

Limnandi Evangeli and Hlangani Bafundi: An exploration of the interrelationships between Christian choruses and South African songs of the struggle

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This article explores the interrelationships between Christian choruses and South African songs of the struggle, which sometimes used the same tunes. The development of each genre is explained and the interrelationship between them analysed. One example is studied in more detail. Songs deeply influence people, be it in their faith or in their political action. A critical awareness of how these songs functioned and continue to function can deepen our understanding of the South African struggle for freedom as well as enriching our praxis today.

Introduction

South Africa is in a time of crisis. Just more than 20 years after the end of apartheid, protests against the government are once again happening everywhere. These are mainly protests against the slow progress of service delivery, against the still elitist system of education and against corruption in the government. There are memories of the protests against apartheid, although the situation is very different and today's protests are part of normal democratic culture. The common elements include the prominence of song in the culture of protest. Understanding something of the function of singing in the liberation struggle can alert us to the role these songs are playing today. Then as now also, Christians were part of the protest movement and involved in various ways in the struggle. The role of the church in resistance, peaceful or militant is a complex, regularly debated question and is beyond the scope of this article to discuss. This article focuses on the role of music and the complex interplay between faith and politics as it influences the songs of faith and the songs of struggle.

Christians were involved on all sides in the conflicts of the apartheid years and used their Christian traditions to justify their position and praxis. Those who rejected political involvement had their singing tradition, which will however not be discussed here.¹ Those in the struggle against apartheid also brought along their singing tradition. The choral tradition and choruses flowed consciously or unconsciously into the political sphere influencing the singing tradition there. Scholars who have studied the freedom songs have commented on this association, with Freedom songs using the 'triads and cadences of European hymn tunes' as well as the 'rhythms and parallel movement of traditional African music' (Blacking in Byron 1995:33). Sometimes only the words were changed of well-known Christian choruses (Scott 2007:73).

Both Christian choruses and struggle songs are part of oral culture, and finding written documentation about this relationship has been difficult. Much of my research has been informed and led by my own experiences and informal discussions over many years. Another problem is that in contrast to the creativity of African musicians, there has been comparatively little African music scholarship (Agawu 2003:xv), and the sources often focus on the easily accessible recorded art music and not so much on the songs sung by the masses during protests.² It is clear that a lot more research can and needs to be conducted, through interviews and comparisons of recordings, which have been made of protest songs and choruses. It was beyond the scope of this article, which was conceived of as the first phase of a longer research project and concentrates on the literature.

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1. There were, for example, songs that emphasised prayer as the response of Christians. These were often sung by Christian groupings across the political divide, but one side would argue that this is the only appropriate response of Christians, while others would say prayer should precede action but not replace it. One such popular chorus was: If you believe and I believe and we together pray the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will be saved (no pages).

2. Shirli Gilbert says in her introduction to her study of the professional cultural groups of the ANC in exile that there has been little detailed study of Freedom songs, that 'ubiquitous but largely informal and unprofessional genre that was (and still is) probably the dominant musical medium of popular political expression' (Gilbert 2007:423).

My personal interest in the question of the relationship between Christian choruses and struggle songs arose during my time as a theology student who was active in the anti-apartheid organisation called the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Amongst white, liberal, politically active students, there were many who came from Christian backgrounds, but not so many who were still active in their congregations. Quite a few had turned away from the church, finding it conservative and oppressive. This was different with the black campus activists, many of whom were committed Christians. Together with some of them, I was also a member of SUCA, the Students' Union for Christian Action. I remember once being very surprised to overhear one of the white student activists, who I believed was very critical of the church, humming one of the choruses, which was a favourite at our SUCA meetings: *Thula sizwe*, 'Quiet country, do not cry, Jehova will fight for you. Freedom, Freedom. Jehovah will fight for you'. But as I continued to listen to this student, I heard, 'Quiet country, do not cry, Mandela will fight for you'. This was the middle of the 1980s, Mandela was still very securely locked up in jail, but he had assumed a mythical stature and embodied the hope for freedom. Would Christians who knew the first version of the chorus have a problem or not have a problem with the second? Mandela songs were sung all the time. Christians in the struggle sang them all the time. Were they conscious of these dynamics, and did they reflect theologically on the difference between songs calling them to follow Jesus, or to follow Mandela? These are interesting questions, again going beyond the scope of this article fully to explore. It is probable that most Christians had no problems separating their loyalty to Mandela from their loyalty to Christ, but for some especially in the young generation, the call to follow Mandela was probably deeper and more existential than the call to follow Christ.³ While many Mandela songs were based on Christian originals, there was one case where I suspected it might be the opposite. The chorus *Mandela wethu, somlandela* was popular and heard often. Once in a congregation, I heard a version to the same tune, *UJesu wethu, somlandela*. At that moment, my impression was that the Mandela version flowed more naturally and sounded more like an original. In this case, the name Mandela might have been replaced by Jesus by Christians feeling uncomfortable with the messianic aura around the prisoner on Robben Island. This was an impression. There is no proof one way or the other in this case, but most probably, borrowing happened not only in one direction. Another example was hearing the freedom song *Senzenina* being used in a Christian litany of lament. These experiences led to my interest in exploring this cross-over of tune and text more thoroughly.

How do Christian choruses and freedom songs arise and function in their context? How do they relate to the people who sing them and how do they relate to each other? What can they tell us about the function of music in communities of

3. Here again, I base my suspicion on informal discussions rather than structured interviews. However, the musical *Sarafina!* shows this dynamic in one scene where the school children found little enthusiasm for the idea that Jesus might come back, but great enthusiasm for the idea that Mandela could be freed. This is a scene most probably based on genuine experience (Ngema 1992).

resistance? One needs to answer these questions in the broader context of the function of music in African society as a whole. The hypothesis of this study is that the relationship is a lot more complex than a simple borrowing and rephrasing. It raises some interesting questions about the relationship of the sacred and the secular and faith to political struggle.

Music in African society

Africa is a vast continent with much variation. However, some general statements can be made about music that would apply to most groups at least in sub-Saharan Africa.

