

The Mqangala and Xipendana Musical Bows of the Shangana-Tsonga

by Thomas F. Johnston

The Shangana-Tsonga

The Shangana-Tsonga are a Bantu-speaking southern African people of whom about 1,500,000 live in Moçambique, and a further 750,000 live in the Northern Transvaal. They are linguistically and culturally distinct from the Tonga of Zimbabwe, and from yet a different Tonga group in the Inhambane area. Tonga means "people of the east," and Shangane is the name of a 19th-century Zulu warlord. The Shangana-Tsonga grow maize, keep some cattle, and to a certain extent practice polygyny and ancestor-spirit worship. Today the menfolk are much involved in migrant labor, and in the Transvaal the homelands have been consolidated under semi-autonomous rule.

An unusually musical people, the Shangana-Tsonga were the subject of Henri A. Junod's two-volume ethnography "The Life of a South African Tribe" (1927), which, however, made little reference to the wide variety of musical instruments and practices. Today, traditional music is still very much alive, and solo instrumental performance on hand-made instruments is common at social beer-drinks and on the numerous ceremonial occasions of Shangana-Tsonga life.

Mqangala Bow Music

The *mqangala* is a 60cm. mouth-resonated, finger-plucked bow made from hollow river-reed which is unflexible. It is strung with thin gut, tendon, or sometimes discarded fishing line. The name itself is a click word, and the instrument was probably obtained from the neighboring Zulu or Swazi, both of whom use clicks in the language, and use the name *mqangala* for that instrument.

Among the Shangana-Tsonga it is generally made and played by old men who alternately sing and play during performance. In our *Mqangala* Transcription 6, an old man accompanies his granddaughter's singing. Among the Venda to the north it is called *lugube*, and is played mainly by girls and young married women (Blacking 1965:27). The Pondo and Khosa to the south call it *inkinge*, and the Sotho of Lesotho call it *lekope* (Kirby 1965:220).

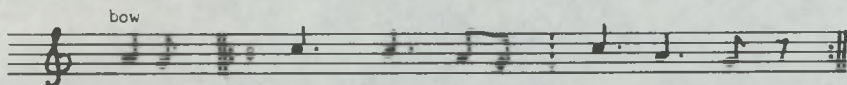
11
mqangala
old men
playing

author Elias Khuga of Klein Letaba, Northern Transvaal, composed and performed the following six *mqangala* pieces, employing mainly the fundamental tone and its octave (the second harmonic), plus cumulative fingerings. The fingering (*machayele*, from the Zulu verb *chaya*, to play an instrument), extends to three positions in which the string is depressed against the side of the bow, the *mqangala* thus being the only Shangana-Tsonga musical bow whose lateral plane serves as a fingerboard. The three positions — *sasankamana*, *mapokonyole*, and *matiringisi*, are named after the first, second, and third fingers respectively.

In all but the final *mqangala* transcription, Khuga first plays the piece uninterruptedly upon his *mqangala*, and then sings an unaccompanied vocal version as a separate performance.

Mqangala Transcription 1. *Ndzi Na Nhlo-mulo Na Mazangu*

♩ = 159 (I Have Sorrows and Troubles)
Cycle: 8 ♩ Transposition: nil



An Unaccompanied Vocal Version of the Above

♩ = 118
Cycle: 15 ♩ Transposition: minor 2nd up

voice

ndzi na nhlo-mu-lo na ma-xa- ngu nyel'

Mqangala Transcription 2. *Hamba Mthetho, Yo!*

♩ = 124 (Obey Orders!)
Cycle: 12 ♩ Transposition: nil

bow

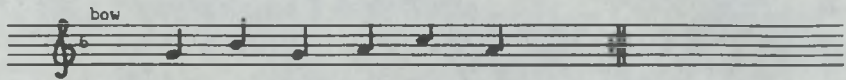
An Unaccompanied Vocal Version of the Above

♩ = 124
Cycle: 6 ♩ Transposition: nil

Ha- mba mthe-tho yo- o- o

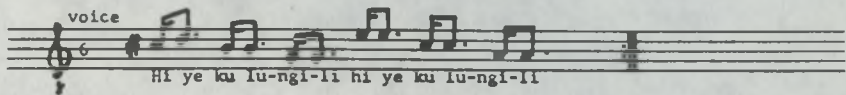
Mqangala Transcription 3. *Hi Ye Ku Lunghili!*

