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Pepu, Lindelwa

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RE-IMAGINING THE ROLE OF FEMALE PLAYERS IN THE MAKING AND RESTORING OF THE UHADI MUSICAL BOW

LINDELWA PEPU
DEPARTMENT OF CREATIVE ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND
PEPUL@UNIZULU.AC.ZA

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This paper, written from an African feminist perspective, focuses on the *uhadi* musical bow, a historical instrument found in museums, particularly in Museum Africa in Johannesburg. The mislabelling and lack of contextual information about the uhadi bow in the museum collection hinder the understanding of its origin and the recognition of its makers. The research highlights the role of women as the likely original makers and performers of the *uhadi* bow. It explores the unique features, construction, and playing techniques of the instrument. The study also profiles female *uhadi* players, emphasising their contribution to reviving and preserving the instrument's cultural significance.

Introduction



Figure 1: MA 1985-1104. Eastern Cape, South Africa. *uhadi* Musical Bow. Made of Wood, Grass, String animal skin and Gourd. Xhosa. Museum Africa, Johannesburg.

The *uhadi* musical bow (Figure 1) is a historical instrument that is commonly found in museums. The above example is specially stored at Museum Africa in Johannesburg. The Museum is an art, culture, and heritage institution with a primary focus on preserving and conserving South Africa's cultural and historical heritage. However, I have discovered that the *uhadi* musical bow is mislabelled and decontextualised in the Museum Africa collection. First, in the photographic archival section, it is labelled as a "utensil or craft," and secondly, on the museum's archival online system, just as a "musical bow" (Seshoko 2017), making it difficult to differentiate from other similar-looking bows.

This contributes to the uncertainty of the musical instrument's origin, as instruments are usually classified as belonging to an ethnic group or in terms of ethnographic practices. It proved quite challenging to find information on the history of the *uhadi* bow. The instrument's mislabelling and imprecise classification provide no knowledge of the *uhadi*'s origin and maker, knowledge that I argue can contribute to the revival of the instrument. The motivation for seeking *uhadi* performers, particularly female performers, was that they were the most likely original makers (Plaatjies 2016). This would assist in acknowledging and giving agency to female performers as makers as well as promoting their possible role in reviving the instrument, thus restoring its significance and status. Current ethnographic practice in museums limits the provision of information about the actual makers of the instrument, which limits their recognition and access to business opportunities. This is an important curatorial issue: non-attribution to a maker deprives the viewer of knowledge and context. Michael Baxandall affirms the importance of attribution to a maker.

> The first agent, and clearly a very necessary one, is the maker of the artifact. If one thinks of the maker's relation to his culture in terms of the customary distinction between a participant's understanding and an observer's understanding, the maker is the classic participant. He understands his culture more immediately and spontaneously than outsiders (exhibitor and viewer included) can. (Karp and Lavine 1991)

In other words, the maker is sharing a creation that is unique to their culture, and knowing who they are gives one a better understanding of a different culture while creating a platform for the maker to be acknowledged for their creation.

My first proper encounter with musical bows was during the Inaugural International Bow Music Conference that occurred on the 24th to the 27th of February 2016 at the University of KwaZulu Natal. The conference featured numerous scholars and performers from different parts of the world, who demonstrated the significance and value of the instrument. As a young person I knew very little about the bow, and most of the attendees at the conference were older and male. Yet the performers were mainly female in accordance with traditional practice. This suggests that women are the gender with practical experience of making and playing the instrument. In addition, academics seemed to be regarded as more important than performers, which served to downplay recognition of women's achievement in respect of the musical bow. Most of the conference was devoted to the presentation of papers, and it was only on the last day of the conference that performers performed.

There is useful information to be gleaned from studies conducted by researchers such as Mandela (2005) and Dargie (2006) regarding how various musical bows are made to function, but no indication of the identity of the instruments' makers. An

early researcher claimed that "there are no specialist makers of the *uhadi* musical bow" (Kirby 1934). However, a more contemporary observation, based on cultural experience, is that "in most cases, Xhosa women have been creating the bowstring instrument for decades and passing the tradition from generation to generation as part of their culture. Perhaps, men would help when needed for activities such as bending and/or tightening the string" (Plaatjies 2016).

My subsequent research has revealed that women are unrecognised and unacknowledged as the makers, preservers, and restorers of the *uhadi* bow. The women featured in this study were chosen because of their variety of status but similarity of relationship and contribution to the *uhadi* bow. Each female artist helps to bridge the knowledge gap between our past and the present by teaching the youth an indigenous instrument. Notable examples are Madosini Maquina and Thandeka Mfinyongo.

