

SOUTH AFRICA

Jacquelin C. Peters

Since the Dutch first settled at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, South Africa's bountiful land and mineral riches have been sources of conflict. Over the course of several centuries, Dutch (now the Afrikaners) and British settlers were able to seize land from the indigenous African peoples. By the end of the 19th century, the Europeans dominated over 90 percent of the territory. When diamonds and gold were discovered in the late 19th century, European settlers prevented Africans from sharing in the land's wealth and transformed them into a tightly controlled, poorly paid labor force.

When the Union of South Africa came into existence in 1910, the new settler-run government held absolute political and economic power. Segregation was the order of the day and, with few exceptions, Africans could not participate in political decisions. They were allowed to hold jobs only as the skilled, cheap laborers.

Since 1948, the Nationalist Party has been in power. It has promoted a policy called *apartheid* (separateness), which built on and intensified European domination through a vast array of laws and edicts. The Population Registration Act categorized people into different racial groups; the Groups Areas Act separated different racial groups in the urban areas; the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act forced all Africans above the age of 16 to carry passes which controlled their residence and movement. The government's ultimate objective was to consign African people, 75 percent of South Africa's population, to bits of impoverished land called Bantustans or homelands, on about 13 percent of its poorest land. In order to achieve that, the government forcibly removed an estimated

3.5 million African people from their homes between 1960 and 1980. The government also insured that Africans would continue to have inferior education by structuring a school system that favored European children. The government allocates \$296 for the schooling of each African child compared to \$1,194 for each European child (Williams, 1990:23).

African leaders and organizations have challenged the injustices and inequities of colonial rule at every step. A leading organization representing Black opinion has been the African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912. Along with other African protest and trade union groups, the ANC challenged colonial rule through non-violent strategies until the government outlawed the opposition in 1960, and banned the ANC, Pan African Congress (PAC) and the Communist Party. The bannings and failed attempts to effect a peaceful settlement led the ANC and the PAC to turn to armed struggle. Government repression of Black dissent has been forceful in recent decades, but political, church, community, student and trade union groups have sustained the struggle and captured worldwide attention.

In February, 1990, the government lifted its bannings on Black opposition movements and released ANC leader Nelson Mandela, who had been in prison for 27 years. But despite the release of Mandela and other anti-apartheid leaders, many more political prisoners remain in jail. Despite the legalizing of organizations such as the ANC and the PAC, the State of Emergency remains in effect. Despite the government statement that exiles may return to South Africa, they may still face prosecution and jail for their political acts. Moreover, Blacks do not have the vote, and the three



Music and dance were vital components of the reception welcoming Nelson Mandela to Lusaka, Zambia. (Photo by D. Michael Cheers, courtesy African Studies and Research Program, Howard University)

key apartheid laws — the Natives Land Act, the Population Registration Act, and the Group Areas Act — still endure. The government has done away with some discriminatory laws, but apartheid is still in force.

Music of struggle in South Africa has many forms and performance contexts. It is based on a variety of regional styles including unaccompanied polyphonic singing, which is an integral part of everyday life. Another regional influence on music used in struggle is praise poetry, often a rap-like poetic recitative that affirms the cultural significance of particular people and events. Such poetry is found today among urban laborers who use the genre to express their physical prowess and to give voice to problems they face far from their families. Amahubo, clan identity anthems with slow, synchronized movements and high kicks, is another traditional base for men's songs and dance steps performed in the setting of workers' compounds.

South African music of struggle also has had sources in European musics and in the musics of touring choirs and musical reviews. Influences on South African composers and arrangers during the early 1900s include African American music of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and choirs of the charismatic Church of God in Christ denomination; minstrel music, and ragtime, the popular syncopated American music of the turn of the century. Blending such genres with their own traditional music, noted South African composers working in the makwaya ("choir") genre — such as Caluza, Bokwe, and Tyamzashe — combined rising nationalistic feelings and social commentary with compelling harmonies and rhythms.

Ngoma, songs and dances performed at weddings, together with mission school "action song," laid the groundwork for mbube, which consciously adapted a European (homophonic) four-part harmony vocal style.¹ In 1939, a young migrant worker Solomon Linda made the first recording — entitled "Mbube" — which named and documented the genre; the melody would be identified by American audiences as "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." Isicathamiya ("walk softly") and cathoza mfana ("walk steadily, boys"), other forms of Zulu male singing which developed from mbube, have gained international commercial acceptance.²

Mbube songs expressing political protest against exploitation were often heard on the South African Broadcasting Corporation until the late 1940s, when stringent monitoring became the rule. "Vukani Mauwethu" ("Wake Up, My People"), a well-known makwaya song, frightened radio censors with its potential to mobilize Africans. And until recently it was illegal even to hum the ANC anthem "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" ("God Bless Africa"), although this has not prevented people around the world from learning the song. The circumvention of censorship continues to be a challenge to South African musicians and composers; South African music has served as a means of defining opposition to colonial rule and affirming African identity and unity.

CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

- Baker, Pauline. 1989. *The United States and South Africa: The Reagan Years*. New York: Foreign Policy Association.
- Bracker, Milton. 1961. African Rallies Marked by Song. *Sing Out!* 11(3).
- Coplan, David. 1985. *In Township Tonight!* New York: Longman.
- Edgar, Robert, ed. 1990. *Sanctioning Apartheid*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press.
- Erlmann, Veit. Liner notes for *Mbube Roots: Zulu Choral Music from South Africa, 1930's-60's*. Rounder Records 5025.
- Mattera, Don. 1987. *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meer, Fatima. 1990. *Higher Than Hope: The Authorized Biography of Nelson Mandela*. Harper & Row.
- Murray, C. 1981. *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Rhodes, Willard. 1962. Music as an Agent of Political Expression. *African Studies Bulletin*. 5(1).
- South Africa. 1985. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*. 11:32-33.
- South Africa. 1988. *The Statesman's Year-Book*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Thompson, L. 1985. *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

cont. page 66

¹ "Action song" is accompanied by controlled movements allowing a physical response to music, short of dancing, which was forbidden by the church fathers.

² Contemporary major exponents include the Boyoyo Boys, whose singing first caught Paul Simon's ear, leading to the success of Ladysmith Black Mambazo outside of Africa. "Ladysmith" serenades its international following — with a non-political repertoire — in English as well as Zulu.