

# Article

## Questions regarding tradition and modernity in contemporary *Amakwaya* practice

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### Introduction

There is the view – we will term this the modernity thesis – that modern social developments entail a radical discontinuity in history and break with tradition. Anthony Giddens (1990:4), for example, writes that ‘the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from *all* traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion’. The radical reflexivity which is the mark of the modern, means one can no longer appeal to tradition. Or rather, if one does justify tradition, this is ‘only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition’. And such justified tradition is ‘tradition in sham clothing’ (1990:38).

In this paper we will present what we think is a counter-example to this thesis, namely the black choral tradition, *amakwaya*. The picture drawn by the modernity thesis is that of a social system in which individuals are subject to, or subject themselves to, a system of rewards which disengages persons from their traditions with their internally generated criteria of excellence, isolates and individualises them, emasculating their specific motivational parameters or frameworks. With our counter-example we want to show the tenuous nature of the thesis that this is *inevitable*, a necessity of social and economic development. We suggest that it can be reasonably hoped that *amakwaya* tradition will continue to synthesise elements from other cultures without fully losing its continuity with past tradition. The way, for example, in which dress codes were adopted, and also the way in which ideas of ‘progress’, ‘education’, and so on were assimilated, points not to a capitulation to modernity (represented by the colonial powers and missionary ideas) but rather to a negotiated identity, embracing various elements and not essentially in opposition to the ‘other’.

In the first part of this article<sup>1</sup> it is argued that the development of the black South African choral tradition *amakwaya*<sup>2</sup> has had an integral connection with questions of cultural identity and this formation of identity can be seen to mature from one of imitation to one characterised by negotiation. The hybrid musical form of *amakwaya* symbolised, in restrictive political circumstances, the general political and social aspirations of black people, as is evidenced in the lyrics and performance practice, as well as in the comments of the choristers themselves. The tradition somehow gave meaning and sense to people's lives, and had a not insignificant role in the emergence of a national culture. The identity being constructed, while for the most part an open one with the potential to inspire a more embracing cultural unity, was however mixed with elements of a class stratification and exclusivity, pitting the educated middle-class and 'progress', against rural and uneducated 'traditional' folk. In the second part of the article we argue that this aspect of exclusiveness has been reinforced more recently by commercialisation, and competitiveness, even simply monetary gain, has increasingly played a distorting role in the choral practice. The evidence indicates that the African cultural practice here in question is able to resist – through assimilation – those seemingly overwhelming detraditionalising forces. An appreciation of the hybrid character of the genius of *amakwaya* tradition, along with its role in giving meaning, would encourage participants and leaders to be aware of, and take measures to counteract, potentially undermining elements in the present situation.

### **Choral singing and identity: from imitation to negotiation**

We can begin with a brief vignette illustrating the impact of the missions on choral singing. Ray Phillips (1930:93-94), an American Board missionary recorded the following experience he had around 1918 when he attended a rural wedding:

We discovered on our arrival that both Christians and heathen had been invited to attend the joyous occasion. On one side of the collection of huts were assembled the heathen; on the other the Christian folk. On the heathen side the wedding dances were being put on by a long line of sparsely dressed men, young and old. They stamped and shouted and sang, looking up into heaven with staring eyes. They were evidently invoking the blessings of the spirits of the departed on the newly-wedded pair. When the dancers lagged there were the women to encourage them by their steady hand-clapping. There also were the equally encouraging pots of home-brew beer containing a powerful 'kick.'

The side of the kraal occupied by the Christians, however, was quiet and dignified. Here in his black frock-coat was the preacher, vigilant to guard his flock. All were attired, as nearly as possible, like the white people they had seen. And they were seated on European chairs. (Their heathen brethren squatted on the ground.). What could the Christians do to contribute to the joy of the wedding? The pastor solemnly stood up and selected a hymn; they turned to the places, stood up together, and in good harmony sang one of the great hymns of the Church: 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. Then they resumed their seats. But all the time, on the opposite side of the kraal, the heathen commotion continued without check, the noise rising and falling – stamp, stamp! grunt, grunt! the bursting into song, the waving of the shields, and the vicious jabbing of the spears.

