

## “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”

From Independent Spirit to Political Mobilization

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Bennetta Jules-Rosette & David B. Coplan

“Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”  
From Independent Spirit  
to Political Mobilization\*

Lord, bless Africa  
Blot out all its wickedness  
And its transgressions and sins,  
And bless us.  
 (“Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”,  
Enoch Sontonga-Samuel Mqhayi, 1927)

Mourning is a solemn pause to grieve, to commemorate the past, and to acknowledge new hopes for the present and future. It collapses cultural time consciousness into an unfolding pathway of memory. Part of the mourning process involves the reconciliation of loss through a redemptive blessing that is epitomized by the powerful and multivalent hymn “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa). The hymn, also known as the African national anthem, provides an open field of memory work at the intersection between public religion and popular culture.

Traces of cultural objects move across borders and boundaries from villages to towns, from territories to states, creating landscapes of memory. Anthropologists and oral historians have recently become fascinated with how songs, rumors, fantastic tales, and images become enshrined in a mobile African popular culture taken for granted by many of those who partake of

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it<sup>1</sup>. The objects circulating in this mobile popular culture mute the boundaries between sacred and secular, as well as public and private social life. Bogumil Jewsiewicki's (1996: 113-142) incisive work on the iconic images of Patrice Lumumba in popular Congolese paintings exemplifies this movement across variegated landscapes of memory. Research on popular painting raises the question of how cultural images are generated, framed, and remembered. In music, as with painting, the framing of images through lyrics, harmonies, and melodies freezes historic moments, in what Johannes Fabian (1996: 227-235) refers to as a remembrance of the present<sup>2</sup>. Each iteration of a song is connected to the community that performs it and that imbues the song with a distinctive, historically contextualized social and political meaning.

According to David Coplan (1985:46), "'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' has come to symbolize more than any other piece of expressive culture the struggle for African unity and liberation in South Africa". Yet the song's popularity extends beyond the borders of South Africa and the confines of the liberation struggle that it so actively animated. Constructed in the form of a blessing and a dirge, the hymn offers a message of unity and uplift and an exhortation to act morally and spiritually on behalf of the African continent. A closer examination of the variations in the hymn and the contexts of its performance, however, reveals the complexities of its messages as they are presented in different performative spaces. The image of Africa and the very nature of the blessing may be called into question relative to the groups performing the song and their intended audiences. The field of song becomes a mutable "gestalt" that changes not only across linguistic and cultural groups and performance frames, but also within a single performance as "Nkosi" moves from the blessing preambles to its closing exhortations (Gurwitsch 1964: 144-146; Schutz 1964: 172-174). In this regard, it is possible to question whether the first printed version of the song constitutes the "original", and to examine the relationship of this text to the various settings in which "Nkosi" has been performed.

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1. J. VANSINA (1985: 70) emphasizes the importance of analyzing formal texts such as anthems and praise poetry as reflections of the communities in which they develop. L. WHITE (1990: 418-438) applies a similar approach to rumor. In the study of music and memory, these concerns may be traced to M. HALBWACHS (1939: 136), who describes music as a critical aspect of the social construction of "collective memory". Music is woven into the symbolic universe and stock of shared knowledge that informs individual experiences (SCHUTZ 1964: 162-164; BERGER & LUCKMANN 1966: 102-103).
  2. J. FABIAN's 1996 study of popular Congolese painting via the work of Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu provides another example of the social construction of memory through cultural objects. Although FABIAN (1996: 276) rejects the notion of collective memory as a theoretical approach to the interpretation of painting, he demonstrates how memory is socially constructed through images.

## Echoes and Landscapes of Memory

Songs are contextualized through their histories, performance arenas, and the presence of other songs and rituals performed in sequence with them. Analyzing a song as a single tune and text in terms of its fixed verse structure stabilizes it in a Western format and establishes the song as a cultural object about which claims of authorship and authenticity may be made. In 1897, Enoch Sontonga, a teacher at a Methodist mission school in Johannesburg, composed "Nkosi" as part of a repertoire of songs prepared for the students in his school (Jabavu 1949: 56-58; Coplan 1985: 44-45). He wrote the opening stanza of the song in Xhosa, and the song was first performed publicly in 1899 at the ordination ceremony for a Tsonga pastor, Reverend Mboweni. Some sources describe Sontonga as Xhosa, while others suggest that he was Tsonga from the north of Transvaal (Jabavu 1949: 56-58). In any event, he used Xhosa as a lingua franca that appealed broadly to the local black elite. In 1927, renowned Xhosa poet Samuel E. Mqhayi added seven more verses to "Nkosi". The original song reflects patterns of both Methodist hymnody and African praise singing. Historical records do not indicate whether the tune already existed in the form of a vernacular piece that may have inspired Sontonga. Nevertheless, he took the step of combining a generic Methodist harmony and concept of redemption with an African blessing. The invocation of the Holy Spirit (*Moya*) combines fundamentalist Protestantism with African traditions of ritual cleansing (Turner 1968: 21-22). This combination has led to the song's widespread and deep-seated appeal across a variety of religious and secular communities and opens up an ethnotheological discussion about notions of life, death, blessing, and salvation.

In 1923, Solomon Plaatje, a founding member of the African National Congress (ANC) arranged for the recording of "Nkosi" in London. The song was performed at the South African Native National Congress in 1912 (Coplan 1985: 46). Then the ANC adopted it as an official hymn in 1925. In various iterations, the hymn punctuated the ANC's victories and struggles as it traveled across borders into exile. As the national anthem of South Africa since 1994, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" has been published officially in Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, English, and Afrikaans and has been abridged (Coplan 1985: 46). The original Sontonga-Mqhayi version appears below<sup>3</sup>.

