

**FORM AND FUNCTION OF XHOSA FOLKSONGS**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

### FORM AND FUNCTION OF XHOSA FOLKSONGS

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Folksongs, like any other oral literature category has a form or structure, which may differ according to the occasion they are composed for. Most traditional folksongs are made up of short verbal phrases. Contemporary folksongs may be longer than traditional ones, especially gospel folksongs.

Folksongs as one representation of art forms have a communicative function, and that reinforces the fact that folksongs have a role to play in society. This is also proved by the presence of an audience during performance. Also to prove the communicative function of folksongs is the fact that there should be an audience during folksong performance. Folksongs play a vital role in maintaining social stability. Songs of ridicule have an impact on social stability as they may reprimand those involved in vices.

Folksongs can be categorized according to different values they have in society. These values assist in presenting different functions, which are of utmost importance to societies. Without these functions members of society may not live to the required expectations, such as conforming to the norms and values of society. It has also been established that in pursuit of forms and functions, folksongs can be categorized according to typology.

Date: .....

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that Form and Function of Xhosa folksongs is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Thokozile Valencia Mabeqa  
SIGNED: .....

Date: .....

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND

Folksongs are generally considered to be part of the discipline/field known as folklore. The term folklore is a complex one. The fact that folklorists do not have consensus as to the exact content of folklore is an indication that the discipline is really complex and broad (Dundes 1965:1). Folklore literally means the knowledge of people. At the same time one cannot escape the fact that folklore as a body of knowledge, is connected to the culture of people. People possess knowledge which stems from their cultural background, and which informs their patterns of behaviour and human relationships.

Dundes' interpretation of folk is that of any group of people who share at least one common factor (1965:2). This indicates that folklore has to do with the knowledge of a group of people who share common factors. My interpretation of these will embrace some of the factors Dundes has individualized, such as religion, language and race. All of these factors encompass culture.

One popular (and acceptable) view of folklore is that of Dorson, who mentions that folklore has four components, namely, oral literature, social folk customs, performing folk arts and material culture (1972:1). Not unexpectedly, these components are culturally bound. Folksongs, which are the focus of this research, can be accommodated within all four components:

- Folksongs have literary features
- Singing is intimately linked with customs
- Folksongs have a performative aspect
- There is dress/costume and cultural artefacts linked to singing

These are not watertight subdivisions and overlapping might occur, that is, various folklore forms might find application in more than one component.

My interpretation of folksongs is that of songs originating from a certain group, but which contemporarily might have been taken over by other groups. These songs are traditional in nature, in that they concur with and reflect the social patterns of the group from which they emanate. Ntshinga in Sienaert's *Oral tradition and its transmission* (1994:127) seems to be in support of the above view by stating that there is an undeniable shift from traditional functions to contemporary functions, from traditional contexts to contemporary ones. Three groups of folksongs I will be investigating are contemporary folksongs representing the following types: *izitibili* or "*iisawundi*" according to Hansen (1981:104) which represent a style of music that is very popular today (songs performed by choirs other than choral music), gospel songs, which has its influence from Christianity and traditional folksongs, which are connected to rituals.

Folksongs are characterized by poetic qualities therefore they are literary. They are often connected with customs and they have a performing aspect. They are often sung with the performers wearing particular attire and are often accompanied by instruments; therefore they

have a connection with material culture. Nowadays songs that used to be performed orally can be found in notational form, but that does not contradict the fact that folksongs are essentially oral in nature.

All four components of folklore namely, social folk customs, performing folk arts, oral literature and material culture have a societal relationship. Jordan in Towards an African Literature (1974:4) emphasizes this relationship. He points out that literature reflects the society that produced it, and that the understanding of the social forces at work in that society is vital to appreciating that society's literature. This entails that when one analyses the four components of folklore, one should not see them as isolated entities, but rather as interlinked components of a particular society.

This study will therefore investigate form and function of Xhosa folksongs and reveal the cultural role that Xhosa folksongs play in society.

## **1.2 THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

What is the role of folksongs in contemporary Xhosa society? Are there different manifestations/forms of folksongs? Do these correspond with different functions?

All art forms, of which folksongs is one representation, have a communicating as well as a modelling function, that is, it is a representation or model of reality. Do lyrics have any communicative role in folksongs? What about action carried out during performance? Is attire or costume also a contributing factor in the communication process of folksongs? What about paralinguistic features such as pitch, intonation, loudness and softness etc.? Do they impact on the conveyance of the message?

What are the structural features of Xhosa folksongs? Are there many different manifestations or forms? Do they conform to one type of form, or do they have different forms?

