

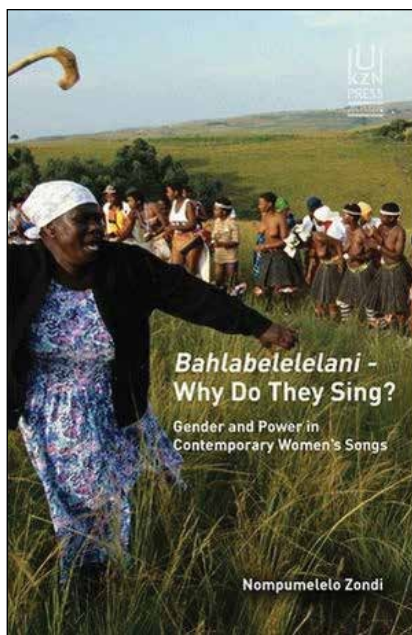
## BAHLABELELELANI — WHY DO THEY SING? GENDER AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S SONGS

by NOMPUMELELO ZONDI

Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2020.

NOMPUMELELO Zondi's book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship that takes South African women seriously as generators of knowledge and teachers of that knowledge. Zondi, associate professor and head of the Department of African Languages at the University of Pretoria, argues that Zulu-speaking women use songs to challenge 'a status quo that requires them not to question the order of things in their society' (2). As such, her analysis of the songs reveals women 'formulating their own meanings' (133) of their experiences of daily life at home, in the community, and in the nearly thirty-year old nation of South Africa.

Zondi situates her examination of women's song within the cultural inheritances of south-eastern Africa that order society by gender and generation. *Hlonipha* (which restricts the language and behaviour of women and youth), polygyny and marriage practices such as *lobolo* all contribute to patriarchal gender constructions that women must navigate. Significantly, Zondi recognises that the women's practices do not reflect some uncontaminated tradition but are shaped by present-day realities in which constitutional guarantees of gender equality and cultural pluralism sit in tension. She draws on theory from Marcel Jousse and James Scott (chapter two) and the extensive literature on African popular culture and oral literature (chapter three) to position women's songs, gestures and expressions as their efforts to make themselves and their grievances visible.



Zondi worked with sixty rural women and men aged 15 to 65 in Zwelibomvu, near Pinetown. She gathered songs at *umemulo* and *umgcagco* ceremonies, women's social events such as *ilima*, and the *amacece* of neighboring communities. She also conducted interviews with individuals and focus groups. Throughout the text, she provides both the Zulu-language lyrics and English translations for a number of these songs and passages from her interviews. Chapter four visually describes the performances and the ceremonies at which they took place. This is critical for her analysis, she shows, as context and audience can change the meaning of a song.

In chapters five and six, the heart of her analysis, Zondi draws out women's

discourses regarding experiences of gender and power in their daily lives and the broader issues of society that extend beyond the home such as national politics, gender-based violence, and diseases of body and spirit. Songs speak to women's experiences as providers and wives in rural areas. For instance, in *Lo Mhlaba*, the singing women educate men that women use the land to sustain when men cannot support their families. This reader thus wanted to hear more about the place of Zwelibomvu: what are the local economic and political conditions that shape the contemporary issues women face? Many of the grievances Zondi identifies in the songs relate to family sustenance, marriage and disease; all issues tied not only to patriarchal gender constructions but also skyrocketing unemployment rates, migrant labour and inferior wages.

Zondi also shines light on the manner in which songs communicate 'horizontal grievances' against co-wives. For example, songs such as *Ngoneni?* and *Ngiphelezele* illustrate the divisions among women in polygamous relationships. This attention to conflict among women made the reader want to hear more about possible generational grievances. Zondi does pay attention to the socialisation of young women into com-

munal values in which marriage is of paramount importance. What pressures might these younger women feel as they hear married women sing of a status, however challenging, that may not be open to them? As she herself remarks, much more remains to be done on how women use similar methods to navigate relationships with other women.

Methodologically, the work is notable for the manner in which it considers reception of these songs by both men and women. Zondi interviews women to understand their intent. Her analysis of song lyrics and the contexts in which they are sung shows how women both challenge and reinforce social structures in their performances. She argues, too, that men take this singing seriously but 'seem oblivious to the fact that, as men, they are the main reason that triggers women's singing' (139). She demonstrates how the women's more political songs confronted President Thabo Mbeki with exceptional disrespect, despite his absence from the location of its performance.

Zondi's *Bahlelelani* reveals the knowledge and talent of contemporary rural Zulu-speaking women in all of their complexities with nuance and grace.

JILL KELLY