

## **SOUTH AFRICA: SOCIAL HISTORY THROUGH THE *MOPPIES*, CALLING FOR RESEARCH**

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In January 1994, during the New Year's celebrations in Cape Town<sup>1</sup>, one of the most heard songs as interpreted by the *Nagtroepe* (literally “the Night Bands”, the name assumed on that occasion by the *Sangkore* or Malay Choirs) in the night of December 31 to January 1, was entitled “*Ons Hoor*” (“We can hear them”). Well scanned by the beat of the *ghoema* and supported by a lively melody with, towards the end, tones of *habanera*, the lyrics of this song composed by Adam Samodien and Rashaad Maliek are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

Here they come, and all of them are doing the toyi toyi  
We hear them, we hear them, we hear them, they are doing the toyi toyi  
There's unrest in Nyanga, Khayelitsha and Langa  
All over South Africa, they're doing the toyi toyi  
We read in the newspapers  
Cape Town is on fire  
We see on TV  
The squatter camps are burning  
The riot squad was there  
To chase them away  
Oh la la la, oh la la la

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<sup>1</sup> About the New Year's celebrations in Cape Town, see: Denis-Constant Martin, *Coon Carnival, New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> “Ons Hoor” is found on a vinyl recorded by a Cape Town sangkoor, The Tulips: *Les ménestrels du Cap, chants des troupes de carnaval et des choeurs « malais » / The Cape Town Minstrels, Songs of Carnival Troupes and « Malay » Choirs*, Paris, Buda Music (distribution Universal).



Before, we did not worry because everything was tax free  
Then came the GST and now it's the VAT  
VAT on coffee, VAT on tea  
There's VAT on meat and rice  
But there's no VAT on reefers, no

The people stayed away from work for two days  
COSATU said they will get their full salaries  
One is walking in front with the flag in his hand  
The others are behind  
In the street on to the Parade they're all doing the *toyi toyi*  
Come on people let's *toyi toyi* all together  
Viva Madiba, viva Madiba, viva Madiba, viva South Africa  
We all want to say we love you,  
Madiba<sup>3</sup>

The success of “*Ons hoor*” is due to the fact that the authors managed to give in a few words a snapshot of South Africa as it had just come out of apartheid, waiting for the first democratic elections to take place. They managed to create laughter to make South Africans forget the fears born of change and the uncertainty of tomorrow. The song explains at first that event goers can be heard from far away as they *toyi toyi* ; then that there is violence in the black townships and shantytowns of Cape Town, i.e. Nyanga, Khayelitsha, Langa, as seen in the newspapers and on TV. By contrast, subsequent verses evoke the switch from local rates to VAT, mocking the fact that dagga is not taxed. Back to the demonstrations as led by COSATU, militants are still *toyi toying* until they reach the Parade, the central square of Cape Town. The last verses were added to the original version by the band called the Tulips and invite listeners to pay tribute to Nelson Mandela (Madiba).

Not only “*Ons Hoor*” is a particularly successful song of actuality, it also condenses, through music and lyrics, elements that make of the New Year's celebrations in Cape Town a real carnival (despite its calendar position), and one of the most obvious expressions of the Creole character of Cape Town society. The text is drafted with and for humour, it uses causticity that can deride the most serious events and, at the same time, help to defuse anxiety and tension as well as criticise reality and the establishment in a discreet manner. All the more so since humour is underlain by a rebellious spirit that respects laws very little. This song is part of a “tradition” or, more precisely, a practice that has been perpetuated and renewed continuously for one century

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<sup>3</sup> English translation: Anwar Gambeno, Musical Director of the Tulips; French translation (based on the English translation): Denis-Constant Martin.

at least, if taking only the New Year's celebrations into<sup>4</sup> consideration. It testifies to a musical history inseparable from a cultural history that could not be any vaster. It is into this cultural history that this song records contemporary events, indicating the presence as well as the permanence, in Cape Town and South Africa, of those who sing “*Ons Hoor*” and the repertory to which it belongs, of those whom the apartheid regime classified as “Coloureds”, “Cape Malays” or “Other Coloureds”.

