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The Role of Music in Shangana-Tsonga Social Institutions

by THOMAS F. JOHNSTON

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During 1968-70, I carried out fieldwork among the Shangana-Tsonga (Thonga, Tonga) of Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal, under grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (no. 2504) and the University of the Witwatersrand. My aim was to (a) identify the social base and musical characteristics of each of the several different musical styles, (b) compare and contrast the styles and show the relationships between them,

(c) identify the unifying principles which incorporate the styles into a whole which can be called Tsonga music, and (d) show similarity/dissimilarity between the Tsonga musical system and that of neighboring groups.

The Tsonga were, in Junod's *The Life Of A South African Tribe* (1927), the subject of a detailed ethnography faulted only by its musical inaccuracies, and they remained until 1968 one of the few Bantu-speaking groups whose musical behavior had not received at least some methodical attention. This is the more surprising because of their outstanding musicality, because of the present interesting Venda/Tsonga symbiosis, and because of the colorful patterns of acculturation (musical and otherwise) involving the nearby Shona, Ndau, Pedi, Swazi, and Chopi. My study therefore aimed to fill a major gap in the southern African ethnomusicological literature.

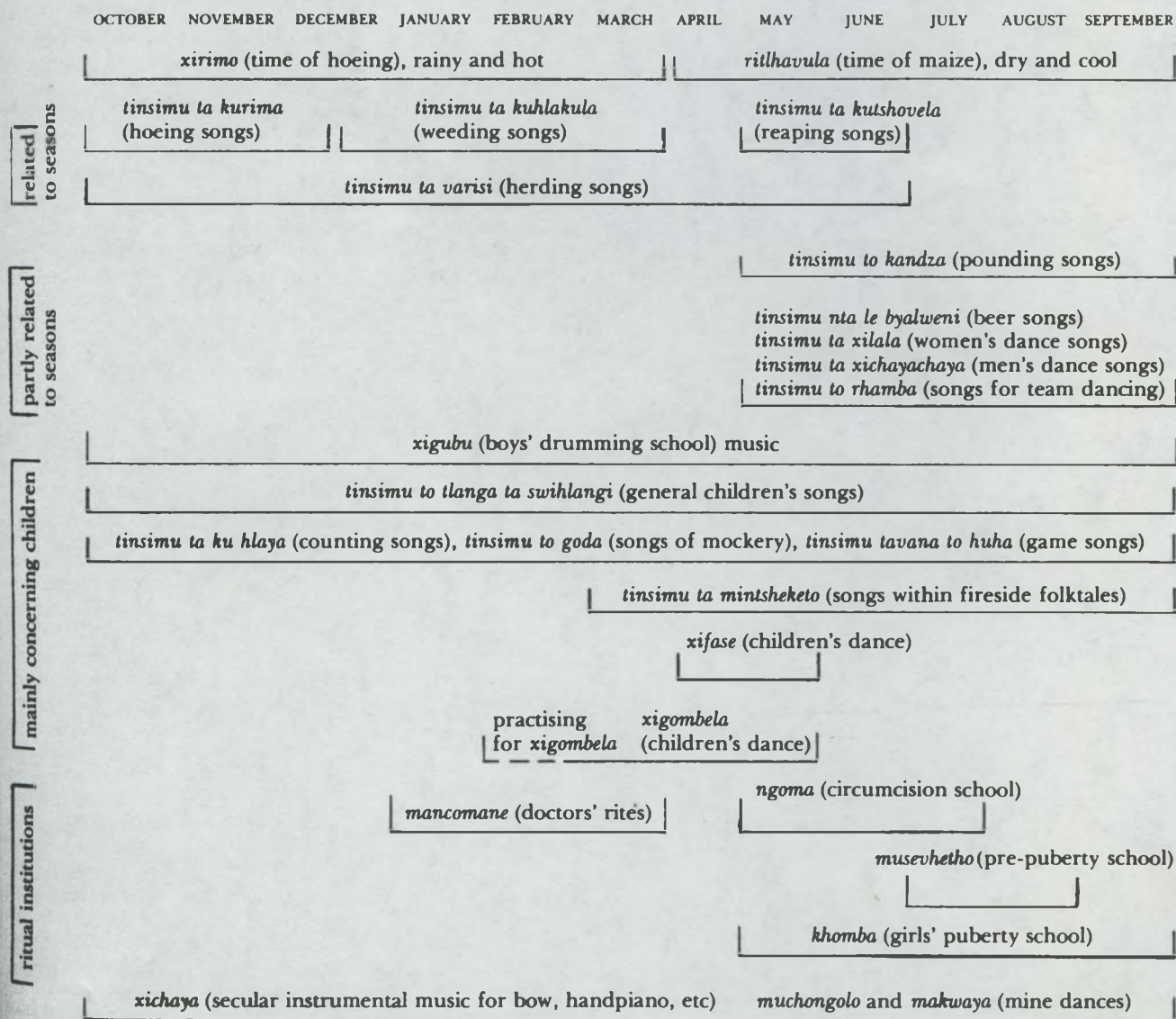


FIG. 1. Communal music of the Shangana-Tsonga: A calendar.

core pattern

khomba rhythms

nyanyula

xisotho

a xigubu rhythm

beer-song rhythms

muchongolo rhythm

pointing

stamping

exorcism rhythms

mandhlozi

xidzimba

FIG. 2. Core rhythm pattern and its variations.

Numbering about 1,200,000, the Tsonga were geographically divided in the early 19th century by Zulu incursions, and are now separated by national boundaries. Both sections are culturally and linguistically distinct from the Tsonga of Zambia, Rhodesia, and the Inhambane area.

Still largely a patrilineal, virilocal people, the Tsonga propitiate their ancestor-spirits and, to a lesser extent, engage in polygyny—some of the chiefs, herbalists, and diviners who acted as my informants and/or hosts possessed up to ten wives. Many of the less wealthy men are engaged in migrant labor, mostly in the Rand mines several hundred miles away.

The round Tsonga huts have sturdy walls of mudcaked reeds or adobe and conical roofs of thatch, and are situated in clusters along the lower slopes of foothills. Some cattle, goats, and fowl are kept, but the primary means of subsistence is maize, planted in October and harvested in May.