3. The format and punctuation of the original text of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", as published in 1904 by the Lovedale Press, has been preserved. This version includes the two verses that were part of E. SONTONGA's original song. It is likely that the sheet music was available to various African religious and social organizations at the turn of the century. J. MUSHAWATU points out the "Nkosi" in the Xhosa version translates as "Lord", while "Mwari" translates into English as "God". This difference may also be based on missionary transliteration of the Bible.

***Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*** (Enoch Sontonga-Samuel E. Mqhayi Version), ***God Bless Africa*** (Original Lovedale English Translation).

*Nkosi, sikelel' iAfrika*  
*Malupakam' upondo lwayo;*  
*Yiva imitandazo yetu.*  
 (Lord, bless Africa  
 May her horn rise high up;  
 Hear Thou our prayers and bless us.)

**Chorus**

*Yihla Moya, yihla Moya*  
*Yihla Moya Oyingcwele*  
 (Descend O Spirit  
 Descend, O Holy Spirit)  
*Sikelela iNkosi zetu;*  
*Zimkumbule umDali wazo;*  
*Zimoyike zezimhlouele,*  
*Azisikelele.*  
 (Bless our chiefs;  
 May they remember their Creator;  
 Fear Him and revere Him,  
 That He may bless them.)

*Sikelel' amadol' esizwe,*  
*Sikelela kwa nomlisela*  
*Ulitwal' ilizwe ngomonde,*  
*Uwusikilele.*  
 (Bless the public men,  
 Bless also the youth  
 That they may carry the land with patience,  
 and that Thou mayst bless them.)

*Sikelel' amakosikazi;*  
*Nawo onk'amanenekazi;*  
*Pakamisa wonk'umtinjana*  
*Uwusikilele.*  
 (Bless the wives;  
 And also all young women;  
 Lift up all the young girls  
 And bless them.)

*Sikelela abafundisi*  
*Bemvaba zonke zelilizwe;*  
*Ubatwese ngoMoya Wako*  
*Ubasikelele.*

(Bless the ministers  
of all the churches of this land;  
Endue them with Thy Spirit  
And bless them.)

*Sikelel' ulimo nemfuyo;*  
*Gzota zonk'indlala nezifo;*  
*Zalisa ilizwe nempilo*  
*Ulisikelele.*

(Bless agriculture and stock raising;  
Banish all famine and diseases;  
Fill the land with good health and bless it.)

*Sikelel' amalinga etu*  
*Awomanyana nokuzaka,*  
*Awemfundo nemvisiswano*  
*Uwasikelele.*

(Bless our efforts of union and self-uplift, Of education and mutual  
understanding  
And bless them.)

*Nkosi Sikelel, Afrika; Cima bonk' ubugwenza bayo*  
*Neziggito, Nezono zayo*  
*Uwazikelele.*

(Lord, bless Africa  
Blot out all its wickedness  
And its transgressions and sins,  
And bless us.)

Sontonga's original song was a plea for help and blessing in an oppressive environment in need of mourning and healing. (See Figure One page 348.) As part of South Africa's rising black elite at the turn of the century, Sontonga wished to impart a sense of hope and dignity to his students. Although the descriptions of Sontonga's piece refer to it as "melancholy" and almost dirge-like (Coplan 1985: 46), this impression emerges from both Sontonga's social discontent and his efforts to bring together two musical and cultural traditions with a feeling of solemnity and reverence. The moderate political tone of the original song may also have expressed some self-censorship on Sontonga's part.

From 1890 to 1898, Orpheus M. McAdoo, a talented African-American who had attended Hampton Institute in Virginia, toured South Africa with a musical ensemble revived from Frederick Loudin's Fisk Jubilee Singers (Erlmann 1991: 24-27; Martin 1999: 85-89). McAdoo, who had been a member of a quintet consisting of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, formed his own group called the Virginia Jubilee Singers in 1889. The group's South African tour coincided with the emergence of a worldwide interest in black spirituals and minstrelsy as popular forms of entertainment. From

## Nkosi Sikelel' i Africa

Enoch Sontonga

Soprano

Alto

Soprano

Alto

- |         |   |  |
|---------|---|--|
| 1.      | Nkosi, sikelel' iAfrica<br>Makupakam upoado lwayo;<br>Yiva imitandazo yetu<br>Uzisikelele | Lord, bless Africa<br>May her horn rise high up;<br>Hear Thou our prayers<br>And bless us.                   |
| Chorus: | Yihla Moya, yihla Moya,<br>Yihla Moya Oyingowele.   | Descend, O Spirit<br>Descend, O Holy Spirit  |
| 2.      | Sikelela inkosi zetu<br>Zimkumule umDali wazo.<br>Zimoyike zazimhlouele,<br>Azisikelele.  | Bless our chiefs.<br>May they remember their Creator,<br>Fear Him and revere Him,<br>That He May bless them. |

Figure One: “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica”, The Bantu National Anthem, by Enoch Sontonga, original sheet music from Lovedale Sol-fa-Leaflets, No. 17, 1904.

France to Australia and South Africa, African-American singers, dancers, and performers, as well as white Americans in black face, began to tour the world marketing this new genre of popular culture. The Virginia Jubilee Singers performed harmonic, four-part singing based on a repertoire of spirituals and songs of uplift (Martin 1999: 87)<sup>4</sup>. Although the form of music that the Jubilee singers introduced was new to South Africa, it contained elements of call-response and rhythmic patterns that easily could be homologated onto "traditional" African tunes.

