

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SONG LYRICS

A SELECTION OF AVAILABLE TEXTS AND SOURCES



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Harp of the Ngabaka people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 20th century. Reproduced in *Le Musée des Arts D'Afrique et D'Océanie*, p.88 (Paris: Musée des Arts D'Afrique et D'Océanie, 1999).

INTRODUCTION

There appear to be no written records of the songs sung across Africa in the period 400–1500 CE; a few, such as the ‘Two Songs for Sunjata’ of the 13th century reproduced in this anthology can be definitively dated, but in almost all cases they are recalled and performed as ‘traditional’ songs in a community, as old as memory and orally transmitted from one generation to the next.

To know what songs were sung in the period before about the 18th or 19th century – their subject matter, styles, social contexts, personal meanings – therefore requires acts of historical imagination, of extrapolation back in time from the song texts that have been transcribed in more recent centuries and preserved in print collections. It is probably not controversial to state that lullabies sung in the 18th century would be indicative of lullabies sung in earlier times; or that songs sung to and by young women preparing for marriage would play similar social roles of guiding the young women into their new role, and transmitting the wisdom of the older women, whenever and wherever they were sung – even if the particularities of the ceremonies, the experiences, the expectations placed on the brides might vary across time and place. The singing of songs of social critique or challenge to authority in the 19th century might be indicative that songs have often played that role in the communities where they are produced and performed, although the targets of that criticism and challenge and thus the particular song lyrics would naturally change. Songs are often elements of stories in African oral traditions, either as sung by an individual character in the story or as responses to the storyteller’s narration, sung by a chorus or the audience. The communal telling of stories is age-old, and perhaps the use of songs in these stories is too.

The texts gathered in this draft anthology are samplings from collections of oral literature compiled across African regions at different times in the 20th and 21st centuries. They do not include material published in French, Swahili, Arabic or other cross-national and regional languages; and they certainly do not cover all collections published in English. All the texts are given in translation from their source languages; in most cases the rhythmic pulse of the text is elusive, or entirely lost. They have been chosen simply to give an indication of the range of styles, themes and social contexts in which songs have been sung in diverse settings across the African continent. Each cited anthology contains a much wider range of texts than those included here, which have been selected for inclusion because according to their related commentaries, they have links to older traditions within their social settings.

Extracts from the introductory notes to the songs have been included where these provide a) descriptions of the performance styles and contexts of the songs; b) information about the career of an individual singer/composer that may be indicative of traditional roles and training of singers; c) details of particular recording projects which may be sources of further songs.

There is a bias in this anthology towards songs by women, because four of the most comprehensive available anthologies, volumes in the *Women Writing Africa* series, are collections of orature and writing by women. A better sense of the range of orature produced by men as well as women can be gained from the overview of African oral traditions provided by Finnegan (1970, 1976). The genre of praise poetry, in particular, is not properly represented in this selection, although it is central to most African oral traditions. Whether praise poetry should be included in the category of song lyrics, or understood as a separate genre of orature declaimed according to non-musical rules of performance, is perhaps an arbitrary distinction. (In the South African context, at least, praise poetry and sung texts accompanied by music appear to be two distinct forms.) Finnegan (1970, 1976) and Opland (1998) are good starting points for an exploration of this question.

Further sources

A key source of analysis of traditional lyric texts and genres is Ruth Finnegan’s *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970, 1976). Finnegan discusses lyrics under rubrics such as ‘Poetry and patronage’, ‘Panegyric’, ‘Elegiac poetry’, ‘Religious poetry’, ‘Special purpose poetry – war, hunting, work’, ‘Lyric’, ‘Topical and political songs’ and

‘Children’s songs and rhymes’. Examples of some of these genres have been included in the present anthology; many more can be found in her chapters on these topics. While not all oral poetry takes the form of song lyrics, Finnegan argues that ‘[in] the sense of “a short poem which is sung”, lyric is probably the most common form of poetry in subsaharan Africa’ (1976: 241). Her discussion of the use of repetition and ‘call and response’ or antiphonal form in many African lyrics demonstrates the rich possibilities of such features for developing elaborated meanings in traditional songs, as new words and phrases are added to the core lyrics by soloist, chorus and sometimes also participating audience members (1976: 259–63). She also refers to the musical role played by tone in certain languages, where it constructs not only lexical and grammatical but also aesthetic, musical elements of oral poems of various genres (1976: 69–71).

The four volumes in the *Women Writing Africa* series and Opland’s collection of South African oral poetry (1992), from which selections have been made for this anthology, as well as Finnegan (1970, 1976) all contain extensive bibliographies that list many sources of African oral poetry and song recorded and analysed by scholars.

Finally, a source which may not be of adequate relevance to a project focused specifically on *sung* texts from Africa is Volume Four of the series *Poems for the Millennium*, edited by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour. This anthology contains North African, Andalusian and ‘diaspora’ prose and poems dating from about 600 BCE to the 21st century CE, by authors living in many of the cities and regions of interest to the AfroAsia Project. However, since the editors locate these works within various traditions of written literature rather than musical performance, examples have not been included in the present selection, whose focus is on the public performance of musical works.

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From:

The Rienner Anthology of African Literature

Edited by Anthonia C. Kalu

Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007

From the Introduction

[p.4:]

In most communities, stories are told with the audience and performers sitting in a circle. Although the story circle usually assigns no specific order of position for audience members, it is generally understood that the current narrator controls the pace of the narrative. The storyteller is also in charge of the call segments of all songs in her or his story. Audience members are responsible for the response segments of songs and chants and may insert appropriate exclamations and affirmations, or encouragement and short corrections to child performers.

[p.5:]

For children, cultural education begins with learning core local narratives with simple plots. Most of these have songs that repeat either the theme or important parts of the plot; the songs are repeated at specific intervals in the narrative to help the child build memory skills.

[pp.6–7:]

The performance of an epic is usually accompanied by music. The musical instruments used are specific to the culture and generally are considered sacred because of their relationship to the ancestors said to have brought them to the people. An example is the *kora* that accompanies the performance of the Mandingo epic.

[pp.52–3:]

THE SONG OF GIMMILE

A Gindo song from Mali

Once there was Konondjong, a great king of the Gindo people. One day a singer from Korro came to Bankassi, where Konondjong lived. He went to the king's house and sang for him. He played on his lute and sang about famous warriors and their deeds, about things that had happened in the world, and about the accomplishments of the chiefs of former times. King Konondjong was entertained by what he heard. When the singing was finished, Konondjong asked the singer what he wanted in Bankassi. The bard replied, 'Oh, sir, all I want is a small gift from you.'

The king said in surprise, 'You ask the king of the Gindo people for a gift?'

'Only a small gift, a token in exchange for my singing,' the bard answered.

'Ah!' Konondjong said with exasperation. 'Here is a homeless bard who presumes to ask the king of the Gindo for a present! Many famous bards come and sing for the honor of being heard, but this man asks for something in return! Whoever gave me such disrespect before? Take him away and give him fifty lashes.'

So King Konondjong's servants took the bard and beat him with a knotted rope for punishment. The singer then made his way home to Korro.

In Korro there lived a man by the name of Gimmile. Gimmile heard the story of what happened to the bard who sang for King Konondjong. So he composed a song of contempt about the king. It went:

'Konondjong, king of the Gindo,
He is fat, his neck is flabby.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo,

His teeth are few, his legs are swelled.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo,
His knees are bony, his head is bald.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo.'

This was the song made by Gimmile. He went out where the people were, taking his harp with him, and he sang his song. Gimmile's voice was good. The music of his song was catching. Soon other people of Korro were singing this song. It became popular among the people and the bards. Travellers who came to Korro took the song away and sang it elsewhere. It was heard at dances and festivals. Among the Gindo people it was known everywhere.

'Konondjong, king of the Gindo,
He is fat, his neck is flabby.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo,
His teeth are few, his legs are swelled.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo,
His knees are bony, his head is bald.
Konondjong, king of the Gindo.'

Women sang it while grinding corn. Girls sang it while carrying water. Men sang it while working in the fields.

King Konondjong heard the people singing it. He was angered. He asked, 'Who has made this song?'

And the people replied, 'It was made by a singer in Korro.'

Konondjong sent messengers to Korro to the bard whom he had mistreated. The bard came to Bankassi, and the king asked him, 'Who is the maker of this song?'

The bard replied, 'It was made by Gimmile of Korro.'

The king gave the bard a present of one hundred thousand cowry shells, a horse, a cow, and an ox. He said, 'See to it that Gimmile's song is sung no more.'

The bard said: 'Oh, sir, I was whipped with a knotted rope when I sang for you. Even though you are a king, you cannot retract it. A thing that is done cannot be undone. A song that is not composed does not exist; but once it is made it is a real thing. Who can stop a song that travels from country to country? All of the Gindo people sing it. I am not the king. If the great king of the Gindo cannot prevent the song of Gimmile from being sung, my power over the people is certainly less.'

The song of Gimmile was sung among the people, and it is preserved to this day, for King Konondjong could not bring it to an end.

The king was not compelled to beat the bard, but he did, and then it could not be undone.

Gimmile did not have to make a song about the king, but he did, and it could not be stopped.

[pp.108–22:]

THE MWINDO EPIC

Banyanga, Congo

[This epic narrative is another example of a story in which songs are central to the plot and the style of narration. Two songs from the epic are presented below.]

... While the maidens were in the act of drawing water and still had their attention fixed there toward the drum [on the surface of the water], Mwindo, where he dwelt in the drum in the pool, threw sweet words into his mouth; he sang:

Scribe, move on!
I am saying farewell to Shemwindo!
I am saying farewell to Shemwindo!
I shall die, oh! Bira!
My little father threw me into the drum!
I shall die, Mwindo!
The counselors abandoned Shemwindo;
The counselors will become dried leaves.
The counselors of Shemwindo,
The counselors of Shemwindo,
The counselors have failed (in their) counseling!
My little father, little Shemwindo,
My little father threw me into the drum
I shall not die, whereas (that) little-one will survive!
The little-one is joining Iyangura,
The little-one is joining Iyangura,
Iyangura, the sister of Shemwindo.

... Mwindo sang; he howled, he said:

Kasiyembe, you are powerless against Mwindo,
For Mwindo is the Little-one-just-born-he-walked.
Kasiyembe said: 'Let us dance together.'
Shirungu, give us a morceau!
If we die, we will die for you.
Kasengeri is dancing with his *conga*-scepter,
Conga-scepter of *nderema*-fibers.
I am saying farewell to Mpumba,
My Mpumba with many raphia bunches.

[p.152:]

TRADITIONAL, LOVE SONG

East Africa, Amharic

[The imagery of this anonymous song clearly evokes the world of Arabia.]

You lime of the forest, honey among the rocks,
Lemon of the cloister, grape in the savannah.
A hip to be enclosed by one hand;
A thigh round like a piston.
Your back – a manuscript to read hymns from.
Your eye triggerhappy, shoots heroes.
Your gown cobweb-tender,
Your shirt like soothing balm.
Soap? O no, you wash in Arabian scent,
Your calf painted with silver lines.
I dare not touch you!
Hardly dare to look back.
You mistress of my body:
More precious to me than my hand or my foot.
Like the fruit of the valley, the water of paradise.
Flower of the sky; wrought by divine craftsmen;
With muscular thigh she stepped on my heart
Her eternal heel trod me down.
But have no compassion with me:
Her breast resembles the finest gold;
When she opens her heart –
The Saviour's image!
And Jerusalem herself, sacred city,
Shouts 'Holy, holy!'

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From:

Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region

Edited by Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo, MM Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi, and Saïda Yahya-Othman

New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2007

From the Introduction

[p.6:]

In 'When We Say' (2001) women's singing uses proverbs to teach children basic rules of proper and ethical behavior:

When we say
A person who heeds not
Goes with feces into her mother-in-law's hut,
We mean
You need to hear others and they need to hear you.

When we say
Being near the anthill
Made the fox turn brown,
We mean
You reap what you sow.

...

The creative aspect of women's orature is largely inseparable from its instructional function, but no less rich for that fact. Women have created songs, sayings, stories, and legends, which they have shared with other women and passed down to future generations. These oral works are also dynamic, changing significantly in form and content over time in an ongoing creative process

Orature is *performed* rather than simply *spoken*, the message contained in the music, the tone, the gestures, and the actions as well as in the words.

[pp.107-10:]

SITI BINTI SAAD, FOUR SONGS

Zanzibar, Kiswahili

The renowned singer Siti binti Saad was born in Fumba village in Zanzibar in 1880. Her family was quite poor, and she followed her mother's practice of making and selling pots and mats. The extraordinary voice that would later win her fame was first heard as she walked through Zanzibar town, singing to call attention to her pots. ...

Siti binti Saad sang in the *taarab* musical tradition, which blends Swahili music with Arabic and Indian. Prior to Siti, *taarab* singers were most often well-off, cultured, and male and sang in Arabic. Siti, who was illiterate but had a gift for memorizing songs, began the now well-established practice of singing in Kiswahili. Her career served to give the language prestige and bring it to audiences outside of East Africa. She performed in the sultan's court and for many events hosted by the wealthy residents of Zanzibar's Stone Town, thus gaining considerable financial rewards. ...

In 'Kijiti', Siti recounts the true story of a man who killed a woman visitor from Dar es Salaam. He took the woman out, along with her friends, then raped and killed her. Siti questions the system of justice that jailed the woman's friends but allowed the murderer to escape to the mainland. 'There Is No Damage' also recalls a real

incident in which a wealthy Arab landowner and government clerk was arrested by the British government for embezzling public funds and sentenced to work in a quarry. The man had also been in the habit of defrauding poor people by taking advantage of their illiteracy. 'With Missive I Am Sending You' is a prayer for good health and true friendship, perhaps referring to Fatuma binti Baraka, known as Bi Kidude, a protégé of Siti who also became a renowned *taarab* singer. 'Do Not Expose a Secret' is a medley of allegory and allusions to love, sex, and infidelity, with a hint about promiscuity in the last verse. In typical *taarab* tradition, these verses allow listeners to hear what they will, depending on the context in which they are sung.

Saïda Yahya-Othman and M.M. Mulokozi

Kijiti

Look, look you all, what Kijiti has done,
To take a guest and give her the runaround.
He took her into the bushes and brought her back dead.
We left home without permission;
We had our gin in our basket.
The dance was in Chukwani; death awaited us in Sharifumsa.

Kijiti said to me, let us go woman.
If only I had known, I would not have gone.
Kijiti you will kill me for one peg of gin.
The judge, presiding, was angry.
He said 'Bloody fools!' to Kijiti's witnesses,
And sentenced Sumaili and Binti Subeti to prison.

These matters are strange, however you look at them.
Kijiti killed someone who was pregnant.
He crossed the river but the witnesses drowned.

Kijiti, I advise you not to go to Dar es Salaam;
You will encounter there a man with a razor.
Everyone is cursing you that you may get elephantiasis.

There Is No Damage

There is no relationship; I am so and so.
The word, like a sin, is branded on the chest.
The name is yours, old man, and the stone is on your head;
The stone is on your head.

Stop your meanness and robbing of the poor,
Especially those who speak not, the ignorant of the ignorant.
Their pen always is ink on their thumbs,
Is ink on their thumbs.

Pilfering is wrong; stealing from the government.
Their books are open, with all signatures,
A matter of long ago, comes under scrutiny,
Comes under scrutiny.

Friends, don't be duped; hark my words.
Maintain caution; don't let it leave your hearts.

Let little satisfy you; that which is your right, clerks;
That which is your right, clerks.

With Missive I Am Sending You

Oh, missive, I am sending you, to my confidant,
To my generous Lord, who has no compare.
The stones have turned well, with speedy peace.
I pray respectfully, with my hands beseeching:
Rid us of enmity and secret envy.
Prayers I have read; may they reach the heavens,
 May they reach the heavens.

Your compassion, oh, Lord, let it be with you.
Every time I look at them, I discover them in my heart.
I pray for health and freedom from suffering,
 And freedom from suffering.

Oh, Prophet, stand up with the angels in heaven,
Together with Bi Fatuma and Hussein her grandson.
Oh, Prophet, it behooves you, since God mandated you
To pray for the human race in heaven and earth,
 In heaven and earth.

Do Not Expose a Secret

Do not expose a secret
With colored ink.
You have to understand:
If you have many problems,
You self-destruct
Through your own ignorance.

