

## The Role of Gospel in the South African AIDS Epidemic

Radhika Sahai

[RadhikaR.Sahai@gmail.com](mailto:RadhikaR.Sahai@gmail.com)

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Modern gospel music in South Africa reflects both colonial and indigenous spiritual and musical roots. Black South Africans used tonality, chords, and lyricism to adapt western hymns forced upon them and take ownership of Black South African religious music. Zulu musical and spiritual traditions that have survived through South African gospel have shaped black South Africans' expressive styles in light of and in reaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa.

Black South Africans experiencing coercive conversion to Christianity employed signifying as a tool to preserve indigenous spiritual and expressive beliefs. Signifying, or a duality within language, served as a means to communicate despite efforts to silence and censor by colonizers.<sup>1</sup> Signifying refers to a covert expression of insult that is rooted in world play and the duality of words, and stems from oral traditions within the black community. Signifying is rooted in bardic traditions of West Africa. Griots, or traditional storytellers in West African oral traditions, held the histories of their people and culture in music or poetry. Griots were commissioned by rulers and the rich elite, but tasked with preserving history, they often created stories that subtly held dual meanings thus preserving histories despite power dynamics that attempted to control narratives. This oral tradition of duality then became essential to communicative practices of colonized Africans who were forced to become adept at speaking without being understood by

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<sup>1</sup> Gates, 17.

increasingly anti-Black societies. This duality has manifested in various forms in South African gospel music.

Black South Africans resisted white colonizers who attempted to use western hymns to deny the humanity of the South African identity through tonality and signifying. European missionaries arrived in South Africa in 1737, but did not constitute a significant presence until the 1800s.<sup>2</sup> Missionaries attempted to “colonize the consciousness” through introduction of western hymns which subtly created parallels between South African identity and the devil.<sup>3</sup> Alas, western musical constructs did not translate easily into existing Zulu notions of composition.<sup>4</sup> Western hymns relied on contrary motion of various voice parts; however, the Bantu languages that comprise Zulu music are tonal, meaning that the rise and fall of pitch for each syllable impacts the significance of the word.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the typical splitting of voice parts into soprano, alto, tenor, and bass that occurs within gospel singing has significant consequences on the translation of these songs into Bantu. The intersections of these two differing musical styles created a space for Zulu peoples forced to sing western hymns to control the music.<sup>6</sup> Bongani Mthethwa, a South African choral composer, explores Zulu singing of Western hymns in his *Study in Nguni and Western Musical Syncretism* which found that many western hymn texts simply cannot retain their original meanings and tunes when translated into Zulu.<sup>7</sup> Not only were many western hymns rendered meaningless when translated, but Black South Africans under siege of Christian colonialism also often

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Falola, 178.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stone, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Mthethwa, 141.

employed Bantu tonality to sing hymns mockingly as a means of resistance to missionary teachings.<sup>8</sup> The use of tones within Zulu singing of Western Hymns is a manifestation of signifying within South African musical oral traditions.

Though Christian colonizers attempted to stifle and erase traditional South African spirituality and culture, Black South Africans passed down these traditions through the very western mediums meant to suppress South African identity. This was done not only through covert measures such as signifying within western gospel, but also through a more overt fusion. Black South Africans passed down traditional Zulu beliefs and singing customs through western hymns. A Xhosa Christian prophet of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ntsikana, is credited with composing the first hymns in common vernacular. Ntsikana's hymns reflect both European and Xhosa roots through lyricism and chord composition.<sup>9</sup> Western musical theory discourages parallel fourth and fifth interval chords in classically composed music. However, indigenous South African musical composition encourages such parallels due to the tonal quality of the Bantu languages. Black South African gospel songs often employ parallel interval chords contrary to the western classical roots of these songs.<sup>10</sup> Black South Africans incorporated other elements of traditional singing and performance traditions into gospel music including dance movements, complex rhythms, and differing meters between dance and song elements of a performance. South African musical traditions sometimes involved use of call- and response, a musical structure involving a succession of two distinct phrases where the second is a direct response to the first. The call and response style of

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<sup>8</sup> Mthethwa, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Dargie, 111.

<sup>10</sup> Stone, 30.

indigenous music was merged with four part voicing of western classical music.<sup>11</sup>

Though western hymns were forced upon indigenous Zulu populations by European missionaries in hopes to colonize the Black South African conscious, indigenous peoples maintained musical and social traditions, and in fact adapted western hymns to better accommodate South African music traditions as a means of resistance.

