



Deborah James

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CHAPTER FOUR

Black Background: Life History and Migrant Women's Music in South Africa

Deborah James

As an undergraduate in Witwatersrand University's Anthropology Department, which Blacking had left some years previously, I read his Venda material eagerly. My excitement on unearthing his articles, and on finding the great tome of his dissertation in the library, was the greater for what I'd felt was the department's – and the university's – relative lack of interest in the anthropology of music at the time. This lack of interest was surprising given the intensity with which, his former students assured me, his charisma as a teacher had been experienced. Finding Blacking's writings was a great source of encouragement to me. Consciously or unconsciously, it pointed me in the direction of my own future research interest, which echoed his in some respects. Like him, I became fascinated by the role played by music in socializing children, and young women in particular. My perspective on this, however, was to investigate how adult women saw the music of their childhood in retrospect, and to try to understand how it had shaped, or been shaped to form, their later musical experiences.

Blacking's own interest in these matters can be seen from several articles he published during the 1960s, covering the music and symbolism of the three stages of Venda girls' initiation – *vhusha*, *tshikanda* and *domba* with its famous 'python dance' (1969a, 1969c–f) – as well as in the more comprehensive material on Venda music and on Venda children's songs (1964c; 1967) and in an earlier report (1957). But it can also be seen in a very different piece of work. In this, Blacking used the autobiographical writings of a Venda adolescent girl of Lutheran faith, Dora Thizwilandi Magidi, for the text of his book *Black Background: The Childhood of a Young South African Girl* (1964a). The Christian childhood it portrays seems to have only a tenuous connection to the experience of the female initiates in the academic articles – a tenuousness highlighted by the fact that many of the photographs with which the book is illustrated are of the female initiation rituals which Dora, as a Christian, was destined never to undergo. That the two kinds of girl saw themselves as distinct from each other is indicated by Dora's use of the term

‘salempore girl’ to describe her traditionalist counterparts (Blacking, 1964a: 158).

Blacking’s interest in the part played by music in a young woman’s upbringing, seen against the backdrop of broader Venda society with its patriarchal and hierarchical structure, and of South African society shortly after the decade of apartheid’s most comprehensive implementation reveals a central tension in his attitude towards music more generally. It also contains a clue as to why his detailed studies of the Venda have had relatively little influence on subsequent studies of music and performance culture in a South African context, although his more general works (Blacking, 1973, 1977a, 1980a) have been acknowledged in this canon (see, for example, Erlmann, 1991; James, 1999b).

The tension is that between music as a designator of a fixed and unquestioned place in the social order, established through age, generation, gender and degree of royal connection, and music as an expression of alternative visions of social order, perhaps able to be used strategically in pursuit of such visions. His writing on girls’ initiation, for example, shows how each stage is marked by highly formulaic learning of musical and speech patterns. These are memorized not so much for the knowledge they can impart as for the fact that they are automatic affirmations of status, denoting unalterably the phase a girl has reached in the life cycle. Affirming this idea that music marks a ranking within the context of pre-existing social statuses, Blacking remarked in his dissertation that music is incapable of expressing anything new; that it ‘can only confirm sentiments that exist but cannot create new ones’ (1964c: 108, 334). This remark is perhaps in keeping with his view, expressed nearly a decade later, that of all systems of symbols musical ones are the most resistant to change (1977a, cited in Erlmann, 1991: 11). Even when people embraced new, Christian types of worship and the new musical forms accompanying them, he saw these as conforming, fundamentally, to the original patterns. Christian adolescents, for example, might learn hymns and biblical phrases rather than the traditional initiate’s music and *milayo* (laws), but these had the same function of designating status rather than being transmitters of knowledge or the means of enabling a fundamentally new and different outlook on the world. From one point of view, then, the Lutheran culture of Dora Magidi’s childhood was every bit as ascriptive as the traditional Venda culture of the ‘salempore girls’.

But bearing an apparently different message are remarks to be found elsewhere in Blacking’s Venda work, and indeed it is these which could be said to have had most impact on subsequent studies – mainly focused on migrant and/or popular forms – in southern Africa. Music, he says, involves a symbolic removal from the everyday scheme of things; hence, those performing it are able to achieve states of mind or sociability which would be unattainable under non-musical circumstances. On one level, this can be seen to occur in the

musical expedition (*bepha*). In this, chiefs or headmen – mostly from the ruling Singo clan – sent commoner boys and girls on competitive musical visits to neighbouring rulers' villages in an expression either of political fealty or dominance, depending on the relative status of the other chief concerned (Blacking, 1962). From the perspective of the commoner youths involved, such expeditions provided opportunities for enjoyment by engendering a 'spirit of fellowship' (1962) and, in particular, for anarchic cross-dressing and transvestite behaviour, which were afforded during the days of musical performance and competition involved (1965: 78–79). Here, certainly, was a case of symbolic distancing from normal patterns of behaviour. At the same time, from the point of view of the royals who harnessed the energies of these commoner youths, the *bepha* was of primarily political significance. It was 'an agreeable means by which a ruler [could] cultivate indirectly the continued loyalty of his people and remind them of his position' (1962: 62), and also by which he could assert, or affirm, his status in relation to that of those positioned at other points in the hierarchy of chiefs and headmen. For these royals, then, the sense of symbolic distancing from normal life which communal music involves was something to be used strategically, in the construction or affirmation of alliances.

