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A MUSICAL HISTORY THROUGH VOCAL EXPRESSIONS AT THE ABBEY CINDI COSMOLOGY CONCERT

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This paper reports on a research project that culminated in a concert honoring South African musician and activist Bra Abbey Cindi. The project involved reissuing Cindi's album, forming a band of young musicians to perform his music, and creating a vocal group called No Limits to reinterpret Cindi's earlier South African choral works. The paper proposes the use of music to explore the past, present, and future, linking generations and addressing social issues. It discusses specific compositions, their lyrical and musical merits, and the process of arranging them for vocal performance. The paper also highlights the role of community engagement and the value of reimagining historical musical works.

Introduction and Context

The Mamelodi Arts and Culture Forum (MACFO) initiated a project to honour veteran artists, and the first to be honoured was the musician and activist Bra Abbey Cindi. MACFO's initiative was undertaken in partnership with the Wits School of Arts and the Wits History Workshop. For a concert planned for International Jazz Day 2022, Abbey Cindi's self-produced, retrospective album of 2008, *Abbey Cindi's United States of Africa*, was reissued on CD, and a band of young musicians from Greater Tshwane was formed to learn his music and perform it with him for the first time.

The performance was split into two sets. The second half consisted of Cindi performing a selection of tracks accompanied by a four-piece band. The first half, for which I directed the music, provided a sonic tale and an all-vocal interpretation of musical pieces in early singing and compositional styles that preceded and informed the cultural context later occupied by Abbey Cindi's sound. In this open segment of the performance, and drawing on my choral interests, as a practitioner and researcher, I adapted his and other compositions. I utilised the voice to create and direct the articulation of the musical arrangements through performance by a vocal group, No Limits, which I will introduce later.

The aim of this paper is to observe how the first half used music to explore the idea of the past in the present while projecting into the future and telling Bra Abbey's story within the broader South African narrative. The intention was to link generations of composers, performers and audiences since the late 1800s by applying a contemporary artistic lens and recreation of musical encounters.

The specific Abbey Cindi compositions were reimagined in this first segment included "Ndoneni Kulelizwe" and "Kulikhuni Ukuba Yindoda" from his 2020 re-issue of the album "United States of Africa." The selection of these songs was made in consultation with him and intended to complement rather than duplicate his set. "Teka Msaba," (take the land) would have been thematically appropriate song, written as an instrumental piece with relevant lyrics, but I could not include it because he planned to play it in his set. Overall, informed by the lyrical content of Cindi's album, the performance covered social issues of black struggle and land. It inspired the inclusion of other tracks with similar themes. I considered tracks from the 1930s by Reuben Caluza, "Umteto we Land Act," composed in 1912, sentimentally connected to the first part of the current South African national anthem. The national anthem is thematically related to an earlier composition by Tiyo Soga, "Lizalis'idinga Lakho" of 1861, a prayer followed by John Bokwe's composition "Plea for Africa" of 1892. While composed in different epochs, these songs attend to the pleadings and yearnings of African people about issues of land and liberation. A Cindi-focused oral history project that I introduce below yielded findings that inspired creative engagement with other earlier South African choral works. The themes captured in his songs inform and accentuate the type of repertoire covered here. I arranged the music as a co-researcher in the broader project, and it was performed by the a cappella ensemble No Limits, which I co-founded in Soweto in 1995.

This paper provides the context of the research project that framed this performance and the motivation for its culmination in a concert. It provides specific information concerning each composition, its lyrical and musical merits, and its subsequent arrangement for performance by five voices. The performance on which this paper focuses is informed by an idea of artistic research that underscores the value of arranging as a mode of knowing and adapting musical knowledge to engage with artistic, social, historical and contemporary issues and navigating issues of land, labour and struggle.

Abbey Cindi – Veteran Artist

The oral history component of this research, where Cindi reflects on his artistry and activism, among other things, inspired the performance in the first half of the concert, which is the central focus of this paper. The research engagement culminated in the Cosmology Concert on 30 April 2022 at the Chris Seabrooke Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Preceding this were extended "on camera" discussions with Cindi, in which he shared his musical journeys and ideologies. On one occasion, the research groups had a listening session where Cindi provided context and reflections for each of his compositions on the "United States of Africa" album. The depth of his knowledge, history and heritage was such as to suggest that a concert performance to reveal and share these ideas was needed. Although Cindi is an activist and social commentator, aspects of his reflections could only be understood through musical expression in performance.