McAdoo's controversial tour overlapped with the beginning of the Boer war, the arrival of an influx of black and white American Protestant missionaries, and the stirring of a heightened sense of political consciousness among South Africa's emerging black elite of clerks, teachers, and professionals. The messages of the Virginia Jubilee Singers echoed the social aspirations of the local black elite and clergymen, some of whom, including African journalist and politician John Tengo Jabavu, attended Orpheus McAdoo's early performances in Cape Colony. McAdoo's troupe caused civil unrest when he housed them at whites-only hotels, making a claim for honorary European status and challenging South African racial conventions (Erlmann 1991: 42).

The Virginia Jubilee Singers' tour coincided with the expansion of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in South Africa. The church welcomed McAdoo's presence as a valuable source of contact with the United States and a vehicle for reviving its liturgy. Gifted African students such as Chartotle Manye and Simon Hoffa Sinamela managed to obtain scholarships to study in the United States through these networks. Sinamela also formed a group of African Jubilee Singers who performed in South Africa and abroad. Veit Erlmann (1991: 49) reports that Sinamela produced a series of hymns, including "Kgoshi Sekukuni", that combined the Jubilee spirituals and songs of uplift with local forms of oratory and praise poetry<sup>5</sup>. The result was a novel form of syncretic music that went beyond the hymns of church composers and performers such as Sinamela and Manye, and began to influence the general public and its collective representations. Both the musical form and the content of Jubilee-style songs conveyed messages of spiritual and social protest masked under religious decorum and

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4. D.-C. MARTIN (1999: 85-88) describes Orpheus McAdoo's South African tour with the Virginia Jubilee singers during the 1890s. He points out that the term "Jubilee" has often been confused with Queen Victoria's jubilee celebrated in 1887 in commemoration of the emancipation of the South African slaves. In the American context, the term "jubilee" was used to describe the spiritual songs of uplift such as those performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and McAdoo's troupe. The Jubilee tradition influenced the harmonic and melodic structure of South African religious music. See also ERLMANN (1991: 24-27).
  5. The Jubilee songs continued to influence South African religious and secular music well after Orpheus McAdoo's departure. The African Jubilee Singers founded by Simon Hoffa Sinamela added new variations to the music and increased its popularity (ERLMANN 1991: 48-49).



solemnity. The melancholic and dirge-like format characteristic of Enoch Sontonga's compositions, including "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", were products of this syncretic cultural combination in a time of changing social consciousness and increasing cosmopolitanism among South Africa's black elite. AME Bishop Henry Turner's tour of South Africa in 1898 provided further exposure for this nascent liturgical music, which both fascinated and repelled South African authorities, who moved to censor AME activities in Cape Colony, Transvaal, and Orange Free State at the time of Turner's tour.

It is likely that Sontonga was involved in the African Methodist Episcopal Church's movement for social uplift and justice in British South Africa. In 1899, at the time of the outbreak of the Boer War, the conflicts between AME missionaries, who were both African and African-American, and the United Free Church of Scotland, which ran the Lovedale Institute, reached their peak (Page 1982: 180-182). Although the Lovedale Institute was the first school to offer a teacher training program for Africans, it followed a strictly segregated vocational model with close control over African students and the ideas to which they were exposed. The AME missionaries were considered to be "evangelical Pan-Africanists" responsible for inciting religious protest, schism, and disruption in the local Protestant churches (*ibid.*: 191). Although these allegations appear to be exaggerated, the AME Church provided a forum from which African ministers organized politically in Cape Colony, and the clergy's reputation for religious dissent and political radicalism resulted in the ultimate barring of AME missions in Transvaal and Orange Free State (*ibid.*: 190-192)<sup>6</sup>. The sense of lament emerging in the final line of "Nkosi", added by Mqhayi, reflects the religious, racial, and political conflicts that had already surfaced when "Nkosi" was first performed in 1899.

Not only does the hymn echo the frustrations of the emerging black bourgeoisie in urban South Africa, it also expresses protest and resistance, albeit in a circumscribed manner. The ANC perceived and elaborated on this sense of lament and protest when it adopted the song. Over the years, the ANC made various uses of the song for purposes of mobilization and fundraising. Throughout the period of the anti-apartheid struggle, ANC choirs toured and made recordings of "Nkosi" in Sweden, the United States, and Great Britain in order to promulgate the political cause of the black liberation struggle. As migrant laborers moved into South Africa from other colonies and territories, they, too, were exposed to "Nkosi" as a song

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6. C. PAGE (1982: 177-196) describes the work of African-American and African AME clergy in South Africa during the late 1890s. Bishop Henry Turner's vocal criticisms of racism and imperialism, along with the organizational efforts of African AME clergy, caused the church to be perceived as a radical element in South African society. PAGE (1982: 184-192) argues that the AME Church's radicalism was exaggerated as a result of the fears of the South African Colonial Office concerning the church's lack of supervision and control of some of its missionaries.

of veiled protest that they took home with them, connecting the music and lyrics to new communities. The interesting stylistic characteristic of "Nkosi" stems from its "blessing" format that allowed it to be appropriated and translated by official organizations such as the Lovedale Institute while becoming a song of protest for resistance movements and independent churches.

### Changing Frames: Is It the "Same Old Song"?

While missionaries moved north into what was at that time the Rhodesias, African migrant laborers traveled south in search of work in the mines, railroads, and industries of the emerging British South Africa. Within South Africa, rural-urban migration created a new mobile labor force whose religious and social outlets were fulfilled by neither traditional religion nor the missions, even with their revitalized musical verve. From the Zionists of Natal to the charismatic Apostolic groups ranging from Durban to Harare, the new type of Protestant hymnody had a compelling appeal with its capacity to link traditional sacred songs, familiar rhythms, and Christian hymnody. Three focal cases highlight contrasting versions and uses of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" as a religious song with different ideological implications for each community. Although undoubtedly aware of Sontonga's anthem as the generative field of song, the independent religious reworkers of the hymn approached it with unique visions of mourning for Africa and its redemption.