Although one has to bear in mind that the report exposes a good deal of missionary prejudice, the report gives a good sense of the tensions that must have existed between educated and traditionalist Africans. Moreover, it gives us an idea of the alienation of black mission communities from their past. It reveals how far the mission educated Africans had departed from their ancestral roots, being almost completely prevented from participating in their own past culture.

The development of a new class of westernised and educated Africans was however not a smooth process, but rather marked by ambiguity. From the available literature dealing with the new middle-class, also called *amakholwa* (from Zulu: *kholwa* – to believe) it is clear that historians have formed two, quite distinct impressions of the early twentieth century Zulu Christians. The first is that of a scorned minority that was left out of both the black traditional communities and the white communities. Here the early converts are portrayed as the 'flotsam and jetsam' of black society washed up on the mission stations, their motivation to convert and settle on mission land being primarily nurtured by the fact that they had no other place to go (Etherington 1978:67). The second impression, however, is quite different, depicting black middle class communities and the mission-educated black elite as new emergent urbanised leaders (Houle 1998; Cope 1993; Marks 1986). Members of the black middle class are portrayed as influential personalities who rose to positions of authority within the wider Zulu society, playing a crucial role in forming political parties. Names such as Rev Canon Calata, ZK Matthews, Chief Luthuli and Dr Zuma come to mind (Wilson 1986:194).

A closer look shows that these two contradictory perceptions belong to

successive periods in the history of the black middle class, with the turning point around 1900. What led to this remarkable transformation? Leaving the rural community meant leaving the protective community of shared values and ideas, the secure position of traditional identity. The separation from these social and cultural ties had a traumatic effect on those who arrived at the mission station. Imbued by the missionaries with Western ideas, they gradually came to perceive imitation and assimilation of Western identity as a possible escape route from the exploitative situation created by the colonists. Under the influence of the missionaries, the majority of black Christians were successfully weaned from past beliefs and practices. The rejected now became the rejecters. All the aspects of African social, religious, political or cultural life that were condemned by the missionaries as being ‘primitive’ or ‘heathen’ – the customs, beliefs, dress, and music making up the tradition – were now regarded contemptuously. To become a Christian was to turn away from these things, as Vilakazi (1962:99) points out:

There are two words which the Christians and the educated dread. They are *iqaba* or *umhedeni*, i.e. a pagan or heathen... who do not belong to any particular church or who show a preference for traditional or tribal ways... – for example, a man who did not build a modern European-style house or have European-style furniture, or did not wear shoes, or whose manners were more traditional than western, as indicated by his attitude to women, to children, etc.

The mission stations became, as David Coplan puts it (1985:26-27), ‘islands of acculturation in a traditional sea’ that led to the polarisation of the traditionalists (*amabhinca*) and *amakholwa*. But the unyielding opposition to the black Christians on the part of the whites led, in turn, to a re-evaluation of this turning away from tradition.

Daniel Msimango, a resident of Edendale station, expressed his confusion and disappointment over this situation in an article published as early as 1863: ‘We are in the light and yet in the darkness. We are in the immediate neighborhood of the white man, and yet we are far removed... Which road are we to take to the right hand or to the left? Are we retreating instead of advancing in civilization?’ (*Natal Witness*, March 27, 1863). The situation provided *amakwaya* with the necessary energy to form a new social stratum with a distinct identity. In *amakwaya* groups a decisive shift from uncritical imitation of Western influences to an informed negotiation between Western and ethnic values is evident in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The first signs occurred in the late 1880s when many mission-school Africans

were beginning to wonder whether they had been wise to trade ‘the birthright of [their] cultural heritage for a Western pottage of unattainable goals and unkept promises’ (Coplan 1995:30). A strong sense developed that a satisfying self-image could not be built entirely on adopted European models. The aspect of the new identity bound up with the musical aspirations is well illustrated through Skota’s ‘Who’s Who’, an *Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary*. Published in the early 1930s, it is a sourcebook documenting the change of the middle-class towards an identity described as ‘New Africans’. This register is both an appeal for recognition by the white rulers and a directory of black ideas and ideals. Many of those whom Skota mentions in his *Register* are the ‘New Africans’ categorised by Herbert Dhlomo as ‘progressive thinking African intellectuals and leaders.’ While the ‘New Africans’ were aware of their position as progressive and educated people, they had at the same time a growing consciousness of their ancestral heritage. ‘The New African knows where he belongs and what belongs to him; where he is going and how; what he wants and the methods to obtain it’ (Dhlomo, in Couzens 1985:33). The attitude of ‘New Africans’ to members of the lower classes was distinctly different from that of the first generation converts. They no longer rejected their traditional heritage, but attempted to incorporate it into their conception of a new African national culture. They saw themselves as providing leadership for those previously left behind in a ‘savage state’. And the prominent *amakwaya* personalities feature in the Register, as does the category ‘lover of music’. The development of a syncretic African choral tradition was one weapon that could be used in order to define and express a distinctively African concept of modern civilisation.

