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Joseph, Dawn and Petersen, Alvin 2008, Recognizing and celebrating Xhosa traditional music in South Africa, in *ANZARME 2008 : Proceedings of the XXXth Annual Conference : innovation and tradition : music education research : 3-5 October 2008*, Australian and New Zealand Association for Research in Music Education, Melbourne, Vic., pp. 160-170.

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## **Recognizing and Celebrating Xhosa Traditional Music in South Africa**

**Dawn Joseph, Deakin University, Australia**

**Alvin Petersen, University of the North West, Potchefstroom, South Africa**

The recognition and celebration of Indigenous Knowledge systems (IKS) as a way forward to promote democracy and inclusivity continues to be part of South Africa's nation building process. One effective platform for this to take place is through community music making as music making in Africa is a way of life. Since democracy in 1994 many initiatives were set up to explore and foster traditional music. This paper presents a brief contextualization of IKS, identity and community music making. It reports on the a Xhosa music research project (2004-2006) as an ethnographic study which is descriptive and interpretive as a holistic cultural portrait. Participants in the project included post-graduate music students, community culture bearers and academics. Only some significant aspects of the Xhosa music project at the University of Fort Hare will be reported on. We contextualize the recognition and celebration of IKS within the parameters of the music and the culture of the amaMpondo within the Xhosa people. The paper specifically focuses on the ritual life of the amaMpondo. It also describes the indigenous bow instruments of the *Uhadi* and *Umrhubhe* as unique examples of South Africa's traditional music. As this initiative proved a worthy undertaking, we challenge whether such a project could strengthen local IKS elsewhere and be a pathway for tertiary institutions to engage effectively with local community music practitioners in order to prepare students effectively as holistic music educators.

### **Contextualizing the field**

The concept of an African Renaissance emerged in 1994 in South Africa after democracy, opening up avenues for the *recognition* and *celebration* of Indigenous Knowledge systems (IKS) as a way forward to promote democracy and inclusivity as part of its nation building. Joseph (2005a, p. 298), points out "one of the major issues confronting African philosophers, historians, anthropologists and educators is the proposal that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) should become more prominent, particularly in a society such as South Africa which has only recently become emancipated from a Western-imposed apartheid system and wishes to reclaim its indigenous heritage and traditions". She further suggests that the notion of IKS is concerned with knowledge that belongs to and is transmitted by a specific ethnic group and is also concerned with common practices that are indigenous to a specific area in which a designated population lives. IKS may even be interpreted as "traditional knowledge" that is based on cultural identity (Joseph, 2005a, p. 298). In the case of the study reported on in this paper, the Xhosa<sup>1</sup> people of the Eastern Province, in South Africa, were studied as an indigenous community setting.

Before democracy, the notion of 'West is best' as a form of knowledge system consumed many educational sites. This was particularly evident within the system of apartheid education, during which the schools of the oppressed became sites of struggle, emerging as they did, as the crucible of change from an autocratic to a democratic political order. The rebirth of a new South Africa has opened up doors of learning for all, aiding and

abetting the exploration, fostering preservation, promotion and protection of local indigenous systems and their musics.

The concept of 'Musical Arts in Africa', coined by the Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE), is now fast becoming fashionable and imperative as part of the transformation of South Africa and one effective way to promote this is through community music making. This paper reports on some significant aspects of the Xhosa music project at the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape Province (South Africa), conducted between 2004 and 2006 regarding the amaMpondo people and the Uhadi and Umrhubhe instruments. Participants in the project included post-graduate music students, community culture bearers and academics. We consider the notion of change, identity, cultural practice and community music making of the Xhosa people as an example and a way forward to preserve, promote and protect IKS in South Africa.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Given that the diversity of musics in Africa and in South Africa is rather context-specific, issues related to performance practice and functions are best understood through context-specific questions such as: "What is the purpose of this music?" As such, the context of music-making is integral to musical meaning and cannot be ignored. In the main it may be argued that African children are exposed to music long before they start attending school, through context-specific social practices. Accordingly, for them the domain of music is the community rather than the concert hall. They do not appear to be behind those with an upbringing which fosters the concert hall; rather, this communal learning through participation is the only way to promote the authenticity of the music whose preservation, development and protection are of importance.

