Songs of the Night: Isicathamiya Choral Music from KwaZulu Natal

Angela Impey

The connection between tradition, Christian sentiment, and expressions of protest has always been strongly interwoven in the genre.

Picture a dark, dilapidated hall in downtown Johannesburg. In it are only a few rows of broken plastic chairs and one or two bare electric light bulbs hanging from warped ceiling-boards in the center of the room. At one end of the hall is a low, wooden stage, in front of which are positioned a wooden table and single chair.

It is a Saturday night, approaching midnight. People are slowly drifting off the dimly lit streets into the hall. The majority of them are Zulu migrant workers who live in the city for periods of up to eleven months of the year, working in factories, gold mines, or in the dark shadows of the inner city as night watchmen.

Once in the hall, they begin to congregate in tight groups, leaning inward toward one another and singing softly, haltingly, in close harmonies, a cappella. They are preparing for a competition they call *isicathamiya*, which literally translated means "in a stalking approach" or "tiptoe guys," descriptive of the soft-footed dance styles, actions, and songs they perform. The choirs are made up of "home boys" — men who come from the same villages or regions of rural KwaZulu Natal, an area to the northeast of South Africa. These weekly *isicathamiya* competitions which take place in the cities serve to assert home ties and to affirm regional identities.

This is the stage of the evening they call *iprakthisa* (practice time). It is the time to perfect voice parts, to make final corrections of lyrics, to remind themselves and each other of the finer details of their carefully choreographed dance steps. Later they will compete in front of a judge, and the choir who exhibits the most synchronized actions and the most creative song arrangements will be awarded a small sum of money. Sometimes they may win a goat or a cow, but it is the pride and prestige gained from being awarded first place that is the incentive which attracts the participants to the competitions.

Each choir is immaculately dressed in combinations of three-piece suits and matching bow ties, two-tone shoes, white gloves, pocket handkerchiefs, and shining costume jewelry. Across their bodies the leaders of each choir wear white sashes loudly embroidered with the name of their group: The King Star Brothers, The Hundred Percent Brothers, The Khalabhayi Boys.

While the choirs prepare themselves for the competition, delegates from each group comb the streets in search of a judge. The judge must be a White man; he must be unknown and therefore unbiased. He is often a hobo found

Just before they take the stage, members of an isicathamiya *choir in Johannesburg, South Africa, prepare for a song competition by congregating in a circle to pray for spiritual guidance during their performance.* Photo © T.J. Lemon

sleeping under a bridge, or an inner-city kid found slouched outside a rough city discotheque. He will be approached with great humility and skillfully lured into the hall with offers of beer, cigarettes, and a night of sweet music. He will be seated at the table facing the stage and told to select the three best choirs of that evening. For the remainder of the night, and often into the following day, he will have to dedicate his attention respectfully and absolutely to the choirs. (In Durban, the South African Traditional Musicians' Association [SATMA], an organization which presides over the standards and practices of *isicathamiya* choirs in KwaZulu Natal, has replaced the convention of seeking a White adjudicator with one in which an educated Black person — a teacher, nurse, policeman, or member of a non-*isicathamiya* choir — is sought to make an informed judgement of weekly competitions.)

The singers will begin their performance from the back of the hall and will parade past the judge, subtly drawing his attention to themselves as they pass him by pointing out their matching cufflinks and socks, or the beaded badges of the new South African flag they may have pinned to their lapels. They will salute, smile, and stare imploringly at him, all the while maintaining, with absolute rhythmic precision, the delicate steps, shimmering hand movements, and respective vocal parts of their song.

STYLISTIC HISTORY OF *ISICATHAMIYA*

The origins of *isicathamiya* are rooted in American minstrelsy and ragtime. U.S. vaudeville troupes such as Orpheus McAdoo and his Virginia Jubilee Singers toured South Africa extensively from 1890, inspiring the formation of numerous Black South African groups whose imitation of crude black-face troupes, song repertoire, and musical instruments signaled notions of cultural progress and self-improvement.

Even earlier, the educated, landed Black elite, or

amakholwa (believers), whose Christian missionary education instilled in them the desire to imitate all things British, performed choral singing (*imusic*) — one of the main symbols of identification with Victorian values. Sankey and Moody urban revival hymns learned from the hymnal of the American Board Missions were central to the repertoire.

The Native Lands Act (1913) prohibited Black property ownership and forced thousands of indigenous peoples from their ancestral land. This devastating piece of legislation led to increasing political repression of all Black South Africans, regardless of educational, religious, and class status. In response, religious hymns were replaced with minstrelsy and other forms of African-American music and dance, as these performance models were considered better suited to emerging discourses of Black social and political dissent. The combination of four-part hymnody (*imusic*) and minstrelsy (and, later, "traditional" Zulu music) thus became the basis of much subsequent Black popular music in South Africa.

One individual who made a significant contribution toward exploring expressive forms able to satisfy an emerging nationalist, Black identity was Reuben Caluza. A choral composer who emerged from a Presbyterian mission background in KwaZulu Natal, his musical education spanned the whole spectrum of Black performance (Erlmann 1991:118). Although not an overtly political man, Caluza lived with strong commitment to Christian values and was sensitive to social injustice. His convictions became the main inspirational source for his songs. His first composition, *"Silusapho Lwase Africa"* (We Are the Children of Africa), was adopted in 1913 as the first theme of the South African Native National Congress, the precursor of today's African National Congress. Caluza's use of four-part harmonies and melodies taken from European and American hymn tunes, coupled with Zulu lyrics, did not simply imitate White choral music but "expressed the new relationships and values of urban groups, who expected fuller participation in the social and political life of the community into which they had been drawn economically" (Blacking 1980:198 in Erlmann 1991:121).

