

## Liberation songs sung by black South Africans during the 20th Century

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This paper focuses on the orally transmitted liberation songs of the black liberation movements in South Africa, and is primarily concerned with two major questions: (a) the lyrics of the songs, which mirrored sociopolitical conditions and the contours of black thought during the Apartheid era, and (b) the transcription of a selection of these songs which reflect the modifications in style the songs underwent in order to mirror the changes in black thought with regard to the liberation struggle.

The rationale for this research was that in the South African context, the black liberation struggle was paramount and in this conflict one of the transformatory forces which manifested itself was the extensive use of liberation and protest music. The aesthetic and stylistic evaluation of these songs was, however, preceded by the recording of historical facts implicated in the songs. This paper highlights the power of liberation music AS A mass medium for purposes other than entertainment.

*Through song and dance a people are able to share their burden, triumph, sadness and gladness of heart. They sing songs about the common oppressor or exploiter . . . songs can be used to draw people together and unite them in one common aim, goal and purpose*

Willie Peacock (in Carawan & Carawan, 1990: 240)

### Introduction

Liberation music is not unique to a particular country or century, for as long as inequality between people exists, those who feel oppressed will find strength and inspiration in music. The tactics and situations of liberation singers throughout the world change over the ages but the goals remain the same: better working and living conditions without discrimination for ordinary people.

In the South African context, the black liberation struggle was paramount and in this conflict one of the transformatory forces which manifested itself was the extensive use of liberation or protest songs. This is mainly due to the fact that music, in the African culture, features in all emotional states and it is used as a vehicle through which people learn about life and, among other things, recount current and historical events. This statement is corroborated by Steve Biko, the black South African activist who died in detention. 'To the African, music and rhythm are

not luxuries but part and parcel of their way of communication. Any suffering we experienced was made more real by song and rhythm' (Biko, 1978:60). This was one of the main reasons why music rather than politics provided the real voice of black South Africans until the early 1990s, the other reason being that there were no other channels open to protest as all other vehicles of political expression had been banned.

For this presentation a selection of black liberation songs was thus collected, transcribed and classified and then placed within their correct historical and socio-political context. The contours of black liberation songs were thus established by means of transcriptions and two classification systems, motivated by texts, which incorporated aspects of South African history, and melodies, which allowed for melodic classification of transcriptions of songs according to musical genre.

## **Transcriptions and classification**

### *Transcriptions*

The liberation songs were viewed as a response to a particular experience in South African history, and changes in style which the songs underwent mirrored the black liberation struggle. The researcher thus considered it essential that these songs be transcribed and systematically classified for future reference and preservation for posterity. Songs sung before the 1950s were reasonably easy to transcribe in Western notation, as they were essentially grounded in European and American music. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions, however, saw black South Africans begin articulating their opposition in more traditional genres. These songs were in the oral mode, stressing cultural roots from traditional backgrounds, which brought with it many problems for transcription. This problem was compounded by the fact that the creators of the song and their point of origin are often lost in the obscurity of the past. Despite these constraints the researcher considered that it was important to salvage these songs for posterity. The researcher agrees with Ndlovu (1991) who states that African music can best be described by performance, but disagrees with his viewpoint that African music must be transcribed according to African terms and according to African criteria. Should Ndlovu's suggestions be heeded, these songs would remain the property of black South Africa and scholars in African music. To make the songs accessible to most people, a notation had to be used which is universally understood. Herein lay a major problem, as no single notation can accurately portray the complexity of traditional African music.

In order to gain a credible insight into the music, and for the sake of authenticity, it was decided to transcribe as many songs as possible from video and audio recordings of rallies, meetings, marches and funerals as these sources offer additional insights into the music. A Western notation was used and the researcher thus has no illusions of the definitiveness of the transcriptions. Ideally, these transcriptions should be used in conjunction with the video and audio material from which the songs

were transcribed, for accurate reconstruction and understanding of the songs and so that the true essence of the performance can be captured. Transcription must thus not be considered to be a substitute for the oral mode, but where the oral mode is no longer available because time has distanced researchers from the original, transcription is of immeasurable value.

### *Historical and stylistic classification*

Each liberation song contains a powerful critique of a key issue in the liberation struggle and the lyrics often sketch the conditions which inspired the singers, thus helping to set the songs in their proper historical perspective. The songs are not only historical records of popular consciousness of South African blacks, but they also reflect style modifications the songs underwent due to deteriorating socio-economic conditions. There is thus a distinct interrelationship between style and historical characteristics.

