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SPEECH-TONE AND OTHER FORCES IN TSONGA MUSIC

Thomas F. Johnston
Department of Sociology/Anthropology
Western Washington State College, Bellingham

The Tsonga, a Bantu-speaking people of Mozambique and the Northern Transvaal, represent an anomaly among southeastern African groups in that, while showing certain affinities with the Nguni, they possess no extensive heritage of pastoral folklore and did not participate in that period of Nguni history when clicks were absorbed into the language (Tsonga is clickless).

Tsonga speech-tone patterns have both syntactical and semantic significance—the meaning of similar Tsonga words may vary according to the rise or fall of individual syllables, examples of which are given below.

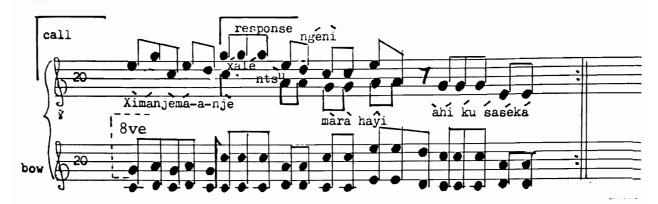
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('= high, '= low, ^= falling)
bávå 'to be bitter'
bàvá 'father'

bòfù 'blind person'
bòfú 'pus'

bvímbá 'an aromatic shrub'
bvímbá 'to seal with a lid'
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In the following different versions of five songs (tape-recorded by the writer during field work in 1968-70 under grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the University of Witwatersrand), speech-tone markings were supplied by linguist C. T. D. Marivate of the University of South Africa, Pretoria.

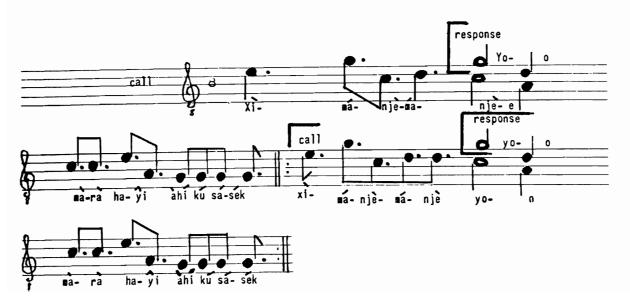
Song 1. Ximánjemánje xálé ntsùngéni màrà hayi ahí kú sáseká Song·1, Version A (sung by a chorus of men at Samarie)



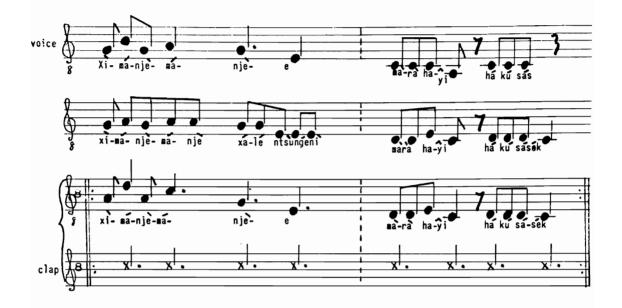
Song 1, Version B (sung by Wilson Zulu)



Song 1, Version C (sung by a chorus of women at Ribola)



Song l, Version D (sung by Joel Mashava)



Song 1, Translation

Ximanjemanje xale ntsungeni mara hayi ahi ku These modern things (times) over there they are so

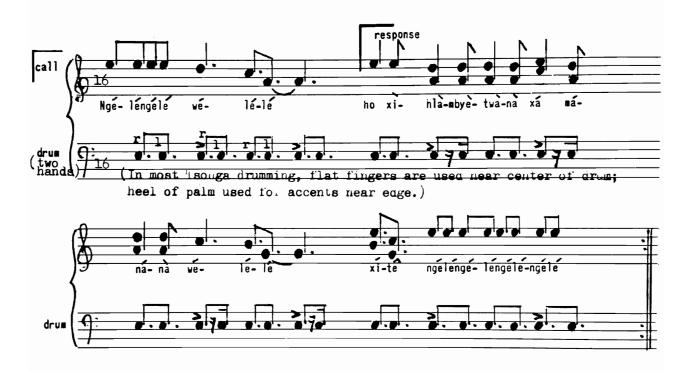
saseka beautiful

(Refers to social change and the white man's possessions...cars, etc.)