Certainly the social interactions which occur in the performance and learning of music within community music making and performing underscore the very essence of music as a social phenomenon. John Blacking wrote voluminously on this aspect of music, particularly in *How Musical is Man?* (1973) in which he states, *inter alia*, that "the principles of polyrhythm, polymetre and harmonic equivalence had come to symbolize Pan African political [and philosophical?] aspirations, epitomizing the interactions of individuals in community" (Blacking, 1973, p.16). As part of this social engagement, the notion of change, identity and culture are briefly discussed when considering the importance of what, who they [the musicians] are, where they live, how they live, what they do, the occasions on which they make music, what they select for such occasions and why (Nketia, 1988, p.101).

### **Identity**

As part of the change process in South Africa, educators at tertiary level as well as teachers in training need to be considered as 'learners'. Such a perspective of 'teacher as learner' (Fullan, 1982) gives community music making the opportunity to preserve, promote and protect IKS and may be seen as a way forward in comparison with merely dabbling with indigenous music. Rather it provides a deeper experience of other cultures

and poses questions regarding how such enculturation affects one's South African identity. Through such deeper understanding of the music studied, like that of the Xhosa people, Bumbaco (n.d) claims it shapes who we are and helps mould the image we have of ourselves, and what we want others to perceive of us. Hence, we are constantly constructing our identity in relation to our heritage and aspirations. In the case of South Africa, with eleven official languages, a diversity of ethnicity, religion and culture, it is difficult, yet, of vital importance, to create a national form of identity. In the aftermath of the 1994 elections, the challenges facing the South African nation seemed insurmountable. Soon thereafter, two of the most visible symbols that reflect the 'new' South Africa were created, the National Anthem and the new flag. Hence, the building of identity can be aligned to what Fornäs (1995) calls a life long process rather than a product, and it is through our interaction with others that we create and reassess our identity, asserts Björck (2000). By providing community music as a valuable aspect to change in nation building and in education, we give rise to cultural hybrids whereby music is deeply connected to identity and it is within such an understanding of one's own and other music that culture is then viewed as pluralistic (Thorsén, 2002).

Community music making has never been a new concept in Africa. Part of the philosophy of music making in Africa is through sharing and participating. "Community Music may be thought of as . . . music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that occur 'outside' traditional music institutions (e.g., university music departments, public schools, conservatories) and/or music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that operate in relation to traditional institutions" (Elliott & Veblen, 2004). It is though such sharing of knowledge, skills and understandings that music continues to be alive and is transmitted through generations. Bebey (1975) contends that African music is created by the people and cannot exist without their support. He further states that "the participation of whole communities is the only way to guarantee the authenticity of the music whose preservation and development is at stake" (Bebey, 1975, p.140). South Africa, like many other African states, faces the problem of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, hence cross-generational IKS is curtailed, leading to a cultural genocide on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

### **Cultural practice in Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

As pluralistic societies, South Africa, like Australia, were both outposts of the British Empire, deeply steeped in colonialism as the dominant culture, promoting the notion of 'West is best' as practice and hence marginalizing local IKS. Conteh (2003) cites Nieto who "defines culture very much in terms of what people do in their daily lives, inevitably influenced by historical, economic and political factors. For Nieto, culture is "dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in contexts, influenced by social, economic and political factors, socially constructed, learned and dialectical" (ibid. p. 5).