### **Liberation songs sung from 1900 until 1950**

The liberation songs sung until the 1950s reflected the Christian conviction of non-militancy and courted no political confrontation. This was mainly due to the fact that up until the 1940s black politicians consisted mainly of the elite, who were products of English-medium mission schools. The Christian environment in which they were educated influenced their political views as well as their songs, most of which were choral works which could not be performed spontaneously in response to a certain situation.

As the main composer of liberation songs during this period was a Zulu, Reuban Tholakele Caluza, and most of these songs are in Zulu, it was decided to concentrate on these compositions within the Zulu milieu. The Ohlange Institute in Durban, where Caluza was a student before becoming a staff member, provided education to many early black politicians and musicians, making it a fertile environment for the composition of liberation songs. As conditions for black South Africans deteriorated due to discriminatory laws by the white government, the style of the songs changed to reflect the mood of the people. In order to demonstrate these style changes the songs up until the 1950s were classified as *imusic*, *iRagtime*, and *isiZulu*.

### *Imusic*

For Zulu speakers up until the turn of the century, the prevailing category of music that symbolized the identification with English values was *imusic*. Erlmann (1991) states that it was the least politically overt musical category and as such, was essentially grounded in European and American music.

In 1912 the SANNC (South African Native National Congress), which changed its name in 1923 to the ANC (African National Congress), was

established. It was the first nationwide umbrella black South African political organization. The reason for its establishment was developments affecting the black population immediately prior to this date, amongst other things a colour bar which was built into the South African Act of 1909. The SANNC's intended strategy was clearly explained by its first president, John Dube, who stated (in Motlhabi, 1985:39) that 'the Africans are approaching the Government, not with assegais but respectfully as loyal subjects, with the intention of airing grievances and removing the obstacles of poverty, prejudice and discriminatory legislation'. This approach was clearly reflected in the protest songs, classified under *imusic*.

The imposition of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 was the first problem with which the SANNC had to deal. This Act laid down the basic guidelines for land division in South Africa, and the blacks were left with about 13% of the country's total area. The SANNC reacted sharply and launched a nationwide campaign against the Act and the song, *Si Lu Sapo* or *I Land Act* composed by Reuban Tholakele Caluza, was a direct response to the Land Act. This song also became the anthem of the SANNC and was followed in quick succession by a further set of songs promoting the Congress and calling for unity of all black South Africans.

Due to declining black autonomy and deteriorating class privileges, Caluza's works began to indicate a shift away from the *imusic* style of those who were perceived as the oppressor, towards a style that blacks could identify with and in this way express anticolonial sentiments more forcefully. He began to look at ragtime songs, *iRagtime*, an example of an Afro-American cultural model.

### *iRagtime*

Black South Africans had first gained experience of Afro-American culture and ragtime through the visits of Orpheus McAdoo and his Jubilee Singers between 1891 and 1898. They were the first representation in South Africa of black life and living conditions in the United States and 'audiences throughout Natal celebrated the descendants of former slaves as their "music heroes"' (Erlmann, 1991:61). It is thus not surprising that Caluza's liberation music shifted from the *imusic* category to *iRagtime*, due to the growing interest in syncopated music among the masses. *iRagtime* was not only more compatible with Zulu speech patterns but it contained ethnic components Africans could readily identify with.

The first indication that Caluza was moving away from *imusic* was heard in the ragtime piano solo which Caluza plays to introduce the solemn *Vulindhlela Mtaka Dube* in *imusic* style (Caluza's Double Quartet 1930: Compact Disc). The first protest song which the researcher could find where the composer merged ragtime with topical lyrics was *Ixeghwana* (Old Man) or *Ricksha Song*, composed in 1917.

During the First World War (1914–1918) the SANNC kept a low profile, hoping that the situation of the blacks would improve after the war. Conditions for blacks, however, deteriorated and after the war a severe drought ravaged the kraals in South Africa and thousands of blacks

streamed into the cities in search of work. Many songs were composed lamenting the migrant labour system under which workers from rural areas were forced to leave their homes in order to seek work in urban areas. *Sa ni bona* in *imusic* style by Caluza, describes a family's search for a young migrant labourer in Johannesburg and their appeal for him to return to his crying children at home. Another popular song by Caluza, *uBunghca*, in *iRagtime*, can be seen as a lament of the situation of the migrant labourer in Johannesburg during the 1920s.

As all these liberation songs are proper choral works it must be assumed that they were sung by the Ohlange Institute Choir on their tours. As the subjects were very topical, black audiences could identify with the songs which expressed their own feelings of protest at the sociopolitical conditions facing black South Africans. Countrywide tours by black performance groups were unusual, as curfew regulations restricting concerts and passes required by blacks travelling outside their own provinces were major obstacles to ventures of this nature.

