

MASKANDI: A CRITICAL GENERAL INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF ZULU MASKANDI SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Although different researchers have conducted studies on *maskandi* songs, very little is known about the artistic techniques Zulu *maskandi* groups use to introduce their songs. Hence, this study reports on various artistic techniques Zulu *maskandis* use in the introductory section of their songs, from a critical general inductive perspective. The data was collected from CDs, cassettes, Ukhozi FM radio programmes and television programmes. The author chose to analyse the introductory sections of *maskandi* songs in order to demonstrate that *maskandis* are flexible, creative and talented. The study found that although playing the *izihlabo* (“instrumental introduction”) is obligatory in this music genre, Zulu *maskandis* keep on exploring other introductory techniques, such as using concertina, bass guitar, voices, a lead guitar and other instruments, as well as *ukubiza ingoma* (“the interplay between the leader of a group and members of the group in the beginning of a song”). Among these artistic techniques, playing the *izihlabo* is used predominantly, as it is still regarded as the basis for all other techniques used in this music genre. Unlike what previous research found about the artistic techniques used by Zulu *maskandis*, this study has shown that while pushing boundaries of indigenous Zulu songs, *maskandis* embrace both indigenous and modern ways of singing. In the end, implications for pushing boundaries of this music genre are considered.

Keyword: artistic techniques; introductory stage of *maskandi* songs; playing the *izihlabo*; *ukubiza ingoma*; Zulu *maskandi* songs

INTRODUCTION

Maskandi music has been neglected in the field of literature (Collins 2006/2007; Davies 1994). “In particular, the relationship between oral and written texts remains an area of neglect due to modernist views that still favour standardisation of language orthographies” (Ntombela 2016, 1). Previous research on the structure of *maskandi* songs concentrated on a single artistic technique called playing the *izihlabo* (Brubeck 1992; Davies 1994; Levine 2005; Shabane 1997). For example, Levine (2005, 61) notes that “[m]askanda songs have a particular structure, which generally begins with an introductory section called the *izihlabo* or *intela*”. Brubeck (1992) asserts that one of four things he learnt from Siphon Mchunu (a legendary *maskandi*) was to play the *izihlabo*. Davies (1994) observes that the *isihlabo* consists of a series of short, fast flashy melodic passages. On the other hand, while concentrating on the literal techniques used by Zulu *maskandis*, Ntombela (2011) refers to playing the *izihlabo* and *ukubiza ingoma* or *isingeniso sengoma*. Taken together, it appears that research conducted on the introductory stage of this music genre has concentrated on the *izihlabo*. It is this author who has gone to an extent of introducing one additional technique—*ukubiza ingoma* (Ntombela 2011). Besides, it appears that *maskandis* are at liberty to either stick to a prerequisite and popular introductory technique—such as playing the *izihlabo* or explore other possible techniques. In this connection, very little is known about additional introductory artistic techniques found in this music genre.

Generally, the music industry is faced with many challenges. For example, while young *maskandis* join this industry in big numbers, pirates are reproducing and selling their music at very low costs. Again in this industry competition is too high and this leads to a situation where only “the fittest” survives. Besides, composing a song is not an easy task because “[t]he artist necessarily needs a spark of ingenuity to compose a tune based essentially on the traditional music but without repeating other people’s melodies” (Ntuli 1990, 305). While all sections of each song are important, the introductory section appears to be the most crucial for each *maskandi* leader because he needs to be more creative in order to attract a wide listenership. Therefore, it is an open secret that a song which is introduced very well is guaranteed to fascinate many listeners, while the opposite is true.

In his study of the guitar in Zulu *maskandi* tradition, Davies (1994, 125) observes that “[t]he structure of guitar songs is fairly standard and proceeds as follows”:

1. *Intela/izihlabo*: unmetred instrumental introduction;
2. Fixed “chorus” section: a melodic-rhythmic pattern established on the guitar, in two or three parts;
3. The solo vocal section: enters after two (or more) repetitions of above pattern;
4. *Izibongo* (praises): optional, usually occurs approximately two-thirds of the way through the song.

The above arrangement relates to the structure of *maskandi* songs from the introduction (beginning) to the end. It shows a common arrangement followed when *maskandi* groups introduce or begin their songs with the *izihlabo*.