While the enjoyable cross-dressing of *bepha* might be viewed as nothing more than a sort of Venda 'ritual of rebellion', Blacking makes the point about symbolic distancing, and transformation, more strongly elsewhere. In a discussion of the national reed-pipe dance *tshikona*, he demonstrates the transformative and transcendent power that music may have in certain settings, in part through its establishing of 'virtual time' (Blacking, 1973: 27, 51) and hence of special kinds of social relationship between participants. Where social integration may not have existed between participants before the dance, it would certainly have come into being in the course of its performance: in such a setting the themes of 'humanly organized sound' and 'soundly organized humanity' interlock (1973: 95–97). In such situations, music becomes 'an instrument indispensable to the transformation of man and his world' (1973: 49), as it was in the hands of such geniuses as Bach or Beethoven.

It is interesting, however, that Blacking's Venda material lays little stress on musical innovation or syncretism as a means of achieving this transcendence. He was interested in the 'political freedom' (inextricably linked to 'musical freedom') which independent African churches seemed to have (Blacking, 1980a). But it was a freedom which lay more in the Africanness of their music, and hence in their escape from mission structures and strictures, than in a creative merging of African with Christian elements. If one looks at the Lutheran childhood described in *Black Background*, it appears every bit as circumscribed and hedged in by institutionalized musical routines – school choir practices, Eisteddfods, weddings, singing competitions – as the childhood of one of Dora's more traditionalist counterparts described in

Blacking's scholarly articles about girls' initiation (1969a, 1969c–f). Reading between the lines of this book, it does not seem that the key to music's role as a transformative force was to lie in a merging of Venda with Christian forms. And yet it is precisely in this kind of syncretic, 'popular' music that subsequent generations of ethnomusicologists in southern Africa have sought, and found, a transformative role.

Leaving aside the question of syncretic forms, it is Blacking's view of music as having an almost heroic capacity to alter the world, or at least to reconstruct it satisfactorily in settings of extreme harshness and intractability (Blacking, 1980b, cited in Erlmann, 1991: 11), that has subsequently become something like the conventional wisdom among scholars of especially migrant, popular and other modernizing or neo-traditional styles of music in southern Africa (Coplan, 1985; Erlmann, 1991; James, 1999; Muller, 1999). This perspective, in its most extreme form, could be called 'methodological idealism'. The methodological idealist tends to mine all forms of musical activity, no matter how apparently quiescent, for their expression or embodiment of resilience in the face of oppression and hardship in South Africa. It is in this – the second of the two aspects in Blacking's work – that the imprint of his work can be discerned on ethnomusicological studies in the region. But my claim here is that the first aspect – in which music demonstrates or confirms apparently unchanging social/structural relationships, rather than transcending these – is a neglected aspect of Blacking's legacy. It is in the tension between the 'endorsing/confirming' and the 'transforming' positions that Blacking's legacy should really be sought, and it is in understanding their interrelations that scholars would do well to deploy their energies in further research on popular and/or migrant styles.

Blacking's resolution of this inherent tension in his own work was to differentiate between the varying functions of different kinds of musical activity: put simply, to claim that certain kinds of music achieve one end while different kinds achieve the other (Blacking, 1973: 44). But my own work on the musical culture of adolescents and of female socialization in the Northern Province (formerly northern Transvaal) suggests that the two functions can be intrinsically linked. I have found that the musical culture of girlhood and initiation, while used by adolescent girls and their parents as endorsements of specific fixed points in the life course and to denote apparently immovable gender orientations, membership of religious groupings and attitudes toward customary as against modern behaviours, can serve – in the context of migrant society – as a basis for later-established identities in which music plays a transformative role.