Music is an important part of everyday life

In traditional African societies music was a necessity – not a luxury. So much so that many African languages didn't even have a word for it; music was not seen as a separate entity as it is in Western society. (Andersson 2001:13)

Music was integrally linked with every aspect of community life and essential for creating bonds and sharing news. Karahi describes music as the 'newspaper' of non-literate societies (1981:80), and Stone argues that in Africa 'Performing is considered as normal as speaking' (2000:8). Song accompanies every aspect of life from birth until death. Tchebwa writes: 'For Africans Music is "simply life, life expressed in the entirety of a language"' (2005:13), something like an 'identity card' which shows people what group they belong to (p. 14).

Songs would celebrate milestones and lament misfortune, teach the young and regulate relationships amongst members in the community (Steinert 2003:154). In them are contained the customs, beliefs, traditions and aspirations of a tribe (Caluza in Lucia 2005:31) Music has always played a role both in religious and political ritual (Steinert 2003:155). It is natural that it played an important role both in South African churches and its political struggle.

Most music is vocal

There are many musical instruments in Africa and these are used widely in ceremony and ritual, especially in celebration. Agawu discusses an ancient painting of a harp player, which shows that listening to music rather than participating was not unheard of in pre-colonial Africa (2003:4). However, most African music is purely vocal (Stone 2000:9), sung during daily tasks, and often clapping and stamping take the place of percussion instruments. This means it was possible to perform music anywhere, anytime, during work or leisure time. In the documentary, *Amandla – A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (Hirsch 2002), the importance of music in the struggle is discussed in interviews and many musical examples. The interviewees recount how mothers would sing if they had not managed to find food for their children, or domestic workers about their day off, miners after they got back safely from below ground. This feature of African music meant it was available as expression of emotions all the time, anytime. In the same documentary, Abdullah Ibrahim recounts how music helped people deal with intolerable

situations: 'Music was our salvation', he says, and makes it clear he is not talking only of songs of resistance, but about any music. People asserted their humanity and human dignity by creating something beautiful and meaningful to others. This was particularly important in dehumanising situations such as prisons or even death row (Kivnick 1990:294). Music was very much suited to the movement of resistance as it was always available, did not need special equipment, except if one wanted to use instruments or sound systems. All one really required was some good, strong lead vocalists, and in most communities, this was not so difficult to find, not even in prison or on Robben Island (Ramoupi 2013:182–183).

Music is cyclical and repetitive

Most tunes in traditional African music, but also in choruses and freedom songs, are fairly simple, but the rhythm can be complex (Agawu 2003:57).⁴ Basic patterns are repeated but in various variations, so that the music is never static. Blacking in his discussion of the music of the Venda people compares the music to a 'waterfall', which is always moving, always changing, but seems to be static from a distance (1995:18).

Repetitive music, as well as chanting, is very much suited to singing with a crowd of people and thus well suited as the style of songs of liberation. The repetition makes the songs easy to learn, and as long as there are strong lead singers, variation can easily be introduced. The general style of African vocal music is the call and response style (Andersson 2001:14), which enables a dialogue between the lead singer and group and allows a strong lead singer to enable enough repetition to bring everyone along, as well as introduce enough variation to keep the interest and dynamism going.

Nketia explains how a cantor can keep variation going while almost seamlessly allowing the song to flow, like the waterfall described by Blacking. Skilled cantors make interventions to change the response pattern:

A chorus response can be interrupted by a cantor where the song lends itself to the use of this technique. The cantor chooses a convenient point before the end of a response phrase and introduces a new lead phrase; the chorus stops singing as soon as they hear him, picking up the response again when he gives them a cue, which is implied in the way he ends his phrase. (Nketia 1974:143)

Similarly, a cantor can allow one chorus to fade and seamlessly lead into a new one.

Music teaches improvisation and creativity

All children learn improvisation and creativity through music and rhythm. Many children spontaneously sing-song names, phrases and enjoy it if new (particularly naughty) words fit a well-known tune. These playground specials are passed down by word of mouth from one generation of

children to another. Many also make up their own songs in their own play (Barrett 2006:203). However, in Western music, the normally fairly rigid patterns of meter and rhyme mean it takes some skill to fit other words to a tune, or to improvise new tunes which are then sung by others. This is different with African music, which is more fluid in rhythm and meter and flows more easily with the words. It takes much less skill to improvise and so is done more, even from playground age resulting in a much higher degree of creativity and improvisation amongst all groups (Blacking 1995:25, 32). New tunes are created regularly. Those tunes that others manage to pick up on and sing along too then become established, being changed or embellished as time goes on until it gains a fairly fixed, easily remembered oral form. Most tunes will not reach this stage but remain pieces of spontaneous creativity, used for a special occasion and then forgotten.

This ability to improvise means that songs can be created for every occasion, used just once-off or repeatedly, with a well-known tune or a spontaneously composed one. An example of a song for a very specific issue, was a protest song about the 'deverminisation' or 'dipping' system for black workers in Durban introduced in 1923 but which had a memorable tune, so continued to be sung for a while (Gray 2004:93). The lead singer becomes a central figure in motivating the group and setting the emotional mood or calling to action. The speed or rhythm of a song could be precisely adapted to the needs of the moment, as in the case where Robben Island prisoners had to dislodge big stones in their hard labour and used song to co-ordinate their efforts (Ramoupi 2013:181).

Music is a social activity

There are times, when music is performed alone, for example, a mother singing to her children, or a boy herding livestock who plays on his flute (Nketia 1974:22). However, in the vast majority of cases, in Africa, music is a social activity which fosters community and helps strengthen social bonds in the group (Kivnick 1990:8). It is much easier to perform an activity together, coherently if it is accompanied by singing or rhythmic speaking (Ramoupi 2013:180). How much easier it is to keep together as a group when singing or chanting is familiar to every congregation, which speaks or sings the Lord's prayer. A culture of singing together in choral harmony goes back to before the colonial era (De Beer 2012:185), though with different harmonic and melodic patterns from that of Western choral music. Singing or rhythmical chanting is both described by the same word in several African languages (Kaemmer in Stone 2000:311) and is an activity which fosters a sense of belonging and unity of purpose (Kivnick 1990:273).