Unlike the focus by Davies, this study concentrates on one aspect of structural features of *maskandi* songs—the introductory section. It investigates various artistic techniques Zulu *maskandis* use in the introductory sections of their songs. A critical general inductive approach is used to assess various introductory artistic techniques used by Zulu *maskandis* to introduce their songs. The researcher chose to analyse the introductory sections of Zulu *maskandi* songs in order to demonstrate that *maskandis* are flexible, creative and talented. It will be argued that while pushing boundaries of this music genre, Zulu *maskandis* embrace both traditional and modern ways of singing.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Zulu Maskandi Songs

The word *maskandi* is borrowed from Afrikaans *musikant*, meaning musician (Brubeck 1992; Coplan 1985; Mathenjwa 1996; Mthethwa 1991; Ntuli 1990). “Even though researchers and authors agree on the origin of the word *maskandi*, they spell it differently: *mazkande*, *mazkandi*, *maskanda*, *masikanda*, *maskandi* and *masikandi*” (Ntombela 2016, 110). In the past only men sang this music genre, but owing to its flexibility and dynamism a number of female *maskandis* are now also singing it. It must be mentioned that at present there is no group comprising female *maskandis* only. *Maskandis* “play traditional tune and sing in several languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Sesotho, and Setswana” (Ntombela 2016, 110). *Maskandis* who sing in isiZulu and promote Zulu culture are known as Zulu *maskandis* and they include white *maskandis* such as Johnny Clegg and David Jenkins, known as *Qadasi*.

Artistic Techniques

In almost all the songs in this music genre there are sections where Zulu *maskandis* introduce themselves to their audiences (Davies 1994; Mathenjwa 1996; Ntuli 1990). When performing such an action, they use certain formulae (Coplan 1985; Levine 2005; Ntuli and Msimang 1991). Brubeck (1992) refers to *maskandis* who brag about their tunes. Depending on individual researchers, there are those who refer to this as “ways used by *maskandis* to brag”, “methods used by *maskandis* to brag”, “styles used by *maskandis* to brag”, et cetera. Ntombela (2011) suggests that there should be one concept which incorporates concepts such as “formulae” of introduction, “styles” of revealing themes and “methods” of revealing emotions, et cetera— strategies or techniques. In his study of strategies used by Zulu *maskandis* generally, Ntombela (2011) discovered that Zulu *maskandis* use various artistic techniques, such as techniques to introduce

themselves to their followers and counterparts, brag about certain members of their groups, coin and use nicknames and many others. However, in this study the focus is on techniques used by Zulu *maskandis* in their introductory sections.

INTRODUCTORY SECTION OF *MASKANDI* SONGS

Just like any told stories, *maskandi* songs have three sections: the introduction, the body and the ending sections or stages. All *maskandi* songs start with introductions (Brubeck 1992; Davies 1994; Levine 2005). Depending on each group, this section may be instrumental or vocal or a combination of voices and instruments. On average the introduction is a minute long. *Maskandis* use various artistic techniques in the introductory stages of their songs, which play very important roles in this music genre. In addition to it being used to decide on the appropriate tunes to play, in the rest of the songs, the introductory techniques are also used to draw the listeners' attention. Hence, techniques *maskandis* resort to using in their songs must be both relevant to the songs and fascinating to the listeners. To appreciate a range of artistic introductory techniques used by Zulu *maskandis*, consider the analysis below.

Starting by Playing the *Izihlabo* or *Intela*

Playing the *izihlabo* is "a short introduction of virtuoso plucking popularized by Bhengu, that runs over the melody and scale that the player will use for his song" (Coplan 1985, 187). John Bhengu, popularly known as Phuzushukela meaning mister drink sugar, is known as a pioneer *maskandi* who recorded his music playing the *izihlabo*. Playing the *izihlabo* is "an instrumental section and is generally fairly fast" (Levine 2005, 61). The instrument which is used to play the *izihlabo* is a lead guitar, which is the first musical instrument to be used by Zulu *maskandis*. "The guitar was introduced to the Zulu culture by Portuguese explorers as far back as the 1880s" (Levine 2005, 61). Having "doctored" lead guitars, as Mthethwa (1991) puts it, *maskandis* were able to play the *izihlabo*. Since then playing the *izihlabo* was regarded as a prerequisite of all Zulu *maskandis* and is the most popular introductory technique used by all *maskandi* groups for this music genre.