This relates, in turn, to the question of syncretism: my study suggests that the worlds and musical cultures of church/school on the one hand and tradition on the other are not as separate as they were alleged to be in Blacking's Venda material or as they have been insisted to be in some anthropological studies

(Mayer and Mayer, 1971). Rather than conceptualizing them as distinct social spheres, a more accurate representation would be yielded – in Venda terms – by thinking of a complex interweaving of the Lutheran Dora Magidi's experiences with those of the salemore girls. As I will demonstrate below, the life course of a young woman from the Northern Province typically incorporated a range of experiences – both school and *sotho*,¹ Christian and traditionalist – which might have been thought incompatible because of their ownership by incompatible social/religious communities. But this intersection of mission/school culture with traditional or neo-traditional influences, in the course of the adolescences I investigated, was not merely a matter of bricolage, in which parts of separate cultures were randomly or indiscriminately blended to form a new mixture. Rather, women leaving home to become migrants identified a voice with which to express a very precise combination of elements: they aspire to live in an autonomous fashion, benefiting from that which a modern or church-oriented route might provide, but they express this in terms which will enjoy a hearing within the male-dominated and traditionalist-oriented world of Northern Province migrancy.

Music of initiation: school and *sotho* culture

My examples are drawn from two studies. One was conducted in the early 1990s, among Northern Province migrant women working on the Witwatersrand who met regularly to sing and dance in a style called *kiba*, only recently acknowledged as the female equivalent of the formerly exclusively male genre known by the same name. The other, which dovetails with the first in some respects, was conducted in the later 1990s among men and women growing up in a Lutheran community, on a farm about two hours' drive north-east of Johannesburg.

To look first at the performers of *kiba*: the fact that men and women were in the 1990s recognized as partners in this musical enterprise obscures some major discontinuities. One can see the contrast if one looks at a single performance group, such as Maaparankwe (those of the royal leopard-skin clothing). Its male performers are mostly traditionalists (*baditshaba* – lit. 'those of the nation') from the Pedi heartland of Sekhukhune, who have been dancing *kiba* and playing its end-blown metal pipes since their childhood in the reserve. Their patterns of work and residence as migrants, and those for their forebears of several generations, were largely determined by the ethnically-based monopolies within particular mines and service sectors, formed on the basis of male initiation regiments (*mephato*) (Delius, 1989: 582–83; Molepo, 1984: 28). As they moved from compounded mine labour through a series of less restrictive forms of employment and residence, such as domestic service and later industrial employment, they took *kiba* with them. For male players, then, this music was a constant and ongoing feature of life.

For future female *kiba* players, in contrast, musical experience was discontinuous and shifting. They came from the northern area known as Leboa (the north),² and had grown up while their families were rent or labour tenants on white- or black-owned farms outside of the reserves, living largely off the proceeds of agriculture or of farm labour. For these families, the belated move from the farms to one of the small northern reserves drew both male and female family members into their first-ever exposure to labour migration. The women who were to become singers of *kiba* departed for town in search of a job without ready-made ethnic support groups.

It was only on arriving on the Witwatersrand that *kiba* women began to construct or become involved in broader social networks. While these were initially church-based and linked to associations of men from specific reserve areas in Leboa, women were later to form their own *kiba* groupings on the basis of the friendships they had made with other women from a more broadly-defined home area. Sometimes, as in the case of Maaparankwe, they went into partnership with male partner-groups that were selected for their professionalism in dancing. Performing their sung and danced version of *kiba*, which they saw as part of *sotho* music/traditional music (*mmino wa sesotho/wa setšo*), provided an opportunity to escape from the restrictive male controls of the more conventional migrant associations.

I mentioned the church as a basis of social networks: most of these women had grown up in communities of Christians (*bakriste*), so the fact that they performed *kiba* did not signify a straightforward continuity with past practice. Starting some time after they arrived to work on the Witwatersrand, for most it represented a revival of a pre-adolescent involvement in *sotho* culture which had culminated in initiation. In the ethnically diverse Northern Province, many of them had grown up speaking languages such as siNdebele – or, like Dora, TshiVenda – and performing styles of music more commonly associated with those languages.³

Since my broader discussion of how these women, during the phase of life when they became mature mothers, built up an identity based on selective application of *sotho* ideals, morals and musical principle, has been published elsewhere (James, 1999a, 1999b, 1994), I will touch on it here only in passing. The ostensible reason for their use of *kiba* is expressed thus: 'Home is where this music is sung. We don't want to forget the tradition of our home people'. This statement sums up the enterprise, but conceals the true nature of this 'home'. They had not met before they came to the Witwatersrand. They started with few contacts except an uncle or brother, eventually started watching male dancers on Sundays, and decided to start their own club. The few who knew this dancing taught the others, more joined, more learned: the sense of what 'home' was gradually expanded to include more and more dancers. Women's involvement in this unusual form of ethnic organization provided a range of benefits. Some of these – financial aid and support and help with securing jobs

Black Background

77

in cleaning and domestic service – were more easily measured. Others – a sense of identity in the city, deriving some impact and audience respect from its connection to the male genre, but having its own coherence – were less material but perhaps more important.