### **Aspects of negotiation in the choral repertoire**

Aspects of negotiating Western and African influences can also be traced in the threefold sectionalised repertoire of *amakwaya* practice itself. This consists of neo-traditional songs (modernised versions of songs taken from African folk repertoire), Western art music (of mainly European origin), and African eclectic compositions (by mainly mission trained composers). As Zakhele Fakazi, Secretary of Imvunge Choral Society, puts it, ‘you do Western pieces, and then you do African pieces, and then you start dancing. That is standard... When they have movements, then it’s wedding songs’.<sup>3</sup> The point that we want to emphasise is that almost all performances of *amakwaya* groups are based on this structure, and, with the distinct function and meaning of its various parts, this distinguishes them from other choral

practices. The choice of repertoire, ranging from simple borrowing in the case of neo-traditional wedding songs, to the wholesale imitation of Western aesthetic and performance practice, reveals to what extent *amakwaya* mediate foreign influences. That this cultural negotiation still continues today is evident in the inclusion of neo-traditional wedding songs, as a sign of their desire to remain true to their ancestral roots, just as the inclusion of Western compositions is a sign of their continued aspirations towards a 'modern' way of life. The section of African-composed eclectic choral works may be viewed as a distinct attempt to reconcile these two cultural elements.

The styles of African composers allow a rough categorisation, which is determined mainly by the degree to which Western or African musical aspects and traditions are used. As might be expected with the development of new styles, this categorisation is marked not by rigid periods, but by fluid transitions. We have argued that a process of negotiation was, at least by the beginning of the twentieth century, a characteristic mark of black middle class communities. Whereas assimilation and imitation were the main strategies of early missionary converts in the struggle to win the recognition of the dominant European culture, this changed decisively towards the turn of the century. Black Christians now began to reconsider the wisdom of rejecting their own cultural heritage in favour of Western values. This move came at a time when, caught between their own culture and the Western culture to which they aspired, they found that they did not belong completely to either. In redefining their identity they began to conceptualise ideas of a national culture that included both traditional and Western values. There was a growing awareness of their African roots, which culminated in the black consciousness movement and later in the idea of the African Renaissance, and this had a formative influence on *amakwaya* composers and the stylistic development of their compositions.

*Amakwaya* compositions reflect the process of identity formation undertaken by South Africa's black middle class, and show *amakwaya* composers progressively re-connecting with their traditional culture as the twentieth century moves on. The proportions in which the various elements are combined, however, are in a state of constant flux. Starting with an almost exclusive imitation of Western musical structures and ideas, by the end of the nineteenth century composers increasingly were looking for ways to find their own style. They never gave up Western elements completely, and all periods reveal a clinging to European ideas.

