

Triads, trials and triangles:

harmony singing, mobility and social structure in Mozambique

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Making Multipart Music: Case
Studies

This paper emerges as a case-study for the understanding of multipart music in its relation to society and historical processes. It stems from my research in southern Mozambique since 1990 (Carvalho 1999), and includes a diachronic perspective on music performance that goes back to the late nineteenth century. Multipart music is conspicuous in this region, and for the last one hundred and twenty years has been an agent for the occurrence of very significant processes of change and for the establishment of structural trends in the history of labour migrants in Southern Africa. In Mozambique, a kind of multipart singing and dancing was simultaneously a factor and a result of these processes. For this discussion, I shall take into consideration the Mozambican experience and I shall deal with three sets of components: labour migration, the mining industry and urban human settlement, and polyphonic singing. Labour migration is a feature of social history in Mozambique and other countries of southern Africa. For about one century, millions of African men have undergone severe periods of labour in mines in the Transvaal, a region of the Republic of South Africa which possesses very rich mineral resources, such as a very important part of the world's diamond and gold production. In the process of migration, the miners' villages of origin and departure, the mine workers' compounds and, later, their settlements in large cities, were the steps of a three-phase movement that still characterizes social history in the region.

Young migrant workers come from different parts of southern Africa for an average labour period of eighteen months in the mines. Evident patterns of ethnicity differentiate these groups in the mine compounds; among these, expressive behaviour stands as one of the most conspicuous. *Makwayela*, a particular mode of expressive behaviour, stands out in the case of migrants coming from Mozambique.

A demonstration of musical creativity in south-eastern Africa, *Makwayela* is a music and dance genre; the word can also be applied to the group that performs this genre.¹ It was first noticed by the Portuguese colonial administration in the mid-twentieth century: night meetings for singing and dancing in *bairros* (the cane city) of the capital city Lourenço Marques (nowadays Maputo) were perceived as a potential threat to colonial authority.

Makwayela performing groups include ten to fourteen men, dressed in western suits, singing and dancing in a line known as *kunfolo*. Musical instruments are not used; besides singing, only feet stamping is used to produce sound. Men are organized according to their voices, and a hierarchy is recognized among all voices. *Bass*, *baixos* or *quarta voz* is the lowest voice, and is considered as the vocal part that gives most vitality to performance, the "true content" of performance. It is compared to shouting, with a strong male connotation: men's shouting, *berrar*, is the most common description of this voice.² *Tenor* (with the same spelling both in English and in Portuguese),

1 A compact disc is available with examples from different *Makwayela* groups in Maputo; see Carvalho 1998.

2 *Baixo* is supposed to be heard over all other voices; it must be the strongest among the

thina or *tinkhela* in Tsonga, also known as *primeira voz* (the first voice), ranks second in importance. It is described as a thin voice, a “women’s voice”, although men perform it. *Soprano*, *second alto* or *segunda voz* is described as a tiny voice, or as *ruído* (noise). Some performers also know it as *fas pathi* (first part), alluding to a Zulu performing genre that uses a similar kind of voice. Finally, *second basso* or *terceira voz*, a relatively low voice, is said to sing below *second alta*.

A typical song in Makwayela includes four sections: *stokhozele*, *bombing*, *canção*, and *istep*. The *stokhozele* section, also known as *dar o bomba* (lit. to give the bomb) is considered an introductory section.³ It is a short section where the *maestro* announces the first few words of the text to the public. In doing so, he uses a melodic formula that functions as an aid for the performers to pick their different tones. This is standard melodic formula, admitting only slight variations; different numbers of text syllables are accommodated to each note, according to text length.⁴ After a vocal *shh* or *rrr* section divider, *stokhozele* goes back to the departing tone (I), with one or more reiterations of that note.