Black South African ownership of choral music enabled the development of gospel influenced protest songs. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black South Africans were conceptualizing Christianity through traditional South African cultural beliefs. Cape colony, the only white dominated region where certain Black Africans had the right to vote, was the birthplace of a politically active black Christian elite community.<sup>12</sup> This community created a space that encouraged Black South African pride in the fusion of western hymns and traditional South African music which became known as as *Makwaya*, (my choir).<sup>13</sup> Even before apartheid began in 1948, Black South Africans began writing lyrics using choral techniques that criticized the government as devilish, reversing the initial colonizer portrayal of the devil in an act of reclamation.<sup>14</sup> Choral music gained popularity in Black working and middle class spaces as community choirs serve as means to raise funds for underserved and under-resourced communities.<sup>15</sup> Hymns that had originally been wielded by White missionaries to degrade indigenous beliefs were slowly shifted into a medium to criticize the white supremacy that plagued

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<sup>11</sup> Stone et al., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Stone, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Stone, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, 32.

the country. A century after colonization, western hymns were being reconceived to uplift Black South African beliefs and subvert colonialist thinking.

Protest songs, which emerged from gospel music, were some of the first tools of the Anti-apartheid movement.<sup>16</sup> Singers replaced biblical figures with anti-apartheid leaders forcing White churchgoers in the South Africa to confront the morality of legalized segregation.<sup>17</sup> Some have argued that the church was a vital social space for Black South Africans during apartheid as it served as a space of solidarity and formed a community that had some power, even when individuals did not.<sup>18</sup> The use of song and dance in the church provides a physically liberating space to escape the crushing weight of apartheid. Song not only served as a space for healing, but also provided a means to spread information, critical to both the spread of biblical gospel and anti-apartheid and HIV activist rhetoric. Existing facets of Black South African church spaces enabled the anti-apartheid struggle to operate through church based advocacy.

The peaceful protests of Black South Africans were met with violence, sparking the creation of a guerilla wing of the African National Congress and the transformation of peaceful protest songs into more urgent calls for action.<sup>19</sup> Protest songs that originally encouraged peaceful liberation became more urgent by drawing analogies between the moral urgency of the church and the urgency of racial justice. The gospel song *Shumayela* begins with *Shumayela Ivangeli*, which translates to “preach the gospel”.<sup>20</sup> Anti-apartheid movements transformed this gospel song into a protest song not through

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<sup>16</sup> Stone, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kivnick, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Frankel, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, 44.

lyricism but through movements; the protestors sang *Shumayela Ivangeli* while portraying firearms illustrating the new message: preach the gospel of the freedom struggle.<sup>21</sup> The evolution of gospel music as a form of social protest continued into the AIDS epidemic in South Africa.

The South African response to the AIDS epidemic built on the protest forms of the Anti-apartheid movement, including the use of gospel as a means to demand social reform. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was formed in 1998 by Zachie Achmat in response to government neglect of those impacted by the epidemic.<sup>22</sup> TAC created change within South Africa through demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, legislature, and protests. One of the most effective and memorable tools of TAC was the elevation and widespread use of HIV protest songs that had been adapted from the anti-apartheid movement<sup>23</sup>. TAC formed a choir, *The Generics*, a choir whose name references the struggle to secure generic medications for those living with HIV in South Africa<sup>24</sup>. *Jikelele*, which means globally in Xhosa, was the first album released in 2001 in Cape Town. This sparked the development of small choirs within various TAC branches across South Africa<sup>25</sup>. One of the songs on *Jikelele*, *Ingaba Senzeni Na*, is inspired by an anti-apartheid pop fusion that follows the structure of choral music<sup>26</sup>. South African Pop star Brena Fassie adapts her own 1997 hit *Memeza* to form the call section of the song that follows a I- IV- V- I harmonic chord progression, a harmonic sound familiar to

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<sup>21</sup> Stone, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Fassie, 122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Stone, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Stone, 113.

<sup>26</sup> Stone, 120.

gospel music<sup>27</sup>. The song employs call and response in a three-part harmony drawing on gospel traditions of vocal composition and chord progression. The song was utilized by anti-apartheid protestors to discuss the violence and desperation that came with anti-Black police brutality in South Africa<sup>28</sup>.

*Bangitholile, abangana xolo;  
Bangikhomba ngezibham'  
nemikhonto.*

They've caught me, those without  
compassion; They point at me with guns and  
spears.

*Noma ngingameze ma akusizi  
lutho. Yimi nabo, Nkosi yami.*

Even if I shout, mama, nothing helps. It's me  
and them, my Lord.

The response section simply repeats *memeza ma* to each of her verses, which translates to “cry out, mama”. Fassie’s verses get more desperate and fearful as the song progresses, but choir is helpless and can only cry out. The choir is unable to address the fear Fassie expresses which reflects the futile feeling of communities living under police brutality in South Africa. The final verse of the song ends with choir reiterating, “even if I shout, mama, nothing helps.”<sup>29</sup> The choir’s only response to Fassie, and those violated by police brutality, is to shout out, though it may seem helpless. The use of the traditional gospel structures within an anti-apartheid song draws on the community style of church music to engage with struggle and resilience.

