



## The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi

by Lisa Gilman. 2009. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. xi + 268 pp., 2 maps, 2 figures, 10 halftones, appendices, references. \$64.50 cloth, \$27.95 paper.  
doi:10.1017/S0149767712000368

In *The Dance of Politics*, Lisa Gilman calls upon her background as a scholar of African dance, gender, and performance studies to explore the embodied practices of women song leaders (alternatively referred to as “praise performers”) in Malawi. In this ethnographic and historical project, the author theorizes that the practices of women song leaders have had an enduring impact on women’s political participation and issues of gender parity and power relations in the Southeast African nation. She ultimately argues that women’s political dancing serves to challenge the state through its embodied critique of formal political actors while at the same time working to reaffirm the marginal political status of women in Malawi. Creative acts that began as an explicit critique of and form of resistance to British colonial rule became a vehicle through which women praise performers offered both criticism and support for political party leadership and state practices. Gilman traces how the songs and dances of the women praise performers were co-opted by party leaders in order to be deployed for their use. She presents a complex narrative that exposes how women’s political dancing, as a tool of an under-represented and marginalized group, functions to initiate conversations between the nation’s poorest citizenry and formal political agents, and suggests that the songs and dances of women praise performers act as an informal politics to facilitate women’s participation in the public sphere while raising complicated questions of agency and power along the way.

Gilman’s emically organized text reveals an awareness of the nuanced history of pre- and postcolonial politics in Malawi and is informed by oral histories/interviews from song leaders, local citizens, party members, and community leaders. This information is supplemented by

thorough descriptions of songs and dances as enacted at political rallies (known as *msonkhanos*). Additionally, the author uses her own observations, reflections, and content gleaned from informal conversations on the topic of women praise performance as source material for this well-researched project.

In Chapter 1, Gilman provides an overview of how she began this project in 1999 in Malawi, and presents a detailed observation of the practice of women praise performers as witnessed at a political rally for the nation’s United Democratic Front (UDF) party. The chapter flashes back to trace the emergence of song leaders’ practices out of traditional Malawi song and dance culture and resistance to British rule in the country, known then as Nyasaland. She relates how this resistive practice was later co-opted by Dr. Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which ran the nation through dictatorial-style, single-party governance from 1964—the year Malawi won its independence—until 1994. Under Banda and the MCP, women were required—without concern for age, interest, ailments, or abilities—to dance at political rallies on behalf of the party. Importantly, while Gilman focuses on the context of this practice in Malawi, she is careful to point out its pan-African nature, noting that similar political dancing can be observed in other places on the continent; I myself have witnessed it in the Republic of the Gambia and know of similar practices in Kenya’s history. By asserting the “pan-African-ness” of political dancing, the author provides a broader context for thinking about these practices while maintaining her focus on Malawi.

Gilman asserts that the willingness on the part of the women to use music and dance as a space for political resistance was particularly important in the colonial period because it presented a stark contrast to European cultural codes and politics. At its core, it asserted the importance of traditional cultural practices in the face of European dominance. Gilman ties the use of song and dance as a way to resist colonial control to similar happenings across the African continent. She cites the work of anthropologist Christopher Waterman and his

studies of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, who infused political rallies of the 1950s with indigenous dance and music forms. Gilman also mentions Leopold Senghor, cultural anthropologist and the first president of Senegal, who founded the World Festival of Black Arts as a means of celebrating African culture over European models. Importantly, Gilman cites Francesca Castaldi, author of *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*. In her work, Castaldi (2006) asserts that the Negritude movement in France was centered on African expatriates who ascribed value to their own cultures—especially in terms of artistic production—above European cultural forms.

The author next explores the coercive use and formal mobilization of women praise performers under Banda and the single-party control of the MCP. Gilman argues that the Banda government wished to appropriate the practice to impress upon the population that while it shared affinities with European culture (through education and modes of dress, for example), it was still invested in Malawi's traditions—a show of kinship with the nation's citizenry. Gilman theorizes that this "biopoliticalism" ultimately helped to divide those in political power from the nation's economically oppressed citizenry, which had neither access to nor interest in appropriating Western culture. The shift under Banda's single-party structure worked to subordinate women and limit their participation in formal party operations, which then set the stage for the increased marginalization of women in Malawi's political sphere. Gilman argues that what had begun as an anticolonial practice with women in control was now a tool for the MCP to force female citizens to use their voices and dancing bodies on the party's behalf. She points out that in recounted memories shared by her informants, under the MCP, women were no longer dancing to communicate their own political interests; now it was something they just did, regardless of their own thoughts and feelings.

