

THE XHOSA *UMRHUBHE* MOUTHBOW: AN EXTRAORDINARY MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

by

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Introduction

In the late 1970s a vinyl LP disc was published with recordings by David Marks of the Mpondo Xhosa musician Madosini Manqina [CD track 1]. The disc included several recordings of an unnamed musical instrument, referred to by Marks on the record sleeve as a 'home-made Jew's harp'¹. The music produced by this instrument was a two-part overlapping polyphony, like a wind instrument accompanied by an overtone instrument – a musical bow of some sort. When I began work at the Catholic Lumko Pastoral Institute, situated then at old Lumko Mission near Lady Frere in the rural Thembu Xhosa area, I set about trying to find the instrument, to see if anyone in that



area could play it. The most likely candidate was *umrhubhe*, a small musical bow which sounded like the accompanying instrument on the recordings. Many girls and young women still played *umrhubhe* in that area at that time – one could sometimes see a young woman carrying *umrhubhe* wedged onto her head-dress. I took a tape copy of the Madosini recordings, and played them for people, to find out if they knew what it was. “*Umrhubhe nomlozi*” I was told: *umrhubhe* with whistling. In time I found several women who could perform *umrhubhe nomlozi*, some who lived in Ngqoko Village, two kilometres from Lumko, and others further afield: hence this article.

Figure 1. A girl playing *umrhubhe*, at Sikhwankqeni, near Lumko, 1980.

¹ I heard the Marks LP played by Andrew Tracey, Director of ILAM, who expressed a keen interest in identifying the instrument.

The *umrhubhe* musical bow

Umrhubhe is an instrument of simple construction: a small wooden bow, strung most often with brass wire. *Umrhubhe* is played by friction – rubbing the string with a reed or scraped stick, and using the mouth as a resonator. Seeing the instrument, the outsider was not likely to expect much from it. Nevertheless it was successful both with and without the whistling, as a solo instrument and for accompanying singers, even a fairly large number.

Existing literature on *umrhubhe*

Percival R. Kirby (1968: 239-42, photo plates 68/9) writes on the *umrhubhe* mouth bow type. He identifies two types saying, the instrument consists of a curved arc of stiff wood from the tips of which a string of wire, fibre, or rush is strained. Alternatively it is made from a length of hollow river-reed, or hollow piece of *umsenge* wood (*Cussonia spicata*), into one end of which a short piece of thin pliable rod is inserted. A string of vegetable fibre or twisted rush is fixed to the lower end of the reed, and to the tip of the thin rod, which is thereby made to curve. The string, after being rubbed with the juice of a leaf, is 'bowed' by a piece of thin mealie stalk held *beneath* it². The mouth acts as a resonator, and the string is stopped by the first finger of the left hand (239).

Kirby's plate 68A has photographs of this (the alternative) compound form, which Kirby found used by the Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi. The first (simpler) type, Kirby says, is "now found only among the Pondo. It undoubtedly represents the earlier form." He adds: "The Pondo call their instrument *umqunge*, and the Xhosa and Zulu name theirs *umrube*" (spellings and italics as in original). The Mpondo instrument, "*umqunge*", is shown on plate 68B. Plate 69 shows a Swazi performer playing the compound form of the instrument. Kirby says he "heard the Swazi instrument called *utiyane* or *ipiano* (sic)" (*ibid.*).

Kirby also writes about a Zulu performer whom he heard and gives a score transcription (239) written in treble clef (a) and bass clef (b), and then says about the music represented on the two lines, "(a) Harmonics resonated by the mouth and throat. These are relatively weak in sound. (b) Fundamentals sounded strongly by the mealie-stalk 'bow.'" Kirby makes no mention of the whistling technique in connection with the *umrhubhe* type. However, describing how an elderly Ndebele man played the *isitontolo*, a braced mouth-bow played by plucking, he says, "In playing, the old man's lips, which were very elastic, almost encircled the barrel of the instrument, and he added to his performance by whistling through the sides of his mouth" (234). Kirby mentions that *isitontolo* is a Zulu name of the instrument; the Zulus "... also occasionally call the instrument *isiqomqomana*"³. Kirby does not describe the whistling, its tone quality, or

² Kirby's plate 69 shows the player holding the stalk beneath the string, but his plate 68B shows the player holding the stalk above the string.

³ In 1982 I recorded the elderly Mr Banginadawo Mpanza playing *isiqomqomana*, near Nongoma (on CD 2 of Dargie 2003).

whether the performer whistled any particular melody.

Kirby describes a number of musical bows, among them a variety of mouth-bows used by different peoples. The names of these bows are of interest and will be discussed in more detail below. The mouth-bow studied in this article is called by the people of the Lady Frere district *umrhubhe*. This name, according to Kirby, is used for the instrument by the Xhosa and the Zulu, whereas the Mpondo call it *umqunge*. Another type of mouth-bow, made usually of a hollow river-reed, fitted with a string of sinew, hair or fibre and played by plucking with a plectrum, is called by the Xhosa *inkinge*. This bow, Kirby tells us, is also called *inkinge* by the Mpondo, but by the Zulu it is called *umqangala* or *umqengele* (220).