The Origin of the *Uhadi* Musical Bow

Dargie (2016) cites Balfour's description of the *uhadi* as "a musical bow also known as a bowstring or string bow instrument [which] in most cases, is made from the Khoisan's hunting bow and a gourd." Dargie (2016) notes that "South African cultures share similar forms of instruments, however, the names and the ways they use the musical instrument make it unique of their cultures." For example, the Zulu bow, known as *umakhweyana*, is often mistakenly thought to be identical to the Xhosa *uhadi* bow. These two bows are made with the same material, the difference being that the gourd on *umakhweyana* is attached to the centre of the bow while on the *uhadi*, it is attached to the side.

The hole of the *umakhweyana* gourd is also smaller than that of the *uhadi*. Interestingly, Dargie (2006) also observed that the Xhosa word *uhadi* is similar to the Zulu *umhadi*, meaning a deep hole or pit. *Uhadi* also refers to the depth of the hollow calabash (i.e., the size of a woman's breast) that creates the sound for the instrument. These similarities may account for why the instruments are usually seen as identical. According to Levine (2005), "the design of all Xhosa bows developed from the San hunting bow, which consists of a curved stick and an attached string. The bow of the *uhadi* was formerly made from the *umbangandhlela* tree (a small indigenous tree with a yellowish flower) but nowadays is made from any type of wood." What makes the *uhadi* musical bow unique to the Xhosa people, according to Mandela (2005), is that the *umbangandhlela* tree native to various parts of the Eastern Cape only.

The calabash was measured according to the dimensions of a woman's breast to create comfort the instrument was handled. Also, "the stick [was] measured by the player in relation to her arm's length" (Mandela 2005). Mandela notably endorses Plaatjies's claim by using the feminine pronoun. Plaatjies (2016) notes that it was customary for women to perform domestic work such as fetching wood from the forest, from selected pieces of which they would craft the instrument.

How to Play the *Uhadi* Bow

There is musical knowledge[1] about the *uhadi* bow that identifies the instrument's uniqueness but does not contribute to the aims of this study. For that reason, I mention the parts of the instrument that contribute to understanding its creation. Mandela (2005) examined the terms for each part of the *uhadi* bow that – although defined in English – were hitherto not to be found in an isiXhosa dictionary. These are words she learnt from a female musical bow elder of the Xhosa culture. For instance, *usinga* refers to the string of the *uhadi* bow and was originally formed from a sinew (Mandela 2005). It was later made from the same wire that was used to make

the anklets that Xhosa women wore. The wire is reused: it is placed in fire first to facilitate bending. Mandela (2005) cites McLaren-Bennie's identification of the *uselwa* as the part of the musical bow that amplifies the sound through its hollow core. The gourd is used to hold the instrument together, with the strings being inserted into two small holes drilled when the gourd is dry and ready to be used. McLaren-Bennie also described the beater, *umcinga*, created from a turf stem that is left to dry for more than two days (Mandela 2005). The *uhadi* bow is constructed according to specific dimensions for each part:

> The stick should be about 20–22mm in diameter, and about 120–130 cm long. When the stick is bent, the string should stretch about 100–150 cm from end to end. The string should be 0.6 mm bronze wire or something similar. The calabash should be about 15–20 cm in diameter and hollowed out carefully. The opening is about 9–12 cm across. The calabash is firmly attached to the stick by the string pulled through two small holes in the base, and then wound around and around in between the calabash and stick until it can be held firmly. (Dargie 2006)

These are the standard measurements of the *uhadi*, though the maker will usually customise the instrument to suit their needs.

Dargie (2016) observes that in Xhosa culture, various songs are performed with the *uhadi* bow, often featuring important stories to share with future generations. The heritage of the musical bow thus assists in performing traditional ceremonies such as the welcoming of new borns, known as *imbeleko*, or traditional weddings known as *umcimbi wesintu*.

How to Position the *Uhadi* Bow

Dargie (2006) describes how the *uhadi* bow should be positioned for the player to operate it easily (see Fig.2). Holding it with the left hand, the instrument is kept firm with the last three fingers gripping the bow while the thumb and index finger wait to pinch the string on the opposite side. As shown in "A" in the figure below, a louder sound is created on note G, when the string is pinched; while when the string is stroked with the index finger only, as shown in "B," a lower sound is created on note F.

> The player can stop the string with the finger, or leave it open, producing two different notes, a tone apart. She strikes the string with the reed while the small opening of the calabash can be towards or away from her chest; in this way she varies the resonance of the sound by selecting different harmonics that are present in it. The *uhadi* player is responsible for producing the melody line, and in most cases sings the leading part of the song. She may also produce another rhythm by beating the feet. (African Musical Instruments 2009)

The instrument, therefore, allows the player to control the tones or melody produced, while she can also add a beat with her feet for an even more interesting sound. Interestingly, the above statement makes it clear that the musicians are female (Fig.3).