Born in 1870 in Natal, Isaiah Shembe evolved into one of the most flamboyant and influential independent religious leaders of his day (Sundkler 1961: 110). From 1906 to 1911, Shembe was part of William Mathebule Leshega's Baptist congregation on the Rand (Sundkler 1976: 164-165). After the Boer War, William Leshega was ordained as a Baptist minister and set up a refugee camp at Boksburg. He sought a number of acolytes to help him. Isaiah Shembe joined the group and remained in the fold until 1911 when he experienced a dramatic prophetic revelation through a near-death experience in which he was called to found his own church. Shembe established the Church of the Nazarites at Ohlange, eighteen miles north of Durban, and built a religious center known as Ekuphakameni, the Elated Place and the gate to heaven. In addition to developing a complex liturgy with healing rituals, rites of passage, and elaborate oratory, Shembe composed his own praise poetry and hymns under divine inspiration (Muller 1999: 92-94). Shembe's charismatic presence as the Nazarite leader and inspired prophet was dazzling, and his appeal was sustained through compelling rituals, dance performances, an annual July festival and retreat, and a new type of religious music.

Isaiah Shembe claimed to hear voices that would dictate songs and rhythms to him while he was awake or asleep (Sundkler 1976: 187). Church

members would then transcribe and type up the inspired hymns (Muller 1999: 92). These songs had a dream-like quality, and they translated spiritual messages for application to the daily lives of Shembe's followers. Shembe, thus, claimed spiritual authenticity and authorship for the hundreds of songs and hymns that he composed to frame and invigorate Nazarite rituals. After Isaiah Shembe's death, Galilee Shembe is said to have inherited his father's charismatic powers and his musical ability. Galilee Shembe was a graduate of Fort Hare College, and he took the intellectual responsibility for inscribing into a hymnal aspects of Nazarite liturgy and song (Sundkler 1976: 187-188)<sup>7</sup>.

Carol Muller (1999: 150) explains that Galilee Shembe composed what she terms most of the "Westernized" Nazarite hymns influenced by the four-part harmonic structure of mission church songs. Among Galilee's pieces is Hymn 242, "Nkosi Yethu". This hymn of invocation appears to be a variation of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika". It asserts the readiness of the Nazarites to stand before God and calls on the Holy Spirit (*Moya*) for help and divine intervention. Muller (1999: 150) presents the following text for Hymn 242 with elements added by Nazarite evangelist Mvangeli Mpanza. The song was subsequently released as a cassette during the 1990s. (See Figure Two.)

### ***Nkosi Yethu* by Galilee Shembe and Mvangeli Mpanza**

*Nkosi yethu simakade*

*Simi phambi kwakho;*

*Siyacela ubekhona*

*Nawe kanye nathi*

*Nawe kanye nathi.*

(Lord, our Eternal One

We stand before you;

We request Your presence

You, together with us

You, together with us.)

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7. Galilee Shembe recalls that his father would often compose sacred songs after hearing a woman's or a girl's voice in a dream. "He could not see her, but as he woke up from a dream or walked along the path in Zululand, meditating, he heard that small voice, the clear voice, which gave him a new hymn" (SUNDKLER 1976: 186). Isaiah Shembe would either write down the words or instruct someone else to do so. After Isaiah Shembe's death, Galilee Shembe composed hymns through visionary inspiration and undertook the project of compiling all of the Nazarite hymns (SUNDKLER 1976: 187; Muller 1999: 92-94). During the 1980s and 1990s, the Nazarites began to broadcast their music on the radio and make record albums (MULLER 1999: 139-142).

Very slow  $\text{♩} = 58$

Leader

Nko-si ye - thu. Si-ma-ka - de [ch] Si-mi pha - mbi [pha-mbi]

Chorus

kwa - kho [kwa-kho] Si-ya ce-la [o-wu] u-be - kho-na [na-we]

Na-we kha-nye [kha na - thi [na-we] Na-we kha-nye [kha-nye] na - thi  
nye]

Figure Two: Nazarite Hymn 242, "Nkosi Yetu", by Galilee Shembe in Mvangelu Mpanza's "Perfect" version as reproduced by Carol Muller (1999: 151).

*Yehla Moya oyiNgcwele,*  
*Ngena wena kithi*  
*Usebenze kubo bonke*  
*Loko okuthandwa nguwe.*  
*Loko okuthandwa nguwe.*  
 (Descend, Holy Spirit,  
 Enter into us  
 And work within everybody  
 In the manner you desire.  
 In the manner you desire.)  
*Zonke izono maziphela*  
*Nazo zonke izifo.*  
*Ubumhlophe nobumnandi*  
*Mabuhlale nathi.*  
*Mabuhlale nathi.*  
 (May our sins be wiped away  
 And all diseases.  
 Let purity and sweetness  
 Dwell with us.  
 Dwell with us.)

“Nkosi Yethu” differs in key and rhythmic patterns from “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”, but the general field of the song is similar as are the lyrics, making it possible to consider Galilee Shembe’s hymn as an interpolation of the earlier song. Galilee Shembe’s interpolation may be viewed as similar to musical improvisation in which the emotional quality and mood of the piece dictate further performative variations (Berliner 1994: 232-234). The spiritual inspiration of Galilee Shembe’s hymn was influenced by his musical environment and the overall configuration of the song as an invocation. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of the religious claims of divine authorship must be recognized with reference to the intended uses and audiences for “Nkosi Yethu”, which assumes its own autonomy and integrity within Nazarene liturgy.

