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## "The De la Rey Phenomenon" – More than a Song?

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### The Story of a Song

South Africa has recently been taken by storm by an Afrikaans song entitled "De la Rey." The controversy surrounding the song has made front page coverage from local community papers to the "Times" of New York. Some want the song banned, others are consumed by it. For some the song has the status of a National Anthem, for others, it is highly offensive. It has sparked militant and highly charged debate on radio talk shows. In some ways it is reminiscent of the South Africa of 20 years ago, highlighting the great Right /Left Wing Divide. So what is the *De la Rey* phenomenon?

*De la Rey* is a song about General Koos De la Rey (1847-1914) a Boer general during the Second Boer War. He was regarded as one of the greatest military leaders during that conflict, one of the most headstrong of the generals at that time and a leading figure of Afrikaner Nationalism. The refrain of this song "*De la Rey, De la Rey, sal jy die Boere kom lei*" has struck a chord with White Afrikaners in an astounding way. The refrain means: *De la Rey, De la Rey, will you come and lead the Afrikaners?*

Numerous newspaper articles and on-air debates relate the powerful effect this song has in social situations such as at pubs, parties, schools and sporting events. From various accounts it would seem that as the song is played it mobilises groups into instantaneous singing and dancing, usually in a large group. The singing is loud, raucous and passionate. Some reports suggest that there are those who even stand to attention, singing the song as if it were their National Anthem.

I recently experienced "the De la Rey phenomenon" at a wedding reception. The atmosphere was relaxed. The guests, a mixed group of English and Afrikaners mingled, chatting in small groups whilst some danced to the strains of a Blues Band. The first time the Band took a break they played a CD as background music and the guests resumed their seats, replenished their glasses and continued chatting in small groups. The music was simply in the background. During the Band's second break, one of the guests played a CD featuring *De la Rey*. I was astounded at what took place. The minute the song began playing there was a buzz in the air. The small groups merged into one large group as they approached the dance floor. The energy was electric as people began to dance, not merely to the catchy rhythm, but with conviction and passion. During the refrain they all spontaneously began to sing (perhaps shout-sing would be more accurate), stood embracing each other in a large circle, with some guests standing in the centre with their hands on their hearts or raising their arms, as if in protest or displaying some form of patriotism. The music seemed to represent something very powerful which galvanised a communal response. At the same time, though, not everyone was moved in this way. It would seem that most English speaking guests, as well as those, whether English or Afrikaans who do not subscribe to the ideology or sentiment of the song, did not engage in the

dance and fervour of the moment. For this group the song seemed "merely a song" during which we observed rather than actively participated. This is not because we were overtly excluded but is very possibly because the song did not strike something within us or galvanise us into responding in this way. For me, personally, it was merely a catchy Afrikaans song.

## Just a Song?

Reflecting on what I have read, heard and subsequently experienced of this song, it would seem that *De la Rey* is symbolic at a number of levels. I wonder whether the young Afrikaans folk singer and composer, Bok van Blerk, had an inkling of the social, political and cultural issues that would be ignited by *De la Rey*.

Analysis of this song by the Afrikaans media seems to suggest that this song is symbolic of a "rudderless volk" looking for a leader, or young Afrikaners "rebellng against affirmative action" (du Plessis, 2007). Others seem to have a different take on it.

Tim du Plessis (2007), editor of the Newspaper, Rapport, speaks of the "*emergence of a new Afrikaner*." He makes the point that, with the political changes that have taken place in South Africa since 1994, the Afrikaner has struggled with issues such as loss of power, identity and privilege. This song seems to represent an emergence of young Afrikaners who are finding a new voice... a new identity song? What is of interest is the notion of calling upon an old hero in the quest for the emergence and recognition of a new identity.

