

structural aspects of the Tsonga musical system.

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STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF THE TSONGA MUSICAL SYSTEM

by
Thomas F. Johnston

The Tsonga (Thonga, Tonga, Shangana-Tsonga) are a Bantu-speaking people of southeastern Africa, numbering about 1,900,000 in Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal. They are patrilineal, virilocal, and to a large extent practice polygyny and ancestor-spirit worship. They grow maize and keep some cattle, build round mud huts with conical thatched roofs, and possess a number of social institutions (initiation, exorcism, the social beer-drink) in which music plays an integral role.

The Tsonga musical system is structured upon a set of specific social and musical principles, and, while it is conceived within one cultural and linguistic framework, comprises a number of distinct musical substyles, each possessing melodic and rhythmic characteristics best suited to the function it is designed to serve.

For instance, work-songs appear to have their point of maximum vocal effort occur at the point of minimum physical exertion connected with the task at hand, with the rhythm paced to combine the physical efforts of the work-party into a concentrated, recurring peak.

Exorcism songs, designed to exorcize undesirable alien spirits possessing patients, model their language, rhythm, and melody on the supposed tribal origin of the feared spirit, so that Ndaú words and Ndaú scales are heard where the spirit is thought to be Ndaú.

The most important structure is the Tsonga musical 'ladder' of sequential musical substyles paralleling social and biological maturation. Individuals and groups of individuals are exposed to and learn sets of songs and dances appropriate to their age-group; they are thus integrated in part via musical mechanisms which serve as the 'credentials' of graduation through rites de passage. Figure 1 illustrates the ascending chain of sociomusical institutions through which every Tsonga must pass.

These institutions are controlled indirectly by the chief via appointed or licensed officiants, thus the second most important structure is the network of musical authority (Figure 2).

The social and musical institutions occur at times appropriate to the Tsonga horticultural year and its changing seasons. For instance, herding songs are not sung after the harvest when cattle graze on the reaped maize patches between the huts, because the social institution of cattle-herding (done mostly by boys) is over (Figure 3).

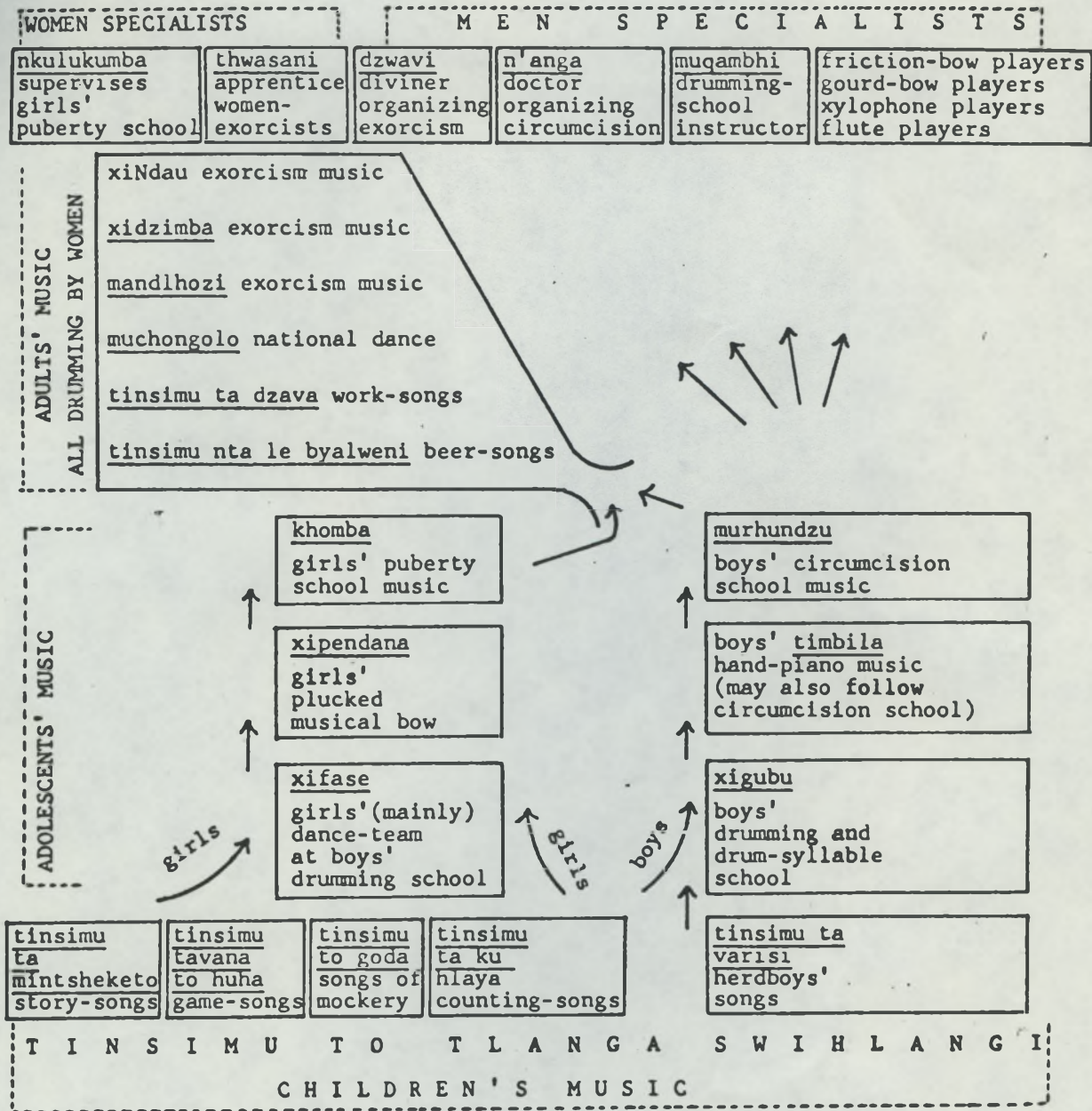
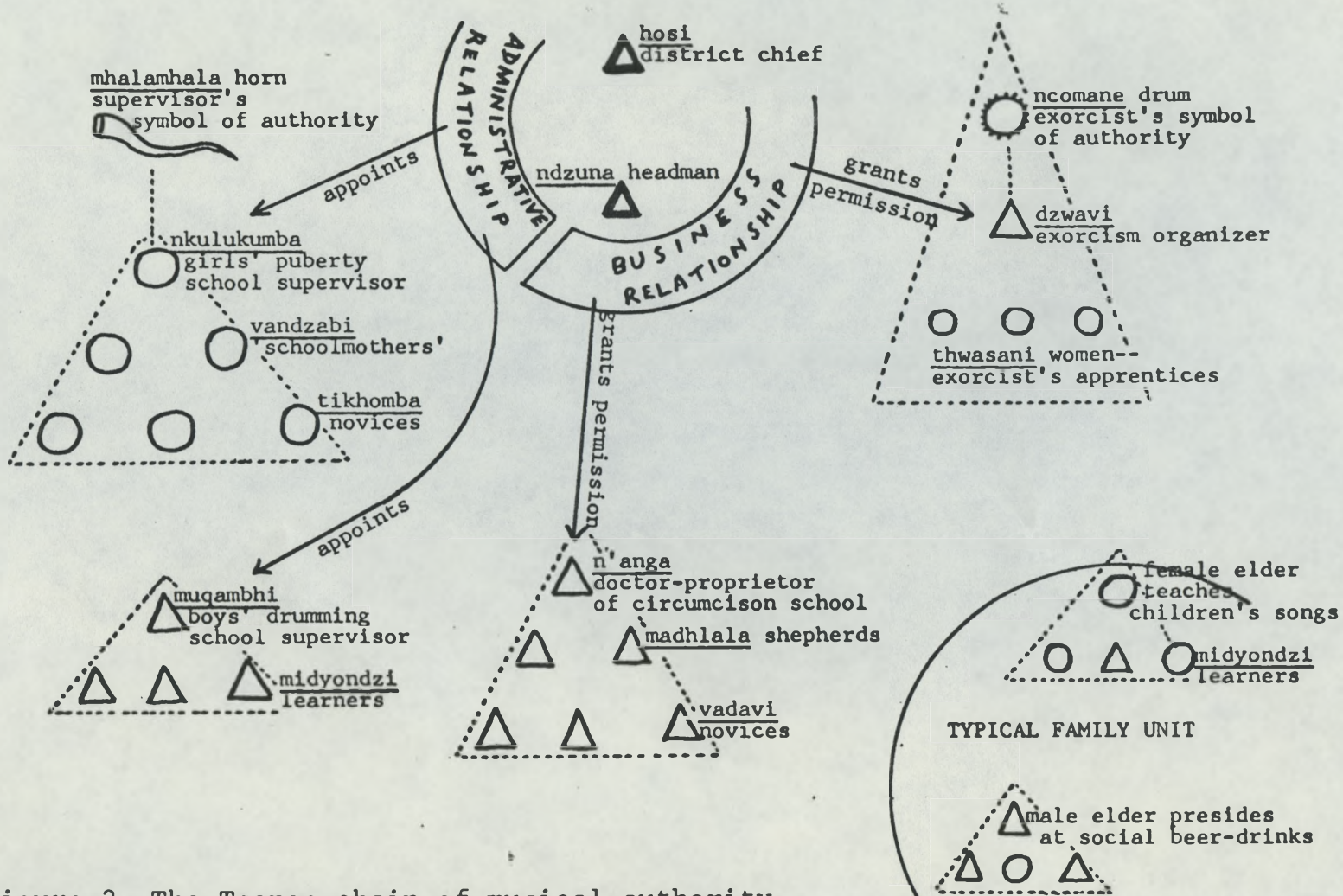


