

The Vocal Traditions of two Indigenous Cultures of South Africa

Daniela Heunis
Rhodes University

I would like to thank the Symposium Organizing Committee for granting me the privilege to be the medium to share some South African voices with you. I would also like to thank the Cape Tercentenary Foundation, the Anglo American and De Beers Chairman's Fund, and the Grahamstown branch of the South African Association of University Women who assisted me financially and made it possible for me to attend this conference.

I have selected only two groups from the vastly differing groups of people in the Southern African society and will deal with each in an individual manner as the sociological, philosophical and musical practise of the music is so diverse. I will deal with the CAPE MALAY vocal tradition first as it is very close to my heart because the secular repertoire is sung in my mother tongue. It is music that originated on South African soil when the Malays were brought by the Dutch Colonists to the Cape as slaves. The second vocal tradition is that of the Xhosa¹ people, one of the many *black* traditions in South Africa, and constitutes 76.6% of the Eastern Cape population, where I now live.

This is a vast topic and my goal is only to introduce you to these traditions to wet your appetite and hopefully entice you to use some of these songs in your own repertoire.

CAPE MALAY

Background

The unique South African "Cape Malay" music originated from a cross-fertilization of a variety of musical cultures namely: the original diversity of slaves imported from Indonesia, the Malabar Coast in Bengal, India and the East Coast of Africa (notably Madagascar) from 1652 onwards (Desai, 1983, p.7) as well as descendents of the European settlers, Free Blacks (who were convicts from the Batavian empire from 1654 who had either completed their sentences or were freed earlier) (Desai, 1983, p. 16), political exiles from 1667 onwards (Desai, 1983, p. 9), and to a lesser extent the indigenous people of South Africa, including the Khoi.

The 'Cape Malay' community constitutes about 7 % of the "Coloured" population group (Desai, 1983, p.1) constitutes 9%² of the South African population. This homogeneous Muslim community share not only "a common religion, but also a distinctive dress, language, food, customs and music" and are mostly Afrikaans-speaking (Desai, 1983, p. 2).

Repertoire

The repertoire of the Cape Malay includes both sacred and secular songs. The main languages used in the **Secular** repertoire are Afrikaans and Dutch and in the **Sacred** repertoire: Arabic, Malay and Javanese.

The repertoire, sung exclusively by the men at public occasions, is kept alive orally by groups such as the Cape Coons, the Malay Night Troops³ and the Malay Choirs. The main accompanying instruments are the tamarien, ghomma⁴, banjo, cello (or double bass) guitar and mandolin.

Moppies and Ghommalledjies are interchangeable with each other and sometimes use the same melodic material. The songs generally have a light-hearted character with a rhythmic vitality enhanced by the accompaniment on the ghomma⁵ and a fast tempo. (mm. crotchet = 130).

1. **Moppies** are characterized by a more coherent story about an important event, person or any topical aspect (such as food). (Desai, 1983, p. 68) Typical of the Malay and the "Cape Coloured" in general who have an excellent sense of humour, the texts of the moppies poke fun at someone. The name of the person will thus appear in the title (*Ou tante Fiena Snui/bek*: Aunt Fiena with the snuff mouth; *Maria se brood bakkerij*: Mary's bread bakery) Or in the song (As in "*Beestepote*": Trotters where the singer refers to "*Galiema, Fatiema and Dorothea*"). Comic gestures enhance the humour and form a vital part of these songs.

The moppie originally has a social function of recreation and entertainment for the performers and the people present. The stories often reveal information which could not have been mentioned otherwise. Traditionally the moppie is antiphonal with a prominent lead singer and a chorus.

2. The joking element is not apparent in the **Ghommalledjies** although a tendency towards the comic and mischief is present. Ghommalledjies are characterized by a succession of alternating tunes, mostly two, and which are generally unrelated in terms of music and text. (Desai, 1983, p. 25)

3. **Nederlandsliedere** include wedding, sea and love songs. Nederlandsliedere are also antiphonal songs. The leader (*kariemel*-singer) demonstrates in improvisation, strongly influenced by the Oriental background, extensive embellishments or "oriental glosses" such as microtonal intervals on selected notes of the melody. The homophonic chorus, consisting of two to four parts, answers in a traditional Western tonal manner.

The various verses are sung in a combination of distorted Dutch and Afrikaans. These songs are invariably in quadruple time, in a major key emphasized by the bordun pattern implying the Primary chords I-IV-V-I in the guitar accompaniment.

