

Song lines into South Africa's past

Some Xhosa music

Often the last surviving memories from the past are carried in songs. **Dave Dargie** shows this graphically through the recording and exploration of the fascinating lyrics of the Xhosa *Song of Ntsikana*.

It is 1981. Two elderly ladies sit and sing, in a room at the Catholic Mackay's Nek mission station, about 40 kms east of Queenstown, next to the road to Lady Frere. One is called Nosinothi Dumiso, the other is Nomawuntini Qadushe.

In the amusing custom of that area, both have English names based on the occasion of their marriages long ago. Nosinothi is a 'synod', a church meeting. Perhaps Nomawuntini was named with reverence towards the great mountain towering over the mission and the nearby village. That mountain is called 'Three Crowns' because of its triple peak. The mission church is built in imitation of it, with three naves all focusing on one sanctuary and altar.

But the Xhosa name of the mountain gives a different picture. It is called Zingxondo – places of refuge. During the frontier wars against the colonisers during the 19th century people under threat of the colonial military would hide deep in the recesses of Zingxondo. Back in 1981 people still remembered hearing hammering far away in the night, as those

hiding on the mountain made weapons for themselves.

In 1981 I was based at Lumko pastoral institute, at the Catholic Lumko Mission over the mountain from Mackay's Nek. I was trying to get into the local music. The people of the area are Thembu Xhosa, and their music is rich in harmony and rhythm. They play musical bows, instruments made with a single string, but on which one can play both melody and harmony using the overtones of the string.

Nosinothi was playing an *uhadi*, a large bow with a calabash attached as resonator. She sang, and Nomawuntini sang in response to her.

Father Arnold Fischer, a German missionary at Mackay's Nek, had found the two musicians, and offered to get them to perform for me. So I recorded them as they sang traditional songs: *Jikel' emaweni*, made famous by Margaret Singana and Thandi Klaasens, and other songs.

SONG OF NTSIKANA

I asked them about the *Song of Ntsikana*, and the next moment they began to sing a marvellous

version of the song, accompanied by *uhadi*. For a musicologist it was like discovering a live dinosaur – perhaps even more exciting.

Ntsikana, called by Xhosa Christians 'Saint Ntsikana the Prophet', was the first Xhosa Christian. He heard the missionary Johannes van der Kemp preaching to Ngqika and his people at Ngqika's Great Place, not far from the present town of Alice, in 1799. None of the Xhosas were converted in 1799.

It was about 15 years later that Ntsikana, remembering the stories about Christ and God the Father, was converted to Christianity. There was no white man around when Ntsikana underwent his conversion. But now, as a Christian, Ntsikana became a missionary to his own people. He held prayer services with his followers, and composed songs for them to sing at their prayers.

When Ntsikana died in 1821, his followers went to Thyume where new missionaries from Europe had set up a mission. They took with them the story of Ntsikana, and they took his song. Until today the Hymn of Ntsikana is in all the main Xhosa Protestant hymn books but the way it is sung in church is only partly typically Xhosa in style. There is melody, there is harmony, but there is no African rhythm.

I first learned about Ntsikana's song in 1965, when the renowned composer BK Tyamzashe composed new songs for Xhosa Catholic churches. I was convinced that there must still be traditional survivals of the hymn, but how to find them?

Now at last, at MacKay's Nek, I could record a truly traditional version. Not only sung in the Xhosa way, with melody, harmony and rhythm, but with *uhadi*, an ancient musical instrument which the ancestors of the Xhosa probably brought with them on their long, long trek from West Africa hundreds of years ago.

In 1823 the missionaries wrote down the texts of Ntsikana's hymn. Nosinothi and Nomawuntini sang lines which had been written down by the missionaries. They knew one line which the missionaries wrote, but which has not been included in the hymn book version. They also sang two strange and unexpected lines:

Hewu, hewu, lemfazwe kaMlanjeni, Hewu, hewu, lemfazwe kaMfuleni. Alas, alas, this War of Mlanjeni, Alas, alas, this War of Mfuleni. I soon learned that *Mfuleni* means the same as *Mlanjeni* (by the riverside). These are some of the lines of Ntsikana's song sung by Nosinothi and Nomawuntini: *Lentsimbi kaNtsikana*: This is the Bell of Ntsikana (name of his song).

Likhaka lenyanisa (God is) the Shield of Truth.

Zidlanza zinamanxeba: The hands (of Christ) are wounded.

How did a reference to the War of Mlanjeni, which happened about 30 years after Ntsikana's death, find its way into his song?

Mlanjeni is a Xhosa name, and *Mfuleni* is the *hlonipha* or respectful form of that name, which must be used by women members of the Mlanjeni family.