Women's performance, then, while apparently harking back to a shared origin (*setšo*), spoke more of a commonality developed among friends in town than of a culture they had personally transported, intact, from the countryside. But its origins were, in complex ways, to be found in these performers' upbringing. In order to find out how, and to establish in what ways this mature identity drew selectively on, and yet transformed, the musical and social experience of youth, I needed to adopt an approach which foregrounded individual singers' accounts of their own musical life histories.

These histories, it turned out, diverged considerably from each other. Part of the difference lay in the complex set of landholding arrangements in the northern Transvaal of the 1960s and 1970s. In a country notorious for its patchwork of different forms of tenure, this seemed to present an extreme example. There were three basic types of landholding, which varied concomitantly with forms of livelihood, culture and music.

Some future singers' families were living in quasi-feudal conditions, as labour tenants on white farms. A second category of people lived, as owners or tenants, on African freehold farms. These were mostly Christians who had bought land away from the reserves in an attempt to live as independent peasant producers, remote from burden to some obligations to the chiefs in the reserves. A third had been born and reared in reserves, where their families were dependent on chiefs for their access to land. The patchwork-like quality yielded by these different types of landholding was one which the apartheid government attempted to rationalize, with its plans in the 1960s and 1970s to remove all Africans in the first two categories – those living in so-called 'white' areas – and resettle all of them in the 'black areas' or reserves. But, for the girls and adolescents who were later to become *kiba* singers, whose families, removed from their original homes, began to converge on these reserve areas, the result was one of considerable dislocation.

It was not only, however, the government's infamous plans which lay behind these removals. While writers on South Africa have tended to highlight resettlements which were involuntary, and attributable to the depredations of apartheid – especially the infamous 'black spot' removals, and the evictions of labour tenants off white farms (Desmond, 1971, Surplus People Project, 1983), the move to the reserves was also occasioned, at least in the case of many farm labour tenants, by the desire of family members to have a more modern life. They wanted to live in conditions of greater civilization (*tlhabologo*) and to have easier access to schools, shops and churches than was possible on the farms. Although not all were Christians or church members, their favouring of church-oriented culture resulted from a modernizing course adopted by them

and their families – an orientation which in part resulted from, but also contributed to, the rapid resettling of their families, as of other Africans, in the reserves during this period. In this flux of social and property arrangements, the adolescent musical culture in which these future female migrants participated was one in which choir, concert and church songs were favoured, but with a selective use of customary *sotho* elements.

In the context of this social and cultural flux, one childhood experience which all future urban singers of *kiba* from these areas were to share was *koma* (initiation), although their disparate social backgrounds meant that their attendance at this ritual was prompted by widely differing, even contradictory, impulses. Former labour tenants who had moved off white farms were still sufficiently steeped in the customary ways – despite the desire to live in a more modern manner – to send their children to initiation without much question. In contrast, those families who moved to the reserves from independently-owned freehold farms ('black spots'), where Christian belief had predominated, often found themselves in new situations where a Christian ethic was not as entrenched as it had been in their former homes. The peasant daughters who had moved from these farms were initiated because of pressure from peer groups encountered in their new homes, sometimes against the wishes of their parents. For the Lutheran Machaba sisters to be initiated was to rebel against the authority of their father, but to conform – albeit more out of a desire to 'fit in' than out of an espousing of traditional values – with the social mores of their age-group in the reserve. In the reserve village of GaKgare to which they moved, where most children were dressed in skins in contrast to their own dresses, they had felt isolated and conspicuous. After attending *koma*, they found that their status as initiates and their membership – shared with their peers – of initiation regiments (*mephato*) served to lessen the gap which had divided them from these age-mates.⁴ But the experience was not to carry the same sense of unification and bonding as it would have done for the Venda initiates of Blacking's account, if only because they were later to become migrants who would rely on very different kinds of musical solidarity for their sense of belonging.

The Machabas were girls very much like Dora, the heroine of Blacking's *Black Background*. Although her family, like theirs, was strongly Lutheran in orientation, she nevertheless longed to dance the girls' *tshigombela* (Blacking, 1964a: 82–86) when she saw her friends and neighbours – the 'salempore girls' – doing so. Her parents were opposed to this, but they eventually relented and allowed her to join the team. But their tolerance was not limitless: they stopped short of letting her go with her team on a *bepha* expedition. One can only speculate about whether her longing to imitate her peers might, as with the Machabas, have extended to initiation had her childhood, like theirs, been disrupted by a move from a predominantly Christian community to one where initiation was the norm.