According to Koela (2016), the calabash (resonator) is attached to the bow because the instrument produces a soft sound when used as a stand-alone instrument. The calabash adds volume and resonance to the sound of the string, and these are further enhanced when the players' breasts are used to position the instrument. This also supports my argument that the *uhadi* is created by women. The different ways of playing the bow exploit the range of the sounds the instrument can produce.

Koela (2016) also elaborates on the various ways of changing the tone of the *uhadi*.

The musical bow's look has gradually changed over the years but the way it is played has not. Dargie (2016) points out that the player can change the positioning of the calabash on their body to create different sounds, both loud and soft. The calabash connects with the breasts in a way the player prefers and controls for various tones, while the fingers determine how the string functions. Clothing made of silk is preferable to wool or other materials when one is playing the instrument.

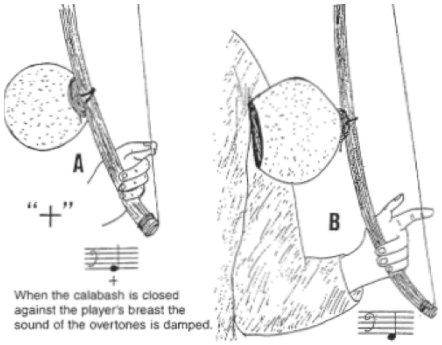

Figure 2: Playing position of the *uhadi* bow. Xhosa Music-Dargie: University of Fort Hare. 2006

Like any other musical instrument, the bow is played on musical scales which, according to Plaatjies (2016), are the same as Western scales.

> The scale which can be played by *uhadi* can be written as F, G, A, B, C, D – the tones F, A and C being produced by using the open-string chord, and G, B and D by using the held-string chord. The player must practice to get the feeling for the tones, which chord position to use, and just how far to open or close the calabash. Because the calabash produces chords, the notes of a melody are always accompanied by a background of soft harmony. So, with just one string the player produces melody and harmony. (Dargie 2006)

It is evident that the instrument is mostly played by women who, as skilled musicians, can control the overtones to create a unique and authentic sound. The "open or close[d]" positions mentioned by Dargie also support my claim about the instrument and the female body. The research presented clearly suggests the intimate relationship between females and the instrument.

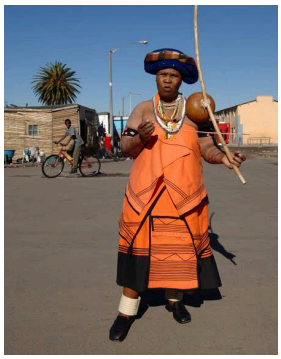

Figure 3: Madosini Mpahleni playing the *uhadi* Xhosa bow. Wood, string, grass, skin, and dried gourd. African Musical Instruments. 2009

Female *Uhadi* Musical Bow Players

The youth of today are exposed to modern music and popular culture and have little awareness of traditional musical instruments. I can confirm this from my personal perspective. When I visited the museum in search of the *uhadi* I did not know how to differentiate it from other musical bows, nor did I know much about its role and significance. This study aims to remedy this ignorance, especially by drawing attention to women – crafters and performers –who are reviving the instrument in important ways. These women were chosen because they represent different generations but all live in Johannesburg. Although largely unknown, they are all contributing to bridging the knowledge gap between generations. I believe that their marginal social status and limited access to education have robbed these women of their rightful recognition as the makers, performers and preservers of the *uhadi* bow. Here I introduce the non-Xhosa musician and instrument maker Esther Maumela, who has made an important impact. This is followed by interviews with the musician and poet Mthwakazi Lenga and the renowned traditionalist and musician Mantombi Matotiyana.

Profile of Female *Uhadi* Players

Esther Maumela, who is now 36 years old, is a Zulu born and bred in Daveyton Etwatwa. She is a musician and specialist in indigenous music. She started her musical career in 2008 as a student at the Sibikwa Arts Centre in Benoni. She successfully auditioned for the Centre's indigenous orchestra in 2009, when she was introduced

to African indigenous instruments as well as music theory. She has performed widely, lectured and presented workshops around South Africa (Maumela 2017).

Mthwakazi Lenga is a very spiritual person who grew up in a family that practises ritual and ancestral beliefs. Her family culture is important to her as a Xhosa who grew up in Mdantsane, East London. She was drawn to music at a very young age and it became something she pursued and grew to love. She emerged first as a singer with a beautiful contralto voice. She taught herself opera singing by listening to opera records. After joining the school choir, she entered school and regional competitions that she often won. She was eventually introduced to indigenous instruments, specifically bow instruments, when she enrolled at the University of Fort Hare. Her singing ability enabled her to accompany the notes she played with the instrument (Lenga 2017).

