

Song lines into South Africa's past

Bow music of Maphophoma

In the early 1980s **Dave Dargie** went deep into Zululand to track down traditional bow singers. He was rewarded with some remarkably rich songs performed by old people, including one whose grandfather was wounded at the battle of Isandlwana.

In a round house in a village an old lady sits, holding a musical bow. As she beats the bow, she hums, and then she sings in a gentle, deeply moving voice. The song is called *Kusemathanjeni* - the place of bones. The singer is Princess Phumuzile Mpanza, one of the daughters of the former Zulu King Dinizulu, but one might say that the real singer is a woman of the deep past.

I cannot go into that place of bones, she sings, the place where all the men of her clan were slain in battle by the warriors of another clan. Now she, the other women and the children of her clan, have been taken into the clan of their enemies, and their menfolk are just bones spread over the old field of battle.

Princess Phumuzile begins another song. This is also a song of mourning. It is called *Abantu baphelile* - the people were destroyed. This is a song about the leaders of a people, who were killed in war against the whites long ago. It is an ancient freedom song, calling on young people to marry and have children, and become new leaders of the people.

The village is called Maphophoma, and it is in the district of Nongoma in the north of

the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The year is 1982, and Princess Phumuzile is 81 years of age. The musical instrument she plays is a large bow with a brass string. A large calabash attached to the bow stick acts as resonator for the instrument. In Zulu this bow is called *ugubhu*, a name referring to the hole in the calabash resonator.

A MAGIC MOMENT

For some years I had been seeking out African musical bows and the people who play them.

There are various kinds of such bows. Some use calabash resonators, some old oil tins, for some the player uses the mouth as resonator. Some are played by beating, some by plucking, some by scraping or bowing with a reed or perhaps a small bow strung with animal hair.

The plaintive, touching sounds of these instruments has been a fascination for me ever since, in 1976, I first heard recordings made by the famous musicologist Hugh Tracey of the Xhosa *uhadi*, which is physically the same instrument as *ugubhu*, but is played slightly differently.

Over many years I hunted out musical bows, from the Xhosa area to the north of Namibia, in many

areas of South Africa and its neighbours, among many different peoples.

From 1977 to 1989 I worked for the Catholic Church, promoting the composition of new church music in African styles. Wherever I went, I also tried to record and document the local traditional music. With the march of Western 'civilisation' into traditional Africa, much wonderful old music was becoming an endangered species. I could not bear to see the old music just die and disappear forever, so as far as I could, I was trying to do something about it. My special interest was the music of the bows.

The famous Princess Magogo ka Dinizulu was known as a performer of marvellous old songs with the *ugubhu* bow. Hugh Tracey had made recordings of her. The musicologist David Rycroft had written powerful articles about Princess Magogo and her songs. But now it was feared that Princess Magogo was the last player of the *ugubhu*. I was anxious to see if any more players could be found, before all disappeared.

I had had the privilege of working several times with Brother Clement Sithole, a Zulu who is also a Benedictine monk. Brother Clement composes fine church songs in true



Princess Phumuzile Mpanza with the "ugubhu" musical bow in 1983.

traditional Zulu style, masses, psalms and other songs. For his psalms he uses another type of bow called *umakhweyanq* a bow which was not as rare and hard to find as *ugubhu*. Brother Clement had been transferred to Nongoma. I asked if he could find any traditional bow players I could record.

He found out about the village of Maphophoma, and let me know. At that time in 1981 I visited the University of Zululand at KwaDlangezwa, so I took the opportunity to visit Brother Clement at the school where he was working at Nongoma. I recorded a number of his church compositions, and then the two of us headed out to Maphophoma to Princess Phumuzile, herself a half-sister of Princess Magogo.

With me I took a Xhosa *uhadi* which I had made, in case we found someone who could play *ugubhu*, but who did not have one. We found Princess Phumuzile doing chores around her homestead.

She told us it had been many years since she had last played *ugubhu*, but she took up my *uhadi* at once

played it as *ugubhu*, and began to sing. She sang *Kusemathanjani* and two other songs, and then she sang a song using Brother Clement's *umakhweyanq* bow. I recorded these songs and it was a magic moment. When we returned to Nongoma I was already planning to return to Maphophoma.

SONGS OF BATTLE AND PROTEST

My second visit to Maphophoma, again with Brother Clement, was in March 1982. To our delight, we found that Princess Phumuzile had made her own *ugubhu* bow with a deeper tone than mine, more suited to her taste. This time I was able to record her singing the ancient freedom song *Abantu baphelile*.