Canção is the subsequent section. It follows a short intervention by a soloist, generally known as *chairman* (from the English chairman), consisting of only one to three words; this intervention works as a section divider, announcing the end of *bombing* and the beginning of *canção*. *Canção* exhibits more elaborated melodic and harmonic configurations, and displays contrapuntal organizations between one or two soloists who stand against the full four-voice choir. The text presents an idea of *stokhozele* and *bomba* in logical sequence. In the two previous sections, the *maestro* stood in front of the group; just before *canção* starts, however, he joins the line. In a few instances during *canção*, the group abandons its static position (hands crossed behind) and starts a short marching routine from one side of the stage (or ground) to the other. This is called *marcha* (march) and is repeated three to four times. When the fourth or fifth repetition is about to begin, movements change into what characterizes the fourth and last section of *Makwayela*, the *istep*.

The *istep* section features a series of repetitions of the same phrase, with no melodic or harmonic change except for contrapuntal organizations similar to those found in

voices, the base of *Makwayela*. The content of the text must be faithfully rendered and fully perceived by audiences through the *baixo* voice; other voices carry no such responsibility and are allowed many elaborations compromising text intelligibility which *baixos* cannot afford.

3 The word *stokhozele* is used in reference to an expressive mode found in southern Mozambique. It is a kind of oral historical-genealogical poetic narrative, where ascendancy and the life events of a person are narrated in public in a heightened speech mode. This usually happens in moments of ritual transition such as weddings or funerals.

4 Notes always used correspond to I, III and Vth degrees of the scale. Starting in I, it goes to III where some ornaments are performed, falls to V in the octave below, then to I also in the lower octave. Harmonically, these tones make a perfect chord – always corresponding to the beginning of the second section of a piece.

canção. It is characterized by lively gestures and feet stamping, making what is locally known as *dança* (dance). Dance routines may change up to four times during *istep*, thus making a fifth section of the performance. Performers resume the same static position as the beginning, creating a sense of closure.

Body motion routines are distinctive for each section of the *Makwayela* form. In the first section, *stokhozele*, members stay strictly in a straight line, feet apart, hands crossed behind. The *bomba* section follows, with no changes in body position; only their mouths move for the loud singing involved in this part. When *bomba* is over, the *chaiman* rejoins the *kunfolo* (the row) and the *marcha* gets started: performers make a 90 degree turn right and march a few steps, coming back and going forth about three times. A fourth time involves special hand gestures, *kuthyia*: left hand below right hand, both horizontal and spaced about one inch apart, at waist level. *Kuthyia* and feet stamping mark the beginning of the *istep* section.

Another main motional component in *Makwayela* is the bodily behaviour of the *chaiman*. This is an important aspect of the organization of the performing group, since it is the differentiating dimension of *chaiman* versus group. *Chaiman* behaviour is known as *estilo* (style), and each *chaiman* develops his own way of *estilar* (to style). *Estilo* is not a part of a composition, since it changes at the *chaiman's* wish. It displays personal strength and conviction by means of several short actions, and verbal or non-verbal expressions. Energetic leg and arm movements, pulling down one's coat, finger snapping, expressions such as "rrrr" or "shhhh", and words like *famba* (let's go) are among the *estilo* repertoire, and show the audience the *chaiman's* energy and expertise even before a single sound is heard from the *kunfolo*. *Estilo* makes its appearance at *stokhozele* and *marcha*.

Makwayela is a cross border phenomenon. It developed in the cluster of diverse identities that characterizes labor migration in sub-Saharan Africa. From the observer's standpoint, Makwayela and other expressive modes could even be seen as a pan-sub-Saharan Africanism. However, in a closer look, a multitude of true pixel-nations and their differences emerges. The musical structure of Makwayela also emerged from the myriad of modes of thought that result from this multi-pixel image. Makwayela is an expressive mode that was developed by the Tsonga group of Southern Mozambique – province of Gaza; this group is well represented in the migrant labor population of miners in Transvaal, and is also important in the city of Maputo. Groups are made up of about twelve male singers. There are four to five pre-assigned voices or parts in the performance; these parts are interchangeable according to the musical and social context. A local music theory exists concerning the origin and performance of Makwayela. Records show that it has existed since, at least, the 1940's. The Portuguese colonial authorities forbade it, mainly because it was public and it was sung in Tsonga languages. Makwayela groups perform at weddings, christenings, at every kind of communal celebrations, and also in Makwayela competitions.