Give the poison to the cat
Who has many lives,
Not the goat;
You will kill it,
For every lecher
Dies deprived.

Poor stars
In the clouds,
I never imagined
That you would be unfaithful.
Come back, my love,
And end my grief.

Show me.
I swear I can't sleep;
Quench my desire by action.

Being apart from him
Makes me crazy.

A ripe fruit must be picked.
A dry leaf is withered by the sun.
The one with a scar may still be hurting.
My love, don't agitate me.
Love does not last without tolerance.
Understand, speed is not progress.

The sweetness of sugar
Does not surpass that of sugarcane.
Sugarcane has juice
Dripping down on you.
With sudden sweetness,
The soul melts.

A decorated cup
Is good for tea;
Add some milk
And sugar aplenty.
When you depart,
Another is waiting.

Translated by Saïda Yahya-Othman

[pp.164-6:]

BIBI PIRIRA ATHUMANI, TWO POEMS

Tanzania, Kiswahili

Pirira Athumani was born at a fishing village near Tanga in 1920, and passed away in 2002. Tanga is a Swahili town with a largely Islamic culture and a long tradition of literacy (in Arabic script) and literature. ...

Athumani grew up in Tanga, but had no opportunity to go to school. She thus acquired literacy as an adult. She married several times, but did not have children. Like many other African women, however, she had ample opportunity to raise several generations of her relatives' and probably co-wives' children. Her poem 'The Stepmother' is thus based on her own experience. ...

The poem – in the traditional tarbia or quatrain form – falls within the Swahili sung poetry tradition. Athumani might have sung it at public occasions or dance events, and other interested poets would have replied in the same mode.

In 'Love Has No Cure' Athumani compares love to juju, or magic. The content of the poem derives from the common belief in Africa that love can be induced, controlled, or maintained through the use of the occult. This widespread belief has often been a source of suffering, especially for women. ...

In this cynical and humorous song, Pirira castigates such beliefs and practices, claiming that there is no love medicine save the language one speaks to a partner. Athumani's view is, in her context, quite unorthodox and very progressive. ...

The poem is in song measure; the lines are uneven and depend on the melody of the song. The short lines, comprising the solo and chorus, have eight syllables each.

Athumani has long been a renowned dance singer and storyteller with a very large repertoire. Her recorded songs are preserved in the archives of the Institute of Kiswahili Research at the University of Dar es Salaam. ...

M.M. Mulokozi

The Stepmother

I begin in the name of Allah, I want to join the dance
Nor have I any hindrance; please bear with me, you poets
It is rice and coconut it pains me, chew on it:
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

The heart of each is different; all stepmothers are not the same.
Not all grab the income so that it goes nowhere.
That is only a practice of some – as of Mashaka and Kilokote:
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

I tell you, experts, leave jokes aside
Of the left and on the right, explore all.
It only happens with some people; it is not the case with all women:
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

I saw Wadia; she loved all the children,
Cooking for them, tea, meat, and bread,
And when a child cried, she would say, 'Bring it here.'
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

For instance, this Sofia, she should love all the children,
Yet she slaps the child on the head, the arms, and everywhere.
By every means, reducing the child to a mere reed.
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

Now let us turn to this Amina – she loves the whole group.
She pours her treasures into all the shops
Of the Banianis and the Chinese, so as to dress and adorn the kids fully.
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

Bye-bye, I tell you, let us not quarrel or dispute.
Now I put down the pen, for all the ink has dried up.
Don't accuse me of fleeing; I am always here.
Not all stepmothers are bad; the heart of each is different.

Love Has No Cure

Love has no cure, except on your tongue.
I warn you, end your arrogance or you will sleep alone.

Solo: If you are a healer,
 Heal your uncle.

Chorus: If you are a witch
 Bewitch your aunt.

You will use up all the herbs in destroying others.
We know you, we let you make a habit of it, and we let you squander your money.

Love has no cure, except on your tongue.
I warn you, end your arrogance or you will sleep alone.

Solo: If you are a healer,
Heal your uncle.

Chorus: If you can do magic,
Spin it on your aunt.

You will use up all the herbs in destroying others.
We know you, we let you make a habit of it, and we let you squander your money.

Translated by M.M. Mulokozi

[pp. 166–8:]

COMMUNAL SONG: ‘GIDMAY: FAREWELL TO A BRIDE’

Tanzania, Iraqw

The Iraqw people, thought to have originally migrated south from Ethiopia, are concentrated in north central Tanzania. Gidmay is a traditional song that is sung to a bride by age mates from her village on the day they bid her farewell as she departs for her groom’s home.

In the Iraqw community, a wedding ceremony lasts a whole week, and sometimes longer. Preparations for the ceremony normally include painting and drawing on the walls of both the groom’s and bride’s homes, with different colors, mostly white, black, and red. ... For several days and nights, various groups sing in praise or reproach of the bride or the groom, depending which side the singers come from. On the groom’s side, age mates and relatives, mostly young men, sing praise songs for the groom, such as, ‘You’re a lion who has brought home a buffalo,’ or, ‘You’re a kite [or an eagle] and have brought home a chick [or dove].’ On the bride’s side, age mates and relatives, mostly young girls, sing songs like this one. They lament the bride’s departure, provide some words of warning for the bride, and make a few sneering comments about the groom. The singers’ insults are meant to be taken in good humor, and are sung with the knowledge that the groom will have praise poured on him when he gets back home with the bride beside him. The reference to the spider invokes the wish for the couple to bear many children. The Iraqw believe the spider is the insect which produces the highest number of offspring.

Gidmay is the generic name of the song. Gidmay and Lanta stand for the bridegroom and the bride. In actual singing, these names are replaced by those of the couple.

Martha Qorro

1. Gidmay son of Da/ati, Gidmay the bulls are fighting.
Gidmay the bulls are fighting, in the land of *Masabeda*,
In *Masabeda* at the house of Tekwi Yawari.
2. Lanta, my dear, when I saw decorated walls, when I saw the decoration,
I thought this was done for mere beauty,
Thought it was for mere beauty, but I realize it’s because you are leaving.
3. Be strong; that you have to leave is your parents’ decision.
Be strong, even though you’ve been sprained while very young.
You’ve been given away very young, the spider of true color.

4. Had I been your parents you wouldn't go there.
I'm not your parents, what can we do?
My dear Lanta, be strong.
5. This distant stranger, why did you accept him?
Why did you accept him, this one with heels as rough as roof tiles?
This one with rough heels, like those of salt lake warthogs.
6. You have accepted a stranger; you've already accepted him.
You've accepted a stranger, whose back is covered with dirt scales,
Whose back is covered with dirt scales, like that of a hyena from Gorowa land.
7. The man you have accepted,
The man you have accepted has a back covered with dirt scales.
His back is covered with dirt scales, like the earth-roofed house of the cold uplands.
8. This stranger, what does he like best?
He is inclined to live on stale local beer,
To live on stale beer made from scum.
9. The spider of true color, my heart has sunk.
My heart has sunk, until my sweat dried.
If my heart has sunk so much, what about those of your parents?
10. Daughter of our father, cry in your heart,
For the stranger of that family has no brothers.
He has no brothers in our midst, as he comes from the Hadza tribe.
11. My dear girl, cry in your heart.
Tell your father to give you a cow,
To give you a pregnant cow to keep.
12. Life is to be lived carefully, not in a hurry.
Living in the home of other people requires calm.
Life is not to be hurried, it is one step at a time.
13. If you take life with lust, you will face those sticks long stored on the roof,
The sticks full of dust; you'll think they are for herding calves,
But alas! They are for teaching you a lesson!
14. My dear Lanta, I am going back home.
I am going back home; I leave you in peace.
I leave you in peace; be strong.

*Collected by Matle Akonaay
Translated by Martha Qorro and Yusuf Lawi*

[pp. 275–9:]

FATMA BINTI ATHMAN, TWO SATIRICAL POEMS

Kenya, Kipate/Kiswahili

Fatme binti Athman has spent most of her life on Pate Island, off the northern coast of Kenya. Her language, Kipati, is a Kiswahili dialect. She was ... in her late sixties in 1989 when she performed both poems for the Swahili Poetry Video Project team led by Ann Biersteker and Richard Randall. Fatma binti Athman has been blind since birth and learned these poems, and many others that she knows, by listening to the performances of others. She does not perform poetry professionally or publicly.

Both poems are examples of *tumbuizo*, or commiseration songs. The *tumbuizo* is considered to be one of the oldest forms of Swahili poetry, usually performed by women for audiences of women and children in private settings. Unlike other Swahili poetic genres, there is no set metrical pattern for *tumbuizo*, nor a particular rhyme scheme associated with the genre, although rhyming words often are used. As is the case with other available examples of *tumbuizo*, the names of the original composers of these poems are unknown. ...

Anne Biersteker

My Husband Went to Pate

My husband went to Pate to harvest oranges; I waited to welcome him.
I waited standing until I fell because of fatigue.
I waited for him happily until my heart became sad.
I waited and when he entered I told him, 'I greet you.'
I received him in a cleared space and hung away his bow.
I received his axe and hoe and I put them behind the door.
I removed his head covering and put it in front of the door.
I took him to the bathroom and washed off his dust and dirt.
I rubbed him with oil and water; I shaved him where necessary.
I removed his farming clothes and dressed him in his finest garments.
I made him drink lots of water to clear his stomach.
And at night we lay down together and he told me deceitful tales.
He told me, 'Dear, I'll never marry another and will not do anything to hurt you.
In the morning I will go to the workshop and make ornaments for you.
I will make clasps, beaded and chain necklaces to circle your neck.
I will make ankle rattles for you and ear plugs and bracelets to remove your fatigue.'
In the morning I went to the kitchen and heard the sounds of celebration.
I asked, 'What's going on in this town?' I was told, 'Your husband has gone off.
He has married a young girl and the dowry is the sum of your efforts.
He has married a virgin today and her mother can do nothing but say,
"Give me the fruit on the mkungu tree.
Its rind should be used to rub his spine.
You should rub him on both sides but especially on his back bone."
Then I smashed the pots and pans on to the ground.
I threw myself down, then stood and broke the small and large beds
And I cut the bed caning; then I left the house.

Transcribed by Ibrahim Noor Shariff

Translated by Ann Biersteker

The Daughter, the Mother, and the Husband

Mother:

Day and night his behavior grows more grievous;
As a disgraceful husband he has no equal.

Daughter:

There's no one like him; he has no rival.
He has passed beyond all limits.
He brings nothing but hostility when he enters our house.
When he comes inside, he exudes nothing but hostility.
His screams and shouts torment me.
Even the walls and doors all tremble.
Even the walls and doors shake with fear.
Everything trembles when he enters.
He brings war all day and I am afraid to speak.
I am silent and fear to speak.
I am silent when he enters shouting
With derision and hostility.
I have no chance to rest – none.
Never do I have a chance to rest, not once.
Mother, you should not see me thus.
I am drained by his hostility.
If I were plump and jolly it would be surprising,
It would be surprising [if] I were plump and jolly.

Mother:

What is surprising is why you have not forced him to leave.
He did not build your home.
You must respond to him.
Why have you kept him in your house?
You must respond to him. Why have you kept him in your house?
Why have you kept him in your house?
You must speak.

Daughter:

He says: 'You will not depart until I bury you.
What you want is a divorce.
What you want is for me to divorce you –
That is what you want – I buried your mother
And you have no father.'
There is no one he does not curse.
But no one curses him.
Who is there he does not curse?
Who dares to curse him?
It's best I be killed so I may die and rest.
Being married to him, what happiness is this?
What happiness is this? To be married to him?
He says: 'What happiness is this?
All right, I'll kill you so you may die and rest.
On my part should I cry – whose loss is it?
Whose loss is it? Should I cry?'

Mother:

Whose loss is it? Your friends would
Respect you for responding.
Even if he is a *Sharif*, why have you kept him in your house?

Why have you kept him, even if he is a *Sharif*?
Why have you kept him?
Do you keep a dog if it torments you?
If it's his house, go to the coast.
Go to the coast, if it's his house.
If it's his house, then
That which is written must be.
To be married to him, I would have rejected it, my dear.
I would have rejected it, my dear.
The marriage was ordered by your father.
He commanded that you marry this man.
You wanted to stay cooking at home.
Cooking at home was where you wanted to stay.

Daughter:

I wanted to stay cooking at home
But I was forced into this marriage.
I know he is not a husband. Why did I not refuse?
Why did I not refuse? I know he is not a husband.
Why did I not refuse and stay at home with you?

Mother:

Your dilemma is sorrowful,
And that father of yours, why is he silent?
Why is he silent, that father of yours?
Why is he silent, my child?
And if I look after you,
What will others say about your pain?

Daughter:

Why do they speak, saying I've become thin?
I've become thin as a dried fish.
My friends say: 'You are nauseous, my friend;
You are nauseous, my friend.
I think you are pregnant.
You are nauseous.'
I did not become pregnant.
My husband torments me.

Daughter and Mother together:

They say, 'Shhh – don't be like that dog.
Don't relive her story.
Shhh – don't be like that dog.
Don't relive her story; be careful.'
Truly there are no husbands.
Truly there are no husbands.
I said I did not become pregnant.
I am tormented.
They say, 'Shhh – Don't be like that dog.
Don't relive her story.
Look at her carefully.'
Husbands there are none.
'Don't relive the story of her mother.
She who desires;
She who desires; don't relive her mother's story.
Those who are troubled are like elders.

To be married to them, what happiness is there for me?
What happiness is there for me to be married to them?
What happiness is there for me to be married to any man?
What does it bring me?
Even did I desire another to enter,
Were another to enter my desire,
For another to enter I could be
Beyond this evil, and you would not have
Even a water jug and a cloth to carry it –
They would be stolen from your head.

Transcribed and translated by Ann Biersteker and Salma Hussein

[pp. 291–3:]

QUEEN NAMUNYALA, [FUNERAL SONG]

Uganda, Lusamia

Queen Namunyala lives in a small village in Eastern Uganda, near the border with Kenya. At the time of recording this piece in 1988 she gave her age as fifty-two. A widow with no formal education, Namunyala is a funeral singer who leads and manages her own singing group. She performs with the group and composes all of its songs, many of which are recorded live at funerals. ...

Singing at funerals is a widespread practice among the Baluhya community, of which the Basamia, Namunyala's people, are a subgroup, living on both sides of the Kenya-Uganda border. The singers perform not only dirges, but also topical songs about life and its many trials. The songs are original compositions, written in response to a specific death and referring to a particular individual, family, and community. The main intention of the performances is both to console the bereaved and other mourners and to help pass the long hours of the communal wake, which is a necessary part of the funeral rites. ...

Austin Bukenya and Jackee Budesta Batanda

The Language of Healers

The disease that attacked my mother came like this;
The disease that attacked my mother came like this:
Fellow Basamia, the disease that came without warning
Attacked my mother in the head and the chest.

I took her to the health center at Buyinja,
And saw a doctor called Badru.
Badru examined her
And told me to take her to the health center
At Lutolo.

On arrival at the health center at Lutolo,
We saw a doctor called Ojiambo.
Ojiambo examined her
And he told us to take her to the health center
At Nambwere.

When we got to the health center at Nambwere,
A doctor called Syambi examined her
And told us that she had a bad infection in the chest.

Then he said we should take her to the health center
At Lumino.

When we got to the health center at Lumino,
A doctor called Nambogo examined her
And also told us that my mother's chest was badly infected.
And he also told us to take her to the health center
At Masafu.

When we arrived at the health center at Masafu,
We found there a doctor called Mulijo.
Mulijo examined her.
He told us that my mother's chest was in a sorry state.
He too advised us to take her to
Dabani Hospital.

When we got to Dabani Hospital,
The doctors examined her,
And they told us that my mother's ailment
Required traditional medicine.

On that advice I took my mother home,
And from home I picked up
Two thousand Uganda shillings
And gave them to the traditional healer.
The traditional healer told me
That it was evil spirits afflicting my mother.

So we had to slaughter a fowl for Were [God]
And another fowl for his friend.
But the sickness was getting worse.

While we were there,
More traditional healers came with bombo herbs.
Others came with other herbs, and banana leaves,
On which they made my mother sit.

Eeeeeee, eeeeeee, eeeeeee, sara sara.
Knock, knock, water.
We have chased them away.
Power, power.