Two recent articles by South African academics are of particular interest. The group Amapondo brought the bow player Madosini back to Cape Town with them after they located her in Mpondoland⁴. In 1998 they performed with her, and produced the CD *Madosini* (1998). Sazi Dlamini took the opportunity to interview her and wrote an article (Dlamini 2004) based on that interview. Madosini had not been to school, but she was thoroughly educated in the traditional way. Dlamini worked with her not only with great sympathy, understanding and respect, but also with the skill born of his own acquaintance with traditional education and, of course, his deep knowledge of the language. At his prompting she goes into great detail about the physical processes of resonating the overtones of *umrhubhe*. She explains the significance of playing *umrhubhe* in the upbringing and education of a young girl of the Mpondo people. *Umrhubhe* is far more than a toy or source of amusement or self-delectation. Playing it helps the girl into her role as a woman of her people. It is an entry point to traditional education. The method of learning *umrhubhe*, typical of the acquisition of musical skill and knowledge and the learning of songs, is by observation and imitation. This is more than just a system of learning. It is a way of learning respect and admiration for the traditional teachers. Mastery of the *umrhubhe* gives the player a status, a position in the society of girls and women. Clearly *umrhubhe* has a special significance, something which the external observer may very easily miss. Maybe it is this significance which in part explains why her art of playing *umrhubhe* reaches the heights which it does.

The whistling technique is not discussed by Madosini in her interview with Dlamini, nor are the ways of structuring the songs. However, Madosini points clearly to the onomatopoeic origin of the name *umrhubhe*. She describes the scraping sound of playing *umrhubhe* as *ukugruzula*, a word built around the consonant *ru* (or *rhu*) which imitates the scraping sound⁵. Incidentally, Madosini, although an Mpondo, calls her mouth-bow *umrhubhe* and not *umqunge*. Her *umrhubhe* is exactly like those used in Ngqoko, the simpler type which Kirby suggests 'undoubtedly represents the earlier form'.

⁴ The members of the music group Amapondo also heard the Madosini recordings at ILAM and went looking for her in their Mpondoland home area.

⁵ This reinforces my suggestion of the derivation of the name in Dargie 1997: 13.

The second author, Luvuyo Dontsa of Walter Sisulu University, Umtata, in his article (2008) mentions the techniques of teaching the instrument "... focusing on its origins, distribution, craftsmanship, handling, bowing, sound-production, resonating and whistling" (177). His article carefully describes his methods of teaching *umrhubhe* to his students, and their success in playing the instrument. The article is notable for the care taken in describing construction methods and teaching/learning methods he used. Dontsa also teaches ensemble playing of *imirhubhe*. In a section entitled "Resonating and whistling techniques" Dontsa describes the technique of holding and bowing the bow saying,

The instrument also produces melodies that are amplified by the resonating mouth. When the students are able to use the mouth as a resonator, whistling lessons are introduced. Whistling technique is achieved by either blowing or sucking the air while bowing the instrument. A melody is sometimes created as a result of the combination of the whistling and the harmonics as they are resonated by the mouth, and the fundamentals that are produced as a result of the touch-and-release technique of the string (184).

Dontsa's article is a convincing attempt to show the value of *umrhubhe* for teaching and learning traditional music, and for promoting understanding of the culture of the people of its origin.

Instrument names and San origins

I recorded a bow exactly like the Xhosa *umrhubhe* played by a young Zulu woman near Nongoma in 1981⁶. She called the bow *umqangala*, and she played it not by friction, but by tapping the string with a light reed. To the names *umrhubhe*, *umqunge*, *umqangala* and *umqengele* must be added the term *umqangi*. This name is given in the Lady Frere district to a certain type of beetle which boys impale on a thorn, and then hold in front of the mouth as it tries frantically to fly away, buzzing loudly. Using the mouth, a boy will amplify the overtones of the buzzing sound. *Umqangi* was also a word used by the overtone singer, Nowayilethi Mbizweni of Ngqoko to describe one of her styles of *umnqokolo* overtone singing. She called this style, which clearly imitates the playing of the *umrhubhe*, using two fundamental tones a whole tone apart, *umnqokolo ngomqangi*. There are therefore the following very similar terms: *umqangala*, *umqengele*, *umqunge* and *umqangi*.

