

## **LAUNCH OF POPULAR MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN AFRICA (Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (ed), 2006)**

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, and especially Dr Michael Drewett  
Good evening, molweni and welcome!

1. Thank you for the honour of launching this evening *Popular Music and Censorship in Africa*
2. It is always a great pleasure to launch a new book, only that in this case it is a multiple pleasure because
  - One of the editors is a Rhodes academic, Dr Michael Drewett
  - 6 of the 14 chapters in the book are penned by Rhodes academics – Michael himself, Nomalanga Mkhize (History), Gary Baines (also History), Diane Thram (ILAM), and a Rhodes PhD student; and
  - The book is an endeavour which cuts across disciplines in a way that enriches the overall project.
3. There are a number of reasons why *Popular Music and Censorship in Africa* is a very welcome book
4. First, while any contribution that enhances our knowledge and understanding of our natural and social worlds is important, *Popular Music and Censorship in Africa* is additionally welcome because it breaks new ground and extends our understanding of a little researched and important issue.
  - It highlights that any notion that censorship is only associated with the state and its agencies is misleading. As Wilson Akpan, our Rhodes PhD demonstrates, censorship is also associated with institutions and organisations of civil society (another useful corrective to the glib notion of all-virtuous civil society and demon state), with business in terms of what is and is not funded, and the market. And as other contributors show, liberation movements during anti-colonial struggles could also become censors; as could democratic states unwittingly through well-intentioned policies.
5. Second, the book shows that popular music and censorship are elements of cultural struggles and hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, and helps us to understand, in the words of one of the contributors, ‘both the power of music and the attempts that are made to restrict that power’ (Cloonan, 2006:4).

Yet there is also exemplification that counter-hegemonic discourses may themselves be contradictory in that while they may be transformative in some respects ('race'), they may be reproductive in other aspects (gender, oppressive traditions, etc.)

6. Third, the non-African editor, Martin Cloonan states that the book not only breaks new ground but also provides further insight into the nature of music censorship' (2006:4) is especially pleasing.

Regrettably, too often research and writing in the ex-colonies take theory produced in the metropolises as not only the starting point but also the conclusion, and remains at the level of the empirical. It is therefore pleasing that the book make a contribution to the theorisation of censorship, and is recognised as doing that.

7. Fourth, the book usefully illustrates the continuities and discontinuities in censorship between colonial and post-colonial periods.

On the one hand, neo-colonial states and once progressive liberation movements now in power draw on the same censorship laws and practices that were used by the colonisers.

On the other hand, progressive liberation movements that are committed to democracy also find themselves in the dilemma of using certain kinds of censorship – for example, in an attempt to cultivate nation-building

8. Finally, like any important contribution to knowledge this is a book that gets you thinking. Cloonan suggests censorship is not 'inevitably regressive, but it does give food for thought for those who want to use it for progressive ends'
9. I found myself stimulated to think about things – and here I must confess that since I read some of these chapters much too quickly I may be open to objections.
  - First, about Michael Drewetts chapter on the cultural boycott and his ambivalence regarding this strategy – this was for a just cause but as he argues it can be seen a form of censorship which must be disapproved
  - Second, whether I was entirely persuaded by Nomlanga's Mkhize's argument that Simon Bikindi's folk songs and radio RTLM in Rwanda were 'symptoms of causes which simple censorship cannot fix' (2006:49). Does this not take away all sense of agency from Bikindi and those who ran RTLM for contributing to fermenting murderous genocide – were they themselves

just victims like those who were butchered? Is no responsibility to be attached to them? Is there no individual accountability if we are all conditioned by social structure?

- Third, Gary Baines' chapter on Ngema and his song 'AmaIndiya' essentially concludes that 'hate speech must be recognized as legitimate and valuable form of symbolic expression in society – not because it is true or sound, but because it identifies discontent, injustice, inequities' To deny voices, even those voices that are vile, disgusting and hateful, is itself an act of contempt' (2006:67).

This is a somewhat 'absolutist' position. Would the author hold the same view on music that promotes sex with children? It also gets me thinking about our contemporary debates on institutional autonomy and academic freedom and public and democratic accountability.

The point, which we will all recognise, is that we are here not just in the territory of theory and explanation but also difficult normative issues and choices.

Nonetheless, however, we may want to conclude and whatever positions we may eventually want to adopt, it is the virtue of these and other articles that they force one to think. Also, knowledge is not fixed and in public debate views and arguments may get modified.

Overall, the book and its constituent articles are important contributions to public reasoning and to deliberative democracy.