In conceptualising this paper, my view as a researcher is that the project fell within two main methodological paradigms. First, community engagement implies a collaborative process to recognise Cindi and his work as a repository of knowledge. Central to this has been the involvement of MACFO and their initial request for assistance in generating various kinds of documentation relating to heritage and cultural histories. The second paradigm involved the creation of a performance reflecting Cindi's interest in and appreciation of vocal music. An exploration of musical composition and lyrical content that addresses social issues in a selection of pieces thus presented an opportunity for an artistic dimension of engagement. These works were first revisited, which implies listening to pre-existing music with an interest in understanding its context. Secondly, they were re-imagined for how they might be if viewed through a contemporary lens of interpretation. The process of locating the music in a particular moment in history was accompanied by an interest in the contemporary relevance that re-imagining might enable. Together, these purposes resulted in the creative process of arranging, the re-organisation of the musical elements of a pre-existing piece to suit a new or different context.

The interviews and listening sessions with commentary in the oral history part of the research provided the initial details of Cindi's activism and music, and how the former became incorporated into his compositions. Listening to his recordings of instrumental music and learning to understand its context from the interviews prompted an engagement with the music through my medium of expertise, the voice. I listened intently to recreate the musical experience within the affordances of voices only. I then sang mentally and vocally, internalising the music and lyrics of all the songs included here. I selected these according to their place in history and thematic focus. Once they were settled in my mind, I taught them to the group, emphasising the emotion I felt and simultaneously drew from the first sub-audience, the singers, and, eventually, the conventional audience in a performance setting. This was auto-ethnographic research relying on tacit artistic knowledge to generate the vocal arrangements for each piece. Understanding vocal structures and being open to adapting to a singer's ability to execute the ideas became crucial.

I consulted archives in the form of songbooks (*Amaculo Ase Lovedale*), past recordings (Abbey Cindi & Reuben Caluza) and discographies (liner notes). In addition, I found some previous studies on some of the repertoire and composers considered (Erlmann 1991; Detterbeck 2002; Olwage 2003; Lucia 2014).[1] Throughout, I was in communication with Abbey Cindi. The formulation of the concert became the musical extension of a verbal exchange in which we were already engaged.

As an artist and researcher, within the collaboration I assumed the role of re-imagining historical works of relevance, including Cindi's compositions, drawing on my artistic experience as an arranger. This required thorough familiarisation with all the chosen works and the application of tacit knowledge to express the music

with artistic authenticity and academic integrity. Recent projects of a similar nature from other practitioners have captured scholarly interest, for both their artistry and historicity: for instance, reimagining the music of the African Choir of 1892 and the 1930s Reuben Caluza's Double Quartet album (Miller and Sibisi 2014, and Miller and Sibisi 2021, respectively). I am drawn to these projects for their recognition of the value in musical histories and the strength of creative imagination that they bring to bear.

Music and Re-Imaginings

No Limits, the a cappella group, offered a five-voice formation (soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and bass) to present the musical expressions that I generated. As illustrated in the following paragraphs, the lyrical themes of these compositions include prayers and protestations about the condition of black people. Though lyrically evoking a sense of gloom and suffering, the music brings comfort and leans on music-making's collective and participatory nature, which reflects a hopeful sense of solidarity. The crucial feature of this revisiting of existing compositions was using the human voice for works previously popularised using instrumental accompaniment.

"Ndoneni Kulelizwe" (1970s)[2]

This song is about fatigue and frustration with life in the country. It raises a question in the title, "What have I sinned on in this Land".

