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THE SPAN PROCESS OF HARMONIZATION IN THE MUSIC OF THE TSONGA NATIONAL DANCE, MUCHONGOLO

by
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Muchongolo was described in 1910 by Daniel da Cruz as "maxongolu, ou danca de homens de todas as idades", a dance for men of all ages (1910: 177). A photograph by da Cruz shows one dancer brandishing a switch and leaping from the ground, while a second dancer faces the opposite direction, grimacing and stamping. Cuénod describes the dance as one in which young men "raise the knees high remaining in one place" (1967: 24). An *Nhluvuko* ("Progress") article presents a photograph showing two women in beaded skirts dancing and three women playing double-membraned *xigubu* drums. Curiously enough, Junod does not mention the dance. The present author witnessed, documented, photographed, and tape-recorded several dozen performances over the two-year period 1968-70 (during a study funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research), in Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal.

The term *muchongolo* derives from the verb *ku chongolo*, to stamp, apt for a slow, dramatic pointing-and-stamping dance. The appropriate songs are known as *munyimisa*, the pointings. Two men or two women (*vakepe-ngoma*, keepers of the drum) enter the circle of singers with loping strides known as *mungenisa* ("putting inside") and, singing loudly in turn, commence violent baton-waving, pointing toward the sky and toward the audience. These gestures derive from similar movements used to drive birds from crops, and for this reason the action is called *ku swaya*, to chase off. A fast section (*mubiasa*) then ensues, and this is followed by a concluding pointing action (*mutlhokosa*) in which the singer-dancer selects a new soloist. The retiring soloist frequently stands at the side continuing various antics known as *ku huma*, "to break out".

The present popularity of the dance is such that an article entitled *Swigubu Na Michongolo* (Drums and Muchongolo Dances) appearing in the May, 1969 issue of *Nhluvuko* ("Progress") drew numerous letters expressing the following opinions:

- (i) ... education is worthier than ancient dances ...;
- (ii) ... bad characters linger at dances ...;
- (iii) ... the Zulu and Pedi have customs, so we must retain ours ...;
- (iv) ... don't blame your ancestors that you are not Europeans ...;
- (v) ... our struggle is great, and dancing does not win the diploma ...;
- (vi) ... civilization is not intended to destroy our traditions ...;
- (vii) ... we passed first-class even while exhibiting dancing ...;
- (viii) ... *muchongolo* must not be eaten by the white ants ...

These opinions are testimony to the social conflict induced by rapid, unplanned social change.

to its occasionally varied rhythmic indications. A chain of successive solo dancers can be "named" by the baton-wielder, as can a supposed witch in the audience. Between the dancers and the drummer there must of necessity exist a good deal of musical empathy, for the *xigubu* drum's two membranes are tuned carefully to different pitch-levels (not precise notes) in order to convey choreographic directions. *Muchongolo* instrumental accompaniments vary according to locality; for instance, the dance-leader and *muchongolo* specialist Fanyias Chavango of Moamba (Mozambique) employs three carved *ndzumbana* drums of various tunings, plus two *mafowa* hand-rattles for his rhythmic accompaniment.

The Pedi have a *muchongolo* pipe dance, and the Tswa have a *muchongolo* tumbling dance. These dances, however, differ considerably from the Tsonga *muchongolo* dance. A selection of Tsonga *muchongolo* songs is given below; note, in Nos. 3, 5, 6 and 9, use of a "span process" of harmonization, based upon the vertically paired "harmonic equivalents" of two superimposed descending pentatonic scales.

Muchongolo Songs Used Within a Mancomane ("Exorcism") Context

Muchongolo Song Transcription 1. Nkocani Vahlale

♩ = 160
Cycle: 18 ♩

(Nkocani Calls)
Transpos.: nil

resp.

N-ko-ca- ni va-hla- le- e N-ko- ca-ni nya me- me- e
pitched drum (exact pitch not shown)

leg-rattles

e- e- e- e- e- e- yo
Ja-vu- la Nko- can'

call

SOLO

Hi yo- o wo- yi yo- o-

(various 8-crotchet phrases, all ending with "tuva!")

o wo-yi- ya wo-yi ya- a i- ya ye tu- va

la- ngu-ta- ni-ma-Cha-nga- na i- i- ye tu- va

na-Cha-nga- na hi-nkwa- a- wo i- ye tu- va

Muchongolo Song Transcription 3.
 ♩ = 180
 Cycle: 8 ♩

I Nhlampfi Baku Mabomu
 (The Fish Twists Like This)
 Transpos.: maj 3rd up

call flat response added part

Inhlampfi bak'ma bo mu oge-dle ma-na- a- ne ge-dle ma na- a- ne

point stamp

L R L R

rectangle described in the air by the nhonga baton, as it weaves in and out, pointing. (Viewed from the performer)

R L R L

Muchongolo Song Transcription 4.