## **1.3 HYPOTHESIS**

The hypothesis to be investigated will be what folksongs do in society and why they are there.

The main focus of this study will be on form and function of Xhosa folksongs in contemporary society.

Folksongs in Xhosa society are sung for entertainment and for ritual proceedings. The nature of singing and sometimes of the choice of folksongs depends on the ritual to be performed. One can for example, differentiate between folksongs performed in the "*ukungena kwenkwenkwe*" tradition (initiation of a boy), and for example, the one performed during the vigil of a family member who passed away. Many rituals are still performed.

From the above statements, one can deduce that folksongs have a communicative role or function. Traditionally people communicated through songs under certain circumstances. Even today there are issues that are communicated better through songs, more especially issues



pertaining to certain groups of people and even individuals. Some groups may need to pay attention to certain issues; hence another group alerts them to the problem through songs. That is significant in, for example, in the case of the daughter-in-law who may be discontent because of the treatment of her in-laws.

Particular events may obviously serve as the inspiration for the composing of songs. There is, for example, a song "*Amagorha oo-Apollo*" (The heroes of Apollo), which was composed after the American astronauts reached the moon and executed the first ever moon landing. The heroism of those men prompted the composer to create that song. This indicates that songs are often shaped by events as much as they are shaped by the norms and values of the society. That will also be investigated in this study.

Xhosa folksongs are, most of the time accompanied by action/movements. The performers connect some songs to the wearing of specific attire. In some cases the occasion of the performance would dictate the attire to be used for those particular songs. This is indicative of the fact that action and attire contribute to the communicative elements in songs.

This study aims to investigate the dynamic role played by songs in contemporary Xhosa society. It will also endeavour to expose the cultural elements embedded in Xhosa folksongs, as songs are used as a vehicle for transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. Songs may also emphasize the past i.e. history, seeing that some songs refer to particular events that occurred in the past. Xhosa folksongs are also connected with the rites de passage of individuals in the community. Each developmental stage in the life of individuals in Xhosa society has a ritual connected to it and songs connected to that ritual.

The main objective of this study is to investigate, and in so doing, also highlighting cultural features as these are reflected in the song.

This study also endeavours to show that culture is dynamic. Because of the current reverberation about the African Renaissance in this country and also on the rest of the continent, the researcher is of the opinion that this study may contribute to highlight and foreground a cultural phenomenon peculiar to Xhosa society.

#### **1.4 A RESUME OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Lyrics in Xhosa folksongs play a vital role in the communication process, hence most Xhosa folksongs contain them. Ruth Finnegan in her work "*Oral Literature in Africa*" (1970:24) supports the above assumption by stating that lyric is the most common form of poetry in Sub-Saharan Africa. A song is basically a poem set to music. She further claims that songs appear in an almost unlimited number of contexts. This enhances the assumption that songs in Xhosa society are also found in many contexts.

Folksongs are culture oriented. The fact that they are sung on so many occasions indicates their cultural importance. Ruth Finnegan emphasizes the fact that the wealth of culture often finds expression in music and poetry. She further states that rites de passage is very common occasions for singing (1970:243).

Elizabeth Gunner (1990:78) shares the same sentiments when she states that the Bakonzo (which

is a nation in Zaire in Africa) need a song at every crucial moment of their lives – they can't live fully without it, neither can they die and be at peace without it. That is exactly the case with the amaXhosa.

Songs have both a societal and historical significance within the culture of amaXhosa. Xhosa life is always connected to singing. Whenever a ritual is practiced, singing for example takes place. Ruth Finnegan supports this by saying that in Africa there are songs about wives, husbands, marriage, animals, chiefs etc... (1970:274) and of course, many others.

In relation to the above assumption Ulli Beier (1966:4) states that a study of the Ewe traditional song is a study of the philosophy of life and of the values of the Ewe people. Beier refers to the Ewe people in Nigeria, but because African people share many spiritual characteristics this may also apply to amaXhosa.

Ntshinga in Sienaert's Oral Tradition and innovation (1994:110 - 111) further elaborates on the above by stating that songs cannot be studied in isolation, but should rather be studied in relation to the factors that have helped to shape that culture.

Zuckerhandl (1973:46) highlights the fact that music is sound that is organized into socially accepted patterns, and music making may be regarded as a form of learned behaviour. He therefore supports the fact that songs have a sociological significance. He further states that the function of music is to enhance in some way the quality of individual experience and human relationships: its structures are reflections of patterns of human relations.