Black Background

79

Even where future *kiba* singers attended initiation, the Leboa villages where they spent their adolescence espoused a culture oriented to school and to modernity. One might imagine that the differences between uninitiated and initiated children would be de-emphasized in such a context. Studies of 'traditional' rural music-making in southern Africa have stressed how musical performance differentiates gender and age roles from each other (Blacking, 1967, 1969b; Johnston, 1971, 1975; Huskisson, 1958), with smaller categories, each specific to a particular occasion and social status and never sung outside of this, eclipsing any broader totality of music or song (Merriam, 1964: 262–70). Adopting a mission-influenced musical culture has been assumed, in contrast, to engulf all generations and sexes in its grip. But this was not the case in Leboa communities, where musical markers of status were important despite the apparently homogenizing effects of Christianity.

Although the pre-initiatory phase *bothumasha* (uninitiated girlhood) was thought not really to exist in such communities, since 'there was now *ilhabologo*' (civilization), it was still marked off by age-specific musical practices and thus distinguished from the subsequent phase *bokgarebe* (initiated girlhood). *Bokgarebe*, like its male equivalent, was characterized by an abandoning of children's songs such as *dikoöa töa go bapala* or *dikoöa töa go aloka* (playing songs, for skipping and the like). Initiated girls, like initiated boys, began to sing in the music of a school or mission culture which had become general to all social classes and categories in these northern reserve areas. They were learned at school, through a mixture of oral and literate transmission, and performed by school choirs: a performance context which gave this genre its name – *kosa töa dikhwaere* (more commonly known in the literature as *makwaya*).

In a similar vein, Dora's brief foray into singing *tshigombela* had ended abruptly when she started school. This was the defining moment which not only separated her from the performance practices of childhood, but also which detached her definitively from the 'salempore girls' with whom she had had a brief musical partnership. In the strongly school-oriented reserves of Leboa, in contrast, what distinguished an initiate from a child was her leaving behind the *sotho* songs of childhood and becoming immersed in the performance of this genre of choir music – a genre embracing both Christians and non-Christians in its grasp.

Makwaya first came into being as a result of the impact on local sung traditions in southern Africa of Christian hymnody, whose successful implanting in this context was probably due to the fact that 'traditional music in the south is predominantly vocal, characterized by choral singing in complex, overlapping responsorial patterns' (Manuel, 1988: 28–29). The impact of hymn-singing was profound: the imprint of its three-chord harmonic structure can be detected in a wide range of popular South African music including not only *makwaya* but also stretching from *marabi*, through kwela and *mbube*, to the mainly media-disseminated *mbaqanga* (Manuel, 86, 108).

Most of what has been written about *makwaya* stresses its initial association with the nascent African middle class in both rural and urban contexts (Coplan, 1985: 72, 118; Manuel, 1988: 107). It was transmitted mainly through a medium available only to literate people – the tonic sol-fa system of notation – although the development of the genre in an urban context saw some choirmasters switch over to a way of teaching songs more oral in its focus, in which their choirs sang ‘by heart’ or ‘out of their heads’ (Coplan, 1985: 117). The aspect of *makwaya* that has not been examined is the gradual increase in its popularity in the rural districts of South Africa. Here, although in its strictly religious form as African hymnody it was sung only by churchgoers, its most frequent performance occurred in schools by scholars on both sides of the Christian/traditionalist divide.⁵ Although identified at its inception with the African middle class, its later developments took it across boundaries of income, occupation and status into the ranks of those who derived their income from unskilled migrant labour. In the areas of Leboa where urban *kiba* singers grew up, as in many other labour-sending areas of rural South Africa, this music became a major form of cultural expression for school-going children and adolescents.

In the reserves of Leboa where these girls lived, initiation did, then, mark off children from post-initiates, but it did so largely by endorsing their inculcation with a mission-style musical culture. Although the formal attributes of *makwaya* or *kosa töa dikhwaere* may have had little overlap with that of the indigenous songs it replaced, the competitive social contexts within which it was sung show striking similarities with indigenous ones. Here one can see evidence of the accuracy of Blacking’s perception – that musical activities confirm existing structures and sentiments and that music symbols are resistant to change. It is interesting, for example, that the *mothetha* (choir for girls and girls under the leadership of a senior boy) to which the Machaba sisters belonged, although singing *dikoöa töa dikolo* (school songs) did so within a setting remarkably similar to that of the Venda *bepha*:

We’d go with our school choir to visit other schools, and spend the night. We’d hear their songs, and learn them, and take them as our own.⁶

This practice of musical competition and learning leads me to mention, in parentheses, the adolescent musical culture of a much more overtly and unreservedly Christian community, living a few hour’s drive to the south-east of these Leboa communities. This was a community similar in ethos, perhaps, to Dora’s, and to the one living on the freehold farm where the Machabas had lived before moving to the reserves. These were the Lutherans of the farm Doornkop who formed the nucleus of that farm’s inhabitants until the ‘black spot’ removal of 1974. In the course of investigating their 1994 reclaiming of the farm, some 20 years later, I asked about their early – and, in particular, their early musical – experiences there.