Instrument names are not used consistently among traditional people in recent times. Kirby has told us that the *umrhubhe* has even been called *ipiano* among the Swati. It seems there is good ground for thinking that *umqangi*, *umqunge*, *umqangala* and *umqengele* may all be applied to the same instrument, which is also called *umrhubhe*. If one takes the onomatopoeic quality of the words into consideration, there is perhaps more than a hint that *umqangi*, or *umqunge*, or the diminutive forms of these names,

⁶ On CD 1 of Dargie 2003.

umqangala and *umqengele*, are names applied to the instrument when it is played by tapping, as with the *umqangala* I recorded in 1981. The fricative *rh* in *umrhubhe* reflects the sound of the bow played by friction. This discussion may seem like irrelevant hair-splitting, except that all these terms use KhoiSan consonants: *umrhubhe* uses the guttural fricative *rh*, the others all use the palatal click *q*. These may be indications rather than proof, but it is surely of interest to try to pin-point the origins of the instrument, and especially the origins of the playing techniques used. In Ngqoko, *umrhubhe* is always played by friction. But in Hogsback in 1996 I was able to record and video a Xhosa woman, Mrs Evelina Mokwena, playing the same instrument by both 'bowing' and tapping⁷. The instrument was *umrhubhe*, made exactly as in Ngqoko, but Mrs Mokwena called it *inkinge*. *Inkinge* is in fact another instrument, the plucked mouth-bow described by Kirby, but which was also called *umqangala* or *umqungele* by the Zulu people he worked with. In Ngqoko and elsewhere the term *inkinge* is applied to instruments which are not the true *inkinge*. In Ngqoko the boys' bow type instrument *ikatari* is often called *inkinge*. Members of the group Amampondo, who brought Madosini to Cape Town, called a musical bow of mine *nkinge*: this must have referred either to *uhadi* or *umrhubhe*, as at that time I had no *inkinge*⁸. All this means that it is not easy to get to the original names of instruments. But it seems that the indications are still clear: *umrhubhe/umqangi* by whatever name probably has a San ancestry. The people of the Lady Frere district, who lived in close contact with the San people of Madoor in the first half of the 19th century⁹, undoubtedly absorbed cultural influences from those people, almost certainly including instrumental and singing techniques.

***Umrhubhe* players in the Lumko area**

In the villages of Sikhwankqeni and Ngqoko there were a number of girls and women who could play *umrhubhe*. It was primarily a girls' instrument, but many women remembered it very well from their younger days. I did not find any men or boys who played the instrument.

One of the women was the late Nofinishi Dywili, the leading *uhadi* player of Ngqoko, and one of the most important song leaders in the village. Enquiring after *uhadi*, I had 'discovered' Nofinishi in 1980, at a feast at Lumko. She was a mine of information and a most accomplished musician. I had the good fortune to record her and work with her intermittently until her death in 2002. She could play the *umrhubhe*, but did not specialize in it, never playing it to be recorded by me. In my early years at Lumko I recorded a number of different girls of both villages, occasionally playing solo but usually accompanying group singing. But none of them knew the whistling technique. I discussed this with Nofinishi, and was delighted to hear from her that her

⁷ On CD Dargie 2001.

⁸ Reported by "Rose" in *Vula* magazine (*Vula*, undated, 7).

⁹ As evidence for the close contact between the Thembu of the Glen Grey District (the area around Lady Frere and the San people of Madoor, see Stow (1905: 169); Stanford (1958: 45-48).

daughter, Nongangekho Dywili¹⁰, knew *umrhubhe nomlozi*. Nongangekho needed time to practise before I could record her, but I obtained some excellent recordings in the end (audio tapes Dargie, 1984, 1985)

In 1989 several musicians in Ngqoko formed themselves into the Ngqoko Traditional Xhosa Music Ensemble – the “Ngqoko Group” for short. The group, usually comprised of 10 to 14 members, included Nofinishi and Nongangekho. However, in the 1990s another woman came forward who could play *umrhubhe*. This was Nogcinile Yekani, who has great expertise in the instrument. Her whistling technique proved to be much more developed than was Nongangekho’s.

Thus one may distinguish three main methods of playing *umrhubhe* in the Lumko area. The first is to play the bow without whistling. The second is to play with Nongangekho’s style of whistling. And the third is Nogcinile’s style, which includes both a whistling technique and also the use of vocalising while playing the bow.

Some special Thembu music techniques

The Thembu are one of the sub groups of the Xhosa who have unique music techniques. Mrs Amelia Nosilence Matiso was a retired school-teacher, fluent in English, who lived in Ngqoko, a Thembu village. She was one of the people who were extremely helpful to me in my research there. One day in 1985, after I had been recording a group of performers at the home of Nofinishi Dywili, the renowned *uhadi* player and song leader, as we left the performance house Mrs Matiso gave me the basic ‘rule’ of Xhosa music. “Xhosa people,” she said, “like to put salt into their songs.”

Putting salt into songs, to give them a more exciting ‘taste’, is done in various ways in Ngqoko:

- (a) It means enrichment of a song through harmony and polyphonic parts. The practice seems to be, as far as possible, not to sing the same as one’s neighbour. This means either to sing the same line as another, but at another pitch level, thereby creating parallel harmony; or to sing another polyphonic part, with different text and melody, and frequently which starts at another point in the cycle. The songs are cyclic, built of short cycles constantly repeating the same cycle of beats and pattern of harmony. Some songs have very many such polyphonic parts, even as many as forty in some songs, and in addition many parts may have their parallel harmony parts. This gives the song a rich texture, and constantly changing patterns as the cycles are repeated over and over. Many of these polyphonic parts are undoubtedly brought into life through constant improvisation of new text lines for songs. The name for these parts in Ngqoko is *izicabo*, a word with a San ancestry¹¹;
- (b) It means putting in ‘rhythm salt’. Songs of Ngqoko are characterised by the use

¹⁰ She later changed her name to Nothembisile Ndlokose. She died in 1998.