Figure 1. The ascending structure of the Tsonga musical 'ladder' of social institutions and accompanying musical substyles.



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Figure 2. The Tsonga chain of musical authority, and the administrative structure of musical institutions.

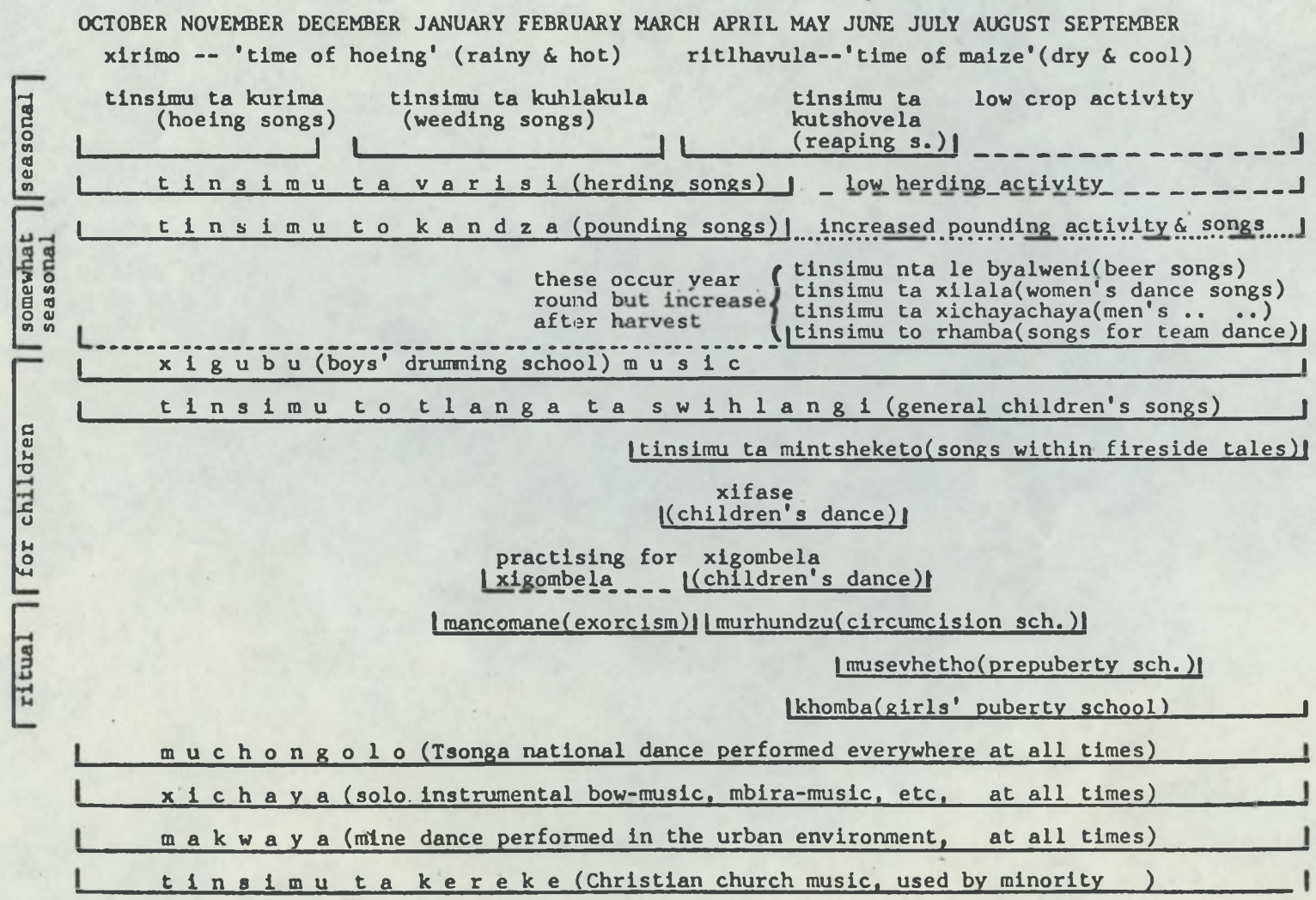


Figure 3. The calendric structure of Tsonga music.

calendar

Tsonga vocal music is often based upon the speech-tone and rhythm of language. An idea is expressed in lyrics for which a contour-matching melody emerges. Subsequent word-lines bear a matching rise-and-fall (Figure 4).

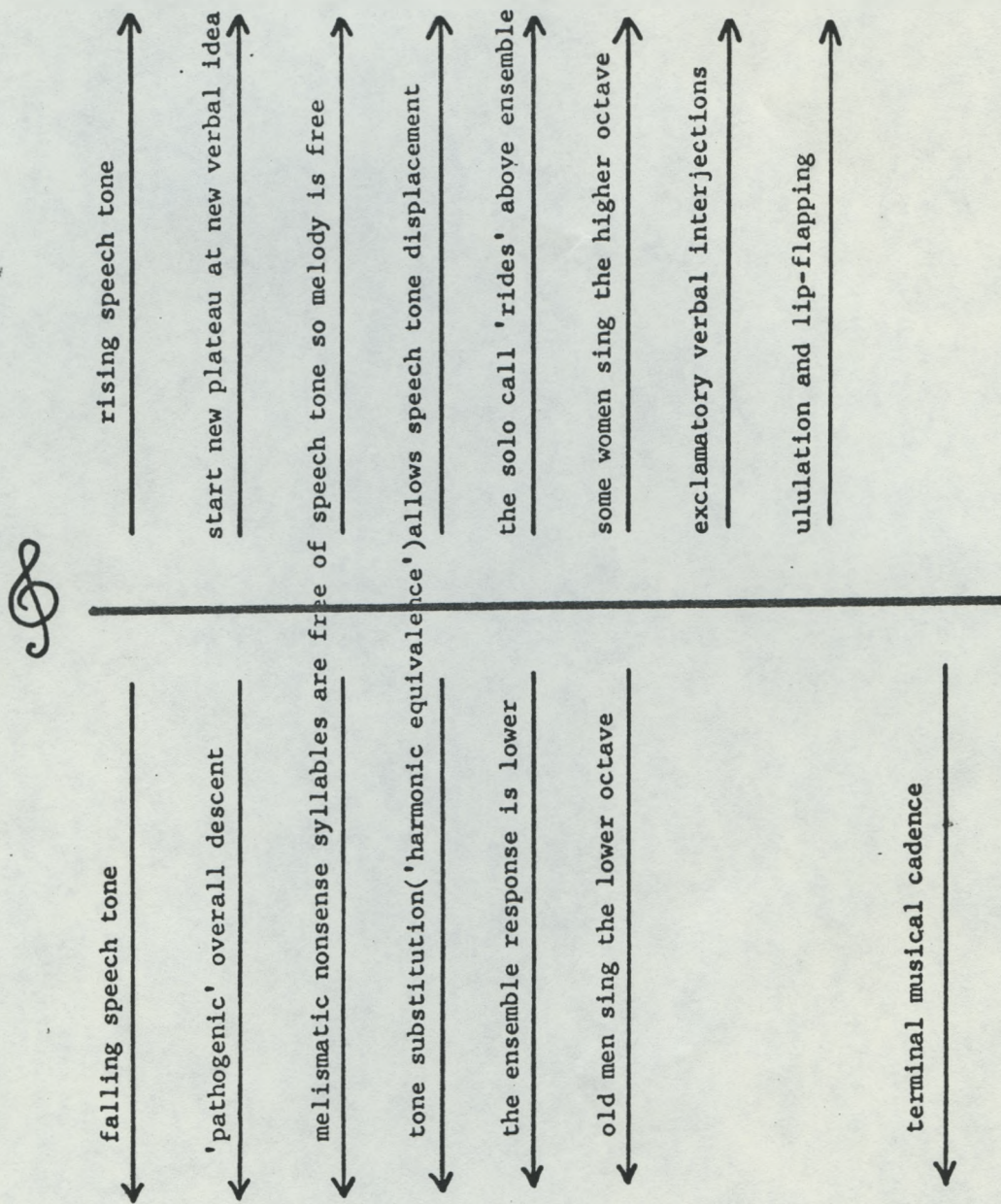


Figure 4. The social, linguistic, and musical determinants of Tsonga melodic rise-and-fall.

However, strict speech-tone control of Tsonga melody is modified by certain interesting principles which allow musicality its due play. For instance, the use of 'nonsense' syllables does not involve speech-tone and so permits compositional freedom, and terminal musical cadence overrules a rising word-ending.

Structural aspects of the Tsonga musical system.

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The musical structure of a given Tsonga song comprises a number of social, linguistic, and musical elements whose peculiar combination is determined by function and social situation. All songs of one musical substyle (i.e. all songs of a given social institution) conform to a like pattern.