Remarkably, the *izihlabo* are played by the group leaders. For instance, in the group led by Mgqumeni the lead guitar is played by Mgqumeni himself (the group leader). In the song titled *Ibambe Ngakho* ("Something expected is happening"), he plays a six-string lead guitar for 30 seconds, while other instruments and vocalists are silent. In Mfazomnyama's song titled *Wentombi Uyangigangela* ("Maiden you expect too much") the *izihlabo* are played by Mfazomnyama (the group leader) for a minute. However, there are group leaders who are unable to play lead guitars because a lead guitar is the most difficult instrument to play in this genre. As a result they rely on the services of other lead guitarists, whom they hire to play in their groups. Thokozani Langa and Mtshengiseni Gcwensa represent such *maskandis*. For example, Nothi

Ntuli plays his lead guitar for the two *maskandi* groups, that is, Thokozani Langa and Indidane's (Mtshengiseni Gcwensa) groups. Another noteworthy point about the *izihlabo* is that although individual *maskandis* and groups are sometimes influenced by their role models to play the *izihlabo*, they avoid repeating their role models' melodies by effecting some changes here and there; because if they do not add their creative flair they expose themselves and run the risk of being branded copycats by their counterparts, as well as their listeners.

Observably, the introductory stage of each song creates a space for each lead guitarist to display his talents through playing the *izihlabo* before he leads the group into the actual song; and as listeners get used to different *maskandis*' styles, they are able to differentiate *maskandis*; owing to their unique way of playing the *izihlabo*. Consequently, this becomes a deciding factor on whether the group's rendition is well received or not.

Starting with a Concertina

Ntuli (1990, 302) observes that “[t]he concertina is the second most popular instrument used by the musicians”, which suggests that the technique of starting a song with a concertina is not as effective as starting a song by playing the lead guitar. The concertinas were introduced into Zulu *maskandi* music after the then producers had persuaded *maskandis* to form groups so that their songs would be recorded (Davies 1994). Having agreed to form groups, *maskandis* introduced western instruments such as concertinas and bass guitars into this music genre (Ntombela 2016). Groups such as *Phuzekhemisi* and *Indidane's* groups introduced some of their songs by using concertinas instead of the lead guitars. For example, in *Phuzekhemisi's* group, in the song titled *Izwe* (Land) Mxolisi (one of the lead singers) plays a concertina for 15 seconds, while singers and other musical instruments are silent and in *Indidane's* group, in the song titled *Abafana Bangenzansi* (“Towards are at a low level”), *Skhindisabesuthu* plays a concertina for 16 seconds. It must be noted that such instrumentalists are hired by different *maskandi* groups. For example, *Skhindisabesuthu* plays in *Mtshengiseni Gcwensa's* group, *Ama-SAP* and in other groups as well. Most popular concertina players in this music genre include *Skhindisabesuthu Zondi*, *Lahlumlenze Nxumalo*, *Nongedle Mkhize* and *Mashansi Mjiyakho*.

A noteworthy point is that concertina players do not receive formal training to play concertinas—instead they are taught by experienced players. Even though the instrumentalists who play concertinas are hired by different *maskandi* groups, they do not play exactly the same melodies in all groups; as they rely on their talents to vary their melodies when playing for different groups. That, however, does not mean that listeners cannot distinguish them by merely listening to their introductions.

Starting with a Bass Guitar

While some *maskandi* groups prefer to start some of their songs by playing either the lead guitars or the concertinas, others start by the bass guitars. For instance, in the group *Shwi noMtekhala* the first musical instrument to be heard in the song titled *Ubuhle Bakhe* (“Her Beauty”) is a bass guitar, played by Madoda Ntshingila (a well-known bass guitarist in this music genre). Madoda displays his expertise for 22 seconds, while group members and other musical instruments are silent. The same technique is also used in Phuzekhemisi noKhethani’s group in the song titled *Senzeni?* (“What have we done?”) Sikhulekile Majola plays his bass guitar for only nine seconds, while other musical instruments and singers are silent. Starting a song with a bass guitar is one of the fascinating unique techniques of introducing *maskandis’* songs. It reveals *maskandis’* skillfulness because the group, especially the leader of a group, needs to always guard against disharmony in each song. Like concertinas, bass guitarists are also hired by different *maskandi* groups, and as with concertina players, they do not play exactly the same melodies in all the groups. It is worth mentioning that whenever a song starts with a bass guitar, a lead guitar always follows immediately before all other instruments are introduced.