Music as a powerful medium serves to engage hands-on activity and/or experience, as well as a form of knowledge system as its cultural practice in South Africa. This knowledge system can create pathways for dialogue to African indigenous knowledge and culture. By involving 'culture bearers' from local communities as effective

knowledgeable practitioners, it is hoped that students' musical identity would be challenged by such 'social travelling' (Palmgren, Löfgren & Bolin, 1992). "Learning African music requires an understanding of the cultural system, the creative principles of the music and the method by which that music is transferred from one person to another" ( Joseph, 2005b, p.155). In the case of learning more about Xhosa people through community music making, the aural-oral and practical aspects are essential characteristics of African music that allow for cross-cultural interchange. In keeping with IKS, (see Nuffic, 1999) even though Xhosa music is not documented, but rather holistic in nature, it continues to be orally and aurally transmitted. Such a cultural practice in a non-formal way interlocks the community and contextualizes them to indigenous areas. A rich part of IKS is ancestral worship, practised to this day. The Xhosa peoples continue to include the ancestors in their rituals and ceremonies which form part of their cultural practices. However, these do vary from place to place.

### **Background to the project**

In 2000 Dr. Ngubane, the then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, mandated a team of academics and officials from his Ministry to produce a strategic plan for indigenous musics of South Africa. The task team<sup>2</sup> had as its terms of reference the collection, preservation, promotion and protection of South Africa's indigenous musics. There are nine provinces in South Africa: in 2003 only three provinces were selected by the then Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to spearhead the project. The music departments of three universities from the three provinces, namely, the University of Venda (Northern Province); the University of Zululand (Kwazulu-Natal Province) and Fort Hare (Eastern Cape Province) were awarded funds by the Department of Arts and Culture to conduct projects in indigenous music and oral history as all three of these universities have several aspects in common:

- They are historically black universities with music departments which have strong track records in indigenous music research.
- They are situated in the heart of impoverished communities and most of their students come from such communities.

For the project at Fort Hare, partnerships were sought between indigenous musicians, senior citizens who had a rich repository of cultural information and the research team on the programme. In this way it was possible to draw up a database of those individuals who can best be described as living treasures of IKS. The partners of this research project at the University of Fort Hare were the Music Department and the National Culture and Heritage Studies Centre (NAHECS).

### **Methodology**

The research can best be described as an ethnographic study, which can most clearly be characterized by participant observation and a description of a small number of culture bearers as informants. According to Creswell (1998), "ethnography is the study of an intact cultural or social group based primarily on observations over a prolonged period of

time spent by the researcher in the field” (p. 246). Thus, the researchers of the project examined the groups observable and learnt patterns of behaviour, customs, and way of life, and listen to and recorded the voices of informants, the final product is descriptive and interpretive as a holistic cultural portrait of the group (Fouché, 2002). Rubin and Barbie (2001) state that “a good ethnographic study will give one an intimate feel for the way of life observed by the ethnographer” (p. 391). However, Mark (1996) warns that such a report will be influenced by the researcher’s points of view, biases, methods and experiences.

For this project, five Bachelor of Music Honours students were invited to participate in the study during the period 2004-2006 and were mentored by the task team as researchers for this project. The students were all resident in the locale of enquiry and this served as an inroad to the local community and their culture. The project consisted of four aspects:

1. Students and the task team spent 2 weeks in the Ngqoko Village (one of several villages), approximately 200 km from East London in the Eastern Cape Province, where they learnt aspects of Xhosa music, culture and orality (aspects such as poetry; praise poetry, stories and legends).
2. During their internship the students and the task team kept reflective journals and wrote up their findings. This was an important aspect for the students as it formed part of their assessment task for the Bachelor of Music Honours degree.
3. Fieldworkers (students and the task team) produced journal entries, field notes, photographs, tape recordings, video recordings and any other evidence of work in the field as part of their holistic community music learning experience.
4. The final phase of the project was an attempt to enter into a database the names of all the practitioners of music and oral history and digitally format all audio/visual material for further research and publication.

