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REFERENCES

EDMONDSON, Laura. – *Performance and Politics in Tanzania. The Nation on Stage*.
Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2007, 175 p.

- 1 *Performance and politics in Tanzania* is a rich and theoretically informed ethnography on performing arts—mixing acrobatics, traditional drumming, comic skits, plays and various genres of music—in Tanzania. Laura Edmondson, assistant professor of theatre studies at Dartmouth College in the USA, explores how national politics, socio-cultural values and gender are expressed on stage. If the author’s analytical framework draws on master works about popular theatre and performances in Africa which assert the necessity to relate popular artistic forms to politics, it departs from analyzes which conceptualize creativity only as a place and tool of resistance to political power. Indeed, criticizing scholar works which theorize popular culture and performers as the “autonomous voices of the disenfranchised African working poor” (note 5, p. 143), the author stresses the need to bring to light the paradoxical positioning of popular culture, which can both, and at the same time, articulate an opposition to the state and work to legitimize it by colluding with the national agenda for the dominance of a political party, for patriotism and nationalism, and for the contribution of the society at large to development. She consequently resorts to the concept of “collaborative nationalism”—also referred to as “complicity”—to depict postcolonial theatre in Tanzania. In this expression, the adjective “collaborative” shall not be misleading: it does not refer to the clear-cut contribution of performing arts to nation-building, but qualifies the complex relations of cultural borrowings and negotiations between the state and local producers of national cultural performances in imagining the nation. Doing so, she follows the steps of authors such as Bhabha, De Boek, Mbembe, Nyamnjoh or Werner whose epistemological agendas of re-introducing the individual and

collective agency of the ruled in shaping national imaginaries shall not be content with a binarized approach of the state *versus* the people which would equate agency with sheer maneuvers of resistance to an hegemonic power. Her work aims to give insight into the intricacies of the working of power relations along its many channels and at various levels.

- 2 The book is divided into three parts : “Imagining the Nation”, “Sexing the Nation”, and “Contesting the Nation”. The first part provides an historical perspective into the processes of collaborative nationalism from the post-independence era of the mid-1960s up to the post-socialist period of the late 1990s—the bulk of the author’s fieldwork indeed took place in 1996-1997. It explores concepts of “alternative nationalism” and “strategic nationalism” to refine the grasping of the ways Tanzanian performing traditions of dance, music, plays and acrobatics contributed to imagining the nation and nationhood. Laura Edmondson convincingly demonstrates that the first national and local cultural troupes born during the post-independence period were complicit in the nationalist agenda of building unity and citizenship through holding the fiction of a coherent national culture on stage. However, this trend changed after the political and economic liberalization of the late 1980s at a time when the three main troupes in the national cultural landscape, Muungano cultural troupe, Mandela cultural troupe and Tanzania One Theater (TOT) explored in a more ambivalent and complex way, on stage, alternative modes of nationhood. In other words, artistic performances then worked as “a testing ground for national identity”, as “microcosms of democratization in which ideas of morality, gender and tradition were fiercely debated” (p. 41). The second main part of the book, “Sexing the Nation”, revisits the same relation between performance and nation-building. The focus is put on the supposedly “traditional” performances of drumming and dances called *ngoma*, on the representation of women and womanhood on the scene, and on classical traditional/modern and urban/rural dichotomies. This second part gives more room to the fieldwork, as the author draws on her observations of actual performances to assert her point. Skillfully depicting the actions and words taking place on stage, and taking into consideration the way audiences react to the performance, she is constantly keen to highlight the complexity of artistic performances. In this view, she demonstrates how cultural shows can collude with the nationalist agenda while, at the same time, proposing alternative versions which contest official narratives of tradition and national identity. This allows her to explore how and why the three main cultural troupes stage different forms of performances, and consequently varied relations to the official discourse of the nation. As far as the last part is concerned, it provides the reader with a careful depiction of a set of formal competitions between two of the main theatre companies, TOT and Muungano. The detailed description of the competing shows and the interpretation of the way they propose renewed versions of gender, tradition and identity do not, however, provide new conceptual insights to understand the thesis defended by the author. Throughout her book, Laura Edmondson manages to develop a nuanced perspective on the nationalist project in Tanzania which unfolds its multilayered dynamics. It interestingly challenges the many academic works on Tanzanian nationalism which, since the period of Nyerere’s African socialism, have tended to focus on high-level political discourses rather than the negotiation of the national narrative at the local level. It is regrettable that the construction of the book leads to many repetitive statements as it applies the same analytical lens to explore the same themes (tradition, modernity, gender) throughout the many performances

observed. Moreover, the conceptual framework used by the author (collaborative, strategic and alternative nationalism) does not always prove convincing, especially when it deals with the representations of womanhood on stage. The reader would also wish to know more about the impact of these cultural performances on popular opinion. If examples of spontaneous reactions of the audience to key moments are well depicted, the reader is not given the means to grasp whether cultural performances lead to actual shifts in popular representations of nation and nationhood. Nonetheless, the book constitutes a captivating analysis of theatre arts in Tanzania which does justice to the plurality and flexibility of the articulation between popular performances and nation-building. Laura Edmondson's accurate and insightful work will likely please all observers familiar with the artistic scene in Tanzania.