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Folklore Emphasis Among Immigrant Tsonga: A Unifying Mechanism?

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This paper suggests the utility of the sociopsychological concept of the threatened cultural identity of the Tsonga in considering the unusual degree of emphasis which the Tsonga place upon the maintenance of their folklore heritage. The Shangana–Tsonga (full name) are an immigrant group numbering about 700,000 in the Nothern Transvaal, with related groups in Mozambique. They are Bantu–speaking, patrilineal, keep cattle and grow maize, and, to some extent, observe ancestor–worship and polygyny. One of their spokesmen has stated of their folklore:

> That treasure is going away, which means our loss and we shall be the poorer. We should teach it to our children, and they, when grown up, will hand same down to the next generation.[1]

Neither the Tsonga spokesmen nor the present writer wishes to imply the widespread presence of cultural disintegration; although Tsonga culture is ongoing and subject to many different outside influences, it is also relatively stable and exhibits a slow rate of change. The implication is that the integrative nature of Tsonga oral literature serves to reinforce social cohesion and encourage the retention of corporate identity.

Tsonga enthusiasm for maintaining their oral traditions is well–known. Blacking reports that they have "a remarkable knowledge of their family genealogies"[2]; Junod reports that "where the Tsonga

1. C. T. D. Marivate, "Some Traditional Tsonga Songs," *Bantu Educational Journal*, August 1939, p. 341.
2. John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs* (Johannesburg, 1967), 31.

excel is in the art of speech . . . tale–telling has developed into a real dramatic art";[3] Marivate states that "we, the Tsonga people, have many folklore stories . . . it is our duty as Tsonga to preserve this treasure, more especially the songs which accompany the stories."[4] Tsonga oral literature appears to serve a unifying function, being a tool both for linking immigrants with fellow Tsonga in the homeland (Mozambique) and for identifying with other permanently re–settled Tsonga groups in the Northern Transvaal.

The partial dissolution of indigenous Tsonga political and administrative systems on both sides of the international border has resulted in government–appointed (rather than hereditary) chiefs and headmen ruling Tsongaland. These chiefs are individually and collectively committed, via their affiliation with the Matshangana Territorial Authority at the capital Giyani, in the Northern Transvaal, to a formal program of maintaining and encouraging Tsonga linguistic and folkloristic traditions; and the well–known Tsonga oral and musical skills may be fulfilling for congregating immigrants (now more than ever) the solidifying function of reaffirming the linguistic and cultural unity of a dispersed people. Large bodies of ancient and elaborate songtexts can be found surviving intact amidst an alien polyglot of intermingled Venda, Pedi, Lovedu, and Swazi and show no signs of diminishing.

The postulate that, fearing loss of cultural identity, the Tsonga emphasize the maintenance of their folklore traditions as a means of reducing social stress and increasing wellbeing and cohesiveness, is supported in a general way by evidence from worldwide ethnographic literature, especially when it is borne in mind that Tsonga cultural continuity and stability is difficult to maintain under conditions involving separation from the ancient homeland and encirclement by alien peoples who often openly depreciate certain Tsonga customs (such as elongation of the *labia minora*). Among the Yoruba in Accra, "music brings a renewal of tribal solidarity."[5] Elkin refers to the Australian songman's "function as a unifying and integrating factor in his clan and tribe."[6] Hawaiian folksongs "function to reduce societal imbalance and to integrate the so-

3. Henri-Philippe Junod, introduction to Duggan Cronin, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa*, Kimberly, 1935, 17.
4. Marivate, 341.
5. J. H. K. Nketia, "Yoruba Musicians in Accra," *Odu* 6 (1958): 43.
6. A. P. Elkin, "Arnhem Land Music," *Oceania* 24 (1953): 92.

ciety."[7] Music "contributes to the continuity and stability of culture . . . it is a summatory activity for the expression of values."[8]