Let me tell you about the tongues of diviners;
Let me tell you about the language of diviners:
We call them drug-addicted crooks.
They twist words around.

They distort words in order to confuse us,
And take our money
While the disease spreads.
They do not cure any disease.

Translated by Jackee Budesta Batanda

[pp. 351–2:]

COMMUNAL SONG

Uganda, Lango

The song ‘One Blanket’ was performed [in 1996] in the Lango language by eight women from Odokomit Village in Lira, a province of northern Uganda. For decades, the region has been a site of violent conflict. ...

The song dates back to an earlier period of turmoil in the 1970s, when Idi Amin was president of Uganda. ... It was common for families to lack such basic necessities as sugar, salt, and soap because of Amin’s policies.

Among the Langi, communal songs are owned by everyone in the community, and anyone can revise songs to suit a particular situation. ‘One Blanket’ is the kind of communal song sung at Langi beer parties and other social occasions that call for dancing. In Lango society, wealth is measured not only in cash but also in the number of children fathered by a single man. This is also a humorous song, in which the women ask – in response to their husbands’ unspoken complaints – how they can possibly have more children when they have no privacy with their husbands.

Florence Ebila

One Blanket

One blanket!
The children also included!
How can you say
That I have refused to deliver?

One blanket!
And for the children also included!
My husband,
How can you say
That I have refused to conceive?

Mr. The-Owner-of-Riches,
Curled inside his sack, really,
He quarreled till dawn.
How can you say that I refused to—
That I refused to conceive?

Mr. This-Man curled inside his sack,
Really,
He quarreled till dawn.
How can you say
That I refused to conceive?

My Boss!
One blanket!
The children also included!
The visitor is also around!
Now, how can you say
That I refused to conceive?

My Boss!

One blanket!
The children also included!
The visitor is also around!
Now, how do you say
That I refused to conceive?

Translated by Florence Ebila

[pp. 352–6:]

SONGS COMPLAINING ABOUT HUSBANDS AND LOVERS

Complaints about husbands and lovers form the subject matter for many songs sung by women in East Africa. Often, women sing these on specific occasions, as is the case for the first five songs collected here. Other songs may be sung in various contexts, as is the case with the final two songs in this section.

‘The Impotent One Climbed a Tree’ is typical of the Langi songs sung by women at beer parties, where they may also feign drunkenness in order to express themselves without inhibition. The group of women of Odokomit village, in northern Uganda, who sang this song do not know the name of the original composer. The crested crane, an icon of honor and beauty, appears on the flag of Uganda; here it is used sarcastically in describing the husband. The repeated word *iya* in the song serves to give rhythmic emphasis to the singer’s words.

‘The Greedy Husband’ was sung by S.C. Hara of Ekwendeni village in Mzimba, Malawi. This song is a *hlombe* song, sung during a dance performed by both men and women. Again, no one knows the name of the original composer. The repeated phrase in this song, *Siyayo hoyo mbelebele*, is a rhythmical repetition of syllables without specific meaning.

The three songs from women in the Rumphi District of Malawi were sung at a women’s dance called *visekese*. The dance is part of a competition among various women’s associations, called *boma*, held in the villages during September and October. As accompaniment, they use a *chisekese*, a square rattle made from straw. The first and second of these songs complain about a man who has migrated to Johannesburg for work, while the third is about the jealousy a woman feels when her husband is adulterous. ...

‘The Irresponsible Husband,’ sung by Njira Chenga, is a work song of Waduruma women, who create a common rhythm for their work. Women have typically sung such songs while cultivating and harvesting, as well as while doing household chores.

Ann Biersteker, Florence Ebila, Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu, and Sheila Ali Ryanga

The Impotent One Climbed a Tree

Langi Women of Odokomit, Uganda, Lango

The impotent one climbed up the tree.
When you see him, he appears like the crested crane.
The impotent one climbed up the tree, as if to shepherd me.
Iya, even if I am going to the well,
Iya, you follow me.
Iya, even on my way to pick vegetables
Iya, you follow me.
Iya, even on the way to collect firewood,
Iya, you follow me.
The impotent one, really, when one is useless!

Translated by Florence Ebila

The Greedy Husband

S.C. Hara, Malawi, Chingoni

Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
Here is a gluttonous chief.
He eats anything.
He is a gluttonous chief.

She cooked okra.
Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
Here is a gluttonous chief.
He eats anything.
He is a gluttonous chief.
He is a gluttonous chief.

She has cooked okra.
Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
Siyayo hoyo mbelebele.
He is a gluttonous chief.

Translated by Boston J. Soko and Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu

Three Visekese Songs

Women of Rumphi District, Malawi, Chitumbuka

We Who Do Not Have Men

We who do not have men,
They have bought for us colorless clothes.
We who do not have men,
They have bought for us colorless clothes.
I cannot tolerate this.
Let's love each other, my relatives.
Let's love each other, my husband.
I cannot tolerate this.

You Who Go to Johannesburg

You who go to Johannesburg,
Please please tell him,
I am naked and so is his mother.
Leader: I am naked.
All: I am naked and so is his mother.
Leader: I am naked.
All: I am naked and so is his mother.
I am naked and so is his mother.

That Woman at Chombe

That woman at Chombe,
She has legs like a hedgehog.
That woman at Chombe,
She has legs like a hedgehog.
She is in agony; she is in agony.
Ah hi yo!
Ah hi yo!
She is in agony; she is in agony.
She has been in agony all night; she is in agony.

Translated by Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu

The Irresponsible Husband

Njira Chenga, Kenya, Kiduruma

Pound, my daughter, pound, and let the maize be clean.
The child is crying because she is sick.
When my husband goes for a drink, he does not come back home.
He says he is not yet through.
But when it is time for dowry negotiations, oh, my,
He dresses smartly in trousers and
He goes to count the cows and the money in hundreds.
When it is time to feast, he has no problems.
When I point this out,
I am accused of talking too much.
I do not talk too much, my friend,
I speak the truth about my old man.

Translated by Sheila Ali Ryanga

[pp. 356–7:]

COMMUNAL, *VIMBUZA* SONGS

Malawi, Chitumbuka

Vimbuza is a curative dance, danced primarily by women in the northern region of Malawi. Men sometimes dance *vimbuza*, but mainly for commercial purposes. For women, the dance is part of traditional treatment for illnesses of the mind and spirit, which are also called *vimbuza*. ...

The dance is performed at night near an afflicted woman's home. Both men and women form a circle, inside which an afflicted woman dances, accompanied by drumbeats and clapping. The dancer wears colorful beads and amulets, rattles on her arms and legs, and a short skirt made of animal skin. She smears her body with either ashes or flour paste. She is in total control of the proceedings, choosing the songs and drumbeats, since the spirits speak through her, and they must be obeyed and appeased. If the spirits have to be exorcised, exorcism specialists prepare herbs and sometimes a concoction of porridge made from uncooked maize flour and blood, which the woman drinks. The dance can last for one night or several nights, depending on the problem.

Legend has it that the *vimbuza* dance was brought to the Ngoni people of the Mzimba District by a Bisa woman from northeastern Zambia called Nyamvula, who had been taken captive. She danced, sang, and made utterances always in her Bisa language. The legend is supported by the fact that, up to the late 1940s, all *vimbuza* dancers in Mzimba, when in trance, made utterances in the Bisa language, in imitation of Nyamvula. Songs often critique the patrilineal system followed by all northerners in Malawi. ...

Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu, Boston J. Soko, and Desmond D. Phiri

Mr. Nyirongo I

You don't know what has happened to Mr. Nyirongo.
Guess what has happened to Mr. Nyirongo.
He has caught syphilis.
The syphilis has made him sterile.

Mr. Nyirongo II

Mr. Nyirongo, I am suffering.
Please appeal to your son.
Your son has been gone so long
That I will have to remarry.

It is my father who gave me the basket.
It is my father who gave me the ladle.
It is my father who gave me the towel.
It is my father who gave me the cloth.
Everything in my house was given to me by my father.
So I am going to have to remarry.

Translated by Boston J. Soko

Mother-in-Law

When your mother-in-law abuses you,
You too must abuse her.
She has begun it;
Oh yes, oh yes, she has begun it;
She has begun it.

When your father-in-law abuses you,
You too must abuse him.
Oh yes, oh yes,
He has begun it;
He has begun it.

Translated by Desmond D. Phiri

[pp. 416–8:]

MBUYU NALUMANGO, POUNDING SONGS

Zambia, Kikaonde, Chinyanja, Chitumbuka, Silozi

Used to grind food grain, such as maize, peanuts, sorghum, finger millet, and cassava, for easy consumption, the mortar and pestle is a common apparatus in most parts of rural Zambia, as it is in much of Africa. ...

The process of pounding is an art, which requires precision in order to avoid spillage of food or damage to hands. In most cases two people carry out the pounding process using two pestles and one mortar, hence the importance of accurate timing during the act. The women alternate their movements up and down with the pestle in the mortar and rely on communal pounding songs to direct their motions and intervals. Because the process is lengthy and may prove monotonous and tiring, women also enjoy singing as a form of entertainment and an aid to endurance.

Some songs call attention to important issues in society, such as gender biases and traditional norms. Other songs bemoan a woman's heavy burden and express anger at men, who appear to live easy lives at the expense of women. ... Performed by Mbuyu Nalumango in 2001, the following communal songs were sung in Kikaonde, a language of northwestern Zambia; Chinyanja and Chitumbuka from the east; and Silozi from the Western Province. ...

Nalishebo N. Meebelo

Let Me Try Whether I Can Pound

Let me try whether I can pound.
Let me try whether I can pound harder.
Let me try to pound, pay attention.
Let me try the way I used to in the past.
Let me try harder, the way I used to in the past.
Let me try the way I used to in the past, pay attention.
There are bananas in our village.
There are plenty of bananas in our village.
There are bananas in our village, pay attention.
When my breasts were still firm,
Young men used to come
to see how young women pound.
My mother sent them away.
My child is still young.
She does not remember to boil water.
She only knows how to pound.
I am old and forgotten
And my husband is gone,
But I know he will come back tomorrow.
My husband is divorcing me.
He loves those who wear makeup.
I want to return to my home.

Let Us Pound, Let Us Pound

Let us pound, let us pound.
Oh, let us pound with our feet apart.
When the chief's wife enters the shop,
She actually has her feet apart,
With a fly whisk and walking stick in her hands.
Oh, let us pound with our feet apart.

Oh, Grandma

Pounding is painful.
If only one could just eat.
Oh, Grandma.
When your friend's child has grown bigger,
Take the child and put it on your back.
Oh, Grandma,
Where will you find a white customer?
Oh, Grandma.

I Am Pounding for Mr. John

I am pounding for Mr. John.
He is lying there in idleness, Mr. John,
With his big stomach, Mr. John,
Like a toad, Mr. John,
Look at the chunks he takes off, Mr. John,
Look at the way he swallows, Mr. John.
His throat is like a bottle, Mr. John.
Ci ci ci ci, Mr. John.
Ci ci ci, Mr. John.

Oh, My Visitors

Oh, my visitors,
Oh, my visitors,
What are they going to eat?
No, sir or madam, I have a bit of maize meal for myself,
In a bowl with a cover.
I only ask that a young boy
Should prepare some porridge for me.

Translated by Nalishebo N. Meebelo and Mbuy Nalumango

[pp. 431–4:]

COMMUNAL, NINE LULLABIES FROM ZANZIBAR

Tanzania, Kiswahili

Women have sung lullabies to babies all over the world from time immemorial. African women rock babies to sleep while they are strapped to their backs or held on their laps, providing them with a complete sense of security.

The Kiswahili lullabies included here are from Zanzibar, but are similar to lullabies recorded in Tanga in northeast Tanzania. Though they have different themes, all are sung to the same tune and with the same refrain.

...

Lullabies, formed into rhymed stanza of varying lengths, often seem melancholy, harkening back to the pain and suffering of childbirth and perhaps to the difficulties of life. Swahili mothers may wish for the child's rapid growth to maturity, as well as for the child's extreme grief when the mother dies. ... Numerous references to both political and cultural happenings of the time – royalty and slavery, seagoing vessels and spices – fix the cultural location of these lullabies. ...

Saïda Yahya-Othman, Nalishebo N. Meebelo, and Florence Ebila

Don't Cry

Don't cry, don't cry, you will make me cry too.
Reserve your tears for when I die,
When you will bang yourself against walls, and be restrained,
When you will throw yourself against trees, and be under watch,
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

When My Mother

When my mother brought me into the world, she called me Kukuwa.
All the Prophet's people recognize me as such.
He who is not my creator cannot uncreate me.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Grow, My Child

Grow, my child, grow, grow big.
Grow like the banana tree, the coconut is too slow.
Grow like the coconut tree, the banana withers away,
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Grow, my child, grow, grow big,
So I can give you a cattle herd, and a goat herd,
So you can drink milk.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Chale's Mother Inquired

Chale's mother inquired, what do you want with Chale?
He has not gone with a begging basket, to Darajani [the marketplace].
He has not gone with a basket, to beg at Forodhani [the seafront].
Chale took poison and left this world
To become a cow, feeding on grass.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

That Canoe Approaching

That canoe approaching, no doubt has something for me.
It has beads for me to string, the size of my neck.
I will not string them, nor give them to my mate.
I will give them to my mother, who shares my secrets.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Slave Girl

Slave girl, let me send you on an errand, to King Hassan,
Who wears a voile tunic, and carries a cane.
The mistake I made, who will intercede for me?
Only the stars, and the king's son.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Hush, Child, Hush

Hush, child, hush, onion and frankincense.
A snake lies on the path, let's crush its head
To let by hewers of wood, and fetchers of water.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

My Beautiful Child

My beautiful child, may God let her grow.
When she grows up, I'll send her to school.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

My Bad Child

My bad child, she cries shamelessly.
If she stops crying, I'll send her to Europe.
Ooh, my child, ooh.
Ooh, my child, ooh.

Translated by Saïda Yahya-Othman

From:

Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region

Edited by Fatima Sadiqi, Amira Nowaira, Azza El Kholy, and Moha Ennaji

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009

From the Introduction

[p.1:]

... Rich, poor, well-connected, orphaned, free, and slave women in North Africa participated in the greatest cultural transformations of recorded history. The poets, scholars, and religious teachers among them documented the emotions and conflicts of their times. Nonliterate singers of songs and tellers of tales who were respected and even feared in communities where the written word was rarely invoked have preserved an oral tradition of intergenerational transfer that has assured the continuity of women's memories. Together, they have left a body of literature about the momentous events in women's lives, from marriage songs, laments, and celebrations of valor to women's yearnings and religious rites. They have left a record of women who celebrated Isis and women who led the first ascetic movement into the Egyptian desert to foster the early Christian search for salvation. And in the seventh and eighth centuries, when poverty and tribalism supplanted the institutions of civil authority across North Africa, women's stories tell of joining the new conquerors from Arabia, who brought Islam with them.

[p.3:]

... From the Old Kingdom of Egypt in the third millennium BCE to the fourth century CE, Isis was at the center of a powerful and widespread religion. The songs of Isis belong to the genre of poetic lamentation that women sang throughout the ancient world, and still sing upon life's momentous occasions in North Africa. Lamentations link women, fertility, and the life of the community. They speak to a world in which personal grief merges with communal burdens of sorrow and regret. They reflect the ancient belief that if women were able to bring forth life, then they were also best able to mourn its end. ...

Amira Nowaira, Azza El Kholy, Marjorie Lightman, Zahia Smail Salhi, Fatima Sadiqi, Khadija Zizi, Moha Ennaji, Nadia El Kholy, and Sahar Hamouda

[pp. 92–4:]

HAFSA BINT AL-HAJ AL-RAKUNIYA, LOVE POEMS

Morocco 1160, Arabic

Hafsa Bint Al-Haj Al-Rakuniya was born in 1135 to a wealthy Berber family in Granada, Spain, which was then one of the primary cities of al-Andalus, the name given to the parts of the Iberian Peninsula that were ruled by North African Muslims from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries. She lived in al-Andalus under the Almohad Dynasty, and became one of its most famous poets. Later in her life she lived in Marrakesh, where she died in 1191.

... She met and fell in love with Abu Ja'far Ibn Sa'id, a poet and son of the Caliph Abd al-Mumin. She also fell in love with the governor of Granada, another distinguished poet. With the first of these men, Hafsa Al-Rakuniya exchanged poems that have been preserved over time. [It's not clear whether these poems were also song lyrics.]