Ndoneni mna kulelizwe (What is my sin in this land)
Ndoneni kulendawo (What is my wrong in this place)
Ndoneni mna kulelizwe (What is my sin in this land)
Ndoneni kulendawo (What is my wrong in this place)

Ndikhathele mna (I am tired)
Ndiyahamba kulezwe (I'm leaving this land)
Ndikhathele mna (I'm tired)
Lilizwe lenhlupheko (Of this land of struggle)
Ndiyathandaza (I pray)
Ndifun'inkululeko (I want freedom)

Ndoneni mna (What is my sin)
Ndoneni kulelizwe (What is my wrong in this land)
Ndoneni mna (What is my sin)
Kulendawo (In this place)
Ndiya hamba mna (I am leaving)
Ndiya hamba kulelizwe (I am leaving this land)

Ndikhathele x3 (I'm tired)
Ndiyahamba kulelizwe (I'm leaving this land)
Ndikhathele x3 (I'm tired)
Yilelizwe lenhlupheko (Of this land of struggle)

I was drawn to this song because of its lyrical content and guitar rhythm. I assigned vocal parts to the rhythm and isolated a lead voice from the beginning of the arrangement. It starts with the lead improvising *ad libitum*. In different sections, several voices take the lead to give a sense of variation to the constant rhythmic part

that primarily frames the song. The arrangement does not use the entire set of lyrics in the song; it works with "Ndoneni mna, ndikhathele mna, ndiyahamba kulelizwe," which expresses the essence of the theme. As different voices take the lead, they insert their interpretation, ranging from scatting to a melody from a traditional song about being tired and returning from a distant place. This recentres the performance in a dialogue with Cindi's ideas. The irony is that, although it is a song about being fatigued and at a point of conclusion, it has a bouncy rhythm that implies a residue of strength, jubilation and resilience in the face of adversity.
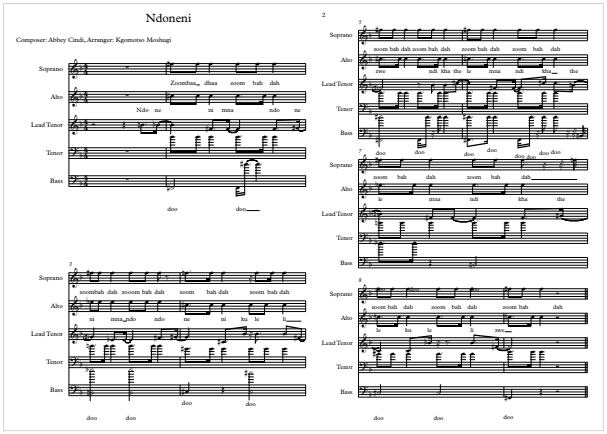


Figure 1: Illustration of the vocal arrangement of Ndoneni.

"Kulikhuni Ukuba Yindoda" (1970s)[3]

This work song depicts a scene of men busy with hard labour in extreme weather conditions, implying that work is undertaken as a duty, not an option to earn money.

> Kulikhumi ukuba yindoda ng'boleken'ipiki mna (Lend me a pick)
> N'gawule (To work)
> Noma sekushisha (Even when it's hot)
> Ngisebenzel'imali (I work for money)
> Noma sekubanda (Even when it's cold)
> Ngisebenzel'imali (I work for money) Spoken word
> O kwaze kwalukhuni ukuba yindoda (It's so hard to be a man)
> Isaga sithi amndla we ndoda awapheli (The proverb says "the strength of a man does not fade")
> Ayikho yonke lento (There's no point to all this)
> Kwaze kwasho ingoma ukuthi (A song says)
> Izithukuthuku zenja ziyophelelemoyeni (The sweat of the brow of a dog will be in vain)

Aligned with the themes in the compositions of the preceding composers, Cindi's song addresses the challenge of the working class and the issue of hard labour that does not receive congruent pay. After Cindi explained that he was also inspired by the slave chants of American slave workers in this composition, I reframed my arrangement around the ideas of struggle and pain. I intended to draw these out through a chant and rhythm carried by the voices, with the lead lyrically expressing the context of labour and hard work under extreme conditions. I assigned the lead voice to the alto voice with enough range to create a variety of emotions through high and low vocal registers. The chant of background voices turns into a harmonised hum halfway through until the end of the song. The lead centres the entire arrangement, emotionally expressing a plangent cry.

