TIR
REVIEW

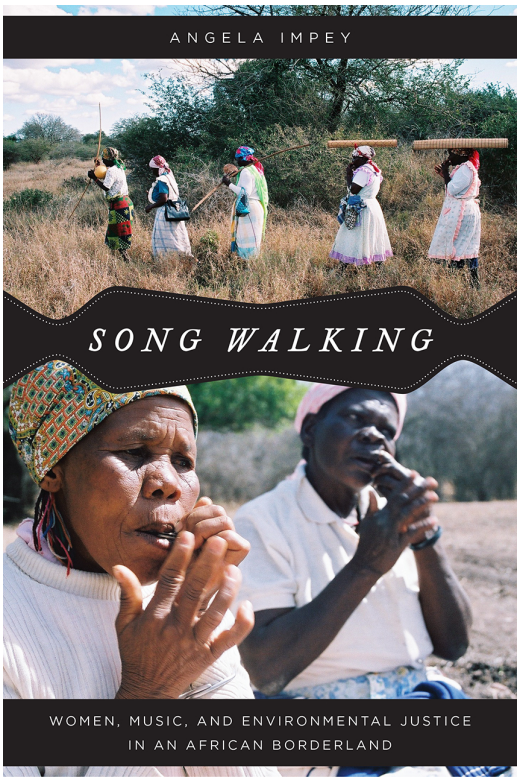
AMACULO MANIHAMBA: WOMEN'S WALKING SONGS IN A BORDERLAND REGION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

DOI
10.11606/issn.2525-3123.gis.2021.176168

DOSSIER LOCAL MUSICKING

Impey, Angela. 2018. *Song Walking*: Women, Music, and Environmental Justice in an African Borderland. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ÉRICA GIESBRECHT
ORCID
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4134-9543
Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 05508 010 - fla@usp.br



Published in 2018, Angela Impey's book offers an ethnographic bridge between the macronarratives of official and historiographical discourses, and the more intimate memories contained in the songs of elderly women in Maputaland, an environmental conservation area located on the border between South Africa, Mozambique and Eswatini. For readers who have never heard of this country, Eswatini was known as the Kingdom of Swaziland until April 2018, when was renamed by its king, Mswati III. Eswatini means "Land of Swazi" in their own language. This sudden change was announced only after the book had gone to press and says much about the region's fluid political dynamics.

Today multilateral treaties and development policies have excluded the local population from decision-making and subjected them to new displacements. Such measures recall previous agreements for the exploitation of natural resources or, going back a little further, the colonial sharing system between 19th century European powers. The practical consequences of these arrangements, however, do not change. In spite of current concerns with sustainable development, governance fails to incorporate the voices of those who will most suffer its consequences.

In this Transfrontier Conservation Area, women, since ancient times, have been involved in farming and grazing. As their lands were divided up by Europeans, access to water, forest or pasture areas became more limited. Such restrictions, accompanied by other colonial changes, forced men to move to the nearest urban centers for work, while keeping women tied to ever-shrinking plots of land in rural areas. Paradoxically, these women never had any rights to the land that they worked.

Initiated in 2002, the South African scholar`s research is motivated by her interest in hearing the most silenced voices in a place where colonial memories, the brutality of past and present governments, transnational interests, and local patriarchy overlap. Amidst these multilayered forms of oppression, women found space to exercise their agency on the few paths still open to them, where they plowed fields and raised livestock.

The silence to which these women are subjected is broken on the day Impey meets them as they wait to receive pensions in a tumultuous scene outside a school in the Ndumo environmental reserve, northwest of Maputaland. It is on this day that women of all ethnicities from throughout the borderland region meet every month. The streets are abuzz with vendors plying their trades, and military police surround the entire area. Armed with a box of *isitweletwele*, Impey approaches the women and asks if anyone remembers how to play them. Their attention piqued, the women snap up the mouth harps, adjust them in their mouths, determine which fit best, try to play familiar melodies, and recall how well their ancestors played.