♩ = 121 (All Goes Well!)
 Cycle: 6 ♩ Transposition: nil



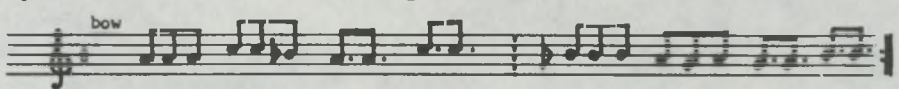
An Unaccompanied Vocal Version of the Above

♩ = 121
 Cycle : 6 ♩ Transposition: nil



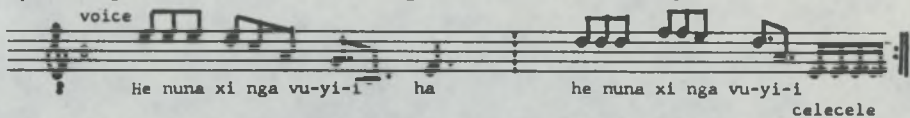
Mqangala Transcription 4. *He Nuna Xi Nga Vuyi, Cele-Cele*

♩ = 70 (The Husband Does Not Come Home At Night)
 Cycle: 8 ♩ Transposition: nil



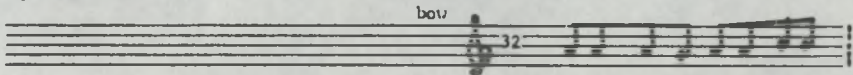
An Unaccompanied Vocal Version of the Above

♩ = 70
 Cycle: 8 ♩ Transposition: minor 2nd up



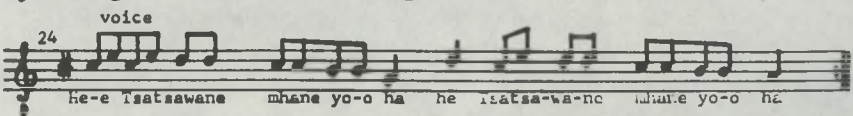
Mqangala Transcription 5. *He Tsatsawane Mhane!*

♩ = 228 (Tsatsawane, Mother!)
 Cycle: 32 ♩ Transposition: nil



An Unaccompanied Vocal Version of the Above

♩ = 228
 Cycle 24 ♩ Transposition: nil



Mqangala Transcription 6. *Mina Ndzi Ya Kaya Mina*

♩ = 137

(I Go To My Home)

Cycle: 10 ♩

Transposition: nil

The musical transcription consists of three systems of staves. The first system has two staves: the top staff is for the 'girl singer' and the bottom staff is for the 'bow (old man)'. The second system has two staves: the top staff is for the 'girl singer' and the bottom staff is for the 'bow (old man)'. The third system has two staves: the top staff is for the 'girl singer' and the bottom staff is for the 'bow (old man)'. The lyrics are: 'mina ndzi ya kaya mi-nz' and 'mina ndzi ya kaya min'.

In the foregoing transcriptions, differences of metrical length and/or rhythm between an instrumental version and its corresponding vocal version sung separately, reflect differences between motor-sensory-influenced playing and speech-stress-influenced singing. In each performance, there is strict observance of the metrical length of the cycle, which repeats indefinitely. The metrical cycles are those commonly used in the mainstream of Shangana-Tsonga music: 8, 6, 12, etc., with an occasional 10. Rhythm may be duple or triple, the latter often programmatically representing the concept of movement (*cele-cele* is an onomatopoeism signifying "to spend all night dancing").

Vocal notes often proceed in parallel 4ths or 5ths with the corresponding tones of the instrumental version. This reflects one of the important principles of Shangana-Tsonga music, the principle of harmonic equivalence, or the span process. The Shangana-Tsonga concept of harmony derives from the simultaneous use of two parallel descending pentatonic scales, staggered, a certain span apart, generally about half an octave — a 4th or 5th. This not only constitutes harmony, but a system of note substitution, whereby the 4th or 5th is considered equal to and the same as the original note. It applies where an instrument cannot reproduce all of the notes used in a vocal version, and also where the melody notes of a wide-ranging tune go above or below the range of the singer in question. Thus where our instrumental version appears to differ from the given vocal version, it in fact represents it through harmonic equivalence.

voice

bow 1 2 4 5 6 7 8

Because of the principle, musicologists should be wary of perceiving such Western phenomena as contrary motion. In *Mqangala* Transcription 6, there is a prominent B in both the instrumental and vocal lines, the voice descending to B below the staff, and the bow ascending to B on the third line, appearing as contrary motion. Seeing that the performer cannot reproduce the low vocal B on his instrument, he follows common Shangana-Tsonga practice in transposing it up an octave regardless of the effect upon melodic contour. We can avoid inferring structural and directional intentions which do not exist in the minds of the players, by giving weight to social context rather than considering the sound in purely musical terms. How the melody line of a traditional song will be instrumentally reproduced depends on whether males or females are present (and thus their sex-specific instruments), the vocal range of the singers present (which depends upon age and sex), and the degree of musical sophistication expected by the performer from that particular audience. Shangana-Tsonga instrumental performers tend to push the boundaries of musical comprehension to the limit in order to intrigue their audiences, by utilizing variation principle, sectional transposition, pulse change from duple meter to triple meter or vice versa, and note reiteration to represent held tones.

