

# VITAMINA H(umanidades)

## ECHOS FROM A FADING PAST: MUSICAL BOWS AND UMNGQOKOLO

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*Pequeñas píldoras de conocimiento*

PARA AFRONTAR EN MEJORES CONDICIONES  
ALGUNOS DE LOS RETOS SOCIALES ACTUALES



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*From left to right: Nontwazana with umrhubhe mouth bow, Nowhi and Pheliwe Zatu with uhadi musical bow. June 2020.*

*Photo by Bernhard Bleibinger.*

# Echos from a fading past: musical bows and umngqokolo

It was in the morning of the 6th of June 2020 when we met in Khayaletu (also known as Auckland), a little village next to the street to Hogsback, approximately 30 Km north of the town of Alice in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The meeting with Pheliwe Zatu (then 59 years old) and her two sisters Nontwazana (64 years) and Nowhi (72 years) was arranged in order to film the three sisters singing and talking of the olden days. On that day they narrated how, as young girls, they were almost forced into marriage, but managed to escape or that Pheliwe had the “calling of the ancestors” to become a traditional healer, but could not afford to

undergo the training because of her children, and that singing and dancing helped her to get over the calling. They remembered their mother singing and playing musical bows and in between their stories they sang, played and danced. Almost like a side note one of them mentioned that they used to practice the *umngqokolo* when they were young.

*Umngqokolo* is a very particular way of singing in the Eastern Cape which may aim at producing overtones, i.e. a second melody over fundamental tones. And in fact, Nowhi



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started a song and for a moment one could clearly hear a fifth over the fundamental tones before – due to her age, as she explained– she stopped amplifying the overtones. In this case it was the ordinary *umngqokolo* or *umngqokolo nje*, as Dave Dargie, a famous specialist for the music of the amaXhosa, would call it. Another very rare type of overtone singing in that region, the *umngqokolo ngomqangi*, is related with bow music, specifically that of the *umrhubhe* mouth bow.[1] *Umrhubhe* music in the Eastern Cape uses two fundamental tones (one whole tone apart) over which specific overtones are amplified in order to produce melodies based on the so-called Xhosa scale (see figure). When counting the tones upwards starting with the fundamental tone, the most important amplified tones would be the tones 4, 5 and 6. That means, if the fundamental tone is F the amplified tones would be F, A and C. A tonal shift of one whole tone (to G) –which is achieved by shortening the string by using the left thumb– leads to the tones G, B and D. Via this tonal shift a hexatonic scale (F-G-A-B-C-D) can be produced on

the instrument.

The term *umngqokolo ngomqangi* is a reference to the musical bow *umrhubhe* which can also be called *umqangi*. *Umngqokolo ngomqangi* could therefore be translated like “umngqokolo in the style of the umqangi”. Nowayilethi Mbizweni from Ngqoko used the term. She was one of Dargie’s most important contacts. But, as Dargie once explained to me, she might have had something different in mind: “She thought the term came from the cicadas which the boys would impale on a thorn. The poor cicada would try desperately to escape, and produce a high buzzing sound in the process.

A boy would then hold the insect before his open mouth, and resonate overtones as when playing a mouth-bow. The unfortunate cicada would then be described as *umqangi*. However, the way Nowayilethi sang was almost clearly related to *umrhubhe* (alias *umqangi* alias *umqunge* plus plus), the defining factor being the use of two fundamentals a whole tone apart, as with playing the mouth-bow.” (Email, 14 June 2023)

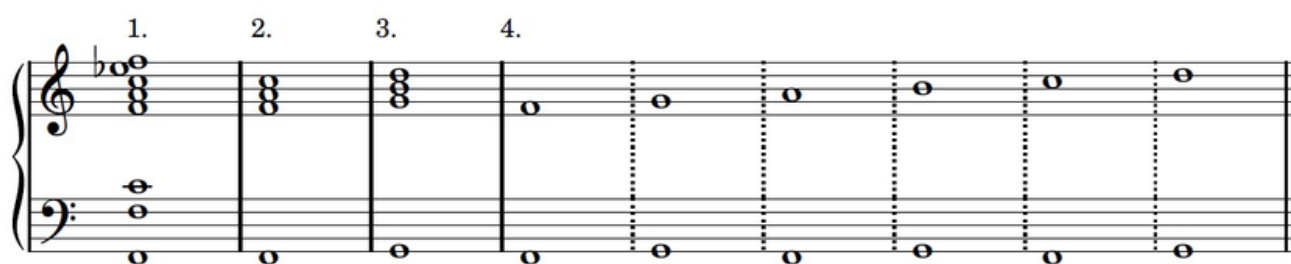
### Xhosa Scale

#### 1. Harmonics

2. Tones amplified on *umrhubhe* (tones 4, 5 and 6 counted from the fundamental tone)

3. Amplified tones after tonal shift from F to G

4. Hexatonic scale as result of tonal shift



Production of the hexatonic Xhosa Scale on the *umrhubhe* mouth bow. Figure by Bernhard Bleibinger.