...

The Jamil and Butayna mentioned [in the fifth poem] are a very famous couple in classical Arabic love poetry, the equivalents of Romeo and Juliet.

Nadia Laachiri

One

I praise those lips
because I know what
I am talking about.
I am giving them justice.
By God, I am not lying.
From them I've drunk nectar
more delicious than wine.

Two

I send you greetings that open flowers,
that make the leaves on branches talk.
Never think that distance will make me forget you.
For God's sake, this will never happen.

Three

I'll protect you jealously against spies,
against yourself, against your time,
and the space where you live.
Even if I hide you under my eyelids
until the Day of Judgment,
it won't be enough for me.

Four

Upon your life, our union makes the garden sad,
else it would have shown envy and grief.
The river isn't pleased to see us near,
and the pigeon is singing its sadness.
Do not be angry,
for anger precludes good action.
I don't think the sky has shown
its stars
except to spy on us.

Five

Shall I visit you or will you visit me?
My heart forever inclines
toward what you desire.
I hope you'll be thirsty and hot
when they announce my arrival to you.
My mouth is a fresh and delicious source,
my hair a cool shelter.
So answer me quickly,
O Jamil, you are too patient
towards Butayna!

Six

The visitor who came to see you
has a gazelle's neck;
under his black hair, emerges the moon.
His eyes are made of Babel's magic.
His kiss is sweeter than wine.
His cheeks make roses shy,
and his teeth outvalue pearls.

Translated by Nadia Laachiri

[pp. 275–6:]

COMMUNAL, TAKE MY BRACELET AND OTHER SONGS

Tunisia, Arabic

These five songs were sung by different women who had been accused of committing adultery and forcibly placed in a special prison called *Dar Joued*. Recorded and published in 1992, the poems come from an earlier era, lasting until the 1970s, when Tunisian women were subject to confinement in *Dar Joued* or *Dar Adel* as punishment for any offense their husbands regarded as a breach of the law. In these prisons, women endured various forms of humiliation and oppression aimed at making them repent for their rebellious acts. Depriving imprisoned women of food was one form of punishment that a husband might inflict on his disobedient wife. One of the most serious reasons for sending a wife to *Dar Joued* was her display of sexual desire.

...

The word *shara'a* in the text alludes to the Islamic tribunal that rules along with the *qadi* (judge), on personal status laws. The *jaid* is paid by a husband who has brought an official request to imprison his wife. In Tunisian popular tradition, the color green denotes a woman who expresses her sexual desire.

Dalenda Larguèche

Song One

Oh my God,
In my prison,
Humiliated,
With no man and no meat,
With no basket,
Alone with my sighs
And the *jaid* behind the walls.

Song Two

I let him down.
I will never roam about
His house.
Harm came first from him,
Leaving behind women,
Beaten and humiliated

Song Three

I am still green
In the blossoming spring.
With my soft eye,
I seduce.

Song Four

Ever since we tasted
The tea of pleasures
Sadness has become our fate.
May God forgive
My lover and me.
I came before the *shar'a* –
What a misery!

Song Five

Take my bracelet,
Give me back my freedom,
You, the man I hate!
Take my earrings,
And one of my curls,
But I will never live
In the *Dar Adel* house of
Cursed women;
My father's house is waiting for me!
Take my belongings
In front of the judge and his witnesses.
I have a young lover
Who at every nightfall
Awaits me.

Translated by Moha Ennaji

[pp. 294–5:]

MALOUMA BINT MOKTAR OULD MEIDAH, AN ARTIST WHO UNSETTLES: AN INTERVIEW

Mauritania, Arabic

[The biographical information and interview extracts below are included here because of the light they shed on traditional musical practices in Mauritania; Malouma herself rejected these practices.]

Malouma Bint Moktar Ould Meidah, widely known simply as Malouma, was born in 1960 in Mederdra, in the Trarza region of southern Mauritania. She is the daughter and granddaughter of celebrated male griots: Her father, Moktar Ould Meidah, is a prominent traditional musician as well as a gifted poet, and her grandfather, Mohamed Yahya Ould Boubane, was also a virtuoso poet and expert at the *tidinit*, a small traditional lute-like stringed instrument. She learned music from her parents at an early age, schooled first on the *ardine*, a multi-stringed instrument similar to a West African *kora*. She started performing at twelve, accompanying her parents, and by fifteen was already regarded as an accomplished solo performer, well skilled in the traditional repertoire learned from her family.

As Malouma grew and developed as a musician, her influences broadened, ranging from Arabic music, including the performances of the celebrated Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum, to European classics and the blues. A talented artist, composer, and interpreter with an extraordinary voice, Malouma is today considered the first truly modern Mauritanian composer. Her highly innovative work reflects a unique mix of aesthetic and cultural influences, combining traditional and modern sounds – as expressed in her use of both acoustic and electric guitar – and drawing on the Moorish music of the Sahara desert as well as the rhythms of Senegal. Like Mauritania itself, Malouma's music is a place where Berber, Arab, and West African cultures meet. ...

The [interview] text presented here was excerpted from a conversation with Ould Omer that appeared in the French-language literary journal *Notre Librairie* in 1993. ...

Abena P.A. Busia

Interview

I refuse to sing seated among an assembly of people who have come to listen to my music, in the traditional manner of emirs and other nobility of bygone days. I prefer to sing standing in front of an unknown audience that has chosen to come and listen to me out of love for my music, and for no other reason.

I refuse to continue to remain seated throughout the night, singing unending praise-songs. A song, to me, must be short in order not to be boring, and it must present something that is likely to be pleasing to the audience. I do not intend to continue with the tradition of praising this one or that one. My music supports the widow and the orphan; it supports the oppressed. ...

As you know, there are no real composers in our country. This is a new concept, which has not yet filtered through our traditional perceptions of music. The same applies to our poets, who are still in the habit of composing poetry in pre-Islamic modes. They should be taught to compose lighter pieces... I am fighting for the introduction of new themes that will express commitment on the part of the poet. Traditional poetry has always remained confined to the themes of memory and of ephemeral love. ...

... By nature, also, a Mauritanian tends to be skeptical about whatever another Mauritanian undertakes! This is because our audience remains local. In order to become popular, one has to be successful elsewhere first. I had to first become successful in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Iraq, before I could have an audience here. ...

Translated by Christiane Owusu-Sarpong and Esi Sutherland-Addy

[pp. 325–6:]

FATMA RAMADAN, LULLABY TO A DAUGHTER

Egypt, Arabic

This lullaby is widely known and sung in both the countryside and urban areas in Egypt. Many different variations of the same song can be found in areas as remote as Upper Egypt and the oases of the western desert. Evidence suggests that this lullaby has long historical roots with some older women indicating that the song was handed down to them orally by their grandmothers or great-grandmothers. ...

The outstanding feature of this song is its quiet, melancholic rhythm, expressing the sense of oppressed resignation experienced by mothers on first learning that they have just given birth to a daughter rather than the greatly desired son. ...

This version of the lullaby was sung by Fatma Ramadan, who was born in 1937 and lives in the densely populated district of Amriya, 30 kilometres from Alexandria. ... The recording of her singing the lullaby was made on 30 June 1999. Fatma Ramadan pointed out that she had heard both her mother and grandmother sing the lullaby when she was a child.

Amira Nowaira

Oh, my darling, little darling!
You're the moonlight of my life.
Oh, my darling, I love you so,
And I'll love all who love you!

When they said it was a boy,
I could hold up my head.
My eggs were fresh and peeled,
And my food was rich in butter.

When they said it was a girl,
The place fell on my head.
They gave me whole eggs unpeeled,
cooked in water, not in butter.

Oh, my darling, little darling,
I won't marry you off to some foreign place.
I'll marry you off close to me,
So that you'll always be near me.

Oh, my darling, little darling!
You're the moonlight of my life.
Oh, my darling, I love you so,
And I'll love all who love you!

Translated by Amira Nowaira

[pp. 340–3:]

RABEA QADIRI, SONGS OF SEPARATION AND UNION

Morocco, Arabic

Rabea Qadiri was born in 1947 in eastern Morocco and now lives in Ahfir, a culturally important eastern Moroccan city. ...

The group of songs that were recorded at a wedding [in Ahfir in 2001] serves to describe the various rituals involved in marriage ceremonies in Morocco, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Qadiri sings them along with other women at wedding parties, accompanied by dancing. The songs are grouped according to three broad steps in the marriage ceremony, which often takes place over a series of days.

The first of these steps is *dfu'*, which takes its origin from the standard Arabic verb *dafa'am* meaning 'to push', 'to give, or 'to pay'. *Dfu'* in this context means to offer gifts, presents, and food to the bride.

... The henna ceremony that takes place prior to the wedding ceremony is an important female bonding ritual, as women gather while henna is applied decoratively to the bride's hands and feet, often by a professional woman artist hired for the purpose. When she finishes her work, the women offer prayers to the prophet and ululate to cheer the bride and chase the evil eye from the house. In response to the traditional *henna* songs, the groom's family sings songs of warm welcome.

The following day, the bridegroom, accompanied by his family and friends, arrive to take the bride to her husband's house. Before they do so, the husband and his relatives pay a sum of money so as to free the wife, whose situation is described as that of an imprisoned person. ... The *neggafas*, women hired to decorate the bride and sing songs in praise of her beauty, are usually present at this ritual. Additional songs are sung while the couple is in the process of leaving for the husband's house, which completes the big day.

Abdennour Kharraki

Dfu' Wedding Songs

Song One

Your brothers are coming, O, Yamina!
Bringing presents and staying up with you.
Here we come, don't say otherwise!
Spread the silk and welcome us.

Song Two

Welcome, O, foreigners,
Who are coming with our brother.

Henna Day Wedding Songs

Song One

Prayer and peace be upon the prophet of God.
There is no power, save that of our master Mohammed.
May God be with the great powerful prophet.

Song Two

We are bringing the henna
From paradise
To you, our bride.

Song Three

Look up, sultan, to see her beauty.
The bride is like a branch of almonds,
So let her pass.
The bride is like a cluster of bananas,
So let her appear.
She is married to him
Against enemies' wishes.

Song Four

Here the gold has fallen,
And here we search for it.

Big Day Wedding Songs

Song One

The bride is freed from the protection
Of her father.
The bride is freed from the protection
Of her husband.
The bride is freed from the protection
Of her brother.

Song Two

Here is the fish,
Here it is.
Here is the honey,
Here it is.
Here is the most beautiful bride,
Here she is.

Song Three

Look, O, bachelors,
Don't say she is not a virgin.
Such are daughter of
Noble families.
May God bring her to us with wealth.
She is another dove in our nest.
Congratulations to you, O sultan!
This is a dove coming to the house.

Song Four

He married her; he married her.
He swears not to leave her home.
She married him; she married him.
She swears not to leave him.
May God bless her husband.

Translated by Abdenmour Kharraki

[pp. 351–2:]

HADDA N'AYT HSSAIN, O, BRIDE: BERBER WEDDING SONG

Morocco, Berber

Hadda N'Ayt Hssain ... was born around 1930 in Timoulilt, in southeastern Morocco, into a wealthy Berber family; her father was a *qaïd*, a local chief. She has always lived in or near her village of origin. ...

Marriage rituals and songs in Morocco, a mixture of traditional practices, religious beliefs, and acts of survival, are handed down from generation to generation, with each one adding its own flavor. Marriage is an occasion for a mother-in-law to exercise her power and for the bride's mother to negotiate some space for her daughter in the household's power network. ...

'O, Bride', a woman-to-woman song, is popular in Moroccan Berber rural areas. It celebrates the female bond that links daughters to their mothers and sisters, which is rarely expressed in everyday life lest the daughter fail to become a good wife and daughter-in-law when she marries. The song ends by expressing fears that female in-laws will make life difficult for the new bride.

Fatima Sadiqi

O, bride, may God be your first assistant!
May He give you luck!
Who would believe
That we celebrate your wedding with joy?

My darling daughter!
You are better than a beautiful singer.
Give me your hand
To decorate with henna.
Give me your foot
To decorate with a bracelet.
O, my lovely daughter,
Don't let your female in-laws
Call you a dirty girl.
They will turn you
Into a shepherd or a slave.

Translated by Fatima Sadiqi

DRAFT NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

From:

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From the Introduction

[p. 4:]

The enveloping presence of orature attests to the dynamic authority of women's verbal art to act at once as a reservoir of history, a mode of cultural validation, and an arena of protest. Stylistically free forms such as songs, lullabies, and folktales, as well as their formulaic counterparts like dirges, praise songs, incantations, elegies, and proverbs, are vehicles of knowledge creation, preservation, and transmission, which provide tangible and symbolic ways for women to legitimate and critique the social system.

[p. 6:]

Clear gender divisions generally instituted and determined the use or misuse of genres. These divisions presumably reflected the gender divisions of work and power in specific cultures. For instance, among the Dyula established in Kong, in the northeastern part of Côte d'Ivoire, men were usually in charge of the *ko koro*, or 'chronicles', and a great portion of mask songs and war songs were hidden from women. On the other hand, women were in charge of wedding songs and songs for female circumcision (*keneke donkili*), and 'when they [had] a grievance to air with their close relations', they sang *kurubi* songs (Derive 1995: 123).* ... Where catharsis was possible through the performance of songs, women seized upon these as openings for verbal rebellion.

* Derive, Jean (1995) 'The function of oral art in the regulation of social power in Dyula society', in Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner (eds), *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[p. 7:]

Creativity in West African orature can be found first and foremost in the constant creation of genres, which, over the centuries, have forced dialogues and opened up social negotiations, even where doors were usually tightly closed to protect those in power from losing face. ... Alongside 'reversal rituals' ..., during which gender roles are actually reversed for short periods of time and lampooning is officially allowed, the existence of ... the Nzema *Avudwene* festival songs (Agovi 1995)*, and *Ayabomo*, or 'maiden songs' ... provide evidence that neither husband nor king is ever above insult, even within the most tenacious forms of patriarchy.

* Agovi, Kofi (1995) 'A king is not above insult: The politics of good governance in Nzema Avudwene festival songs', in Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner (eds), *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[p.7:]

In oral cultures, the art of orature moves far beyond the skillful choice of words. ... These poetic texts, ambivalent and ambiguous in themselves, are performed in an expressive, rhythmic manner, enhanced by a play on intonation that, combined with theatrical gestures and mime, opens up the meaning of the 'text in context' and reinforces the *double entendre*, thus producing a subtle connivance between the speaker or singer and the listeners, who might respond to or choose to ignore the message. Meaning – especially when it is provocative – can further be wrapped up in total theatrical silence or simply rewritten and transformed through various nonverbal codes, such as the drum, the xylophone, the flute, or the horn ...

[p. 9:]

[The] *griotte* is one of the most important personalities of a host of West African and Sahelian cultures: Wolof, Mende, Songhay, Bariba, Fulbe, Mossi, Dogon, Hausa, and Dagomba. The *griottes'* work, as is true in general of oral texts, is marked by a sophisticated use of language. It is codified by specific methods for the articulation of theme and style. Other professionals of the 'literary class' to which *griottes* belong, as well as their patrons,

appreciate their work for its ability to conform to the tenets of the genre while also displaying originality in subtle embroideries of language, voice, and style of performance. All professional singers are judged according to the beauty of their singing voices, the quality of their memories, their sense of artistry, and their cultural knowledge and literacy. They usually benefit from their professional training by accruing power and privilege through their sociocultural positions. They should not, however, be confused with the elite women who are their patrons, nor with the non-guild affiliated and non-elite women who form the greatest group of ‘commoners’ who also create and perform orature.

[p.17:]

In a study of two modern female *griottes*, Edris Makward (1990)* makes a distinction between one who chronicles contemporary society and one who transmits the history of the ruling class. It is indeed necessary to read certain womens’ songs through the lens of class and caste.