From that first encounter, Impey invites them to get together to play. Most women who attend these meetings are between fifty and seventy years of age; they live near the Ndumo reserve but weren't all born there, some having moved to the region via exogamous marriage. During the first meetings, they sit beneath a tree and, as they recall melodies, they let memories of past walks emerge. When they were young, they had walked in groups with the small metal arches in their mouths, synchronizing their voices and movements through melodies. But the paths they trod back then are closed to them today.

Usually made of brass, the small mouth arch makes sounds when vibrated by the fingers. The mouth becomes a sounding board, regulated by lip movement. With this movement, words can be imitated: the *isitweletwele*, therefore, "sings" songs, with lyrics. The languages spoken in Maputaland, as well as the songs that were sung and shared, are not hermetic, but rather mix linguistic and aural elements from all those peoples. Impey's ethnography reveals the frictions present in this process in which women, who belong to different ethnic groups, work on the same shared land, thereby developing familial relationships with other women from different communities and backgrounds.

Through exogamous marriage, women from different ethnic groups came to share family ties. Speaking their mother tongue and that of their husband's family fluently is natural for many of them. In addition, the spaces for cultivation and walking intersect, allowing them to listen to each other and eventually communicate in all their different languages.

When Impey asked the women about the similarities among the songs formerly performed with isitweletwele, however, her interlocutors strive to show her what they did to make themselves stand out when they were young. They played differently, because they made the instrument "sing" words in different languages. Thus, songs played on the isitweletwele demarcated spaces, trails and diversity in their shared border territory.

Walking and playing simultaneously completely engages the body at the same time that a second rhythmic and audible engagement is performed with the group. On walks from the forest to the fields or from the river to the house, this was the way the women now seated with Impey under the shade of the tree moved around the areas they were permitted to enter in the borderland conservation area. Their ancestors, however, could walk freely throughout the territory. It is not by chance that the first songs recalled narrate experiences of removal, not necessarily lived by Impey's companions. They are intense memories, as if their families had just been deterritorialized; women relive a social trauma when playing isitweletwele.

Soon, these meetings gained movement. Women left the shade of the tree to sing *amaculo manihamba* - walking songs – on the trails they still had access to. The amaculo manihamba style encompasses everything that the isitweletwele can sing. In addition to songs denouncing land removals, there are others: of marriage, advice for girls and boys, radio hits and day-to-day events, almost like sound chronicles. Songs composed about commonly known facts from the past – a police raid that arrested someone they know, for example – can be resignified in the present – as when the group of women bypasses an approaching guard when passing through a restricted trail inside the forest reserve. A sense of complicity is built among them, immediately after, through the responsive form of amaculo manihamba: when one of the players suggests this song, known to all in the group, and the others accept, they echo the melody that once reported the abuses of the past, but which today is used to mock the guard.

As Impey accompanies women on their once-again musical walks, she brings to mind Ingold and Vergunst's (2008) discussion of walking. More than just moving, walking has to do with the agency of the senses, with gaining skills and knowledge, even as it demarcates spaces. Walking is both journey and narrative (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). This is how these "butterfly" women, as Impey calls them, walk, showing her their knowledge of a host of native plants, sprouting here and there, good for curing the most diverse array of evils.

In the middle chapters, Impey shows that the Maputaland region has not only became cross-border based on colonial divisions, but was already a region of transit for the Mabudu-Tembe, or Tonga, people from the Maputo Bay region; the Ngwane, or Swazi, associated with the western region of the Lebombo mountain range and the Zulus, from south of the Pongolo River. It was an inhospitable natural landscape with a rocky terrain, prone to droughts and floods, only suitable for meetings – whether ceremonial, friendly, wars or negotiations – but which eventually served as a refuge for dissidents from these three peoples.

The European colonial partition at the end of the 19th century would involve Portuguese, British and Boers as the main players, as they took advantage of local conflicts and allied themselves with local chiefs in the pursuit of political and commercial domination. By the early 20th century, South Africa had already passed laws, which would eventually be replicated in both Swaziland and Mozambique, that racially divided the population into a native working class. In South Africa these existing laws were incorporated in 1948 into the country's official policy of apartheid.

