task given her full participation in Tanzanian music and politics as both a scholar and a performer. She discusses how her research into the politics of *ngoma* was aided by her role as an "honorary cultural officer," and then how she slowly began to perform with *taarab* and *dansi* groups. Interestingly, she presents herself as somewhat of a passive figure when she mentions her emergence as a performer. "Upon discovering my musical capabilities," she writes, "Babloom [a *taarab* group] set to work transforming me into a colleague" (118). While there is no reason to doubt Askew's characterization of events, it is difficult not to wonder if she is being strategic in presenting herself as more a social scientist than a performer.

The next three chapters present the majority of the empirical data, ethnographic and historical. The focus of these chapters moves back and forth between the personal and the national, allowing her readers a sense of a more dialogic reality. Askew's point is not to describe nationalism from below or from above, but to understand its complex, "polyphonic" reality—the attempts by the state to compose and arrange its nationalist projects and "the cacophony that continually threatens to deafen state attempts at harmony" (161).

Chapter 5 deals with Tanzania's attempts at top-down cultural politics (including its rather lackluster Cultural Revolution). Tanzanian cultural policy has been consistently undone by its marriage to protean political paradigms (modernization, then traditionalism, then back to modernization, etc.) and the petty corruption of postcolonial bureaucracy. Askew offers another view of the inherent problems of top-down cultural policy in chapter 6, which describes at length *ngoma* performances at Tanzania's National Arts and Language Competitions. Through step-by-step accounts of performances and rehearsals, Askew delivers the distinct impression

that national *ngoma* competition has been reduced to a series of regulations and standards in the name of a nationalism based in socialist unity.

In what may be considered the main strand of her ethnography, Askew traces the relationship between the dynamic interpersonal politics of *taarab* performances and the national multiparty politics in which they have become ensconced. She begins seemingly far from the realm of national politics or cultural policy. Relying on colorful descriptive vignettes, Askew illustrates how female audience members air disputes publicly and attempt to manipulate their own and other's social positions through the histrionics of *kutunza* (tipping), the highly performative act of bestowing money upon musicians as they perform:

There is a definite art to the act of tipping—as much performance as anything on stage. . . . The uninitiated or very shy may unceremoniously walk up to the singer to hand him or her some money, but the vast majority will make their way from the audience to the stage with a stylized, elegant dance that enables them to stand among the seated and thus show off skill in dancing or perhaps a new dress. . . .

When combined with lyrics that speak to a particular personal issue, tipping provides people with the means of appropriating those lyrics and claiming them for personal use. Someone angered by a friend's lack of loyalty, for example, in choosing to tip during a song about a disloyal friend appropriates the text for a personal dispute and, without transgressing local protocol, makes public a private grievance. (139–40)

Tipping, “the audience's medium of participation” (141), is thus shown to be an institution with a perhaps unexpected function: it provides social actors with a performative arena in which to work through (if not actually resolve) issues and disputes that are not otherwise aired for reasons of propriety (or even for fear of violence).<sup>3</sup> Askew's purpose for bringing this fascinating material to light is to present Swahili music (perhaps *taarab* in particular, because of its highly metaphorical texts) as imbued with a “communicative potency” that opens a space for social relations to be constituted and reconstituted through their expression in performance (155).

Askew brings the insights gained from her examination of *taarab* performance to bear on national cultural politics by focusing on the links that were established in the nineties between *taarab* groups and Tanzanian political parties engaged for the first time in multiparty politics. She finds, perhaps unsurprisingly, that political parties are far more successful in appropriating the labor of *taarab* groups than controlling the communica-

tive potency of *taarab* songs. With multivalency of meaning an integral aspect of *taarab*, it would be impossible to put forward a singular interpretation of any song (262). Askew presents examples of performance situations where multiple interpretations of particular *taarab* songs coexist in obvious tension with one another. Differently situated subjects accept different interpretations, often with full cognizance of other interpretations, creating an opportunity for strategic, performative negotiations and manipulations of various messages. Askew's prime example is most stark. She describes a concert at a political campaign rally where the finale was, from one perspective, the party's rousing theme song and, from another perspective, a lewd commentary on female promiscuity. In the end, we are told the audience members were more interested in the latter interpretation. They "tipped according to their politics of the personal and did not, by in large, get swept up in a wave of anti-opposition sentiment" (262).

What Askew presents us with here is a visceral sense of the difficulty of controlling symbolic production in the Tanzanian public sphere. Her observations, she admits, are in direct tension with what some prominent theorists have observed in regard to the ability of those in power to manipulate public consciousness. Achille Mbembe, Pierre Bourdieu, and others whom Askew refers to as "state-centric" theorists, paint a very different picture of the workings of the cultural and symbolic in national politics (10–13, 273). Askew focuses on Bourdieu in particular, who writes that agents of the state essentially bring the state into being by articulating what the state is (Bourdieu 1999; Askew 2002:11). While accepting Bourdieu's basic premise, Askew finds nothing in the Tanzanian case to validate his inference that the agency for state-formation lies solely with the state. Instead, Tanzanian state-formation appears as a dialogic and highly contingent process, just like any other performance.