The development of African composed compositions can further illustrate this point. Various periods can be distinguished, with Ntiskana Gaba, born around 1780, as an influential precursor, with his 'Great Hymn' and other compositions being transmitted orally for half a century. Ntsikana's compositions are today regarded as embodying a genuinely original 'African' aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> But the works of our first category of composers, who emerged from the mission stations almost 50 years later, show that many of the features of that aesthetic had been lost. African vernacular words were the only native element, and what we find is mere imitation of the melodic and harmonic structures of hymns taught by the missionaries. Examples of this are John Knox Bokwe's 'Vuka Deborah!' (early 1880s) and Enoch Sontonga's 'Nkosi Sikelel' Afrika' (1897). A decisive change set in towards the beginning of the twentieth century, when composers started to reconnect with their roots. Initially this recourse to African musical elements that coincided with the emerging nationalism, concerned only rhythm. Composers started to replace Western hymnic square rhythms by introducing polyrhythm, multiple downbeats, syncopated rhythms, interlocking and interrhythm, into their compositions<sup>5</sup> – examples are PJ Mohapelo's 'Mokhotlong' and RT Caluza's 'Silusapho Lwaze Afrika', or 'I Land Act', (1912), the political content of which is evident. It was only towards the middle of the twentieth century that composers began to explore what Mzilikazi Khumalo, one of the foremost *amakwaya* composers, calls a 'distinctively African style' of choral composition. In the late 1980s he created, with *uShaka Kasenzangakhona*, a large-scale work that is based on the European form of oratorio, but uses many African elements. His most recent development is the composition of an African opera, 'Princess Magogo', premiered in Durban in 2002. This undertaking has provoked interesting, and at times, heated discussions regarding the contrary forces, or *Spannungsfeld*, of what is taken to be 'African authenticity' on the one hand, and the negotiated choral tradition on the other.

The link drawn here between music and identity is not fanciful. In the African cultural tradition, music and choral singing were never simply entertainment. Among South African Nguni, music is regarded not only as an expression of one's creativity, but also as a powerful means of communication with the ancestral world and the natural environment. Thus music creates a strong feeling of community. Men, women, and children join in spontaneously, no matter what their status or function in the society, and 'any individual who has the urge to make his voice heard is given the

liberty to do so' (Bebey 1975, in Pewa 1984:27). This, however, should not be taken to imply conformity: an attitude of criticism (for example challenging a figure of authority, a king or a chief) that would be unacceptable if directly expressed could be freely articulated if put into song. Such customs were alluded to by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, then Minister of Home Affairs, at the 'Birth of an African Opera' event at the Playhouse in Durban, April 18, 2001:

Music and song play an important function in our nation. They express how chorally we perceive and experience life, and mark joy and sorrow, love and war, and each of the recurring seasons. They manifest the ethos and pathos of our nation. Other nations have consigned the expression of their culture to writing or buildings while, since time immemorial, the Zulu nation has consigned it to music, dances and rituals. For this reason, music is one of our most important cultural expressions.

Today, choral music has become the most popular form of musical endeavour among black communities in South Africa (compare Peter Morake, *Drum Magazine*, February 1992). With hundreds of choral groups rehearsing on a regular basis and receiving financial sponsorship from the private sector for big choral events like the annual National Choir Festival, these mixed choirs have arguably become the most important musical group in South Africa. The value attached to choral singing goes back a long way: 'If there is an assurance of civilised advancement', wrote a correspondent in 1911, 'it can be found in beautiful singing, especially in concerted singing' (*Ilanga* June 23, 1911). Singing and in particular choral music, we want to argue, played its role in the process of formation of black middle-class identity. In an arguably parallel context of subaltern groups in Peru, Thomas Turino (1993:3-4) concludes that music often plays a crucial role in group identification. People 'adapt, alter, combine, and create cultural resources in unique ways, and for very specific reasons, the search for security, feelings of self-worth, and some kind of liveable space not least among them'. In our own case this importance was recognised during the socially restrictive years of the 1960s, as the following extract shows.

The deeper and more realistic purpose of our music is the positive building of our nation on the cultural plain [sic]. If the magnitude of this campaign has reached unprecedented heights it is only because music is the only talent we can develop to the international level without any restrictions... It can be nothing else at the moment (*Journal of the Transvaal United African Teachers Association, TUATA*, June 1962:4).

This perception, as the writer continues, was partly responsible for the increasing focus of these choral groups on competitions, by means of which they hoped to ‘produce [not only] singers but musicians – composers of world standard’. In music and singing, the black elite saw the possibility of achieving their goal of emancipating themselves, and of drawing level with and even excelling the white communities. The ambiguous nature of this development, and its link to the elitist identity-formation associated with *amakwaya*, is what we now turn to in the second part of this article.

### **Competitions, tradition, and modernity**

The new music was creating meaning for the choristers and their audience. At the same time the identity being forged was one which was to some extent a self-consciously elitist one, in other words, one which positioned a certain group as privileged over other groups. One manifestation of this continued privileging is the competitive dimension to be seen in *amakwaya* performance, issuing in the present-day National Choir Festival and all it entails for choristers today. Before the National Choir Festival there is an undignified scramble to ascertain the judges’ opinions on the material they will judge. This would seem to run counter to the tradition in which external criteria of what counts as ‘good’ in choral singing – for example, the European approach – were always, after the initial period of imitation, sifted through by a process of negotiation, producing something truly original.