While music is excellent at fostering bonds within a group, it is just as effective at creating barriers to the outside and sharply drawing boundaries between 'in-group' and 'out-group'. Joyce Scott in her book about cross-cultural music *Tuning in to a different song*, writes:

⁴Agawu agrees with the assessment of most commentators that 'rhythmic complexity is the hallmark of African music' (quoting Helen Myers), but warns against a too narrow focus on rhythm to the exclusion of African harmony (2003:57).

‘Music is a universal language’. This sounds a warm and comforting thing to say. But in fact it is a myth, and almost the exact opposite is true. (Scott 2007:1)

We probably all have experience of times when songs clearly demonstrate closed-group allegiance over against another opposing group. Typical instances are on the sports fields or when youth bands deliberately seem to want to shock the older generation. Blacking gives examples from Venda children’s songs, where boys and girls have some clearly separate and even opposing singing traditions (such as songs deriding boys for playing with girls) (1995:24, 31). Typical examples are also those when the music seems inoffensive, but the words are ironic and their real meaning is only understandable to insiders, as with the religious language of Negro Spirituals, which used religious imagery to speak about oppression, injustice and the dream of the end of slavery. According to Kivnick, songs allow people to give voice to that which may not be publically spoken (1990:272). This ironic use of music has a long tradition in African resistance and was very important in the functioning of freedom songs (Schumann 2008:19).

Music is a tool of political power

Music has for millennia been used both as an instrument of political power and as a weapon of resistance. Kings maintained power using music in ceremonies and sponsoring royal musicians (Kaemmer in Stone 2000:311). Music was used in marches and processions and at ceremonial events to celebrate the leader (Nketia 1974:232). Music could even be used to solve political disputes, as the size of the choir, and in consequence the volume, would be a direct sign of support and political strength. Blacking writes of the Venda:

Music is therefore an audible and visible sign of social and political groupings in Venda society, and the music that a man can command or forbid is a measure of his status ... Music may settle peacefully a political dispute: the volume of sound of communal music is an indication of the number of its performers, and hence of the supporters of its sponsor. On one occasion, a chief withdrew his candidate for a headmanship when he heard that the music of his dance team was not as loud as that of the rightful incumbent. (Blacking 1995:23)

The size of the crowd and the volume of the singing is a sign of political strength. This was quite clearly a factor in the use of both chanting and singing in political resistance. For example, the singing on death row, right up to the point of hanging, was a statement that the cause of the condemned was still undefeated (Kivnick 1990:297).

Music in the missionary-founded African churches

The missions built on existing singing traditions

As was stated above, the missions found an already vibrant singing tradition in the African communities they were trying to convert, and music became an important tool in the evangelisation effort. There were overlaps in the way singing

was social and the polyphonic nature of the music (De Beer & Shitandi 2012:186).

While some missionaries tried to utilise and foster indigenous music traditions, many discouraged this, and many converts bought into the notion that their culture must be inferior to that of the missionaries who brought them the new faith. Rather than actively fostering a local musical culture, many missionaries translated Western hymns into African languages (King 2008:20). In the process, often, the tonal nature of the African language was ignored, leading to unaesthetic and sometimes misleading texts (Kaemmer in Stone 2000:328). In spite of this, music played a large part in enabling missions to gain a substantial foothold in southern African society and was a primary way to teach the converts the basic content of the new faith (Steinert 2003:112).

Multipart choir singing, already an important part of African society, became a crucial part of the new convert’s life. This choral tradition utilised Western harmonies and largely depended on the tonic solfa system popularised by Curwen in working-class England (McGuire 2006:111). This was often rhythmically static music, without clapping and dancing. Mthethwa argues that because traditional music was suppressed, the hymn became the only musical choice and this:

led to the modification of the hymn. The hymn therefore had to become a work song, a love song, wedding song and [*serve*] other ceremonial situations, including sheer performance of music for pleasure ... (in Lucia 2005:140)

Development of an African singing culture in the churches

While mainline Christian churches opened up gradually to new forms of music, the growth of indigenous churches accelerated the growth of indigenous Christian music. Music was an obvious way to assert independence of Western control and obliquely protest this domination. The music was not protest music, but nevertheless was in itself a protest (Blacking in Byron 1995:217)

A more African Christian singing tradition gradually developed. The texts were simple and repetitive, and the call-response form was followed. This enabled simple texts to be more easily remembered (Steinert 2003:125). Western harmonies and African rhythms were incorporated as well as African melody patterns, which include adapting melody to the rise and fall of tonal language and parallel movement between voices. Important was also the incorporation of dance and body movement (Steinert 2003:142). Western hymns were adapted to conform to the speech rhythm and tonal inflections of African languages (De Beer 2012:186). In the mainline churches, this involved clapping and movement, but still relatively little use of drums and other instruments.

The choral tradition or ‘makwaya’ merged the Western and the African traditions. Singing in the choir became a widespread past-time, also leading to internationally acclaimed choirs such

as Ladysmith Black Mambazo (Bender 1991:176). Composition was spontaneous and normally no-one took personal ownership of any chorus (Steinert 2003:141). This 'makwaya' style then flowed into secular music as well as into the freedom song tradition.

The singing of choruses has become well established in most mainline churches alongside traditional hymn singing. It allows a time of greater spontaneity and generation of emotion (Steinert 2003:206). They are a communal, accessible expression of faith (p. 163).

Songs of resistance

International experiences

It may be argued that music played a particularly prominent role in South Africa. Abdullah Ibrahim suggests in the documentary *Amandla* that this was the 'only revolution anywhere in the world that was done in 4 part Harmony' (Hirsch 2002). However, examples of music being used both in asserting domination and in resisting domination are found all over the world and this seems to be a universal human phenomenon. The book by Peddie, *Music and Protest*, brings together many international examples. It shows up the complexity of the phenomenon, so that Peddie says in his introduction that 'all-encompassing statements that purport to delineate the parameters of protest music should be treated with suspicion' (Peddie 2012:xiv). Crucial to the phenomenon of protest music are 'the meanings the audience imbues it with' (2012:xiii). So a simple folk song or even a song of the powerful can become a protest song, and a song which was written by an artist with critical intentions can be misunderstood and be sung as an establishment-friendly song (Peddie 2012:xiv).