Tiyo Soga – "Lizali'sidinga Lakho" (1861)[4]

Soga wrote this multi-denominational hymn that now appears in various hymnals, including the Seventh-day Adventists' *uKristu Engomeni* (1977). This is where and how I have come to know it. It has five verses, with lyrics that over the years have been given different melodies, so that as a hymn several versions now exist. It is a prayer to God for the salvation of all nations and for "this" land, "that all may bow and tell of His glory, and that joy shall only come through Him, in a troubled and corrupt world." The African Choir that travelled to England in 1892 sang this hymn for Queen Victoria

(McCord 1998). It encapsulated their struggles and the sentiments they wished to express about their African reality (Detterbeck 2002).

Although this is an old hymn, it is still part of the typical repertoire in local communities, and presumably continues to circulate because of its ongoing meaning and relevance in the 21st century. For the reasons stated above, I was drawn to it and integrated it into the repertoire for the performance. It resonated with the ideas of prayer for Africa, a call for help and a sense of reliance on supernatural intervention in the conditions of struggle in which people find themselves.

In my arrangement, the song opens with a humming to signify a sense of solemnity. I was intent on retaining the original melody as popularly known, but decided to create a variation with background voices through a different and vertical melody that moves with the harmonic parts. Inspired by the need to accentuate the lyrics' meaning and emotion, I ensured that each verse was unique, even when the original melody in the lead remained unchanged. I also added the second melody moving together with the first in the lead on the fourth verse to create a sense of climax in the arrangement. I had already produced this arrangement in an earlier recording and kept it close to the recorded version, even though the performance had minor variations, given that there were only five harmonic parts (fewer than in the earlier arrangement).

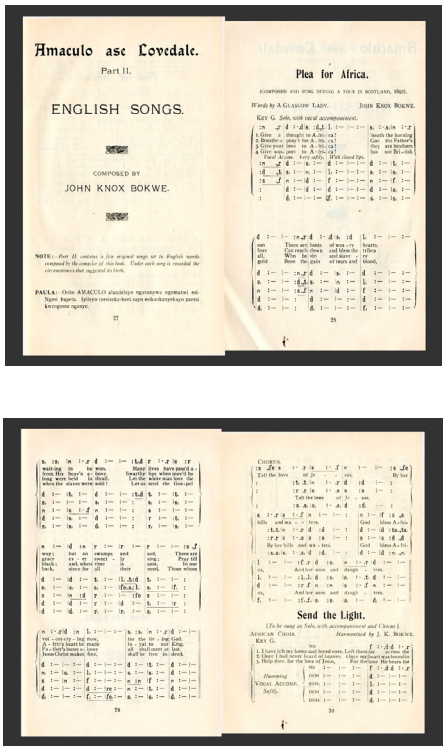

Amaculo ase Lovedale.
Part II.
ENGLISH SONGS.
COMPOSED BY
JOHN KNOX BOKWE.
Plea for Africa.
Send the Light.

Figure 2: Illustration of the original composition – Plea for Africa

John K. Bokwe – "Plea for Africa" (1890s)[5]

This song was also among those performed by the African Choir on their England tour of 1892. It had appeared earlier in a locally published song collection, citing John Bokwe as the composer of the music and a "Glasgow Lady" as the author of the words. Drawn from a 1922 edition of *Amaculo Ase Lovedale*, this version of the song has four verses and a chorus. The words specify the conditions of Africa and the need for intervention, with an appeal for love and support towards Africa and Africans. Over the years, it has attracted various artists (including the soloist Sibongile Khumalo) who have performed and recorded it, utilising only a selection of verses.

In my arrangement, I altered the rhythmic flow of the melody and, consequently, the entire song. I opted for a slower pace. For instance, where the original melody goes through the first phrase and sustains the word Africa only at the end, I created a long-sustained note on the word "thought" on the second beat of the arrangement. This allowed for an accentuated word expression. In my view, the original version is hurried. My arrangement aimed to address this. The time allocated for the entire performance did not permit elaborate arrangements. As a result, in my approach to this particular piece I discarded all the other verses. I used the first verse and a repeat of the chorus with extended harmonies and a slight chant in the phrases leading into the chorus. Working with the idea of a plea, I created a "big" ending on a high-pitched last phrase with some tension in the tenor part that rapidly resolves, while the bass moves from a high to a low octave on the tonic.