Thus the very success of the choral music – signifying triumph over adversity – ushered in a new danger, that of betraying the aesthetical values of the art form in favour of success in a simple competitive sense. And this development would seem to some extent to support the modernity thesis: no longer does the choral practice of itself bear the same meaning-giving force for the choristers and audiences. We will suggest, however, that this does not at all indicate that the ideals of the tradition will inevitably be lost, as long as appropriate and realistic steps are taken to counter such tendencies. It is argued, against the modernity thesis, that the goal of an authentic identity in a tradition is a well-founded one and needs to moderate the future planning and direction of choral music. Jean and John Comaroff make a similar point (as Turino explains, 2000:6), namely that the very term ‘modernity’ highjacks the issue, by suggesting that there is no alternative to ‘progress’, understood in its European and American paradigms. Modernity, Turino argues, ‘is a continuation of evolutionary discourse that posits European and American post-Enlightenment ethics and economics as the

apex of universal development through the rhetorical hijacking of contemporary time...’ (2000:6).

What is it about the intensity of the choral competitions that strike the observer as so surprising? Here we have to take into account the subaltern status, during the Apartheid years and before, of the black choristers in South Africa, in their places of residence and also their school or work situation. Winning at the competitions began to symbolise achievement in general, measured against world standards, a way of ‘beating the system’ which was all the time, with Apartheid, closing in on and marginalising black people. Where the efforts of *amakholwa* to achieve a sense of identity and self-worth by imitating western culture had largely failed, success at competitions could now succeed. It would convey the message to the outside world that here, as an NCF chairman puts it, we have men and women of true worth, at ‘world-class levels’ (George Mxadana, *Newsletter of the Old Mutual/Telkom National Choir Festival*, 2000, nr 2:1). ‘No man or woman who has a heart beating in his breast can afford to stay out of competition today’, remarked IEZwane in 1965 (in Detterbeck 2003:237). While at first glance the competitive side of music performance might seem to be of secondary importance, this is in fact not at all the case, and again stresses the link between the singing tradition and the formation of identity.

With such aspirations governing these events, demonstration is everything. ‘Here we are showing our culture, values and norms’, one competitor remarks (Xolani Cele, Imizwilili Choral Society, questionnaire, 2000). It is felt that one can even overpower the other groups by the sheer volume of sound one’s choir produces: in this way, one ‘makes oneself heard’, in a land in which one’s voice has, in other spheres, been silenced. You need power, various commentators repeat. ‘First of all you got to have power. Because without power, you are nothing. In some way you got to be supported by singing. And if you don’t have power, really, you cannot survive’ (Thulani Maqungo, Tsakane Adult Choir, questionnaire, 2000). And winning, being number one, is everything. No doubt this is the case with any competitive event, but here this seems to take on added meaning which can only be understood by taking into account the broader social context of the singing. ‘There is only one winner – and this winner takes it all’, confirms Sidwell Mhlongo, conductor of the Gauteng Choristers, voicing his disappointment on achieving second position at the NCF in Cape Town in December 2000. Participation in a choral contest is a matter of testing yourself. As Ray Kantuli, an *amakwaya* veteran, puts it, ‘if you

see somebody doing something good, and you have got a constructive jealousy, you want to be above that person' (personal communication). The day of the contest is the 'moment of truth', adds Thembelihle Dladla of the Pietermaritzburg Choral Society (interview questionnaire, January 30, 2001), it is the opportunity to 'put ourselves on the stage to see where we are'. Here again, we can perceive the social background of the participants as one of disruption and alienation. Being on centre stage is important, and the audience then has the role of affirming their approval.