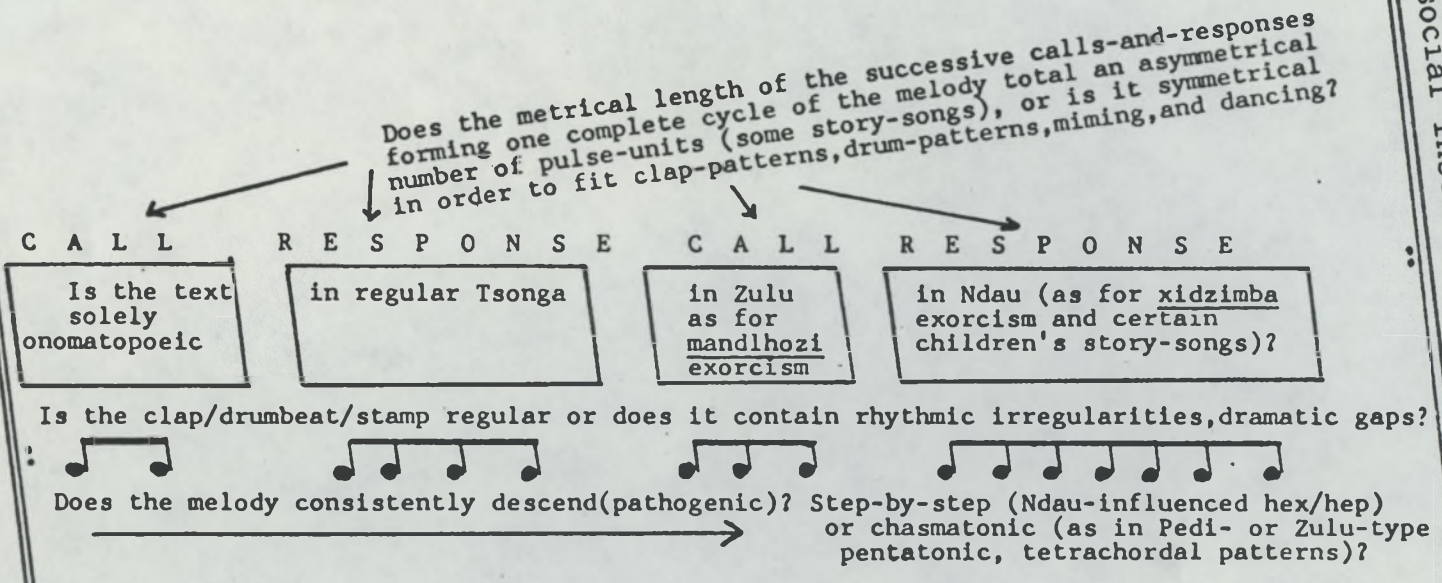


Figure 5. The structural elements of a given Tsonga song.

For instance, most children's songs descend in small, step-by-step intervals, while adult music utilizes single call-and-response school songs possess short, to-the-point single call-and-response which teaches a law, while beer-songs contain sophisticated combinations of several calls-plus-responses of varying lengths within one repetition (Figure 5). 110

Not only do Tsonga social and musical institutions possess their own bodies of songs exhibiting situation-specific features, but they possess discrete drum shapes and sizes (Figure 6). The drum peculiar to an institution adds a distinct timbre or tone-color to the music and also adds visual effect approaching symbolism: phallic in the case of the girls' initiation school, solar in the case of the exorcism rites. Size is a concomitant of volume, thus the large hemispherical ngoma drum is ideally suited to the boisterous revels of the social beer-drink.


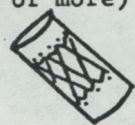

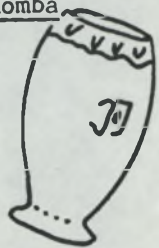
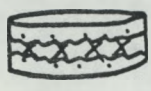
	DANCE	DRUM (not to scale)	OFFICIANT
social beer-drink	<u>xichayachaya</u>	 or  xigubu drum (2 or more)	<u>mufambisi</u> , dance-leader
	<u>xilala</u>		<u>kepe-ngoma</u> , dance-leader for <u>muchongolo</u>
	<u>rhambela phikezano</u>		
	<u>muchongolo</u>		
exorcism	<u>mandlhozi</u>	 ncomane drum in sets of 4 for exorcism	<u>dzwavi</u> , exorcist
	<u>xidzimba</u>		<u>thwasani</u> , medium
	<u>xiNdau</u>		<u>bangoma</u> , special drummer
girls' initiation school	<u>ku khana</u>	 ndzumba in sets of 2 for khomba	<u>nkulukumba</u> , supervisor
	<u>nanayila</u>		<u>bangoma</u> , processional drum-carrier
	<u>managa</u>		<u>mufambisi</u> , dance-leader
	<u>ku thaga</u>		<u>ndzabi</u> , schoolmother
	<u>ku rhwala tingoma</u>		
boys' drumming school	<u>ku wamikapa</u>	 xigubu drum in sets of 2 for drumming- school	<u>muqambhi</u> , instructor
	<u>xifase</u>		
cir-cum-cis-ion sch.	<u>mayiwayiwane</u>	NO DRUMS in order to keep secrecy	<u>n'anga</u> , doctor
	<u>ku nenga</u>		<u>madhlala</u> , shepherds

Figure 6. Drum specificity of the Tsonga social institutions.

The drums of the different social institutions are used to provide the various different rhythms necessary for rites, dances, and mimes. These rhythms, while dance-specific and thus peculiar to a recurring social situation, appear to derive from a basic core pattern which might be called the preferred Tsonga rhythmic wellspring (Figure 7).

Figure 7 displays musical notation for various Tsonga rhythms. The notation uses a simplified system where notes are represented by stems and dots, often with flags to indicate eighth notes. The patterns are organized as follows:

- CORE PATTERN:** A sequence of four quarter notes.
- nyanyula rhythm in girls' initiation:** A sequence of eighth notes.
- xisotho rhythm in girls' initiation:** A sequence of eighth notes.
- a xigubu drumming-school rhythm:** A sequence of quarter notes.
- beer-song rhythms:** A group of four rhythmic patterns, each consisting of eighth notes.
- two muchongolo (national dance) rhythms:** Two complex rhythmic patterns with numerical groupings (6, 7, 7, 7, 7, 4, 7) and a final triplet.
- pointing:** A rhythmic pattern consisting of eighth notes.
- stamping:** A rhythmic pattern consisting of eighth notes.
- mandlhozi exorcism rhythm:** A complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth notes.
- xidzimba exorcism rhythm:** A complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth notes.

Figure 7. The core drum-pattern in Tsonga music

The rhythm of muchongolo (the Tsonga national dance), while possessing dramatic gaps to accommodate the exhibitionistic stamping and pointing of the soloists, nevertheless appears to be founded upon the four-square base given above. Thus Tsonga rhythm is in contrast with the rhythm of the neighboring Venda (see John Blacking's Venda Children's Songs, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1967), which is triplet-based, after the West African drumming style.