Black Background

81

In some ways their musical activities were very similar to those of the Lutheran Dora. Wearing special uniforms, they joined the strongly Christian-oriented Wayfarer movement which, in South Africa, was an African equivalent of the Boy Scout movement (see Blacking, 1964a: 101–07). Within the context of this movement, and of school and church, they spent a large proportion of their time learning and singing choir songs. But they also had much in common with the reserve-dwelling traditionalists from whom their forebears had been so keen to distinguish themselves. One of these was the prevalence of confirmation groupings (*dithaka*) which undertook activities strikingly similar to those of the initiation regiments (*mephato*) to which traditionalists' children belonged in the reserves. Another was the favouring of a musical competition/expedition format, much like the *bepha*. A great deal of time and energy was spent in practising for, and in carrying out, competitive events in which the chief rivals were children from other Christian communities in the neighbourhood or members of other branches of the Wayfarers. Even here, before the removals that caused such flux and disruption in rural districts of the Transvaal, there were interchanges and striking continuities between school and traditionalist culture, despite people's attempts to distinguish strongly between these. Music on the farm Doornkop, as elsewhere in that province, was giving adolescents a specific point in the life course at which to fix themselves.

To return to the singers of *kiba*: the significance of initiation in the rural areas where these people grew up was a complex one. It was not a mark of group identity that excluded non-traditionalists, since it incorporated Christians of long standing and of recent conversion alongside those who had never been churchgoers. Neither did it mark a commitment to a traditionalist or custom-bound social order: indeed, while *koma* itself represented perhaps the most intense experience of *sesotho* and its ways yet undergone, especially for those of long-standing Christian affiliation, it also heralded a phase in most girls' lives when the things of *sesotho* would be put behind them almost completely, at least for a while. But it did lay the basis for proficient practice of *sotho* cultural forms when these girls, as women, began to sing *kiba* in town. The songs and music of *koma* were secret and, strictly speaking, should not have been repeated outside of this context. But their basic structure and style was characteristic of Northern Sotho traditional music (Huskisson, 1958) – polyrhythmic, hexatonic and with descending cadences – and similar to those of present-day women's *kiba* (see James, 1994). It was at *koma* that most informants, but especially those whose parents were Christian and so taught them no *sotho* music, learned, through oral transmission, to sing in a *sotho* style.

Black background: the case of Julia Lelahana

Among those who were later to sing *kiba* in town, there was then a general orientation towards modernity, to be followed much later by a selective revival of *sotho* culture. But this general trend needs qualification, if one bears in mind that children of different sexes – even those within one family – are socialized in very different ways. While it is true that the school culture that took root in these northern communities was not strongly differentiated by gender, as can be seen from the case of the mixed choirs, there were some important cultural and musical differences between boys and girls. Girls were required to perform more duties in the domestic domain, were less free to move beyond it for long periods of time, and were less likely than boys to be given anything further than a primary school education. In some cases, this meant that girls were thought of as ‘more *sotho*’ than their brothers. Their orientation to the domestic sphere often led to their acquisition of forms of musical or oral culture from mothers and grandmothers where boys, at school, were not in a position to acquire these. And it was these girls in particular, more *sotho* than boys and more *sotho* than some of the other women with whom they would later club together to sing in town, who would later assume key roles in teaching and developing *kiba* in the urban context.

The case of Julia Lelahana, later to become the leader of Maaparankwe’s women’s section, is one which demonstrates a complex interweaving of gendered experience with the effects of the social disruptions mentioned earlier. She grew up on the farm Bijlsteel, about 30 kilometres north-east of Pietersburg, ‘ran away’ to work on a nearby farm and eventually moved with her parents to a village in the Moletöi reserve in Lebowa. But this major move had not been the only one in Julia’s life: her parents had moved to this farm, where her paternal grandparents were living as labour tenants, after being evicted from the soon-to-be-demolished African location adjoining Pietersburg where Julia had been born. It was because of this move away from town that Julia, the youngest of five children, had no education at all, while her older siblings, brothers and sisters alike, had been schooled in the location up until the time the family left for the farm.