The TAC rendition of *Memza, Ingaba Senzeni Na*, follows the original melodic structure, but the lyrics have been rewritten to address the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. The use

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<sup>27</sup> Stone, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Stone, 121.

of the original structure invokes similar gospel techniques to express community outrage.

The verse begins:

*Ingaba senzeni na kuwe Thabo Mbeki?*                      I wonder what have we done to you,  
Thabo Mbeki?

In this rendition, Thabo Mbeki replaces “those without compassion” and those who point guns and spears, equating the violent brutality of the White apartheid regime and the negligence of Thabo Mbeki. The original anti- apartheid song *Memeza* was in fact frequently sung by Govan Mbeki, one of the leaders of the anti- apartheid movement and Thabo Mbeki’s father<sup>30</sup>. TAC’s rendition of this song uses Mbeki’s father’s voice as a call for action against Mbeki’s policies. *Ingaba Senzeni Na* however, contrasts the original anti-apartheid song as it ends with a call to action rather than a reiteration of helplessness.<sup>31</sup> The TAC song creates a space for the oppressor to right wrongs and create positive change. The verse not only give Mbeki the opportunity to mitigate the destruction caused by his denialism, but offers him an escape from occupying the oppressive role his father had protested against in the anti- apartheid song<sup>32</sup>. The use of song in HIV activism in South Africa reflects gospel music’s reclaimatory and reparative power.

*Khawuthethe noPfizer bo, Thetha  
noGlaxo Thetha noBMS Bathoba  
maxabiso*

Please speak to Pfizer, Speak to Glaxo  
(GlaxoSmithKline), Speak to BMS  
(Bristol-Myers Squibb), to lower the prices.

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<sup>30</sup> Stone, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Stone, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Stone, 125.



Gospel not only shaped HIV action, but was itself also adapted within religious settings to address HIV. The Sinikithemba Choir, an HIV/AIDS support group, originated in Durban in 1997 at the McCord Mission Hospital when an estimated 70% of medical admissions at the hospital were HIV related<sup>33</sup>. Given that there were few medical remedies to the physical pain caused by HIV as antiretroviral therapy was unavailable, the hospital leadership recognized that alternative forms of healing might mitigate the emotional and social burdens associated with HIV<sup>34</sup>. Nonhlanhla Mhlongo, a social worker associated with the hospital, founded the Sinikithemba choir (which translates as “we give hope” or “give us hope”). The group worked to find peace through religious means, meeting once a week for prayers, bible readings, and share space<sup>35</sup>. The members of the support group recognized that HIV limits economic ability within capitalistic society, and began to create self- help projects through which the group would engage in some type of production (such as beadwork) generating income to support sick members and creating a healing space. Income generating projects became the foundations upon which Sinikithemba was built. Choir members would often sing gospel while working on these income generating projects, and indeed Nonhlanhla noted that the choir was truly inspired one night, when after a long day of working on the project, the choir members stayed afterwards for hours to sing and dance.<sup>36</sup> The First Sinikithemba choir was formed from 40 of the support group members who performed at hospital events. Thus, the Sinikithemba project, an HIV/AIDS support group, economic endeavor, and musical performance group, was born.

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<sup>33</sup> Okigbo, 242.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

The Sinikithemba choir is able to bring discussions of HIV and sex into highly stigmatized and censored spaces. As the choir is composed of solely HIV/AIDS + singers the mere presence of the choir breaks down stigma and falsehoods regarding people living with HIV/ AIDS. The choir dons traditional Zulu clothing and intersperse song with toki-toki dancing, an indigenous dance form often used in anti-apartheid protests.<sup>37</sup> The choir composes traditional gospel music but uses lyricism to discuss HIV, and specifically works to talk to the wider HIV/AIDS community.<sup>38</sup> The lyricism of the choir noticeably interchange the words and notions of Black and African, which reflects Kwame Appiah's conception of Africa as a place not defined along geographic lines but rather by demarcation of skin color.<sup>39</sup> The Choir director, Phumulani Kunene, notes that the word choice is intentional and works to acknowledge that the majority of those impacted by HIV are African or of African Descent.<sup>40</sup> The group thus creates music as people living with HIV/ AIDS, as Black South Africans shaped by a history of apartheid, and as a group whose pan- African perspective touches all people of African descent.

Gospel music originated as a means of suppression within South Africa, but has developed over time to become a tool of social change. Gospel has impacted the expressive styles of liberation movements pre-apartheid, during apartheid, and during AIDS denialism in South Africa. Black South African ownership of gospel music is showcased through lyricism, tonality, and chords to intertwine the morality of the gospel and social justice.

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<sup>37</sup> Okigbo, 242.

<sup>38</sup> Okigbo, 244.

<sup>39</sup> Appiah, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Okigbo, 245.

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