The most common stereotypes fabricated and disseminated by the racist authorities of South Africa, going against the “Coloureds”, maintained indeed that this “racial group” did not have its own particular history or culture; that it had no other existence that was not granted by its “dependency” with respect to the whites.<sup>5</sup> The *moppies* (comic songs), issued from the *ghoemalidjies* (picnic songs) that livened up picnics and encouraged people to dance in the streets in particular each time an opportunity presented itself, offer a symbolic contradiction to this denial of creation ability and participation to history: they are anchored in the past and evoke events that have marked or are marking history. It is for this reason that they have given Cape Town its most recognised musical symbol, the *ghoema beat*. The rhythm accompanying *moppies* and *ghoemalidjies*, once transcribed, does not stand out as very original. It is characterised by a structure whereby a semiquaver-quaver combination is played twice on a 4/4 timing. But the way the rhythm is delivered in order to support singers or orchestras, and the plasticity allowing it to adapt to the pace of vocalists and musicians parading in the streets, give it an undeniable specificity. This rhythm is omnipresent during the New Year's festivities and each time musicians want to show that they are from Cape Town, to depict and particularise the mother city, they use it. From jazzmen Abdullah Ibrahim and Robbie Jansen to rappers Brassie Vannie Kaap via banjoist Mr. Mac, the *ghoema beat* is a constant reminder of the Creole nature of Cape Town, highlighting the fact that Cape Town is home to original cultural practices and that the Coloured people are behind these.

As for any Creole culture, Cape Town culture is not only the result of a local

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Winberg, linking the *moppies* with the *ghoemaliedjies* (literally “drum songs”), dates them back to 1707; see: Christine Winberg, « Satire, slavery and the *Ghoemaliedjies* of the Cape Muslims », *New Contrast* 76, 1992: 78-96.

<sup>5</sup> “Smuts repeatedly assured Coloureds that the UP recognised the ‘traditional special position of the Cape Coloured people as an appendage to the whites.’”, Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall, A History of South African « Coloured » Politics*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1987: 210.

invention process that would have developed in isolation to the rest of the world. On the contrary, *moppies* and *ghoema beat* underline the fact that foreign influences were constantly absorbed and worked on. The *ghoema* drum, already with its cask-like architecture, is reminiscent of other percussion instruments imagined in alcohol and wine producing regions, like the *gwo ka* of Guadeloupe. The uncertain etymology of this word could link it to Javanese, but one could not disregard its phonetic proximity with the *ngoma*, a pan-Bantu root connoting drum, dance and music<sup>6</sup> in general. The repertoire of the *ghoemaliedjies* can be brought closer to that of the pantuns of Indonesia<sup>7</sup>. The attitude of solo singers, their gestures in particular, the role of the banjo in the orchestra accompanying the choir, the harmonic progressions underlying the melodies and the frequent interpolation of musical passages in *habanera-style*, show a sense of identification with the Americas (intermixed Americas in particular), one that transpires in the celebrations and music the *Coloured* people have been inventing and reinventing constantly in Cape Town, as if to mean global crossbreeding (the Khoikhoi were living there when Vasco de Gama landed in South Africa; the slaves came from Africa, Indonesia, India, Madagascar; deported convicts came from China; the sailors, fishermen and missionaries from the West Indies and the United States also ended up in the *Coloured* category) and, always remaining in contact with the world, they have always partaken of a world of modernity where the whites did not necessarily have the first role.

The permanence of *moppies* repertoire and its symbolic density were to make of it a privileged object of study for historians, linguists, anthropologists or musicologists. Just as it was possible to show the history of Trinidad or Brazil under a new light based on the study of calypsos<sup>8</sup> and sambas<sup>9</sup>, one could write a new social history of Cape Town by analysing *moppies*. And yet, nothing or almost nothing has been undertaken in this domain, for several reasons: where dominating racism wanted to impose the idea that coloured cultural production and practice were devoid of any value, it was not conceivable to study them, except with the intention of creating instruments of manipulation to serve

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<sup>6</sup> See: Jean Branford, William Branford, *A Dictionary of South African English*, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1991: 105.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Winberg, *art. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Port of Spain, Gordon Rohlehr, 1990 ; Louis Regis, *The Political Calypso, True Opposition in Trinidad and Tobago, 1962-1987*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Carlos Sandroni, *Feitiço Decente, Transformações do Samba no Rio de Janeiro (1917-1933)*, Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar/UFRJ, 2001; Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba, Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

the cause of apartheid, as did I.D. Du Plessis. The fear, shared by many antiapartheid militants, that any attention given to the specific cultural element of a community would feed apartheid ideologists, caused any research on the cultural practices of part of the coloured population, willingly suspected of alienation in respect of white power, to be excluded from the field of lawful inquiry. In addition to the texts of I.D. Du Plessis<sup>10</sup> that ought to be used prudently, only the pioneering article of Christine Winberg, to my knowledge, showed the importance of studying moppies and *ghoemaliedjies*.