From that moment, all the inhabitants of Maputaland started to be treated as Zulus by the local authorities. Rural areas, previously utilized for family

farming, were expropriated, giving way to cotton and sugarcane monoculture. Access to the Usuthu River and all that came with it was blocked by the construction of weirs for the maintenance of large estates. Deprived of water and much of the land destined for subsistence agriculture, families lost irreplaceable sources of subsistence. By destroying autonomous land tenure systems, the colonial administration created a surplus of male labor that would be critical for mining and other industries in southern Africa. Formerly self-sufficient Maputaland families began to depend on the wage men sent from the main urban center, Johannesburg.

It was also in the mid-twentieth century that the isitweletwele first appeared. Sold as a cheap manufactured good in the south of African continent, the "Jewish harp" could be found on the counters of a wide variety of urban stores. When they returned to the countryside, migrant workers brought it as a gift for their girlfriends and wives. The instrument came to be used by single women as a necklace pendant, adorning their necks. The married women, who had already collected some isitweletweles, kept them close to their bodies. This small metal instrument has remained little studied by researchers of southern African music. Impey speculates that this may be due to the fact that it looks rather like a children's toy, or even because it is not part of the pantheon of traditional African instruments.

Impey mentions previous studies, concerned mainly with music and genre, of other mouth harps, such as the *umqangala* or the *isizenze*, both of which are larger and made of bamboo. However, as confirmed by her interlocutors, while women traditionally play these instruments, their performance is restricted to the domestic sphere. The isitweletwele, however, is different because it is a women's instrument meant to be played while walking in a group. Hanging as it did around women's neck, it was always readily available for any opportunity to play that appeared. Making their little arches sing, women coordinate their steps through the sound, while engaging in musical messages collectively amplified by the little instruments resonating in their mouths.

Maputaland women had their movement even more curtailed in the early 1970s. Decolonization and independence would be followed by international concern with environmental conservation. Such environmental policies, given form in the creation of ecological reserves, framed the hunting and planting habits of the land's native inhabitants as a problem for preservation, which in turn conveniently justified their removal or access restrictions.

Such expropriations silenced the isitweletwele, since women understood it as an instrument to be played along the trails that led them to the

fields. Now they were alienated from those fields, the paths patrolled by armed guards. At the same time, the men brought the first stereos (*gumba-gumba*), to the countryside, drastically changing musical habits. Finally, the international embargo imposed on South Africa as reprisal for apartheid resulted in the disappearance of imported goods, not only there, but also in the surrounding countries that depended on South Africa as the middleman for their own import sectors. The isitweletwele did not escape the embargo. As it disappeared from the shelves, it became increasingly rare among women, until it disappeared completely, since brass does not last forever. This, however, did not erase the instrument from women's memories, nor did it undermine the isitweletwele's potential to echo the most oppressed voices within the social system.

By daring to invite the women of Maputaland to reinsert the isitweletwele into their daily lives, Impey seems to have opened the floodgates of subaltern memories and practices. In Maputaland caring for the land is understood as a female domain: women cultivate and walk on it. It is the women who have the necessary knowledge about the territory. They know which plots of soil are good for planting. And only the girls, with their naked bodies, are able to walk through a locust infestation and dispatch them by singing and ritually burning food.

The amount of land required to maintain this family agricultural system is increased by the need to frequently let the soil lie fallow; by alternating between vegetable cultivation and resting periods, daughters and mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and mothers and daughters exchanged surpluses in order to supply their families with all types of food. Nevertheless, the landscape they see now while walking is comprised of fences, which have transformed into "reserved" lands that were previously arable fields. Not only the lost land is at stake, but also the relationships forged among women and mediated by the land and its cultivation since time immemorial, but which are now constrained by a fence.

In addition to restricting the use of the fields, fences also prevent access to important rivers such as the Usuthu and the Pongola. Not by chance, many songs denounce the lack of water, or the stolen water. Enclosed or dammed to supply large estates intended for the planting of exportable products, the scarcity of water left a trail of misery and death in its wake. The decrease in resources previously used for family farming has ultimately changed the very relationships among women and between them and the land. Although they were once the guardians of family self-sufficiency, today women are dependent on their husbands, brothers and sons. When women "romanticize the past", they actually remember a time when they did not depend on cities or money to survive, which gave them greater emancipation from men.