* Makward, Edris (1990) ‘Two griots of contemporary Senegambia’, in Isidore Okpewho (ed.), *The Oral Performance in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

[p. 22:]

In many West African cultures, music is made from a rich blend of drums and percussion instruments, including bells and rattles, and such wind instruments as horns, flutes, and trumpets, as well as xylophones and a variety of string instruments, especially lutes and the kora. Some of these, however, are forbidden to women, except under rare conditions, since instruments are often associated with male spiritual or political power. Not surprisingly, therefore, women have had to be creative. They have turned their bodies, their everyday utensils and even their clothes into instruments to accompany songs and chants. In Igbo, Toucouleur, and Akan societies, for example, a popular instrument women play is the water drum, either a pot filled to a certain level with water and then beaten over the opening with a fan, or a large bowl of water covered by a calabash; the water level may be deftly raised or lowered to provide various levels of sonority. Other sorts of cooking utensils feature in certain ceremonies and in funeral rites of the Diola. Akan women strike a hoe head with stone in their performances, as in ‘The Warring Hosts’ [see below]. For work songs, including pounding songs, the mortar and pestle act as accompaniment. As Frafra women of northern Ghana sing, they pull their clothes tightly across their thighs, turning them into drums on which they play a complex rhythm. Clapping is also an advanced art in many West African female genres of performance. It can be observed in women’s traditional rhythm games and in highly complex rhythmic patterns accompanying songs and chants. Finally, women may also resort to imitating the sounds of instruments. This is what the Ghanaian Zegbulo of Loho does with the sound of the Dagaare xylophone in her ‘Praise Song’ [see below].

[p.36:]

In ‘The history of the Sunjata epic: A review of evidence’, Ivor Wilks invites the reader to concentrate on old Mande songs, which, he postulates, most certainly constitute a faithful rendering of the original composition.* Wilks believes that these short texts, which mention ‘outstanding incidents’ of the past, have been transmitted with accuracy, thanks to the Mande metric pattern of composition that introduces rhythm into the text and, at the same time, serves as a mnemonic device. He reminds us of Ibn Battūta’s fourteenth-century testimony from Mansa Suleyman’s court. Battūta reports, ‘Dougha the interpreter (the *jeli*) comes with his four wives and his slave girls [to sing and commemorate]. There are about a hundred of these, with fine clothes and on their heads, bands of gold and silver adorned with gold and silver balls.’ According to Wilks, Battūta’s chronicle authenticates the existence of Sunjata and places him in the ‘second antecedent generation’ to the fourteenth-century ruler Mansa Musa (Wilks 1999: 47). He affirms that the songs we still hear and record today were most probably those Battūta heard (Wilks 1999: 25–7).

* Wilks, Ivor (1999) ‘The history of the Sunjata epic: A review of evidence’, in Rakog A. Austen (ed.), *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Tuzyline Jita Allan, Dierdre L. Badejo, Abena P.A. Busia, Aminata Diaw, Christiane Owusu-Sarpong, Esi Sutherland-Addy

[pp. 91–4:]

Béatrice Djedja, Maïéto, or the Battle of the Sexes

Côte d’Ivoire, Bété

Every time a woman dies in childbirth, the event is seen in the Bété region as the manifestation of a struggle between men and women that has existed since the beginning of time. The women’s community comes together and performs a war dance, the only one of this kind that women are permitted to dance. On that day, the wives, who have suddenly become terrifying, chase the men away from the village and take over. When the men return, for three consecutive days they are forced to perform the duties ordinarily reserved for women: They must haul water, grind rice, and cook, under the strictest supervision of their wives, who hold court and give orders, each one of them in imitation of the customary quirks and whims of her husband. On these days, no man has the right to enjoy sexual pleasures.

The Bété justify the rite through a myth of origins... Every time a woman dies, three particularly remarkable songs, stemming directly from the myth, are included in the funeral dance, known as *logbo digbeu*, performed by women. Since these songs and dances awaken wicked instincts in women, the sensible man should distance himself when unbridled female mourners come near him. Béatrice Djedja, singer of the village of Yacolidaboudy in the Soubré region, sang the following ceremonial songs for us. They are usually performed as the women return from burying the deceased. They enter the village with their faces blackened with charcoal, the bellies of the pregnant women also blackened. They wear men’s clothing and hold bludgeons, machetes, and spears.

Helen N’gbesso

Song One

Will the day of vengeance ever come
For he who killed our dear Zouzou?
Oh, see, Zouzou, that day is here!
Here within your very city!

Song Two

We are coming for Zagô.
We are coming for Gnali Zagô, the ruler of the village.
You cannot run away from us!

Song Three

We shall avenge you
Waging war, waging war.
We shall avenge you
Declaring war, declaring war.
We shall avenge you
Unleashing war, unleashing war.
We shall fight
And avenge you.

We shall avenge you
Waging war, waging war.
We shall avenge you
Waging war, waging war.

We shall avenge you.
Hear the click of our rifles!
We women are now like men
Hear the click of our rifles!
Hear the click of our rifles!
We nipples women are just like men.
Hear the click of our rifles!

Here we are on the pond.
Let the otter dare come out.
We are panthers!
Here we are on the pond.
Let the otter dare come out.
We are panthers!

I say let us greet Naki.
Oh Naki
Such fine mourning tears we weep.
Tell him I greet her.
We are greeting Naki.
We shall avenge you.
Waging war, waging war.
We are deaf to men's cries.
We shall avenge you.
Warrior shrub, go and fight.
Armored shrub, go and fight.
Go and fight!
We shall avenge you.
We shall fight for you.
Rest where you are.
Rest, where you are lying down.
For we shall fight.
Do not avenge yourself.
We shall avenge you.
Do not avenge yourself.
We shall avenge you.

I seek my husband.
Yes, I seek the husbands.
I seek my husband.
Yes, I seek the husbands.
Just watch me seek my husband!
Yes, seek our husbands.
I seek the husbands of misfortune.
Yes, I seek our husbands.

*Translated into French by Bernard Zadi Zaourou
Translated from French into English by Marjolijn de Jager and Judith Miller*

[pp. 94-5:]

COMMUNAL, THE PLUMP WOMAN'S SONG

Niger, Songhai-Zarma

'The Plump Woman's Song' is the opening air of *Mani Foori*, a festival that celebrates plumpness, which takes place in rural Songhai-Zarma societies. Based on a clearly articulated sense of the feminine aesthetic, the festival is a grand beauty and fashion pageant that takes place after the harvest. The underlying perceptions are those built around the woman as representing for the society a sense of well-being and fulfillment. The woman who is able to evolve into a state of majestic plumpness also reflects the prosperity of her family and/or her husband. A woman who has just had her first child is considered to be at her most beautiful.

A few months before the day of the pageant, the previously crowned queen of plump women distributes grilled chicken parts to all of the young women of the community. In the spirit of this playful festival, each woman accepts a chicken part meant to correspond to her body. Thus, for example, white meat goes to those with well-developed breasts, thighs to those whose lower body is well developed, feathers to those with a lot of hair, and the chicken back to the very thin ones. Women perceived as running around the village rather than caring for their own homes receive chicken feet.

Then women go into seclusion for forty days to fatten up. If a woman has received a bony piece of chicken, the whole family, including the husband, want to meet the challenge of making her attractive. ...

On the day of the festival, the dance arena becomes a space of intense competition. Women emerge from their fattening seclusion, radiant and beautifully dressed, to preen before the public. The drummers are at their disposal as they enter the arena. 'The Plump Woman's Song' is of the genre of rhythmic poetry, chanted at the request of the reigning *Waymonzon*, queen of plump women, as the drummers beat out the dance rhythm....

The first two lines of the last stanza mention the Kebbi and Zamfara armies respectively. These are two powerful Hausa states that rose in the early sixteenth centuries. Kebbi indeed defeated the formidable army of the powerful Songhai empire of the western Sudan. In the shared memory of the Songhai-Zarma, this allusion is an apt metaphor for the exclusion of thin women from this celebration. Amid the poetry, dance, and music, another woman will be elected *Waymonzon* ... until the next harvest.

Fatimata Mounkaila

When the bony woman hears the drum beat the *komkom-no-aci* air,
She springs up, then collapses on her bed.
Her men-folk cry, Hide her! hide her!
The grandmothers cry, Let us hide her.
The mothers cry, Hide her! hide her!

The drums repeat, No hiding place today!
Let her heart burn like a campfire!

When a Zarma girl hears the plump one's air, the *komkom-no-aci*,
When a scrawny woman hears this air,
Her heart burns like a campfire.

As if the whole Kebbi army had swooped down on her,
As if the whole Zamfara army had swooped down on her,
Her heart burns like a campfire.

When the skinny woman hears the drums play *komkom-no-aci* for the plump woman,
She springs up from her sleep,

She runs to her men-folk.
She runs to their children.
She cries, Hide me! hide me!

Her co-wife retorts,
No hiding place, today!
The drums keep beating
No hiding place today for a woman who is so meager
You could lodge a *balanites*, an entire date palm and its roots,
In the empty space between her two buttocks!

Translated by Aïssata Niandou and Antoinette Tidjani Alou

[pp.99–101:]

MARRIAGE SONG CYCLES : COMMUNAL, HAUSA SONGS

Nigeria, Hausa

[The rituals accompanying such songs are described on pages 96–7.]

Song One: Shimbidi, or Opening Day

Aye, mama ye iye
mama ye iye
Aye mamula bolabo
mama ye iye
If marriage could escort marriage
mama ye iye
I would have accompanied you so that we'd go together
mama ye iye
Even if it is *fura* I will learn
mama ye iye

Song Two: Laula

Laula, new bride, Laula
Laulay, Laulaye, Laula,
Stop crying my friend, Laula,
I'm not getting you married, Laula,
I am only taking you to school,
The school of those who own the town.

Song Three: Ahaiye Yaro, or No Way, Boy

'A haiye' 'boy'
'A haiye', 'no way', 'A haiye', no doubt about it.
When it comes to noses, someone is better than another.
When it comes to noses, I too am better than another.
When it comes to eyes, someone is better than another.
When it comes to eyes, I too am better than another.
When it comes to cooking, someone is better than another.

When it comes to cooking, I too am better than another.
When it comes to work, someone is more hard working than another.
When it comes to work, I too am more hard working than another.
When it comes to beauty, someone is more beautiful than another.
When it comes to beauty, I too am more beautiful than another.

Song Four: Mai da Aro, or Returning the Borrowed Bride

Aye, here is the borrowed one returned.
Here is the loan given to us.
Here is your daughter we've returned.
She refused to eat, she refused to drink,
She rejects guinea-corn dumplings,
She just cries some more.
Here is your daughter, owners of the house.
Here is your daughter, we've returned her.
Here is your daughter, we've returned her.
The one who cries all the more,
Cries like a statue,
Red eyes like a buffalo.

Song Five: Wanka, or Bathing the Bride

Old woman with small pot,
May Allah kill you next month,
The month after next so that we drink
Ayyiraye, here is the bastard,
The bastard wrapper *tsalala*.
Don't you allow it to be worn around the waist.

Song Six: Bakyaraya ba, or Farewell Song

You will not stay, you won't stay.
You will stay in front of your house.
You will stay with your husband.
You will not stay [with us].

From this year on, you won't be with us on Tuesday.
From this year on, you won't be with us on Tuesday.
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,
You won't stay with us.
Your mother-in-law owns the garage.
You won't stay with us.
Your father-in-law owns the garage.
You won't stay with us.

Song Seven: Budar Kai, or Unveiling the Bride's Face

You have become 'bring me gown'
You have become 'bring me trousers'
You have become 'bring me cap'
You won't give me water for prayer?

Translated by Ladi Yakubu, Rabi Garba, and Patience Mudiare

[pp. 110–4:]

LAMENTATIONS

In many African societies, death is a time of collective mourning and celebration, for it signifies a transition from this world into that of the ancestors. Funeral and burial ceremonies, meant to usher the deceased into their next abode, are therefore of great importance. During such ceremonies, women speak the grief of the entire community. They also function as historians by celebrating the dead person's life achievements. In many societies, including the Akan of south and central Ghana, songs, chants, and recitatives express grief aesthetically in funeral dirges and laments. ...

The [two] dirges below suggest some of the diversity of this form. ... Like all traditional Akan dirges, 'Nyaako' deals with the themes of the ancestor, of the place of origin of the deceased, following a well-known, prescribed pattern. The verbal skills of the solo performer, the daughter of the deceased, allow her to prolong the lament in an endlessly repetitive style, as she rhythmically interweaves names, appellations, proverbs, messages to the dead, and praise-singing. ...

... 'Dry Your Tears Little Orphan Doe' is a lament improvised by Sereer women of Senegal during a procession to the cemetery of one of their age-mates. ... The song is meant to comfort the youngest daughter of the deceased, who is affectionately called 'Ngaay' or 'Little Doe'. 'Seen', the name joined to 'Ngaay', tells us immediately that we are in the Sereer world, where every family has a totem animal. The Seen family's totem is the deer. ... Part of the beauty of the text is its repetitive rhythm.

Akousa Anyidoho, Rokhaya Fall, Christiane Owusu-Sarpong, and Aminata Diaw

Afua Siao (Fofie), Nyaako

Ghana, Akan-Twi

Grand-daughter of Nana Kwaagyei of Hwedee, who drinks the water of Abono
Kyeame ba, Kyeamewaa, spokesman's daughter, of a spokeswoman's calling,
Mother, all looks well with me, but it's a battle.

Nyaakowaa of Anteade and grandchild of Osafo Agyeman,
Oh, mother, all looks well with me, but it's a battle.
Mother, when you send food, send it with a munificent cooking pot,
grand enough for feasting strangers.

The god Opem has seen red, the palm oil of failure,
and the gourd of spells wears the white clay of success.
Oh, mother, there is no branch within reach that I can grasp.
Mother, when you send your presents, send parched corn
Then even without cooking fire, I'll eat it raw.
Mother, pestiferous common fowl can kill a glorious parrot!
Grand-daughter of Nana Kwaagyei of Hwedee, who drinks the water of Abono,

Nana, mighty pot, succor of strangers,
Appearances are really deceiving, for the battle is overwhelming.
Mother, generous gift-giver, when you find a voyager give them a gift for me.
Mother, this deserted dwelling has no fire to provide a lighted brand for me.
My Sustaining-Wicker-Basket that rescues me with rocks of salt,
O, mother, Otire's child doesn't cry, or I would weep blood for you.

Nana, the crab that knows the hiding places of alluvial gold,
What ails you, Kyeameba?
Oh, Mother! The shock of your death has ambushed me so.
Mother, all looks well with me, but it's a battle!

*Translated by J.H. Kwabena Nketia
Translation revised by Abena P.A. Busia*

Communal, Dry Your Tears, Little Orphan Doe

Senegal, Sereer

Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!
Look, Thiab is crying! Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!

Tening Thiab's mother! Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!
Look, Thiab is crying, Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!

You are so forlorn, but oh, my little doe, dry your tears!
Look, your mama's here, Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!

Ndiague Dibor's mother! Oh, Thiab Diome, dry your tears!
Comfort your sister, Dibor, don't let her cry. Oh, do dry your tears!

You're not frightened, you're just feeling lonely, dry your tears!
Ngouma Mane Diome, my sister! Oh, Mane Diome, dry your tears!

You're not frightened, you're just feeling lonely, dry your tears!
Only Siga Ndour came back with the orphans. O Mane Diome, dry your tears!

So, your mama's home, Mane Diome! Oh, Mane Diome, dry your tears!
You're so forlorn, but Oh, Mane Diome, dry your tears!
Who will you confide in tomorrow? Oh, Mane Diome, dry your tears!
Oh, please comfort Mane Diome! Mane Diome, dry your tears!

Waly Diome's sister! O Mane Diome, dry your tears!
Dibor Ngoumba, do not cry! Mane Diome, dry your tears!

Where is Tening Diome's mother? O Mane Diome, dry your tears!
Show me Tening Diome's mother! Mane Diome, dry your tears!

Oh, my little doe, dry your tears!
Oh, Ngaay Seen, my little doe, dry your tears!

*Translated into French by Souleymane Faye
Translated from French by Antoinette Tidjani Alou and Marjolijn de Jager*

[pp. 119–20:]

COMMUNAL, TWO SONGS FOR SUNJATA

Mali, Malinke

These two songs were composed in honor of Sunjata Keïta (1235–1255), emperor of Mali. Both academic and traditional historians attribute the first song to Sogolon Kondé, Keïta’s mother, and the second to his sister. ...

[Sunjata was handicapped from birth, and he and his mother were the victims of court machinations after his father’s death which displaced him as heir to his father’s throne. After the intervention of a master blacksmith and soothsayer who made him a cane out of an iron bar, Sunjata was able to walk with full strength. The full story of this transformation is given on page 119.]