Particularly in very oppressive regimes, the protest in the music is often very hidden, sometimes it simply means taking the freedom to create something freely, as was expressed in the quote of Abdullah Ibrahim, in a previous section. And yet experience shows that music 'may open cracks even in iron curtains' (Peddie 2012:xv). Protest does surface, even in very difficult circumstances. Peddie writes: 'invariably, the musical articulation of grievance and hardship hardens into protest even under the most austere and threatening regimes' (2012:xv).

An example that makes an interesting comparison to the study of South African freedom songs is the article of V. Samson, 'Music as Protest Strategy, The example of Tiananmen Square 1989':

As a major feature of the demonstrations in Beijing, music contributed to this dramatic transformation. Singing or chanting could be heard wherever people congregated in large groups. Protesters sang children's songs, Communist party songs, folk songs, popular songs, and at least one theme song from a television program. (Samson in Peddie 2012:517)

On the one hand, the music gave the protests a 'holiday' atmosphere, thus attracting students who might not otherwise

have participated, but then it also was a 'factor in politically arousing protesters to such a degree that they increasingly engaged in risky behavior' (2012:517-518).

All kinds of songs, known by the crowds, became protest songs, usually with changed lyrics. There is nothing in the music itself that defines it as protest music, more in the way it is used and received. Any kind of music could be used (p. 518). Familiar tunes, such as 'Frère Jacques' were used with new texts added. The origin of the tune was less important than the familiarity of the melody. The songs were taught: posted, copied or photographed. New material was continually added (p. 512).

Very important for the Tiananmen Square protest was the singing of communist songs, such as children's songs, or also the *Internationale*. With these songs, the students claimed that they were the true inheritors of the revolutionary tradition, and at the same time loyal citizens of the People's Republic. Their defiance was justified (p. 528). Singing together controlled the behaviour of the group and emboldened the timid (p. 520). It also made very clear who was a participant and who a bystander (p. 524). It 'seemed to calm nerves and fortify resolve' (p. 529) even in the face of bullets.

This article raises interesting points or comparison for the South African study of freedom songs. Would Peddie's description of the function of music be applicable to South Africa? Were there instances of singing the song of the oppressor? This will be explored later in this article. There are definitely similarities in the use of well-known tunes.

Development of South African freedom songs

The early freedom songs are written in a fairly western, hymn-like style and they were not overtly political, as the interest was still in pursuing peaceful, non-confrontational means to ensure political change (Gray 2004:91). The most famous song from this early era is of course the hymn *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*. It was not conceived as a political song, but became a song signifying protest and solidarity (Okigbo 2010:52). The hymn was composed in 1897 by Enoch Sontonga, a teacher at a Methodist mission school, and it was first publically sung during the ordination of an African Methodist minister in 1899. In the early time, most of the African leaders were people educated in the mission schools and they accepted the Western style of music as culturally superior (Gray 2004:90). But the song came to be adopted as an anthem by the African National Congress and became a symbol of resistance.

However, gradually the style of freedom songs shifted away from the hymnic to a more Afro-American style, which Gray calls 'Ragtime' (2004:93). The lyrics were more critical. This came after the founding of the African National Congress in 1912 and the 1913 *Land Act*, which ushered in an era of increasing hardship for black South Africans. This intensified even more after the introduction of apartheid as a system in 1948. Resistance songs were composed about the various

apartheid laws that were enacted to regulate and subdue the lives of the African majority. There were songs about education, anti-pass songs, performed during passive resistance campaigns of the 1950s. More and more songs began to use the 'call-response' style (Gray 2004:94). Integrating African culture and foreign styles was not seen as a loss of African values (Ramoupi 2013:111).

While most songs are anonymous, owned by the collective (the struggle community) (Makky 2007:13) and often use adapted or known tunes, there are some celebrated composers of freedom songs, whose names are still known, such as Vuyisile Mini, an activist, executed in 1964 for failing to give evidence against his colleagues (Gray 2004:95). Gaby Magomola, who was the first to receive a musical instrument on Robben Island, taught others music and composed many songs including one which became a farewell anthem to those who were released from the island (Ramoupi 2013:208).

Songs accompanied all forms of resistance, such as the Defiance Campaign and the famed woman's march, where the women rewrote a Zulu warrior song to the words: 'Strydom, you have tampered with women. You have struck a rock' (Gray 2004:98). Militancy increased after the Sharpeville shootings and the beginning of the armed struggle, but was crushed after the arrest of the political leadership. The spirit of the people was almost broken. However, the singing did not stop. It continued both inside and outside the prisons.⁵ It was songs of lament, which were now the most prominent, such as a song about the leaders in prison, by Miriam Makeba (Ramoupi 2005:188), and the increasingly well-known, *Senzenina?* 'What have we done, our sin is that we are black' (Gray 2004:95).

The Black Consciousness movement and the Soweto uprisings in 1976 were a turning point in the resistance against apartheid, and the beginning of a new militancy and urgency in song (Makky 2007:7) with many young people going into exile to join the armed struggle. S'busiso Nxumalo describes a change in song: 'the songs started taking on these overtones, changing a word here, changing a word there, putting in an AK there, taking out a Bible there'. Here he is acknowledging the Christian origin of some of the tunes, even of in the end very militant songs. Songs were there to mobilise and train the fighters (Makky 2007:9), but also as a way of dealing with the trauma of fellow fighters being killed. The mournful song *Hamba kahle Mkhonto* became a regular feature at political funerals (Gray 2004:98), which expressed lament while strengthening the fighting spirit. An intensive song culture continued in the turbulent 1980s with the many internal demonstrations. Struggle songs were a weapon to win hearts and minds and instil fear in the enemy. Singing gave people enough courage to take on a seemingly unbeatable opposition. The documentary makes the connection with the biblical story of the fall of Jericho through the use of music (trumpets): 'The more we sing, the more we

shall see cracks in the walls of Jericho' (Andile Magengefele in Hirsch 2002).