While only a little musical influence has flowed from the heptatonic Venda to the pentatonic Tsonga, diffusion of musical artifacts has been considerable. This reflects the fact that acculturation involving tangible, adaptable material goods involves less cognitive dissonance than does acculturation involving thought processes and abstract, conceptual frameworks such as that of a new, alien musical system using foreign scales and harmonies. Various importations and in-going influences are shown in Figure 8.

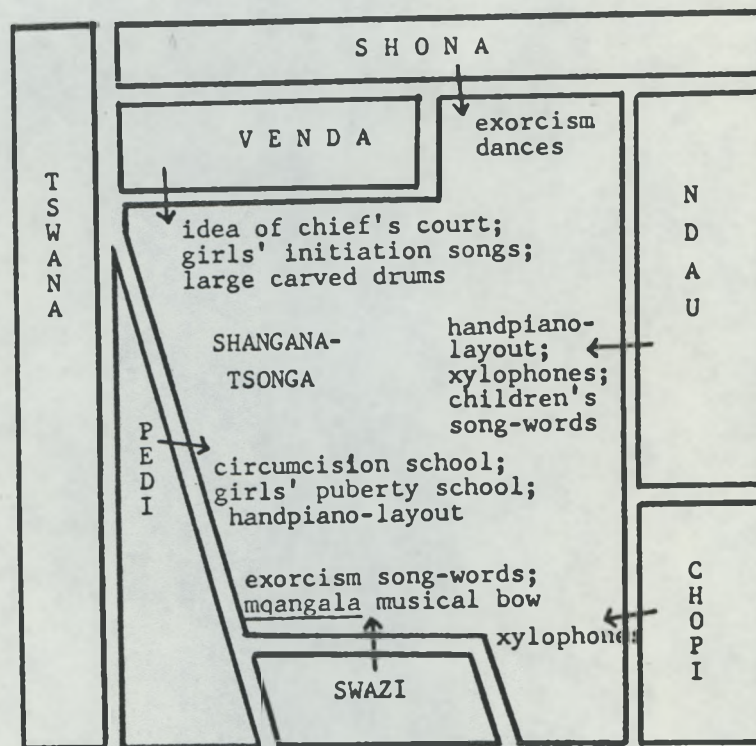


Figure 8. Diffusion of musical artifacts and other social phenomena in the Northern Transvaal.

Not shown is the fact that the Tsonga have, in return, exported their flat round shaman's drum to the Swazi, their hand-piano layout to the Venda, and their friction-bow to other groups. This busy scene of musical interaction is the result of the 19th-century westward migration of the Tsonga into the Northern Transvaal from their homeland in Mozambique, caused by the Zulu wars. Now surrounded by an alien polyglot and separated from their progenitors in situ by the international border between South Africa and Mozambique, the Tsonga accept or reject alien cultural elements as part of a psychohistorically-founded selection process (as do their many neighbors).

One of the Tsongas' new neighbors -- the Shona to the northeast-- derive from the ancient Monomatapa Empire of four or five hundred years ago. The Shona are famous for their possession cults, which they have exported all over South Africa as part of a diffusion process. Musical acculturation accompanied social acculturation, so that Shona-like scales are found among the Tsonga, but only in the possession cults. This accounts for the proliferation of scale-types in Tsonga use: heptatonic in xidzimba exorcism songs (the Shona feature a chidzimba dance) but generally pentatonic in the other musical substyles (Figure 9).

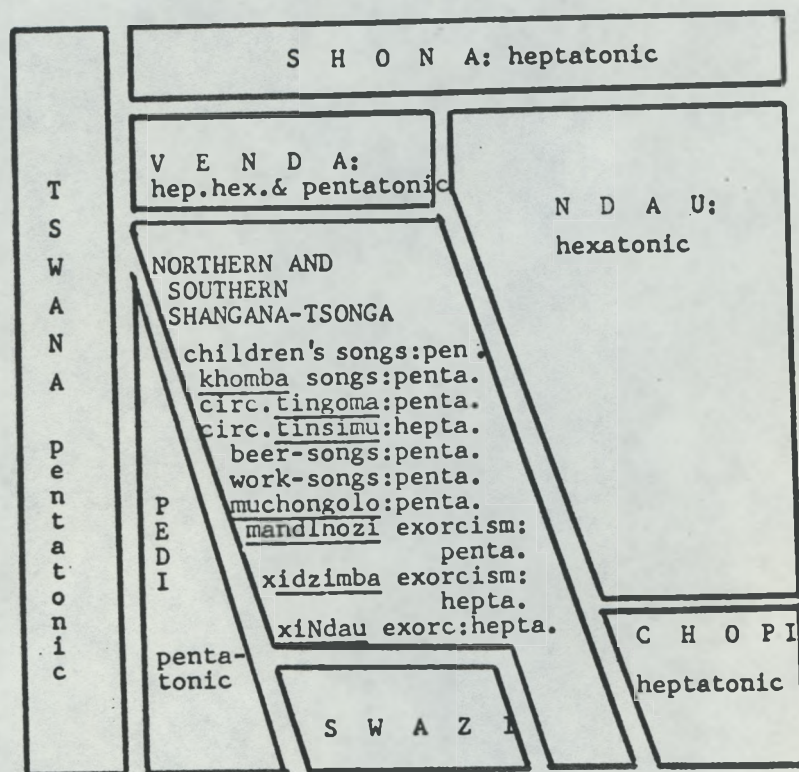


Figure 9. A map of musical scales in the Northern Transvaal.

As an illustration of the selective processes at work, it can be pointed out that, while the Venda have accepted the Pedi pentatonic reed-pipe dance and added it to their musical system (i.e. in addition to their own heptatonic reed-pipe dance), the Tsonga, closer to the Pedi, have shown no interest in it. Possibly, the Venda and Pedi, being long-sessile, interacted prior to the coming of the Tsonga, and the latter have never seen the ancient Pedi dance performed at its best.

An analysis of the availability and frequency of different musical substyles reveals that Tsonga beer-drink music is the most popular and the most performed (Figure 10). The Tsonga beer-drink is held to mark important social events such as births, marriages, and deaths, and all occasions when a group is losing a member to another group: infants become human at one year; brides go to join their husband's family's work-force; the deceased join the ranks of ancestor-spirits. The beer-drink thus marks rites of passage, when individuals go through separation, liminality, and re-incorporation, to the accompaniment of beer-songs.