Growing up in this context, she was remote not only from the school culture described above, but also from the culture of people initiated in the reserves. The songs she sang as a child were not the mixed choir songs of boys and girls but those of the herdboys with whom she worked and played. As a young girl she was sent to herd cattle together with boys of her own age on the farm, and they had taught her to make and play a string instrument called *botsorwane* or *setseketseke*. Perhaps with the hindsight of a migrant career, she observed:

I was not shy and I had no problem in playing things that are *senna* [of men/meant for men]. I did this because I was a herdgirl.⁷

It was her lack of schooling that set this girl apart from all her older siblings. But the contrast she noted between herself as *motho wa sesotho* (a *sotho* person) and her brothers as *batho ba dikolo* ('school people') was due not only to this educational disparity but also to her acquisition of an interest in *sotho* ways from her parents and older relatives. She learned *go reta* (praising) from her mother and grandparents, with whom she spent much time around the house. Another means by which she acquired a love of the ways of *sesotho* was through a kind of cultural inheritance from her father, who was a diviner, a maker of drums for spirit-possession drumming, and a player of men's *kiba*.

Julia, with her exposure to and interest in *sotho* things beyond the boundaries of initiation and despite her background in a generally mission-oriented area, was later to become a key figure in the development of urban *kiba*. In 1993–94 she was the *malokwane* (leader) of the Maaparankwe group, heading the singing, teaching songs learned at home to her fellow-singers, embellishing existing songs with new words or actions and providing extensive interpretation of these words and actions if called upon to do so. Her relationship to the music was in contrast to that of some of her fellow singers, who had learned all the songs from others, who mostly sang the chorus rather than the lead part, and who were hard-pressed to explain the significance of particular songs. Leading figures like Julia tended to be those who were exposed to some *sotho* ways in their own and in relatives' homes. Conversely, the musical followers were often those whose early exposure to this music was restricted to what they learned at *koma*.

The cultural background of the girls who spent their youth and adolescence on the farms and later in the reserve villages of Leboa was a complex one. A variety of inputs contributed to the overall culture of modernity to which they and their families aspired, but these inputs were refracted, and in certain respects deflected by their refraction, through the lens of gender. Although most desired to live in a modern way, their role within the household gave some, like Julia, a leaning towards *sesotho*.

Diversity merged in music

In the process of gathering life and music histories from *kiba* singers, it became clear to me that their differing experiences in adolescence nevertheless converged in particular ways. In addition to the shared experience of *koma* there were some other things they had in common. Many had been forced into labour migrancy, as domestic servants, when a father's death or desertion left their families penniless; and it was the position of oldest child which – despite being women – made them feel responsible for their families in this way. Some had been briefly married, but all ended up as single mothers exclusively responsible for the upkeep of their own children and other kin.

But it was not only in their objective socioeconomic circumstances that there were commonalities in these women's disrupted lives. If, on the basis of these regional diversities, they eventually came to have a single homogenous experience of 'home', it was through music that this was achieved. When they first decided to sing together, they discovered that their sense of *sotho* music (*mmino wa sesotho*), although its basic aspects had been learned through initiation, was regionally varied and hence far from uniform. But this changed as they practised together under the tutelage of influential musical figures such as Julia Lelahana and as, with the passing of time, they engaged in a process of reciprocal teaching and learning. Competitive performance formats created ever-increasing pressure to make of women's *kiba* a highly polished and unified style. It was thus that multiple and initially somewhat mismatched styles of performance were adjusted to create a standardized and homogenous music and dance style (James, 1999a).

Conclusion

Lived in the midst of turbulent and disruptive experiences in the northern area of Leboa, the childhood and adolescence of future female migrants was one in which musical experiences definitively demarcated particular positions in the life course. They gave those who had faced the insecurity of relocation a way of affirming customary connections, and those aspiring to a modern life a way of entrenching and fortifying their commitment to civilization (*tlhabologo*). They also allowed those whose circumstances denied them any easy social or cultural connections to draw nurture from the almost forgotten musical backgrounds of their parents. Although initiation played an important part in this, its role was not the well-established one of providing a solidary peer group in which all future activities could be undertaken, or of affirming adherents' membership of a well-defined ethnic community in contrast to other ethnicities in the neighbourhood. Nor did it incontrovertibly divide boys from girls. Rather, it was a watershed between a childhood marked by traditionalist children's music and culture and an adolescence marked by school- or church-oriented music and culture. At the same time it served, in its teaching of *sotho* music, to lay a foundation of musical principles to which many initiates would return only in adulthood, in the process of constituting of a very different kind of ethnic identity and group of peers.

For these young women, as for those Blacking described (1964c: 108, 334; 1969a, 1969c–f), the musical experiences of childhood and youth were ones which circumscribed identities and statuses. But the fixity and secure social positioning they achieved was a fleeting one. By seizing at moments of stability within the flux and mobility of changing identities and social arrangements in the northern Transvaal of the 1960s and 1970s, it may be that girls like Salome

Black Background

85

and Andronica Machaba were doing more than simply trying to 'fit in' with those around them. As well as yielding to the temptation of attempting to belong in communities from which they felt somewhat estranged, they were, albeit unknowingly, acquiring the groundwork for the musical culture which would characterize their adulthood. It was on these musical foundations that their future life as autonomous wage-earning mothers, within the largely male-dominated world of urban migration, was to be built.