The independence of Mozambique in 1975 brought the intellectual elite of the Tsonga to power; soon after, Makwayela was sung at the opening of National Assembly meetings and performed by the members of the assembly themselves. It became the

symbol of the fight against tribal behavior, for the modernization of the country: the new government created a National Festival for Music and Dance, where Makwayela became a mandatory piece for all competitors, no matter their ethnic origin or their regional provenance. Makwayela became a national symbol, as it was used virtually everywhere in the South, and a little all over the country. It also became a fundamental part of state paraphernalia, performed by both party and government members, and by groups whose brilliance added significance to state ceremonies. Makwayela groups were established in their hundreds. There were groups established in every factory - sometimes more than one -, in every company, every market-place, in every agricultural production unit, every hospital, in every state administration department.

Makwayela: the hub triangle

Let me speak about Makwayela as a life-triangle. The process of labor migration, as mentioned before, requires a young African man to find a complex set of solutions for a set of intricate problems. There are long distances to cover (hundreds or – sometimes – thousands of kilometers) between their homesteads and the mines (Wenela barracks): Which way to go? How to get there? Also, a choice must be made as to which mine to aim for. Other problems include how to get documents demonstrating name, ancestry, and the minimum legal age to be accepted for mining (18 years old). The intense flow of migrants for many decades demonstrates that solutions for these problems have been put in place, which operate from generation to generation.

Some Mozambican villages (in the Gaza province) stand out as important centers of labor recruiting. In these villages, recruiting is centered in a *Makwayela* group. *Makwayela* stands as the sonic symbol of migration. Young men become *Makwayela* members even before their initiation school takes place. Most skilled performers are most likely to engage in mining in the first place. In so doing, they embark on their own mining life history. When they come to mining age, they are already members of a true brotherhood that provides the path for their future, that is *Makwayela*. Most of these particular villages were also strongly subject to church music, through the action of protestant missions that settled in their vicinity. These villages are the first vertex of a triangle that determines the migration flow in Mozambique.

The second vertex of this triangle is the mine itself. The young miner follows the path of both his ancestors and his kin. In the mine in Transvaal, he is integrated into the barracks of his own ethnic group (or “tribe”, as mining enterprises used to put it). He immediately rejoins *Makwayela*, singing a voice that corresponds to his social status; usually he integrates with a group carrying the same name he knew at home (“The Morning Stars B”, e.g., corresponding to the “Estrela da Manhã”). In mine barracks, among the thousands of miners coming from different parts of Southern Africa, *Makwayela* plays different roles. It is an ethnic marker and it is a solidarity network. It is also a tool for the building of social structure in an alien environment, away from home. Here, newcomers have to perform several tasks of a different nature in favor of the older miners. Their integration into *Makwayela* again follows their performing

skills. Also, participating in *Makwayela* brings important social and material privileges.

A contract period in the mine corresponds to 18 months, and supposedly no miner should be authorized to perform two consecutive periods; yet this happens all the time. After a few periods in the mine, a miner goes back to Mozambique. However, he does not rejoin his home village. His experience in the mine has made him an urbanized African, who deserves nothing less than to settle in the capital city, Maputo, the third vertex of the life-triangle for migrants. This resettling process is often conducted through the agency of *Makwayela*. From the mine to the capital-city, the migrant follows the footsteps of his ancestors, and a third group of *Makwayela* is there to aid him in his search for a job and accommodation. In the city, *Makwayela* groups are the bonds of a social network that provides support in every corner of life, including work and accommodation, as already stated, but also in livelihood, medication, security and so on. This network operates across the city, the province of Maputo and the southern part of the province of Gaza.