In Chapter 3, Gilman continues her exploration of how women's bodies in Malawi had come to be mobilized by the state. Here she claims that once the MCP appropriated the practices of the women song leaders, this creative practice was linked—perhaps

permanently—to issues of gender and economics in the soon-to-be democratic nation. Gilman theorizes that those with political power in the MCP knew that the women's songs and dances had the potential to carry ideas to the larger population. She states that the MCP established youth and women wings or leagues in order to control how the considerable energy of those groups might be utilized to shore up party operations and to ensure that the party's colors, slogans, symbols, and ideals would be firmly enshrined in the public's consciousness. Here the author theorizes that praise performance, which might have been a means of bringing women into the formal political party structure, was instead used to keep them outside it by requiring their participation elsewhere.

In the next chapter, Gilman looks at the practice of the women song leaders in the early 1990s with special attention to the nation's first multiparty elections in 1994. Here, the emergence of patronage relationships between politicians and citizens in post-Banda Malawi established a link between praise performance and economic reward, with women song leaders exacting small amounts of compensation on an individual basis in exchange for their "work."

A thorough description and analysis of a *msonkhano* follows. Here, Gilman explores the power of political rallies as a space to reinforce awareness of and allegiance to state ideals as forwarded in the symbolic representations of clothing, colors, slogans, symbols, and the embodied practices of the women song leaders. This chapter illustrates how the rallies can be a site for complicated and contradictory messages in which women praise performers may laud a politician and then use song and dance to criticize him. Gilman notes that the formal mobilization of the women has become a politically powerful tool in garnering the attention of the nation's nonliterate voters while at the same time pointing out the irony that in praise performances at the *msonkhanos*, the songs and dances give way to multivocal messages that might confuse voters with contradictory messages. It is in this context—where the women are both bearers of state symbols and receivers of monetary gifts for their performances at the rallies—that the country's emerging multiparty democratic system is situated.

The next chapter explores the many reasons why women dance as praise performers in

contemporary Malawi. Drawing on interviews and oral histories, Gilman notes that many women reported that they dance in the nation's newly democratic context to support "their" party and that some enjoy the creative leadership opportunities afforded to them in the song/dance space. Some women cited the singing and dancing as a welcome distraction from regular daily work and activities. Importantly, the author notes that the women are not ignorant of the power that their songs and dance can have in the political sphere, and that they use that knowledge in two compelling ways. Some women use their positions to foster opportunities for remuneration from party authorities—money and small gifts are exchanged for the women's willingness to wear a particular party's colors and to sing their praises at political events. This seems to be particularly important, given the low economic position of women in Malawi. Second, the song leaders are intentional in their use of music and dance to criticize the party's policies and/or leadership. This matters a great deal, given that the song leaders have the attention of the populous at the rallies and can incite loyalty to or criticism of a political party. Gilman then addresses the complaints of human rights activists, who maintain that the women are still being coerced into performing and are being exploited economically. This sets the stage for Gilman to argue that notions of resistance and agency in the context of the praise performers' work are necessarily complicated. She states that for the most part, the women in Malawi "go along" with their unequal economic and political positions, while at the same time using them to take what they can as song leaders. As such, the author reads the women song leaders' performances as both resistant to and complicit in the prevailing political system. She rightly points out that the complex ways in which people respond to power and the imbalances of political access do not always mirror expectations of a resistant act. She is careful to point out the importance of not exaggerating the liberating aspect of the song leaders' performances and in so doing ignore the unequal economic, political, and social reality faced by women in Malawi. Citing cultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood, Gilman notes that assumptions about agency in much Western feminist theory emphasize the power of the individual to resist and act in their own best interests (168–169).

Gilman proceeds in Chapter 7 to further explore the practice of women praise performers within the larger scope of women in politics in Malawi. Here she notes that the various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), political actors, and human rights activists who claim to be working toward gender parity in the nation are not actively challenging the structures that position women praise performers at the very bottom of the nation's formal political strata. As such, Gilman theorizes that the opportunities for "political and economic mobility" are necessarily stifled for women in Malawi.