Reuben T. Caluza – "Unthetho We Land Act" (1912)[6]

Caluza wrote this song to express his regret at the provisions of the Natives' Land Act (Detterbeck 2002). The song is based on the 1930s recording he made in London with Caluza's Double Quartet. On the cover of the record, he appears as the conductor, standing in front of nine individuals. The original recording has piano accompaniment and conventional soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices. The original form consists of sections A and B that are repeated. The words refer to the prohibi-

tion of blacks from buying and owning land. The last part is about a cry for future generations that have no place of their own in the land of their forefathers.

The arrangement retains the integrity of the original melody with slight variations and extensions of the harmony. At the end of the song, I created a medley by adding the words of another popular struggle song, "Thula Sizwe" (Hush Nation), although I do not use the melody of the actual song. The words Thula Sizwe form a rhythm through background voices, and their use is enough to suggest the reference to the known song and its sentiment. The two are connected by emphasising the silencing or comforting of the crying nation. Somewhere in the middle of the repetitive rhythmic section, I interrupted the chanting of "Thula, Thula, Thula, Thula Sizwe" with a short reference to the current national anthem, the Sesotho part, "Morena boloka sechaba sa heso, o fedise dintwa le matshwenyeho" (Lord preserve our nation, end wars and struggles), that is essentially a continuation of a prayer. Overall, this connects the cry for the land with a response of comfort and prayer, further echoing the sentiments of Soga's and Bokwe's hymns.

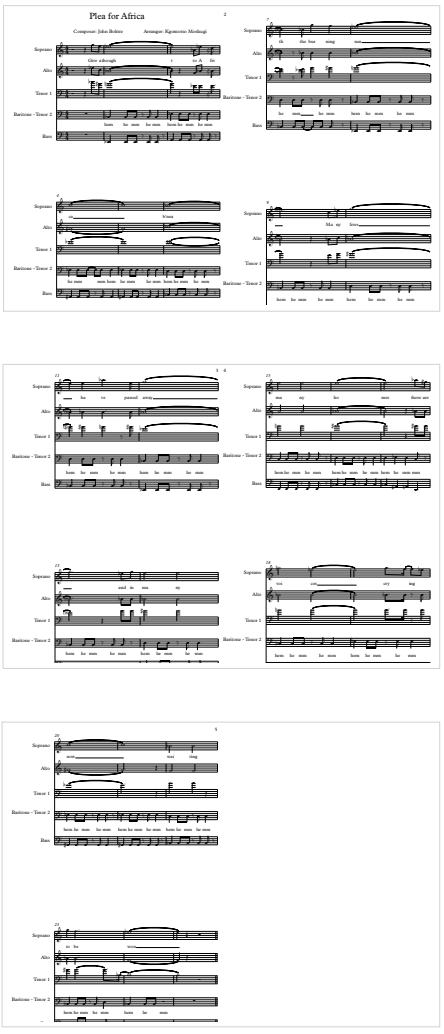


Figure 3: Illustration of the arrangement – Plea for Africa

Manhattan Brothers – Male quartet from the 1950s

"Mbube," Solomon Linda's song from 1939,[7] has been in the media in recent decades due to copyright violations and issues arising from its international use in film and Broadway musicals. However, some of its earliest popularisations came through Solomon Linda and the Evening Birds, soon followed by the Manhattan Brothers quartet. It has since been part of a range of choral repertoires, often creating excitement through the significance of the bass voice singing "mbube haaa, we mbube haaa, we mbube haaa." It is one of the most easily identifiable songs linked directly to South African music traditions. Including this song in Cindi's research-based performance was based on its history of internationalisation as an early African composition and its impact on male group singing. The Manhattan Brothers also influenced male jazz singing in ways that have defined subsequent styles and male group singing traditions.

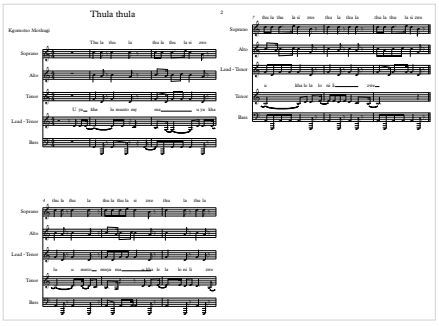


Figure 4: Illustration of the vocal arrangement for Thula Thula:

Joshua P. Mohapeloa – "Diphala" (1951)[8]

As a prolific composer who occupies a prominent position on the South African scene, Mohapeloa's range of music is popular with large choirs and has often been performed at choir competitions, where I first encountered it as a child. For this performance, I chose a jubilant song about inviting and welcoming new cohorts of students in a school setting. "Diphala" means "blown whistles" or "wind instruments." He refers to these in his depiction of the celebration and joy associated with education.