... On seeing this feat, Sogolon Kondé sang her thanksgiving to God, celebrating her son’s ability to walk. She also sang to force her malicious cowife to witness the event. Sunjata’s youngest sister, Sogolon Kolonkan Konatém sang the second song on the same occasion.

Both these songs date from the thirteenth century. They have been remembered throughout the ages and are part of popular culture of contemporary Mali. We are grateful to historian Adama Bâ Konaré for their preservation.

Aminata Diaw

One

Come out, women, come out of your huts!
Sunjata has walked!
Women, you Witches!
Sunjata has walked!
Today is a sweet day!
Today is the most beautiful day Allah ever made!

Two

My sterling brother, the eldest of us all,
The day you call me to celebrate with you,
I will strut about, preening among your crowd of guests
With the majesty of a vulture,
My base older brother, so much hated by all,
The day you call me to celebrate with you,
I will crouch in my corner,
Like a tree frog.

*Translated into French by Adama Bâ Konaré
Translated from French by Christiane Owusu-Sarpong*

[pp. 133–4:]

OLA BENTSIR ADZEWA GROUP, THE WARRING HOSTS

Ghana, Akan-Fante

Every Fante community in Ghana has at least one militia or Asafo group, which once defended the community. Today Asafo remains a strong ritual institution, with every man automatically belonging to his father’s Asafo, and with women taking charge of the ritual and celebratory occasions. The Adzewa group, an association of women, learns about and passes on the history of the Asafo, particularly through a sacred core of texts, always sung first during formal performances. The Adzewa group also has license to compose songs expressing frank opinions on

current events.

‘The Warring Hosts’ forms part of the sacred core of texts from the Bentis Adwez group of Cape Coast. The song was composed in honor of Adwoa Kwadua, who is best known for responding bravely to the wartime death of her husband and ninety-nine other men. In an alliance with the British Governor Charles MacCarthy, they had lost a campaign against the Asante kingdom. Adwoa Kwadua assumed the onerous burden of redeeming the lives of these dead men by paying each of the surviving families a measure of gold dust. News of this brave act reached the governor, who personally offered his condolences.

Since MacCarthy arrived on the Gold Coast in 1821 and died in a campaign against the Asante in 1824, the song can be dated as composed during that period. MacCarthy is the ‘Whiteman’ in the song, given the Fante name ‘Kwesi’, thus acknowledging the family bond between him and Adwoa, as father and daughter. The word ‘*enyaado*’ is a gracious greeting of respect offered to Adwoa Kwadua by the governor.

Esi Sutherland-Addy

Call In this situation, what am I to do?
 The warring hosts have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.
 Adwoa, daughter of Asebu ancestors.

Response The warring host have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Call Adwoa. Daughter-of-Kwesi-the-Whiteman.

Response The warring hosts have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Call Adwoa, daughter of Kofi Dadzie.

Response The warring host have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Call Know that however pale your skin
 You can be to the whiteman no closer kin
 Than Adwoa, daughter of the whiteman.

Response The warring host have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Call Ayee! Pitiab!e one.

Response Pity, *enyaado*, ee.
 The whiteman says, ‘What a pity.’
 Pity, *enyaado*, ee.
 The warring host have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Call What is it? Aaaahhh! It is my most precious treasure,
 Adwoa, Daughter-of-Kwesi-the-Whiteman.

Response The warring host have destroyed my most precious treasure.
 Ayee.

Ensemble Ayee! Pitiab!e one.
 Pity, *enyaado*, ee, such a pity.
 The whiteman says, ‘What a pity.’
 Pity, *enyaado*, ee.
 The warring hosts have destroyed my most precious treasure.

Translated by Esi Sutherland-Addy and Abena P.A. Busia

[pp. 151–2:]

LULLABIES

[While the lullabies presented below] function primarily to calm, celebrate, and affirm a child, other themes suggest a wider adult audience. The Sereer poem ‘Ayo, My Baby’, for example, alludes to the exchange of a person for salt. Here, a lullaby carries elements of history, for salt was a precious commodity, even more valuable than human slaves. ...

Esi Sutherland-Addy and Fatimata Mounkaila

Samba Tew Tew, Ayo, My Baby

Senegal, Sereer

Ayo, my little one
Keep on crying
And I'll swap you for salt
The salt will be seized
And I'll come back in tears.

Ayo Aay!
Ayo Aay!
Kuroo – Kurr . . .
Ayo, my little one
Keep on crying and I'll swap you for salt
The salt will be seized
And I'll come back in tears.

Ayo, aay
Ayo, hush
Ayo, my little one, hush, be still
Ayo, my little one.

*Translated into French by Souleymane Faye
Translated from French by Antoinette Tidjani Alou and Abena P.A. Busia*

Communal, Lullaby

Niger, Tuareg

Oh, my sweet baby, my *koudoudou*
Whom I bounced upon my knees
And rocked in my arms till I was weary

Oh, my beloved baby
May God keep you from all shame
May you never be like that woman's child

He grew up to be a thief
And stole an ear of corn
And when his cousin saw him
She spat on him
And when his cousin saw him
She threw sand in his face.

*Translated into French by Manou Zara Villain
Translated from French by Antoinette Tidjani Alou and Abena P.A. Busia*

[pp. 154–5:]

MAIDEN SONGS

On moonlit nights, and on the afternoons of market days, girls and young women in rural Burkina Faso play their clapping and dance games. A girl in the group begins a song, and all the others clap their hands, sing the refrain in chorus, and invent couplets as they go along, depending on the inspiration of the moment. In this manner, the girls improvise in a ‘dancing circle’.

Despite the recreational context, the girls’ songs resonate with a sense of impending doom about the next stage of their lives, marriage. ...

Fatoumata Kinda and Denise Badini-Folane

Communal, I’d Like to Stay

Burkina Faso, San

I’d like to stay by my mother,
I say, I’d like to stay by my mother,
Near mother there’s peace!

Why would I go to a man’s house?
Why would I go to a man’s house?
He’ll keep me up all night.

Why would I go to a man’s house?
Why would I go to a man’s house?
He’ll lie to me all day!

He’ll leave me in the care of his Ma,
and the woman’s a witch.
He’ll leave me in the care of his Pa,
and papa’s a pompous peacock.

So, I’d like to stay by my mother,
I’d like to stay by my mother,
Near mother there’s peace!

*Translated into French by Andre Nyamba
Translated from French by Abena P.A. Busia*

[pp. 156–8:]

CIRCLE SONGS

Ayobomo is a genre of female recreational performance in which women comment, especially on marriage, and in the process express social solidarity with one another. In a given performance, young women participate in a closed circle, in which their singing is accompanied by clapping and significant gestures. Everyone in the circle is expected to lead the singing in turn with a verse that she individualizes in some subtle manner. The audience, in a designated public area in the village, consists of the women themselves, though others may attend. The appropriation of a closed circle in a public space bonds the participating women, as do their clapping and their spontaneous short shouts. ...

Esi Sutherland-Addy and Mary-Esther Kropp-Dakuta

Communal, Even If You Beat Me

Ghana, Nzema

Even if you beat me mercilessly,
And drag me in the mud,
Or turn into a cobra
To block my path,
I will follow him
Wherever he is abroad.

If you turn into a python
To watch the only path,
I will climb over its head.

Communal, Maidens in a Group

Ghana, Nzema

i
Maidens in a group,
We are only singing Ayabomo songs.
We are not in a group war!

ii
Maidens, maidens, youthful maidens,
I bid you all a fine evening!

iii
Mothers of the household,
I have come to lure
Away your husbands!

iv
If you don't leave him alone,
I will hit you with something!

v
An erect object: there's nothing to it;
Only a piece of half-cut bread!

vi
Yes, we are singing Ayabomo songs.
No fight[ing] is allowed.

vii
We are only playing.
There is to be no fighting here.

viii
Maidens, maidens, yes,
We are only singing Ayabomo songs!

Translated by Kofi E. Agovi

[pp.252–6:]

PRAISE SONGS

... Women in northwestern Ghana can sing praise songs only as work songs, while they are grinding millet or churning shea nuts into butter. In *dannu*, the form they practice, women are expected to praise their husbands' families and ancestry, since the married woman becomes part of her husband's family. Not surprisingly, women have turned *dannu* to their own ends, adding social and personal commentary, about both life and death.

The most important performer of *dannu* in the Dagaare language is Zebuglo of Loho, whose compositions have been heard – since 1999 – on Radio Progress, a station run by the Catholic church. Her life story is well known, for unlike many *dannu* performers, she breaks into her singing to speak about her life and about topics of the moment, so that these comments become part of her song. Her comments often subvert customary beliefs, for example with respect to childlessness, one of her major themes. Since she gave birth to ten children and none survived, she blames the 'witches' or evil people in her husband's family. ...

When she sings of her childlessness, she makes clear that she is in deep mourning – see the line 'this is not a soft xylophone', for example. Further, she suggests that the *kpeli*, a calabash drum usually played as an accompaniment to the funeral xylophone, should accompany her mourning. ...

Zebuglo sees herself as a *goba*, a master xylophone player. She says that she has not been 'initiated' through the customary male ritual, and the defiance can be heard again as she announces her talent as God-given, since men do not allow women to play this instrument. Defiantly also, she punctuates her singing with refrain in vocal imitation of a xylophone. ...

Esi Sutherland-Addy, Patience Mudiare, and Edward Nanbigne

Zebuglo of Loho, Praise Song

Ghana, Daagare

Hi len lan, len lan len, hi len lan, len lan len
When I sing the truth of my story,
Accompanied by the *kpeli* drum,
Still this is no soft xylophone I play.
If the force of truth does not save me,
The trees and all of nature will.
I did not give birth uselessly.
Had it not been for death,
I would also have a few [children].
I built Loho. Am I dead?
Even I, I could have had ten living children, I.
What else could I do? Didn't I help build Loho?
I can't say witches should not eat them.
They should eat; it is their house they are destroying.
They are not killing me, they are not killing Nyensaala.
Hi len lan, len lan len, hi len lan, len lan len
They have thought I was nothing
What woman is pregnant for twelve months?
Haa! God!
Kin of my protector, oh! Death
Kin of *Yelibaye*, oh! Death
Kin of Jebuni *Ninbaye* of Kaleo, oh! Death
See Death, oh! Death, ahh!
And my husband won't bemoan Death?

Oh! Death, oh! Death
Oh! Death, kin of the knowledgeable one, oh! Death
Oh! Death, Oh! Death
Hee hee, hee hee hee, hee hee hee hee
Somebody's mother from the Bawaara of Kaleo
Sen lan len, len len, len lan len
My namesake, Zebuglo, mother of Jebuni
H'mm h'mm len len len, len lan len
They do not like me at all, *Hayelimaa*
Len len len, len lan len, len lan len. . . .

H'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm
Where there are many tadpoles, children come.
When they come give them a place. . . .

I'm a great xylophone player and nobody initiated me.
God gave me a talent
And I came to Dumbie's lineage with it.
H'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm h'mm
Once I was crying about a penis,
But they said why not have a swim,
And I put it down and
I jumped into the water, *buu buu*.
When I returned it was gone,
So I took a useless vagina
And I came to Loho, to live in destitution.
H'mm h'mm h'mm, hen ai h'm ai h'm h'm h'm
That is why my life has been a struggle to no end.
Oh! This thing pains me, like bangles on a leper. . .

Translated by Edward Nanbigne and Abena P.A. Busia

[pp. 317–22:]

NAWA KULIBALI, NAWA'S LAMENT

Côte d'Ivoire (Senufo)

[Nawa Kulibali was a Senufo woman whose husband, Salifu, sacrificed her life in exchange for promises of a life of wealth and successful cotton farming, based on the advice of a *marabout*. She died in 1990. Extracts from her lament are included here because they may provide evidence of a genre of lament with traditional origins. A fuller version of her story is included on pages 317–8 in the source text. Note also the details about a recorded version of the lament below.]

... People believe that Nawa sang her lament in order to inform her extended family about what was to happen. She asked her elder brother, Lacina, to make a recording of her singing so that she might leave a testimony and to inform her mother, sisters, and brothers of her impending death.

In the late 1960s, with the advent of the tape recorder in the Senufo region, women began to record their songs. Cassette dealers record songs or simply duplicate and sell original recordings. The tape of 'Nawa's Lament' was provided by Soro Sohelo, who worked in the area where the tape was recorded. At first, the recorded song was a family secret, but eventually cassette dealers smuggled it out, lengthened it by copying and repeating bits, and

made it commercially viable. Hence, on tape the song is not finely structured, for there are many repetitions and false starts. We have selected portions for this volume.

Sassongo Silue

Life in the Cotton Fields

Mother, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now without any purpose.
Mama, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now pointless.
I am being trapped among vultures.
I am being insulted by those good-for-nothings.
I am among those good-for-nothings.
Mother, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now without any purpose.
Mother, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now without any purpose.
Mama, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now pointless.
All these vultures go gossiping against me.
I am being insulted by those good-for-nothings.
Mother, thank you for bringing me to life but it is now without any purpose.
Mama, thank you for bringing me to life but it proved pointless.
I've been trapped among snakes.
I've been trapped among pythons.
I wished Mother were not informed of that.
I wished Mother did not hear about what is happening to me.
I am experiencing a lot of hardship in the cotton fields.
I wished Mother did not hear about that.
I suffer from hatred in the cotton fields.
I wished Mother did not hear about that.
Dear cotton, keep growing, cotton of the cotton field, keep growing.
I shall tell my mother all from the beginning.
I think I should also tell my father all from the beginning.
I think I should really tell Toritcha how this may end.
Ah! In these cotton fields!
There is so much suffering in the cotton fields!
There is so much quarreling in the cotton fields!
There is so much hatred in the cotton fields!
We are so beaten and so beaten down in the cotton fields!

Disappointed Love

I suffered a lot, just for you,
But you did not take that into account.
I accepted being insulted.
I offered myself as a solution to your loneliness.
I experienced being insulted just to find a solution to your loneliness.
I accepted being insulted by everyone.
Mama, you see, life with my darling has become impossible.
I offered myself as a solution.
I offered myself as a solution to your loneliness.
I accepted all the bad names.
Mama, you see, my love has turned away.
The people of Korhogo insulted me and I took it.
The people of Kagbolo insulted me and I took it.
Everyone insulted me and I took it.

I did not know my darling had no respect for people.
My darling has no respect for people.
Mama, my darling has no respect for people.
Life is hard with my darling.
Mama, look, life with my darling has become hard.
I did not know that my lover was ungrateful.
I did not know that Salifu was hard to live with.
Jeneba, I did not know that Salifu was hard to live with.
Darling of my early and young days,
Why should you exhibit me like that
In the open?
Long ago, when I was visiting you at home
I would slide through to your place
Thinking that you were a good person.
Early in the morning as soon as the morning cock sang
I would slide through to your place,
Thinking that you were a good person.
Early in the morning when some husband shouted at his wife
I would slide through to your place
Thinking that you were a good person.
So, darling of my early and young days,
Why should you exhibit me like that
In the open?
Why should you exhibit me like that
And leave me crying?

Message to My Family

You, Lacina, who is operating the tape recorder,
You, Lacina, the tape recorder operator
When you get to our home village,
Tell my mother that I greet her,
And say hello to Lacina,
And say hello to Madu,
And say hello to Brahima,
And say hello to Natogoma,
And say hello to Lohonyon.
Tell my mother that I greet her.
Tell Jeneba that I greet her.
When you get there
Tell Lacina
When he finishes his trading activities on market day
Let him look for a diviner.
Living conditions have turned very troubling.
The living conditions in the cotton fields have turned hard for me.
The working conditions in the cotton fields have become unbearable for me.
I will send the letter to Lacina.
When he knows the contents, let him come so that we can talk. . . .

Misfortune and Death

Hold up your sorrow tightly,
Mother, hold up your sorrow tightly.
Mother and father, when they hear of my death
Let them refrain from crying.
When they hear of my death in the cotton fields,
When they hear of my death in the cotton-growing area,
Let them hold up their sorrow tightly.
Mother, hold up your sorrow tightly.
Uncle, hold up your sorrow tightly.
You are as easy crying as a money.
[. . .]