The policy of the SANNC remained devoid of militancy, but as the black urban population's prospects steadily deteriorated, dissatisfaction mounted. The 1919 strike against the restrictive pass laws which had come into existence in 1913 was the first public protest organised by the SANNC. Gathering in their thousands behind the central pass office in Johannesburg the demonstrators sang *God Save the Queen* and raised cheers to the British Crown (Holland, 1989:44). Rioting broke out when police baton-charged the crowd and 700 demonstrators were taken to prison. Roux (1966) makes mention of the fact that crowds swarmed outside the magistrates' courts where the trials of those arrested were taking place, singing *Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika*, composed by Enoch Sontonga, and demanding the release of the prisoners. This song was popularized by the SANNC and Caluza's *Silusapho Lwase Afrika* was eventually replaced in 1919 by *Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika* as the official anthem of the SANNC also in the *imusic* style.

As discriminatory laws against the black population increased in number, more songs were composed in the *iRagtime* style which was clearly meant to indicate hostility towards the white oppressors. During the 1930s there was a resurgence of ethnic pride and black South Africans came to the insight that their position could be strengthened by a black identity in opposition to white racism. In 1932 Mark Radebe (in Erlmann, 1991:76), a leading musical ideologue and Johannesburg music critic, also argued that a genuine national musical idiom had to be 'based on the only real Bantu music, namely, its folk music'. Liberation songs in Natal arose in the *isiZulu* performance idiom for the expression of Zulu ethnic identity, in opposition to what was perceived as the racism of Natal's white settlers. It was, however, only after the 1950s that authentic African musical elements became entrenched in the liberation songs.

### **Liberation songs sung after 1950**

Liberation songs falling into this period served a propaganda function where artistic value is of minor importance as the message takes priority

over musical expression. The researcher decided to classify these songs as a subgenre of South African black folk music, mainly due to the fact that from the 1950s the songs became part of the oral tradition and '[m]ost definitions treat oral tradition as fundamental to folk music, if not its most salient feature' (Bohlman, 1988 : 14). The advantage of the oral mode is manifested in the ability of groups to carry out spontaneous and improvised singing in response to any situation. This sentiment was echoed by the well-known South African singer, Miriam Makeba, when she stated:

In our struggle, songs are not simply entertainment for us. They are the way we communicate. The press, radio and TV are all censored by the Government. We cannot believe what they say. So we make up songs to tell us about events. Let something happen and the next day a song will be written about it

(*Sangoma*, 1988: Record cover).

Traditional wedding, work and children's songs as well as hymns were adapted to become liberation songs. Despite the fact that urbanization must have introduced black liberation singers to Western musical styles, their song style, with its functionality, its antiphony, its group nature, its repetitive and cyclical nature, its improvisational character and its rhythmic patterns which invite the body to move, remained close to their traditional rural links.

In 1948 the National Party under Malan gained control and implemented its policy of *apartheid* with further discriminatory legislation against the blacks. A vast power base for political action emerged amongst the blacks which developed into mass mobilisation and militant resistance. There seemed to be a growing conviction that overt political confrontation was the only way in which blacks could hope to reform the South African social and political order. This viewpoint was clearly supported by a new generation of ANC members who constituted a major pressure group within the ANC itself. This group, the CYL (Congress Youth League), began 'to revise drastically the earlier approach of the ANC and to jettison completely its defeatist and apologetic tactics' (Motlhabi, 1985:41). Among the leaders were Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe. Many examples of liberation songs containing the names of these people, e.g. *Baba Mandela*, *Papa Sisulu* and *Mandela Wethu* are transcribed. Often the names of other leaders were superimposed for different verses. In 1949 the CYL authorised an official ANC sign – the clenched right hand with the thumb pointing to the right shoulder. 'This was to be a symbol for Africa and a sign of Unity, Determination and Resolution, which, with the congress flag and the Anthems *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica* and *Mayibuye iAfrika* became the outward signs of a renewed search for self-confidence' (Walshe, 1987 : 291).

As the Liberation struggle increased in fervour, so did the tone of these songs in order to reflect the mood of militancy. This was verified by Jon Qwelane, when speaking of the 1976 riots initiated by the black youth he says, 'when children did the unimaginable and tackled the apartheid monster by the horns, something of a new culture asserted itself in black neighbourhoods. The freedom song came into its own'

(1991:5). He goes on to explain that putting trials and tribulations to song was nothing new, but the revival of singing freedom songs was enthusiastic and accompanied by a new level of defiance which had even seasoned campaigners wondering if they had slept through the revolution.