The struggle against apartheid was complex and had many and complimentary facets. The documentary *Amandla* has been critiqued for showing a too one-sided picture of struggle music (Byerly in Olwage 2008:262; Ramoupi 2013:15). Of course, music alone does not bring down an oppressive system. But undoubtedly, it was an important factor in the whole package of action that brought transformation to the country, and continues to be so.

The functioning of freedom songs

How did these songs function and what did they mean for those who sang them? Did they release tension or heighten tension? Did they make the crowds more orderly or more aggressive? This is difficult to assess and to measure. It is likely to have been similar to the Tiananmen Square protest: music seems to make the crowd both more orderly and more willing to fight. Songs were effective tools to 'mobilise' and 'unify' the people against the oppressor (Twala & Koetaan 2006:168–169). While I did not find sources to document whether the songs had the 'calming and ordering' effect which Peddie describes (2012:529), many freedom songs, particularly those with a more 'hymnic quality' have a calming effect. But all of them helped unify the group, work against group chaos and enable the group to move forward with unity of purpose. A skilled lead singer could calm agitated crowds through intoning a slower freedom song. But of course, even an orderly gathering was not a guarantee that violent repression and violent retaliation did not follow, as indeed happened on Tiananmen Square and in many South African protests. Many of the words were undoubtedly violent, but this did not mean that the crowd intended to be violent. It was more an expression of anger. Many people who sang these songs had no intention of joining the armed struggle.⁶ Still, the words expressed solidarity with those who had joined, and common cause. Nkoala laments that most of the discussion on Freedom songs is done in English and argues that the translations often lose the meaning the words have for people (Nkoala 2013:57–58). Perhaps a parallel would be the meaning of the words of the *Marseillaise* for the French. In translation, they sound violent and aggressive, for the French they are a sign of patriotism and identification with France and its long and turbulent history.

Using the oppressor's own songs, as Peddie describes, was something that in my experience happened amongst white, leftist Afrikaans students who changed lyrics or sang the oppressor's song with a changed meaning, an example from my memory was the *Lied van jong Suid-Afrika* rewritten by students from Stellenbosch. This did not really happen in African anti-apartheid songs. However, it is happening now, as a new generation of activists claims the heritage of transformation for themselves (see later discussion).

⁵The biography by G. Houser and H. Shore on Rivonia trialist Walter Sisulu is entitled *I will go singing*. It shows the importance of song to Sisulu and refers to his statement, that if he had been given the death sentence, he would have gone to the gallows singing (Ramoupi 2005:192).

⁶I have found little written on this, and these comments are based on my own observations and experiences of protest. There is no doubt that singing also accompanies protests that do turn violent.

Freedom songs definitely relieved tension in allowing the expression of anger and protest in hidden, ironic, even humorous ways. Sometimes code words were used. Schumann quotes an example where a song about 'Winning my dear love' was actually about Winnie Mandela (2008:27). These songs could be sung directly in the presence of police or oppressive employers and they would not perceive it as a protest song. Sometimes it fooled the regime into believing the black South Africans were happy with their lot. For example, in the documentary *Amandla*, Sophie Mgcina tells of the music that followed the destruction and resettlement of the Sophiatown residents to Meadowlands. Songs with joyful music and ironic texts helped them to deal with the anger without provoking the authorities. Sometimes the white listeners would even comment on the beauty and exuberance of the music, without realising that they were being sung about (Hirsch 2002). Another example recorded in the documentary is the song *Jabula Mama*, which sounds joyful and celebratory. Even white listeners who had some knowledge of Zulu would probably not immediately pick up that this is a song of protest: 'Mama is happy, mama is happy when I hit the boers' (Hirsch 2002)!

Choruses and freedom songs: Christians in the struggle

Christians were very active in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. The struggle was always also a spiritual matter and people reacted to injustice also in a spiritual way. The early political leaders were mostly people educated in mission schools, trained in choral singing (Okigbo 2010:43). This led to the fact that choral music began to play 'a significant role in articulating the nationalist agenda' (Okigbo 2010:46). Some of the leaders were ordained ministers, such as Rev. John Dube, first leader of the African Native National Congress, later the ANC (Okigbo 2010:49). This meant the church and the political struggle were always linked. The churches were also largely exempt from the restrictions on political gatherings for Africans, and thus became places where one could organise safely (Kivnick 1990:270). Hymns became political songs, and political songs gained spiritual significance. The interrelatedness was, of course, most marked in funerals for victims of political violence. Funerals were conducted by the church, but also very often became political rallies. Hymns and political songs stood next to each other and no distinction was made. It was also not uncommon for prominent church leadership to lead political marches in a hope that clerical collars and bishops' shirts might lead to restraint from the authorities – which indeed was fairly often the case. Participating in protests and singing freedom songs was not uncontested within the church, particularly in terms of the question whether one condoned violence and how a Christian should relate to the state. This was a central question that resulted in the *Kairos Document* in 1985 (Kairos Southern Africa 1985). While many Christians participating in protests were advocates of non-violent resistance, they sympathised with the reasons for the armed struggle and had

no problems being in solidarity in Song.⁷ Okigbo describes the involvement of the churches in the mass demonstrations in the 1970s and 1980s through the use of protest liturgies and that composers deliberately changed gospel choruses into political choruses, for example, by changing 'Jerusalem' to 'South Africa' (2010:57) and singing religious songs with clear double meanings, such as 'There is a race that I must run, there is a victory to be won', which first gained the meaning of an anti-apartheid song and was later reused during the struggle for AIDS treatment (58).

Using 'church' tunes for political songs would not have seemed strange or wrong for most people, not even if the lyrics in the end 'took out the Bible' and 'put in the AK' (Hirsch 2002). Nevertheless, the stark juxtaposition of 'insulting' sounding and 'religious' sounding songs still did seem strange or 'surprising' to some people involved in the struggle, as related by M. Motloun, an ANC cadre. He quotes the example of a song to Mandela, which used the 'religious' sounding line, 'There is no-one like you' (*Haho ya tshwanang le wena*). This was sung immediately after one mocking President P.W. Botha's wife and this did not seem quite fitting to him (Twala & Koetaan 2006:191).