Askew spends considerable time mapping the theoretical terrain upon which she links performance and nationalism. She begins with Michel Foucault's (1980) assertion that power "only exists in action," that it "is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised" (Askew 2002:127, 291). This dictum, she holds, "lays the foundation for a performative understanding of power" (291), because it tells us that power must always be demonstrated, must be made palpable, in order to exist. In the context of the nation-state, this is often done through dramatic, performative means. State power is made tangible through performances in such contexts as festivals, ceremonies, or even, as we read in the very first paragraphs of *Performing the Nation*, border crossings.

This notion that the Tanzanian nation is "performed" as much as "imagined" emerges in the context of an effort by some anthropologists (including Herzfeld) to revise reigning theories of nationalism<sup>4</sup> by looking be-

yond Western Europe for empirical data. In the view of Herzfeld, Askew, and other cultural anthropologists of the nation state, the most often read and cited work on nationalism lacks a nuanced perspective on culture. Benedict Anderson's oft-cited *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* ([1983] 1989) provides a step in the right direction by attempting to elaborate upon the cultural foundations of European nationalism; however, Anderson's culturalism still suffers from oversimplification and a lack of broader (comparative) perspective on the role of culture in history and society. In particular, Anderson's overriding focus on print media as the vector of national consciousness blinds him to the dialogical nature of the national imaginary (Herzfeld 1997; Askew 2002:9–13). Invoking Antonio Gramsci, Askew writes:

Rather than an abstract ideology produced by some to be consumed by others, nationalism ought to be conceptualized as a series of continually negotiated relationships between people who share occupancy in a defined geographic, political, or ideological space. No amount of rhetoric can construct a nation if it fails to find resonance with state citizenry. There must be some degree of mutual engagement for nationalism to flourish, but this very element of mutuality, or sharedness, of common participation, admits the possibility of dissension from those excluded from state activities. (12)

Thus, Askew's treatment of nationalism begins with a basic anti-reductionist move, describing the state as a somewhat messy "work in progress" (26), rather than the miraculously cohesive social fetish others have argued it to be. She admits that this view is especially well suited to the particularities of the African postcolonial state. The Tanzanian state in particular has shown itself to be a fluid and consistently contested entity. Not only has it undergone major changes of economic and political identity in its short four decades of existence, but its very being has continually been called into question due to the fraught nature of the union between the semi-autonomous Zanzibar archipelago and the rest of the Republic (the mainland). Still, Askew means for her study to have relevance beyond the African subcontinent as an important addition to the growing bookshelf of ethnographic case studies on nationalism. In the end, she concludes that her "performative approach" to the state could be usefully applied more generally: ". . . to my mind, it can expose the continual performance not only required *by* states but required *of* states that, just like individuals, must continually reinvent themselves to accommodate the flux and flow of social, political, ideological, and economic change" (292).

Defined this way, Askew's performative approach may be more deeply indebted to previous anthropological approaches to the state than one might guess from her bibliography. After all, it has been nearly a quarter century since Clifford Geertz (1980) concluded that nineteenth-century Balinese "pageants were not mere aesthetic embellishments, celebrations of a domination independently existing; they were the thing itself" (120). What is perhaps more groundbreaking in Askew's work is the insistence on the dialogic nature of nationalism. This she brilliantly imports from the fields of performance studies and ethnomusicology, which have both come to a general consensus that the barrier between performer and audience is even more of a Eurocentric myth than once thought.

While I agree that Askew's "performative approach" has much to offer, it is hard to overlook an inherent problem when one examines it from a more musicological perspective. Here I am referring to Askew's tendency uncritically to conflate music with performance, as if musical performance is no different than any other type of performance.

In an epigraph to chapter 4, Askew quotes musical anthropologist Steven Feld:

An ethnography of musical communication which concentrates on musical meaning and interpretation should be concerned with explicating some of these lived epistemologies, these intertwining of form and substance, these practices full of potential or realized coherence and contradiction. (Feld 1994; Askew 2002:123)

It is interesting that Askew reproduces this quote as an epigraph, because it can be argued that what Feld suggests is not exactly the direction she takes. While she affords ample attention to "lived epistemologies" and the "intertwining of form and substance," Askew does not accomplish her analysis through a particular focus on *musical* meaning and interpretation, if we accept that the term *musical* refers primarily to the human manipulation of *sound*. One could never argue, of course, that Askew ignores sound. After all, *Performing the Nation* is packaged with a CD to offer readers "an appropriately aural sense" of *taarab*, *dansi*, and *ngoma* (327).<sup>5</sup> Still, I contend that there is a lack of engagement on Askew's part with sound as empirical data in her writing.