Caluza directed the Ohlange Institute Choir, which he toured extensively and which people of all classes and identities came to hear. His concerts, considered one of the earliest forms of variety shows for Black performers, combined *imusic*, brass bands, film shows, ballroom dancing, traditional drum-and-reed ensembles, and back-to-back dances (Erlmann 1991:122). Significantly, Caluza introduced ragtime into his repertoire. Although blackface minstrelsy groups had existed for a number of years and had come to be known as coons (*isikhunsi*), Caluza's ragtime renditions, which combined slick dance action with Zulu topical lyrics, more vigorously represented nationalist sentiments through their positive images of the ideal Black urbanite (Erlmann 1991:159).

Isicathamiya has survived for almost a century, providing a cultural space for Zulu migrant workers whose reality in the cities has been one of dehumanization and dislocation from home, family, and community.

RURAL-URBAN COMMUNITIES

By the 1920s, minstrel shows had gained widespread popularity throughout South Africa, extending deep into remote parts of the countryside, where traditional performance practices remained relatively unaltered. These shows particularly impressed Zulu migrant workers from the KwaZulu Natal regions, who combined stylistic elements of minstrelsy performance with *ingoma* (dance characterized by forward-stretching hands and high-kicking footwork) and *izingoma zomtshado* (Zulu wedding songs closely related in structure to *ingoma* songs) to form the prototype of present-day *isicathamiya* song and dance.

The vast number of Zulu men who entered the migrant labor system were made to occupy the marginal spaces of the cities: squalid, single-sex hostels, compounds, and impoverished locations. City dwelling demanded creative responses to the dislocation from home and family and to the new experiences of everyday life. With urban development in South Africa, Blacks formed trade unions, sports organizations, and entertainment clubs. Zulu *isicathamiya* groups developed a complex network of weekly competitions; they were prescribed and stately occasions, organized around set pieces, as had been the convention of school and mission competitions. Choral groups comprised men who shared regional and kinship ties. While *isicathamiya* competitions may have originated in Durban and KwaZulu Natal, they soon emerged among Zulu

migrants in Johannesburg, where performances took on subtle stylistic differences.

The organization of choirs and the repertoire of actions, dance, and songs which characterized *isicathamiya* performance did not merely represent creative adaption and straddling of rural and urban, traditional and Western worlds. Rather, choirs and the web of competitions which held them in place became an important survival strategy for migrants in an increasingly fragmented and alienated existence.

> "We're here and suffering," sing the Nthuthuko Brothers, "just as we come from difficulties in Zululand." "Sizulazula", we're going up and down, between town and homeland.... We're going here and there, riding the train, see you later my sweetheart (Meintjes 1993:4).

THE SACRED DIMENSIONS OF *ISICATHAMIYA*

Isicathamiya song repertoire spans a wide range of styles and orientations, ranging from Zulu wedding songs to renditions of Beach Boys hits. However, basic to the performance genre is an underlying Christian commitment — expressed not only in frequent references to biblical texts and Christian hymn texture but also in the ritual action which patterns the competition. Choir members will customarily congregate in tight circles prior to a competition and pray for spiritual direction during their upcoming performance. (The gathering of men into tight circles with the leader in their midst also recalls *isihaya*, the cattle enclosure in a traditional village. Being the most sacred space in the homestead, it is considered a powerful, male domain where men likewise request guidance and spiritual strength from ancestors prior to going to war [Erlmann 1996:190].)

Some choirs specialize in religious repertoire, retaining strong stylistic and lyrical inspiration from African-American spirituals, Methodist hymns, and Sankey and Moody revival hymns. Most choirs, however, include in their songs elements of prayer, such as the cadenza with which many will conclude their song (Erlmann 1996:220):

> Chorus: *Ile! Khuluma Nkosi kimi.*
> He! Speak to me, Lord.

The connection between tradition, Christian sentiment, and expressions of protest has always been strongly interwoven in the genre, such that Old Methodist tropes will frequently appear alongside descriptions of political turmoil and praises to a chief.

Isicathamiya has survived for almost a century, providing a cultural space for Zulu migrant workers whose reality in the cities has been one of dehumanization and dislocation from home, family, and community. Through performance they have been able to dramatize and temporarily discard loneliness, nostalgia, and hardship.

Like countless similar semi-urban South African performances genres which developed during the harsh years of Apartheid rule, *isicathamiya* has been a medium through which a particular cultural group has been able to think aloud about itself and the changing environment around it. That the participants of *isicathamiya* have sought dignity through the very symbols associated with their oppressors — those forces which have denied them dignity and selfhood — demonstrates how symbols can be claimed through performance and reinvented to serve the needs of another in powerful ways.

Works Cited

Erlmann, Veit. 1996. *Nightsong: Performance, Power, and Practice in South Africa.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____. 1991. *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Meintjes, Louise. 1993. "The Hobo Judge Wears No Coat Tails; Zulu Choristers Do." Unpublished paper.

Angela Impey *is a South African ethnomusicologist presently lecturing at the University of Natal, Durban. She received her doctorate from Indiana University in 1992, worked as music coordinator of the Johannesburg International Arts Alive Festival, and has worked with numerous outreach programs in southern Africa to facilitate research, documentation, and performance of indigenous music.*