Borrowing and reusing tunes has happened in all contexts, not only in Africa where tunes and texts were not originally copyrighted. It has happened frequently, that the church has used secular tunes.⁸ To write a really memorable tune which can be sung by anybody is a reasonably rare gift (see characteristics of 'good tunes' in Tönsing 2014:81–88). Also, well-known tunes are always a way to popularise new lyrics more quickly and there was often a cross-over from the sacred to the secular and vice versa. It was even made into a conscious programme by the founder of the Salvation Army William Booth, who is associated with the famous phrase, 'Why should the devil have all the good tunes?' This quote has also been attributed to Luther and Charles Wesley and Rowland Hill. It is most likely that the latter is the author (Litten 2012), but that Booth took it up as inspiration (Kingsway Music 1981:CD Writeup p. 2).

Sometimes this borrowing is consciously done, and probably often not consciously, when a tune comes to mind and the person would not even know whether they heard it or thought of it themselves. An example of how this happens is related in the documentary *Amandla*, where Lindiwe Zulu describes a time when 26 soldiers were killed on the same day and somehow all these lives had to be acknowledged at the funeral. She sings a song that was written for that day as a tribute, and does not mention, or perhaps is not conscious of the fact that it uses the tune of the popular chorus *Malibongwe*, which was popular in the women's movement with the words: *Igama lama nkosikazi, malibongwe* [Let us praise the name of women]. But this chorus is also likely to

7. There were no sources available on whether Christian activists experienced this as a tension when singing.

8. In the German *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, tunes with a secular origin are marked by stating the date they were taken over by the church: *Geistlich* [spiritual] with the date, for example, the hymn *In dir ist Freude* Geistlich Erfurt 1598 EG 398.

have arisen in a Christian setting. The new words Lindiwe Zulu sings are *Lihambile* [He has gone]. The tune, usually more cheerful is quite suited to a more sombre setting and she begins in a slightly different way, which may indicate that the borrowing was not conscious (Hirsch 2002). Particularly in such a situation, songs arise out of acute need and it is unlikely that there will be reflection on the origin of the tunes. Tunes of choruses are part of a common pool from which anyone can draw when the need arises. In this case, it served its purpose to provide a fitting tribute to so many fallen fighters.

Many African Christians had no problem with singing the freedom songs, and probably none with the fact that there was a crossover of tunes and lyrics. Helen Kivnick recounts a case where a chorus sung during worship in Soshanguve township, *Hallelujah to us all* had the same tune as a popular freedom song to Mandela, which she had got to know in the United States anti-apartheid movement, *Show us to freedom now* (1990:45). In the endnotes, she describes how moved an exiled song leader was when he heard that the Mandela song was based on a song about resurrection (p. 339). However, there was still a marked distinction between songs that were normally sung in Christian meetings and at secular political meetings. Even in SUCA meetings, where the discussion and the themes were often fairly political, many traditional Christian songs or choruses would be sung, and only those freedom songs that had a 'hymnic' quality, such as the *Nkosi sikelel'* or *Senzenina*. Indeed, some traditional Christian choruses were sung, which were not in line with SUCA's focus on Christian action, because they focused only on our home in heaven. The popular song *If you believe and I believe* caused some discussion, about whether it meant that prayer was the only way Christians should be involved politically. Militant freedom songs had no place in the Christian meetings, nor songs which praised Mandela or other political heroes. In general, the SUCA singing tradition did not diverge that much from what was sung in other more conservative Christian groupings on campus.

The long fought for Western distinction between secular and sacred (Leatt 2007:30) has never been seen in the same way in Africa where life is seen in a more holistic way. Gulbrandsen discusses the 'intimate' relationship between politics and religion in traditional African society (2001:45). However, Igwe argues that also in pre-colonial Africa, distinctions were made between secular and sacred, between the throne and the shrine and the king and the priest (Igwe 2014). In most African countries, the liberation struggles had religious undercurrents, and although most post-independence African countries opted for a 'secular state' constitution, a total separation has been impossible to maintain (Igwe 2014), with pressure from religious institutions, sometimes becoming very strong. There are indications that also in South Africa there is a tension between the clear need for religious institutions to be active in political processes, and the danger of certain religious groupings gaining too much power in a multi-religious society, and being co-opted by government. These are tensions that are difficult to resolve. The question

how important it is to maintain responsible distinctions for Christians between their faith loyalties and their political loyalties is an important issue here, but beyond the scope of this article to discuss fully. More research would be needed on how Christians experienced and interpreted the singing tradition both in Christian groupings and in secular meetings.

An example: *Limnandi* and *Hlanganani*

These are two choruses that I got to know during my first and second year in the university, respectively. As they were sung in very different settings with quite a different atmosphere, I did not recognise until very much later that they shared a tune. This example has been chosen as the chorus has a published version including the tune, and there is a documented version of the freedom song.

Limnandi Ivangeli

This Christian chorus has found a firm place in the divine service of many congregations in South Africa, mostly sung in the Zulu version in my experience. It is often sung before or after the gospel reading as an acclamation. It is sung in praise of the gift of the gospel. In some areas, it has almost become part of a fixed liturgy. It has been translated into many languages and there are many slight variations in rhythm and melody. The translation could be roughly rendered as 'The gospel is beautiful (or "sweet"), it is beautiful! I have already told you, it is beautiful'. It can be sung in a typical 'call-response' pattern, or as a whole by a group.

The chorus has been published several times and is quoted in an article by Kloppers, where a Zimbabwean describes it as a chorus which was carried into South Africa by Zimbabweans who now live there (Kloppers 2016:96).