As recalled by the women of Maputaland, the isitweletwele's songs reveal some of the most intimate dimensions of human relationships, such as dates with boys at *isigcawu* parties, engagements and weddings. From her conversations with MaFambile, an elderly resident of the Eziphosheni region, a reserve located further to the south, Impey comes to understand a network of exogamous marriages between young people from that region and the residents of the Usuthu valley, further west. The main reason these boys went to work in Johannesburg was to get enough money to buy cattle to offer for a dowry. In exchange, the young wife owes a debt that she will pay for the rest of her life. In return for being traded for oxen, a woman owes a lifetime of loyalty to her husband, who himself is free to have other wives and lovers.

This relationship was profoundly altered when husbands started to leave the countryside in search of work, and as economic life began to gravitate around gold and diamond mines, and, by the 1960s, a rapidly industrializing Johannesburg. This new economic organization made women, formerly self-supporting providers for their families, economically dependent, as we have seen. In fact, with the exception of cases of abandonment or the husband's death, which caused some women to migrate to the cities to work as maids for European-descended families, they were prevented from leaving the countryside by both the colonial administration and the patriarchy that it helped reinforce. Separations between couples lasted as long as an entire year. The return home of these workers has been identified as one of the main causes of the serious spread of AIDS in the region, which has decimated so many communities.

Furthermore, the stories the iisitweletwele tell denounce the capillarity of pre-independence violence in these cross-border regions. Young men, when moving from rural areas to urban centers, were subjected to prison (and torture) if they failed to carry their passports, a requirement imposed by the South African apartheid regime; women, even without leaving the countryside, suffered much the same abuse if they were caught selling or producing alcoholic beverages from sugar cane, a traditional economic practice, which was suddenly criminalized.

In Johannesburg, apartheid placed restrictions on what shops and public spaces the migrants could frequent. Even so, the men recruited for this type of work gained a certain amount of prestige in their home communities for having worked in the big city. Until the beginning of Mozambique's war of independence, Maputo presented a less hostile alternative, albeit less developed than Johannesburg. The war of independence, however, reversed the direction of migration, with many Mozambicans fleeing to South Africa. To prevent South African and Mozambican freedom fighters from providing support for each other, the Transfrontier Conservation Area

between the two countries gained military reinforcements that would restrict movement even more, turning the territory into a buffer zone.

The release of Nelson Mandela from prison and his subsequent election to the South African presidency would bring, in addition to the end of apartheid, the concept of the inseparability of human development and ecological preservation. This approach to conservation prioritizes a model of ecological tourism in which government, private initiative and local authorities theoretically manage public policies together. The initiative, however, soon proved to be flawed, with business interests (often from outside Africa), steamrolling any attempt to make the region prosperous for the native population.

At the same time, in the absence of men, female responsibility for immediate family support had to continue, since the process of regaining access to natural resources advanced only fitfully. Dynamic and creative, the women of Maputaland have expanded their commercial activities to include not only the sale of agricultural products in the local market, but also the formation of cooperatives to sell these products in more distant regions. Some even purchase clothes, shoes and other Chinese-made products in Johannesburg for local resale. The resumption of isitweletwele-playing itself became an economic activity, as women formed performance groups like the "Mamas of isitweletwele", whose concerts brought in a little extra income. And, of course, some of them also are employed by the reserves themselves.

From their walks with different groups of women through the territory of Maputaland, Impey and her interlocutors were able to draw three musical maps, distinguished by their temporalities and contexts. Demarcating the pre-1960s, the 1980s, and the present (2009, when they were made), these maps show the transformation of geographical space from the point of view of women. The paths, recalled as songs were remembered, are distinguished by access and restrictions, by the need to maintain survival and by adjusting to new spaces.

Although it recalled memories of decades of expropriation, the process Impey initiated by bringing back the isitweletwele also brought up memories of resistance: women remembered how important they had been for their families' livelihood in the past and realized how restrictive impositions had been increasingly imposed on them. With their isitweletwele back, they felt as strong as when they were young and realized that they had never abandoned the battles for survival imposed upon them by every plunder of their rivers and lands. In particular, they began to remember how they used the isitweletwele to express themselves during a time when colonialism continuously reinforced the oppressions of the

patriarchy. “My music is my weapon,” said MaGumede, one of Impey’s interlocutors, leading her to recall James Scott’s (1990) reflections on the arts of resistance.