The musical calendar is somewhat governed by the horticultural one—people who must be up at dawn to hoe do not organize nocturnal beer-drink sing-songs or exorcism dances. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of musical activities throughout the horticultural year.

The production of communal music is the prerogative of various administrative offices. (Music is an index of the balance of power, and its competitive performance reflects the social allegiances and rivalries of the participants.) Tsonga musical officials are distinguished by type of relationship to the chief: in the "business" relationship, the officials—the exorcist (*dzwavi*) and the doctor-proprietor (*n'anga*) of the circumcision school—are "licensed" (granted permission) by the chief in return for payment; in the "administrative" relationship, the officials—the puberty-school supervisor (*nkulukumba*) and the drumming-school supervisor (*muqambi*)—are appointed.

Tsonga communal vocal music occurs mainly within the context of eight social institutions: (1) children's activities (*vuhlangi*); (2) girls' puberty school (*khomba*); (3) boys' drumming school (*xigubu*—featuring mainly singing); (4) boys' circumcision school (*murhundzu*); (5) the beer-drink (*nhlengeletano*); (6) the work party (*dzava*); (7) the *muchongolo* dance; (8) spirit exorcism (*mancomane*). Instrumental music, played on communally owned drums, horns, and leg-rattles, accompanies the vocal music in certain of these institutions. Xylophones, hand-pianos, and flutes are solo instruments, privately owned, on which the nonritual *xichaya* music is played, anywhere and anytime. The musical bow called *xizambi* is an important "court" instrument used for accompanying chiefly praises, etc., while three other musical bows, *xipendana*, *xitende*, and *mqangala*, are used for the less important *xichaya* music.

The musical style used in the first of these institutions, children's activities, includes the following substyles: (a) *tinsimu ta mintsheketo*, "songs within fireside folktales," also known as *tinsimu ta tingaringeto* (from the customary interpolation "garinga!"); (b) *tinsimu tavana to huha*, "songs accompanying games"; (c) *tinsimu to goda*, "songs of mockery," also known as *tinsimu to solana* (from *ku sola*, "to censure or reproach"); (d) *tinsimu ta ku hlaya*, "counting songs"; (e) *tinsimu ta varisi*, "boys' herding songs." These substyles are together called *tinsimu to tlanga ta swihlangi*, "songs for children's activities"; they are usually 8 or 16 units (pulses) long and of restricted vocal range and utilize small melodic intervals suitable for conveying in song the rise and fall of Tsonga speech-tone. Handclapped accompaniments are the rule.