This was deemed important as it constituted the beginnings of an evolving database to preserve, promote and protect IKS in South Africa. One of the authors interviewed the ‘culture bearers’ and recorded their work, as part of crafting a cultural mosaic of the Xhosa people. In South Africa, like many other African countries, many of the elders and younger generation have fallen victim to AIDS and HIV and associated health conditions. Therefore such a study is necessary for the *raison d’etre* to preserve, promote and protect the Xhosa culture.

### **Findings and Discussion of the amaMpondo**

There are many different Xhosa peoples: the amaThembu, the amaMpondo, the amaMpondomise, the amaBomvana, the amaMaqwathi, the amaMfengu, the amaXesibe, and the amaZizi, to mention a few, interspersed all over the Eastern Cape Province. For the purpose of this paper, only a few findings will be discussed in relation to the ritual life of the *amaMpondo* who are regarded as a hegemonic group within the Eastern Cape region. The *uhadi* and the *umrhubhe* indigenous instruments are considered as unique to the Xhosa people. We nevertheless contend that generalizations can also be made about the other Xhosa peoples in the province.

## **amaMpondo**

The term *amaMpondo* is a collective term used to describe a group of Xhosa people domiciled in the Eastern Cape Province. The dominant language spoken is Xhosa which hails from the Nguni<sup>3</sup> language group. These people live in the Ntabankulu district of the Eastern Cape.

Each village group falls under an independent chief who is responsible for his chiefdom. Within such chiefdoms, homesteads are inhabited not only by a man, his several wives and children, but also by others who have attached themselves to that household. Such a practice is evident among indigenous people as they claim to have descended from one common ancestor and they regard themselves as extended family belonging to a clan. Through such communal living, music making and sharing continues to thrive.

It is interesting to note that even to this day the possession of cattle continues to give social status to the *amaMpondo* and also serves as a form of payment for a bride (*lobola*), an indigenous practice. The *amaMpondo* live in round huts, normally on hillsides where the temperature is more bearable than in valleys. Dress code varies according to clan; age, status and locality. Amongst their indigenous practices the adults continue to use cosmetics (such as fat, red ochre and white clay) for facial decoration and the children adorn themselves with white clay for initiation (*imbeleko*) ritual purposes.

## **Ritual Life**

In keeping with a common tradition of African societies, an integral part of the *amaMpondo* is their religious belief system which acknowledges their ancestors. Through interview data it became clear that calling on the ancestors is not aligned to worshipping them. Rather, they believe that their ancestors' spirits can be called upon to give advice. During such rituals music and dance play important roles and are a significant part of this particular cultural practice. According to an interviewee, when calling up an ancestor/s, offerings are made (for example, the slaughtering of chicken, goats, sheep and cows) to which music and dance are integral. Ancestors are both revered and remembered during the key stages of life (birth, marriage, death) and are also called upon for help in the events of daily living.

Another aspect of the *amaMpondo* ritual practice allied to music and dance as an activity is when women potter, weave, sew, carve wood, sculpt, plough and do beadwork. This form of communal creativity is a means to economically empower women and can be seen as an effective way to protect and promote the Xhosa culture. Such preservation of the many craft forms, as well as religious and other cultural practices, also suggests a determination on the part of many *amaMpondo* to retain elements of their heritage as part of the eleven official language and cultural groupings in South Africa

## **Music and Xhosa instruments**

Music and dance are inseparable in traditional life. Hence, the *amaMpondo* are both vocalists and dancers using rattles, reed flutes, whistles and horns as their predominant instruments, as drums were not part of their custom. Most of their song repertoire can be aligned to ceremonies and events pertaining to their social life.

It is interesting to note that, similar to the Zulus, adult men and boys dance in a similar fashion using sticks in their right hands, like that of the Zulu holding a shield, using the technique of kicking and stamping without much contact with the ground. Whenever the men dance, the women in the main sit and the younger girls clap and sing rhythms appropriate to the foot movements. Depending on the age group and the ceremony, the music can be the same; however, the movement and the cultural context can be different.

