The interplay of ethnic and other identities in Tsonga popular music

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ABSTRACT
Studies on black South African popular music have often invoked the idea of identity performance: certain music genres are associated with particular ethnic identities, for example *maskanda* with Zuluness1. This work shows how various South African popular musics construct ethnic identities. Although ethnic identity continues to be performed in contemporary black South African popular music, there is also, I argue in this paper, a performance of and discourse on identities that exceed ethnicity. In this paper I focus on the relationships between ethnic identity and other identities that elide the national South African identity as manifested in the stories and music of two Tsonga musicians from different generations, General MD Shirinda and Jeff Maluleke. From several in-depth interviews with these musicians I analyse their use of language and modes of self-representation, in their music and in their discourse on their music during apartheid and post apartheid times. In so doing I show how the musicians’ thinking about and practicing of identity moves between different levels of affiliation at different historical moments.

KEYWORDS: identity; genre; ethnicity; Tsonga; popular music.

GENERAL MD AND JEFF MALULEKE: AN INTRODUCTION
General MD Shirinda was born Khokhozeya Shirinda in 1936 in Mozambique but later moved to South Africa with his family2. His career as an artist began with him being discovered and recorded by the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which embarked on a search to record traditional music to play on Radio Bantu3.
Shirinda recalled being first recorded in 1962, and in 1965, the year in which Radio Bantu Tsonga was established, he recorded some songs for the station. Following these experiences, Shirinda went on to pursue a career in music, and, in the words of former Munghana Lonene FM (the Tsonga radio station) manager, James Shikwambana (2009), Shirinda “dominated the airwaves”. Shirinda’s music has always been labelled Tsonga traditional music by music commentators and the media at large.

Jeff Maluleke, on the other hand, was born in 1977 in Mambhumbu, a village in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga, but grew up in Daveyton, a township in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng. A self-taught guitarist, Maluleke found his place in the South African music industry by first collaborating with artists such as Dr. Victor and *kwainto* legend, Arthur Mafokate. It was only in 1998 that Maluleke made his mark as a solo artist with the release of his album *Dzovo* (Maluleke 1998) in which the song “Byala bya xintu” (traditional beer) turned him into a popular name in South Africa. Since then, Maluleke has won numerous awards including three South African Music Awards and two Kora Awards. Maluleke is often described by the media and music commentators as a Tsonga musician; however he describes his music as world music.

Though Shirinda and Maluleke participate in different music styles, there exists within their music, features that communicate, construct a Tsonga ethnic identity, one of which is language.

**Negotiating Tsonga-ness through language**

From the commencement of his music career, Shirinda used Xitsonga in his song lyrics. Shirinda’s sole use of the Tsonga language in his music is mainly due to his belief in keeping the language “pure”. This became apparent when he raised concern about young musicians today recording songs that “do not make sense”, proclaiming that if “you went and sang Zulu and it was not ‘well cooked’, the song would not work with the Zulus. Even Shangaan, you were supposed to it sing it purely” (Shirinda 2010). Having spent two weekends with Shirinda and his family I observed that Shirinda is very rooted in his culture and heritage. He protested:

> We need to preserve the Shangaan language. In the olden days when you spoke Shangaan and mixed it with English, you went for an interview and you mixed with English, they didn’t want that. If you ever spoke and mixed with English, while on air, it meant you are killing the Shangaan language. It will slowly die, bit by bit... So for me, I am determined that for as long as I live, that our language, I’m not saying the other languages are not right, they must be there, all eleven languages here in South Africa. (Shirinda 2010)

Though Shirinda’s love for his mother tongue is indisputable, the circumstances surrounding his emergence in the music industry cannot be left unexplored, as it is evident in the above statement that it was not only his preference but “they” (music commentators of the time) also did not want mixing of languages. His music career began during one of South Africa’s darkest decades, the 1960s, which witnessed,
amongst other things, the attempted repression of cosmopolitan musical styles such as township jazz (Coplan 2008, p. 225). The repression of the cosmopolitan styles came with the promotion of ethnic language based styles such as the Tsonga traditional or Tsonga neo-traditional, as it was later labelled, which Shirinda participates in. Therefore, though Shirinda expressed pride in singing in Xitsonga, it is also important to consider that his career coincided with a period in South African history in which he had limited choice in terms of the language in which to sing⁶. Maluleke’s use of Xitsonga on the other hand, is a different matter.