Mohapeloa's lyrics narrate a story and spark imagery. Simultaneously, he draws on music to bring the story to life with a counterpoint in the "B" section of the song where he imitates the blowing of pipes with the words "Peperipepe," which are not actual words but onomatopoeic sounds. I included this piece for its popularity in choral settings and to draw in Mohapeloa as an African composer who uses a local culture and its symbolism to express musical ideas in a way rarely viewed in Cindi's jazz genre. Both are memorable artistic expressions of African culture, separated by genre and tradition but connected by compositional skill.

I used this moment to intersect the often-formal choral tradition with the often-informal jazz expression. The original version is often fast paced. The version performed by No Limits is slower and in the "Bosa Nova" feel with a lead voice that carries the song's essence, background vocals supplying what is conventionally is expected from a jazz piano accompaniment, and a vocal scat imitation of a walking bass.

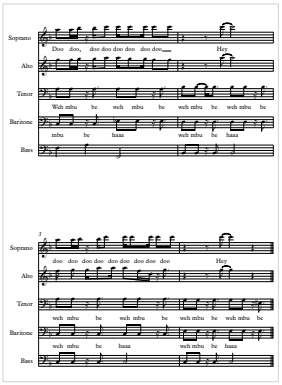


Figure 5: Illustration of the vocal arrangement for Mbube – Composer (Solomon Linda), Arranger (Kgomotso Moshugi)

Conclusion

This research-based performance sought to advance knowledge and the ways in which it can be attained and disseminated. It was crafted with the understanding that, although qualitative means such as interviews yield valuable insights, some artistic subjects require the application of artistic tools to reveal their richness (Przeworski and Salomon 1995). This was certainly the case with a project such as this, which links the past with the present through contemporary lenses, reflections and voices. Darla Crispin (2015) proposes a valuable approach that I adopted in a previous project (Moshugi 2022). It identifies artistic research at the input level, which informs the focus of a research question on artistic phenomena. The next level, throughput, utilises artistic modes and methodologies to gather or analyse data. The third level entails artistic output as a supplement or complement to, or an outcome of, the research. Following this logic, this paper's attention to arranging and its interconnections with composing positions it in the terrain of artistic research as input. Utilising listening and singing to know the compositions and then creating and disseminating the arrangements in their new, totally or slightly altered form, represents artistic research's throughput and output dimensions. At the same time, studying ways of knowing through the activities of listening and singing provides grounding for practice-based research relating to the arts, as suggested by Mareli Stolp (2012).
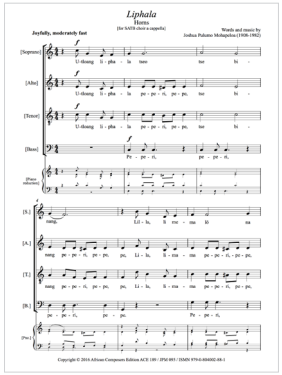


Figure 6: Illustration of the original composition – Diphala
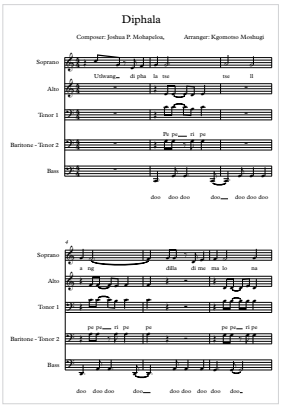


Figure 7: Illustration of the arrangement – Diphala

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Appendix

"Lizalis' idinga lakho"

Lizalis' idinga lakho (Fullfil/realise your promise)
Thixo Nkosi yenyaniso (God the Lord of truth)
Zonk' iintlanga, zonk' izizwe (All tribes and all nations)
Ma zizuze usindiso (Should gain salvation)

