

What is traditional South African music?

Looking at *Ezodumo's* maskanda

Is there such a thing as pure traditional music in South Africa? **Caleb Okumu** looks at SABC's *Ezodumo* programme and finds that traditional music is not easy to define.

In South Africa there have been several music programmes that focus on African music. One such programme that claimed to present traditional African music was *Ezodumo*. The programme's website listed *Ezodumo* as 'a traditional music show that focuses on maskanda, tshikono, tshikombela and other styles of traditional music.' However, the musical styles presented were mainly maskanda, mbaqanga and isicathamiya.

Mbaqanga is an urban genre of popular music and isicathamiya is a vocal genre in close harmony that does not use instrumental accompaniment.

Isicathamiya is predominantly performed by males. One explanation for this is that it developed as hostel music where only men who worked in the gold and diamond mines of South Africa resided.

However, since culture is not static, one of the leading exponents of the genre, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, have recently incorporated some instrumentation largely through collaboration with Western musicians. An example of this was found in the 1986 *Graceland* project with Paul Simon, and more recently with Dolly Parton, the American country music singer, and Des'ree, a British R&B singer.

R Graham's *Stern's Guide to Contemporary African Music*

contends that in Africa almost all music is a combination of tradition and innovation. Such innovations are responsible for these sorts of collaborations.

Of all the genres that were presented in *Ezodumo*, maskanda was one of the most traditional. Maskanda is Zulu traditional music with the principle instrument being the guitar.

When I asked why the programme was referred to as 'traditional' Themba Mkhwani, from the production company which produced *Ezodumo* for the SABC, explained, 'When we were growing up in KwaZulu-Natal we saw traditional musicians performing maskanda on the guitar and the concertina. Although the guitar and concertina were Western, the sounds were authentic Zulu and the melodies were traditional Zulu melodies.'

Traditional Zulu melodic and harmonic sequences in maskanda compositions, regardless of the instruments used, qualify the music as Zulu traditional. The Zulu maskanda guitar and the concertina have since been termed as traditional by practitioners through the process of appropriation.

The patterns of maskanda music have remained recognisably Zulu in idiom and social construction. A typical maskanda pattern comprises a solo acoustic guitar prelude followed by a concerted

instrumental section before the vocals enter in antiphonal or solo-chorus rendition. A distinctive praise section is chanted in fast tempo in the middle section before the vocals re-enter the performance. Dance, especially the *indlamu*, is part of the maskanda performance.

Thuso Motaung, one of the presenters, contends that the programme portrays traditional music because, 'In South Africa we have got nine black languages with different cultures like Venda, Shangaan, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi and all that. So the programme is the one and only programme that brings us all together. If you watch the programme you notice that most of the artists performing... are in their traditional attire; like the Ndebele, the Basuto and the Zulus. Also the way they dance differently in their own line of their tradition.'

Motaung stresses the 'traditional attire' of performers. In Africa, traditional attire makes cultural statements and different ethnic groups have what I call 'ethnic colours'. The Xhosa, for example, are most likely to adorn garments in rich orange, black and creamy white. The maskanda performers would most likely dress in leopard skin printed vests and animal skin loins.

All the people in this programme stated that what is traditional is the melodies, the dress code, the dance

styles and the instruments used. Although the guitar is a Western instrument, over the years it has qualified as a traditional instrument as in maskanda. Andrew Tracey declares that the maskanda guitar is a Zulu traditional instrument because of the way it is tuned and played.

Before the missionary and colonial era traditional African music was linked to the everyday activities of indigenous communities. It was functional in that it was performed on social occasions like initiation and burial ceremonies, celebrations and good harvest rituals.

In traditional African societies, music making is generally organised as a social event. Public performances take place when members of a group or a community come together for leisure or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival, or collective activity, such as building bridges, clearing paths, going on a search party, or putting out fires - activities that in industrialised societies might be assigned to specialised agencies.

But contact from outside the community brings in external influences creating a new dynamism in cultural traditions.

The perception that traditional music belongs to rural areas and non-traditional music to urban ones is not feasible because of the dual nature of contemporary African societies. Many urban communities maintain dual linkages with their rural background and vice versa. The maskanda tradition permeates all Zulu speaking areas including Johannesburg and other urban centres where Zulu speakers are found.

But listening to maskanda is not limited to Zulu speakers. It is listened to by all groups who are exposed through touring artists and

electronic media. The maskanda musician, Phuzekhemisi is a popular attraction at many music festivals locally and abroad.

The producers of *Ezodumo* described the music as traditional but another school of thought would term it 'neo-traditional' because of the merging of African and Western music into exciting new sounds. Music presented as traditional African is, by and large, a mixture of Western and African traditional influences. The music is packaged as a commodity rather than reflecting the age-old tradition.

Neo-traditional music has direct links with commercialisation, marketing and mass appeal. The changing lifestyles of most African communities has forced a shift in the production, dissemination, consumption and experience of music. In the words of Bennett in *The Study of Ethnomusicology*: 'We are living in a new era, having entered a period of history in which the world is... a single unit of culture... the typical Third World music now available for study is the result of a mix of stylistic and conceptual elements from traditional and Western cultures.'

All this explains the frustration experienced when attempting to define traditional music in contemporary Africa. The debate between the concepts of traditional music versus popular music is still alive. Bhodloza Nzimande, an *Ezodumo* presenter insists that the programme played traditional music when he explains: 'When it comes to culture you find that for the Zulus the music that they sing and dance to is something that they started from home when they were young and still growing. They can add some instrument here and there but whatever they sing is something that they were practising when they were still young. This

makes an impact on the whole nation especially the nine (black) languages. They all watch this programme. They are brought together into believing in themselves because we have our own customs and traditions.'

According to Nzimande, tradition is 'something that people do when they are still young and growing'. The question that arises from this is how to classify the music that is still functional in traditional African societies. The music that is still used to accompany social events such as initiation rites, traditional weddings, work and play songs and funeral dirges evident in many rural communities. This is the music that has for a long time been known as 'traditional'. It is apparent that the definition of tradition varies from community to community.

At another level the increasing interaction of different musical influences has resulted in a category of music referred to as 'world music'. World music arises mainly from the difficulty of Western commerce to categorise music from the non-European tradition in their music shelves. This is the 'politically correct' renaming of what used to be called ethnic or primitive music. It now appears in contemporary user-friendly language.

At the end of the day all music is either traditional music with foreign elements or foreign music with traditional elements. Any which way according to a Nigerian Yoruba chief, Joshua Olufermi, 'our tradition is a very modern tradition.'

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