Starting with Voices, Lead Guitar and other Instruments

Using their creativity, some groups introduce their songs using voices, lead guitars and other instruments. This is evident in Mgqumeni’s group in the song titled “*Inselelo*” (“A challenge”), where Mgqumeni leads as *igoso* (“a group’s leader”) and other group members respond as *abanye*

Igoso (Leader): *Simshay’engawi engan’unenkani*
 (“When we hit him he doesn’t fall because he is stubborn”)

Simshay’engawi engan’unenkani
 (“When we hit him he doesn’t fall because he is stubborn”)

Abanye (Others): *Simshay’engawi engan’unenkani*
 (“When we hit him he doesn’t fall because he is stubborn”)

Simshay’engawi engan’unenkani
 (“When we hit him he doesn’t fall because he is stubborn”)

This excerpt has an interesting interplay between the leader and members of the group. While playing a lead guitar, the leader also leads by singing a whole melody twice, and while group members repeat it twice, male members blow whistles and female members

ululate to express their appreciation. “It is common practice that women express their appreciation by ululating in characteristic shrill voices” (Ntuli 1990, 302). Males express theirs by whistling and shouting some praises. In the example above, the interplay lasts for two minutes and five seconds. When Zulu *maskandis* sing simultaneously with lead guitars, bass guitars, concertinas and other instruments without being given required tunes, they display their high proficiency of harmonizing with instruments and one another. This confirms that “[i]ndigenous people [thus] tend naturally to harmonize with one another musically, such that any single note is immediately felt to exist within a chordal framework” (Mulaudzi 2014, 93).

Starting with *Ukubiza Ingoma*

Ukubiza ingoma is the interplay between the leader of a group and members of the group in the beginning of a song. It is a drama-like session between two parties—*igoso* (a leader) and other participants. *Igoso* says certain words, while others are silent and when he finishes, others repeat those words. One of the *maskandi* groups which like to use this introductory technique is Mtshengiseni Gcwensa’s group. In a track titled, *Ngadalwa Nginje* (“I was born like this”) there is this interplay:

Igoso (Leader):

Asambeni webafana baMageza

(“Let us go Dandies”)

Ayikho indawo yokulala layikhaya

(“There is no place to sleep here at home”)

Asambeni

(“Let us go”)

Abanye (Others):

Asambeni webafana baMageza

(“Let us go Dandies”)

Ayikho indawo yokulala layikhaya

(“There is no place to sleep here at home”)

In this extract “[t]he leader starts the song and gets the response” (Ntuli 1990, 302). When it is his turn all other members and musical instruments are silent. As soon as the leader finishes, other group members respond by repeating his words. This time they are accompanied by whistles and this interplay lasts for a minute and one second. When the introduction is finished, the leader switches to the song with ease and the members of the group, including the instrumentalists, join him. What is noteworthy about this

technique is that *maskandis* are influenced by *ukubiza ingoma*, a popular technique used by Zulu people. “Influence may be defined as the presence of certain elements in a latter work similar to those found in the former work” (Msimang 1986, 8). Another striking point about this technique is that while exploring with artistic introductory techniques, Zulu *maskandis* do not overlook their roots, they keep on tapping on their indigenous Zulu songs. For example, they adopt *ukubiza ingoma* and use it in their music without modifying it and by so doing they promote and protect indigenous Zulu elements of songs.

Ukubiza ingoma portrays what black African people are fond of doing; as it is not in the nature of the performing individuals to start and finish their performances without involving their audiences. For example, when narrators introduce folktales, two parties are actively involved—a narrator and the audience/listeners. The two parties follow the formula explained below. The narrator is the one who takes the lead, expecting listeners to respond. Here is an artistic technique used to introduce Zulu folktales:

Oxoxayo uqala ngokuthi, Kwesukasukela

(Narrator starts by saying, (“Once upon a time”))

Abalalele baphendule bathi, Cosu

(Listeners respond by saying, (“Bit by bit”))

Uyaqhubeka oxaxayo athi, Kwakukhona

Narrator continues to say, (“There was”))

Abalalele bathi, Sampheka ngogozwana, kokunye bathi, Sikupheka ngogozwana

(Listeners say, (“We cook him/you in a smallest pot”))

When the listeners say, “Bit by bit”, they mean a narrator must introduce and narrate his/her story bit by bit. When they say, “We cook you in a smallest pot”, they mean that the narrator is under their full control as this serves as a binding agreement between the two parties. Once the parties reach this stage of an introduction, the narrator is obliged to respect the rule of this artistic work by continuing to narrate a story until it is finished. What is important about this stage is that the narrator sets the tone of his/her story. After this stage the narrator switches over to the next stage—which is narrating the story. In the same way, when *maskandi* group members split into two parts during *ukubiza ingoma*, they do what is practiced in their communities.