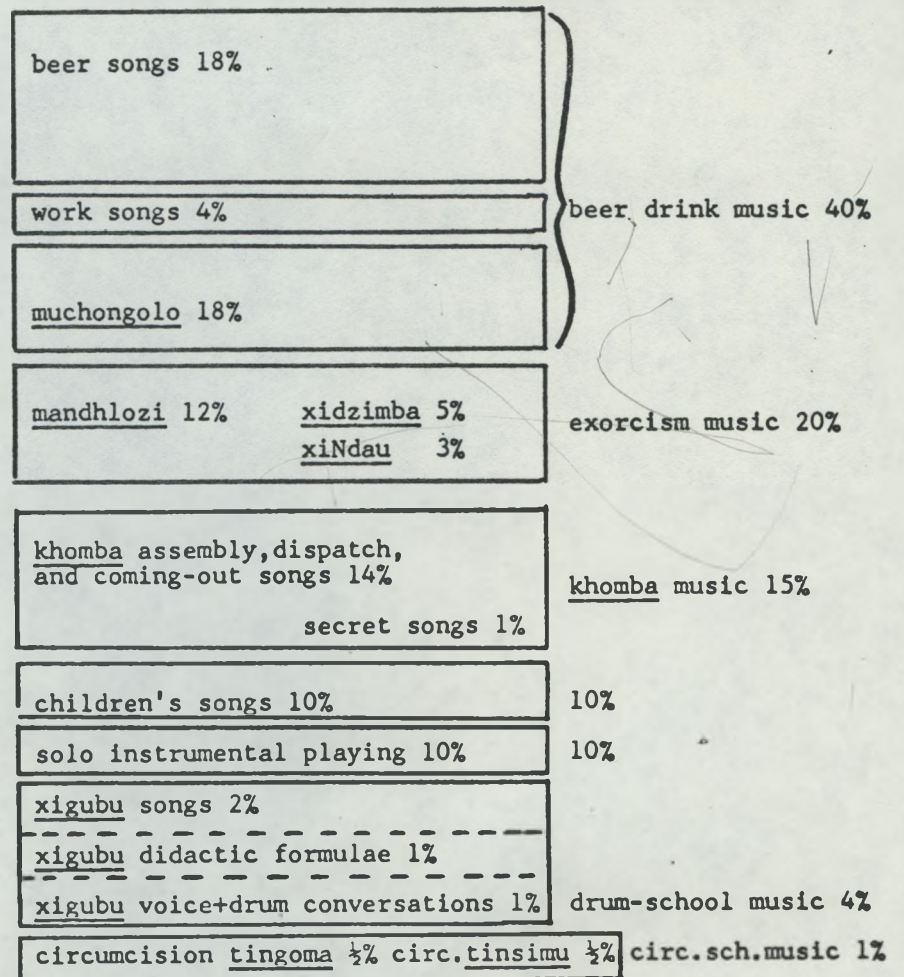
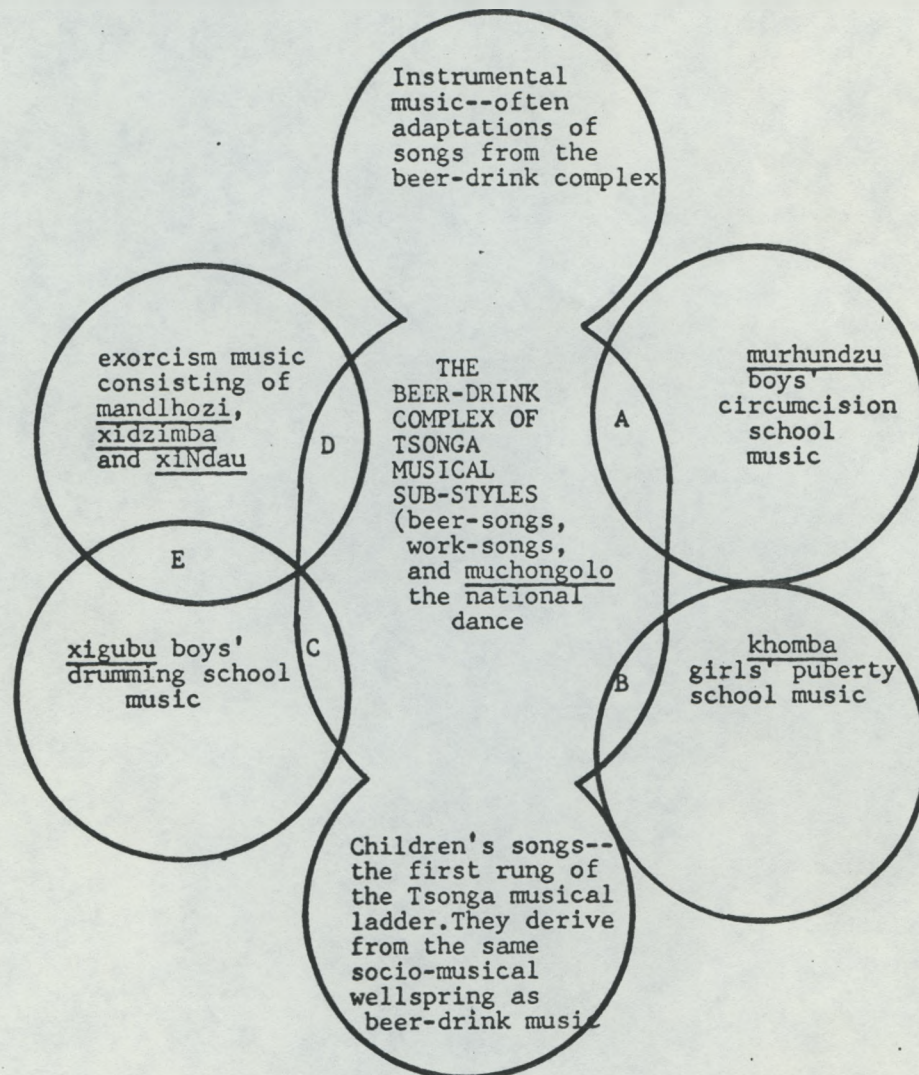


Figure 10. Frequency of performance of the various substyles.

Beer-drink music, which includes work-songs and the national dance muchongolo, is, along with exorcism music, adult music for both sexes. The 'infrequency' of khomba (girls' initiation) music is explained, not by its unpopularity, but by the fact that it involves one sex only. The 'infrequency' of circumcision music is explained by the same reason and by the fact that the bush school is held only once every four or five years.

