

VERBAL ART FORMS AS POETIC LICENCE FOR WOMEN: THE CASE OF ILIMA – WOMEN’S WORK SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Cultural songs are one of the highly formulaic verbal art forms through which African women mediate contradictions by commenting on their personal fortunes and tribulations in their married lives. In this medium they may express sentiments that go against the principles of modesty, where utterances expressed in everyday social interaction would be condemned, but the same ideas expressed in songs are viewed as extraordinary, leading to sympathising with the opinions conveyed. By means of oral melodic forms, therefore, women express true feelings that would otherwise, in terms of the *hlonipha* custom, be perceived as violating their moral code had they been expressed in everyday, ordinary language. The aim of this article is to discuss songs gathered at one of the five women's social events referred to as *ilima*, a collective word referring to a group of women who come together with the intention of assisting a fellow-woman complete an otherwise time-consuming and laborious home-based activity. The shared labour manifests *ubuntu*, which is one of the philosophies of the life of Africans. By also presenting women's own voices in the form of

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snippets that comment on some of the songs, the article further highlights the themes prevalent in them. It concludes that women find poetic licence in songs that accompany the kind of labour performed at women's unions such as *ilima*.

Keywords: songs, *ilima*, poetic licence, social interaction, *ubuntu*

INTRODUCTION

Songs are vital to African culture and they constitute some of the richest treasures, as they help fix ideas in words, making it possible to remember them through musical rhythm and repetition. A cultural specialist, Msimang (1986, 97), succinctly proclaims that:

... ukucula lokhu kusemithanjeni yomuntu ongumZulu. Empeleni leli yiqiniso elingephikwe futhi aligcini kumaZulu odwa; bonke abayinzalo yaseAfrika bazalwa naso lesi siphiso esibaluleke kangaka ... Uma kufiwe kuyahutshwa, uma kujajiwe kuyahlatshelwa, kubhiyozwe; uma kuyimikhosi kuyahaywa kugidwe, uma kusetshenzwa kunamalima umculo kawusaleli ngemuva, uma kwenziwa noma yini ongase uyicabange leyonto iphelezelwa umculo.

(... singing is engrained in a Zulu person. In fact, this is an unquestionable truth and does not end with the Zulu people – all descendants of Africa are born with this wonderful talent ... If there is death, songs are sung; if people are happy, they sing and dance; whenever there are ceremonies, songs will be sung; when people are engaged in any kind of work such as working in the fields, music will be there; in fact, whatever the occasion is, music will be part of it.)

Nketia (1974, 21) corroborates the view above when he maintains that songs are ever-present when traditional African societies 'come together for enjoyment of leisure, for recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival or any kind of collective activity'.

In order for the reader to appreciate this article and to obtain a holistic picture of the study from which the article draws, I find it useful to provide a broad contextual background of the ceremonies and instances on which the study was grounded. The research was carried out in five of the seven districts comprising Zwelibomvu (Zondi 2008). These were ePhangweni, eMkhangoma, ePanekeni, Ezimbokodweni and eMadwaleni. The Magcaba and Masomini areas fell outside the scope of my study, as it would not have been feasible to deal with all of them. The other reasons that justify their exclusion are:

- They border Mangangeni, which is an area under the jurisdiction of another chief.
- The population is not proportional to that of the other districts. Sparsely populated with the Magcaba and Msomi families respectively, they derive their names from those surnames.

The other five districts, on the other hand, are named after rivers from which the local residents drink – not an unusual phenomenon, as noted by Shangase (2006), who mentions a similar naming trend in his study of the Shangase clan. Traditional ceremonies from which data was collected were in the form of *umemulo* (a girl's coming-of-age ceremony), *umgcagco* (the traditional wedding) and *ilima* (a collective name for a group of women who come together to assist one another with a home-based activity such as ploughing the fields). Furthermore, Zwelibomvu has rituals which are formalised through *amacece*. These are ceremonies held in honour of a young man and a woman who publicly declare their love for each other. In this way, potential suitors are made aware that the young woman is no longer 'available'. At these gatherings, neighbouring communities come together to perform according to *izigodi* (districts). A variety of songs are sung. The songs deal with a number of issues and are rendered in different genres. Because of the porous nature of these genres, it was sometimes complicated to nail down the exact nature of a song. For instance, women *maskanda* (sometimes pronounced as *maskandi*), a genre which is commonly associated with men, but in which women also feature (as was the case in Zwelibomvu), breeds *izigiyo*, a poetic song genre which refers to specified solo dance songs and which at Zwelibomvu is peculiarly referred to as *ukushoza* or *ukujoqa*.