Characteristics

Movement forms an inherent part of the Malay music culture, but differs in intensity depending on the light-hearted nature of the genre. Malay cuisine, another strong tradition of this culture, often occurs as the theme in their songs. (*Die Lewer en die Long*, *Beestepote*, *Snoek*) Folk music not only reflects the mood of the community at one or other stage in its development but the lyrics at times provide information about some historic event. This is probably most clearly

illustrated with the songs "*Daar kom die Alabama*" and "*Oom Jakkals*" which combines with their historical background "*Na Batavia*", referring to the Dutch invasion of the Cape of Good Hope.

Music at times also reflects the degree of cultural assimilation which takes place when two communities, of divergent cultures, come into contact with each other. Cape Malay secular music genres, notably the *nederlandsliedere*, moppies and ghommaliédjies, reflect an indebtedness to Western European musical traditions. The transmission of the Dutch songs by the so-called "Malay" community from one generation to another, is another example of the process of cultural assimilation - the melting of cultures. The words of these songs are Dutch, the singing very much eastern. Oriental musical influences are strongly present in the *Nederlandsliedere* and also the sacred repertoire of the "Cape Malay".

The second vocal tradition concentrates specifically on that of the Xhosa, which is the main language group where I come from, namely Grahamstown or Rini.

XHOSA

Background

The main black African language groups in South Africa are the Nguni tribes (Xhosa, Zulu⁶, Ndebele⁷ and Swazi) which with a few exceptions, live between the Drakensberg range of Mountains and the sea.

The Xhosa have been divided by anthropologists into **twelve chiefdom** clusters. The Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, Bomvana, Mpondomise, Bhaca, Hlubi, Xesibe, Bhele, Zizi, Ntlangwini, Mfengu. Each chiefdom is further divided into smaller clans such as the "true" Xhosa consisting of the Ngqika (gaikas), Gcaleka, and other smaller clans such as the Ndlambe and Dushane.

The South African landscape consists mainly of grasslands with little forest vegetation. The lack of trees to manufacture other instruments, such as drums and marimbas, is the main reason why the musical tradition of the black South African tribes developed using the voice as the primary instrument.

The social structure of the pastoral cattle kingdoms, on the one hand, was such that they clubbed together in large groups. They did not possess a great variety of instruments and had a militaristic way of ruling. The agricultural tribes such as the KhoiSan, on the other hand, did not have powerful chiefs, and so grouped together in smaller groups and had master musicians. The Hottentots, (Khoi) and the Bushmen, (San), had a strong influence on the Xhosa, affecting the cultural practices, personal and place names, the physical appearance of the people as well as the language. The following three click sounds, x, q, c, were inherited from the Bushmen.

When Vasco da Gama and his men landed in Mossel Bay on 2nd December 1497, they were greeted by the Hottentots. The logbook entry notes that they played four or five flutes together, in harmony. (Huskisson, 1969, p. xxi) This art of individual polyphony was passed on to the Xhosa songs when meeting them in the Eastern Cape.

The dance style of the western Xhosa, with tense body and movements focused on the feet, is another reminder of the ancient people

and contrasts vividly with the bold stamping styles of the eastern Xhosa and the other Nguni peoples. (Tracey, 1995, p.2).

Repertoire

The true Xhosa folk songs are functional and form an integral part of daily living. African music is embedded in the daily routine and all may participate, although the music is sex- and age-specific. Peer groups such as young children, teenagers, unmarried women, to name a few, dance and sing together. The songs are kept alive orally. If the song is no longer functional it dies out.

Songs of Xhosa culture "LINGOMA ZESIXHOSA"

Beer Songs (*lingoma zotywala*)
 Diviners' Songs (*lingoma zamagqirha*)
 Ceremonial Songs (*lingoma zemigidi*)
 Songs for Boys' Initiation (*lingoma zukwaluka*)
 Songs for Girls' Initiation (*lingoma zentanjane*)
 Songs for the Women's Round Dance (*lingoma zomngqungqo*)
 Songs for the Young Men's Dance Gathering (*Intlombe yabafana*)
 Songs for the Boys' and Girls' Dance Gathering (*lingoma zomtshotsho*)
 Boys' Stick-Fighting Songs (*Amagwijo*)
 Children's Songs (*lingoma zabantwana*)
 Lullabies for babies/children (*lingoma zokuthuthuzela usana/ umntwana*)
 Wedding Songs (*lingoma zomtshato*)
 Work Songs (*lingoma zobusebenza*)
 Hunting Songs (*Ingqina*)
 Songs of the Gqobhoko people (*lingoma zamaGqobhoka*)
 Zionist songs (*lingoma zaseZiyoni*)