### **Bow instruments: The Uhadi and the Umrhubhe**

According to Dlamini (2004) “musical bows are among some of the most pervasive pan-ethnic indigenous musical instruments” (p.140) south of the equator. It may be argued that Xhosa musical instruments can be aligned to the standard categories of membranophones, idiophones, aerophones and chordophones. For the purposes of this paper only the *uhadi* and the *umrhubhe* will be briefly discussed.



**Figure 1. The uhadi**

The *uhadi* is made of a branch tree called *ulizi* (Weeping willow) which grows in mountainous areas and has long supple branches. Its string is made of ‘*icingo*’, obtained by straightening the wound brass wire used to make bangles (*iinkhohlane*) and anklets (*imiliza*). They are heated over a fire, and stretched out into straight lengths. Attached to the stick of the *uhadi* is the resonator, calabash (*iselwa*). It is hollowed out and holes are bored through the bottom through which it is then tied to the stick (See Figure 1). A pad, usually of strip of cloth, is wound around the tie to avoid buzzing sound effects caused by the direct contact of the calabash with the stave of the bow. The string is beaten with a stalk of thatch grass called *umcinga* in the local Xhosa dialect to produce a tone. Besides the fundamental tone, the overtone series can also be heard. It was interesting for the researchers to observe how skilled players can manipulate overtones to produce melodies. The Xhosa hexatonic scale originates from the indigenous practice of bow playing (see Figure 2). The open string produces chord I and the stopped string, which is approximately a tone higher, produces chord II.

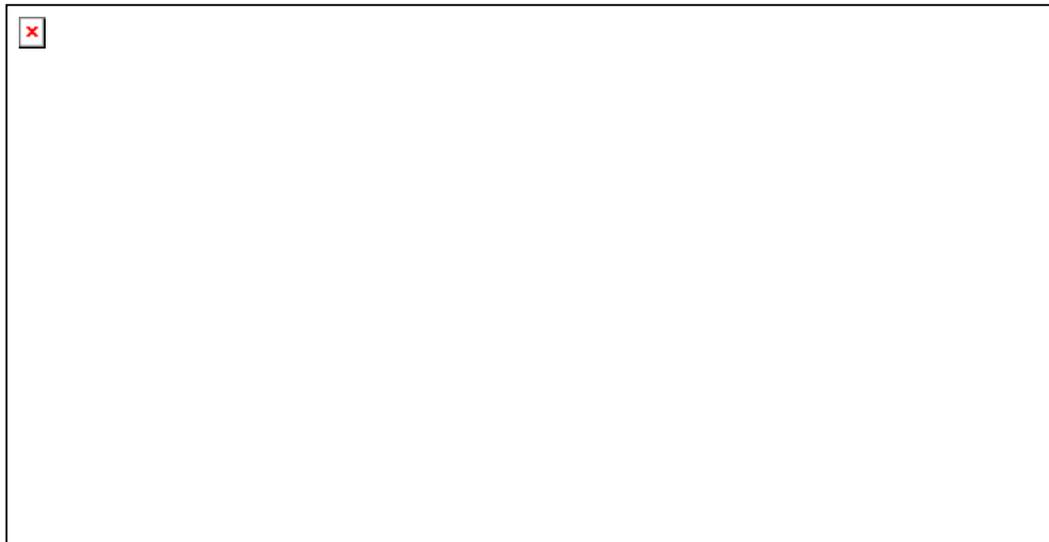


**Figure 2. The Xhosa hexatonic scale**

The pitches of this scale conform to natural harmonic series produced by a stretched string, not to the Western equal temperament scale. Performers shift from chords I to II in accordance with the underlying harmonic scheme of the song. Prof. David Dargie refers to this as the tonality shift principle (2002: personal communication with author Alvin Petersen). While the tonic chord may be I, it is also likely to be II.