Though Xitsonga is dominant in Maluleke’s music, he uses English often and occasionally makes use of Zulu, Sotho, Portuguese and Kiswahili. Maluleke also exploits mixing languages in his lyrics such as in the songs “Let’s Save The World” and “Luleka M’nwanati” (“Advice M’nwanati”) from his album Kilimanjaro (Maluleke 2001) in which he sings the verses in Xitsonga and the choruses in English and vice versa.

As a young artist who first placed his mark in the South African music industry during the post-apartheid era, it is not surprising that Maluleke sees no obligation in singing in Xitsonga regardless of the fact that he is Tsonga. When I asked him why he sings in other languages other than Xitsonga, his answer was: “Why don’t you ask me why I sing in Tsonga?” (Maluleke 2009a). He made it clear that he sings in Tsonga because he chooses to. Though this stance may seem as though Maluleke is distancing himself from his ethnic language, the contrary is true. Maluleke released Ximatsatsa (Maluleke 2004), an album which he dedicated to the Tsonga people. He described it to me as “the coming back to my roots” saying he sang all the songs in Tsonga as a way of honouring his people.

The use of the term ximatsatsa for the album also draws attention to Tsonga-ness in the music. The word is a common affectionate word in the Xitsonga language, meaning “my love”, “sweetheart”, “darling”, etc. The popularization of this term was further accentuated by Thomas Chauke, the best selling Tsonga traditional artist to date. Chauke (1982, 1983) uses the terms as a title to his album series; hence the word has almost become synonymous with Xitsonga. Maluleke therefore may have emerged at a time when he had the freedom to choose which language he wanted to sing in, his use of Xitsonga functions to underpin his ethnic identity in a similar way it does for Shirinda. The difference between the two is that Shirinda’s ethnic pride in singing in Xitsonga was practiced during a period in which the objective, though not from him, was to separate his people from the rest, while for Maluleke it is to celebrate his identity along with other South African ethnic groups and the rest of the world. Language therefore, as one of the fundamental markers of ethnic identity, plays an important role in the construction of a Tsonga ethnic identity in Shirinda’s and Maluleke’s music; nevertheless, there are features within the language itself that further emphasize Tsonga-ness.

**Negotiating ethnic identity through reference to Tsonga-ness**

In addition to the use of Xitsonga in their music, there appears in Shirinda’s and Maluleke’s music a name that has long appeared in Tsonga folklore including mu-
sic, “Mithavine”, which appears several time in Shirinda’s and Maluleke’s music. This name also appears in the music of most of the artists studied for my research. It is a common name amongst the Tsonga and its use in their music is a direct reference to Tsonga heritage. Maluleke also makes direct reference to his ethnic identity in “Luleka M’nwanati” with “M’nwanati” being his clan name. Also, Shirinda employs dress code to further enhance his Tsonga-ness in his performance. He emphasizes how he always performs in his “Shangaan” traditional dress (Shirinda 2010). In addition to wearing traditional Tsonga attires, Shirinda explained that when they perform, they dance the XiGaza dance, which is the Tsonga traditional dance in which the women swivel their skirts and the men execute their stamping dance routines. While these elements construct a Tsonga ethnic identity in their music, Maluleke and Shirinda both view their music as participating or constructing more than an ethnic identity.

