

# The use of music and dance in the struggle for independence in South Africa

David O. Akombo

Faculty of Culture, Creative and Performing Arts  
The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus  
P.O. Box 64, Bridgetown BB11000, Barbados  
Email of corresponding author: dakombo@hotmail.com

## Abstract

Music played a significant role in unifying and liberating the oppressed communities in South Africa. Music and dance in the black South African history continue to intrigue scholars and therefore this study provides a need for further exploration on the subject. The protest songs for instance were and remain indispensable to the South African people in their quest for freedom and social justice. Without protest songs, it would have been onerous to achieve justice and equality for the people of South Africa during apartheid era. Whilst black Africans found nostalgia for their imperious minority government, they craved for an independent, strong and free South Africa. Additionally, through music and dance, they lamented their own failures as a people and the perils of a country in disarray. In order to understand the role of music and dance in South Africa's independence, it is imperative to examine the origins of artistic expressions among the black people of South Africa. This is particularly relevant given the effects music and dance on of the colonial powers during the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, apartheid eras, and post-apartheid eras. This paper provides a brief background information on the origins of music and dance in South Africa and their role in the context of the struggle for political independence.

**Keywords:** South Africa, music, apartheid, protest songs, love songs, independence

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## 1. Introduction

Love songs and protest songs of South Africa played a significant role in unifying and liberating the oppressed communities. Therefore, love songs might be considered in black South African history as a conduit used to explore the role of music in the context of and politics in South African communities. In order to understand South Africa's love songs well, particularly given their role particularly in the pre-colonial, colonial era, post-colonial, apartheid, and the post-apartheid eras, I will provide a brief background information on the origins of love songs and protest songs in South Africa. South Africa's love songs are not well known among Western scholars, yet these songs provide a significant representation of the struggles of black Africans throughout their livelihood. Because of the historical significance of South Africa's love songs in the present-day South Africa, these songs stand as a cultural repertoire of music that would appeal to scholars interested in studying all contexts of love songs from South African cultures. When European explorers settled at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, they discovered both diamonds and gold. Over the course of their settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, they also began to exploit other natural resources in subsequent years. The endeavor of natural resource exploitation was advanced further on many different levels and continued for centuries into what was known as the Mineral Revolution, allowing the white population to export the valuables abroad causing the demand for cheap labor – a demand that was filled by Blacks (native to Africa), Indians (imported as indentured workers to work on sugar plantations in the Natal region of South Africa), and Coloreds (the descendants of slave women and White men), were now a commodity (Thompson, 2000).

## 2. South African concepts of love songs

The essential differences between African love songs and western European love songs in relation to the performing arts exist in the manner in which the songs are contextualized. In the European traditions for instance, love songs were a precursor of romantic love and the concept of romantic love itself was in fact the ultimate and idealistic emotional expression (Allen et al., 2014). In Europe, the practice of singing love songs *per se* originated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after a pervading sense of humanism, after centuries of domination by the Church where sacred music was the main genre. However, the recent practice of singing love songs *per se* originated in the upper class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the growth of modern industrial civilization and the Romantic Movement of early modern Europe.

In south Africa however, considering the vast nature of South African cultures, with its tremendous diversity of people, dialects, and traditions, the love songs of Africa are scarcely known abroad. Whereas the uneducated people might tend to regard South African love songs music as homogeneous, on the contrary, these songs serve a multifaceted role. Since a large portion of African music has been transmitted from generation to another through the oral traditions, the composers and performers of African music evolved in a fashion that places much less emphasis upon romantic feelings than those found in love songs of their European counterparts. Long songs of south Africa are tangible expressions of human values. Love songs express the Afrocentric tenets of togetherness or *ubuntu*, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, an African philosophy well described by Tutu (2004:25) in which he states that “A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed (p. 25). For example, the Venda of the Northern Province of South Africa have a shared proverb that states “*muthi ndi muthu nga vhanwe*” which translates to “a human being is a human through association with other human beings (Blacking 1981, 10).