Among the Shangana-Tsonga, *mqangala* players are highly respected for their age and maturity, for in them is thought to reside not only the musical wisdom of a lifetime in Shangana-Tsonga music (and thus a thorough knowledge of all of the various stages and classes of vocal and instrumental music), but, because of their closeness to the grave, an ability to communicate musically with the spirit world, and to receive musical inspiration from ancestor spirits.

They carry the bow vertically under the robe or shirt, to be produced whenever a group of elders sit formally to drink the maize brew. It also serves as a staff of office for an elder, and as a pointer when emphasizing direction or hammering home a conversational point. It is occasionally used as a handy stem for smoking, the length providing cooling.

Xipendana Bow Music

The Shangana-Tsonga name for the mouth-resonated, braced, thick-handled bow is *xipendana* (same as the Karanga name for it), and not *sekgapa*, as stated by Kirby (1965:228). Kirby's work was originally published in 1934, and the name may have been replaced over time. The term *sekgapa* is used by the Pedi for their braced gourd-bow, but not at all by the Shangana-Tsonga. The braced gourd bow is more than twice as long, bears a calabash, and is struck with a short baton.

While the Shangana-Tsonga *xipendana* is played exclusively by girls (often in tuned pairs), the Venda equivalent, which is called *tshiwana*, is played mainly by men and boys (Blacking 1965:27). The Pedi call it *lekope*, and play it in bands of up to six men (Huskiison 1958, Plate 22). Note that *lekope* is the term applied by the Sotho of Lesotho to the hollow cane-bow, thus there has been an exchange of terms with instruments; not only are the names inconsistent across the southern African Bantu groups, but they are confusing.

Xipendana Transcription 1

Two *xipendana* bows in unison
(not shown: resonance two 8ves up)

girl singers
La-ngu- ta-ni ma-lu-zan

bows
l'xo bo-imba na ua-kwav

The Chopi of Moçambique call it *penda*, the Swazi *isitontolo*, the Zulu *isiqomqomana*, the Kwebo *kedondolo*, the Luvedu *kashane*, and the Sotho *setolotolo* (Kirby 1965:228). The Shangana-Tsonga name

xipendana is an expansion of the name *penda* used by their south-eastern neighbors on the Moçambique coast, the Chopi. *Penda* is sometimes used by the Karanga of Zimbabwe, with whom the Chopi are suspected of being related by virtue of their excellent xylophone playing.

The *xipendana* consists of a meter-long carved wooden bow, flattened at each end, with a thick portion in the center for grip. This is known as *xipula*, the handle. It is cut from the *muluwa* tree (*Acacia ataxacantha*), a thorn tree whose wood splits easily into thin strips. *Muluwa* is also used for making winnowing baskets and, in heavier thicknesses, for axe handles. The bow is curved by being soaked in water and held in a frame. Note that the *mqangala* is straight and cannot bend — an important organological difference between the two musical bows. Entire families of musical instruments in certain parts of the world are flat and straight because of their unbending bamboo construction. Ecology and non-musical social practices thus influence instrumental usage.

Xipendana Transcription 2

girl singers

20 xa le ntsugeni mara ha-yi ahi ku sa'-ka

Two *xipendana* bows in unison

20 xa le ntsugeni mara ha-yi ahi ku sa'-ka

The string is a length of tendon from the hind leg of cattle, but today there is a tendency to utilize solid copper wire. In fact, this acculturative change often accounts for the difficulty in putting through long-distance calls in southern Africa — the telephone poles have been climbed and the wire stolen. The bowstring is pulled in near its center by a loop of thong or wire. The loop is not permanently tied, but remains loose and adjustable so that the player can relax his left-hand thumb and change the tuning when desired. Tension can be

increased by winding the end of the wire round the top or bottom of the bow, and this is done as the bow ages. The string is slackened during non-use, in order to protect the flexibility of the wood.

