

Zulu indigenous beliefs: to what extent do they influence the performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians?

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Abstract

Isicathamiya is a popular urban vocal music genre of Zulus who constitute the majority of about a dozen ethnic groups of people in South Africa. Scholars like Erlmann (1996), Ndlovu (1989, 1996) and Xulu (1992), have, from their field studies and writings, asserted that *isicathamiya* has been influenced by Zulu indigenous beliefs such as: belief in communalism expressed in the Zulu dictum “*umuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu*”; belief in competition; belief in strength and power associated with animals; reverence of the fire-place as a resource for food and warmth; and belief in dreams for communicating with ancestors.

This paper examines the extent to which the above-mentioned beliefs have been applied in the performance practices of selected *isicathamiya* musicians. Data obtained from the researcher’s observation of performances, attendance of competitions, and interviews of *isicathamiya* musicians, supported with audio video recordings are analyzed. The researcher discovers that the influence of Zulu indigenous beliefs on *isicathamiya* has been waning since the 1990s and, therefore, concludes that such beliefs, to some extent, influence the performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians.

Introduction

Isicathamiya, derived from the Zulu verb *cathama* (to crawl like a cat), is a popular urban male vocal music genre of Zulus who constitute the majority of about a dozen ethnic groups of people in South Africa. According to Ndlovu (1989:45), *isicathamiya* emerged in the coal mining districts of Newcastle, Celenso, Vryheid and

the neighbouring areas in the province of Natal in the 1920s and 1930s. It was performed by a group of eight to twenty male migrant workers in the hostels of mines to express nostalgia and to assuage their feelings from separation from their families and loved ones. The singers: one leading voice, a tenor, followed by one soprano (falsetto), one alto and the rest singing bass; performed a cappella and their repertoire included nostalgic, political, topical and love songs. Erlmann(1996:XXI), has observed that *isicathamiya* performance is, and always has been a form of struggle and some of the problems on the minds of South African migrants such as tribal issues, religion and cattle are the topics of so many *isicathamiya* songs.

Isicathamiya songs are accompanied by a quiet dance marked by tiptoeing to control the noise the musicians made as they stamped hard on the ground during rehearsal. According to Joseph Shabalala, leader of the most famous *isicathamiya* group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, whom Erlmann (1996:217), describes as "arguably the foremost exponent of *isicathamiya*", the Zulu word for tiptoe is *cothoza*, which is an action of the dance and not necessarily of the lyrics. (Erlmann, 1996:5)

Scholars like Erlmann (1996), Ndlovu (1989,1996) and Xulu (1992) have, from their field studies and writings, asserted that *isicathamiya* has been influenced by Zulu indigenous beliefs, customs and musical practices.

This paper examines the extent to which Zulu indigenous beliefs, as claimed by the above-mentioned scholars, have been applied in the music and performance practices of selected *isicathamiya* musicians. It begins with a review of the related literature, followed by an analysis of the data the researcher obtained from observing musical performances, attending competitions, and interviewing musicians, of *isicathamiya*. Since both the aural and visual aspects of *isicathamiya* performance are equally important, audio as well as video recordings of the music will be used for illustration.

Review of Literature

According to Ndlovu (1996:186), the Zulu dictum, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person because of other people), dominates Zulu social organisation and is used as a tool of strengthening social harmony and reciprocity, which influence the

musical practices of Zulus, such as *isicathamiya*. Blacking (1980:204) who hardly researched Zulus but focused his research on the Venda, paraphrases this Zulu dictum, "man can only become fully human through his relationships with his fellow men", asserts that "all South African peoples have a similar saying that expresses the philosophical basis of musical experience." He adds that "it is a basic principle of African socialism, and its musical consequences are found all over sub-Saharan Africa whenever different parts are combined in polyrhythm and polyphony." Indeed, a successful performance of African ensemble music depends on the mutual interaction of the players/singers whose 'different parts "slot into" a common movement' (Blacking, 1980:204).

The Zulu dictum, according to Xulu (1992:412), also refers to the value of competition in Zulu society because, all music among the Zulus is conceived as a public issue, and thus, is liable to competition. Xulu (1992:412) adds that "competition is perceived as a public platform in which people can establish the concept of personal identity in community. *Isicathamiya* musicians improve their image by winning *isicathamiya* competitions." Erlmann (1996:229) opines that the history of *isicathamiya* was influenced by an uneasy balance between two models of competitive performance: the urban middle-class concert and the rural stick fight. Writing about the aesthetics of power and competition in *isicathamiya*, Erlmann (1996:228), also states that "other competitive rituals that form models of *isicathamiya* contests, include *ukuqhatha*, a playful contest among herd-boys. The terminology and imagery of these youthful tests of strength - *inkunzi* (bull) for a powerful leader, and *izingqwele* for boys who defeat their rivals - are often transferred directly to *isicathamiya* choirs.