Amadolo kweli lizwe (Knees in this land)
Ma kagobe phambi kwakho (Should bow before you)
Zide zithi zonk' iilwimi (Until every tongue)
Ziluxel' udumo lwakho (Declares your glory)
Law'la, law'la, Nkosi, Yesu (Reign, rule, Lord Jesus!)
Koza ngawe ukonwaba (Joy shall come through you)
Ngeziphithi-phithi zethu (Due to our unsettledness)
Yonakele imihlaba (Lands are ruined)

Bona izwe lakowethu (See the land of ours)
Uxolel' izoono zalo (Forgive its trespasses)
Ungathob' ingqumbo yakho (Let not your wrath descend)
Luze luf' usapho lwalo (Lest its children decease)

Yaala, Nkosi, singadeli (Forbid, Lord, that we give up)
Iimfundiso zezwi lakho (The teachings of your Word)
Uze usivuselele (Till you revive us)
Sive inyaniso yakho (So we hear your truth)

"Plea for Africa"

Verse 1
Give a thought to Africa 'Neath the burning sun
They are hosts of weary hearts Waiting to be won
Many lives have passed away And in many homes
There are voices crying out To the living God

Chorus
Tell the love of Jesus By the hills and waters God bless Africa
And her sons and daughters

Verse 2
Breathe a prayer for Africa God the father's love
Can reach down and bless all hearts From his heav'n above
And when lips are moved by Grace They so sweetly sing
Pray for peace in Africa From the loving God

Chorus
Tell the love of Jesus By the hills and waters God bless Africa
And her sons and daughters

Verse 3

Give your Love to Africa They are brothers all
Who by sin and slavery Long were held in thrall
Let the white man love the black And when time is past
In our Father's home above All shall meet at last

Chorus
Tell the love of Jesus By the hills and waters God bless Africa
And her sons and daughters

Verse 4
Give support to Africa Has not British gold
Been the gain of tears and blood When the slaves were sold
Let us send the Gospel back Since for all their need
Those whom Jesus Christ makes free
Shall be free indeed

Chorus
Tell the love of Jesus By the hills and waters God bless Africa
And her sons and daughters

"Umteto we Land Act" (The law of the land act)

Silusapho lwase Afrika (We are descendants of Africa)
Sikhalela izwelakithi (We cry for our land)
Mzulu namXhosa namSotho hlanganani (A Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho persons unite) S
khalel'iland act umtheth'omubi (We cry over the land act, a terrible law)
Owulwelwa ngamanxusa (That was opposed by those who pled for us)
Eyayalela thina lusapho (For refusing us descendants)
Ukuba silithengilizwe (To buy land)

Skhaleli'ngane zikababa (We cry for our father's children)
Ezimeyo zimezweni (Who stand in the land)
Zingena ndawo yokuhlala (With no place to stay)
Elizweni lokhokho bethu (In the land of our fore-parents)

"Diphala"

Utlwang diphala tse tse llang (Hear the whistles and pipes)
Dilla dimema lona bafihlang (They sound to invite you the arriving)
Dire sekolong sena ke thabo (They mean, in this school it's a joy)
Lephuthuloheng bohle ka thabo (All relax with joy)
Peperi pepe
Dibina jwalo (Thats how they sing)
Ho rona ditsebeng ha dikena (In our ears when they come)
Peperi pepe
Melodi ena (These melodies)
Dingkgopotsa thabo esafeleng (They remind me of the joy that never ends)
Thabo le monyaka o mane pele (Joy and celebration ahead).

Notes

1. Detterbeck, M., "South African Choral Music (Amakwaya): Song, Contest and the Formation of Identity"; Olwage, G., "Music and (Post)Colonialism: The Dialectics of Choral Culture on a South African Frontier"; Lucia, C., "Composing towards/against Whiteness: The African Music of Mohapeloa."
2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XA8ZPuhJODw&list=PL366QCSDkXJn3LeuDvXrarkifH17Y3Ssy&index=7
3. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYFr1HpPD14
4. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrzZlJJUD6w
5. See Figures 2 & 3 for the original and arranged versions referred to here.
6. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpKApTWtLGo
7. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrrQT4WkbNE
8. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTGH-PGWZsI&list=RDwTGH-PGWZsI&start_radio=1

   See Figures 6 & 7 for a segment of the original score and an illustration of the arrangement referred to here.