Characteristics

As in all African music, Xhosa music:

- 1) is primarily antiphonal (call-and-response⁸),
- 2) is strongly repetitive using cycles⁹,
- 3) grows out of speech¹⁰,
- 4) generally use inclusively descending¹¹ speech patterns in the sentence structure,
- 5) use parallel fourths and fifths¹² as the common polyphonic structure,
- 6) includes improvisation, such as shouting, whistling and other sound imitations, in the performance,
- 7) is rhythmically complex and characterised by its advanced combination of rhythmic units (hand clapping, dancing and to a lesser extent drumming) into rhythmic harmony. Musical rhythm is built up out of movement patterns felt in the body. Xhosa music often combines two's against threes and fours in a song rhythm to an evenly spaced regular clap of three. The first beats of the song and the clap though are never together. The hand claps are an

important structural device, keeping the singers geared to the basic meter of the song.

According to Hansen (1982, p.38) the Xhosas,

think of sound as by products of rhythmical movements, whereas Westerners pay more attention to the sounds than to the movement." ... "Their attitude towards rhythm derives directly from dancing, which is synonymous with singing. Upward movements of the body involve tension, while downward movements which follow are acts of relaxation which resolve tension. Thus the Cape Nguni idea of *up* and *down* movements, expressed as *strong* and *weak* beats, may also represent the reverse of the Western idea of *up* and *down* movements, which are expressed as *weak* and *strong* beats respectively.

This could thus explain why, (i) Xhosa melodies invariably start on an upbeat (in the Western sense); (ii) singers accent the voice when doing so; (iii) physical movements upwards (kicks and clap-preparation) coincide with the strong beat (in the Nguni sense); (iv) diviners and so many choirmasters conduct their music with strong upbeats and weak downbeats.

Xhosa songs derive their modal character from the bow scale patterns produced by the single-string gourd bow, *the uhadl*¹³ and the mouth bow *the umrhube*¹⁴ using the two fundamentals a whole tone apart (F and G) which result in the common pentatonic scale (F g A C d)¹⁵ and the Xhosa hexa mode (F g A b C d)¹⁶.

Hansen (1982, p. 50) writes,

In viewing the whole tradition of Xhosa music, and the different categories, one finds that a considerable number of melodies are based on a melodic formula¹⁷ consisting of the repetition of two similar phrases on different degrees of a hexa mode, or a hexa-based penta mode. It is this feature, employed within the limits of a hexa (or hexa-based) mode, which gives Xhosa melody and therefore Xhosa music its characteristic sound.

A rare but interesting form of overtone singing¹⁸ ("*umngqokolo*") was traced by Dargie (1988, p. 56) in his research under the Thembu Xhosa tribe. Tracey, (1995, p. 4) explains that the singer intonates a deep gruff note or drone and selects specific harmonic partials to resonate in the mouth and throat,

thus producing a melody which is heard as an almost ethereal, whistling sound, high above the low drone. ... In the Oriental style, the drone usually remains on a monotone; in the Thembu technique, however, the pitch of the drone is continually changed, which is necessary to accommodate the Xhosa harmonic system (Tracey, 1995, p. 4).

Conclusion

Johnston's (1986, p.56) observation about Tsonga music is also true about Xhosa music.

Music in all societies should belong to everyone, as a birthright. Exclusivity and élitism have no place in ...music-making, and there are no 'tone-deaf' or 'unartistic' community members. Musicality is encouraged from early childhood to old age, and its avenues of personal and communal fulfilment greatly enrich all levels of Tsonga society.

Titelman, (1988, pp.8-9) writes "If you really want to experience something special, just listen to the music of the culture. There is nothing on earth that can tell you more about the soul of the people than music" and Chernoff, (1979, p.74) writes, "Live with them, move with them, observe them but never judge them."