As a priority, they need to be collected. Sometimes, the texts of these songs are recorded on notebooks kept by their authors or on sheets given to choir members that are rarely kept after Carnival or Malay Choir competitions. Most of the time, the lyrics survive in parts or in full in the memory of interpreters. As to the melodies, they are always passed on orally: since their composer, for most, cannot write music, melodies are practically never written down. In this instance again, memory is the most fertile source. Since no systematic collection of *moppies* exists, one ought to compile such a collection by collecting the written records conserved and reviving those heard long enough to be recalled. A few scattered remains of texts could also be found in the press, taken down quickly and re-transcribed by journalists who, in any case, could not have hoped to see the most corrosive and anti-establishment verses printed.

Then it will be possible to analyse music and text, and even the recent performance styles by using the videos shot during the Malay Choir and Carnival Band competitions<sup>11</sup>. After such an analysis, a whole section of the way in which racism, apartheid and forced displacement was endured by the Cape Townians should be revealed. Sticking to political attitudes, the New Year's celebrations (Coons Carnival, Malay Choir and Christmas Choir competitions) are often considered as a manifestation of escapism, an opportunity for oppressed and despised people to express, through excessive unusual behaviour, the tensions and feelings accumulated along the year ; of course, these celebrations, in Cape Town as in anywhere else, fulfil such a function. But, by examining in detail the body language, the adornment of the costumes, the musical references, the lyrics and the play on words these afford in a particular dialect of Afrikaans, one finds hidden clues of protest, symbolical for most, that cannot be extracted from the

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<sup>10</sup> In particular: I.D. du Plessis, *Die Bydrae van die Kaapse Maleier tot die Afrikaanse Volkslied*, Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1935.

<sup>11</sup> The Cape Malay Choir Board has been recording them systematically in the past few years.

open Cape Town demonstrations or revolts, nor excluded from the field of historical and political science research.

While the debate has been resumed concerning whether it is really necessary and moral to celebrate the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in Cape Town, we can quote one of the most famous examples of *moppies* political humour. In 1952, four years after the National Party election victory, while the new regime was systematically implementing apartheid, it was decided that the three-hundredth anniversary of Van Riebeeck's landing would be the subject of a huge South African patriotic event, involving all population categories<sup>12</sup>. Coons and Malay Choirs were thus invited to take part in the event and intense debates followed to decide whether this grand mass should be attended to celebrate white domination; certain bands accepted, the Cape Malay Choir Board resigned itself to doing it, not without some choirs seceding to form a Zuid-Afrikaanse *Koorraad* that refused to co-operate. A *moppie* was subsequently composed and, it seems, sung a lot. Many of those who lived during that period still remember it. Combining elements drawn from an advertisement for Vim detergent and from an American piece that was popular at the time (broadcast by Lionel Hampton in particular and based on onomatopoeias invented by Cab Calloway: "Hey baba rebop"), playing as always on words, his verse stated: "*Hey ba-ba-re-ba se ding is vim*" (Hey ba-ba-re-ba his thing [that of Van Riebeck] is impotent). Another example: in the 1990s, a Coons Captain recalled with a certain pleasure a reworked interpretation of "It's now or never" sung by Elvis Presley (the song based on the Italian aria "O sole mio") that stated ingratiatingly: "It's now or never, Verwoerd is gonna die" ...

From "*Se ding is vim*" to "*Ons Hoor*", a real social history of Cape Town through *moppies* remains to be done. The research material available leads one to believe that such a study would make for an interesting MA or PhD.

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<sup>12</sup> Concerning the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival, see: Ciraj Rassool, Leslie Witz, "The 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: constructing and contesting public national history in South Africa", *Journal of African History* 34, 1993; Leslie Witz, "n'Feers vir Dir Oog: Looking on the 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival Fair in Cape Town", *South Africa Historical Journal* 19, 1993.