The final chapter focuses on arguments that the song leaders' practices deserve perpetuation because they are emblematic of Malawi's traditions and informed by precolonial resistance. According to Gilman, this argument, sometimes made by people who have participated in or seen praise singers' performances, in part explains why the practice persists. She reasserts the idea that while women's political dancing may be an empowering avenue for political participation in some way, it perpetuates the political marginalization of women by helping to maintain a system that reinforces it. Gilman rounds out the chapter by exploring how women praise performers are impacting contemporary dance in Malawi, having noted earlier in the text that once women were compelled to perform for political purposes, much dancing and singing ceased in other sociocultural spaces.

Gilman's writing is accessible throughout, and her prose is accompanied by rich descriptions of Malawi's history, culture, political context, and landscape. Strategically, the author interjects text of the actual songs and slogans employed by the women as a basis from which to draw her analysis. The most prominent and enduring strength of the work is Gilman's willingness to deal with the ambiguity present in women's praise performance and her ability to resist a simple analysis of this cultural practice. According to Gilman, the embodied acts of the women song leaders are neither strictly resistant nor a simple mechanism through which the state expresses its political power; rather the songs and dances of the praise performers have served multiple purposes as Malawi's political landscape has changed. In the first chapter, Gilman's transparency about the difficulties of doing her research with regard to issues of language, transcription, race, and

subjectivity serve as a useful model for any ethnographer. While the book is without substantial photographs, it does include maps, relevant figures, and several useful appendices, including a timeline of Malawi's political history, annotated list of interviewees, notes on a selection of rallies attended, and a section on multimedia Web sites and resources associated with the project. This is an important work that will be of particular interest to those researching contemporary African history, post-colonialism writ large, and the intersections between gender, power, performance, and formal politics. Gilman's work provides a model for looking at other contemporary pan-African practices and presents a narrative that extends discussions of how the dancing body relates to political participation. Her book suggests several questions, including how the dancing body may be deployed in the context of formal state practices, and how it may be deployed by the state specifically in postcolonial spaces. Last, Gilman's work is of use to those studying how the practices of the economically and politically marginalized are co-opted by the state and the subsequent impact on traditional cultural practices. Notably, this work complements Castaldi's text (2006), mentioned above, and extends conversations advanced in the work of dance scholars Toni Shaphiro-Phim and Naomi Jackson, Susan Foster, and Alexandra Kolb. The Jackson and Shapiro-Phim edited volume *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice* (2008) features chapters that explore issues of gendered performance in non-Western contexts, including Joan Huckstep's study of "embodied nationalism" in Zaire and Anthony Shay's exploration of the intersection between dance and human rights throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Gilman's work is an important complement and extension of this volume, much of which examines the ways in which dancing bodies across the globe are exploited by governments and other authorities. Gilman's contribution also further complicates the notion of world dance as engaged in Foster's edited volume, *Worlding Dance* (2011), and provides another analytic frame—one that foregrounds agency, culture, gender, and political contexts to explore global movement forms. Lastly, Kolb's anthology, *Dance and Politics* (2010), focuses on the connections between dance and political studies

and interrogates the relationships between dance practices and government, a relationship that is thoroughly explored in Gilman's work.

Takiyah Nur Amin

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

## Works Cited

- Castaldi, Francesca. 2006. *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.
- Foster, Susan Leigh, ed. 2011. *Worlding Dance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolb, Alexandra. 2010. *Dance and Politics*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Jackson, Naomi, and Toni Shapiro-Phim, eds. 2008. *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008.

## Living in an Artworld: Reviews and Essays on Dance, Performance, Theater, and the Fine Arts

by Noël Carroll. 2012. Louisville, KY: Chicago Spectrum Press. 388 pp., notes. \$22.50 paper. doi:10.1017/S0149767712000381

Any open-minded person curious about avant-garde art in New York City in the late 1960s or early 1970s encountered a fermenting stew, in which the ideas of choreographers, composers, theater directors, writers, and visual artists jostled against one another. Creators associated with minimalism were never timid about reducing dancing to walking, a sculpture to a railroad tie, music to two wrangling sounds, and theater that transgressed the spectator-performer boundary.

Noël Carroll was an adventurous observer back then. Now, after producing fifteen important books, Carroll—currently a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York's Graduate Center—has published *Living in an Artworld*, a collection of erudite, stimulating essays and reviews that he wrote for *Artforum*, *The Village Voice*, *Soho Weekly News*, and various scholarly journals. The writings cover a period ranging from the 1970s through