Video footage of marches and demonstrations from the beginning of the 1980s, however, indicated that a new brand of demonstrator had arisen; the chanting of slogans and the *toyi-toyi* had replaced the freedom song. The easing of *apartheid* measures, the release of political prisoners and the return of exiles, all had an impact on the liberation song: 'Composers of freedom songs are finding work harder to come by' (Qwelane, 1991:5).

On 11 February 1990 Nelson Mandela was released. At all the rallies to welcome him home, thousands sang, asserting their co-operative identity and pride that their long struggle for freedom had not been in vain.

### Conclusion

These liberation songs are unique to South Africa and they were used effectively as a positive strategy to accelerate change in South African society. Throughout the struggle they had proved to be a potent catalyst for cementing solidarity, empowering the masses and for catharsis. As the songs were used as a medium for seeking equality and peace as interlocking aims, an intimate knowledge of the black liberation struggle was obtained, based on the content of the songs. The songs thus fulfilled the overall functions of asserting cultural unity and assisting in societal integration.

The singing of liberation songs leads to a culture of defiance, self-assertion, group pride and solidarity. This is a culture that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression . . . and is responsible for the restoration of our faith in ourselves and offers a hope in the direction we are taking from here

(Biko, 1978:60).

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## **Compact disc**

*Caluza's double quartet 1930.* (1992). France: Remastered by P. Vernon and C. Crump. CD Heritage.

## **Les chants de liberation chantés par les noirs de l'Afrique du sud durant le 20e siècle**

Cet article se concentre sur la transmission orale des chants de libération du mouvement noir en Afrique du sud et se concentre sur deux questions majeures: (a) les mots de ces chants, qui imitent les conditions sociopolitiques et les caractéristiques de la pensée des Noirs durant l'époque de l'Apartheid, et (b) la transcription d'une sélection de ces chansons et certaines modifications au style qui reflètent les changements de la pensée noire à propos de la lutte à la libération.

Le raisonnement de cet article est que dans le contexte de l'Afrique du sud, la lutte de la libération des Noirs était prioritaire et dans ce conflit une des forces transformatrices fut manifestée par l'emploi de la musique relié au thème de la libération et de la protestation. L'évaluation stylistique et esthétique de ces chants ont été précédées par l'enregistrement de faits historiques reliés aux chants. Cet article démontre le pouvoir des chants de libération en tant que 'mass medium' et non seulement au niveau récréationnel.

## **Befreiungsgesänge schwarzer Südafrikaner im 20. Jahrhundert**

Es geht in diesem Beitrag um mündlich überlieferte Befreiungslieder der schwarzen Befreiungsbewegungen in Südafrika vornehmlich unter zwei wesentlichen Fragestellungen: (a) die Texte der Lieder, welche die sozio-politischen Bedingungen und die Konturen eines schwarzen Denkens während der Apartheid widerspiegeln, und (b) die Transkription einer Auswahl solcher Lieder, die stilistische Veränderungen durchlaufen haben, um Veränderungen im schwarzen Denken in bezug auf die Befreiungskämpfe spiegeln zu können.

Die Begründung für diese Untersuchung liegt darin, daß im Zusammenhang Südafrikas der schwarze Befreiungskampf vorrangige Bedeutung hatte und eine der Umgestaltungskräfte in diesem Konflikt in der extensiven Verwendung von Befreiungs- und Protestmusik lag. Der ästhetischen und stilistischen Bewertung dieser Lieder ging jedoch die Dokumentation der historischen Fakten voraus, die in die Lieder eingegangen sind. Der Beitrag unterstreicht die Kraft der Befreiungsmusik als ein Massenmedium zu anderen als Unterhaltungszwecken.

## **Canciones de liberación cantadas por los negros de África del Sur durante el Siglo XX**

Este trabajo se centraliza en las canciones de liberación provenientes de los movimientos de liberación negros en África del Sur, transmitidas oralmente, y se interesa principalmente en dos aspectos importantes: (a) el texto de las canciones que reflejaron las condiciones socio políticas y los contornos del pensamiento negro durante la época del Apartheid y (b) la transcripción de una selección de estas canciones que reflejan las modificaciones en el estilo que las mismas han experimentado, para poder reflejar los cambios en el pensamiento de los negros con respecto a la lucha por la liberación. La razón por la cual se realizó esta investigación fue, que en el contexto Sur africano, la lucha negra por la liberación fue suprema, y dentro de este conflicto, una de las fuerzas de transformación puesta de manifiesto, fue la música usada en gran medida para la liberación y la protesta. La evaluación estética y estilística de estas canciones fue, sin embargo, precedida por el registro de hechos históricos implicados en las canciones. Este trabajo pone de relieve el poder de la música para la liberación como un medio masivo y con otros propósitos que el entretenimiento.