Zulu indigenous belief in animals associated with strength and power is symbolically portrayed in *isicathamiya*. According to Erlmann (1996:153), in Zulu folklore bulls are one of the most common symbols of strength and masculinity. Bulls and wild animals like snakes, crocodiles, tigers and lions" are vivid expressions of the concern with power relations and the assertion of power in competitive *isicathamiya* performance." Erlmann (1996:232), also observed that some of the early *isicathamiya* groups, for example Empangeni Home Tigers and Brave Lion Singers, were named after wild animals.

The concept of bull's horns, *izimpondo zenkomo*, features prominently in *isicathamiya*. In fact, converging bull's horns are associated with harmony and strength within an *isicathamiya* group. 'The convergence of the horns of a beast can be seen when isicathamiya performers are finding a key. They come close together, place their palms against their ears so as to listen more intently and consciously to their own vocalisation and as a means of blocking the noise around. They first hum their parts "like bees" until a clear distinct chord is heard. Then the leader shouts "Two" and they start' (Ndlovu 1996:191-192). In his field research Ndlovu (1996:192), also found that Joseph Shabalala and his Ladysmith Black Mambazo group employ the sounds associated with oxen "grr ... grr ... drr ... drr ..." as a percussive device to enhance rhythm and choreography.

Ndlovu (1996) emphasises that symbolic and metaphorical forms, the hallmarks of Zulu indigenous music, greatly influence *isicathamiya*. "Melody to Zulus is perceived as *indlela*, the rural path whose undulation and meandering cannot be measured and anticipated." (Ndlovu, 1996:16). Ndlovu (1996:187), also states that "Zulus say that they do not compose songs but *bayazakha* (they build them), which in Zulu philosophy means the concerted effort or involvement of many people in building it, as they do with the building of a hut. While a composition may have germinated in the mind of one individual, when he teaches others he only sings his *indlela* (path), and they join in with their own *izigqi* (footprints) harmonies. In this way harmonization is socially fabricated."

The leader of *isicathamiya* is therefore, referred to as *ivulandlela* (the pathfinder). He, so to speak, leaves his *izigqi* (footprints) on the path and the other members of the group follow him in their own "footprints" with interlocking rhythms, giving different harmonic directions to the melody provided by him. Ndlovu (1996:193) says this happens during the *isicathamiya* musicians' journey to the stage and adds that "when they begin their meandering and undulating (*indlela*) journey to the stage there is much improvisation/interpolation with their feet"

The importance of the fire-place, (*iziko*) in Zulu society cannot be overemphasised. It is located at the centre of the traditional Zulu hut and is used for cooking and for

heating in winter. According to Ndlovu (1996:186), '..... the fire-place is used metaphorically for the "cooking of the songs" in *isicathamiya* stage performances.' He adds that *isicathamiya* harmonies are "cooked" in circles resembling the circular house designs of Zulus (Ndlovu, 1996:184). On this latter information Ndlovu (1996:184-185), emphasises the importance of Zulu social organisation, based on an indigenous Zulu family residence which took the form of a circle of bee-hive grass huts (*kraals*), in *isicathamiya* (refer to illustration 6,p.184). In the centre of the family residence was the residence of *umuzi wendoda* (the kraal head) surrounded by the huts of the wives and children of a polygamous husband and members of the extended family. It should be noted that this form of social organisation is demonstrated in *isicathamiya* when, during the "cooking" of songs, the leader stands in the middle of a circle formed by other members of the group.

Erlmann (1991, quoted in Xulu, 1992:15), asserts that: "Rhythm or rhythm-making is described idiomatically by the Zulu people as '*ukubasa umlilo*', that is , making fire; which can be interpreted as heightening physical and emotional experience. Rhythm should be felt inside the body and explicitly articulated in dance. The main idea about rhythmic intensification is that it inspires people to dance and through dance they communicate their sentiments." It should be noted that rhythm is so important in Zulu indigenous music that without it dance will be lifeless and meaning cannot be communicated in music making.