¹¹ Dargie (1988: 64-5).

- of a variety of rhythm techniques: cross-rhythms, rhythmic disguise through equalisation of beats, hidden cross-rhythms and delay techniques. There is a constant use of two (or sometimes more) beat systems in the same song, so that down-beats of one pattern serve as up-beats for another. Starting points of the different beat cycles in the same song often do not coincide. Cross-rhythms include varieties of a basic 3-vs-2 pattern; one finds such patterns as 4-vs-3, 10-vs-8, 5-vs-4, 12-vs-13, with practically each song having its own unique pattern¹²;
- (c) It means the use of extraordinary and rare techniques, such as overtone singing, not found in Africa outside the Xhosa area. These techniques, as already noted, are called *umngqokolo* and *umngqokolo ngomqangi*, click words strongly suggesting the San origins of the techniques¹³.

In playing *umrhubhe*, it is also necessary to ‘put in the salt’

Playing *umrhubhe* (see Figure 1)

Umrhubhe is a small bow, strung with wire, the string about half a metre long. Around Lumko the bow wood is from a tree/shrub called *ulizi*, which grows very much like hazel (but without the nuts). These days the wire is usually of brass. In the 1980s players got this wire by heating and straightening out the ankle bangles which used to be common in Xhosa land, but which are now very scarce. *Umrhubhe* is held against the side of the mouth, which acts as resonator. The player bows (scrapes) the string with a cleaned stick or reed (in the player’s right hand in the photographs, figures 1 and 8), touches (or does not touch) the string with the thumb of the left hand in order to raise (or not) the fundamental tone of the string, and shapes the mouth to amplify the desired overtone. In this way the melody can be followed clearly, but at the same time patterns of overtone chords can be heard.

Xhosa music theory and *umrhubhe* – scale and harmony

The Xhosa system is to produce a tonality shift of a whole tone, raising the fundamental (and therefore the patterns of overtone chords) by a whole tone by touching the bow string. Most players touch the string with the thumb nail as shown in the photographs, but some produce the same effect by using the middle finger of the hand holding the bow. The illustration, Figure 2 below shows: a) the fundamental tones (hollow notes) and the overtones (filled in notes), b) the resultant overtone chords and c) the scale.

¹² Dargie (1988: 82-7).

¹³ Dargie (1988: 56-60).

whistled at the same time. The overtones used in the melody are dependent on the fundamentals – the correct fundamental must be used to produce the desired overtone. The whistled tones are independent of the bow fundamentals. The player can whistle even when not ‘bowing’ the bow string. The whistling technique is one way of ‘adding the salt’.

Thomas Johnston’s principles of mouth-bow technique, applied to *umrhubhe*

Johnston(1970) writes about the Tsonga instrument *xizambi*, a mouth-bow with notched stick, played by rubbing a stick across the notches, and resonating the overtones with the mouth¹⁶. Johnston studied the principles of adaptation of songs to the *xizambi*, principles which are also relevant in adapting songs to *umrhubhe*. Johnston makes the following points which also apply to playing *umrhubhe*:

- i) Substitution of weaker bow tones by higher, stronger tones occurs frequently, especially the octave. Figure 4 is an example of this, from the *umtshotsho* (boys’ and girls’ dance) song *Irobhane*. The upper line shows one of the melody lines of the song. This line starts at ‘Voice’, after the double bar. The lower line shows the same line as performed on the *umrhubhe* by Nofirsti Lungisa, a member of the Ngqoko Group. Note how the tone written as D, the last tone of the song line, is moved up an octave by the *umrhubhe* player to a strong position in the *umrhubhe* register.



Figure 4. Substitution of weaker bow tones by higher, stronger tones in the *umtshotsho* (boys’ and girls’ dance) song *Irobhane* [CD track 4].

- ii) Substitution of tones in this way can cause changes in the bow melody compared to the vocal original, such as the introduction of contrary motion in the parts. In the example from *Irobhane* in figure 4, the movement up an octave of the note D not only causes contrary motion relative to the voice part, it also has the effect of making the *umrhubhe* cycle begin before the voice cycle.
- iii) Like *xizambi* players, Xhosa bow players often use the concluding phrase of a song to begin the song, as do singers. In singing this is easy to spot because of the text, but in bow playing this may disguise the beginning of the melody.