This evidence does not reveal why the Tsonga emphasize the maintenance of folklore traditions more than do their neighbors, but a review of Tsonga historical and cultural experience suggests that: (1) Tsonga culture is somewhat menaced by events of the present century; and (2) Tsonga songtexts often reflect intertribal fear, resentment, and hostility, particularly with regard to disputed land claims. During the Zulu wars of the nineteenth century about one third of the Tsonga then in Mozambique were forced to flee across the Lebombo Hills into a strange geographical environment and among strange peoples.[9] In Mozambique, the Portuguese colonists moved in. Along a north–south axis formed by the Limpopo River clans were divided so that kin were separated from kin, and within the new environment there was no Tsonga common administrative system such as that of the Paramount Chief possessed by the Zulu. The situation became irrevocable when the fenced and policed international border between British/Dutch South Africa and Portuguese Mozambique was established, and the feeling of isolation (particularly in the western group) was intensified by the sometimes hostile presence of non–Tsonga groups. The Venda resented Tsonga encroachment on their ancient, fertile Zoutpansberg slopes, and the other groups expressed distaste for Tsonga food and dress customs. Faced with the totality of this polyglot and with the inevitability of accepting the *status quo,* the Tsonga not only learned to adjust to their neighbors territorially, but also took over those of their social and musical institutions which they felt could usefully incorporate. These institutions were often the least Tsonga–like, such as heptatonic (seven–tone) melody and elaborate plays performed at puberty rites.

Shona possession cults from the north acquired Venda or Ndau social and musical characteristics during transmission to the Tsonga. The adoption by the Tsonga of the Pedi girls' *Khomba* initiation, and the addition to it (during transmission) of certain Venda mimes, dances, and songs, furnishes an instance of selective musical borrowing, not the least interesting of which is the fact

[7] Lonton C. Freeman, "The Changing Function of a Folksong," *JAF* 70 (1957): 215.
[8] Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago, 1964), 225.
[9] N. J. Van Warmelo, *A Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1935), 91.

that Venda scale patterns become muted to fit Tsonga musical preferences, while Shona and Ndau scale patterns remain mostly unchanged after adoption. The Tsonga musical system is thus a complex of pentatonic and heptatonic traditions acquired through deep historical and psychological processes. It is feasible that the Tsonga accepted and internalized several facets of the non-indigenous sociomusical phenomena with which they were confronted partly in order to reduce intertribal hostility; there are, of course, many precedents for the acceptance, from enemies, of preferred and apparently attractive musical traits. A partial list of Tsonga musical importations and exportations follows.

OUTSIDE MUSICAL INFLUENCES THAT HAVE ENTERED TSONGA CULTURE

Item	*Origin*	*Direction of Flow*
ngoma drum	Venda	southward
the idea of the chief's court (with its musical roles)	Venda	southward
xitiringo 3-hole transverse flute	Venda	southward
2-in-1-hand mallet playing (see Kirby, 1934, Plate 16)	Venda	southward
vhusha song-words	Venda	southward
possession cults	Shona	southward
wooden axes for dance-props	Shona	southward
mvegomvego bow (now obsolete)	Shona	southward
name of the *xidzimba* exorcism-beat	Shona	southward
23-key thumb piano layout	Ndau	westward
oval-slatted xylophone	Ndau	westward
some children's song-words	Ndau	westward
name of *xindau* exorcism-beat	Ndau	westward
oblong-slatted xylophones	Chopi	northward
mqangala hollow cane-bow	Swazi	northward
name of the *xigubu* drum (from gubo, hollowness)	Swazi	northward
17-key thumb-piano layout	Pedi	northward
murhundzu circumcision school	Pedi	northward
khomba girls' initiation school	Pedi	northward
5-string gas-can guitar	European	northward
harmonica	European	northward
jew's harp	European	northward
form of the *xigubu* 2-headed drum	European	northward
name of the *makwaya* dance ('choir')	European	northward

MUSICAL INFLUENCES EXPORTED BY THE TSONGA

Item	*To Whom Exported*	*Direction*
17-key thumb piano layout	Venda	northward
mortar (& hence reason for pounding songs)	Venda	northward
children's leg-counting songs (*Ha matshutshuru-banga,* and *Lembe timibiri*)	Venda	northward
girls' initiation song *Namuntlha wa xaxa*	Venda	northward
name of the *xifase* dance	Venda	northward
name of the *muchongolo* dance	Pedi, & Tswa	south, east
name of the *swikwembu* spirits	Chopi	southward
ndjele maraca hand-rattle	Swazi	southward
ncomane exorcism drum	Swazi	southward
dzwavi exorcists	Swazi	southward

This musical exchange does not serve to contradict our main postulate; it demonstrates that folklore emphasis need not engender musical chauvinism and exclusiveness—the Tsonga say, "Retain our traditions but add those of others which we find useful."