Antjie Krog (2007) commenting in the *Mail and Guardian* (Online) suggests that "to 'obtain liberation' from a past, children often try to develop the identity they long for by relying on surrogate mothers and fathers. As mediator, De la Rey brings a third option about. He becomes the surrogate father, not to lead to uprising, but to assist children to deal with their guilt in such a way that they can successfully integrate their past into a new society".

For a minority of Afrikaans speakers this song represents a "struggle song" with militant overtones. It is, perhaps, for this reason that there has been such an outcry from sectors of South African society calling for the song to be banned. For many others, though, it is a song about roots, history, identity, belonging, ideology and culture.

This is not a new phenomenon to South Africa. Our political history has been accompanied by musical commentaries in the form of struggle songs of the apartheid era, many of which were banned. These too represented identity, culture and socio-political ideology. I recall attending political rallies and church events in the early 1980's at which these songs were sung with equal conviction, energy and potential for galvanising groups into some form of solidarity or political protest or action.

How, then, do we think about the *De la Rey* phenomenon? Perhaps recent thinking from disciplines such as musicology, sociology of music and music therapy could contribute to thinking about the powerful impact of this song.

Firstly, music is social. Ansdell (2004) refers to a shift in thinking in musicology where music, instead of being regarded as an autonomous object, is embedded in socio-cultural practices. Pavlicevic (2003) refers to music as intimately connected with our sense of social self which contributes to our sense of being a part of a social group. Martin (1995) suggests that musical meaning is not inherent in the musical product itself, but that this meaning is socially constructed. Wherever this song is played it seems to galvanise and energise groups into responding to the song in a communal fashion, because of the meaning that they together have created. The song cannot be separated from what it symbolises and evokes. To think "De la Rey" is to think Afrikaner, identity, culture or rights.

Secondly, music means different things to different people across a variety of contexts. Sociologist Tia de Nora (2000) refers to music as affordance through appropriation. For some it is appropriated as a symbol of political struggle and thus affords some form of political solidarity and platform. Then there appears to be a large section of South African society who are equally passionate and united in their rejection of the song, affording a different platform and motivation for protest. For others, still, it strikes a chord which gives a renewed sense of 'the Afrikaner voice and presence' and therefore affords a sense of belonging and community.

Thirdly, music is an agent for building and strengthening identity (De Nora, 2000; Pavlicevic, 2003). *De la Rey* appears to represent a new generation of Young Afrikaners, with which many Afrikaners across age, class and other strata identify. "Like the *Soweto generation* of 1976, who brushed aside the "quiet diplomacy" approach of their parents, the *De la Rey* generation of

2006 is telling my generation (50-plus): 'If you feel hesitant to reclaim your Afrikaans identity, then make way. We don't.'" (du Plessis, 2007, para 20).

As previously stated, music has always been a powerful force in South African society. This force is voiced through the traditional music of indigenous people, Afrikaans folksongs, Township Jazz, Kwaito, various songs of the struggle, music associated with sporting events (Shosholozza for soccer and Leon Schuster's music for rugby), church music to offer a few examples. In each of these contexts music expresses something of the culture, the community and the diversity of the South African context. Similarly, *De la Rey* is an expression of one aspect of South African life.

The *De la Rey* phenomenon raises a number of issues. Should the song be banned or celebrated? Should music only be a vehicle through which people are united? Should music be controversial? Is the song potentially harmful for South Africa? Can music sound the many voices present in our richly diverse context? Whatever the answers or responses to these questions.....it would seem that *De la Rey* is clearly more than a song. It is a talking point, a powerful expression of identity, the political aspirations of a minority, a mobilising force in a variety of social settings, a dance song and so on.

I conclude with a quote from Eyerman and Jamison's *Music and Social Movements*:

As the carrier of (past) traditions, music bears images and symbols which help frame (present) reality. Music represents many traditions, as it expresses a range of social forces and processes, local cultures, and, inevitable tensions between commercial and political interests. In that sense, music is central to what Gene Bluestein (1994) has called "poplore," the syncretic process through which modern cultures are formed" (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998, pp. 45-46).

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