John Maranke, born Muchabaya Momberume in 1912 near Nhengwe Mountain in the Maranke Tribal Trustland of Southern Rhodesia, began to preach in his area after a near-death experience resembling Shembe’s (Jules-Rosette 2001: 38-40). Considering himself a divine messenger (*mutumwa*) and African prophet, Maranke had a vision instructing him about his spiritual calling on July 17 1932. (See Plate One.) During his youth, Maranke had attended school at the local Methodist mission, where he had been baptized under the name of Roston, as reported by his followers (Daneel 1971: 316; Jules-Rosette 1987: 24)<sup>8</sup>. John’s preparation for his calling

8. Over the years, Apostolic informants have told me that John Maranke was baptized as Roston in a Methodist mission in Eastern Zimbabwe. Some group leaders,



Plate One: John Marranke (center) with Apostolic Church leaders Robert (second from right) and Kangwa William (right) at the annual Passover ceremony in Lusaka, Zambia, 1958. (Photograph from the collection of Bennetta Jules-Rosette courtesy of Kangwa William.)

included many dreams and visions recorded in his spiritual journal, the "*Humbowo Hutswa we Vapostori*" or "New Revelation of the Apostles", which serves as a foundational ecclesiastical text of the group, much in the manner of Galilee Shembe's hymnal. In providing a record of his visions and spiritual instructions, John states ("Humbowo Hutswa" p. 16):

"The Voice told me that all I had seen was going to happen and that a lot of people were going to be converted and fear God. The Voice said that It was Jesus Christ. The following morning I went out and a lot of people followed me. The Voice told me that I had seen the heirs of the Heavenly Kingdom. The rod which I had seen and had flashed with light was held upright in the building. The rod shone with light whenever I was told or given a thing. Whenever I wanted to do the work of the Lord or wanted to pray, I was told to sing the following song: (Everywhere we see people who do not know the Lord. They sin. Oh, Lord! Our God of strength, Hear us when we pray. Send us Thy Holy Spirit and send it also to those who do not have it.)

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however, feel uncomfortable about any suggestion that the Vapostori were connected to the Methodists. The church itself had no formal affiliation with Methodist missions (JULES-ROSETTE 2001: 38-40).

The other song I was commanded to sing was as follows: (Lord bless Africa. Listen to its Prayers. Bless us its family. Come the Holy Spirit come. Come and bless us we servants of the Lord.)”

The first hymn, known as “Kwese Kwese”, opens the Apostolic sabbath ceremony, or *kerek*, while the second, “Mwari Komborera Africa” is an inspired version of “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”, which designates the Apostles as “spiritual saviors of Africa”. By 1932 when John experienced his vision, “Nkosi” was widely distributed in printed form and had become part of southern African vernacular and religious cultures. As with Shembe’s hymns, the Vapostori performed “Mwari” as a sacred song issuing from John’s divine revelations. It is paired with the “Kwese Kwese”, which exhorts Apostles to evangelize, and it ends with the affirmation: “We are here to meet You”, which goes beyond “Nkosi’s” original blessing by designating the Vapostori as chosen messengers, just as “Nkosi Yethu” selects the Nazarites. In an interview by Jules-Rosette with Apostolic song leaders, members stated that John first sang “Mwari” as “God Bless Israel” and then changed the words to “God Bless Africa”, with the connotation that the Vapostori were the chosen elect, designated to intervene on behalf of the continent, hence the notion of standing in readiness as religious soldiers with a mission (Jules-Rosette 1975: 131). The parallel between Africa and ancient Israel implicit in Maranke’s version of the song also echoes the invocation portion of Sontonga’s original text. Maranke’s notion of the “Heavenly Kingdom”, like Shembe’s ideal of Ekuphakameni, is a space out of time and a utopian theodicy promising the fruits of spiritual redemption. This space is the spiritual transfiguration of “Africa”.

John Mushawatu, a leader and composer of songs among the Maranke Apostles in Zimbabwe, explained the variations in the performance of “Mwari Komborera” in contemporary Apostolic ceremonies<sup>9</sup>:

“There is no standard version or translation of the song, and the words vary from place to place and occasion to occasion. Apostles in Zimbabwe sing it differently from the rest of the country, and even within the church, Manyikas Zezurus, and Ndebeles do not sing it the same way. You go to Congo, and it’s another version, although with all attempts to sing it in the Zimbabwean language. The Manyika [a Shona dialect] version is getting prominence here.”

***Mwari Komborera Africa* (Manyika Version transcribed and translated into English by John Mushawatu)**

*Mwari komborera Africa,  
Inzwai minamoto yedu  
Mwari Baba na Jesu  
Mutikomborere  
Kudai matikomborera isu tavepano  
Vapostori venyu.*

9. Mushawatu, personal communication, November 6, 2002.

(God Bless Africa,  
 Hearken to our prayers  
 Lord God and Jesus  
 Bless us  
 We wish you to bless us—those that are here  
 Being your Apostles.)

*Tumirai Mweya*  
*Uya Mweya komborera,*  
*Tumirai Mweya*  
*Uya Mweya komborera*  
*Uya Mweya,*  
*Mwari Baba na Jesu*  
*Mutikomborere*  
*Kudai matikomborera isu tavepano*  
*Vapositori venyu.*

(Send the Spirit  
 Come Holy Spirit and Bless,  
 Send Holy Spirit  
 Come Holy Spirit and Bless  
 Come Holy Spirit,  
 Lord God and Jesus  
 Bless us  
 We wish you to bless us—those that are here  
 Being your Apostles.)