### 3. Music and dance as fundamental features of African culture

African societies generally do not categorize music and dance as two separate and distinct art forms. In fact, they are so interconnected that they are accorded the same term in many vernacular African languages (Akombo, 2016). In Zulu, the term *ingoma* refers to ‘song and dance’ performed at rituals, festivals and community celebrations. Likewise, *mahobelo* in South Sotho, *khiba* in North Sotho, and *pina* in Setswana refer to ‘song and dance’ as integrated cultural activities or processes. According to ethnomusicologist John Blacking music and dance are part of the basic infrastructure of life in Africa. Song and dance are inherent to the essence of being human and are integral to the experience of birth, death, rites of passage, religious ritual and work: African societies treat ‘music and dance as foundations of social life, which enable individuals to discover and develop their human potential, to reaffirm their relationships with each other, to sharpen their sensitivities and educate their emotions. In such societies, both song and dance help people to remain politically conscious, intellectually alive and creative, constantly adapting to the changes that are required as people relate to their environment and make decisions about their future (Blacking, 1981).

The structural and aesthetic principles inherent in African music and dance are inherent to all art forms, and further, provide the philosophical basis of all aspects of life on the African continent. Leopold Senghor has described the holistic and integrative concept of rhythms in the lives of the African people in which he observed that rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it general introductory discussion (Senghor & Halperin, 1956). In this description Senghor referred only to basic elements which he believed represent commonalities between cultures form, and the pure expression of the life force. According to Senghor at al., rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colors and volumes in architecture, sculpture or painting; through accents in poetry and music; through movements in the dance. But, doing this, rhythm turns all these concrete things towards the light of the spirit. In the degree to which rhythm is sensuously embodied, it illuminates the spirit.

Song and dance as a unifying social force and an embodiment of strength in community Performance in Africa plays an essentially unifying social role. While specialist performers may be acknowledged in certain communities, the dictum ‘if you can talk, you can sing; if you can walk, you can dance’ remains basic to most African cultures. One’s very presence at an event qualifies one as an active participant, and in the context of African performance, no separation exists between either producer and consumer or performer and audience. The importance of a performance lies rather in the process or the practice of a performance, rather than the finished product. It is through the act of performance that an individual is able to learn about him- or herself in relation to others; that individual and group identity is strengthened; that people affirm others and, in turn, are affirmed. In African cultures, the highly interactive, communicative and communalistic nature of music and dance creates a high degree of social cohesion.

### 4. The integrated nature of African musical performances

The integrated nature of African musical performance is symbolically reflected in the basic structures of dance and music in Africa. For instance, African melodies are performed in cyclical patterns that provide a framework for elaboration and variation supporting the creative expression of the performer (Berliner, 1978). A song will generally consist of a short, repetitive declamatory ‘statement’ (melodic pattern) to which other cyclical melodies will respond in specific harmonic and rhythmic relation. This principle of multiple parts (polyphony) which interact with one another in a cyclical, call-and-response format is fundamental to both vocal and instrumental

music in Africa. In fact, polyphony exemplifies and embodies the highly interactive and communicative elements of African music and dance in a way that allows and encourages individual expression that is integrated with and supportive of group expression.

Additionally, African music is characterized by multiple rhythms (polyrhythms). In other words, music is not based on one rhythmic structure only, but will contain numerous seemingly mutually exclusive rhythms. In its simplest form, a duple beat will occur at the same time as a triple beat. To the uninitiated, these rhythms may appear to be disconnected and may not make musical sense. The listener will be drawn to the simplest of the two proposed rhythms - the duple beat - but will find him- or herself gradually exploring the more complex, conflicting triple beat. In so doing, the listener will perceive an abrupt shift in the music from a duple to a triple structural rhythmic configuration. Slowly, the listener will be able to move, with more perceptual facility, back and forth between duple and triple beats. Finally, he or she will be able to listen to both beats at the same time. It is in the resultant rhythmic pattern - the combination of duple and triple beats - that the dynamism, the energy and power of African music is situated.

This auditory exploration into polyrhythms is generally a new experience for most non-African audience, for example the Europeans whose own music is linear (rather than cyclical) and is most often based on one rhythmic configuration only. Where African music exists in cyclical form, western music follows a linear progression and, as such, tells a story. Structurally, it contains an introduction, a middle section (the introductory theme is developed) and a conclusion (the introductory theme returns in its original form). Rhythmically, western music is conceived on the basis of a two-step (duple beat) or a waltz (triple beat). Any change to the beat in the course of the music is considered a deviation from the fundamental rhythm, and therefore understood in relation to the principal rhythm. The notion of playing 'off the beat,' in which the main beat is displaced for instance, is common in jazz improvisation, as played against the basic beat. Off-beat is a temporary movement away from a principal beat, to which the music will always return. It is therefore the more complex principles of polyphony and polyrhythms that identifies African music as distinct from most western music.