Further on the subject of beer-drink music's popularity, it should be noted that, because the social beer-drink 'invades' the province of the initiation school and that of many other institutions (at coming-out celebrations, for instance), its influence is felt musically in other substyles (Figure 11).



- A. This area represents circumcision coming-out songs sung at the final day beer-party with the relatives.
 B. This area represents puberty school coming-out songs sung at the final day beer-party with the relatives.
 C. This area represents beer-drink rhythms taught within the boys' drumming school.
 D. This area represents muchongolo danced within an exorcism context.
 E. Unrelated to beer-drink music. It represents exorcism rhythms taught within the boys' drumming school (included here for completeness).

Figure 11. Tsonga beer-drink music as the nucleus of the Tsonga musical system.

That vast body of songs and dances performed by adults of both sexes at social beer-drinks possesses melodic and rhythmic characteristics peculiar to its musical substyle, but, by virtue of the interactional nature of the beer-drink, it influences the singers and dancers performing in other contexts, and thus can be seen as a controlling and regulating 'master-style'.

Beer-drink music is inter-court music: its rehearsed and uniformed competitive dance-teams bring power and power to the sponsoring chief by exhibitionistic inter-village visits. Rulers widen their broad pyramid base of political support by attracting constituents from other villages, through good music (Figure 12).

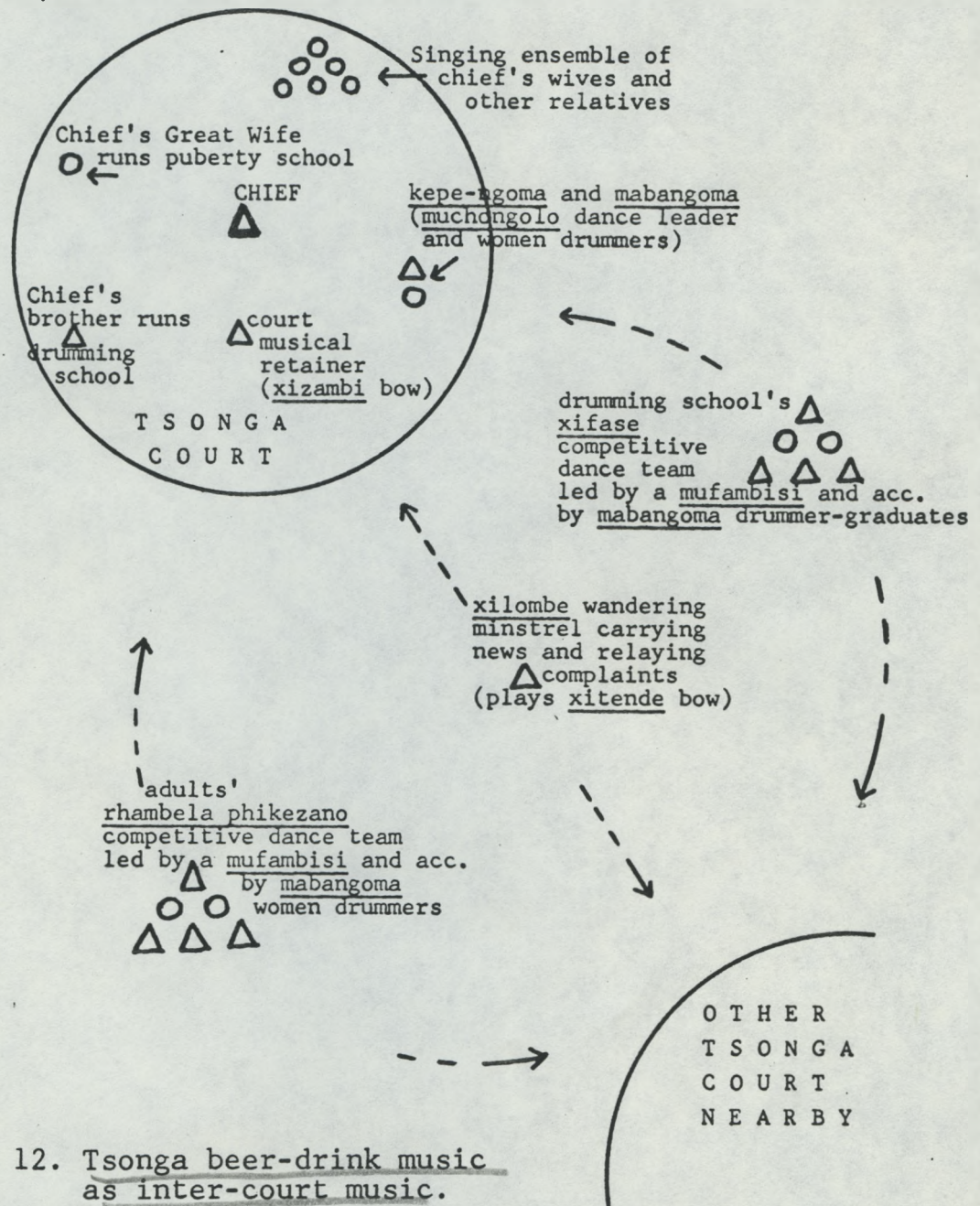


Figure 12. Tsonga beer-drink music as inter-court music.

Victory at an 'away' match means free food and beer and hospitality, and glory for the home-village chief, who recoups his financial outlay (purchased drums, stitched costumes) via increased regional status. Thus Tsonga beer-drink music reflects the allegiances and rivalries of its performers, and can be seen as a mechanism for social control.

Part of the special attraction of Tsonga beer-drink music lies in the variety of vocal tone-color and voice-range manifested; this stems from the diverse sex/age distributions seen at different beer-drinks according to what is being celebrated. A birth brings out all the young and old women to sing; a visit by ruling celebrities brings out all the young and old men. Different social situations are reflected in the preponderance of high descant, of bass lines, of multiple entrances, and other event-specific musical features.