Nghunghunyane

(Chief Nghunghunyane)

Transpos.: maj 3rd up

♩ = 106
Cycle: 64 ♩

resp. call response

Nghu-nghu-nya- ne Nghunghunyane way'dla m'hala way'dla m'hala

call response call response

Nghunghunyan way'dla m'hala Nghunghunyane way'dla m'hala way'dla m'hala

Muchongolo Songs for Beer-drinks and Mine Dances

Muchongolo Song Transcription 5.

Tinyandhaye Ya Tindlopfu

Tile Ku Chauke

(Men, Elephants Destroy Corn At Chauke's)

Transpos.: min 6th up

♩ = 104
Cycle: 26 ♩

call

A tin- yan dha ye ya- a-a ya ti-ndlo-pfu ti-le ku Chau-ke Mu-dla-yi udlo-pfu

ti-le ke- e- e

2nd part

hi he- ri- le- e- e ku Chau-ke- e

overlap

hi va kuma vava be-la na mihlo-ti va ri-la ma-se- ve- e- e

DC

D C on 2nd quaver of this clap

*Muchongolo Song Transcription 6. An Alternative Version
Of the Above*
Cycle: 26 $\text{♩} = 100$
Transpos.: min 2nd up

call

8 Ha ti-nyandha-ye-e ye va-va-nu- na va ti- ndlop' ti- le ka

response

8 Cha-u- ke M- gu-nga ndlo- pfu hi- he- ri- le- e

8 e- e ti- le ka Chau- ke- e- e- e hi va ku-

8 na va lo be-la na mi-hlo-ti va ri-la ma-ve- e- la

Muchongolo Song Transcription 7. Hina Gwaza N'wa Majaha Hi Mpindzi
(Stab The Man With A Pick)
Cycle: 12 $\text{♩} = 84$
Transpos.: min 7th up

call

12 Hi-na gwa-za- a ya

resp.

12 n'wa ma-j'ha hi mpi-ndzi

12 mu-nya-ma hi hlo- va

12 n'wi- na ma- j'ha u Zi- tha

Muchongolo Song Transcription 8.

♩ = 87
Cycle: 8 ♩

Risiva Ra Manje Ra Majaha

(Pass Us the Feather for The Gentleman)

Transpos.: min 3rd up

call
8 Ri- si-va ra ma-nje he-ha-ha ma-nje ri

resp.
8 siv' hi nyike ri-si-va ra-ma-j'ha-a hi nyike ri-

added part
8 Mee-ee!
another added part
8 Ga-va-za we ntombhiku njhan'

8 old man siv' hi nyi-ke ri-si-va ra ma-j'ha hi nyi-ke ri-

Muchongolo Song Transcription 9.

♩ = 102
Cycle: 16 ♩

Hinavela Mpfula Mawaku

(We Long for the Rain)

Transpos.: 4th up

call
16 Hi-na-ve-la

call
16 mpfu-la ma-wa-ku hi-a-yi

resp.
16 ho-za mpfu-la-a

call
16 hi-a-yo-yo-o ho-ka Se-ga-lo

resp.
16 mpfu-la ma-wa-ku ho-za mpfu-la

Muchongolo Song Transcription 10 *U Ya Khuluma Nkosi*
 ♩ = 180
 Cycle: 24 ♩ (The Chief Speaks)
 Transpos.: min 2nd up

call
 8 We-na uya khu-lu-ma 'nko-os' u ya khulu-ma 'nko-os'

call
 24
 8 we-na u'a khuluma nda-ba
 u ya khu-luma 'nkos' mkhondo

resp.
 24
 8 we-na u ya khuluma 'nko-os' we-nau'a khuluma n'da-ba
 mhkondo.