This article is confined to the *ilima* setting, the event from which the songs discussed in this article were collected. Among the descriptions of where and when songs are seen to be central in a Zulu person's life, Msimang (1986) mentions *ilima* as an important event where one is likely to hear women singing for various reasons: singing for enjoyment, commenting about what goes on in their lives, and singing while performing some kind of collective activity. *Ilima* is generally organised to ensure that work that would otherwise have taken a longer time to accomplish, for example in the fields, takes a short time because many people work together collaboratively.

The particular *ilima* gathering from which songs discussed in this article were gathered took place at Mama Maseko's homestead at eZimbokodweni on Thursday the 23rd of February 2006 between 08h00 and 13h00. Whilst this discussion is limited to the ten songs performed on that occasion, as well as some remarks heard on that particular day, it must be pointed out that some of them had been heard in other districts and at other ceremonies as well – hence my reference to their porous nature. For this reason comments that emerged from other contexts may be mentioned, if only to highlight a particular point.

When an *ilima* is organised, the family that is to be assisted usually prepares food and drink to take with to the fields. This is because generally there is not enough time for each person to take a break to go and eat at their individual homes. This is also a gesture of appreciation by the family towards those volunteering their help. However, as a gesture of *ubuntu*, those who come to assist also bring *umphako* –

food they bring along for what we would casually refer to as a 'bring-and-share' or potluck meal in English-speaking countries. Eating together also gives the group a sense of togetherness and comradeship.

One can therefore identify in the activities a calabash of *amahewu*, home-made fermented porridge. In some cases it can be *utshwala*, traditional home-brewed beer, or in these contemporary times even juice (see the picture below).



Figure 1: Tilling the soil during *ilima*

PRINCIPLES INFORMING THE STUDY

Kgobe (1985, 48) claims that every society has a system of laws, social ethics and precepts according to which every member of the society is bound to conform to certain obligations and codes of conduct within his or her society. These structures have played a major role in power struggles between individuals in most cultures, as demonstrated, for example, in the subjugation of women in pre-colonial times (Anderson and Zinnser 1990). The result is inequality in the sharing of power and decision-making within families. Any work in gender studies is therefore bound to

reveal the injustices and oppressive practices of such traditions (Malherbe, Kleijwegt and Koen 2000; Muthuki 2004).

DATA PRESENTATION

The women who participated at Mama Maseko's homestead sang rhythmically as they cultivated the soil. They indicated that singing encourages them to keep going without feeling worn-out. From the way they looked, one could observe that despite the parched land they worked, they did indeed not exhibit exhaustion. The prevailing rhythm of the songs was so powerful that as the women raised and brought down their hoes, this was choreography at its best. What they sang seemed to be coordinated through the sound made by the hoes as they went up and down in a precise beat. It can also be pointed out that because this is a concerted task, there is no competition among the women. This is one of the most important observations about the connection between the traditional values of *ubuntu* and caring for one another, and the culture that has managed to be passed on to modern times. If one got tired, she took shelter under a tree, while the others went on with the job without deserting the area worked by the woman taking a break.

Because the activities are usually physically taxing and the women are often exposed to harsh weather conditions, volunteers in the *ilima* generally dress up in loose-fitting aprons and smear *ibomvu*, some form of clay, on their faces to protect themselves from the environmental conditions, such as being burnt by the sun. Others bring along straw hats to protect themselves. It is therefore obvious that these women are quite flexible as to the type of attire they are wearing. Some wear sneakers, while others work barefooted.

SONGS PERFORMED AT THIS PARTICULAR *ILIMA* OCCASION

1. *Singabas'eZimbokodweni*

*Wo suka sambe ilizwe silakhile
Singabas'eZimbokodweni ngenkani
Wo suka sambe ilizwe silakhile*

2. *Lo mhlaba*

*Lo mhlaba wakithi
Sondliwa yiwona
Sikhuliswa yiwona
Kodwa sililadi lokukhwela*

*Lo mhlaba wakithi
Sifundiswa yiwona
Kodwa sililadi lokukhwela*

We are from Zimbokodweni

Oh damn, we have built the country indeed
We belong to Zimbokodweni indeed
Oh damn, we have built the country indeed

This soil

This soil of ours
sustains us
It helps us grow
But we are used as a stepping stone for
others to climb up
This soil of ours
It educates us [how to live]
But we are used as a stepping stone for
others to climb up