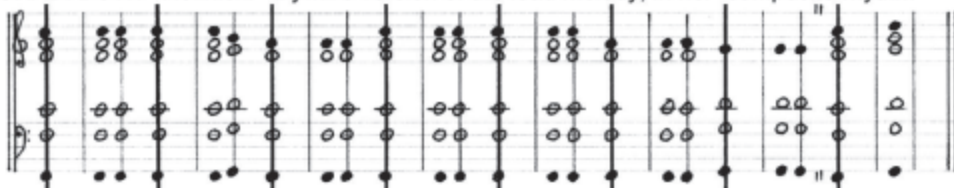
¹⁶ Kirby (1968: 235ff) & plates 66/67); (in Tsonga orthography, *x* represents the consonant written *sh* in English, and is not a click consonant as in Xhosa.)

- iv) Xhosa, like Tsonga, is a tonal language, so Xhosa harmonisation is based on parallel movement of parts which use the same text. This also occurs in bow playing because the bows resonate overtone chords.
- v) As with singers, parallel melodies are regarded as versions of the same melody. The bows are not regarded by Xhosa bow players as playing melodies, but rather as singing texts, the bow tones representing the tones of speech.
- vi) Johnston refers to a bow “tone row” in *xizambi* playing. In playing *umrhubhe*, only two fundamental tones are used, but the same pattern of fundamentals must be used constantly in order to follow the melodic pattern(s).
- vii) In Xhosa music harmonically equivalent intervals include not only the unison, the octave, the 4th and the fifth, as in Tsonga music, but also the 3rd.
- viii) In bow adaptation a voice tone may be difficult to produce, especially when it involves a very rapid change of fundamental. The melody tone may then be omitted or substituted by a near (but of opposite harmony) tone. The following example shows how three different Xhosa bows realise the leader melody of the boys’ and girls’ *umtshotsho* dance song *Nontyolo*. Only the *umrhubhe* is easily able to produce the rapid change of fundamentals necessary to follow the quick melody notes after the sixth pulse line, and the *umrhubhe* player may also omit this rapid change.

UMRHUBE BOW: the title line melody (melody & fundamentals solid, overtones hollow)



UHADI BOW: Nofinishi Dywili's version of the lead melody, in her composite rhythm



KATARI: The boys tend to prefer this rhythm with this instrument the melody is less distinct

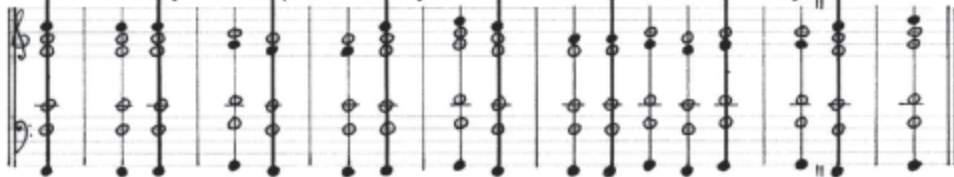


Figure 5. The song *Nontyolo*, as realised by different musical bows.

- ix) The *umrhubhe* player may alter the rhythm pattern of a song, and also the cycle length. The song *Nomkangaye* usually has a cycle length of 9 beats. But in the version accompanied by two *imirhubhe* (shown in transcription in figure 13 below), the bows have changed the cycle length to 8 beats, and the singers adapt to this. In adapting songs to a flowing *umrhubhe* rhythm, Nongangekho Dywili often used equalisation of beats. The transcription example in figure 6 below is taken from the song *UTsiki*, the song for carrying off a girl for marriage. The song is usually sung in a relatively slow, thoughtful way, suited to memories of marriage. However, Nongangekho equalises the original 3+2+3=8 beat pattern to 5 beats. The effect of this is shown in two ways in the transcription, when voice and *umrhubhe* begin on the same beat (Va and Ua), and when they coincide on the first strong beat (Vb and Ub). Nongangekho usually played the song solo at a lively pace, but on one occasion I recorded her accompanying a group of singers. They had great difficulty adjusting to each other, but somehow they managed and kept the song going.



Figure 6. *UTsiki*: sung melody and Nongangekho Dywili's *umrhubhe* version of it.

- x) As with *xizambi*, *umrhubhe* may repeat or extend melody tones when there is a vocal rest, because the player continues to sound the fundamental tone. Short vocal notes may be combined into longer ones. In addition, the *umrhubhe* player may combine two overlapping vocal melodies into one composite melody. This occurs in the example below, Figure 7, from Nongangekho's performance of the song *Irobhane*. The melody in line H is clearly a combination of the melodies of lines L1 and L2.

The image displays a musical score for the song *Irobhane*. It consists of four staves: H (High), Fundamentals, L1, and L2 (Low). The score is organized into a cycle of 12 notes, indicated by the text "Cycle 3+2+2+3+2 = 12" at the top. The notes are represented by black dots on the staves, with curved lines connecting them to show the melody. The H staff is labeled "Composite melody" and the Fundamentals staff is labeled "Fundamentals". The L1 and L2 staves show lower octaves of the melody. The score is written in a style that uses vertical lines to separate the notes, suggesting a specific rhythmic or phrasing structure.

Figure 7. The song *Irobhane*, as performed by Nongangekho Dywili.

The above principles mean in practice that a bow version of a song may be a re-building of the song in a way significantly different from the sung version. It is necessary now to see how the whistling technique fits into the picture.