Of the above four versions of Song 1, all melodically observe the various speech-tones of the word ximánjèmánjè, two observe the "high-low" at ngéni, and all observe the "falling" at haýi. Two of the versions exhibit a melodic "high-low" at sáséká that is not indicated by the speech-tone markings, but sáséká is the song's concluding word, and a cadential drop in pitch is considered (by the Tsonga) musically desirable.

Song 2. Xihlambyetwana xá mánána wélélé xitê ngéléngéléngélé wélélé

Song 2, Version A (sung by a chorus of women at Mahonisi)



Song 2, Version B (sung by Johannes Mathye)



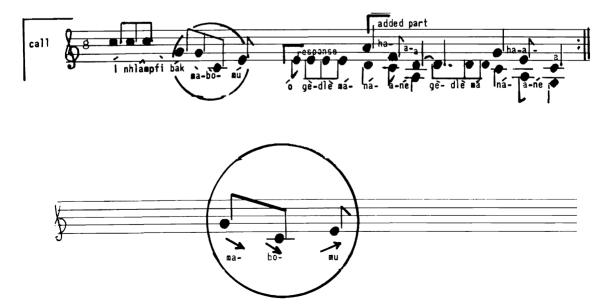
Song 2, Translation

Xihlambyetwana welele xite ngelengelengele xa manana The little pot ideophone repreof my mother tralala! goes senting the sound of a newly baked welele clay pot rolling tralala! along the ground

(This is a song sung for an infant aged one week, i.e. it is likened to a clay pot that has survived the hazardous firing process, and its cry is likened to the welcome sound of a sturdy clay pot as it is rolled along the ground in an acoustical test of its soundness. Infant mortality is high. Dead infants are buried in broken clay pots.)

Of the above two versions of Song 2, both observe "high" at xá; version A ignores the "low" at the end of mánáná but version B observes it; and both observe the "high-fall" at xíté. Neither version observes the "highs" at wélélé (see the three melody tones following ngéléngéléngélé), but then this is the song's concluding word, and a cadential drop in pitch is musically desirable.

Song 3. Í nhlâmpfi bák màbòmú ó gèdlè mánáné gèdlè mánáné (sung by a chorus of women at Mutsetweni)



Song 3, Translation

I nhlampfi bak mabomu o gedle manane gedle manane
The fish splash around mother around mother
(This is a fish-netting song, commonly sung within the context of muchongolo, the Tsonga national dance.)

In the melody of this song there is a sharp descent from G to C, followed by a sharp ascent to E. This melodic descent and ascent accommodates the central low syllable bo of mabomu, and the accommodation suggests that, regardless of the apparent freedom exhibited by much of a song's melody, the obvious speech-tone contours of key words are preferably retained.

Song 4. Yố nàvénàvé Nténgûlé nà wèná áhí yénì Màntèngùlà ù téká tá wèná ú fúnéngétá hí mbítá áhí yénì Mànténgûlé

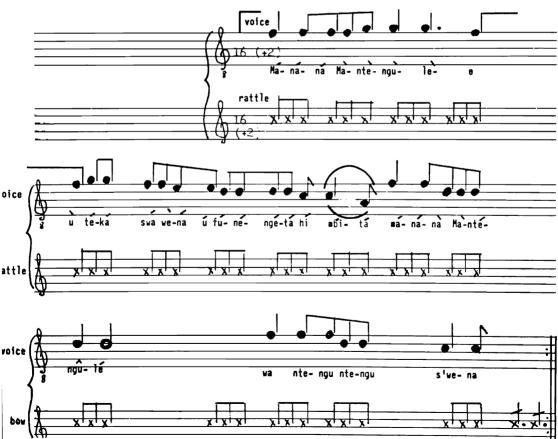
Song 4, Version A (sung by a chorus of women at Mhinga's location)