This focus on identity, which we have seen is part and parcel of the tradition, seems to continue today. For many people the social structures in post-Apartheid South Africa do not yet offer an adequate sense of security, and the choir continues to be 'a family affair', 'something fairly permanent in a situation where there is little permanence' (Thanduxolo Zulu, personal communication). This sense of belonging is attested to by other choristers. 'I can't be without singing,' says Falithenjwa Mkhize, 'I can't be without the choir – without the choir it's like being hungry' (personal communication). But it is, finally, a fragile affair: a good 'choir family' is one that wins. Thabane Sello, who sings with the Lesotho based Maseru Vocal, stresses the importance of joining a choir – 'a winning choir', he adds, 'because I don't think anyone likes to be associated with losers' (questionnaire, Cape Town NCF, 2000). And Thokozani Ndolomba, a chorister of the Pietermaritzburg Choral Society, argues that 'if you join a choir that is not successful, you waste your time...you want to be successful, you want to be recognized and known' (Pietermaritzburg Participatory Action Research Group, 2000).

The culmination of these expectations is for many the Finals of the National Choir Festival. Preparations begin early in the year, the venues for the preliminaries being selected according to rotation so as to reach as wide an audience as possible. Participants are caught up in the infectious excitement of challenging other choral groups. One cannot help feeling the thrill of the anticipated contest. But this narrow focus – for the entire year – on a few competition pieces, as interpreted by those particular judges, constricts the sustained growth of the choirs and their repertoires. Competitions, to be sure, motivate the participants, but this comes at a price: among other things, the competitiveness as manifested in secrecy, lack of cooperation, and in an attempt to outguess the judges by working out exactly what aspect of the winning choir in the previous year had swayed the results, and then imitating that. Already in 1967 it seems the conflicts

between choristers and adjudicators could turn the events into fairly grim affairs. In a letter to *The World* newspaper (quoted in *TUATA*, September 1967:32) a reader complains that the annual Reef Eisteddfod has begun to be dominated by threats to choirs and conductors, and that one of the best choirs, from ‘consideration for the safety of its members’ has been forced to stay away. Various commentators have judged the event not capable of bearing the weight of such aspirations and hopes, and the Johannesburg conductor, Richard Cock, will have nothing to do with the choral competitions. He comments that they are taken too seriously, ‘ranging from death threats to physical attacks of adjudicators after the competition’. At times they may degenerate into near chaos, as is evident from the following account given by Douglas Reid of one regional preliminary held in the Jameson Hall at the University of Cape Town:

It was raining outside. They had packed people into this venue, so that you couldn't even breathe. They were right on top of each other. And then three adjudicators at the table, myself being one. In order to cope, we needed a secretary, who would table up the results and all the rest of it. And what happened unfortunately was... the choir that came third, in fact came fourth. In looking at all the numbers – everything was under pressure – we had mixed up the third and the fourth position. A mistake by the secretary and of course by the adjudicators that were there. We should have been checking through things. But at the end of a competition everybody wants to know the results before you can even think. And after the results were announced, there was a whole to-do at the back – so we were rushed out, even Peter Morake and the secretary. And while we were waiting, I looked at the results and I discovered that three and four were the wrong way around. It was one point difference. So Peter went in and announced that straightaway – Gosh! People stormed, they took the typewriter, they threw the typewriter across the floor and they were all upset. So ... a public apology was made immediately. And it was decided – because money was involved as well – that in fact an award should be made to both choirs. And the one choir that had got third place now said that they were ruined because they were now fourth and they had been told they were third. The choir that was fourth said that *they* were ruined because they should have been third and they were announced fourth. A press conference was called ... and it went out on the air, a public apology was made, that the wrong result was announced and that an award would be made to both choirs. And that they both had been good choirs and there was just a single point difference. I tell you, you'd have thought the world had come to an end.

This account speaks for itself.

In order to sustain the authentic tradition, the choristers have to see the aesthetic values of this kind of music as part and parcel of their normal motivational framework, bound up with – not of course coextensive with – their sense of their general identity as persons and members of society. This way of seeing things, as we have argued, is evidenced in the South African choral tradition. That tradition includes good music – however complex and culture-specific this notion is – as part and parcel of what it means to be a successful human being, a model for others: ideas of pleasing the audience, of giving meaning and identity, of offering a technical challenge to the choristers, and so on. Our notion of an authentic music tradition within the framework of an authentic national culture presupposes this idea. For Giddens (1990), on the other hand, a reconstituted tradition is a sham, without intrinsic drawing power, although one might join in with others (sharing the mock-tradition) because of extrinsic benefits in status, or hegemony, or because tourists demand it, and so on.