This matches the published sources that I have at my disposal, which also say it is a 'Traditional from Zimbabwe'. The first is the international ecumenical hymnbook, *Thuma Mina* (Trautwein 1995:84), which publishes a Shona text: *Rakanaka vhangeri*. Three verses are published in Shona, verse 1 given as 'Traditional' and the other two verses by Hendriks Mavundse, which seem to have been added later, or even specially for the publication. The other is an unpublished collection for the Lutheran World Federation Youth Assembly in Bangkok (LWF 1997:9), with a slightly different Shona text and a second verse in Ndebele: *Yakanaka Vhangeri* and *Limnandi Ivangeli*.

The words quoted by Kloppers are the same as those in the LWF Youth Assembly song book:

Yakanaka Vhangeri, yakanaka! (x2)
Tanguri takuudza kuti yakanaka! (x2) (Kloppers 2016:96; LWF 1997:9)

In *Thuma Mina*, the Shona words are the following:

Rakanaka Vhangeri, Rakanaka! (x2)

Ndanguri ndakuudze kuti Rakanaka! (x2). (Trautwein 1995:84)

The Ndebele words are given as the following:

Limnandi Ivangeli, limnandi!

Kudala sikutshela sithi limnandi! (LWF 1997:9)

The differences in the Shona words are probably regional differences, but could also indicate a longer process of oral transmission. The Zulu version that I have heard sung, most often matches the Ndebele version above. The Xhosa version I originally learned in 1986 leaves out the 'sithi' in the last line. This was taught to me by a student from Cape Town. This shows that the chorus had spread through southern Africa (probably from Zimbabwe) at least by the early 1980s, but probably much earlier, and existed in many variations.

In 1977, Ladysmith Black Mambazo recorded a version of it on the album *Phezulu Emafini* (Ladysmith Black Mambazo n.d.). According to the *Wikipedia* article on the group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, this was an Album which was 'composed entirely of Zulu Christian religious compositions by composer, director, and lead singer Joseph Shabalala' (Wikipedia n.d.). However, it is fairly unlikely that this one is an original composition of Shabalala, more probably an arrangement, as it develops and embellishes the chorus. Songs that spread through famous groups or recordings do not normally show so much variation. The first two lines are fairly close to the Ndebele version above, also in the tune, but they leave out the 'sithi'. This matches the Xhosa version I learnt. The third line is a variation, and the fourth brings in a completely different tune.

Then there is the expanded arrangement by Ladysmith Black Mambazo:

Limnandi evangeli, Limnandi

Kudala sibatshela, limnandi

Kudala sibatshela the church of God, of prophecy, the church of God

Hamba nathi, Mkhululu wethu (x2) (transcribed from recording Ladysmith Black Mambazo n.d.)

Hlanganani

This song is used to motivate people to unite and join the organisations that are part of 'the struggle', organisations that opposed the apartheid regime. The organisations are named, and depending on where this is sung, the song will focus on just one organisation or a different one each time the chorus is repeated.

I was not able to find a recorded or published version of this chorus, but the lyrics were recorded in two different versions on song pamphlets together with other lyrics of freedom songs. These have been preserved as part of a collection of historic papers in the archives of the University of the Witwatersrand (n.d.a, n.d.b). In the version I learned (Zulu), all the verses used 'Hlanganani', and they named COSATU in the second verse.

Version 1: The title of the pamphlet is simply *Freedom Songs*. No source is given:

Hlanganani bafundi, Hlanganani (x4)

Ikhona letlangano, iN U S A S i/ C O S A S/ A Z A S O (x4)

Manyanani basebenzi, Manyanani (x 4)/Ikhona lelangano ngabasebenzi (x4)

Manyanani abafazi, Manyanani (x4)/Ikhona letlangano iUW O (x4)

The translation given on the pamphlet:

Unite, students/There is an organisation, NUSAS etc

Unite workers/There is an organisation for the workers

Unite women/There is an organisation, UWO. (University of Witwatersrand n.d.a)

Version 2: The title of the pamphlet is 'Joint Union Education Project Songsheet'. No translations are given in this version:

Hlangani basebenzi (twice)/Hlanganani (CHORUS)

IGAWU yinhlango yabasebenzi/IGAWU yinhlango yabasebenzi. (University of Witwatersrand n.d.b)

This is not a song that would be sung during a protest, but rather during a meeting or a rally to prepare for some kind of action. It is a song that tries to motivate people to become more politically active and publicises (and indirectly praises) the organisations. It is a non-threatening, non-aggressive, 'entry-level' freedom song, maybe for this reason one of the first I heard and learned as a new member of NUSAS.

Comparison

In the tune, there is the same sequence of notes as that of *Limnandi*, but a slightly different rhythm because of the flow of the words. The rhythm in the first half is more similar to the Shona version, *Yakanaka* (i.e. four syllables rather than three in the first word and other similarities). However, in the second half, the rhythm of *Hlanganani* is more similar to the Xhosa version of *Limnandi* mentioned above. But there are many subtle variations in the tune and the accents, which seem to indicate a fairly long process of oral transmission. It is possible to argue that *Hlanganani* could also have originated in a Christian setting, as its translation is more literally, 'gather' or 'assemble', which may have come from a call to worship and a call to encourage others to join Christian groupings. I have no evidence for this except a memory of once having heard *Hlanganani* sung in a Christian setting. This would mean it would have been a very easy process to adapt the words to a political context. Both *Yakanaka* and *Hlanganani* spread throughout southern Africa, and either one could be older. If it is *Yakanaka*, it is easy to imagine that initially the tune was used by Zimbabweans and then adapted in various ways in the South African languages, either by translation or by a completely free use of the tune. I have seen no evidence of a Zimbabwean version of *Hlanganani*, but there may be one. The tune has become one of the vast pool of anonymous tunes, which are drawn on by song leaders. However, unlike many other tunes that have come and gone, it has shown its adaptability to many contexts

and languages and is not one that is likely to drop out of use in the near future. On a YouTube video from the student protests, #WitsFeesMustFall, the students sing *Hlanganani Bafundi* (University of the Witwatersrand 2015). It has therefore crossed into the next generation as a protest song. It is also quite likely to survive in its incarnation as gospel acclamation in Christian services.