Song 4, Version B (sung by Johannes Mathye)



 $\underline{\text{Song 4, Version C}}$ (sung by John Chauke)



Song 4, Translation

Yo navenave Ntengula na wena ahi yeni

Tempter! Child-of-the-Drongo-Bird! Yes, you

Mantengula u teka ta wena u funengeta

Child-of-the-Drongo-Bird! You hide all your secrets

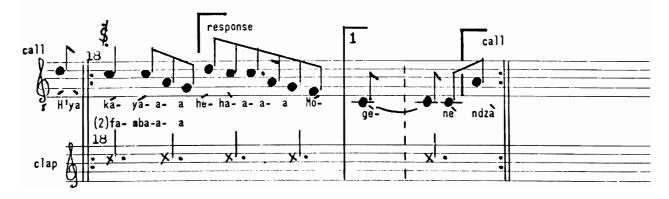
hi mbita ahi yeni Mantengula

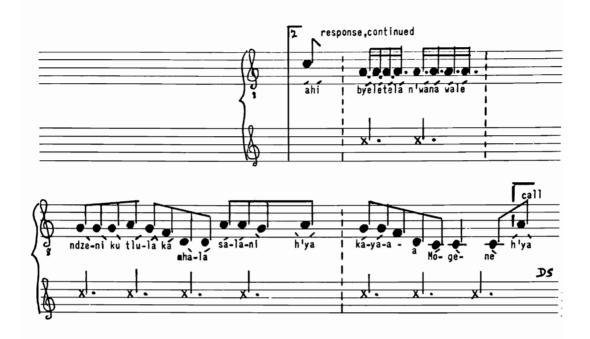
under a mortar Yes, you Child-of-the-Drongo-Bird!

(Refers to a legendary bird that hides its secrets but reveals everybody elses, i.e. it is customarily blamed for the spread of gossip.)

Of the above three versions of Song 4, all exhibit a melodic fall between the two syllables of mbitá (the two tones following fúnéngétá hí) regardless of the "fall-high" speech-tones of the word. A possible explanation is that mbitá occurs at the conclusion of a verbal and musical phrase, preceding the new phrase áhí yéni Màntèngùlè, which must preferably commence "high" in relation to its predecessor.

Song 5. Hiyà héhà Mógènè ndzà áhi byélétélá n'wáná wálé
ndzèni kù tlula ká mhalá saláni hiyá káyá Mógènè
(sung by a chorus of women at Njakanjaka)





Song 5, Translation

Hiya heha Mogene ndza ahi byeletela n'wana wale
I'm going to Mogene (place) It teaches the child

ndzeni ku tlula mhala salani hiya kaya 'inside' of the jumping of the antelope I'm going home to

Mogene

Mogene (place)

(Refers to pregnancy. Mothers-to-be sing the song in December, when the impala antelope is carrying its young. The impala is famed for its leaping ability. As the antelope foetus "learns" about jumping from its mother's jumping, so does the human foetus learn of life's values before birth, from its mother. Its movements are "proof" of this.)

In the above song, the "high-low-low" speech-tones of Mógènè are melodically observed, as are the eight repeated "highs" of byélétélá n'wáná wálé. From the end of the latter phrase to the first word of the

next, ndzèni, a speech-tone "high-low" is indicated and this, also, is melodically observed. The five speech-tones of kù tlúlâ ká mhà-"low-high-falling-high-low" are all observed by the melody, as is the "low" at the end of sáláni.