*Ngaisimudzirwe zita rayo*  
*Inzwai minamoto yedu*  
*Mwari Baba na Jesu*  
*Muti Komborere*  
*Kudai matikomborera isu tavepano*  
*Vapositori venyu.*

(May its name be uplifted  
 Hearken to our prayers  
 Lord God and Jesus  
 Bless us  
 We wish you to Bless us—those that are here  
 Being your Apostles.)

*Mwari Batsirai Africa*  
*Ngaisimudzirwe zita rayo*  
*Inzwai minamoto yedu*  
*Mwari Baba na Jesu—etc.*

(God Help Africa  
 Hearken to our prayers  
 Lord God and Jesus  
 Bless us, etc.  
 We wish you to bless us—those that are here  
 Being your Apostles.)



*Tumirai Mweya, etc.*

*Tiripano nerusando rwenyu.*

(Send the Holy Spirit, etc.

We are here on your mission being your Apostles.)

Within the Apostolic *kerek*, “Mwari Komborera” is considered to be an invocation of the Holy Spirit to bless Africa and its chosen people and an exhortation to Apostles to act on behalf of their own and the continent’s salvation. The specific addition of “Vapositori venyu” (We being your Apostles) makes this version of “Mwari” stand apart from other religious and political renditions. (See Plate Two.) Variations across Apostolic congregations remain similar in intent. All Maranke Apostles attempt to sing “Mwari” in a Shona dialect. Local vernaculars, however, intervene, creating a creolized version of the hymn with slightly different tempos, harmonic patterns, and spiritual resonance. In 1971, Jules-Rosette recorded a version of “Mwari” performed by non-Shona Zambian and Congolese church members (Jules-Rosette 1975: 268-269). At their request, she recorded this version as the official Shona church song, although it differs in significant ways from John Maranke’s original hymn and John Mushawatu’s Manyika version by combining Luba pronunciation and vocalizations with the Shona text and stepping up the tempo<sup>10</sup>.



Plate Two: Apostolic leaders of song in Bocha, Zimbabwe in 1791.  
(Photograph from the collection of Bennetta Jules-Rosette).

10. Jules-Rosette’s transcription of “Mwari Komborera Africa”, labeled as the Shona version, shows interesting creolized additions and performative embellishments (JULES-ROSETTE 1975: 268-269). These changes reflect the passage of the song across cultural borders and performative environments.

***Mwari Komborera Africa as performed in Lusaka, Zambia, 1971, (Jules-Rosette 1975: 268-269)***

*Mwari komborera Africa, Alleluia*

*Chisua yemina matu yedu*

*Mwari Baba Jesu utukomborera*

*(Utukomborera)*

*Jesu, turi baranda bako.*

REFRAIN: *(Uya Mueya)*

*O mueya, hosanna mueya, utukomborera*

*Hosanna mueya)*

*O mueya, hosanna mueya, utukomborera*

*(Utukomborera)*

*(God save Africa, Alleluia*

*Hear our prayers*

*God, Father, Jesus, bless us*

*(Bless us)*

*Jesus, we are Your servants.*

REFRAIN: *(Come Spirit)*

*O come Holy Spirit, bless us*

*(Hosanna Spirit)*

*O come Holy Spirit, bless us.*

*(Bless us)*

*O Holy Spirit, God, Father, Jesus, bless us)*

*O mueya, mueya*

*Mwari Baba Jesu, utokomborera*

*(Utukomborera)*

*Jesu, turi baranda bako*

*Aridzi mzitwe zbitarako, Alleluia*

*Chisua yemina matu yedu, etc.*

*(Uya mueya), etc.*

*Mwari fungeni Africa, Alleluia*

*chisua yemina matu yedu, etc.*

*(Uya mueya), etc.*

*Turi pano pa rusambo rako.*

*(Bless us)*

*Jesus, we are Your servants*

*Let Your name be exalted, Alleluia*

*Hear our prayers, etc.*

*(Come Spirit), etc.*

*God remember Africa, Alleluia*

*Hear our prayers, etc.*

*(Come Spirit), etc.*

*We are here to meet You.)*

This performative variation of “Mwari” includes “Alleluia” in the first line and the addition of “Hosanna” in each refrain. These embellishments point to a more charismatic performance of the song, masking the fact that non-Shona singers do not always know the exact words, and that the text itself is a polyglot simulation of the original Shona when performed in the outlying Zambian and Congolese Apostolic congregations. None of these changes diminish the authenticity of the song or its inspired performance. Instead, they point to the universality of its appeal and the connection of its core message to each community in which it is performed. As a result, “Mwari” has become one of the crucial ceremonial building blocks for grass-roots ecumenism and revival across Apostolic congregations.

As independent churches began to spread and consolidate their bases, various efforts at grass-roots ecumenism emerged. In Lusaka, Zambia, two major Apostolic groups, the Maranke Apostles and the Masowe Apostles, joined forces for local and external political reasons. Their cooperative efforts involved joint worship ceremonies, funerals, and domestic healing rituals in which the hymn “Mwari” played a key symbolic role. Emerging as a prophet in the Hartley District of Southern Rhodesia in 1932, John Masowe, who preached an apocalyptic and millenarian message, moved *en masse* with his followers to the Korsten suburb of Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 1948. His followers, who engaged in various self-supporting activities, such as furniture building and basketmaking, were known as the “Korsten Basketmakers”. Masowe reportedly became involved with the South African labor movement (ICU) through contact with one of its influential members, Charles Mzengeli (Dillon-Malone 1978: 23-24)<sup>11</sup>. It is possible that the version of “Mwari Komberera Africa” adopted by the Masowe Apostles was influenced by variations of “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” performed at labor union rallies.