8 u ya khulum' u ya khulum' u ya khuluma 'nkos'

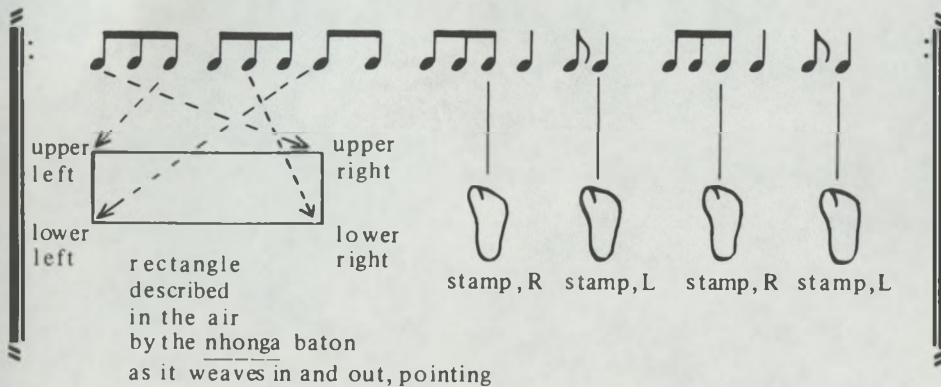
8 u ya khulum' ha- a ha- a- a- a

Note, in No. 1 above, how the dancers' movements are conveyed by the sound of the leg-rattles, and how both are led by the pitched drum into the following interesting *muchongolo* rhythm:

Javula
 Nkocan'!

Note, in No. 3 above, use of the quaver-grouping of 3+3+2, described by Sachs as "ubiquitous" (1962: 118). Gibling describes it as "Afro-Cuban" in the form of the rumba, thus (1951: 32), and Jones describes it as "Afro-American" in the form of the samba (1959: 114). The latter writer also gives an Ewe bell-pattern containing 3+3+2, thus:

The 3+3+2 rhythm in No. 3 above provides for baton-pointing at 2-quaver intervals, for vocal syllables at 3+3+2-quaver intervals, for foot-stamping at 4-quaver intervals, and a recurring overall metrical length of 8♩ for the whole song and the movement which it suggests, thus:



Note, in Nos. 1-4 above, that exorcism *muchongolo* singing is frequently unisonic – this may reflect the high volume level and lack of “harmonic” subtleties at the allnight “exorcism” dances. In contrast, the beer-drink *muchongolo* singing in Nos. 5-10 exhibit much “harmony”.

The texts of the songs shown in Nos. 8 and 9 have interesting histories. *Hi Risiva Ra Majaba* (Pass Us The Feather For The Gentleman – No. 8) was originally a wedding song sung only when the bride is a virgin, and the “feather” supposedly refers to a goat. Junod explains the allegory thus:

A goat is killed, a goat called “the feather”
because it is, as it were, a feather in the
fiancée’s hair.

Junod 1927, 1:117)

A real feather is, in fact, often worn in the virgin bride’s hair, and the goat which is killed is an offering in honour of her virginity.

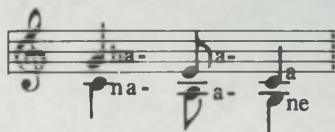
Although the given version of Song 9, *Hinavela Mpfula Mawaku*, was recorded after a harvesting, the present writer has heard it sung during the commencement of harvesting at the women’s symbolic *ku sesa* dance. The occasion was a “first fruit” beer-drink, and the women advanced in line abreast bending alternately to each side. With the toes of each raised foot they shuffled the earth in front of them, an action which resembles Cuénod’s description in his translation of the verb *ku sesa*: “to make a small hole with the foot, drop in a seed, and cover again with the foot” (1967: 185). Daniel da Cruz describes *massessa* as a “danca das donzellas (dance of maidens)” (1910: 177).

The song has also been heard at a men’s beer-drink dance known in urban areas as *ku chaya mandla*, or *makwaya*, which features slapping of the fist into the opposite palm. *Chaya* is a Zulu word meaning “to play an instrument”, *mandla* is Tsonga for “hand”, and *makwaya* is derived from the English word “choir”.

Both beer-songs and *muchongolo* songs utilize predominantly descending pentatonic melodic patterns. The tones sung by a second part, when present, consist of the 4th or 5th, selected systematically by a form of "span" process. The use of this "span" process in Tsonga communal vocal music is more common than that of exactly parallel "harmony", and four examples are given below.