Dance structures in West Africa, an area of the continent where highly complex and large drum ensembles are concentrated, characteristically reflect a multiplicity of rhythms. The body will mirror the rhythmic complexity of the drum ensemble. An accomplished dancer will conceivably move her shoulders in a triple rhythmic motion while her hips will move to a more rapid quadruple beat; her feet will follow a duple time, her hands in a more rapid division of a triple beat, and so on. Drummers and dancers will be dynamically interlocked in performance and, should a dancer tire from over-dancing; the drum ensemble will similarly lose impetus. Conversely, if the drummers are highly motivated, the dancer will reflect their spirited momentum. The interdependence of parts inherent in the structural arrangements of music and dance in Africa is symbolically reflected in the wider concept of social interconnectedness in African society. It is in this sense that the principle of inter connectedness as an illustration of *ubuntu*, is reflected in dance and music (Mabingo, 2020).

##### **5. Music and dance as tangible expressions of human values**

In African societies, music produces intangible good (Merriam, 1964). As discussed earlier with regard to *ubuntu* philosophy in African music and dance ensembles, the term is also ubiquitous to the Venda people of the Northern Province of South Africa who also express the same proverb: *muthi ndi muthu nga vhanwe*: a human being is a human through association with other human beings (Blacking, 1981). This intensely communalistic notion is reflected in the *mutavha* reed-pipe ensemble of the Venda people. Every boy in the village, upon completion of initiation, is assigned a single reed-pipe. The individual will be unable to perform a melody with a single note and will only be able to do so when performing with other reed pipe players. Venda reed-pipes are played in circular formation and each note is intricately interwoven with the others to ensure a resultant melodic pattern. Each performer is expected to hold his own while, at the same time, remaining in perfect synchrony with his peers.

Blacking (1981) discussed at length the role of dance and music in Venda society, and related his observations to other African groups. He observed that in Venda society, and in several other African societies whose life he had been privileged to experience, it seemed to him that opportunities for cooperation and creativity were built into the social system and inextricably linked with music and dancing. That is to say, music and dancing were the most tangible expressions of basic values, and their performance was a most powerful, if not the most powerful, way of expressing the values and fundamental structures of social and economic life.

Performance was always a creative, political act in the sense that it brought people together in a special social relationship, which could induce powerful shared experiences that make people more aware of themselves and

their responsibilities towards each other. Thus it was not only the widespread use of music in Venda society that ensured that it was part of the infrastructure of Venda life. The very forms that the music took, if performed properly, required relationships between people that enhance the individuality in community that was essential for life together (Blacking, 1981).

Despite the fact that many traditional African music and dance forms and practices have changed over time, basic principles inherent to and values associated with performance have essentially remained intact. Modifications to expressive forms are often highly imaginative symbolic rearrangements of social realities. The arts therefore become a significant barometer of how people have had to mobilize, adapt, and reshape available cultural resources to construct their own notions of social inclusion and exclusion, mutuality, morality and self-worth (Harries, 1994).

The arts have multiple roles of in traditional southern African cultures (Gyegwe et al., 2016). There is a variety of roles that are fulfilled by music and dance (Nussbaum, 1989). The attention given to implicit versus explicit intention gives an indication of the variety of roles played by dance and music, and elucidates the sophisticated social functions of these performing arts. Twenty dances in Zimbabwe were classified according to whether they have a developmental, preventive or remedial/rehabilitative function. It is important to note that, while the focus of the analysis was on dance, each dance is accompanied by music. In the context of the analysis used in this research, the term 'developmental' was used to refer to dances which contribute to the education, socialization and development of individuals and groups. In addition, the term 'tradition' was used to refer to static, non-developmental. All cultures are dynamic and our use of the term in this context is to refer to specific cultural traits which have not been changed by western [commercial] influences (Nussbaum, 1989).