The version of the song performed by the Masowe Apostles was more strident and upbeat than the Maranke rendition. Describing their reactions to Maranke hymnody in ecumenical ceremonies, Masowe Apostles stated: “The Marankes sing too slowly. They don’t teach their members how to sing either. You have to open your mouth very wide, like this” (Jules-Rosette 1981: 51). Although Maranke and Masowe ecumenical ceremonies were infrequent and marked by mutual criticism, the message of “God Bless Africa” created a bond uniting the two groups in common ideals of spiritual protest and change. In the interpretations of both churches, the Africa to be blessed was the province of misguided political leaders and remained to be recaptured as part of a religious utopia.

11. C. DILLON-MALONE (1978: 23-24) asserts that while he was in Port Elizabeth, John Masowe came into contact with Charles Mzengeli, a member of the Independent Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of South Africa (ICU). The ICU was active in its criticism of the educational and labor policies of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. South African authorities viewed Masowe’s group as threatening because of its leader’s association with ICU members.

## Popular Music, Religion, and Political Culture

"Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", a song originally composed for school children, was adopted by political and religious leaders across the African continent as an emblem of hope and unity. The song itself occupies a unique cultural space in the landscape of memory. It stands at the crossroads between utopian secular and religious visions of African unity and political action. The formulation of the term "bless" ("*mutikomborere*") in the subjunctive voice in the Manyika religious version of the song points to the wish for utopian freedom in a virtual Africa that does not yet exist. The substitution of the terms "save" and "remember" for "bless" in various versions of the song suggests that Africa has been lost or forgotten and is in need of redemption. The independent religious leaders position themselves as intercessors waiting to bring about this utopian change, while political performers of the song wait for blessings to fall upon their chiefs and leaders. In all cases, the hymn is a preamble that sets the stage for more dramatic events—religious ceremonies, political rallies, funerals, and celebrations. As John Mushawatu described it for the Vapostori, the song "solemnizes" events in its transformation from an oration to an anthem.

Ceremonial framing plays a critical role in political action. It serves as the basis for shaping a civil religion and civic culture across which dialogues can take place. Yet this civic culture may be as fragile and mutable as the changing lyrics and melodies of a song. The terms of dialogue and coalition shift with personal, communal, and institutional memories. Robert Bellah (1970: 186) remarks: "Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth". These images emphasize not only the "transcendent goals of politics" (Bellah 1970: 173), but also the political goals of religion. In Sontonga and Mqhayi's early version of "Nkosi", Africa (as opposed to any particular subgroup or nation) is blessed, and its colonial and potentially revolutionary leaders are held accountable to transcendent goals that go beyond those of the state. Spiritual intervention is invoked as the method to achieve the desired end. The last stanza of "Nkosi" or "Mwari", however, is the most variable because it contains the ambiguous narrative outcome of the exhortation to act. Who assumes the ultimate agency and responsibility for change, and who benefits from it? This question is posed and answered differently in each variation of the hymn as it moves from one context and population to another. The change in agency points to shifts in the loci of power and in the spaces and arenas for political debate.

Thomas Turino (2000: 58) argues that popular songs contain "highly mediational signs" that reinforce a sense of community and group identity. At issue is not merely "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991: 144-145), or what Terence Ranger (1975: 32) has termed a desire for political "wish-fulfillment" but, instead, the conscious construction of a solemn and sacred

intermediary space where groups meet, meld, and mobilize in a shifting political environment<sup>12</sup>. The blessing in “Nkosi” sacralizes unity by drawing upon a powerful religious archetype that calls for justice beyond the bounds of the state in the name of empowered and sacralized communitarian groups. This call for justice and redemption is present in both the “political” and more strictly “religious” versions of the song. “Nkosi’s” blessing links religion to politics as a source of transcendent morality. The mediational space constructed by the song is broad enough to allow various versions to develop and survive across cultural contexts. There is even a rock version of the anthem that has been released by the group Boom Shaka, modernizing its presentation and expanding the audience for the song. These contemporary variations are possible because the song is now established as an official anthem and a popular cultural artifact that loops back into vernacular culture.

In 1994, at the time of South Africa’s first multiracial elections, the independent churches, including the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the Nazarenes, and others, were considered by political analysts to compose South Africa’s “silent majority” (Keller 1994: 34-41). The fact that the churches did not remain silent but instead supported the African National Congress surprised many of the same analysts. Symbolically, the Zionists “voted” for their utopian vision of Africa, an imaginary landscape in suspension and waiting for redemption. Arguably, this was not the same “Africa” as the political space championed by the ANC, but the two forces were united by, among other things, a song that created a mutable field of political discourse.

### Conclusions: What’s in a Song?

“Nkosi” is not alone in its status as a religiously linked song of protest that has become a political anthem. “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, the so-called Negro National Anthem, composed by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson in 1896 occupies a similar position as a song of protest and uplift in the United States (Johnson 1933: 154)<sup>13</sup>. The Johnson brothers composed the song for a school celebration in honor of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday and dedicated the song to Booker T. Washington. The message

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12. B. ANDERSON (1991: 143-145) points to the importance of music and song in emphasizing a sense of nationalism in “imagined communities”. Song creates a national landscape that transcends internal borders and connects, in different ways, with each community performing a musical piece.