Song Walking sheds light on a global problem: the imposition of state and corporate power on native peoples by force, with a near-total disregard for their lives. It also speaks directly to issues in Latin America involving indigenous and *quilombola* communities. For example, in Brazil ethnographers have documented the daily experience of abuses of all kinds, including expropriations, the dismantling of family farming due to the concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands, violence, forced displacement, and death (see: Ferreira 2013; Kopenawa and Albert 2015 e O’Dwyer 2002). Just as in southern Africa, Latin American indigenous and quilombola communities also use creative forms of expression to evoke memory, reaffirm rights to land and resources and advocate for environmental justice and the right to self-sustainability in the face of unrelenting state oppression. (see: Oliveira 2011; Mombelli 2014; Araújo and Sansone 2008 e Arruti 2006).

Impey urges us to follow the path of shared and engaged ethnographies, not simply among marginalized communities in general, but specifically with the most excluded voices among the oppressed. Ethnographers can become instruments that amplify their voices, like the isitweletwele itself. Research that engages with the most sensitive dimensions of human life is able to perceive, even in silence, the presence of the hidden and the unspeakable, as Foucault suggested (1990). Like Donna J. Haraway (2016), Impey warns us that public policies often fail because they are incapable of seeing these “hidden transcripts.” She thus claims that ethnographers, who are trained precisely to observe the hidden and the unspeakable, have an important role to play in transforming flawed and unjust policies.

TRANSLATION TECHNICAL REVIEW:
Bryan Pitts

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Araújo, Osmundo e Livio Sansone. 2008. *Raças: Novas perspectivas antropológicas.* Salvador: EDUFBA.

Arruti, José Maurício A. P. 2006. *Mocambo: Antropologia e história do processo de formação quilombola.* Bauru, São Paulo: Edusc.

Bullerjahn, Maximilian D. B. 2018. Colonialismo dual e formação do estado nacional: o caso sul-africano. *In: Revista Brasileira de Estudos Africanos*, v.3, n.5, p.153-174.

Ferreira, Andrey Cordeiro. 2013. *Tutela e Resistência Indígena: Etnografia e História das Relações de Poder entre os Terena e o Estado Brasileiro.* São Paulo: Edusp.

Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1: An Introduction. Londres: Penguin.

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ingold, Tim e Jo Lee Vergunst. (Orgs.) 2008. *Ways of walking: ethnography and practice of Foot*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.

Kopenawa, Davi e Bruce Albert. 2015. *A queda do céu: palavras de um xamã yanomami.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

O'Dwyer, Eliane Cantarino. 2002. Os quilombos e a prática profissional dos antropólogos. *In: Quilombos: identidade étnica e territorialidade.* Eliane Cantarino O'Dwyer, (Org.). Rio de Janeiro: FGV.

Oliveira, Osvaldo Martins de. Comunidades quilombolas no Estado do Espírito Santo: Conflitos sociais, consciência étnica e patrimônio cultural. *In: RURIS - Revista do Centro de Estudos Rurais - UNICAMP,* v. 5, n. 2, 2011.

Mombelli, Raquel. 2014. Quilombos em santa Catarina e os 10 anos do decreto 4.8871. *In: 29ª Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia,* Natal/RN: Associação Brasileira de Antropologia.

Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Erica Giesbrecht is an ethnomusicologist and since 2007 has researched African-Brazilian music and dance, also exploring the potential of visual ethnography as a means of expressing knowledge. She's taken her PhD in Music in 2011 from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas. She was a visiting professor at the Instituto Vilallobos of Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (2018-19) and Chair in Music - Visiting Fulbright Professor in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University-Bloomington (2019). At Universidade de São Paulo, joins the Visual Anthropology Group (GRAVI) and the Research on Musical Anthropology group (PAM). E-mail: egiesbrecht@gmail.com

Submitted: 10/12/2020
Accepted: 10/14/2020