As mentioned before, movement nearly always accompanies Xhosa folksongs. Performance is also culturally related. In relation to the above, Bauman (1978:46) mentions that the setting is the culturally defined place where performance occurs. Groenewald (1998:42) supports Bauman by indicating that it seems justifiable to distinguish two aspects of the total situatedness of performance, namely situation and context. Situation is the immediate setting of a performance, and context is the broader socio-political climate.

Songs play a vital role in shaping the behaviour of people. If someone is engaged in human vice, he/she may be reprimanded through songs of ridicule. Alan Dundes in support of this view states that ridicule is one of the means of protesting against disgusting practices, and of getting rid of things undesirable (1965:313).

Dundes further claims that one of the most important functions of folklore is its use as a vehicle for social protest. Wherever there is injustice and oppression, one can be sure that the victims will find some solace in folkloric expression (1965:308). Often in the South African context, if for example, workers are treated in an unjust manner they may resort to protest, and songs of protest may accompany this.

Folksongs have a communicative function even if they have no lyrics. Jafta (1972:13) supports this view when she says that it is the totality of the actions of the characters that conveys a particular meaning even though there may be no elaborate content in terms of words.

Ngara (1990:15) is of the opinion that any work of art is a communicative utterance produced by the performer and received as such by the audience. In outlining the above assumption, one can

refer to Jakobson's general communication model, which clearly states the communicative channel. The sender in the case of folksongs is the performer, the message is the communicative elements in the folksong, whether it be lyrics, dance, paralinguistic features etc. or the combination of any of them, and the audience functions as the receiver.

Dundes in his work "The Study of folklore" claims that form is relatively stable whilst content may vary (1965:10). Coffin (1968:32) on the other hand states that lyrical folksongs are amorphous, they adapt to particular situations and they change form and shape according to the demands of both the singer and audience. He further claims that stanzas are improvised and that folk lyrics often consist of idioms of the people. Ngara seems to be in agreement with Coffin when he argues that form is determined by social and historical conditions, and that there is a relationship between form and content (1990:13).

Ngara (op.cit) states that form has a more general application. He refers to both the external and internal structures of the poem or folksong. He mentions parts of the internal structure of a poem such as the use of images, symbols, allusions, peculiar idioms and other poetic devices, such as repetition and parallelism. He further claims that form is more conditioned because of historical and social factors and they will be marked by the use of traditional cultural elements and oral forms. This is true when one considers the form of most Xhosa folksongs. Repetition and parallelism are prevalent in most Xhosa folksongs. Peculiar idioms are used more especially in songs of ridicule. Ngara emphasizes the fact that the form of folksongs is influenced by historical, social and cultural factors of the society.

According to Hansen (1981:111) Xhosa music is collective in performance. She further echoes that 'It is a shared experience both socially and musically'. Hansen confirms the fact that all Xhosa songs are performed by groups of people who sing and dance in a highly co-ordinated manner, each performer maintaining his individuality even though he is a member of a group.

## **1.5 RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

In pursuing this study the following procedures were followed:

- (a) Empirical research through attending and observing performances,
- (b) Bibliographical research,
- (c) Interviews and
- (d) Questionnaires.

The main objective of using these procedures is to gather a wide range of information pertaining to the form and functions of Xhosa folksongs.

Interviews with performers and audiences were conducted. The advantage of such interviews was to get first hand information from the performers and from people knowledgeable about Xhosa culture.

Bibliographic research is another important source to cover theories and approaches to folklore studies, as well as published research on folksongs particularly in Africa.

Questionnaires were convenient for gathering information from persons with a vast knowledge of

Xhosa culture, but who were not easily accessible to the researcher.

## **1.6 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter 1 is the introduction. In this chapter the background of the study is explored. Statement of the problem as well as the hypothesis is also addressed. A literature review is included to support the study. The research methodology is also outlined.

Chapter 2 investigates folklore as a discipline, with the emphasis on definitions and assumptions of different theorists. Also the position of folksongs in the discipline of folklore will be explored.

Chapter 3 deals with song as an art form. Different definitions of folksongs will be presented. Form and functions of folksongs will be explored as well as typology and analysis of folksongs.

Chapter 4 is a summary of some of the major findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### FOLKLORE AS A DISCIPLINE

#### 2.1 WHAT IS FOLKLORE?

As already mentioned in the introduction, folklore covers a very wide field of study. It is therefore very difficult to define the term adequately. That is, *inter alia*, indicated by the twenty-one definitions of the term found in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend (Leach:1949) Various folklorists interpret folklore in various ways. In most of these definitions the oral nature of folklore has been identified. This then suggests that oral tradition forms an integral part of folklore.

In cultures without writing, almost everything is transmitted orally. By contrast, in cultures with writing, only some issues are transmitted orally, particularly issues pertaining to cultural beliefs such as initiation.

