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# Maskandi whitey

## An outsider's view

What is the essence of maskanda? **Barbara Titus** learnt through a very personal experience of joining a maskanda Zulu women's band in Durban.

**S**kho Miya, maskandi lead singer and dancer of the Khombisile Band, has a stern look on her face. 'We have bought an outfit for you now, so you are going to perform with us,' she tells me. We are rehearsing for our performance at the Kushikisha Imbokodo Musical Festival in Durban's BAT Centre in August 2009. And Skho needs to be stern with me because I keep searching for excuses: 'I'm not a performer, I am a musicologist. I am from Europe; I can't dance.' She is no longer buying it.

About a year earlier, I got in touch with Skho when I attended her gig in the Centre for Jazz and Popular Music at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where I worked as a visiting researcher. I told her I had come from Holland to study maskanda and she instantly took me under her wing. She invited me to attend her rehearsals at the Stable Theatre, right in the middle of the Warwick Triangle market.

Her entire crew, guitar, bass, drums and synthesizer on two amplifiers, and four dancers, rehearsed in a 20-square-metre room. I thought I could hide in the corner with a tape recorder and some scrap paper, but I soon realised that this was not her idea of our collaboration. Attending a rehearsal means attending a

rehearsal. In the eight weeks that were left me in Durban, Skho taught me how to dance and sing maskanda with admirable patience. So one year later I returned to Durban and Skho insists I am ready for performance.

Skho is a remarkable maskandi. She is a woman in a traditionally male and often virile musical genre.

Secondly, she is not the traditional guitarist-maskandi, but a front singer and dancer. Her role epitomises that maskanda is no longer the sole domain of the lone wolf troubadour, picking his guitar on a street corner for the whole afternoon. Rather, it is a band on stage and in the recording studio with three-minute songs, sometimes about universal themes such as love or death, sometimes with a specific social critique, biting satire, or a lesson for the youth.

Maskanda owes this social function to its emergence in experiences of forced labour migration in the early 20th century. Up to this day, fierce maskanda competitions are held in many hostels in Durban and Johannesburg. Musicians boast their guitar virtuosity, their vigorous ingoma dance and, of course, their izibongo: spoken self-praise.

My guitar teacher, Shiyani Ngcobo, is a master in all these

skills. 'I am the cow that kicks when being milked. I am the boat that refuses to cross the river. I am the famous man, well known for his loving amongst girls,' he raps in Zulu. His songs, ranging from love songs, an anthem for the elders, and complaints about crooked diviners are always followed by this izibongo as his signature. The dazzling combination of this form of rhetoric, martial dance, and musical virtuosity is designed to impress, to intimidate and to win. Competition is inherent to maskanda.

Nowadays, women appear to engage easily in this competitive musical genre. Women maskanda groups are proliferating. However, my colleague Kathryn Olsen from the University of KwaZulu-Natal has revealed that many women maskandi operate as front figures. Their songs are composed by men, their lyrics express a male and sometimes misogynist perspective, their male producers and marketers make the decisions about the format, the sound, and the exposure of the music.

But Skho and her Khombisile Band do not conform to this practice.

### A HARD LIVING

Skho performs her own songs, which she teaches the dancers and

Barbara Titus



Maskandi, Skho Miya, leader of the Khombishe Band.

the musicians part by part, step by step. She presents herself emphatically as an independent musician with a message, and she brings this message with an explosion of verbal and physical energy, sometimes even aggression.

The songs she taught me about lobola (dowry) (*Seliyongilobola*), a call for respect (*Sithi khuzani*), and a warning against HIV/AIDS (*Ingculazi iyabulala*), she frames as explicitly Zulu values that need to be passed on to the next generation. 'I pass on the message to our youth,' she told me, 'because they have forgotten where they come from... and our culture is going away.' Like many maskandi, she regards herself as a guardian of Zulu heritage.

Together with her sister, Khoni Miya, she stages the band at local festivals such as the Kushikisha Imbokodo Musical Festival, the Durban Blues Festival, and the MTN Onkwini Royal Festival in Ulundi.

Last year, she took the band to Johannesburg to record a demo. Only when I started working with her, I realised what immense achievements these were. Skho manages to make ends meet by living from one gig to the next. Like many maskandi, she does not primarily make music for an artistic purpose or for her personal development, although this is important. Making her art is a necessity for her to survive.