I Ask You My Darling

When the time comes to 'catch' me
Do not do it in the open.
I am waiting for a letter from Mother.
As soon as I get her note
I shall settle this matter.
I'm just trying to know who is at the bottom of all this.
When I know who is at the bottom of all this
I shall deal with it.
Do go and consult a diviner,
Mother, my Mama, do go and consult.
Father, my Papa, do go and consult,
Go and consult.
I am suffering from starvation.
I am suffering from misfortune.
I am suffering from the *sandoho*.
I am suffering from the curse of spells.
I am suffering from love.
Go and query the diviners.
Rid me of evil spells.
Rid me of misfortune.
I am being tormented by love and I feel lost.
Do go and consult.
Do go and ask my fate.
Do go and consult the *sandobele*.
Query God to learn what is happening to me.
I am being tormented by love and I feel lost.
Tell the *Kalamohos* that I just want to save my head.
Tell the *Kalamohos* of Jelige district in Korhogo that I just want to save my head.
Do tell the *Kalamohos* that I just want to save my head.
Tell the *Kalamohos* of Kapele that I just want to save my head.
Tell the *Kalamohos* that I just want to save my head.
Tell the *Kalamohos* in Abidjan that I just want to save my head.
I shall ask someone to go and see my mother.
And ask her if I have become worth nothing.
I shall ask someone to go and see my father and ask him
If all that is happening to me was bound as early as my birthday,
If all that is happening to me is part of the family inheritance,

If I have become worth nothing.
I shall ask someone to go and see Toritcha and ask her
If all that is happening to me is part of our family's inheritance.
I shall ask someone to go and see my mother and ask her
If all that is happening to me was bound as early as my birthday.

Translated by Sassongo Silue

DRAFT NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

From:

Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region

Edited by M.J. Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjies, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford, and Nobantu Rasebotsa

New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003

From the Introduction

[p.6:]

While songs and stories do not provide unbroken access to the past, they do provide information about how women were – and still are – expected to behave as daughters, wives, and mothers. Experiencing orature as informative does not diminish it. ...

Women compose songs for different occasions, for instance, to mark declarations of war, to announce political resistance, or to lament military loss [see ‘Song of the Afflicted’ below]. Women’s songs also celebrate particular moments in life ... The dances and call-and-response structure of songs offer individuals an opportunity to comment upon orthodoxies without diminishing the songs’ potential to maintain collectivity.

[pp.85–6:]

ANONYMOUS, SONG OF THE AFFLICTED

Lesotho, Sesotho

‘Song of the Afflicted’ is a lament that falls within the nexus of traditional warfare in Lesotho. Departure for battle involved strengthening rituals meant to discourage cowardice and celebrate the brave deeds of warriors. Such rituals, and the songs, poetry, and dances that went with them, focused exclusively on men ... The songs and poems go by the generic name of ‘mokorotlo’, which Thomas Mofolo describes in his novel, *Chaka* (1925), as songs of men, songs of war.

Return from battle similarly involved ‘cleansing’ rituals, the purpose of which was, among other things, to mourn the fallen. ‘Song of the Afflicted’ belongs here, although it was performed on other occasions as well. Thomas Arbousset, the collector of this song in 1836, points out that it was ‘particularly dear to widows’, who, when someone had died, gathered outside the village to sing and dance it in chorus to the accompaniment of a goatskin drum. ...

Leloba Molema

Older widows:

We are left outside!
We are left to grief!
We are left to despair,
Which only makes our woes more bitter!
Would that I had wings to fly up to the sky!
Why does not a strong cord come down from the sky?
I would tie it to me, I would mount,
I would go there to live.

The new widow:

O fool that I am!
When evening comes, I open my window a little,
I listen in the silence, I look:
I imagine that he is coming back!

The dead man's fighting sister:

If women, too, went to war,
I would have gone, I would have thrown darts beside him:
My brother would not be dead:
Rather, my mother's son would have turned back half way,
He would have pretended he had hurt his foot against a stone.

All the women:

Alas! Are they really gone?
Are we abandoned indeed?
But where have they gone
That they cannot come back?
That they cannot come back to see us?
Are they really gone?
Is the underworld insatiable?
Is it never filled?

*Transcribed by Thomas Arbousset
Translated by Willard Trask*

[pp.461–463:]

COMMUNAL, SWAZI WEDDING SONGS

Swaziland, siSwati

These Swazi wedding songs, recorded in the early 1990s, describe the traditional culture of the wedding itself and also the construction of the marriage, often seen as hurtful to, or at least difficult for, women. ...

Sarah Dupont-Mkhonza

Song One

Oh what a beautiful hairstyle, young bride.
You must be joking you of the King,
I travelled until I was too tired.

Song Two

Subject of the King is playing.
I walked till noon.
I struggled, I suffered.
My sister's cattle.
Oh you were beautiful, my sister.

Song Three

I left home justly,
Oh yes.
If I were you I would not be deserting my people.
Come, my father's pride.
I have completely left my people.
I left with my father's approval.
My father's wish should be fulfilled.

Song Four

I have been contaminated.
Hey you, Ngwane people, we are in trouble.
I have touched a spear.

Song Five

Pick me up, my darling.
Put me on your shoulders.
Now I can see the heavens.

Song Six

I told my father, you subject of the King.
Oh my mother, I told my father
That to get married is like abandoning oneself.
To get married is like throwing away your own bones.
I even told my mother, you of the King,
That to get married is like throwing yourself away.

Song Seven

I got married young.
I do not have any energy left.
All my energy got wasted in marriage.
All my energy, all my strength is gone, oh my Lord.
I got married young.
All my strength is gone.
Marriage has defeated me.
All my energy has gone.
Marriage has defeated me.

Song Eight

Go well, my mother's child.
Oh it is hard in marriage.
Please, you must go well, my sister.
You must take care of your mother-in-law.
Oh it is hot in marriage.
You must behave yourself.
Oh it is where people grow weary.
Oh it is difficult; it is where one grows weary.
You must greet your in-laws for me.
Oh we are tired, we are tired.

Song Nine

Here is the man killing me!
(Beat her, man.)
Here is a man stunning me.
He has been misinformed.
(Beat her, man.)

Here is a man killing!
He has been misinformed.
(Beat her, man.)
I have tried to plead and beg.
Here is a man stunning me.
He has been misinformed.
(Beat her, man.)
Help! help! women.
The man is beating me.
He is killing me.
(Beat her, man.)
He has been misinformed.
He was told in bed.
He is fed with stories in bed, on a pillow.
He is killing me.
(Beat her, man.)

Every day, I shield myself from big canes.
Here is a man beating me.
(Beat her, man.)
I shield myself from big canes.
The man beats me every day.
(Beat her, man.)

Translated by Thulisile Motsa-Dladla

[pp.506–7:]

COMMUNAL, *BOJALE* – SETSWANA INITIATION SONGS

Botswana, Setswana

Initiation songs are normally sung by the initiates at either *Bojale* or *Bogwera* (initiation schools for girls and boys, respectively). Before the advent of Christianity many ethnic groups in Botswana regarded these schools highly. ...

Bojale, designed to usher girls or young women into womanhood and adulthood, are run privately and exclusively for young initiates, who are subjected to a complex web of rules and taboos. ...

The main objective is to educate the young women on their rights and responsibilities as full citizens of their communities. ...

The teachers' lessons and the initiates' responses to the instructions are sung conversationally so as to create a sense of dialogue. Taken together, the songs offer a commentary on the harsh realities of womanhood and life in general. The songs are short, often five to six lines, yet they convey complete and meaningful ideas. The singing itself is long because lines or even whole stanzas are repeated. Metaphor, mockery, parallelism, and rhetorical questions are also characteristic.

These songs were collected and published by Ntikwe Mtolotle in 1998. Some, which she had sung at her own initiation in Mochudi, she first recorded in 1984 for a radio program at the National Museum, Gaborone. Some were recorded and transcribed by Elizabeth Nelbach Wood in 1975.

Nobantu Rasebotsa

Complaints by the Initiates

Song One

I dig hard clay
Womanhood is a hardship
Yes, yes, womanhood is a hardship
Yes, yes, womanhood is a hardship
Please help me dig this clay
Womanhood is a hardship.

Song Two

Escaping, I try to hide outside the wall
Trying to hide outside the wall
The ears heard of it, the ears heard of it
As I try to hide outside the wall
The ears heard it
It got back to the ears.

Song Three

I am not going anywhere
I am not going anywhere
My mother chases guests away
It's a month since I visited
My mother chases guests away.

Complaints by the Instructors

Song Four

Let that young girl go
Let her go, I have given up on her
I try to speak to her
It's like speaking to a stone
A small stone like steel iron
The whiteman's steel iron.

Song Five

Are you the troublemaker, are you the cause of the storm?
Are you the stirrer of that dust-storm?
Are you the cause of the storm?
Let it build. Build up as me.
Are you the cause of the storm?

Translated by Leloba Molema and Nobantu Rasebotsa

[pp.507–10:]

COMMUNAL, *INTONJANE* – XHOSA INITIATION SONGS

South Africa, isiXhosa

In Xhosa society *intonjane* was and still is regarded as a sacred ritual performed to mark the development of a girl into womanhood when she first menstruates. ... Women and girls perform songs to celebrate the event. ...

In Xhosa culture the performance of song marks almost every social or ceremonial occasion that brings people together. Singing is accompanied by ululation and rhythmic movements such as the clapping of hands, stamping of feet on the ground, and shaking of the upper part of the body. Even the attire is specific to the occasion, and the words of the song also articulate the uniqueness of the event.

Some of the songs at *intonjane* are performed when the girl goes into seclusion; others when she comes out. Since both times are occasions of great joy and gratitude to the ancestors, the songs combine prayer and celebration. They may also convey a personal observation or comment on a particular issue in the village. Cryptic or metaphorical references to specific situations may obscure a song's meaning to all but the performers. This makes accurate translation difficult.

In *intonjane*, the lead singer usually sings every line twice or more, thus setting the pace, tune, and rhythm. In accompaniment, the other women sing 'yho – yho – yho' for the duration of the song, and repeat the last word of each line after the lead singer. ...

Songs One and Five were recorded in 1999 from the Xhosa radio station *Umhlobo Wenene* (True Friend) in Port Elizabeth. The other songs were performed by a group of women in April 1999, at KwaTuku B in Peddie, Eastern Cape, and recorded by Sisi Maqagi and Thandiwe Majola, the daughter of one of the performers, Nokwanda Majola.

Zingisa Guzana and V.M. Sisi Maqagi

Song One: The Girl Has Come of Age

Ihyo – yho – yho the girl has come of age
Father of the initiated girl is now called
with a pleasing name
Yho – yho – yho MaJolinkomo
Yho – yho – yho the girl has come of age
Father of the initiated girl
We have asked since yesterday, praying
These whores MaJolinkomo
Father of the initiated girl
Ha – la – a – a – a – la
Cattle of Mtika
Of Jotela
Of Mazeleni
You continue to act this way
Hoyi – ho – ho it is a wonder

Song Two: Come All

Come all, come and listen
Even you whores
You finally spoke
Pity you cry

You man
You will regret in the future
A selection has been made
Ho – ho – ho

Song Three: Be of Age Girl

Be of age girl
Control yourself even if you are sexually aroused
It is the vagina which is like this
This thing is like this!

Song Four: Today I Think of the Past

Today I think of the past
While the sun is going down

Song Five: Father of Ntonjane

Yho, yho father of Ntonjane
Yho, yho father of Ntonjane
Your child has come of age

Song Six: Mistress of Lekendlana

Mistress of Lekendlana
Ha! Why are you behaving so badly?

Song Seven: Yho Yho Father

Yho! yho! he! he! father
Yelele father ho! ho! ha!
I will remain behind
I am not going through with initiation
Ho! I behaved shamefully
I will still need my mother
Ho! he – ha – ha – ha

Translated by Zingisa Guzana

NYAMUTANGO (NTUMBA MACHAI), *MUTONDO* – NYEMBA INITIATION SONGS

Namibia, Nyemba

Songs and rituals restricted to female attendance are regarded as ‘women’s secrets’. One female ritual called *mutondo*, a generic word for tree, used to be performed when a girl had her first menstruation. Although *mutondo* is sometimes performed by women in western Zambia, it has probably become obsolete in Angola and Namibia. ... Most people cite the war in Angola and the growing influence of the churches as the reason for this disappearance. Elderly women may instruct young female relatives privately about sexuality. ...

The songs printed here emerged from three interviews held in 1999 in Kehemu, at the homestead of Ntumba Machai, called NyaMutango, and her family. NyaMutango, a Iauma speaker, was perhaps seventy years old, born by the Lomba River. She and her husband left for Zambia in 1971 and migrated to Namibia in 1995. Two older female relatives joined the first and second interviews. ...

On the day a girl first menstruated, she would be taken into the bush by the elderly women of the community, most of them female relatives. The girl’s mother did not participate. Around a mukula tree, or more exceptionally a muvulia tree, the ground was cleared. For every day that the girl bled, the tree was cut so that its red fluid came out. As the girl drank this fluid, the initiation ceremony began and the women began to sing songs like ‘Here it comes, the *lingongo* of my daughter’ (Song One). ...

[Further details of the stages of the initiation ceremonies linked to the songs below are given on pages 510–11.]

Inge Brinkman

Song One

Here it comes, the *lingongo* of my daughter,
It comes to destroy the house.
Here it comes, the *lingongo* of my daughter,
It comes to destroy the house.
Here it comes, the *lingongo* of my daughter,
It comes to destroy the house.
Oriole, what has it carried?
Burning, burning.
Here it comes, the *lingongo* of my daughter,
It comes to destroy the house.

Song Two

A little, you turn your hips around
A big, your turn your hips around
A little, you turn your hips around
Child, let me tell you
A little, a little, you turn your hips around.

Song Three

How did I give birth? The girdle.
How did I give birth? The girdle I tie around my waist.
How did I give birth? The girdle.
The whole day. The girdle I tie around my waist.
How did I give birth? The girdle.
Every night. The girdle I tie around my waist.

How did I give birth? The girdle.
[Turning to each other.] The girdle I tie around my waist.

Song Four

We found a man collecting honey, he had large testicles.
We found a man collecting honey, he had large testicles.
We found him climbing the tree with large testicles.
We found a man collecting honey, he had a big penis

Chorus:

When we sing the penis dance
(repeats four times)

Song Five

Have you ever seen this big penis?
No, oh no, I just saw my first menstruation
Without knowing this, ee.
Have you ever seen this big vagina?
No, oh no, I just saw my first menstruation
Without knowing this, ee.

Song Six

Dance-dance
Oh, today, we will touch
Oh mother, mama, today I will touch
The beard of the lion.

Translated by Rebecca Kastherody, Dominga Antonio, and Sarah Mchai

From:

Words That Circle Words: A Choice of South African Oral Poetry

Edited by Jeff Opland

Johannesburg: Donker Paper Books, 1992

[Introductory notes below to each song are by Jeff Opland.]

[pp.49–51:]

KHAMYO

South Africa, Xhosa

Songs often form key elements in African folktales, which are generally told by older women to children in a hut after dark. This Xhosa tale illustrates both the integral role of the song and also a typical series of changes that it undergoes in the course of the narrative. Structurally, the song advances the tale and lies at its very core. A translation of this tale appears in Tracey, 1967*; my translation is based on the recording made by the late Hugh Tracey – whose achievement as a collector of traditional African and South African music and song is unrivalled – and issued commercially by the International Library of African Music, which Tracey founded.

* Tracey, Hugh (ed.), 1967. *The Lion on the Path and other African Stories*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Here's a story. There was a man, handsome, old, with many cattle, who didn't have a wife. He was reluctant to *lobola* [pay bridewealth] with his cattle, *lobola* for a wife. He thought and thought, and decided to go to a river, *emfuleni* [to a stream], and make himself a wife. He arrived and took a cabbage tree and chopped it down. He went back to the kraal and carved it and carved it, and made it beautiful. He made arms, he made legs, he made the head, and he made a woman out of it. It was a tree. When he finished, now he took an ornament and put it on the head. It looked, like a person. He began to buy a dress, he cut it to size, and this was now his wife. Now he gave her a name. He said when asked she should say she's the daughter of Mfuleni [at the stream], Khamyo by name. And then his wife stayed on. He was old by this time, the man with his wife. The young unmarried braves of the location said, 'That such a beautiful woman should belong to a senior! We're going to take her, that woman.' His village agreed and she was placed on a mountain, with another one beyond, and a brave of that village abducted her, and eloped with the girl from the river, envying the senior who had so beautiful a wife. This man had raised cattle, he had raised pigeons. He searched and searched and learnt that his wife was over in that village. The following morning at dawn he gave his pigeons sorghum. He fed them, he fed them and said, 'Go and fetch my belongings from that village, from that woman, and when you have done that, bring her.' He told them to sing when they went to fetch his belongings. Yes, they went then, these two pigeons. They flew and arrived at that village. People said, 'Drive away these pigeons, drive away these pigeons.' These pigeons said (her name is Khamyo),

'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch
That apron, that apron.'