Girls' puberty school songs consist mainly of didactic formulae performed with miming gestures and accompanied by leg-rattles, drumming, and whistle-blowing. The normal constitution of lines of marching, singing women is an audible sign of stratified authority, and the intervillage

congregating of puberty school horn-blowers is an audible sign of parallel links in the chain of authority (there is one horn to a village, each accessible only to the supervisor).

The boys' drumming school features mainly onomatopoeic drumming formulae (*switshekashekani ta xigubu*) and longer voice-and-drum conversations (*ku vulavurisa xigubu*), while the boys' circumcision school avoids drumming because of the desire for secrecy.

The beer-drink is the scene of the intervillage competitive team dancing (*rhambela phikezano*) and other musical reciprocity, while the united voices of a work party symbolize social reciprocity as kin groups combine to weed gardens or till their chief's soil in fealty.

Muchongolo is the Tsonga national dance and is characterized by dramatic stamping, pointing, and gesticulating. Its music features asymmetrical rhythms and dramatic gaps.

Exorcism music consists of three substyles corresponding to the presumed foreign origin (Zulu, Shona, Ndaou) of the undesirable spirit to be exorcised. Scalar pattern, rhythm, and language are spirit-specific: for Zulu spirits, the style is *mandhlozi*, for Shona *xizimba*, and for Ndaou *xiNdaou*.

These styles of communal vocal music, in the order mentioned, form a continuum of musical complexity (though there is no "simple" music) reflecting their suitability for age/sex groups of different social and biological maturity. The most rigid division results from the sexual exclusiveness of the two initiation schools: the schools must (by law) be attended after puberty but before marriage, and the songs/dances/mimes of each are forbidden to the opposite sex and to preinitiates of both sexes.

The different styles result from modifications of length and number of the song-words, amount of conformity to speech-tone, melodic contour, melodic range, rhythmic pattern, harmonic framework, overall metrical length (cycle), structure and form (ABAC, etc.). For example, speech-tone control is limited by observance of overall "pathogenic" descent from an initial peak to a terminal nadir; a need for cadential drop at phrase-endings; use of a special vocabulary of melismatic nonlexical syllables; use of harmonic equivalents (the approved substitution of one tone for another); vowel elision, terminal syllable contraction or prolongation; and the use of "m" and "n" as syllables. Again, the rhythmic scheme varies, within limits, from a core pattern (fig. 2), and the harmonic framework rests upon a series of tone combinations resulting from two quasi-parallel pentatonic scales (fig. 3). The similarity between these vocal harmonies and the *xizambi* musical bow harmonies (fig. 4) accounts for the popularity and "court" use of the latter. Here I am arguing for the selective use of an instrument according to how well it fulfills preexisting requirements, a theory which reverses the long-standing assumption that African vocal harmony derives from the properties of stretched strings. Support for this theory comes from the fact that Tsonga instruments "imitate" the overall descent, due to breath expiration and the decrease in available energy, found in each cycle of a sung performance; since bowplaying needs no breath, the characteristic could hardly have originated there.

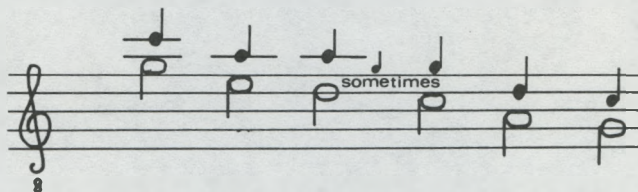


FIG. 3. Harmonic framework: bottom, true melody tones; top, customary "harmonic" equivalents (arrived at by span process).

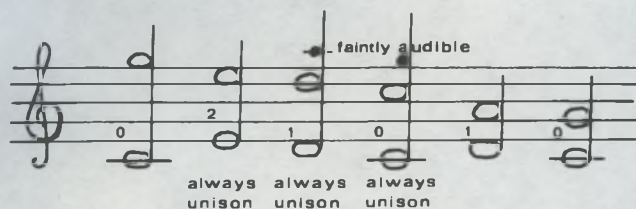


FIG. 4. Xizambi harmonies: top, resonated tones; bottom, 2d harmonic of fingered/unfingered string.

Social acculturation in the form of imported cults from the north is still occurring, and it is accompanied by musical acculturation. Tsonga borrowings from their neighbors are diagrammed in figure 5. Despite the close proximity of various Northern Transvaal groups, attenuated since the Tsonga immigration, musical integrity and identity are still characteristic of each system. Adherence to traditional scale patterns is particularly noticeable; Tsonga scales are pentatonic or (in *xidzimba* and *xiNdau* exorcism and in some circumcision songs) heptatonic, Pedi scales pentatonic, Ndaus hexatonic, Chopi and Shona scales heptatonic, and Venda scales all three.