There is little need to recount all known instances of Tsonga/Zulu enmity resulting from Shaka's ravaging of Tsongaland. Less well-known, however, is the intertribal strife in the new area of Tsonga domicile. On 15 October 1901, twenty Venda were killed during a clash between the forces of Tsonga Chief Muhlaba and Venda Chief Sikororo at Shiluvane in the Northern Transvaal; on 7 November 1901, during a hut-burning attack by seven hundred Venda, the latter lost forty men.[10]

One song collected by the present writer contains the line "My grandfather's land has been taken by the Vendas," further stating, "we were pushed by the Vendas over the Xikarile River." A Chopi (southern neighbors of the Tsonga) song given in the same collection contains the line, "The Tsonga are detestable." South African whites frequently make the unjustified comment that "the Tsonga are dirty—the Zulu make better house-servants." That this opinion is perhaps derived from the opinions of other African groups is

[10] Henri-Alexander Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (London, 1927) 1: 513.

suggested by the following: "The standard Venda opinion of the Tsonga is that they are rude, ill–mannered, and eat atrociously."[11]

Bearing in mind, then, intertribal friction caused by the rural water shortage, the relative aridity of the shared territory, arbitrary government shifting of ethnic populations into and between one another, and the above–mentioned ancient enmity, one can safely assume an indigenous fear of social disintegration resulting from threatened cultural identity. Of course, there is not a southern African Bantu–speaking people who stress equally each of their various social, economic, political, and religious institutions or parts thereof. Historical and psychological influences cause emphasis to be placed in one direction more than another. In this respect Henri–Philippe Junod (son of the previously quoted Tsonga ethnographer Henri–Alexander Junod has stated that, "If the Nguni be the soldier, if the Sotho be in a way the thinker, if the Chopi be the incomparable musician (the reference applies solely to xylophone playing—T.J.), the Tsonga may be the artist . . . tale–telling, ideophones, humorous riddles, and an extraordinary number of proverbs, nicknames, such are some o the flowers in the garden of Tsonga oral artistic production."[12] Three years later the same writer commented that "The Tsonga are, in a way, exceptionally gifted in self–expression in this poetical manner."[13]

A typical Tsonga day in September will see twenty or thirty boys of the village loudly tuning drums with firebrands outside the drum–storage hut and chanting non–lexical didactic drumming syllables, two or three hundred women and girls marching in hierarchical singing line down the path from the village to the river with their drums and uniforms for the initiation rites, several dozen men gathered at a ceremonial beer–drink to discuss village matters with the headman, and various amateur girl and boy musicians playing home–made instruments appropriate to their sex and age: mouth–bows, hand–pianos, flutes, and rattles (*A1530*).

Prominent ethnomusicologists and Africanists Dr. Nicholas England and Dr. John Blacking, to whom Tsonga types were played by the present writer, ventured the opinion that both the quantity and quality of Tsonga traditional music is outstanding. Tsonga

11. Blacking, 31.
12. Henri-Philippe Junod, *Bantu Tribes*, 17.
13. Henri-Philippe Junod, *Bantu Heritage* (Johannesburg, 1938), 30.

audiences invariably respond boisterously and enthusiastically to amusing episodes within songs and tales, interpolating their own lines and leaping up to dance and clap in approval. One of the ascribed family roles of female elders is to recite folktales often containing songs, with and for the children gathered around them at the fireside during the evening after sundown; this is the highlight of the day for the children. The Tsonga drumming school called *xigubu* has as one of its primary functions the inculcation of Tsonga traditional song– and dance–rhythms; other musical institutions such as the work–party, the beer–drink, the initiation rite, the exorcism rite, and the group–game serve to perpetuate Tsonga folkloristic beliefs and values.

The Nkuna tribe has published its own history[14]; the Tsonga linguist C. T. D. Marivate has published a few traditional songtexts and collected many more[15]; and Professor H. E. Ntsanwisi, who was in 1970 Chief Executive of the Matshangana Territorial Authority in the Northern Transvaal, has published a collection of Tsonga idioms.[16] A recent development has been interest in creating a Tsonga school songbook.

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14. R. P. M. Shilubana and H. W. E. Ntsanwisi, *Muhlaba* (Letaba, 1958).
15. Marivate, op cit.
16. H. W. E. Ntsanwisi, *Tsonga Idioms: A Descriptive Study* (Johannesburg, 1968).