The whistling technique: *umrhubhe nomlozi*

The usual method of whistling a tune is to purse the lips, and force the breath through the orifice so formed, controlling the pitch by changing the position of the tongue. The lips tend to remain in the same position. One may whistle while breathing in or out. From the photograph at the left of expert bow whistler Nogcinile Yekani, it is clear that whistling while playing the bow cannot be done in the normal way. Instead the air must be forced through the gap between the lips beside the bow stick, and the pitches controlled by use of the tongue. This requires a certain amount of practice. The bow whistler must learn what tones can be easily reproduced and must learn to follow a melody using the available pitches. The more skilled the whistler becomes, the greater possibilities there are to follow.

Whistling while playing *umrhubhe* does not depend on the sounds produced by the bow itself, whether fundamentals or overtones.

It is not possible while whistling to use the mouth at the same time to focus the high overtones, but a skilled player will not lose touch completely with the melody. I have heard, and once recorded, an *umrhubhe* player who while playing the bow, pursed the lips in order to whistle. It is easy to whistle in this way, but it has the effect of closing the mouth to the bow overtones, so that the overtones are almost completely damped. Both Nongangekho Dywili and Nogcinile Yekani whistled through the aperture at the side of the bow, so that both whistling and overtones could be heard through the same aperture.

Nongangekho's technique is not as clear as Nogcinile's. Nogcinile's technique is more advanced. She produces two complete melodies simultaneously in a very special type of polyphony. When she whistles she can no longer resonate the melody overtones so clearly, but the lower overtone patterns may still be heard. The melody is clouded, but is still there in the parallel movement of the overtone chords.¹⁷ In addition, seeing that the whistling produced by someone while playing *umrhubhe* has no connection to the bow fundamentals or overtones, it is perfectly possible to whistle non-harmonic tones and dissonances, and to produce glissandos. In the score of *UTsiki* below (figure 9), whistled glissandos produced by Nongangekho are indicated by wavy lines falling from one written note to the next written note.



Figure 8. Nogcinile Yekani playing *umrhubhe*.

¹⁷ I checked this with Tsolwana Mpayipeli, co-performer and organiser of the Ngqoko Group. He said when Nogcinile whistles, he cannot hear the high bow tones, but he is still able to follow the bow melody through the lower tones. I believe this is because the lower tones reflect the melody in parallel. As for Nogcinile, she is always perfectly aware of the bow (i.e. overtone) melody when she whistles. (Telephone call, 3/6/2011.)

Figure 9. UTsiki, as performed by Nongangekho Dywili [CD track 5].
(In this transcription and those that follow, *w* indicates a whistled tone.)

Nongangekho Dywili's combination technique

Dontsa (2008: 184/5) says: "Whistling technique is achieved by either blowing or sucking the air while bowing the instrument. A melody is sometimes created as a result of the combination of the whistling and the harmonics as they are resonated by the mouth. ..." Of particular relevance here is his comment that a melody can be created by combining whistling and overtones.

The principles of tone substitution which apply to *umrhubhe* overtone melody apply also to whistled melodies, *mutatis mutandis*. Higher whistled tones are more powerful and more penetrating. Achieving a good, clear tone for whistled low notes is not easy. Regarding the structuring of *umrhubhe nomlozi* music, the *umrhubhe* whistlers whom I interviewed all stated that the overtones are used to perform the melodies¹⁸ of the lead singer, and the whistling performs the melodies of the followers.

¹⁸ There is no direct term in Xhosa which means "melodies". The sung parts of a song are called *izicabo*, a word relating to the improvisation of texts. The *umrhubhe* plays the *izicabo*, whether of song leader or followers. So the implied concept is that the *umrhubhe* is singing texts: what the westerner hears as melodies is text lines (*izicabo*) in traditional Thembu thinking (Dargie 1988, 64-6).

However, this does not always work out exactly like that. Nongangekho Dywili, for example, often combined overtones and whistled tones into one melodic pattern. The score example above (Figure 9) shows lines from her performance of the song *UTsiki*. The tones marked with a *w* are whistled tones, the others are the overtones. The transcription layout is designed to show the constant melodic flow, showing how Nongangekho combines overtones and whistled tones into single melodies. The leader part is the overtone melody cycle in the left half of the top line of the score, and is also shown in the constantly repeated falling pattern (with the overtone chord patterns) in line 4 of the score. The whistled tones often begin a follower's melody, which is completed by tones from the leader's melody.

The second example of Nongangekho's style, shown in Figure 10, is the *umtshotsho* dance song *uSitolotolo*. (*Isitolotolo* is the Xhosa name of the Jew's harp, but *uSitolotolo* here is a person's name.) The line H is Nongangekho's leader line. It may be seen how she has constructed this line from the sung leader line, the line marked "voice". Canonic imitation occurs often in Xhosa songs, so perhaps Nongangekho's leader line is already a combination of the leader ("voice") line and a following imitation. In this song, she whistles two complete lines of song followers, the lines L1 and L2. The third follower line shown, L3, consists only of overtones. The tonal identity of lines H and L1 (and the similarity of L2) seems to indicate the use of imitation by the song followers, as hinted at already in line H. Interestingly, line L3 is clearly quite different from the others.¹⁹

¹⁹ Six of Nongangekho Dywili's *umrhubhe* whistling songs, including those referred to in this article and all the other *umrhubhe* songs transcribed here, are on the CD Dargie 2010, with transcriptions in the accompanying handbook. Nongangekho can be seen performing an *umrhubhe* whistling song on the DVD Dargie 2005A.