Freedom songs today

Even today choruses and freedom songs are being sung, both in the church and in the protests that are happening around the country again. They are being used both by the government and those opposed to its corruption. Jacob Zuma's strong and dynamic singing voice and physical style had much to do with his appeal and rise to power. This becomes very apparent in the many online YouTube videos that record him singing freedom songs (e.g. SA Daily News 2015). He has all the qualities of an ideal song leader and can move a crowd, as he does in this semi-religious setting at the reburial of J.B. Marks. Liz Gunner in an article described the importance of the song *Umshini wami* in the rise of Jacob Zuma to the presidency. Without many words, the song was able to evoke the whole heroism of the exiled freedom fighters, cast Zuma in the role of someone resisting unfair oppression and be as Gunner puts it, a 'reclamation of voice, sound and body within the public sphere' (2008:30), reclaimed from an increasingly distant, technocratic and unpopular government. However, today it is the new generation of protesters who are reinterpreting the freedom songs, singing them during their own service delivery struggles, or directly back to the government as the Chinese students did. It is clear that traditional freedom songs that are reinterpreted are playing a role in the new struggles. Ramoupi mentions a song, *Zikhalela izwe lethu* [We are crying for our land], which was sung to 'unite different tribal groups' around a common issue in the past, and which is again finding a place as expression of the present land struggles (2013:304). When Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan was fired, treasury staff sang *Senzenina!* (The South African 2017). In the video documentation of the protests against President Zuma in 2017, there are several choruses from the past, which are used again, for example, *Siyaya ePitoli* (we are marching to Pretoria) (ZumaMustFall 2017a) or the vibrant *Shona Malanga*, which was originally a domestic workers' song (Hirsch 2002) but became a general anti-apartheid song (ZumaMustFall 2017a; 2017b).

The new song culture is alive and well, and again there is much improvisation for new situations.

In contemporary social movements, South Africans are adapting apartheid-era songs and creating new expressions to bolster their ongoing struggles ... Not only do freedom songs constitute legacies from the past, they indicate present dynamics and offer directives toward the future. (Jolaosho 2014)

Songs for specific present issues are being written, such as *Zupta must Fall* (EFF n.d.) and various versions of *Pay back the money* (CrashCarBurn 2016).

The fact that song is a necessary feature of South African protest culture seems to be universally accepted, although there is less unanimity about what to sing. In early 2017, a group of mostly novice white protesters was ridiculed for singing *Kumbaya my Lord* at a protest against President Zuma. The song seemed to show that the protesters were elitist and middle class and out of touch with 'real' struggle culture, because they did not even know what to sing at a South African protest. A satirical piece of advice written for white novice protesters by the lawyer Tracey Nixon-Lomax, *Protest 101* went viral. It mentions the song twice in its 20 points:

7. Do NOT sing kumbaya. Go onto YouTube and do searches for Fees Must Fall or other struggle songs. Shosholozza is not a struggle song. And we don't hold up lighters for Senzeni Na.

17. Protest speeches start with shouts of 'Amandla' and fists flung skyward. Go with it. The louder the better. Just not kumbaya! Listen to the shouts around you. Do not ask anyone what they mean. (Nixon-Lomax 2017)

Lloyd describes the ambivalence of liberal whites who joined the protests and the excuses that many made including, 'people citing hectic workloads as it was a work day, and the ubiquitous, vicious threats of Kumbaya-ing' (Lloyd 2017). It seems the song had come to symbolise the hypocrisy of white South Africans who grumbled about service delivery protests, but now took to the streets when their lifestyle or overseas trip was threatened by the downgrade of ratings.

In the comments against *Kumbaya*, there were no real reasons advanced against its use as a song at a protest. Weeks describes the song's shift in meaning in the United States, from an African-American spiritual, which cries to God on behalf of oppressed people, to its association with 'campfires and roasting marshmallows', that has made it in some people's eyes a sign of a 'consensus that does not examine the issues' (Weeks 2012). It is no more religious than *Nkosi sikelele*, though of course the national anthem has a very different status. *Kumbaya* was used in the 1980s during Christian anti-apartheid meetings, even being included in the protest liturgies in the book by John de Gruchy, *Cry Justice! Prayers, Meditations and Readings from South Africa* (1986). In itself, it is not unsuited to being a protest song. In this case, it could be an issue of negative associations about togetherness that is not genuine, but even more the issue of who defines protest culture in South Africa, and clearly for those who objected, it should not be middle-class whites.

Christians are again represented on all sides of the current political conflict and need to determine a responsible Christian way to act in present-day South African reality. The call to prayer is a primary response, but church leaders and all Christians are also challenged on ways of responsible action. There will be many Christians who join protests and need to accept the ambivalence of being part of a group of people with varying degrees of militancy, singing songs or shouting slogans, which may not always agree with one's values. However, just as it was in the 1980s, it is vital that Christians are involved and in some way, participating in

shaping the protest culture and influencing it in positive directions, entrenching a culture of the right to peaceful protest and rejecting anti-democratic and violent ways of dealing with conflict. Nurturing leaders with strong voices who can guide responsible protest may be a good direction to take.

Conclusion

Song will continue to be a prominent feature of our political struggle and it is likely that the mutual influence of Christian choruses and protest singing will continue. This is a complex relationship that ranges from conscious to unconscious borrowing, often through many steps of oral transmission and rephrasing. Christian and secular activists have access to a wealth of tunes, which have proved their worth, as well as the talents of improvisers at their disposal. Christians can accept the interrelationship and help shape it in ways that are compatible with their values. Creativity is needed to shape a protest culture that is inclusive, militant but not violent, respectful of opponents without compromising on one's own values and vibrant enough to give hope for genuine change. Christians, whatever side of the political spectrum they may be on, need to have the courage not only to challenge the opposing side but also to challenge methods, slogans and songs of one's own group, that deepen divisions and are likely to foment a culture of hatred and disrespect of difference. The 'calming and ordering' effect of protest songs can be consciously nurtured without blunting their motivating effect. None of this is easy to do, but it is vital for the future. Consciously shaping new protest songs from the wealth of tunes available is a viable way to do this, songs where the whole spectrum of protesters will be comfortable joining in.

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