3. Utshwala bugayelwe bani?

*Utshwala bugayelwe bani?
Sifa yindlala
Utshwala bugayelwe bani?
Sifa yindlala*

4. Asiwafun'amavila

*Asiwafun'amavila thina
Asiwafun'amavila thina
Kulo mbuthano wethu
Asiwafun'amavila thina*

*Asiwafun'amavila thina
Asiwafun'amavila thina
Kulo mbuthano wethu
Asiwafun'amavila thina
Asiwafun'amavila thina
Kulo mbuthano wethu
Noselibambil'ijoka lakhe
Akasabuy'abhek'eceleni*

5. Imbenge

Leader: *Imbenge*
Chorus: *Wothath'imbenge*
Leader: *Imbenge*
Chorus: *Wothath'imbenge*
Leader: *Sekunjenje kwenza bani?*
Chorus: *Kwenz'imbokodo*

6. Ngimthathe ngimxolele?

Leader: *Ngimthathe, ngikhohlwe?*
All: *Myeke. Kakade udla wena*
Leader: *Kant'ifunani le ndoda?*
All: *Myeke. Mshiye. Kad'umncenga*

7. Umkhwenyana

Leader: *Umkhwenyana may'edlala ngami*
Chorus: *Ngizohamba*
Leader: *may' edlala ngami*
Chorus: *Ngizohamba*
Leader: *'Ngcono ngigoduke*
Chorus: *Ngizohamba ngiphind'ekhaya*

8. Kuyashis'emendweni

Leader: *Kuyashis'emendweni*
Chorus: *Wawuyangaphi?*
Leader: *Kuyashis'emendweni webaba*
Leader: *Uyangisind'umendo. We baba*
Chorus: *Wawuyangaphi?*

For whom is the beer brewed?
For whom is the beer brewed?
When we are dying of starvation
For whom is the beer brewed?
When we are dying of starvation

We do not want lazy people

We do not want lazy people
We do not want lazy people
In this association of ours
We do not want lazy people

We do not want lazy people
We do not want lazy people
In this association of ours
We do not want lazy people
We do not want lazy people
In this association of ours
Even the one who has taken on the yoke
Will never have to lose focus again

A grass-woven dish

A grass-woven dish
You must take the dish
A grass-woven dish
You must take the dish
Who is behind these improved conditions?
It is the rock

Forgive him?

Should I take him back, should I forget?
Leave him. After all he is 'living off' you
What does this man really want?
Leave him. You have been begging him for
too long

My husband

If my husband ill-treats me
I will leave
If he ill-treats me
I will leave
It's better that I leave
I'll leave and go back home

It is hot in marriage

It's hot in marriage
Where were you going?
Oh father, it is hot in marriage
I can't handle marriage. My father.
Where were you going?

9. Wo bekezela

Leader: *Wo bekezela*

Chorus: *Esithenjini kunzima wobekezela*

Leader: *Ukhala kuze kuse*

Chorus: *Esithenjini kunzima wobekezela*

10. Ngiphezelezele

Leader: *Ngiphezelezele*

Chorus: *Ngiyobon'isilingo somnakwethu*

Awu lesikhophocwane

Leader: *O sekunjan'ukwaliwa*

Chorus: *O sekunjalo nje*

Leader: *O sekunjani ukuhluphek*

Chorus: *Osekunjalo nje*

You must persevere

You must persevere

It is tough in a polygamous marriage

You cry until dawn

In a polygamous marriage it is tough (to) persevere

Accompany me

Accompany me

To go see this nuisance of a co-wife

She has sunken eyes

How does it feel to be jilted?

It is just like that

How is it to suffer?

It is just like that

ANALYSIS OF ILIMA SONGS

Coplan (1994, 157) maintains that 'it is in the medium of song that black women enjoy poetic licence'. Ntshinga (1993) and Manqele (2000) take the idea forward when they view songs as one of the channels through which married women comment about their married lives. In this light, women's songs could be viewed as a way of giving a voice to African women who Bukenya (in Kaschula 2001) argues are disadvantaged, exploited and oppressed – this being evidenced primarily in the institution of marriage where, in accordance with their culture, their voices have been silenced. The following thematic analysis is strengthened by respondents' own chronicles. It makes a strong case for women who, bound by societal expectations which prevent women from raising their voice at their spouses, or even expressing their feelings, find songs a channel through which to speak out against situations that would, otherwise, cause them to 'throw tantrums'.