Recently, other ethnographers of African popular music dealing with similar connections between power relations on the micro and macro social levels have chosen to delve deeply into the semiotics of musical sound (Turino 2000; Meintjes 2003). In his work on music and nationalism in Zimbabwe, Thomas Turino employs Peircian semiotic theory to analyze the unique power of music as a political tool, explaining how musical sound

can seem more true (unquestionable) than words alone. Louise Meintjes, meanwhile, focuses on the symbolic mediation of sound in the production of *mbaqanga* music in order to understand the ways in which discourses of race and difference in post-apartheid South Africa are made manifest in everyday expressive culture.

While Askew dutifully describes the sonic aspects *ngoma*, *dansi*, and especially *taarab*, she rarely links this technical parsing of sound to her larger points. Her semiotic gaze is focused more sharply upon another aspect of musical performance—poetics. She discusses the Swahili cultural predilection for subtle, artful wordplay and how highly metaphorical *ngoma* and *taarab* texts allow room for groups and individuals to reinterpret messages in tactical ways. Summing up an argument that is fully treated in her ethnographic description, Askew writes: “Metaphor produces multivalence and transforms the songs into power-laden weapons commonly exploited in the negotiation of social relations” (126). This is an important point, but it doesn’t explain why these metaphors are transmitted through *music* and not some other form of poetic recitation. Leaving aside any meta-physical, arguments about the relationship between musical medium and poetic message, I would contend that there are concrete ways in which a deeper focus on musical sound may have enhanced or revised the ethnographic evidence presented in *Performing the Nation*. For example, take the following observation of the nationalization of *taarab*:

It may have been officially desirable to embrace the Swahili language, Swahili poetry, and certain other things Swahili in the early years of independence, but not the genre of music most identified with Swahili coastal regions, namely, *taarab*. One can only suspect that the obvious musical influences from Middle Eastern and Indian sources struck a sharp dissonance with the Afrocentrism of post-independence nationalism. (280–81)

Why is it that “one can only suspect” that sounds perceived as foreign were at odds with post-independence nationalism? In fact, it seems that this could be a fruitful direction for in-depth research rather than mere suspicion. Given her aim to focus on music as a way inside the intricate dialogics of the national imaginary, one might have expected Askew to attack head on the tropes of foreignness and Swahiliness in the discourse surrounding the sounds of *taarab*. The eventual ascendance of *taarab* onto the stage of Tanzanian national politics must have involved a great deal of discussion and political maneuvering (amongst musicians, cultural officers, politicians, etc.) over the meanings and values associated with particular musical sounds. And yet, Askew, who one would assume to be intimately

familiar with these discourses, elides them in her writing.

All this is not to say that the material Askew presents is flawed in any major way. I simply think it is worth pointing out—especially here in a journal of musicology—that there exists another, more sound-oriented direction Askew might have usefully taken, a direction that would have potentially yielded other kinds of ethnographic data. The fact remains that *Performing the Nation* is one of the best ethnomusicological monographs to emerge in recent years. From the very design of the study to the smallest articulated detail, it stands as a testament to the power of expressive culture as an object of anthropological inquiry. By constantly linking the expressive practices of individuals to the larger workings of national politics, Askew is able to center on what Michael Herzfeld refers to as the “broadly shared cultural engagement” behind the instantiation of the nation as an idea (Herzfeld 1997:3). Thus, *Performing the Nation* is not only a fine work of ethnomusicology but a weighty contribution to the ethnographic study of the nation-state.

#### Notes

1. It should be mentioned that *Performing the Nation* is also in print in Tanzania (Mkuki na Nyota Press). The fact that Askew is also writing for a Tanzanian audience only brings greater relevance and validity to her work. It is still all too rare for a young Northern scholar working in a Southern area to take the pains necessary to make her work available in the region where she conducted her research. I hope that Kelly Askew’s book is a harbinger in this regard.

2. There is also some discussion of *kwaya* (Christian “choir” music), but only a passing mention of Swahili rap, which was a relatively minor phenomenon when Askew conducted her field research but had by far surpassed all the other genres in popularity by the time her book was published. Though I do not believe it decreases the relevance of her work, it is interesting to note that a visitor to Tanzania in the year *Performing the Nation* was published would have found a very different musical landscape than Askew describes.

3. This point is also elaborated upon in a recently published study by Kenyan anthropologist, Mwenda Ntarangwi (2003). Readers interested in the social dynamics of *taarab* are encouraged to examine Ntarangwi’s ethnography, which centers on *taarab* in Mombasa, Kenya, alongside the work reviewed here.

4. See especially Anderson ([1983] 1989).

5. The CD features Askew’s own field recordings, mastered by German scholar and record producer Werner Graebner. The list of tracks, provided as an appendix, is annotated and cross-referenced with the rest of the text. Askew herself is featured as a singer on one track.

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