Lastly, the legendary *uhadi* musician Matombi Matotiyana was born years before apartheid. She is uncertain of her birth date because of never having had an identity document, but she believes that she was born in 1932. She can depict this through her performances, which she started to do at a very young age. She is originally from Tsolo in the Eastern Cape. The village recognises her as the all-time best Xhosa indigenous singer after the late Nomajova (Matotiyana 2017).

The Role of Female Musicians in the Crafting of the *Uhadi*

Maumela (2017) observes that it was compulsory to know how to play all the instruments featured in her orchestra, but that she "grew a special love for the *uhadi* bow." She adds that:

> the orchestra leaders would look at the one instrument that they see one plays better than the rest, then give us a responsibility to take care of it and also share with the rest of the members [what] they can do to improve playing it. So that's when I grew the love for this instrument. I then told myself that I am going to get one for myself. Even though I can make it, I decided to buy myself an *uhadi* from Cape Town, then I changed the string and replaced it with a string I bought from Sweden, and I love the special sound it makes.

Maumela emphasises her ability to make the instrument and that it was just a choice to buy the imported string, perhaps helping the instrument look and sound more modern.

Lenga (2017) stated that during her first year at university, most of the women students learned how to make their own African musical bows, but never had the opportunity to create the instrument in a more traditional setting by going into a village. They would be given the calabash, stick and other materials to make the instrument in class, including cutting and cleaning the calabash.

Matotiyana (2017) is well-versed in the making of musical bows, as this was the very first lesson she was taught by her mother. She specialised in the *umrhubhe* and *isitolotolo* because she learned how to make them first. Her nephew, who is also a musical bow player, asked her to learn some songs by well-renown *uhadi* player, Nofinishi Dywili, and in time she learnt all there is to know about the instrument. Interestingly, she recounted a time when her nephew was approached by an unknown international musician who expressed interest in having an elderly musical bow player perform in a show he hosted in Paris. Matotiyana is distinguished by her ability to create and play a variety of instruments and teach them to the youth. Today, Matotiyana produces and composes songs of her own with the use of the instrument and various vocal tones (2017). She is now regarded as a living legend, having travelled to various countries around the world and become the first woman to popularise the instrument.

Capacity Building of Emerging Artists

Maumela is currently teaching a group of girls at a Chinese temple in Bronkhorstspruit how to play this instrument, as well as about its history and how it is made (2017). She has also recently introduced it to schools around Daveyton. In her teaching, she emphasises that while it may be an indigenous instrument, it can also be used to play beautiful 21st-century music. Her initiative is helping to revive the instrument because her learners gain confidence from the knowledge that it is truly one with them, a part of their heritage. This creates a sense of belonging and helps them understand what it means to be proud of their roots.

Lenga (2017) is an 'art in education' teacher that uses her art to teach young people about their culture and traditions, while also showing them how to work with others in different contexts. She incorporates her personal journey and her drive and passion for this instrument into her teaching, where she prioritises reaching out to different kinds of people and teaching them more about the *uhadi*. Mostly focusing on children, she gets to work with various organisations. Her teaching includes workshops that cover the step-by-step process of making a musical bow, everything from collecting the material to making, positioning, and playing the instrument. Through a process called *Xho-cestra*, learners are taught Xhosa and other South African songs and given the opportunity to record and sell their music once they have mastered the instrument. Lenga's primary focus is on teaching young girls because she understands this historical aspect of the instrument.

Matotiyana (2017) makes it her priority to teach and educate the youth about the indigenous instruments she plays because she is aware that young mothers today live in urban areas and have little exposure to such instruments and music. She travels to various places in Cape Town to share her skills with different young groups. She will typically tell them stories about her childhood and how she came across these instruments. She carries a few around with her to teach the children how to use them.

Conclusion

My research reveals the important fact that women are not only players but the makers of the *uhadi* musical bow. They currently play a crucial role in preserving and reviving the instrument, conducting classes for nearby communities and teaching young people how to make and play the instrument. The amazing work these women do not only prevents the extinction of the indigenous musical bow but highlights its unique musical and cultural value, as a traditional artefact but also as an instrument that has a place and a role to play in contemporary society. For this reason, I recommend that South African museums develop their *uhadi* collections and knowledge about them for the general public. It is especially important that the craftspeople who create the instruments receive the credit due to them.

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Notes

1. *uhadi* (Xhosa), *ugubhu*/*ligubhu* (Zulu/Swati). Mostly played by women and girls normally in the evenings, although musical male youth occasionally take it up (Musical Bows in Southern Africa-Swazi Dlamini 2020)