The suggestion that folklore only exists in an oral form could be challenged. In both these cultures, the oral and the written, some orally transmitted information could not be regarded as folklore. The point is that there are some materials that are transmitted orally but are not folkloric in nature, that is, do not deal with matters traditionally considered as folkloric. This is supported by the Clarkes (1963:1) when they say that for the few who do read, folklore is that powerful all pervading portion of knowledge acquired apart from formal education, that is, knowledge gained from the environment. In their statement, the Clarkes mention the environment, which is perceived as the environment where cultural activities and expressions prevail. They further claim that as one of the folk, you experience your own beliefs and practices as perfectly natural and that only the beliefs and practices of the 'other' folk are considered odd. I fully agree with the Clarkes because one's culture is inherently intrinsic to oneself and because of its naturalness, one does not feel uncomfortable when participating in cultural activities, and because of that nothing seems odd about spontaneously participating in cultural activities. But 'other' people may find certain forms of cultural expression strange. That, however, does not mean that one should downplay or neglect one's culture. The remedy to this, particularly in the South African context where indigenous cultures may have been marginalized, is that there should be an awareness and respect for the diversity of cultures. Human culture is made up of many separate cultures, each being different from the others.

The Clarkes (1963:8) present the following definition of folklore:

"Folklore consists of all lore (knowledge, wisdom, action) transmitted by tradition." This implies that people transmit particular forms of knowledge, wisdom through sayings and advice and their actions from generation to generation. These are transmitted orally and they represent and are influenced by tradition. For instance, in the marriage tradition of the amaXhosa, there are many aspects of knowledge, wisdom and action. Words of wisdom are communicated by the elders of the family, and action takes place in the form of dancing and singing. 'Lobola' is one of the traditions included in the marriage process of the amaXhosa. It is not the commercial exchange of a girl as perceived by some who are not knowledgeable about the amaXhosa customs and

traditions. Lobola in its original sense is 'ikhazi', that is, cows are given as a gesture of creating a bond between the families of the bride and the bridegroom. In Xhosa we talk of "ukukhupha ikhazi", that is to take out cows, but these days due to economic pressures money has taken the place of cows.

Okpewho (1992:4) claims that folklore implies more than just literature and in some quarters underplays the literary aspect of what the folk do. I support Okpewho in his claim as the deeds or actions of people may not be literary although in some cases there may be some literary aspects involved. For example, in the case of folksongs, dancing and attire may not be regarded as literature, although the singing that comprises lyrics may be regarded as literature. Okpewho further describes oral literature as "literature delivered by word of mouth".

Finnegan (1992:5) states that folklore is commonly defined in terms of orally transmitted material. Finnegan reaffirms the fact that folklore is oral in nature and that it is responsible for the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation.

Finnegan (1992:12) cites Wonko ( UNESCO:1989a:8) who made the following definition of folklore: "Folklore (or traditional or popular culture) is the totality of traditional based creations of a cultural community expressed by a group of individuals; they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally by imitation or by other means. Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts."

What Wonko is expressing is that folklore is about the philosophy of life of people. He further expresses the fact that there are many forms that reflect the culture of people. He also points the fact that through folklore one's identity and culture is easily recognized and that standards of the people are firmly held and are passed orally and by other means from generation to generation.

Okpewho (1992:4) states that folklore implies more than just literature and in some quarters underplays the literary aspect of what the folk do. I share the same sentiments as Okpewho because the deeds of people may not be literary in nature although there may be some literary aspects involved. For instance, in the case of folksongs, dancing and clothing may not be regarded as literary, although singing, which may comprise lyrics or not is regarded as oral literature. Okpewho further describes oral literature as "literature delivered by word of mouth".

Beuchat (n.d.) in her paper on 'Folklore as literature' quotes Richard Waterman, who defines folklore as follows:

"Folklore is that art form, comprising various types of stories, proverbs, sayings, spells, songs, incantations and other formulas which employ spoken language as its medium." Waterman is then clearly biased in viewing folklore as verbal art, excluding other possible forms.

Beuchat also quotes MacEdward Leach:

"Folklore is the generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs songs, etc; in short the accumulated knowledge of a homogenous unsophisticated people." One could challenge folklore as belonging to an "unsophisticated people". This is a rather old-fashioned view and modern folklorists are at pains to emphasize that folklore forms are found in all societies, traditional and modern, and at all levels of sophistication.

It is clear that Leach's definition is wider than Waterman's in that he mentions the accumulated knowledge of a homogenous people who have not lost their traditions and customs. He does not narrow it down to simply the verbal art forms.