The girl who plays the bow has generally manufactured it, with help from a suitor. She holds the bow at a graceful angle, with the head slightly tilted, and plucks it with a metal safety-pin. The open buccal cavity is held close to the upper end and resonates the various partials required. As she plucks with the right hand on alternate sides of the center (i.e., on alternate string-lengths), she adds additional strokes with a left-hand finger, providing a rapid succession of syncopated accents and an exciting rhythmic background to the singing of others. Vocal phrases rhythmically cross the instrumental accompaniment. Call-and-response structure is important — the singing often occupies only half of the first cycle of a song, leaving the *xipendana* player to supply the 'response', or vice versa.

Text-Borne Melodic Variations in *Xipendana* Bow Music

Whereas in *Xipendana* Transcription 1 the sung melody remains constant while the accompaniment varies, in No. 2 the sung melody changes while the accompaniment remains constant. This is due to the fact that in No. 1 the text remains unchanged each time, while in No. 2 the text changes each time. In Shanaga-Tsonga *xipendana*-accompanied singing, the properties and characteristics of the stretched string may determine initial melody, thus:

The image shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff is labeled 'voices' and contains a melody with lyrics 'La-n-gu- tu-ni na-lu-zan'. The bottom staff is labeled 'bow' and contains a corresponding instrumental melody. Both staves are in G major and 4/4 time.

Note here that the open string-lengths of the *xipendana* are tuned to C and F, with the depression of the C string raising the C temporarily to an E flat (this is done with a left-hand finger). The voice follows the bow melody, employing the expected 4th and 5th substitutions which provide much of the spice in Shangana-Tsonga music. Text changes may be introduced either by differing subsequent stanzas, or by improvisation. These text changes bear new speech-tone implications which, to make sense to the audience, should generate a parallel melodic contour in the vocal melody. These text-born vocal changes

will bear a new intervallic relationship with the unchanged instrumental accompaniment. The harmonic relationship remains basically unchanged; it is merely that higher or lower tonal equivalents are selected in order to yield the new rise and fall which is necessary, thus:

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled "voices" and the bottom staff is labeled "bow". The lyrics "l'xo bo-mba na ma- kwav" are written below the top staff. The notation consists of notes on a five-line staff with a treble clef, showing a melodic line for the voices and a corresponding line for the bow.

Conclusion

Vocal melody during *xipendana* performance is usually pentatonic, and thus compatible with the tuning system of 4ths, where the interval between the two string-lengths resembles the two conjunct 4ths of a common pentatonic scale, and is modified by fingering to yield the intermediate tone.

Vocal melody during *mqangala* performance is generally non-pentatonic, being influenced by the physical properties of the hollow cane-bow: finger placement along the fingerboard determines intervals. Because the human hand possesses tendons between the fingers which vary greatly in the ability to stretch, the tones yielded by fingers which are set close together (the third and fourth fingers) will be minor 2nds rather than major 2nds. Since minor 2nds occur in the Shangana-Tsonga heptatonic scale but not in the pentatonic, *mqangala*-accompanied singing is not limited to pentatonic segments.

All of the foregoing does not imply that, in the Shangana-Tsonga musical system, the great tradition of vocal music is influenced by or derived from bow music. In many aspects of bow music, such as meter, tempo, repertoire, melodic contour, etc., bow music adheres to basic principles of Shangana-Tsonga group singing. Where ensemble vocal music fills an important role in social institutions such as initiation, exorcism, and spirit placation, it is safe to assume that vocal practice determines instrumental norms. Certain writers have tentatively offered the suggestion that, where pentatonicism is used and where harmony in 4ths and 5ths is employed, this may derive from the 4ths and 5ths which are part of the inherent property of stretched strings. Such reasoning, however, does not account for pentatonicism where the bow is not found, and does not account for

those regions where a 4th is generated by means other than through the natural series. In some regions, an octave divided into five equal intervals of 240 cents each, then transferred to a xylophone which is beaten on alternate slats, consistently yields intervals of 480 cents, which sound like consecutive 4ths (500 cents).

Shangana-Tsonga bow music, then, varies from bow type to bow type according to construction, and is influenced by physical and mechanical factors such as plectrum use, finger span, and the availability of a fingerboard. Musicologists seeking geographical and historical reasons for apparent inconsistencies in scale distribution maps of the African continent, might give more consideration to the motor-pattern origin of scale use in instrumental performance.

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Plate 1

Embouchure and right-hand plucking position for the Tsonga *mqangala* musical bow.



Plate 2

A duet on the Tsonga *xipendana* musical bow.