Bow cycle: 18 (2+2+3+3+2+3+3)

H

Fundamentals

L 1

L 2

L 3

Voice

Cycle 18 (6 x 3)

nde. He S'to-lo-to-lo bu-ya, wen'u-ne-ntomb-e

Cycle 12 (6 x 2)

Clap

Figure 10. *USitolotolo*, as performed by Nongangekho Dywili [CD track 6].

Nogcinile Yekani's polyphonic technique

Nogcinile Yekani, who joined the Ngqoko Group in the middle 1990s, uses a different structural technique from that of Nongangekho Dywili. Nongangekho's technique is primarily the building up of melody by combining overtone and whistling melodies. When Nogcinile whistles with *umrhubhe*, the whistled melody is its own complete polyphonic part, built on the part(s) of the answering singers, and her overtone melody remains a full melody throughout, based on the leader part(s) of the song.

Nogcinile Yekani's technique with *umrhubhe nomlozi* shows perfect control. Her overtone melody is subdued but still there when she whistles, and her whistled melodies are complete sentences. Her solo performance of the song *Nokhaz' intshonga* (Figure

11) illustrates this clearly. The transcription shows the *umrhube* overtone melody and related fundamentals, using pulse notation, in the top two lines. The melody is repeated in normal staff notation in the last line. Five lines show whistled melodies, of which no's 1, 2 and 3 begin at different points in the cycle from the main (i.e. leader) melody. It is not easy to sing while playing *umrhube*. So far I have not heard a performer do so. But Nogcinile vocalises, as shown in the fifth line of the score. The vocalising is most attractive, setting off the other sounds. For some cycles she will concentrate on the overtone melody, and then she goes from one whistling line to another and to the vocalising line ad lib., then back again, and so on.

The image displays a musical score for the song *Nokhaz' intshonga*. It consists of ten staves. The first two staves are labeled 'Umrhube melody' and 'Fundamentals' respectively, using pulse notation (vertical lines with dots) to represent the overtone and fundamental frequencies. The third staff is labeled 'Whistling 1', the fourth 'Whistling 2', the fifth 'Vocalising', the sixth 'Whistling 3', the seventh 'Whistling 4', and the eighth 'Whistling 5'. Each of these staves shows a sequence of notes and rests, with some notes connected by lines, indicating the whistled melodies. The ninth staff is labeled 'Umrhube melody' and shows the main melody in standard musical notation (treble clef, quarter and eighth notes). The score is set in a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 11. The song *Nokhaz' intshonga*, as performed solo by Nogcinile Yekani [CD track 7].

The song *Novazimtsholo* (Figure 12) is performed by Nogcinile with the Ngqoko Group. When she accompanies the group on *umrhubhe* in this song, she usually begins the song and plays a number of cycles solo before the singers join in. The first line of the transcription shows the bow melody line in staff notation, and the third and fourth lines show the same melody in pulse notation together with the pattern of fundamentals. The staff notation shows the bow cycle beginning at the start of the line, but in the pulse notation the cycle (which does not begin on a main beat) starts after the double bar line.

The image shows a musical score for two parts. The top part is labeled 'Umrhubhe melody' and is written on a single staff in 3/4 time. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The bottom part is labeled 'Voice part 1' and is also on a single staff in 3/4 time. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The voice part starts with a double bar line, followed by a series of notes and rests, including some slurs. The two parts are aligned vertically, showing their relative timing.

Figure 12a. *Novazimtsholo umrhubhe* melody and voice part 1

It will be seen that Nogcinile's rhythm contains internal (2-vs-3) cross-rhythms. She whistles several cycles, and also vocalises, as shown in the score. When the singers begin, it is at once clear that their rhythm forms a typical Thembu cross-rhythm pattern with the bow rhythm: 9 sung beats in the same time as 12 bow beats. There are some points of coincidence. The musical effect of this is most attractive, and extremely difficult to imitate, as can be imagined. The singers, in performing this song for an audience, sing very quietly, so that bow and voices are clearly audible.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Novazimtsholo'. It consists of eight staves. The top two staves are labeled 'Umrhubhe melody' and 'Fundamentals'. The third staff is 'Vocalising'. The fourth and fifth staves are 'Whistling 1' and 'Whistling 2'. The bottom three staves are 'Voice part 1', 'Voice part 2', and 'Voice part 3'. The score is written in a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, with repeat signs (double vertical lines) indicating specific sections.

Figure 12b. *Novazimtsholo*, as performed by Nogcinile Yekani and the Ngqoko Group [CD track 8].