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Even though Pheliwe and her sisters did not perform the *umngqokolo ngomqangi* during our meeting, all of them made overtone music: one of them performed the ordinary *umngqokolo nje* and the other two played the *umrhubhe* and *uhadi*[2] bows which also amplify overtones – just as they used to do it when they were young girls. What makes that moment with *umngqokolo* so special is the history attached to this kind of singing: It was at the beginning of the 1980s when the before-mentioned Dave Dargie discovered this unique singing technique in Ngqoko, a village in the region of the former Transkei in the Eastern Cape Province (approximately 50 Km east-north-east from Queenstown and 160 Km north of the place where I made my recording in 2020).

At that time Dargie was working at the Lumko institute, which was part of a Catholic Mission next to Ngqoko. At Lumko he was responsible for

the introduction of indigenous music in the Roman Catholic liturgy (Dargie, 2016; Bleibinger, 2019) and because of his working situation he was familiar with the music of the amaXhosa. Yet this kind of overtone singing was exceptional and only seemed to be continued by women and in regions where the old traditions were still practiced, for instance, the region of the former Transkei (some of his first recordings of *umngqokolo ngomqangi* are available on Youtube). [3] Later he recorded a man from Auckland –the place where I recorded the three sisters– whose technique was very similar to the *umngqokolo ngomqangi*. Unfortunately, this man died shortly after.

Encouraged by Dargie some of the ladies from Ngqoko formed a music group in the 1980s and even performed on international stages. But over the last 40 years most of the singers known to



*The Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.*

perform *umngqokolo nje* and *umngqokolo ngomqangi* have died. In order to conserve this practice Dargie published a series of CDs and DVDs on Xhosa music and tried to organise workshops in which younger people should be trained by the singers of the Ngqoko group (they even received financial support from him).[4] At the SASRIM Conference in 2013 and the ICTM Symposium on Applied Ethnomusicology in 2014 the group was invited to give concerts and workshops in order to make the academic world

aware of the problem. And in 2017 a field trip was conducted in the former Transkei region to identify locations where this unique art was still to be found, to document it and to connect potential future singers with the ladies from Ngqoko.[5] Even though the field trip led to the discovery of people who practice the ordinary *umngqokolo* and although younger artists are getting interested again in the musical culture of the amaXhosa, it was not possible to train or form a group of younger



*Dr. Norma Van Niekerk and Pheliwe Zatu, Hogsback, Back o' the Moon, December 2022.*

*From left to right: Jonathan Ncozana, Bernhard Bleibinger in Mkonjana, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa 2013.*

singers. At the moment only two women are known who can still perform the *umngqokolo ngomqangi*. Once they have died the unique art of overtone singing in the Eastern Cape will be gone forever. I met Pheliwe again in December 2022, for I wanted to give her copies of the recordings and photos of the above-mentioned meeting. When I was told that her two sisters had passed away I decided to discuss the matter with an old friend first, because “voices from

the grave” are not always welcomed. Yet the videos and photos I forwarded to Pheliwe via our friend Dr Norma Van Niekerk[6] were much appreciated as memories of a wonderful afternoon when we talked, laughed, sang and listened to traditional music and stories. Watching those recordings brings fond memories back to life and gives hope that there still might be some old people able to practice the art of *umngqokolo nje* and *umngqokolo ngomqangi* in



unexpected places. Yet it also reminds us that we are running out of time, if we still want to conserve this precious intangible cultural heritage of the world.

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*BB with kelp trumpet, South Africa 2013.*

[1] In the case of the *umrhube* overtones are amplified in the mouth cavity of the player. It is an instrument which, as the three sisters told me, used to be played by young girls above all.

[2] The *uhadi* uses a calabash as resonator.

[3] Dargie's friend Tran Quang Hai made the DVD available on youtube. Tran Quang Hai was a specialist for overtone singing and visited South Africa twice. He died in December 2021.

[4] It was a sum of 50000 Rand he had once received for giving lectures on Xhosa music abroad. All of it was given to the singers of the Ngqoko Group.

[5] I organised a first exploratory research together with Tsolwana Mpayipeli who had heard of singers around Ncobo village. During this first research short recordings were made and meetings with the Ngqoko women were discussed. Some months later we arranged a meeting of the singers we had met during our research with the ladies from Ngqoko in the Ngqoko village. Dave Dargie and Prof. Tiago de Oliveira Pinto from the UNESCO Chair on Transcultural Music Studies at the University of Music Franz Liszt in Weimar were present at this meeting with performances which was filmed by Mariano Gonzalez.

[6] In December 2022 Dr. Norma Van Niekerk wrote to me: "Pheliwe was ecstatic when she received these photos. I was very aware that some African cultures don't want to hear 'voices from the grave'. I discussed it with her, and she is keen to have the recordings on a memory stick. Later today I will go & buy a memory stick and transfer the recordings to her. You made her extremely happy! Warm greetings". Shortly after she handed over the recordings.

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