Ndlovu (1996:208) asserts that dreams, which are essentially for communicating with ancestors, are part of belief systems deeply rooted in Zulu religious thought processes. In his fieldwork he met *isicathamiya* musicians who claimed that some of the songs they performed came to them already composed in the spiritual realm through dreams, given them by "ancestral agents" (*izithunywa*). "For people like Joseph Shabalala, the reality is that he hears songs in dreams. Dreaming is an integral part of his everyday reality." (Ndlovu, 1996:210). In fact, Shabalala says he first realized his gift for composing songs in 1964. "I had a dream. I heard these beautiful sounds of people singing. The dream persisted for six months and I listened until I learnt to imitate all of the voices. Then I could compose." (see notes on CD, *The Best of Ladysmith Black Mambazo*, Gallo Record Company South Africa, 1998).

It is evident from the above literature review that Zulu indigenous beliefs have influenced the music and performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians. The beliefs that stand out in this regard are: 1) belief in communalism expressed in the Zulu dictum "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*"; 2) belief in competition; 3) belief in strength and power associated with animals; 4) reverence of the fire-place as a resource for food and warmth; and 5) belief in dreams for communicating with ancestors.

Methodology

To find out the extent to which the above-mentioned Zulu indigenous beliefs have been applied in the performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians, the researcher, who has been researching *isicathamiya* since 1999; watched and analysed a 3-hour video recording of a competition held in 1993 at the YMCA, one of the five competing venues in the city of Durban, the largest city in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and the hub of the *isicathamiya* musical enterprise. He also interviewed two *isicathamiya* consultants who were themselves leaders of *isicathamiya* groups in the 1980s, namely Paulos Mfuphi (born 1940), who led the *Morning Stars* of Estcourt, near Ladysmith and Theo Mtshali (born 1941), who led the *King Boys* of Durban. Both men are active members of the South African Traditional Music Association (SATMA) which Ndlovu (1996:210), asserts is not only concerned with the ennoblement of *isicathamiya* but, all traditional styles as well.

The researcher will begin this section of his presentation by playing and analysing three excerpts from the 3-hour video recording mentioned above. This will be followed by a discussion of an audio recording entitled *mbube*, the precursor of *isicathamiya* which is performed to imitate the roaring of a lion. Finally, the information provided by the two *isicathamiya* consultants interviewed will be analysed.

The extent to which Zulu indigenous beliefs influence the performance practice of *isicathamiya* will be examined from the standpoint of a 3-point Likert-scale: 1) to a great extent. 2) to a considerable extent 3) to some extent.

Data Analysis/Results

All three excerpts from the video recording show members of the *isicathamiya* groups moving on to the stage in single file. The musicians try to demonstrate with their movements that they are following their leader on a "meandering, undulating rural path," symbolic of the Zulu indigenous belief in communalism. In the first excerpt, however, the leader of the group is behind and not in front of the group. He also covers his right ear with his right hand palm, ostensibly to block the noise around, which is contrary to the norm of involving the whole group in such a practice.

In the second excerpt, the group of singers hold hands on stage, a manifestation of "converging bull's horns" to signify harmony and strength within the group.

The third excerpt, the "cooking of songs," done off-stage, is demonstrated by the musicians who form a circle around their leader, standing in the centre of the stage. This represents the structure of an indigenous Zulu family residence which takes the form of a circle, with the head of family's hut in the centre, surrounded by the huts of his wives and children. The group moves in single file on to the stage after the song is, so to speak, "cooked."

In the light of the above, the overall extent of the influence of Zulu indigenous beliefs on the musical practices of the *isicathamiya* musicians who participated in the competition can be described as considerable.

In the audio cassette recording of *mbube*, the deep bass and the guttural voices of the group, representing the roaring of a lion, symbolize social power. This is rendered in call and response form between the voice and the other parts of the group. The extent of Zulu indigenous belief on the music of the *isicathamiya* group in this recording, in this regard, can be described as considerable.

The two *isicathamiya* consultants, who were interviewed by the researcher at the premises of the Playhouse Company in Durban on February 22, 2003, agreed that one of them, Paulos Mfuphi, should be their spokesman.

Mfuphi said Zulu indigenous beliefs, to a great extent influenced *isicathamiya*. In fact, he added that such influence was a 100 percent. When the researcher asked him to give reasons for his assertion, he provided the following which he ranked in hierarchical order:-

1. *Isicathamiya* evolved from *ingoma* (Zulu music and dance) *amahubo* (Zulu clan songs) and *indlamu* (Zulu stamping dance).
2. The Zulu belief in egalitarianism, reciprocity and a well-knit family, summed up in the saying "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," is emulated by *isicathamiya* groups.
3. The use of Zulu traditional clothing in *isicathamiya*.