13. Acknowledgments and thanks are extended to P. M. SENIORS (2002) for her remarks on James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. Her research on this anthem will contribute valuable information to the study of cultural objects and collective memory.

of suffering, hope, and veiled protest in the song resembles Sontonga's version of "Nkosi", and the doctrinal roots of the song in liturgical music and in the African-American struggle for freedom are also similar.

Although the Johnsons' anthem was adopted by the NAACP and performed in black schools and churches on solemn occasions, it did not acquire the political prominence or cross-national appeal of "Nkosi". Nonetheless, the origins and messages of both anthems position them as mediational signifiers uniting and mobilizing regional groups for a common cause. While it has a very different history, the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" could also be analyzed as a mediational signifier that unifies various groups as it shifts and assumes multiple meanings across contrasting contexts of performance. Gerald Platt and Rhys Williams (2002: 343-344) suggest that the wording and uses of these anthems in the United States were intended to counteract the notion that segregation was a divinely ordained and morally sound plan of political action. In this sense, "Nkosi", and the other anthems are redemptive pleas for social justice and reconstruction. "Nkosi" also opens up discussions of music and globalization. The recording of "Nkosi" and other South African sacred and secular songs, both in their original cultural context and within international projects such as those of Paul Simon and Peter Gabriel, raises interesting issues about the diffusion and authorship of popular music, including political and religious songs (Lipsitz 1994: 56-60; Keil & Feld 1994: 238-246; Erlmann 1996: 306-310; Attali 2002: 128-130).

In his brief essay "Save the African Continent", V.Y. Mudimbe (1992: 61-62) suggests moving beyond "anticolonialist" and "decomposing" critiques of African politics to develop concrete projects and new programs to save the African continent. It is interesting to speculate about the extent to which such projects and agendas might be deeply rooted in popular culture with an organic momentum of their own in addition to a strategically constructed critique. The movement of songs, stories, and works of art across borders and boundaries reflects this organic momentum and the ongoing cultural critique that takes shape beyond the confines of any single community.

The utopian vision implicit in "Nkosi" does not refer to a specific boundary, or even an imagined community, but rather to the protean reworking of landscapes of memory and utopian spaces. Sontonga's vision of freedom, the ANC's call to liberation struggle, the nation-state's exhortations, and the dreams of independent church prophets represent different versions of a virtual Africa yet to be born. Emerging out of a profound sense of discontent with the social world, all versions of "Nkosi" conclude with the hope for change. In the end, what actually changes, even more than political realities, is the song itself in its kaleidoscopic renditions across pathways of memory.

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## ABSTRACT

"Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" ("God Bless Africa"), known as the African anthem, is a powerful signifier for mourning, redemption, and celebration. The Methodist hymnody patterns and the text of the song belie its roots in missionary cultural contact. The song also figures prominently in the ceremonial repertoire of many independent churches and has been translated into several languages. Adoption of the song by the African National Congress (ANC) and subsequently by the South African state under Nelson Mandela as a national anthem are further iterations in its trajectory. In the religious versions, the text emphasizes mourning for Africa's past and a prayer for redemption through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The secular versions eliminate the reference to Jesus and focus on the spiritual inspiration and uplift needed by Africa's leaders. Africa metonymically occupies the space of a departed ancestor, living in a timeless eternity while waiting for redemption in the religious version. The political song transforms this timeless eternity into an active present and an opportunity for future progress. It creates a landscape of memory that spans religious and political domains of action. Analyzing the contrasting versions of "God Bless Africa" reflects how concepts of mourning and redemption influence religious ideals and political mobilization. Millenarian notions of time interface with political realities in which Africa itself becomes both the victim and the hero of a new narrative. This paper concludes with a discussion of mourning as a landscape of memory and symbolic practice in African popular and civil religion.

## RÉSUMÉ

*"Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika". De l'esprit indépendant à la mobilisation politique.* — "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (Que Dieu bénisse l'Afrique), connu comme l'hymne africain, est un signifiant puissant pour le deuil, la rédemption et la célébration. Les tonalités méthodistes et les paroles du chant puisent leurs racines dans les contacts culturels avec les missionnaires. Ce chant occupe aussi une place importante dans le répertoire cérémonial de nombreuses églises indépendantes et a été traduit en plusieurs langues. Il fut également adopté par l'African National Congress (ANC) puis par l'État sud-africain sous Nelson Mandela comme hymne national. Dans ses versions religieuses, le texte met l'accent sur le deuil du passé africain et se présente comme une prière pour la rédemption par Jésus et le Saint-Esprit. Les versions séculaires éliminent toute référence à Jésus et insistent sur l'inspiration spirituelle et l'élévation morale nécessaires aux dirigeants africains. Dans la version religieuse, l'Afrique occupe alors de manière métonymique la place d'un ancêtre disparu, vivant dans l'éternité en attendant la rédemption. Le chant politique transforme cette éternité en un présent dynamique, une vision de progrès. C'est à la fois un chant funèbre, un appel à l'espoir et un cri de joie. L'analyse des différentes versions de ce chant montre comment les notions de deuil et de rédemption influencent les idéaux religieux et la mobilisation politique. Les notions millénaires de temps se mêlent aux réalités politiques dans lesquelles l'Afrique devient elle-même la victime et l'héroïne d'un nouveau récit. Nous concluons cet article par une discussion sur le deuil comme paysage de mémoire et pratique symbolique dans les religions populaires et civiles en Afrique.

*Keywords/Mots-clés :* South Africa, collective memory, ethnomusicology, God Bless Africa, independent churches, national anthem, oral history, performance, popular culture/Afrique du Sud, mémoire collective, ethnomusicologie, églises indépendantes, hymne national, histoire orale, représentation, culture populaire.