## 6. Songs of Protest

Native black Africans were exploited to supply the workforce needed to run the mines. Black South African males in particular were recruited from the rural areas, a practice that forced them to be separated from their families for months, sometimes years thereby breaking families and having a lasting impact on family life for the Africans. Social injustices were limitless but included black people being prohibited from residing within the city limits unless they were servants to the whites. The native blacks ended up squatting around the mining centers giving rise to areas that came to be known as *Townships*. A great deal of scholarship has focused on South Africa under apartheid and, more specifically, on the national liberation movement. It was not, however, until relatively recently that the role of music began to gain some attention. *Townships* are the birthplace of protest songs. The male laborers from diverse tribes were now residing in the ghettos around the urban centers in appalling living conditions including housing near the mines being horribly cramped and inhumane, songs of protest emerged.

## 7. Songs of protest as culture

In South African societies, music and dance are considered one unitary mode. The two intertwined to the extent that they are accorded the same term in many African languages. Music and dance help people to remain politically conscious, intellectually alive and creative, constantly adapting to the changes that are required as people relate to their environment and make decisions about their future (Blacking, 1981). The Zulu people of South Africa use the term *ingoma* to refer to 'song and dance'. Other terms include *mahobelo*, for the South Sotho people, *khiba*, for the North Sotho people, and *pina* for the Setswana people. Music and dance are part of the basic infrastructure of life in Africa (Blacking, 1981).

In South Africa, as in many parts of Africa, dances have their own music, movement, costume, as well as function and motivation which is well understood by the members of the community. The dances are relevant from an inter-human perspective (Snipe, 1998). Traditionally, South African dances by the black Africans did not occur in isolation, but rather, they played a specific role in an event or a series of events organized for specific social occasions. African dances are valued as entertainment; however, their primary purposes are more directly linked to historical, political, sociocultural or religious purposes (Kwakwa, 2002). African people were governed by their bodies, and their bodies' visceral, irrational, responses to external stimuli (Sandri, 2012). Despite the oppression by the whites of South Africa, African blacks choreographed their dances to mobilize masses against the ordinances. Following the Kwa Zulu Natal city ordinances, and legislation forbidding blacks from dancing on any other day, the administration kept many black communities under careful surveillance for any signs of potential uprising. For example, the Ndebele people's dance known as *hosho amabiza* is performed to help community cope with anxieties about problems and circumstances that they face which may include but not

limited to draught. This dance was performed to give inspiration to the young Ndebele men to keep on fighting for their independence.

The political role of songs in South Africa is embedded in the cultural aesthetics. All liberation songs had a political message. The songs were didactic and informed those oppressed why they needed to shake off the chains of bondage. The mobilizing role of the music by the oppressed and dissenting musicians was linked to the politicization of the song texts. As oppression increased in the 1980s, politically subversive meanings were hidden in songs and that African elements were integrated into the music to make political statements with the emergence of a new musical political consciousness (Schumann (2008)). As a matter of practice, protest was conducted purely through the musical art performance which became the safest medium compared to mass media such as print, broadcast or cinema.

## 8. The mobilizational role of protest songs

The songs' message wanted to reach as many people as possible—calling them to join the liberation struggle. The role of protest songs in mobilization through social movements was a significant one in giving musicians and the masses a focus and direction to musical expression (Eyerman & Jamison 1998). Protest songs emerged as one of the tools with which South African blacks bonded together to oppose the unjust white minority government of South Africa. Protest songs such as *senzeni na and Meadowlands*, described the struggles of daily life in the Meadowlands Township, both represent the militant sentiment found in the early reaction to apartheid. *senzeni na and Meadowlands* have light percussion and relatively melodious tunes, which coincide with the passive resistance that was implemented against White rule. The deceptiveness of *Senzeni Nais* smooth and sorrowful melody can be seen when the harsh lyrics are translated to reveal insults targeting white oppression. The song *Senzeni Nai* as seen in example 4, implicates the Boers, the agents and architects of apartheid.

### Example 4. *Senzeni Nai*

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Senzeni na senzeni na  
Senzeni na senzeni na  
Senzeni na senzeni na  
Senzeni na kulomhlaba?

Amabhulu azizinja  
Amabhulu azizinja  
Amabhulu azizinja  
Amabhulu azizinja

Kuyisono ekubamnyama  
Kuyisono ekubamnyama  
Kuyisono ekubamnyama  
Kuyisono kulelizwe

What have we done, what have we done?  
What have we done, what have we done?  
What have we done, what have we done?  
What have we done in this country (world)?