Tsonga music is atypical of southern African music, displaying elements of central African musical style. The rapid tempi, extended periods (i.e., relatively large number of units per cycle), contrastive interspersing of short and long vocal phrases, and the anticipatory build-up toward points of musical intensity are rarely found in other southern African musics. Certain elements of Tsonga music look northward, toward that of the Plateau and Zambesi Tonga. Other elements (notably *khomba* music) look southward. This "cosmopolitan" diversity reflects the dynamic nature of the Tsonga social process and the musical creative process of selection, modification (re-creation), and assimilation.

My work on Tsonga music prompts me to make the following methodological suggestions:

1. Most African societies classify their songs according to their *musical* characteristics, which correspond to their function. Folklorists who classify songs from different institutions according to song-text subject matter are ignoring the indigenous order.
2. Where a society classifies its musical instruments as either sacred and communally owned or nonritual and privately owned, this indigenous classification tells us more about function than an imposed classification into chordophones, aerophones, etc. The sacred antelope horn that

Hypertrichosis Pinnae: A Taxonomic Character

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The utility of hypertrichosis pinnae as an anthropological marker was first suggested by Dronamraju (1960). It has not been used by anthropologists for this purpose because it changes with age. Its ethnic significance was highlighted in an investigation among the Australian Aborigines (Abbie and Prasad Rao 1965). Recently, it was noted that the change of the character with age on the top of the helix is negligible; hence, this is a useful character for human taxonomy (Ali 1972). Furthermore, Slatits and Apelbaum's (1963) findings as to the distribution of the potential for the character in a given population are of considerable significance.

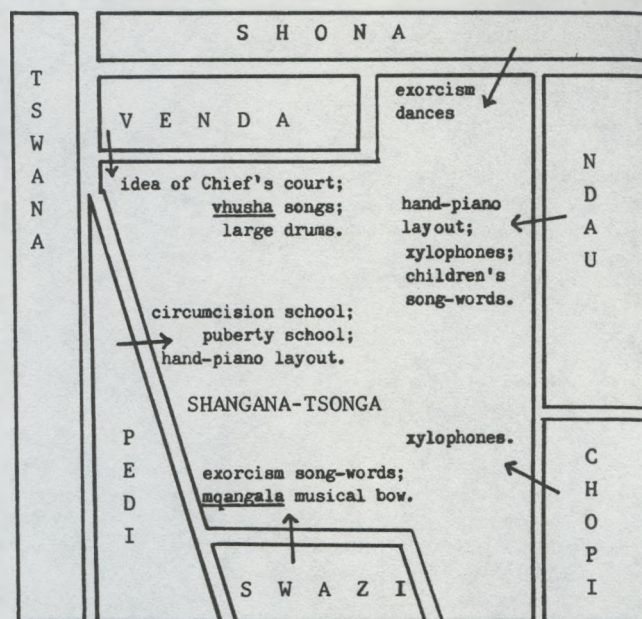


FIG. 5. Tsonga borrowings from their neighbors.

is the symbol of supervisory authority and is used to deflower initiates should not be classified and/or displayed with the privately owned cow horn with which a herdboys signals his personal identity-call. This type of "science" is ethnocentric and makes nonsense out of a meaningful logical system.

3. The possibility should be considered that societies utilize musical instruments as they fulfill preexisting norms rather than base the norms on the properties of the instruments. Southern African vocal harmony stems, would argue, from psycho-historical factors unrelated to the properties of the instruments used, and these instruments have many musical properties that are consistently ignored by the indigenous musician.

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Concerning the genetics of the character, uncertainty persists (Dronamraju and Haldane 1962, Stern et al. 1964). Its coefficient of correlation, the trends of age change (Ali 1972), and the occurrence of 126 of 512 probable combinations corresponding to the nine zones of the pinnae (Ali, unpublished) indicate the possible involvement of multiple alleles in the expression of its different phenotypes.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the usefulness of the character for human taxonomy in the light of the published data.

I have noted elsewhere (Ali 1972) that various authors differ as to the definition of the character. This makes comparison of the published data somewhat complicated though not absolutely impossible. The definitions used by investigators in West Bengal (Sarkar et al. 1961, Basu 1965), Israel (Slatits and Apelbaum 1963), and Kerala (Ali 1972) are similar. It is not worthwhile, however, to compare these series in full, as their representation of the various age