Among the rare *umrhubhe* techniques which I found among Ngqoko musicians is the playing of two *imirhubhe* in duet. Nogcinile Yekani taught a number of other women in the Ngqoko group to play *umrhubhe nomlozi*. The final example of her style (Figure 13) is a transcription (here using staff notation) of her and one of her pupils, Nopasile Mvoty, playing an *umrhubhe* whistling duet, accompanying the singing of the other group members. The song is *Nomkangaye*. Nogcinile and Nopasile performed by themselves for a while, and then the singers joined in. In the score, the *umrhubhe* overtone melody and fundamentals, used by both bows, is shown at the top. “Whistle 1” is Nogcinile, who leads. Nopasile, who follows, is “Whistle 2”. Line 4 answers line 3, line 6 answers line 5. Lines 7 to 10 show the singers. Of interest here is that the bows have contracted the usual 9 beat cycle of this song to 8 beats; when the singers join in, they also sing the 8 beat pattern, adapting to the bows. The *imirhubhe* have combined the last two sung lines in the score (lines 9 and 10) to construct their leader line, played using overtones (line 1). The tone G (line 10)

is replaced by the stronger bow tone D'. The whistled lines closely imitate the other sung lines. The pattern of fundamental tones, and therefore the pattern of harmony ("harmonic rhythm"), fits all the song parts, whether overtones, whistled or sung.

The musical score is titled "Umrhubhe duet - melody pattern" and is written for a duet performance. It consists of several staves:

- Umrhubhe duet - melody pattern:** The top two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The upper staff contains a sequence of eighth and quarter notes, while the lower staff contains a sequence of eighth notes.
- Fundamental tones:** A staff in bass clef showing a sequence of eighth notes.
- Whistle 1:** A staff in treble clef showing a sequence of eighth and quarter notes.
- Whistle 2:** A staff in treble clef showing a sequence of eighth and quarter notes.
- Whistle 1:** A staff in treble clef showing a sequence of eighth and quarter notes.
- Whistle 2:** A staff in treble clef showing a sequence of eighth and quarter notes.
- Voice melody patterns:** The bottom four staves, all in treble clef, showing various vocal melody patterns with eighth and quarter notes.

Figure 13. *Nomkangaye*: *umrhubhe* duet performance by Nogcinile Yekani and Nopasile Mvotyo, with the Ngqoko Group [CD track 9].

Conclusion

The main run of *umrhubhe* players in the Lumko area ‘add the salt’ through their lively style and their use of cross-rhythm. Although she often accompanied singers without using the whistling technique, Nongangekho Dywili’s method of *umrhubhe nomlozi* was largely geared to solo performance, equalising rhythms and building melodies by combining overtones and whistling. Nogcinile’s technique demonstrates her polyphonic and rhythmic mastery, her control enabling her to perform solo and with singers. Nogcinile Yekani has successfully taught her *umrhubhe nomlozi* technique to a number of other women of the Ngqoko Group²⁰. Five of the other women in the photo have learned it from her.



Figure 14. The Ngqoko Group, 31 March 2005. From left, Nogcinile Yekani, Nopasile Mvoty, Nolineti Ntese, Nokhaya Mvoty, Tsolwana Mpayipeli, Nosomething Ntese, Nofirsti Lungisa, Maxanjano Mangaliso. In front: Nowayilethi Mbizweni, kneeling with the drum.

At Walter Sisulu University *umrhubhe* playing is being promoted and at Fort Hare University Music Department, the Ngqoko musicians have been brought several times to teach the music students. Lecturer Jonathan Ncozana has mastered his version of *umrhubhe nomlozi*, and conducts bow workshops with *uhadi*, *umrhubhe* and *ikatari* for schools and groups in the area. Professor Bernhard Bleibinger is working with Ncozana on using other methods of making *imirhubhe*, especially with different materials for the string, in order to experiment with the sound of the instrument. Thus indications are that interest in *umrhubhe* will persist.

²⁰ Nogcinile Yekani and some of her “pupils” are seen performing on the DVD Dargie 2005B.

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Songs on accompanying audio CD (Volume 9 number 1)

All these songs have been referred to in the article, and 2-9 have been transcribed.

1. Madosini: *umrhubhe* whistling song, from *Marks 1975*.
2. Nontyolo: *umrhubhe* bow solo, Sikhwankqeni, 1980.
3. Nontyolo: as on track 2, but at half speed.
4. Irobhane: *umrhubhe* whistling song – Nongangekho Dywili.
5. UTsiki: *umrhubhe* whistling song – Nongangekho Dywili.
6. USitolotolo: *umrhubhe* whistling song – Nongangekho Dywili.
7. Nokhaz' intshonga: *umrhubhe* whistling song – Nogcinile Yekani.
8. Novazimtsholo: *umrhubhe* whistling song – Nogcinile Yekani and the Ngqoko Group.
9. Nomkangaye: *umrhubhe* whistling duet – Nogcinile Yekani and Nopasile Mvoty, with the Ngqoko Group.