She has to take gigs with lousy fees for her and her band members. But something is better than nothing. Sometimes, and I witnessed one of these occasions, she is promised an all-in weekend for one performance of two songs on a festival. Transport, three meals a day, and two nights in a hotel will be provided. But on arrival, she is supposed to perform five rather than two songs, there is only one meal for the whole weekend, and the hotel turns out to be a deserted school building without blankets or showers.

#### THE OVERSEAS DREAM

With poverty and exploitation as daily companions, Skho's perception of *phesheya olwandle* (overseas) is understandably romanticised. Skho and her band members are fixated on the utopia of the overseas stage. The belief is first you need contacts, preferably white ones like me, then you'll get more gigs and more money, this will enable you to make an album.

The album is the ticket to ride, because it is a way to parcel your skills and send them to anyone around the world. Once you've sent your album 'overseas', it's just a matter of waiting before you get your first commission from 'overseas'.

Skho is certainly not alone in her longing for a career overseas and her plans to get there make sense. Coming from overseas myself, I found the concept exerts a very powerful spell on almost all South Africans, regardless of cultural background, ethnicity, education, or social class. In South Africa, 'overseas' means something more specific than abroad. It is 'over the sea' and not this dark continent. It conjures up an 'other-worldliness'.

When I tell my South African friends and colleagues that Dutch infrastructure is incapacitated by traffic jams, that we face disconcerting social and ethnic segregation in schools, that homeless people roam the streets of the small, provincial town where I live, and that the Utrecht University network including its email service was down for five consecutive weeks, they are surprised. Isn't everything supposed to work overseas? Isn't everybody supposed to be rich, healthy and happy overseas? Well, they are supposed to, but they are not.

No matter how often I tell Skho about my country, she remains focused solely on that concert overseas, which will change her life. And I have to help her with it, whether I want to or not. I search for excuses: 'You don't want me as a manager; I can't even manage my own life. My job is to write a book about maskanda, not to organise a tour.'

The excuses sound lousy. And we both know it. For can I write a book about maskanda without the skills and knowledge Skho has given me? No. I am experiencing neo-colonial guilt. I am exploiting Skho's gold mine in order to earn my money, while she will keep eaking out an existence on the margins of Durban's cultural life. Will a concert tour in Holland change that?

Not if you ask Shiyani Ngcobo, who teaches me maskanda guitar at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is one of the few South Africans I met, who is completely realistic about playing overseas. And for him overseas has lost its lustre.

Ngcobo won several maskandi competitions in Durban, he toured Asia, Europe and the US where he played in New York's Carnegie Hall in 2007. In 2004, he released a CD in the UK *Introducing Shiyani Ngcobo Zulu guitars dance: Maskanda from South Africa*, which is held in high esteem by world music experts around the globe. But this acclaim has not been picked up by local concert organisers. Shiyani finds himself in much the same situation as Skho: not enough gigs, bad living conditions, and no prospect of a more stable income.

Both Skho and Ngcobo do not seem to be far removed from the experience of permanent displacement with poor living

conditions from which maskanda emerged in the early 20th century. In musical respects, however, they respond actively to today's musical developments around the globe.

#### 'IT IS MY MUSIC'

Some maskandi, based mainly in Johannesburg, also work in gospel, soul, R&B, and jazz, and they initiate musical cross-overs in style, form and playing techniques. Their music is played not only in local taxis or supermarkets, but also at jazz festivals and national radio stations. And some of them, iHashi Elimhlope, Phuzekhemisi, Busi Mhlongo, have flourishing musical careers, each with their own distinctive maskanda sound.

If you ask a maskandi why his/her music is maskanda, s/he will give you the obvious stylistic features: an isihlabo (free guitar introduction), call-response features, and an izibongo (rap) passage. But the most important aspect is the music being self-

conceived, self-made, self-expressive: a 'body' in which the character, the skills, the life stories and the opinions of the maskandi manifest themselves. 'It is my music' both Shiyani and Skho told me independently. 'That's why my music is maskanda.'

Gradually it occurred to me, to my great relief, that this was Skho's main motivation for drawing me into her music. One day in August, after rehearsing one of her songs together, I realised I hadn't brought money to pay her for the lesson. 'It doesn't matter,' she said to me, 'you are learning my music and we are singing my music here together. That is what matters.' So, thanks to her, I overcame my stage fright and performed a song with the Khombisile Band. We all enjoyed it immensely. LS

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Skho Miya rehearses her band – author Barbara Titus at back right.

Magpiesen Naidoo