Both Waterman and Leach therefore acknowledge great variety in folklore forms.

J. Russel Reaver and George W. Boswell (1962:11) in their work **Fundamentals of Folk Literature** give a more acceptable description of what folklore could comprise. They highlight the fact that folklore is intimately linked to an oral tradition. They say: "Too frequently folklore is concerned for the most part with outmoded survivals of earlier periods.... (Yet even the modern countries, any modern people) is full of folklore, for folklore is traditional belief, literature, exaggeration, knowledge and skills orally conceived or transmitted from one generation to the next or disseminated among the members of the same generation. It is preserved in the memories of the people. Its indispensability is unwritten tradition."

Reaver and Boswell's definition is thus far more satisfying than the others. Folklore does not concern only traditional folk. Modern folk have folklore too. Modern folk also have traditional beliefs and participate in customary activities. Most of its norms and values emanate from customs and traditions. Modern folk also possess knowledge and skills that they have inherited from their fore-bearers and these are preserved in the memories of people and transmitted orally when necessary.

According to Reaver and Boswell (1962:11), folklore can be divided into four main types, namely:

### **1. The Action type:**

This involves dances, that is, bodily movements of performers and sometimes of the audience. Gestures, practical jokes, games, mime, religious and other ceremonies are also involved in this type. A good example is that of ritual ceremonies where action such as singing, dancing and the actual practicing of the ritual takes place.

### **2. The Science type:**

This type involves all beliefs, ideas, folk philosophy, myth, wisdom, prophecies, cures and remedies. Each folk have its own beliefs, ideas and folk philosophy. To discredit any of these would be unacceptable. One should not be deprived of one's right to exercise one's beliefs. Cures and remedies, particularly those associated with traditional religion also play a role. "Amagqirha" or traditional healers have a place in Xhosa society. There are cures that can only be performed by them and remedies that are only known by them.

### **3. Linguistic Folklore:**

This entails the study of speech, phonology, dialect phrases, curses, jokes, incantations, blessings, idioms, proverbs and riddles. Each nation has its own language, which it uses to relate its experiences. One would easily understand a joke if it is told in one's own language and the same applies to all other linguistic expressions.

#### **4. Folk Literature:**

This constitutes the “ aristocratic type” of folklore and would cover a vast area. In folk literature we have legends, tales, epics, drama, songs, ballad etc. These are replete with traditional material. Folk literature is passed from generation to generation through language. Human experiences in literary form are transmitted from generation to generation. One could obviously challenge the position of forms such as proverbs, idioms and riddles in Type 3. They could ostensibly also be considered as ‘literary’ in nature.

Folksongs, the focus of this study, can be accommodated in more than one type because they feature not only in one type.

A slightly different way of typifying folklore forms is the following. It corresponds in part with Reaver and Boswell’s typology, but there are also differences. The following four categories can be distinguished: 1) Oral Literature, 2) Social folk customs, 3) Performing folk art, 4) Material Culture.

##### 1. Oral Literature:

Oral Literature is one of the most important categories of folklore. As the name indicates, there are literary forms that at least originally, only knew an oral form. These forms were dependent on being transmitted orally from generation to generation. This was the case before, and still is the case in illiterate societies. As these societies were introduced to writing, it was natural that these old forms were put into print. That is why it is common nowadays to find original oral literature in writing. This is also the case in Xhosa society. This does not detract from the importance of oral literature. Even today many of these forms are still transmitted orally. The folktale tradition amongst the amaXhosa is a good example, even if it is restricted to rural areas these days.

What is important is that in most societies oral tradition paved the way for written tradition. Oral forms can therefore be seen as forerunners of modern literature. The roots of the people can be traced in these oral forms. It is clear that oral forms are still in existence, and that oral literature constitutes one important category of folklore. One could distinguish between prose and poetry. Under prose we have myths, legends, folktales, fables and historical narratives. These are often called narrative prose. Non-narrative forms of prose like proverbs, idioms and riddles are accommodated here. Both these types of prose could at times be didactic in nature. Under poetry we have lyrical poetry dealing with folksongs and dramatical or praise poetry. Poetry could also be didactic.

##### 2. Social folk customs:

The emphasis here is on group interaction rather than individual skills. It has to do with traditions and customs as they are revealed by social norms of behaviour. Social folk custom is often connected to the rites de passage of the individual, like birth, initiation, marriage and death. These traditions are bound together by folk beliefs and these folk beliefs may even include and be informed by superstition. Various kinds of religious expression can be accommodated here. Whenever a group meet for a social gathering, folk singing and dancing usually take place.