Thematic analysis, which I felt was suitable for the type of research I conducted, is a method that identifies, analyses and reports patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). While the themes also take into account participants' responses from the entire study, for the purposes of this article they are guided by the *ilima* event, which is the focus of the article. While not exhaustive, the following is a thematic analysis of songs 1 to 10 above.

Appreciation for being women from Zwelibomvu

The phenomenon observed throughout Zwelibomvu was that, no matter what the occasion was, the first song rendered always mentioned the district in which the event was taking place. Women showed that they were proud of belonging to their specific districts. The lyrics of the song were always the same, except for the name

of the district. On this particular occasion, as the women started hoeing, they sang *Singabas'eZimbokodweni* (We belong to eZimbokodweni) (**Song 1**). As the song was sung at the top of their voices, the women looked like they were charged with energy, even dropping down their hoes and starting to dance and ululate. Within a short space of time everyone's hoe was on the ground and they were clapping and dancing, each one showcasing her individual dance style. This seemed like a ritual on its own, as the women expressed a sense of pride and honour in being a hardworking unit. In this song women proclaim, almost in disdain, to the 'other' that though the dominant (in this case their men) may exert power over them, women are in fact the most important people, as they are instrumental in the development and prosperity of their districts – in this case eZimbokodweni and Zwelibomvu as a whole. The weight of the phrases *ngenkani* and *wo suka sambe* cannot actually be translated faithfully into English to convey the sense of pride, patriotism and worth embedded in the song.

Women as sustainers of life

As part of their daily chores women generally cultivate the land and often help one another. As they work, they sing in order to encourage one another not to feel tired. While tilling land during *ilima*, the women were very vocal about their role in using agriculture for the sustenance of their families. **Song 2** demonstrates this commitment and communicates a powerful message about women being strong members of society who play a critical role in looking after society and sustaining communities. Thus, in the words of Waterman (in Barber 1997, 49), 'hegemonic values enacted and reproduced in musical performance portray that group of people as a community'. The song talks about the role of land in nurturing families. The striking aspect of this song is the sharp, underlying message which is embedded in it. The deeper meaning in the context of protest and resistance is that although the value of land for both men and women is understood, it is women who use the soil to sustain everybody. In fact, it is implied that men are not prepared to play their part, and exploit women to get whatever they want. In the context of this presentation this could mean that men do not work to support their families, and that women are expected to play the dual role of breadwinner and mother. The connotation of exploitation is evident in the imagery of a 'ladder'. Again, in terms of power and gender issues, this is a striking and loaded metaphor, as it shows that women are a means for the dominant group to get to the top. After all, as one woman pointed out, when the crops thrive and the harvest turns out well, the glory goes to *umnumzane*, the head of the family, as passers-by shower praise onto him:

Awamahle kanje amasimu kaMkhize

(How beautiful Mkhize's fields are [Mama Mzila's words].)

This recognition ignores the real people behind a good job. The use of the prefixes 'si-' in *sililadi* (we are a ladder) (**Song 2**) and 'asi-' in *asiwafuni* (we do not want ...) (**Song 3**) are in plural form. Since songs are generally a hidden transcript for societies to voice issues that the oppressed cannot usually articulate freely, this plural form carries more substance with regard to gender solidarity and ensures that no finger can be pointed at one particular individual for having complained and protested about any form of oppression. This plurality is another means that gives women the courage to freely express what they are discontent about. Scott (1990) argues that the idea of a collective which, in this case, is emphasised by the use of the plural in the song, as well as by the collective nature of the performance, illustrates the fact that subordinates (in this case women) may collude to create a piece of theatre that serves their superiors' view of the situation but that is maintained in their own interest.

There is a sense too that when women sing **Song 2**, they want to educate men to respect the land as it 'teaches' and 'helps us grow' – even though they do not mention men directly. Akivanga and Bole-Odaga's (1982, 5) ideas are evoked in this regard when they state that 'the images, similes, metaphors and other figures of speech used in songs ... are drawn from the people's own experiences and their daily activities'.

On the occasion of this *ilima* one woman declared that:

Sisebenza kanzima ngomhlabathi sibeke nembewu yonyaka olandelayo ukuze kudliwe emakhaya. Phela lokho okuncane abasinika khona abayeni bethu kugada indlala kodwa basazenzela umathanda ngathi.

(We till the soil and save seeds so we can put food on the table. Whatever little our husbands provide, we have to ensure we don't get hungry, yet these men still think they can do as they please with us.)