**Figure 3. The “Click” song with uhadi bow accompaniment**

The advantage of uhadi bow playing, as far as the singer is concerned, is that it can be tuned up or down to suit the range of her/his voice. Skilled players can manipulate the overtones in such a way so that the overtones themselves constitute counter-melodies (see Figure 3). This they do by bringing the calabash closer to their chests for the lower overtones and further away for the higher overtones. Figure 4 is an example of an overtone counter melody to the “Click” song. The top staff denotes the counter melody while the bottom staff denotes the uhadi.



**Figure 4. Possible counter melody to the “Click” song**



**Figure 5. The umrhubhe**

Like the *uhadi*, the *umrhubhe* is also made of a tree branch stick (see Figure 5). The stick is made of wood locally known as *intonga*, crafted from ulizi wood. The string, called *icingo*, is made of brass wire. The bowing stick can either be scraped or struck on the string to produce a tone. Unlike the *uhadi*, where the calabash serves as the resonator, the mouth of the player serves both to resonate as well as to manipulate the overtones. This unique technique of being able to whistle counter-melodies whilst playing is unusual and found only amongst the Xhosa people of South Africa. Skilled *umrhubhe* players are able to produce three-part harmony, an accumulation of the fundamental tones (produced by scraping the stick against the string), the overtones (produced by opening and closing the mouth cavity), and whistling. For this reason, the *umrhubhe* is often used as a solo instrument, in contrast to the *uhadi*, which is used to accompany singing.

As part of the preservation efforts, both student and task team members of the project were taught how to make and play the *uhadi* and the *umrhubhe* instruments which are very typical of the Xhosa culture. In tandem with music making, students also learnt some dances, one of the dances called the *ukutyityimba* (to vibrate your body) was very challenging yet highly popular. This paper only highlights a few pertinent findings of the *amaMpondo* group in the Eastern Cape Province.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this project about the *amaMpondo*, their ritual life, the *uhadi* and the *umrhubhe* instrument has not only informed the Music Department of the University of Fort Hare, but also has benefited both student and lecturer in learning about concepts of change, identity, cultural practice and community music making. This initiative of integrating a tertiary institute with a local community has provided a pathway for effective dialogue between community practitioners, tertiary students and staff. Among the outcomes of the project, was the promotion of the playing of the *uhadi* and *umrhubhe* to the learners from the wider community surrounding the University of Fort Hare. By so doing, the tertiary students succeeded in promoting and disseminating an endangered art form.

This paper contextualized the recognition and celebration of IKS within the parameters of the music and the culture of the *amaMpondo*. It can be reported that IKS within this community exists and will continue to do so especially if it is documented within the parameters of preserving, promoting and protecting indigenous music in South Africa. Within African societies, music making, culture and society (the dissemination of values, morals, traditional beliefs and rituals) are in the main passed down to younger people by the elders through story telling. However, it must be noted that such practice is challenged and can be changed due to the influence of westernization, modernization and globalization. It is a concern for us that if such indigenous music practices are not documented, they will die, especially because of the HIV and AIDS crisis in South Africa. This pandemic has reached major proportions and has huge implications for local communities and all levels of education. As there are currently 2.5 m AIDS orphans in South Africa, we are of the opinion that if local community music making is not implemented and documented at school and tertiary level, a large heritage of South Africa's music and cultural heritage will gradually become obsolete.

### Notes

1. The Xhosa tribe/clan may be classified under the Nguni group of people. They make up just one of many types of indigenous people in South Africa. "Briefly, the Nguni were strongly cattle-oriented, spoke a language containing the so-called 'click' consonants" (Hammond-Tooke, 1993, p.39). The Xhosa people form one of the major cultural groups of the South Nguni people.
2. The task team was made up of two members of the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre at the University of Fort Hare and two members of the University of Fort Hare Music Department.
3. The Nguni congeries of people consists of Northern (Zulu, Swazi and Ndebele) and Southern (Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, bhaca, Mfengu etc) cultural groupings and are by far the most numerous in South Africa (see Hammond-Tooke, 1993).

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