The musical characteristics of the initial statement of a Tsonga song are considerably influenced by the rise and fall of Tsonga speech-tone, and by the length and rhythmic stress of the syllables. Once melody and rhythm are set, subsequent "statements" may be a product of both linguistic and purely musical forces (the latter will be discussed under the next sub-heading).

The relationship between Tsonga song-words and their musical setting generally involves more than mere imitative processes. Hornbostel's statement that "pitches of the speaking voice, indeed, appear to determine the melodic nucleus; but they have no influence upon its inborn creative forces" assumes particular significance in the light of many compositional practices of Tsonga. There are musical forces limiting the influence of speech-tone on melody, and musical forces limiting the influence of speech-stress on rhythm.

Some Tsonga melodic principles: musical forces limiting the influence of speech-tone on melody

There exists, within Tsonga communal vocal music, a phenomenon which might be termed "pathogenic" descent. An analysis of Tsonga "pathogenic" descent reveals that 24% of songs exhibit a first-to-last-tone descent of a 5th; 20% exhibit a first-to-last-tone descent of an octave; 13% exhibit a first-to-last-tone descent of a 4th; and 100%

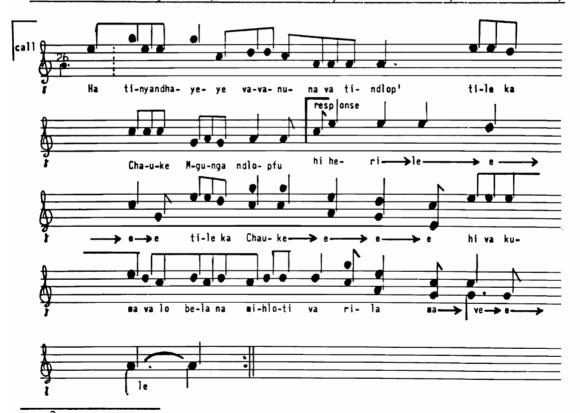
lof Sambian Tonga song-rhythm it is reported that "the theory that the determinant lies entirely in natural speech length and stress is not consistently born out." (Rycroft, David. "Tribal Style and Free Expression". African Music, 1:1, 1954, p. 26.

²Von Hornbostel, E. M. <u>African Negro Music</u>. London: Oxford University Press, p. 31.

exhibit a first-to-last-tone intervallic descent of one kind or another. These descents are neither sharp nor gradual, but occupy a series of plateaux, and exert limiting counter-influence against speech-tone domination, particularly at sentence-endings where a musical drop is desirable.

There exists within Tsonga communal vocal music a special vocabulary of melismatic syllables such as huwele, welele, hayi-hayi, yowe-yowe, etc., during the singling of which a melody is released from any possible obligation to obey speech-tone rise and fall. Nketia states of Akan singing that "unlike other syllables, interjectory syllables e, ee, o, oo, etc., may be sung to one, two, or more notes."3 Examples of Tsonga melismatic non-lexical syllables are given below.

Melismatic Example 1 (he-ri-le-e-e-e, Chauke-e-e-e, mavele-e-le)

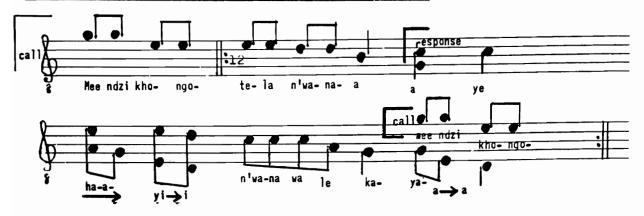


Nketia, J. H. 1963. <u>Folk Songs of Ghana</u>. Legon: University of Ghana, p. 9.

This refers to the carrying of a <u>single</u> syllable over <u>many</u> notes, as in

the "ah" in Allelujah; i.e. a non 1-to-1 relationship.