To understand the relationship between the ascriptive nature of these youthful musical experiences and their future imaginative transformation by migrant women, one needs to recognize the complex meanings attached to terms of religious affiliation. In the changing world of rural/urban connections in twentieth-century South Africa, terms such as 'Christian' (*mokristi*) and 'traditionalist' (*heitene*) were not adjectives describing distinct and separate identities. Although these terms were conceived of as denoting opposite polarities on a continuum of social experience – and often had connotations of class as well (see James 1997) – in the life of a single individual they could be woven together into a new totality. Like the gender polarities which music's strict subdivision had informed in more thoroughly traditionalist Northern Sotho communities (Huskisson, 1958), these polarities of religious belief, sociocultural orientation and class have been intertwined with each other to yield new, heretofore unknown, combinations. It is as though the experiences of Dora and those of her friends and erstwhile dancing companions, the 'salempore girls', were encompassed in the life of a single individual.

The legacy of Blacking's Venda work for understanding the musical culture of migrants lies, then, in understanding how music, in its ascriptive and transformative aspects, affects and is used within the life histories of individuals. Blacking's legacy can lead us to try to comprehend how innovative individuals, produced by pitting themselves against the powerful social forces that have moulded them as people, assimilate musical influences in the process of maturing, and later use these to create new and transcendent situations.

Notes

¹ Where Sotho denotes a language or a set of musical or other features which have been attributed to a group of people by analysts, it is spelt with a capital and is not italicized. The language officially known as Northern Sotho (SeSotho sa Leboa), also called SePedi, is an example. But where, as the noun *sesotho* or as the adjective *sotho*, it denotes a language, a way of dressing, a state of being, a way of life, or a set of qualities which informants themselves have enunciated or commented on, it is italicized and spelt without a capital. In this commoner form, *sesotho* is rarely qualified by terms such as 'northern' or 'southern' (*sa Leboa/sa Borwa*). See Comaroff and Comaroff (1989: 276–96) for a similar usage.

² Local people's classification of the area north of Pietersburg as Leboa (the north) should not be confused with Lebowa, the name of the former bantustan or homeland set aside by the apartheid government for the Northern Sotho or Pedi.

³ SeTswana, *seSotho sa borwa* (southern Sotho) and *seSotho sa leboa* or *sePedi* (northern Sotho) are all cognate languages with common sociolinguistic roots, belonging to the linguistic family termed Sotho. The speakers of vhaVenda have close relationships to the northern Sotho, although conquest by a Shona-related people from north of the Limpopo makes matters linguistically more complex. The speakers of siNdebele, belonging to the Nguni linguistic family, moved from the east coast to settle in the areas now called Mpumalanga and the Northern Province in the late seventeenth century, well before the era of warfare and migration sometimes called the *difaqane*. For fuller information on the socio-linguistic relationships between the speakers of these various groups, see Krige (1937), van Warmelo (1952, 1974) and Wilson (1982).

⁴ Andronica and Salome Machaba, recorded discussion with DJ (Deborah James) and PM (Philip Mnisi) on 19 October 1991. This was in contrast with girls in the Pedi heartland, Sekhukhune, where uninitiated girls of the same age were still singing the songs of *mathumasha* (uninitiated girls), including a rain-making song crucial to the agricultural viability of society.

⁵ Even in the mission contexts where it initially took root in the nineteenth century, it provoked not so much the slavish imitation of which some writers have complained (Andersson, 1981: 16) as the inventive and eclectic responses of such genres as *makwaya* (Manuel, 1988: 107). The case of *makwaya* shows that people's use of cultural forms originating in the mission does not necessarily have an 'overwhelmingly imitative character' as is claimed by the accounts that Ranger criticizes (1975: 6), or signify 'the colonization of consciousness' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1989). Even within the mission context and among converts, people may transform the religion of the colonizers into something significantly different, as Hofmeyr has shown in her excellent study of the oralization of literate Christianity in an area that is part of Leboa (Hofmeyr 1993: 68–83). New and syncretic cultural forms which arise among churchgoers, as *makwaya* did, may spread through a variety of channels to reach – and to be actively sought out by – even those people who do not count themselves among the ranks of the converted.

⁶ The format of visiting, competing with and learning from one's hosts, as well as having much in common with *bepha*, also shows similarities to the process of visiting and imitating which characterized the spread of *kiba* (see James 1999b, ch. 3).

⁷ Julia Lelahana, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Johannesburg, 13 October 1991.