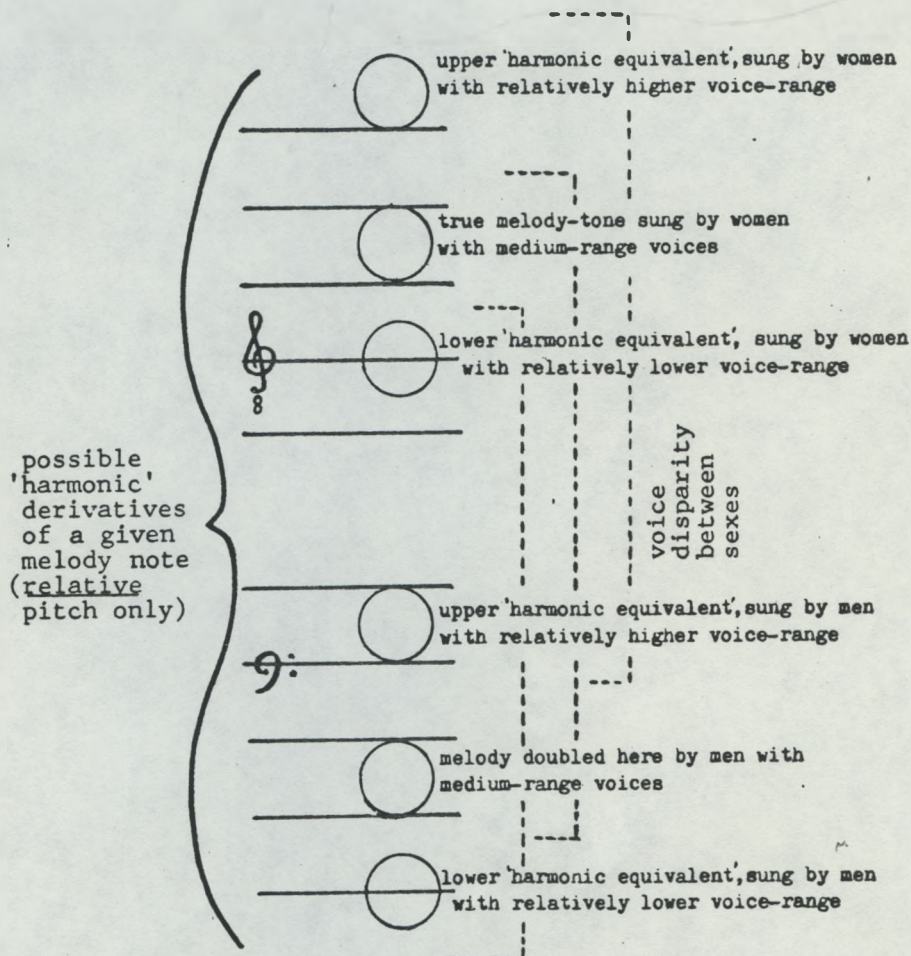


Figure 13. Sex/age distribution as a determinant of harmonic structure and polyphonic complexity.

In some dances, boys without broken voices are forbidden to sing; in orders, women ululate shrilly over the top of the ensemble. The balance between the sexes and between the young and old affects the number of high or low lines being sung and their volume level. This is less apparent in a one sex-one age situation such as initiation school.

Tsonga beer-drink music accompanies complex dances such as the men's xichayachaya dance and the women's xilala dance; these dances possess symmetrical choreographic structure which is reflected in such numbers as 16, 32, and 64 -- common metrical lengths of the songs. The songs are rarely structured as 8 beats of call + 8 beats of response, however. Tsonga music is rather unique in southern Africa in that it features sophisticated combinations of multiple call + multiple response (Figure 14).

Representative Formal Structures

Evinced By Tsonga Songs

	<u>Total</u>
Song A (call=9 ♪ + response=3 ♪ + call=9 ♪ + response=9 ♪ + call=3 ♪ + response=3 ♪)	36 ♪
Song B (call=4 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + response=14 ♪)	26 ♪
Song C (unison chorus=2 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + unison chorus=2 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + divided chorus=4 ♪)	16 ♪
Song D (call=6 ♪ + response=3 ♪ + call=6 ♪ + response=9 ♪)	24 ♪
Song E (call=4 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + response=8 ♪)	20 ♪
Song F (call=10 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=4 ♪ + response=4 ♪)	30 ♪
Song G (call=4 ♪ + response=7 ♪ + call=1 ♪ + response=12 ♪)	24 ♪
Song H (call=6 ♪ + response=10 ♪ + call=6 ♪ + response=10 ♪ + call=5 ♪ + response=27 ♪)	64 ♪
Song I (call=2 ♪ + response=3 ♪ + call=2 ♪ + response=11 ♪)	18 ♪
Song J (call=18 ♪ + response=18 ♪ + call=2 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=3 ♪ + response=3 ♪ + call=3 ♪ + response=3 ♪ + call=3 ♪ + response=3 ♪)	60 ♪
Song K (call=6 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=6 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=2 ♪ + response=4 ♪ + call=2 ♪ + response=4 ♪)	32 ♪

Figure 14. Interesting and sophisticated formal structuring
in the antiphony of Tsonga music.

These formal structures are maintained throughout each repetition of the song, and form a sort of time grid over which the cantor (leader) inserts improvisations, anticipating her entry and causing the occurrence of harmony via overlap.

Overlap and voice-range disparity are not the only causes of the occurrence of harmony in Tsonga communal vocal music. There is a system of tonal equivalence, whereby the basic descending pentatonic pattern GEDCAG possessing a series of substitute tones above it, themselves forming a second descending pentatonic pattern. Harmony provided by a second group of singers must conform to the prescribed tonal equivalents. There is thus a preferred set of tone-pairings in Tsonga communal vocal music (see upper part of Figure 15).

Tsonga common melodic pattern GEDCAG.
Top row: customary harmonic equivalents arrived at by span process.
Bottom row: true melody tones.

Tsonga common friction-bow pattern GEDCAG.
Top row: resonated tones.
Bottom row: 2nd harmonic of fingered/
unfingered nala string.

Friction-bow coincidentally yields culturally prescribed tonal pairings

sometimes

faintly audible

E is always unison
D is always unison
C is always unison

Figure 15. The Tsonga use the notched friction-bow because it coincidentally fulfills vocal music's harmonic requirements.

The notched friction-bow so dear to the Tsonga easily reproduces the tonal pairings prescribed for vocal music (lower part of Figure 15). This fact suggests that, contrary to current theory (in some quarters) that southern African parallel harmony derives from the properties of stretched strings, stretched strings are used where they fulfill cultural norms in music; i.e. pre-existing vocal harmonic structure determines what instruments a society will adopt. Surely this is a more scientific supposition than the theory which holds that the bow-music of the few shapes the all-important social and communal vocal music heard where hundreds of non-instrumentalist Tsonga assemble in ritual contexts. Furthermore, stretched strings emit partials which are perfectly parallel (all 5ths), while much southern African 'parallelism' is by the varying span process. Only by fingering can it be reproduced upon a musical instrument.