Reference List

- Chernoff, J. M. (1979). *African rhythm and African sensibility*. Chicago: Chicago Press. University of Chicago.
- Dargie, D. (1986). *Techniques of Xhosa music: A study based on the music of the Lumko district*. PhD thesis, Grahamstown: Rhodes University. (One video and two audio tapes.)
- Dargie, D. (1988). *Xhosa Music*. Johannesburg: David Philip. (One audio tape.)
- Du Plessis, I. D. (1935). *Die Bydrae van die Kaapse Maleier tot die Afrikaanse Volkslied*. Cape Town: Nasionale Pers.
- Du Plessis, I. D. (1977). *Kaapse Moppies*. Johannesburg: Perskor.
- Hansen, D. D. (1982). The Categories of Xhosa Music. Paper presented at the Second Ethnomusicological Symposium. Grahamstown: International Library of African Music. pp. 34-52.
- Hayes, P-S. (1992). A collection of traditional oral songs from the Queenstown district. B. Mus Thesis. Grahamstown: Rhodes University. (One video and one audio tape).
- Huskisson, Y. (1969). *The Bantu composers of Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: SABC.
- Johnston, T. F. (1986, October). "Musical traditions in Gazankulu." in *Lantern*, 35(3) 49-56.
- Titelman, R. (1988) Foreward to Miriam Makeba's Compact Disk *Sangoma*. Warner Bros. Records. CD 7599-25673-2. pp. 8-9.
- Tracey, A. (1995, March). *Ngqoko women's ensemble*. Grahamstown: International Library of African Music.

Endnotes

¹ After the Zulu the second largest language group, which according to the 1991 census amounted to 17.6% of the population.

² Source: Demographic Statistics of the 1991 census.

³ "A 'Malay' group, the Nagtroepe, quite distinct from the Coons are an organized band of 'Malay' musicians who perform upon instruments such as the saxophone, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, banjo, guitar, mandoline, and piano-accordion. The possible influence of the early 'Malay' musicians who performed music in the households of their owners as slaves, should also be considered." (Desai, 1983, p.67)

⁴ The Ghomma is a drum made from a small wine container covered with skin on one side. The rhythmic patterns ta-fe taa, ta-fe taa and tate tate... are used

to accompany the moppies and the ghommaliédjies.

⁵ It is also used to accompany the wedding songs of the *nederlandsliedere* (no 3) which precedes the ghommaliédjies in performance. (Desai, 1983, p. 35)

⁶ The Zulu are mostly in Kwa-Natal and constitutes 22.4% of the gross South African population.

⁷ The Ndebele lives mainly in Zimbabwe but 1.6% lives in South Africa.

⁸ There is no break in the line of singing, solo and chorus parts often overlap. African songs are never set in verses but are structured like a conversation or a discussion.

⁹ Each cycle in each voice part is a sung sentence composed of phrases; these cycles may use the same sentence or continue with different sentences which will fit the same melodic pattern.

¹⁰ In all the African languages there is a strong link between speech tone and melody.

¹¹ Individual phrases will start high and end low, while the overall structure in the sentence will also gradually follow a descending saw pattern. Similarly, the contours of African melodies generally follow the overall descending speech patterns.

¹² "Parallel parts using the same texts, and which are harmonically equivalent, are considered to be variants (*iintlobo*) of the same song-line: a singer may switch from one of these parts to another in the midst of the sung sentence." (Dargie, 1988, p. 75) "Two people singing together will never sing in unison or in parallel. One will always take the role of leader (*Hlabela*), and the other the role of the follower (*Landela*), singing parts which overlap with the leader part, which begin after it and which usually overlap the beginning of the next leader cycle." (Dargie, 1988, p. 87)

¹³ A large deep-sounding bow, using a calabash for resonance of specific harmonic partials against the player's body. Sound is produced by tapping the string with a piece of stiff grass.

¹⁴ A small bow that is held close to the mouth for resonance of harmonic partials. Sound is produced by rubbing the string with a stick, as in bowing a stringed instrument.

¹⁵ Hexa-based penta mode, which comprises about 40% of all the South African folk music.

¹⁶ Six note scale.

¹⁷ This 'formula' is apparent in the oldest known Xhosa music such as *uNonkala* (The crab = divination music), *ingoma ka Mhala* (Mhala's song) and *umhlahlo*, old ritual songs sung at diviners' seances. (Hansen, 1982, p. 50)

¹⁸ Overtone singing, also known as split-tone or harmonic singing, has also been identified in the folk music of Tibet and Mongolia. "The singer sings a fundamental tone and produces a high melody above this fundamental tone by amplifying the overtones: through using the size and shape of the mouth cavity, using vowel positions within the mouth, using a whistling shape within the mouth, and so on." (Dargie, 1988, p.56)