Another one said:

Obaba basemaGoli bandindile. Kodwa lo mhlaba uyasincelisa wena owabon'ingane incela kunina.

(Our men are in Johannesburg and have abandoned us, but this soil provides for us and we suckle from it like a child suckling from its mother).

In her feminist critical practice, Weedon (1997) examines ways of understanding social and cultural practices which throw light on how gender power relations should be understood within a variety of contexts in which they manifest themselves. She posits that patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference and that in patriarchal discourse the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. Of relevance here is also African feminism which cherishes motherhood, as it makes women special since they are the only ones who can bear children (Muthuki 2004, 9). That as the case may be the imagery used by one resident of eZimbokodweni when she compared the soil to a

woman is profound in that the woman was, in fact, further talking about herself as a woman and mother and as the soil of a nation that nurtures men as well.

The repetition of the lyrics within each song provides for the rhythmic nature of the songs in line with Ong's (1982) and Jousse's (1990) mnemonic patterns which facilitate effortless retention in a paperless education. Once again, the use of the consonant 's' in *sifa* (**Song 3**), which results in the figure of speech called alliteration, produces a rhythmic effect while ensuring that the singers easily remember the songs. This idea of women as 'sustenance' where they encourage each other to keep going is well expressed in the lines *Noselibambil'ijoka lakhe/Akasabuy'abhek'eceleni* (even the one who has taken on the yoke will never have to lose focus again) (**Song 4**).

Protest against unappreciative men who take women for granted

Song 3 looks at the ironic position in which women find themselves with regard to their roles in the family. In this song they find themselves in a compromised position in that they are the ones who have to brew beer for their husbands, although they live in poverty. The irony of the rhetoric question 'For whom is the beer brewed?' is a powerful form of protest. There is another level of protest conveyed by the song in that the women are not just complaining about their role as servants of men who have to satisfy their every whim, but also about the fact that beer is sheer entertainment and is not essential – more so if women and children are starving. The whole notion of men being *abanumzane* (heads of their families) is beautifully subverted, dismissed and questioned in this song. In line with the song, one woman complained about irresponsible men who expect their wives to always fix beer for them, while they do not care about putting food on the table:

...abayeni bethu abangondli emakhaya bebe kodwa befuna njalo kuhlale kukhona utshwala uyabona nje ukuthi ngenhliziyo bathi "Kungamane kulale kungadliwe kodwa eyokuphisa utshwala yona iyohlale ikhona".

(One can just read the mind of men who do not take care of their families. They think that even though their families may go hungry as long as they provide money to fix beer everything is fine.)

In fact the issue of brewing beer is sadly ridiculed by Zwelibomvu men themselves, who patronisingly argued (when counter-interviewed on a different occasion) that when men sing, they do it to express appreciation for the beer their wives brew for them. One man further stated:

Kuyaxaka ukuthi labafazi bathi asiyinakekeli imindeneni yethu kodwa bebe besiphisela utshwala. Uyenza kanjani into enjalo?

(It is funny that these women brew us beer, yet complain afterwards that we are not responsible. Why serve a negligent husband?)

Women emphasising their power to men through song

The sense of self-worth is almost directly communicated in **Song 6**, which takes the form of a dialogue between a leader and a chorus. One woman in this instance, representing the plight of all women, asks the other women, if she really should take ‘him’ back and forget [all the hardships he has put her through]. The women answer in unison that she should leave him, especially because ‘he lives off her sweat’. This message conveys once again the fact that women realise the power that they have and that there is, in fact, no need to beg the man, for he is not worth it. Again, it is important to point out that in the context of orality and particularly women’s songs, the subject can be successfully contested without causing confusion to the group as to who the song is referring to. In this particular song, the song begins with *ngimthathe*, without clarifying who it is that she should be taking back. Nevertheless, the other women understand that it must be a man and they all argue that she should leave ‘him’. It is only later on in the song that it is confirmed that it is indeed about a man, when the leader sings, *Kant’ifunani le ndoda?* meaning ‘What exactly does **this man** want?’. Once again the subject can be hidden through the use of agreement and by not saying the real name, but by generalising. This is another way in which women show off their power to men through song.