DISCUSSION

Playing the *izihlabo* using a lead guitar, the first western instrument to be incorporated into Zulu indigenous songs; is as old as *maskandi* music itself. As evidence that this introductory technique is very important and central in this music genre, some leaders of the *maskandi* groups who are unable to play the *izihlabo* hire skillful lead guitarists to perform this technique for their groups. Other leaders resort to exploring new introductory techniques as substitutes. One, therefore, can safely conclude that one of the reasons for *maskandis* to explore other introductory techniques is the difficulty associated with performing this technique. But if this is the case, why do *maskandis* who are known to be experts in playing the *izihlabo*, such as Bhekumuzi Luthuli, Phuzekhemisi Mnyandu and Mgqumeni Khumalo, are also part of *maskandis* who explore other introductory techniques? This question suggests that besides the fact that playing the *izihlabo* is difficult, there is something else which pushes Zulu *maskandis* to explore other introductory techniques.

Taking the above argument into consideration, it appears that *maskandis* who are unable to play the *izihlabo* and those who are able to, have a common quest to make their songs relevant and appealing to the listeners. Apparently, the most important stage of the structure of *maskandi* music that draws the attention of the listeners is the introductory stage; and if *maskandis* can excel in this stage they are sure to fascinate many listeners. While perfecting introductory parts of their songs, *maskandis* indirectly explore other artistic introductory techniques. This is evident when they combine different singing styles such as *ukubiza ingoma*; where there is an interplay between leaders of the groups and members of their groups. This pattern is known as call-response. “Call-response is replete in African communicative style and is widely used in a range of contexts: music, speeches, sermons and folktales” (Ntombela 2016). In this context, *maskandis* are influenced by *ukubiza ingoma*, which is another Zulu music genre. Having explored new artistic techniques, Zulu *maskandis* have discovered some additional artistic introductory techniques—such as starting a song using a concertina, a bass guitar, voices, a lead guitar and other instruments as well as *ukubiza ingoma*. A remarkable point is that although different *maskandi* groups may use the same introductory techniques; they vary their talents to differentiate one group from another.

When considering implications for pushing the boundaries of this music genre, it is worth mentioning that “before the inception of the genre”, a *maskandi* was a male individual who performed in informal settings (Davies 1994; Ntuli 1990). Owing to dynamism of *maskandi* music, the focus shifted from males only to females as well (Ntombela 2011). It must be noted that after being persuaded by the then music producers, Zulu *maskandis* started to perform as groups (Davies 1994). Thereafter, this music genre started to accommodate many sophisticated instruments (Ntuli 1990). As this music genre grows it adapts and modifies some elements from other music genres. For example, Zulu *maskandis* retune lead guitars to different acoustic pitches (Ntombela 2016). When *maskandis* perfect introductory stages of their songs by introducing

additional introductory artistic techniques, they break the monotony of introducing songs using the *izihlabo*. By so doing, they indirectly expand parameters of this music genre, which is a relevant contribution to the existing knowledge of indigenous music.

The incorporation of various Zulu singing techniques and western instruments into Zulu indigenous songs needs a highly skilled individual for such techniques to fit in well with Zulu *maskandi* music. It involves a combination of deep thoughts, flexibility, creativity and talent. For example, Zulu *maskandis* are revisiting indigenous knowledge systems of singing and utilise them in conjunction with western forms of music (Muchenje and Goronga 2015). While incorporating western artistic techniques into their indigenous music, the “unmentioned, unsung, uncelebrated indigenous African music practitioners” as Masoga (2015, 80) describes them, are indirectly promoting indigenous ways of singing; and the results of this fusion of horizons can produce desired results—and can change negative attitude towards African indigenous music. Again, “the so-called non-college music performers” are drawing people’s attention to the fact that the fusion of horizons is feasible, even in other spheres of life (Masoga 2015, 81). This suggests that if collaboration of African indigenous knowledge systems and western knowledge forms can be extended to schools, tertiary institutions and communities, for example; the effects of the long overdue tolerance would be realised.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this article sought to investigate various artistic techniques used by Zulu *maskandis* to introduce their songs from a critical general inductive perspective, and demonstrate how flexible, creative and talented Zulu *maskandis* are. The main finding is that the introductory artistic techniques analysed reveal that although playing the *izihlabo* is obligatory in this music genre, *maskandis* keep on exploring other artistic introductory techniques; such as using concertina, a bass guitar, voices, a lead guitar and other instruments as well as *ukubiza ingoma*. Thus, this music genre is dynamic in nature. The second finding is that among these artistic techniques, *izihlabo* is played predominantly because it is still regarded as the basis of all other techniques used in this music genre. Unlike what previous research found about the artistic techniques used by Zulu *maskandis*, the study has shown that while pushing boundaries of indigenous music, *maskandis* embrace both indigenous and modern ways of singing. However, owing to flexibility and dynamism of *maskandi* music, there is a need for more studies to be conducted to find out how this music genre develops.

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