The War of Mlanjeni took place from 1850 to 1853, and was one of the most dreadful of the frontier wars, with the British even resorting to genocide in order to drive the Xhosa under the famous Chief Maqoma out of the

Waterkloof area north of Fort Beaufort. However, when I asked the two ladies about this line of the song, it was clear that they did not know about the War of Mlanjeni, and interpreted the line as referring to some fairly recent family feud.

Tiyo Soga, a son of Soga, Ntsikana's most important follower, was the first Xhosa to be ordained as a Christian minister. He ministered during some of the darkest days of Xhosa history, a time of constant wars against the colonisers and of constant defeat and deprivation from their traditional homes. After the War of Mlanjeni the Ngqiki Xhosa were forced by the British to move right out of their traditional area of the Amatolas. Tiyo Soga ministered to them where they were forced to settle, east of the present town of Stutterheim. In his Journal, Tiyo Soga describes how the Xhosa Christians, defeated and scattered by the British, would gather to

pray after the war and sing Ntsikana's song with many tears.

It is clear that this song meant a great deal to the Xhosa Christians. This was not just because of its value as a sung prayer, but also because it proved to them that God cared about them, that God willed to come to the Xhosa people directly, and not just through Europeans. Ntsikana's song was a kind of national freedom anthem for them.

So where was the connection to Mlanjeni's War? I found the answer discussing this with the renowned historian Professor Jeff Peires.

Peires told me about the Battle of Imvani. In 1851 a combined force of Boers and British killed about 200 Xhosas at Imvani, now a railway station on the line between Queenstown and East London about 30 kms by direct route from Mackay's Nek and Zingxondo. Nosinothi and Nomawuntini's version of Ntsikana's song preserved the



Nosinothi Dumiso with *uhadi* musical bow (right), Nomawuntini Qadushe and Father Arnold Fischer at Mackay's Nek in 1981.

David Dargie

memory of this tragic battle for the local people. The song carried the memory even when, after 130 years, it had faded in the minds of the people.

BY-LINE TO NTSIKANA STORY

There is an interesting by-line to this story, through another song.

At the time of Ntsikana the Xhosa people in that area, did not bury the dead, except for chiefs and other important people. Ordinary people were left in the bush for scavengers. Joseph Williams was a missionary who came to Ntsikana's area in 1814 and Ntsikana met him. Williams' wife drew a picture of Ntsikana (see the illustration). Williams took ill and died in 1818. In the Christian way his followers buried him. His grave can be seen close to the town of Fort Beaufort. When Ntsikana felt he was near death, he instructed his followers to bury him in the Christian way, just like Williams. Ntsikana's grave is near the small village of Herzog, between Fort Beaufort and Seymour. His followers make pilgrimages there until today.

I learned the background to the custom of not burying the dead in this way. There is a certain Xhosa traditional song which is sung in many different places and by many people in the Xhosa area today. It has a strange text, as follows:

Leader: *Yakayaka!* (You ragged thing)

Response. *Ndemka nehlungulwana* (I have departed with the scavenger crow).

I learned from Dr Cecil Manona, a Xhosa academic working at Rhodes University, that to depart with the crow is a Xhosa idiom meaning to die. I was part way to the solution.

Professor Peires, a colleague at Fort Hare, was at that time working at Rhodes University. After speaking

with Dr Manona, he told me about the terrible smallpox epidemic which decimated the Xhosa people in 1770. This disease was brought by the colonists from Europe. The Xhosa people soon learned that it is horribly contagious – to touch an infected person is to become infected. This led to the probably at that time necessary practice of



driving infected people out of the village. I have heard that people afflicted with AIDS are treated unnecessarily in the same way sometimes today.

It became clear that the song re-enacts the driving out of a village of a smallpox victim. 'Get out, you ragged thing!' To which the victim responds: 'I will go to die with the scavenger crows.' Many people still sing this song, without knowing the awful significance of the

words. It is not unlike the old English nursery rhyme:

*Ring a ring of roses
A pocket full of posies
Ah tishoo, ah tishoo,
We all fall down.*

Some people think that the 'ring of roses' refers to the marks on the skin caused by infection with bubonic plague, the 'Black Death' of the Middle Ages. Ah tishoo – sneeze; and fall down dead. This may be so – who can know for sure? Perhaps this nursery song also has long, long roots back into the past. This seems to be the case with the Xhosa song *Yakayaka - Ndemka*.

There are many traditional Xhosa songs which have references to things that happened in the past, people who lived long ago and cultural practices which may be hundreds of years old. Sometimes there are references to the names of people who are no longer remembered. But it also often happens that songs refer to fairly recent events and people. Sometimes it is possible to trace them, and sometimes not.

However, there is no doubt that often the last surviving memories from the past are carried in songs. If only we could interpret them all correctly! But there is one thing about Ntsikana's song: it is the only Xhosa traditional song from that time where we know for certain who the composer is. Since then I have recorded several more traditional versions of Ntsikana's song, each one adding a bit more to our knowledge of a fascinating piece of music and an important figure in our history. LB

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