HARDSHIP AND REJECTION IN MARRIAGE

In **Song 7** the voice of the bride comes out clearly, where she declares in public what her expectations of the groom are. This song states that the bride will leave the groom if he were to ill-treat her. There could be many arguments and speculation about the reason for this bold assertion and potential defiance. One reason could be that, while tradition is still practised, its weight has been clouded by the onset of modernity. Women, understanding human rights, dignity and social justice, are no longer willing to suffer under men, but realise that they too have a choice – to leave and ‘go back home’. Another theory could be put forward that, knowing very well that they are under the spell and power of men, women are using this public forum to ‘plead’ with their men or to even ‘threaten’ them that should they think of ill-treating them they would ‘leave’. However, in reality, they will not. Either way, these two assumptions do point to a basic need for women to convey that they are human beings and that, despite their perceived roles in society, they are aware that they need to be treated with dignity, honour and love.

In an interview with Mama Msomi, referring to **Song 7**, this is what she had to say:

‘We have adopted this song which is mainly sung at *umgcagco*, traditional weddings. The younger generation, unlike us, is not prepared to take nonsense from their husbands. As for us, we are stuck with our husbands and have nowhere to go. Our reputation would be at stake if we left our husbands.’

For this reason I take it that **Song 8** is a warning to young brides that they should enter marriage with the full knowledge that marriage is not a bed of roses and that they should persevere (**Song 9**).

Scott (1990) argues that if subordinate groups have typically won a reputation for subtlety – a subtlety which their superiors find cunning and deceptive – this is surely because their vulnerability has rarely permitted them the luxury of direct confrontation. That is why, in their responses, the women argued that through song they find a voice over those who dominate, and gain power, even if only through words and just for that particular moment – before they go home from where they were gathered and face the domineering husbands and in-laws.

In an article entitled ‘Whose music?’ Graebner (in Barber 1997, 115) argues that songs and culture in general are not only about society; they do not just reflect, but are part of the social-cultural fabric. They articulate and mould life experiences at the same time. The analysis of women’s contemporary songs at Zwelibomvu is therefore a good illustration of the contestation of the dominant ideologies, the general characteristics of hegemony. And one of the dominant themes expressed through these songs is that of the hardship women experience as a result of abuse by their husbands. This theme of hardship was, in fact, the most salient argument put forward by respondents.

The same can be said about the interviews which were conducted with men to determine to what extent they were aware of what women are experiencing. Most of the men would respond ‘*bahleba ngathi*’, meaning that women gossip about them. This in itself revealed that they are not oblivious to women’s protests, even if these are conveyed through songs. This brings forward another theme that emerges in women’s songs, where gossip becomes the instrument of silent protest.

POLYGyny AND JEALOUSY

In the community being studied, the kind of oppression highlighted above is mostly obvious in the relationships that exist between co-wives within polygamous marriages. Whoever happened to be *intandokazi*, the most loved wife (which in most cases was a younger wife), was ill-treated by the fellow-wives and in some instances even by the mother-in-law. Whilst the man is the cause of *isikhwele* – the jealousy that exists between co-wives – through songs sung by the Zwelibomvu women, it becomes apparent that it is the *intandokazi* who gets teased and ostracised by other women, including those who do not fall within the family. This is evident in **Song 10**, where the co-wife is mockingly referred to as a menace and one with sunken eyes. According to the women, the origin of the song dates back to an occasion when a man allegedly forced his senior wife to visit a young wife who had been ill for a long time. In annoyance, the co-wife requested her friend to accompany her, and they found the co-wife, who was also an *intandokazi*, in bad shape owing to the

long illness from which she had suffered. She was looking gaunt, with sunken eyes like those of a baboon. From then on the senior wife, other co-wives and friends mockingly referred to the sick woman as *isikhophocwane* – sunken eyes.

CONCLUSION

Through songs sung during *ilima* activities, it became clear that though the daily existence of the Zwelibomvu women may seem ordinary, they also have burning issues, especially with regard to their society, which accepts the entrenched gendered mind-sets which perceive women to be inferior to men. The article has presented a context in which Zwelibomvu women could describe what singing means to and for them. Whilst the situations and conditions that call for the performance of songs have been treated individually, they should be viewed in the light of what Barber (1997) refers to as porous genre boundaries, which means that while there are songs for each occasion, they nevertheless permeate the different contexts. Zwelibomvu women, to some extent and through their contemporary songs, refute notions that women are helpless when it comes to their oppression. Rather, songs and fellowship afford them poetic licence to share what affects them in their daily lives.

NOTE

1. Ethical considerations were adhered to when the main study from which this article draws was undertaken, in line with the requirements of the institution under which the study was conducted. Furthermore, permission was obtained to use data even after the main study had been completed – hence the use of the photograph taken on the day of *ilima*.

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