The performance of *Makwayela* is manifold. Competitions between groups take place at night, in closed gardens; winners of these contests make good money but, above all, they achieve a remarkable social status. Weddings stand among the most important performing occasions for *Makwayela* groups. Here, songs tell the genealogies of both bride and groom, and make statements about acceptable behavior for married couples. Political celebrations also used to rank among performance occasions; however, since the establishment of the Second Republic, *Makwayela* has lost most of its importance in the governmental sphere.

In later life, many men go back to their home villages, where they take care of their small piece of land (*machamba*). There, they help to maintain the *Makwayela* groups that keep the life cycle going. This corresponds to the closure of the triangle.

Makwayela groups in the different places of the migratory path constitute hubs for the strategy of mobility, as they represent conspicuous signs of ethnicity and network knots in the venture of migration. Multipart singing patterns reveal the sonic dimensions of this important historical and social process, and also the steps of the social status of migrants in their life venture.

Trial

For the young labor migrants, daily life in the mines has been described as severe. Hazing and a certain level of brutality is present, particularly in the treatment of young miners: physical and verbal aggression, sexual abuse and work overload are constant, even coming from their fellow-villagers. These are part of the *mteto*, a code of behavior in the mine barracks that obliges young newcomers to submit. They have to undergo a genuine ordeal for a few months. Like in initiation school, the outcome of such a trial is crucial for each young migrant's perspectives of life accomplishment; true rites of passages marking acceptance in the group are performed in mines. It is, thus, important to say that, for decades, the mining experience has complemented boys' initiation

schools. In these rites, *Makwayela* plays a substantial role in the barracks. It helps to ease life for newcomers who, thanks to their performing abilities, can be integrated into the groups.

Miners returning from the Transvaal, known as *magaiças*, get their price. They receive special social recognition of their knowledge: not only do they have money and experience, the knowledge of other languages, a set of goods that could not be bought in any other way (these may include a blanket, a suit, a hat, shoes, a radio-set and often a bicycle or a gramophone), but they are also the most fitted to get the best marriage opportunities – the best brides.

As a result of *mteto*, strong solidarity ties among *magaiças* are built during a stay in the mines for two or more periods, and these ties are bound by the belonging to *Makwayela*. *Makwayela* is at the same time an expressive mode, a solidarity group, an identity marker in a foreign environment, and the complement to initiation schools.

Triads

Makwayela performance follows the rules of triadic harmony. This is not a native African tradition: protestant missionaries have taught it to Southern Africans since the XIXth century. Mission schools had “mission choirs” that, together with African and American dance traditions, gave birth to several expressive modes in the rich and multicultural context of Southern Africa.

Triads rule not only the formal flow of performance, but also the hierarchy and social structure of the group. The performance of social dynamics comes along with the sonic performance. According to local musical knowledge, each voice has a specific musical function and social connotation. For example:

- *Bass*: the voices of the elders, they stand for continuity and stability in the group.
- *Thina* (standing for “tenor”): the “thin” voices that stand for the women, and their ability to move forward.
- The *Alto*: those who are able to keep everybody together.
- The *Guengue*, the voice that has the ability of generating instability and of challenging all the other voices in real time in a public performance. *Guengue* is a kind of clown or jester who stands at the extreme left of the group, a bass voice, and performs body routines different from the other performers, catching the audience’s attention and pretending that he is always committing mistakes. He occasionally acts like a drunkard, or as an eccentric who suddenly notices that he is acting wrongly and takes on the movements of his fellows. Laughter is the expected effect, which enhances the audience’s reception of the performance.
- *Muthekelele*, someone who performs the *kuthekelele* voice, a short introductory phrase for other musical sections. Similarly he carries out short introductory phrases in other sections of *Makwayela* pieces of repertoire, as well as short solo sections and individual parts against the four-voice background; other members of the group, usually the *principal*, may also perform these parts.