Melismatic Example 2 (ha-a-yi-i, ka-ya-a-a)



Melismatic Example 3 (va-hla-le-e, myame-me-e-e-e-yo)

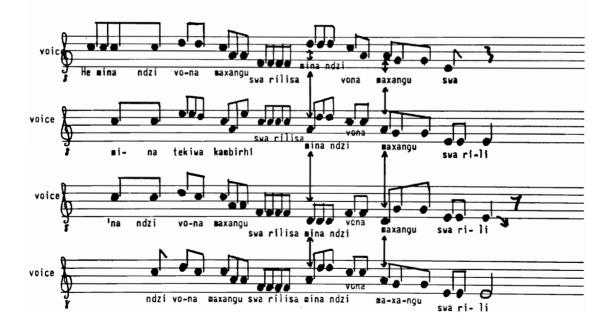


There exists within communal vocal music a system of "harmonic equivalence" whereby tones a 5th (inverted 4th) distant are regarded by the Tsonga as interchangeable. This system of tone-substitution results in otherwise-inexplicable melodic "highs" and "lows" during unchanging speech-tones. Examples are given below.

First example of "harmonic equivalence" (the word hlambyetwana which contains exclusively "low" speech-tones, is melodically represented by D's during the first cycle, and by A's during the second cycle, D and A being "harmonically equivalent"):



Second example of "harmonic equivalence" (note the substitution of D for A at mina and at maxangu--D and A are "harmonically equivalent"):



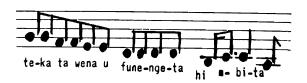
There exists within Tsonga communal vocal music, word-changes which occur during the successive cycles of a song. Choice of these new words is generally made so that their speech-tone approximates that of the old words, and could, should the singers so desire, be sung to the same melody. Where the melody changes (as in the following example), it does so according to an implicit "harmonic" framework which could be considered as the real control.

resp.

| Ma-y1-va- vo- o | ma-

Example: implicit "harmonic" framework as the real control

There exists, within Tsonga communal vocal music, occasions on which musical considerations completely overrule speech-tone considerations. The following melody exhibits purely musical characteristics (a descending 4th GD filled-in with 2nds and complemented by a 3rd CA, the whole spanning a 7th) that disregard the speech-tones, which are thus: téká tá wèná ú fúngéngétá hí mb†tá.



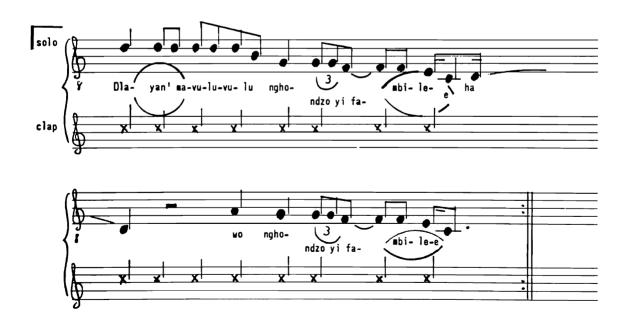
Musical forces limiting the impact of speech-stress on song-rhythm

Of particular use to the Tsonga in the relaxation of speechstress controls is vowel elision, terminal-syllable contraction, and terminal-syllable prolongation. Examples are given below.

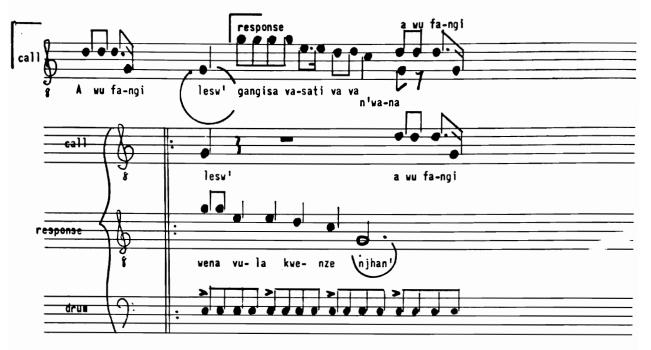
Example 1 (the word h'ta is a contraction of hi ta):