'Gosh, what do these pigeons say? What do these pigeons say?' He said, 'Indeed, they have come to fetch the apron from that wife. Give it to them, my wife, we will buy you another one.' It was thrown outside, that apron, it was taken from that wife. The pigeons snatched it, and carried it until they arrived. Again he said, 'Go and fetch the dress.' Soon he was told that there were the pigeons returning. They came flying, flying, flying, flying. When they arrived at the courtyard they said,

'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch

Dresses and petticoats,
Dresses and petticoats.'

'Alas! You will have to undress my wife. We will buy them for you.' They undressed her, and left her wearing a blanket. They went. And he said, 'Go and fetch the *doek* [handkerchief] she's wearing on her head.' Again the pigeons arrived and said,

'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch
That doek, that doek, that doek.'

And he said, 'Eeh! What's wrong with these pigeons?' And he said, 'Oh, take off all her clothing and give it to him. We do not care for her clothing: what we wanted was the person.' They went away with it, with the doek as well. The pigeons returned. By this time she was naked. People did not know what they wanted, what they wanted. They came again flying, they came again flying, the pigeons came. They settled down, they sat on the door, on the door frame, and said,

'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch
Life, life, life.'

'Ah! has life ever been taken? What is it that is wanted now? We have given him the clothing.' And again they said, 'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch
Life, life.'

And he said, 'Oh, let us leave them alone. Let us see how they will take that life.' They came flying, they flew nearer, they flew nearer and perched on her thighs and said,

'Khamyo, Khamyo,
We are sent by your husband,
We are sent by your husband,
He says we must fetch life.'

They perched on the head, plucking the head ornament. The cabbage tree changed and lurched off to the river. The arms fell off, the legs fell off, everything fell off. The cabbage tree changed back into a cabbage tree. The life of that woman was ended. The story's ended.

[p.60:]

GRASS SONG

Kalahari San

Laurens van der Post recorded the following song during an expedition to the Kalahari San in the 1950s. The four-line song, superficially simple, exhibits a sophisticated structure. In the first couplet, the grass cries in the wind for the rain; in the second couplet the woman, like the grass, cries for her hunter, who offers her essential sustenance such as the rain offers the grass. The two couplets are parallel, inviting comparisons between the situations of the grass and the lonely woman; but they are also chiasmic in structure, inviting contrasts. The rain brings life to the grass, but the woman sits in the withering desert sun; she holds in her hand the once-living grass, now dead, and, dead in the absence of her hunter, she hopes that her hunter's return will bring her to life such as

the grass once enjoyed in the wind. This little song demonstrates superbly an integration of words, action and situation. Van der Post describes the context, and the dramatic effect of the song on those who heard it.

[Prose notes before and after the song text are by Laurens van der Post]

Sometimes the women would sit together beside their shelters, in the long level light of evening sun, their beads and necklaces like gold upon them. Each would hold a handful of long dry grass and they would all sing together, beating time with the grass, and stroking the stems with the tips of their fingers like the strings of a guitar. The melody was charged with all the inexpressible feelings that come to one at the going down of the sun over the great earth of Africa. ...

This grass in my hand before it was cut
Cried in the wind for the rain to come:
All day my heart cries to the sun
For my hunter to come.

They would sing this over and over again, the song becoming more charged and meaningful by repetition. ... The song put us all under a spell so that I was not surprised that often the younger men, hearing its crescendo of longing, could contain themselves no longer. They would drop what they were doing and come out of the bush, their feet pounding the desert sand like a drum, their hands stretched wide, and their chests heaving with emotion, crying as if the sound had been torn alive and bleeding from the centre of their being: 'Oh, look, like the eagle, I come!'

[p.61:]

SONG OF THE RAIN

Kalahari San

Van der Post records another song that explains the same imagery. This time the structure is based on parallelism alone: the heat of the sun is equated with the heat of the fire, and the dry earth awaits the revivifying rain just as the woman awaits her lover. This symbolism is explicit in the man's reply, in which he equates his imminent arrival with the proximity of rain. At twilight, with the first rain falling, Van der Post tells us, a woman sings:

Under the sun
The earth is dry
By the fire
Alone I cry
All day long
The earth cries
For the rain to come.
All night my heart cries
For my hunter to come
And take me away.

'From somewhere out of sight,' writes Van der Post, a man replies:

Oh! Listen to the wind,
You woman there;
The time is coming,
The rain is near.
Listen to your heart,
Your hunter is here.

[pp. 66–70:]

NOMAGUNDWANE

South Africa, Zulu

This remarkable story of an unhappy love affair was recorded by David Rycroft at KwaPhindangene on 16 April, 1964. It was performed to the accompaniment of the *ughubu* musical bow by Princess Constance Magogo, and is narrated in the person of an unnamed girl who addresses her younger sister, Nomagundwane ‘woman of the rats’, in the opening line of the song. The narrator has been on a visit to her fiancé, in the course of which her prospective mother-in-law has shown her preference for a rival, whom the narrator calls ‘Miss Favourite’. Ultimately, the narrator is offered *amasi* – curdled sour milk – to drink, which social custom strictly prohibits her from doing until she is married. From this studied insult, the narrator realises that her affair is at an end, however well-disposed her lover might be towards her. She discards the trappings of a betrothed girl and rushes home in distress.

Each line of the song is introduced with the phrase *Maye-babo* ‘Alas! woe is me!’, sung with a plaintive falling cadence, with two exceptions: in order to indicate the passage of the long night the narrator spends at her lover’s home, and prefiguring the conclusion of the song, Princess Magogo breaks the refrain and, at the end of the song, when the narrator realises her affair is doomed, she once again discards the refrain, rendering the balance of the story ‘in a rather free, impassioned style’ (Rycroft, 1975: 69) to suggest the girl’s headlong flight home.*

... Rycroft’s 1964 recording – on which the following translation has been based – and Hugh Tracey’s 1972 recording [of the same song] are available commercially on disc. Elsewhere, Rycroft says of the princess that she ‘was widely acknowledged as the supreme authority on Zulu music, having learnt by heart from her grandmothers, the widows of King Cetshwayo, a Zulu musical repertoire extending back to the 18th century.

* Rycroft, David K. (1975) ‘The Zulu ballad of *Nomagundwane* with translation, annotation and musical transcription’. *African Language Studies* 16: 61–92.

Ah! my heart aches!
 What sorrow is mine, Nomagundwane!
Ah! my heart aches!
 Bring me my *gubhu* from the hut there, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
 You have come to see me, Nomagundwane!
Ah! my heart aches!
 Sit down, let me tell you my story, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
 I have been on a journey, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
 After a time I came to the village.
Ah! my heart aches!
 I found the bachelors’ hut closed.
Ah! my heart aches!
 I opened it and went in.
Ah! my heart aches!
 I rolled out a mat and sat down, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
 And then some people came in.
Ah! my heart aches!
 And they offered me greetings.
Ah! my heart aches!
 And I responded in kind, my sister.

Ah! my heart aches!
And then in came my lover.
Ah! my heart aches!
He said, 'I greet you, my lady.'
Ah! my heart aches!
I responded in kind, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
He said, 'Is all still well at home?'
Ah! my heart aches!
I said, 'Yes, they send greetings.'
Ah! my heart aches!
And we sat down with the people.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then his mother came in.
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'I greet you, my child.'
Ah! my heart aches!
And I responded in kind, my sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'I shan't kiss you my child.'
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'I have pain in my mouth.'
Ah! my heart aches!
So saying, his mother left us.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then in came Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
And she knelt in a more privileged place than me.
Ah! my heart aches!
They unrolled a mat and you sat down, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
Your lover offered you greeting.
Ah! my heart aches!
You responded to him in kind, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
The people offered you greeting.
Ah! my heart aches!
And you responded in kind, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
They said, 'Is all still well at home?'
Ah! my heart aches!
You said, 'Yes, they send greetings.'
Ah! my heart aches!
And then I greeted you, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
And you responded in kind, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then his mother came in.
Ah! my heart aches!
She came in dressed in her finery.
Ah! my heart aches!
She now wore a shawl.

Ah! my heart aches!
She greeted you, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
And you responded in kind, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'Let me kiss you, my child.'
Ah! my heart aches!
And you were kissed, Miss Favourite.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then her son asked a question.
Ah! my heart aches!
He said, 'Why do you kiss that one alone?'
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'It's some time since I saw her, my child.'
Ah! my heart aches!
Again her son asked a question.
Ah! my heart aches!
He said, 'But when last did you see this one?'
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'She's from nearby, my child.'
Ah! my heart aches!
Then night fell, as it must.
What sorrow, mountains! Night fell, as it must.
What sorrow, father! Then night fell, as it must.
Ah! my heart aches!
Dawn broke, as it must.
Dawn broke, dawn broke, as it must.
Oh! Then came the dawn, as it must.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then we said, 'We are leaving.'
Ah! my heart aches!
Then some people came in.
Ah! my heart aches!
And we went out and left.
Ah! my heart aches!
The people saw us off.
Ah! my heart aches!
My lover followed us.
Ah! my heart aches!
He said, 'Bring that girl back, little sister.'
Ah! my heart aches!
In turn I said, 'I'm just seeing someone off.'
Ah! my heart aches!
We returned with his sister.
Ah! my heart aches!
We came to the bachelors' hut.
Ah! my heart aches!
His sister drew a calabash and left.
Ah! my heart aches!
She said, 'Let's go and wash.'
Ah! my heart aches!
We went to wash and returned.

Ah! my heart aches!
We entered the bachelors' hut.
Ah! my heart aches!
His sister came with water.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then his sister left.
Ah! my heart aches!
She came in with food covered over.
Ah! my heart aches!
I began to uncover it.
Ah! my heart aches!
I cried, 'But oh, it's *amasil*!
Ah! my heart aches!
I said, 'Please call my girl for me.'
Ah! my heart aches!
And then I kissed my girl.
Ah! my heart aches!
Then I removed my necklace and put it on her.
Ah! my heart aches!
I said, 'Stay well, then, my girl.'
I removed my belt and threw it on her shoulders.
I took all my things and threw them on her shoulders.
I went out saying 'He's rejected me!'
I said, 'What sorrow, father! Today he's rejected me!'
I said, 'What sorrow, mountains! He's rejected me!'
Alas, people! He has rejected me indeed!

Constance Magogo

[p.72:]

ZULESOKA ZULU, I'LL NEVER GO TO HIM!

South Africa, Zulu

Unmarried girls used to compose and sing to themselves love songs to the accompaniment of musical bows with gourd resonators known as *ugubhu* or *umakhweyana*. The songs were declarations of love, celebrations of the lover, laments at separation, songs of rejection or other trials and tribulations. Although the tradition is no longer active, in October 1976 Rosemary Joseph was able to record a number of performance by older women recalling their youthful compositions, including this one, sung to the accompaniment of the *umakhweyana*, in which a Zulu girl expresses defiance when her lover fails to keep an appointment.

I went along to the river, my God!
I thought I'd see him,
I didn't see the likes of him.
How am I going to choose him, because he doesn't come to the river?
I shall abandon him indeed!
I shall choose others!
He thought he was sure of me but I'll never go to him!

IT'S LATE IN THE DAY

South Africa, Xhosa

In this song a Hlubi girl worries that she may have waited so long to marry that she may never find a husband. A.C. Jordan, pre-eminent authority on Xhosa literature and author of the most distinguished novel in Xhosa, who recorded this love song, offers this description of its performance: 'As they sing, the leader and the chorus hold their hands appealingly to one side, and they sway their hips from side to side with graceful modesty. Meanwhile the young men, who hum the bass softly in sympathy, walk slowly in a row along the line of girls and gaze tenderly into the face of each one, especially that of the leader' (1973: 19).*

* Jordan, A.C. (1973) *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Come, it's late in the day!
All those of my age are married,
And now I wander, wander all alone.
Hold back the sun that it may not go down
Without bearing the news of my betrothal.

ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS, DESCRIPTION OF A BUSHMAN /SAN SONG PERFORMANCE

Southern Africa

The words of San songs are often extremely elliptical, for they serve to conjure up in the mind of the singer a narrative and emotional context. ... Elizabeth Marshall Thomas offers this account of a San performance late at night, after most of the people around the campfire had gone to sleep:

Ukwane took out his hunting-bow and, setting one tip on a dry melon shell, he began to tap the string with a reed, making a sound. Soon he played a song, humming a melody and playing an accompaniment on his bow.

He sat alone at his fire, his wife a tiny heap under her kaross and fast asleep some distance away. He was squatting, his eyes on the embers of his fire, holding one end of the bow with his toes. With the fingers of one hand he touched the string, making different notes, and when he wanted to change the pitch he turned his head slightly, catching the other end of the string with his chin.

His song was a mood piece, as are all Bushman songs except the medicine songs. It was a song of pure music without words, a song composed to express a feeling the composer had had, a mood, or an emotion. The mood songs do have names or titles, but these only tell the subject of the piece, the minute incident that may have inspired the composition. Ukwane had composed this song himself, and from time to time he sang the words 'bitter melons'.

We stopped to listen, caught in the net of the music which Ukwane had cast into the air, for it was a soft, sad song that he hummed and played, a song in a minor key to wring your heart, to make you think of places far away and make you feel like crying. Ukwane was so dark that he could hardly be seen against the black veld, and all that showed clearly was the yellow reed tapping and his filmed blue eyes. When he finished the song he put down his bow. We asked him what the song was about and he told us: 'If you are walking in the veld, and you remember where a field of melons was growing and you go there and find them but when you taste them they are bitter, so you can't eat them, you leave them, that is what this song is about.' (1959:122–23)*

* Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall (1959) *The Harmless People*. New York: Knopf.

[pp.129–30:]

OXEN FOR THE VULTURES

Lesotho, Sotho

In contributing this war song to the Sotho newspaper *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, where it was published on 1 February, 1891, A. Sekese remarked that it is ‘one that strengthens the warriors; when it is sung, they shower themselves with tears.’ The song depicts the destiny of all males as death on the battlefield, where they will lie as carrion for birds of prey both in the mountains and on the plains. ... As the enemy approaches, advancing to reclaim the cattle they lost, the singer exhorts his companions in this stark all-male world of death and deprivation.

A male child – ox for the vultures!
Twice over we’re ruled: we’re endlessly slaughtered,
And, slaughtered, we’re left to the eagles,
We’re left to the crow and the vulture!

Vulture, stop hovering over us: we’re burying a man!
He who falls by the spear isn’t buried at home;
One who falls by the spear is buried in the mountains,
The grave of him who falls by the spear – the tall *seboku* grass!

We men are oxen for the vultures.
Men, for their part, call death on themselves,
They call it when spears are brandished,
And the young brave – his mother mourns him.

And the little girl, youthful maiden, cried,
She cried when the sun sank in the west,
‘We told you to stay but you said you must go’ –
Vulture, leave me to see the courtyards back home.

Woman, say not your man has survived:
We leave once again on the morrow.
Woman, give me to eat, I must go to battle,
This night I’ll spend crouching in readiness!

There they are: tramp! tramp! tramp! tramp!
Here come the owners of the cattle!
Thunder the song, you men, all of you!
Why so sullen, about to taste flesh?
You thunder not, you thunder half-heartedly!

[p.142:]

WE DESTROY THE HUT

Southern Africa, Shangana-Tsonga

This song refers to the ancient Shangana-Tsonga custom of demolishing the hut of the deceased. The conical thatched roof is carried into the maize field, and the walls torn down. A sacrifice is then performed in the open hearth area. ...

Chief, Chief

Chorus: We weep for our chief

while we mourn for him

Chorus: as we destroy

Chief, Chief

Chorus: we mourn as we destroy

as we destroy

Chorus: as we destroy it

the hut, the hut

Chorus: as we destroy the hut

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