When the researcher drew his attention to the fact *isicathamiya* musicians wear Western clothes like shirts and ties, suits and so forth and therefore, disagreed with his third point, Mfuphi explained that the old *isicathamiya* groups were started by real, rural people who wore Zulu traditional clothes made of animal skins.

Mfuphi also provided other relevant information regarding the influence of Zulu indigenous beliefs on *isicathamiya* performance practices. On competition he emphasised that *isicathamiya* was competitive by nature. He added that some characteristics of *isicathamiya* such as *ukungcweka* (pretending to fight), imitating the stick-fight and *cothoza* (tiptoe) could not be detached from a rural Zulu situation. With regard to the rendition of songs he said *isicathamiya* musicians looked up to their leader to start a song to which they would provide support with their individual parts. He endorsed the idea of the group leader leading his group on an unknown path, *indlela*, adding that when he was the leader of his *isicathamiya* group, hearing the footsteps of his men behind him as they moved on to the stage, gave him encouragement and power to sing his heart out. Mfuphi also mentioned two Zulu beliefs, associated with animals, insects or other phenomena which influenced *isicathamiya* musicians' preparation for a performance or competition: the converging of bull's horns which brought the singers together in the form of a circle; and what he described in Zulu as *isihomuhomu* (singing in harmony like the sound of bees or like a waterfall). Connected with the latter is the placing of the palms of the musicians on the left or right ear to enable them hear each other's part. He jokingly said that such as practice could well represent the use of traditional head phones. The "cooking of

songs" would naturally go on together with the aforementioned practices. Mfuphi insisted that an *isicathamiya* group will not go on stage until its song/harmony was "cooked," after which it would disintegrate and mount the stage in single file. He likened the "cooking of songs" to the preparation of maize/millie meal in a Zulu home, stressing that food can only be served on the table when it is cooked. He asked, "You wouldn't put uncooked maize meal on the table for your guests to eat, would you?" Mfuphi also revealed to the researcher that the night hours, between 8pm and midnight were normally devoted to the "cooking" of songs when groups participating in a competition would rehearse their songs. The competition would normally start after midnight when each group would be given approximately five minutes to perform its song/s to the audience. No "cooking" of songs was allowed on stage.

Unlike Shabalala, Mfuphi does not believe strongly in the idea of songs being given from ancestors to *isicathamiya* composers in their dreams. He conceded that one could be given songs in a dream but emphasised that such songs were often forgotten after such a person woke up. He said that throughout his forty-year experience as an *isicathamiya* musician, only one song, entitled *Kwa Mashu* (named after a Durban township), had been given to him by his ancestors, when he dreamt.

Finally, with regard to the texts of *isicathamiya* songs, Mfuphi said these were purely in Zulu and rarely in English or some other language and were mostly about love because the male migrant workers who were innovators of *isicathamiya* missed their wives and girl friends.

Conclusion

The scholars whose writings have been reviewed in this paper, the analyses of the audio and video recordings of selected *isicathamiya* groups and data obtained from the two *isicathamiya* consultants interviewed confirm that Zulu indigenous beliefs exert a considerable influence on the performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians. On the contrary, the researcher feels the influence of such beliefs on the

music and performance practices of *isicathamiya* groups has been waning since the mid 1990s. The commercialization of many *isicathamiya* groups, including the Ladysmith Black Mambazo, has resulted in them performing like pop music groups accompanied by orchestral instruments and equipment like synthesizers. The themes of the texts of *isicathamiya* songs on love and nostalgia are gradually giving way to current issues such as AIDS, drugs and crime. Also, *isicathamiya* groups are now singing in languages other than Zulu such as English and Xhosa. Some groups also like to produce cassette or compact disc recordings of their music to make money and therefore cut out the choreography and body movements which are essential in *isicathamiya* performances when they have their music recorded in studios. The researcher came across one such group outside the studios of the Playhouse Company in Durban on February 22, 2003. After interviewing the nine-member group of young men in their twenties, who called themselves *Abafana Beqiniso* (The Truth Boys), and hailed from the town of Eshowe, near Durban, he discovered that they had very limited knowledge about Zulu indigenous beliefs and the extent to which these influenced their performances.

In the light of the foregoing, this researcher concludes that Zulu indigenous beliefs, to some extent, influence the performance practices of *isicathamiya* musicians.

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