- *Principal* voices are performers who are the oldest in the group; they stand in the centre of each voice-group while performing. Their opinion is respected, after that of the *maestro*.
- The leadership of the group is assigned to the first role, known as *chairman* or *maestro*. He performs the functions of artistic direction and management of the group; he is often the most competent composer within the group. And, while performing, he is the conductor.

Triadic harmony establishes the path for a series of performing characteristics that have idiomatic meanings for identitarian purposes. The recognition of the uniqueness of these characteristics creates a social functionality: for instance, audiences are able to recognize their ancestry, as well as the ancestry of others, in these particular sonic constructions.

Conclusion: multipart music and social structure

The conceptualization of multipart music requires not only the understanding of the interaction of musical texts, but also of what is specific to music made by a plurality of musicians, compared to what is not. Musicians in a group, be it small or large, behave in patterns that are musical and social at the same time. The question arises: is there a social analogy to multipart musical modes of organization and vice-versa? Should we ask, as John Blacking might have put it, “How Multipart Musical is Man?”

How much of personal relationships go into multipart music? *Makwayela*, which we have discussed, is a stage of conflict. Conflict between groups that can lead to physical violence, and that often involves the use of witchcraft: to put a spell on a competitor is very common. So common in fact, that group-singers usually put salt in their socks as a preventive measure against spells. Conflict between members of the same group is not overtly demonstrated; however, performers do not make life easy for each other since there is a hierarchy in the group within which everybody needs to step up. In this sense, *Makwayela* multipart music is a social stage where conflict is unavoidable. Symbolic mediation between music and society, through metaphoric enactment, is conceived to actuate stability and resolution of social forces within a system - local or global. People’s reactions to changing contexts are seen as a problem of symbolic mediation in order to re-establish “the coherence of their lived world and to render controllable its process of reproduction” (Comaroff 1985: p. 3). Emphasis is put on communicative processes such as religious group celebrations, song, theatre, dance, which function as a fusion of “pragmatic and communicative dimensions” (*ibidem*). Both group commentary and group action are understood as products of this kind of symbolic mediation. David Coplan’s (1985) study on South Africa’s black city music and theatre, and Jean Comaroff’s (1985) study on the Tshidi of the South Africa-Botswana borderland are examples of the emphasis on social action as a result of metaphoric enactment. Both studies privilege the interaction between two clear-cut analytic universes: a human group and its social environment - colonial or post-colonial.

However, both tend to minimize the large borderlands between the two universes, and to enlighten the role of group-internal social dynamics. Sub-Saharan ethnomusicology has particularly underlined the dynamics of group performance, and also multipart music, as social action. The study of performance in such a context has been an important tool to empower African societies whose socio-moral integrity “was undermined by the intrusion of the forces of colonial domination and the world market” (Erlmann 1996: p. 161). This is the case with Veit Erlmann’s (1996) work “Nightsong”, which provides a rich perspective - though necessarily different from my own - on the phenomenon of *Isicathamiya*, a performing practice which can be considered as a stem for Maputo’s choral performance. Christopher Waterman (1990) has studied group performance in south-western Nigeria as a creative response to colonialism; David Coplan (1985) explores the history of black performance culture in South Africa as a dynamic force against the harsh background of the apartheid system. As Erlmann puts it, “the victims of these processes perceive the breakdown of their universe as being caused from within the very moral core of their societies” (Erlmann 1996: p. 161). Such an inner view, together with recent post-colonial history, has demonstrated that opposition to discrimination and repression has been but only one aspect of the internal dynamics of expressive modes in Africa south of the Sahara. Multi part choral performance is used to symbolically convey and re-configure a new social setting; it is employed as a strategy for comprehending one’s changing environment, and acting successfully upon it, through the manipulation of symbolic alternative systems of values: *Makwayela* performing groups are the most readily available symbols of successful urban adaptation and upward social mobility for a large group of the migrant population. The manipulation of group sound and body motion, where diverse experiences seem to be encoded, emerges as a privileged metaphoric mechanism for social action. These dynamics are best achieved by a multipart expressive mode, as the case of *Makwayela* is able to confirm.