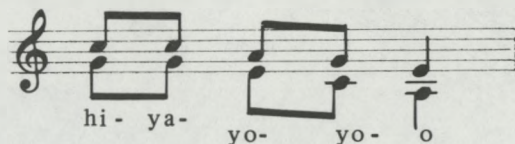
Example of use of the "span" process:

Muchongolo Song Transcription 3 (I Nhlampfi Baku Mabomu)



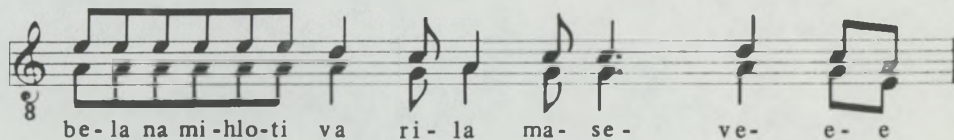
Example of use of the "span" process:

Muchongolo Song Transcription 5 (Tinyandhaye Ya Tindlopfu Tile Ku Chauke)



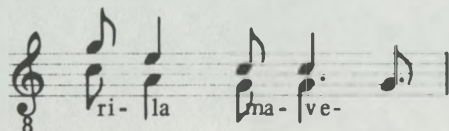
Example of use of the "span" process:

Muchongolo Song Transcription 6 (alternative version of part of the above song)



Example of use of the "span" process:

Muchongolo Song Transcription 9 (Hinavela Mpfula Mawaku)



Southern African use of the "span process" of harmonization is interesting in the light of certain theories (Kirby 1959: 4, 1965: 242, 1966: 281, Kubik 1964: 52, Rycroft 1967: 97) stressing the possibility that parallel vocal harmony in Africa (some writers also include medieval European organum) possesses roots in the natural series, and that man merely imitated the fixed parallel tones heard in stretched strings. The fact that much Southern African vocal harmony is not *exactly* parallel, but varies between 4ths and 5ths according to the narrowing/widening distance between two vertically paired descending pentatonic scales, suggests that the unvarying parallelism of the partials of fingered stretched strings was *not* the source or inspiration of parallel vocal harmony, but that African musical bows and other instruments utilizing the natural series (flutes, horns) are selectively utilized according as they coincidentally fulfill the vocal music norms of the society in question. For instance, the Tsonga *xizambi* friction-bow has become the musical bow *par excellence* in the Northern Transvaal probably because it easily reproduces those paired intervals commonly heard serving as harmony in the communal singing at *muchongolo* dances, social beer-drinks, and large-scale exorcism ceremonies. Although this bow is perfectly capable of reproducing chromatic scales and has limitless possibilities for modulating from key to key, these properties are made use of only so far as they fulfill the usual requirements of the *sung* repertoire.

The "span process" of harmonization in music of the Tsonga national dance, *muchongolo*, forms an underlying harmonic framework for song-composition, and as such constitutes a mechanism for reducing the strong influence of speech-tone, which tends to limit melodic inventiveness and musicality. By providing composers and singers with *alternative* tones (harmonic equivalents or tonal substitutes) for given word-syllables, tones which are considered not to violate speech-tone rules although they disregard their contour, repetitiveness and monotony are avoided and creative expression is achieved.

SUMMARY OF THE MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MUCHONGOLO SONGS

A musical analysis of the performances of 30 *muchongolo* songs revealed the following:

- (i) *muchongolo* songs show an overall preference for the intervals of the descending major 2nd, descending minor 3rd, and descending 4th;
- (ii) all utilize pentatonic melodic patterns;
- (iii) all observe pathogenic descent from an initial peak;
- (iv) typical *muchongolo* drumming patterns contain irregular accents and dramatic gaps;
- (v) 22 employ uncommon meters (only 8 use a basic cycle of 8 or 16 units);
- (vi) 26 utilize call and response.

INTERVAL PREFERENCE IN 30 MUCHONGOLO SONGS

<i>Interval</i> (Total of 917 intervals)	% (approx.)
major 2nd, descending	26
minor 3rd, descending	19
4th, descending	11
minor 3rd, ascending	10.5
major 2nd, ascending	6.5
4th, ascending	6
major 3rd, ascending	5
5th, ascending	4
minor 6th, ascending	3.5
5th, descending	2.5
major 6th, ascending	2
minor 7th, ascending	1.5
8ve, ascending	1.5
major 3rd, descending	1
	100 %

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