It was clear that this song and *Kusemathanjani* dated back into the 19th century, to the times of the founding of the Zulu nation and the period of resistance against the colonists. The princess sang two further songs with *ugubhu*. Like three of the songs I had recorded on the previous visit, these songs reflected aspects of traditional Zulu life such as comments on the

behaviour and activities of people or reflecting royal pride. These five songs may have been very old or more recent as they did not refer to specific historical events.

Some other people came to the performance, including two sisters, Mrs Uzulu E. Zulu and Mrs Ziphokuhle Nyandu, who looked alike enough to be twins. These sisters took Brother Clement's *umakhweyanq* bow and sang with it.

First they sang songs commenting on traditional life and the behaviour of people, but then they performed two protest songs. The first *Vangibiza, ngavuma* - You called, I answered - accuses the police of doing nothing when there was fighting and killing among the people. The second song *Sababona abelungu* - We saw the whites, says '... we saw the whites come to this country and take everything from the blacks. Happy are the whites, because they get the taxes!'

I recorded all these songs.

Towards the end, there was a stir at the door of the house, as an elderly man came in. When there was a pause in the singing he tried to take the *ugubhu* bow. People said, don't let him. He is not right in the head, he will go on too much. He was Mr Bangindawo Mpanza, the husband of the princess, and was 83 years old.

I sensed at once that here was somebody very special, and made it clear that I very much wanted to record him. What treasure he gave! His heart was so full of his musical and poetic messages that songs and poems just came boiling out of him. Perhaps one could understand that some people could get tired of his outpourings, but even more, one could feel his burning desire to share what he had to give.

Mr Mpanza's grandfather had fought against the British at the famous battle of Isandlwana, where

the Zulus inflicted the worst defeat by an indigenous people on a British army in colonial history. His grandfather was shot by the British, but not killed. So he lay still, pretending to be dead, until he had the chance to stand up again in safety. He made it back to his village and recovered his health, and lived to tell the story.

After every song Mr Mpanza recited praise poetry, including telling the story of his grandfather. It was very likely his grandfather who gave him the messages which he constantly passed on in his songs and poetry: young men should learn to be brave, and try to equal the deeds of the past. 'The great people have all died,' he lamented, 'only useless people are left..' 'The great heroes of the past are dead. There is now no hero left alive.

Again and again in his songs Mr Mpanza referred to the wars fought by the Zulu people. *Zulu, bayimpi!* says one of the songs. 'Zulu man, an army is attacking us! *Zimbube, zimbube*, calls the song rise up, Lions, resist the enemy.

Mr Mpanza sang another version of the protest song *Vangibiza, ngavuma*, sung by the twin sisters. His version was called *EMkuze kunjani?* - How are things at Mkuze, you policemen? How are they at Ingwavuma? Let us speak about the blood... This protest song most probably dates to an earlier time in the 20th century.

Another that may date back to earlier times was the song *Uthi angimuke* - 'You say I must go away. The white intruders came over bridges and rivers, and ordered me to go away. From whose land should I go away? My own land may be small, but it is not too small for me. Oh King, we would rather go to Nngogo and throw ourselves there..' Nngogo was a less attractive but more secure place. If the whites threw them off their land, they would at



Brother Clement Sithole and bow singer Mr. Bangendawo Mpanza in 1983.

least prefer to go there than be driven away entirely.

RECORD OF BEAUTIFUL SONGS

I made two more visits to Maphophoma later in 1982 and again recorded Mr and Mrs Mpanza. Brother Clement had found another player of the *ugubhu* bow. Mrs Natalina Mhlongo of Nongoma, then 79 years of age. I recorded her singing some of the old royal songs, with a group of people singing with her. They were beautiful, moving performances.

Then in 1983 Brother Clement and I went with some interested people, to arrange for the Mpanzas and other musicians from Maphophoma to perform at a musicology conference at the Durban branch of the University of Natal. They came and performed and many people were touched by their songs, but after that I regret there was no follow-up. Trouble broke out in the area, classes were suspended at the university and I made no further visits.

It was at least some comfort to me that people could hear the wonderful songs, that students could still study my recordings, that people could still hear the old songs if they took the trouble. Who knows what songs still survive from the deep past, sung in age-old villages off the beaten track? Let us hope that there will still be some people who are willing to go there and make recordings. Brother Clement is still around, with his *umakhweyane* bow, at Inkamana monastery near Vryheid. He knows the way. LB

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