Example 2 (the word dlayan' is a contraction of dlayani, and the word fambile-e exhibits terminal-syllable prolongation):



Example 3 (the word lesw' is a contraction of leswi, and the word njhani exhibits terminal-syllable contraction to njhan'):

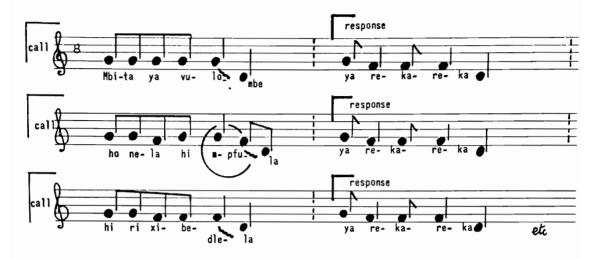


Vowel elision permits the singer (a) to execute one long tone instead of two short tones, and (b) to fit a long word into a relatively short musical space. Terminal-syllable contraction permits the singer to utilize, on the concluding <u>single</u> tone of his song, an otherwise-trochaic bisyllabic word. Terminal-syllable prolongation permits the singer to utilize, on the concluding <u>two</u> tones of his song, an otherwise-monosyllabic word.

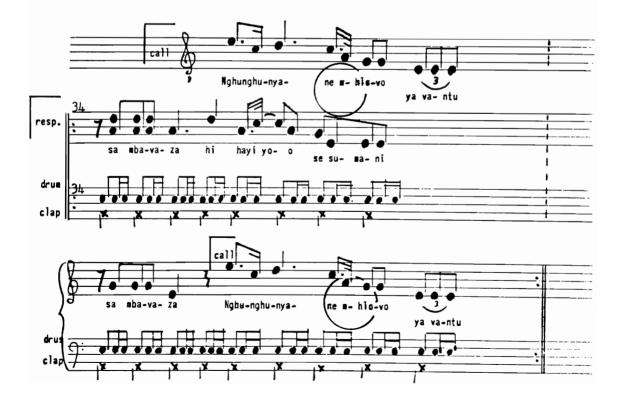
Another method of freeing song-rhythm from speech-stress controls is the use of letters n and m as independent syllables--Kubik reports of Yoruba singing that "these m and n sounds are considered musically as syllables and can bear one note." Tsonga examples are given below.

⁵Kubik, Gerhard. 1968. "Al6--Yoruba Story Songs". African Music 4.2: 13.

Use of n or m as syllables: example 1



Use of n or m as syllables: example 2



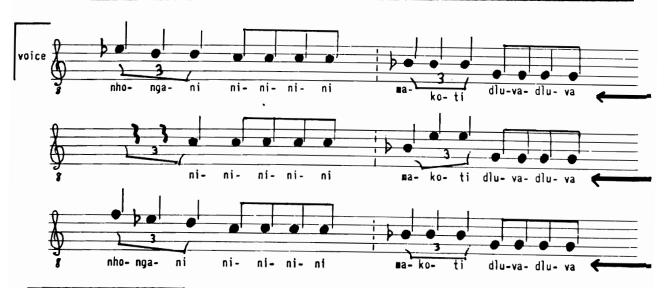
In example 1 above, the m of mpfula occupies an entire crotchet and enables this bisyllabic word to straddle three musical tones. In example 2, the m of mblovo is used as a musical anacrusis for the two quavers on which blo-vo are sung.

Within Tsonga vocal composition, many musical factors combine to limit speech-tone domination not the least of which is perhaps a desire for musical contrast between call and response. Concerning the resultant "distortion" of word-meaning, the present writer sought the opinion of native Tsonga linguists in ascertaining to what extent speech-tone may be ignored within Tsonga vocal composition. The consensus was that context is as important as speech-tone, and where, for musical reasons, the latter is dispensed with, recourse to context adequately clarifies meaning.