Boers are dogs  
Boers are dogs  
Boers are dogs  
Boers are dogs

It's a sin to be Black  
It's a sin to be Black  
It's a sin to be Black  
It's a sin in this country

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Note: From Pollard, Alton B., III. (1999).

## 9. Narrative role of protest songs

Many South African songs of protest bore history; they recounted what happened in history. The narratives were contained in the political and the mobilizing role of the songs. South African songs of protest are derived from Pre-colonial music performance production which was embedded within society's activities of daily life and passage of rites that ranged from birth, to death. Within the African cultural contexts, music is an important African resource and as a vortex of religious ritual. South African pre-colonial music traditionally provided an avenue for musicians to naturally engage the villagers in artistic creations throughout their livelihood (Akombo, Katembo & Kmt, 2015). South African political movements and social protests have often been articulated through the use of exotic music among them *a cappella* (or unaccompanied) singing, drumming, lullabies, children play songs and poetry.

As demonstrated by the research and documentation done by Merriam (1982, 127) and Berliner (1978, 20-25) music was integrated into the process of community living, in people's personal lives, in social organization, in work or economic life, religion, celebration, political life and history. In embedded performance, the arts are repositories of the values and attitudes of human actions and aspirations. Africans have held strongly to the trilogy of religion, music, and dance as a mode of dialogue with their ancestors, a symbol of strength, a means of cultural expression, and idiom of identity (Njoku, 2007).

South African protest songs are therefore songs that became the protest movements' responses to the societal turmoil of the times. Music is "used in the war to instill determination, inspiration and hope among fighters and everyone who participated" (Dube, 1996, 110). In songs of protest, we hear the voices of the oppressed, the voices of those individuals who seek to evoke change in their worlds through their music and poetry. Protest songs, lend themselves to emotions that build community and egalitarianism. These emotions are stored and retrieved through storied texts. This is so very true of South Africa's apartheid experience for many African whose only artistic tactic to confronting apartheid was the use of songs, dances and poetry. Protest songs in South Africa are powerful social literacies that deserve thoughtful and critical exploration. South Africa's political and social change as we know it today is as a result of the history of the performance of protest songs, especially their role in society, and the effect of colonialism and South Africa's political independence. The songs that the African composers composed and arranged have enormously contributed to the state of politics in South Africa. Just as in many parts of Africa, songs, dances and poetry greatly influenced the interaction of Africans and the British rule (Coplan, 1985; Waterman, 1990; Manuel, 1988).

In South Africa, protest songs were generally censored, and never allowed on mainstream stations because music was an intrinsic element in communication that enhanced solidarity and strength for a common purpose through religious experience and expression. For example, The song *Izakunyathela...* (Loosely translated, Africa will trample on you), was composed in prison during the 1956 Treason Trial. (See Example 5).

### Example 5. *Izakunyathela*

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<i>Izakunyathel'iAfrica,</i>	Africa is going to trample
<i>Verwoerd,</i>	on you Verwoerd
<i>Verwoerd shuu!</i>	Verwoerd careful!
<i>Uzakwenzakala</i>	You are going to get hurt.

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Adopted from Msila (2013)

Africans of all tribes found common ground through songs and used music as a way to surmount the apartheid policies aimed at fragmenting their oppositional front. This can be seen in Example 6, a song with a line that translates to:

### Example 6. *Let's unite*

Let's unite, let's unite  
Let's unite, fellow Africans  
Down with inter-fighting  
Up with Peace  
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(Pollard, 122)



## 10. Conclusion

Protest songs were indispensable to South African protests in their quest for social justice. Ibekwe (2009) has noted that during musical activities, individuals “are trained to associate, accommodate, and relate with one another in a most friendly way. Individual differences are tolerated, and harmonious coexistence is ensured” (p. 56). Without music, it was difficult to achieve justice and equality for the people during apartheid era in South Africa. Whilst black Africans found nostalgia for their imperious minority government, they craved for an independent, strong and free South Africa, but also through singing and dancing, they lamented the failings and difficulties of a country in disarray. Nonetheless protests, songs promoted a sense of unity and endurance (Schumann, 2008). Despite the struggles the people of South African experienced, they used songs in a way that promoted coherence, love, and happiness (Makky, 2007). As Mtshali & Hlongwane (2014) have noted, liberation songs were ancestral texts that were used by anti-apartheid activists to create their collective identities.

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