Shirinda’s music has been labelled Tsonga music, Tsonga traditional or Tsonga neo-traditional, but these are labels which he highly contests arguing that when he records music, it is not only for the Tsonga people, but for everyone. He related how he “improved” his music by adding western instruments and drawing elements from mbaqanga, so that it could appeal to everyone. Regardless of the fact that his music continues to be branded and marketed as Tsonga traditional, Shirinda maintains that his music is “African Music” (Shirinda 2010). He contested:

This music is music of Africa, it is not Shangaan because it's Shangaan when we sing, the language, but the rhythm that I play works throughout the world. That is why it was taken by Malcolm McLaren, and taken by Paul Simon, do you see where they are. They are outside [the country]. (ibid.)

Important to note from this quote is that Shirinda’s positions his music as “African” rather than South African or Tsonga. For rural based musicians the nation was the ethnic identity rather than the country. Black South Africans were allocated “homelands” according to ethnic groups and Gazankulu was the one reserved for Tsonga speakers, hence Shirinda’s use of the word maGaza (“Gaza’s” or “people of Gaza”) whenever he referred to Tsonga people. Shirinda’s belief that his music transcends ethnic boundaries gave way to the idea that it could not only be Tsonga, but also “African”.

Maluleke is also against the idea of music being ethnically labelled, arguing that it is “tribalism” (Maluleke 2009b). He lamented that “if you are Shangaan and you sing Shangaan, they will take you and lock you up and say you play Tsonga music and then which means your music must be played mainly in the Xitsonga radio station” (ibid.). While Shirinda’s music can easily be identified as Tsonga when heard at first encounter due to its heavy reliance on Tsonga indigenous melodies, Maluleke’s music on the other hand, without the Tsonga lyrics, cannot be easily identified as Tsonga. Maluleke explained that his music is world music because “I fuse different elements”. He emphasized how he uses different instruments from all
over the world and different genres in his music. He said, “Anything that I listen and I love, I take a piece of it and then I make music” (Maluleke 2009a).

Though Maluleke is clear on what his music is or what it should be labelled, these fusions which he often speaks of have resulted in confusions amongst music commentators. Besides being constantly described as a Tsonga musician, to his annoyance, his music has been marked everything from mbaqanga, Afro-pop, contemporary, Afro-jazz, folk music, and to my surprise West African. This multiple labelling affirms that though Maluleke is Tsonga and often uses Xitsonga in his lyrics, thus constructing a Tsonga ethnic identity, his exploitation of various elements from other cultures, whether be it instruments or any other musical features, creates a platform for the performance of multiple identities. His use of Swahili, Portuguese, kwasa kwasa, and directly referring to Kinshasa in the song “Kabila” also builds a Pan-African aesthetic in his music.

Evident in these case studies is the impact of a specific moment in a country’s history of music making and how musicians identify their music. Shirinda’s and Maluleke’s experiences also indicate the lack of authority over music labelling experienced by musicians. Both have expressed dissatisfaction with the labelling of their music by music commentators and the media at large, with Shirinda still being branded and marketed as a Tsonga traditional artist regardless of the fact the he prefers for his music to be labelled “African Music”.

ENDNOTES

1. See Olsen 2000, Nhlapo 1998, and Collins 2006/7 for discussions on maskanda
2. His father was a traditional healer who enjoyed playing indigenous instruments. Young Shirinda was also trained as a traditional healer and he played indigenous instruments such as the timbila (Tsonga thumb piano, and Chopi xylophone) and the guitar.
5. See Drewett and Clegg 2006 for discussion on popular music censorship in South Africa.
6. It is commonly known that Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu’s “Woza Friday” (“Come Friday”) was banned because it was seen as an “insult to the Zulu people” for polluting their language by mixing it with English (see Drewett and Clegg 2006).
7. Shirinda’s music was made available to me by the SABC Media Libraries.
8. See Tracey c. 1950 for description of some Tsonga traditional dances.
9. Mbqanga is a black urban South African popular style that emerged in the early 1950s, popularised by the groaner Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens. See Meintjes 2003 for detailed discussion on mbqanga.

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