Programmatic musical settings

Onomatopoeicisms such as dluva-dluva 'jump', vula-vula 'gossip', cele-cele 'carousing', and ngomu-ngomu 'ogre' receive programmatic treatment at the hands of Tsonga composers, being set to reiterative, motional, or accelerative tone-patterns. Similar treatment occurs elsewhere in Africa, for Kubik states of Yoruba singing that "gbinrin (the sound of dropping iron)...is worked into the pattern gbinrin ajalubale gbinrin" and that "erin (elephant) suggests the dull movements of a walking elephant." Tsonga examples are given below.

Onomatopoeic example 1: the reiterative setting of dluva-dluva 'jump'



⁶ Kubik, Gerhard, op. cit., p. 11.

Onomatopoeic example 2: the motional setting of vula-vula 'gossip'



Onomatopoeic example 3: the accelerative setting of cele-cele 'carousing'



Onomatopoeic example 4: the reiterative setting of ngomu-ngomu 'ogre'



Formal structure

Tsonga communal vocal music, when compared to Venda and other Southern African musics, appears to reveal a predilection for longer metrical periods. These periods contain interesting proportions of call to response, and contain multiple reappearances of the call and response within any one cycle.

Representative formal structures evinced by Tsonga songs

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Song F (call=10 + response=4 + call=4 + response=4 + call=4 + response=4 + call=4 + response=4 + call=4 + response=7 + call=1 + response=12 + call=1 + response=10 + call=6 + response=10 + call=5 + response=27 + call=5 + response=27 + call=2 + response=3 + call=2 + response=11 + call=2 + response=18 + call=2 + response=3 + call=3 + response=4 + call=6 + response=4 + call=2 + response=4 + call=2
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The transmission, from one generation to another, and from one geographical area to another, of Tsonga musical principles

The Tsonga have a reputation among their neighbors for possessing an extensive body of folklore (ntumbuluku wava khale). They are themselves particularly proud of this folklore and ensure that their children become acquainted with it. Generally, in the daytime, small children learn from older children the legend-telling words of the game-songs (tinsimu tavana to huha) used in games such as Xifu fununu-The Beetle, and Mbita Ya Vulombe-The Pot of Money, both of which were reported over fifty years ago by Junod. In the evening they watch the adult "exorcism" dances, or listen to the story-songs (tinsimu ta mintsheketo) sung by their maternal grand-mother at certain times of the year.

Young boys who gather round a visiting bow-player receive an intriguing music "lesson" (ntsakela-vuyimbeleri) as he carefully tunes his string-lengths to a Tsonga 4th, just as older boys learn by observation how to construct their own hand-piano (timbila) and to correctly arrange and tune its seventeen keys.

In the girls' puberty school (khomba) and the boys' circumcision school (murhundzu) songs are learned under rather rigorous conditions, and the present writer encountered urban Tsonga old men and women, miles and "years" removed from their rural initiation schools, who could recite or sing rapid and apparently meaningless initiation formulae for up to thirty minutes, with brief rests.

The young people's competitive team-dancing (xifase) of the drumming school and the adult competitive team-dancing (rhambela phikezano) of the beer-drinks are performed during village-to-village visits and contribute toward the geographical dissemination of Tsonga music old and new, as do the musical activities of itinerant doctors and minstrels.

By carefully observing the correct method of producing the rhythmic and melodic patterns used during these various visits, and by themselves reproducing the heard rhythms upon upturned canisters or pebble-filled stick-rattles (mafowa) while singing, children develop familiarity with, and mastery of, many Tsonga musical principles. This does not imply a latent desire to become musical specialists; engagement in normal social life (which is general) involves the Tsonga in music whether they like it or not, because music is an essential part of Tsonga social life. The acquisition of musical skills are incidental to acquisition of other skills necessary to social and biological maturation.

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