The choral tradition seems to have been a way of giving meaning, under stringent and potentially destructive social conditions. The question that arises, under present radically altered social conditions, is whether an adequate account of society can be given without reference to any such elements to do with meaning. In his study of the exigencies circumscribing contemporary South Africa, Daryl Glaser (2001:216-20) discusses with equanimity the (to us incommensurable) possible factors of social cohesion: the English language, Christianity, consumerism, and sport! The approach seems to proscribe any discussion of strongly-valued goods of the kind which promote an identity and counter disintegrative tendencies, such as consumerist attitudes, which would override, for purposes of gratification, the cooperation and commitments made in the name of the communal project. But *amakwaya* tradition seems to suggest a way of seeing persons as, importantly, ‘participants in meaning’, and this perhaps points to a difference of outlook between the traditional African approach and the modern western picture of, in Charles Taylor’s phrase, the ‘unencumbered self’ (Taylor 1989). Our point is that there might be many aspects in which one might think of a renaissance of a cultural tradition as ‘sham’ – we can point to purist approaches to African choral music – but the project itself is *not necessarily* correctly judged sham as a whole.

## Questioning the modernity thesis

What is thought to be at stake in the alternatives, tradition or modernity, is well explained by Ross Poole (1991). According to Poole, market conditions associated with contemporary society break down the sense in which the individual is first and foremost a *participant*, rather than an isolated individual. He illustrates the problem by the example of the family as a social practice, and the kind of normative constraints that govern members of a family (analogous to the way in which choristers, through natural and learned talents, slot into certain roles in the choir). In pre-modern society the individual is first and foremost a participant, and one's behaviour patterns are governed by particular relationships to one's child, or colleague, or husband, and so on. The tradition gathers individuals through their shared beliefs about common meanings and values. Because of the way one identifies oneself, the dyad egoism/altruism does not apply but rather as a father in a family, or a chorister in a choir, for example, one achieves one's own good through the achievement of the good of others too. But later, so goes the modernity thesis, the role-defined identity that is part and parcel of a pre-modern society, gives way to the self-concerned critical and socially unencumbered individual. In dissenting from this view, however, we are not proposing as basic drive in persons unselfishness rather than self-centredness. It is not that the mother, for example, is altruistic rather than egocentric, at least in the sense in which these are constituted in modernity, ie as practically as well as conceptually opposed: if I give more time to you, I give less time to myself. Rather, modernity's conception of instrumental reasoning is being thrown into question (Poole 1991:54). Applying these ideas to our own problematic we can say that modernity has constructed an identity which is incompatible with our proposed guiding standard of an authentic identity, authentic participation, in the choral tradition, which symbolises and gives meaning to one's life as a whole.

Once the identity of the individual is conceived in abstraction from his relations with others, the assumption of pervasive self-interest becomes almost inescapable... The identity required by the market is that of an individual who is not tied to particular activities and responsibilities. (Poole 1991:7 and 61)

And this means that the countervailing tendencies to do with winning at all costs will have much more of a foothold on the motivations of the choristers and others in the choral scene. External goods, of reward and so on, increasingly dominate the internal goods intrinsic to the tradition, to do with the aesthetic qualities of the music.

For Poole, the greater options available in modern societies break down the drawing power of past identities. Is this an accurate view of the matter? Clearly the modern period has ushered in the conditions for a greater degree of individual freedom of choice. But this has led to the assumption that participation in the (past) tradition is *defined* by its uncritical attitude towards the status-quo allocating roles in the cooperative social project. The dichotomy traditional/modern seems, in our secularised culture, part and parcel of the received wisdom of how history is moving forward: ‘those people then’, we think, were for the most part less critical, narrower, less aware, more prejudiced, than we are now. Only if the traditional identity or sense of self, so the argument goes, is thought of as an inescapable destiny, not social and contingent but natural and necessary, will it have drawing power (Poole 1991:62). One could think of the affirmation of the choristers of their roles, and the discipline required of these, in the creating of the music. In other words, Poole is implicitly arguing that there can be no *critical* adoption of the role-based social participation:

Any process of evaluating these identities is liable to undermine them. For an individual to subject her or his identity (as wife/mother or breadwinner/head of household) to such a scrutiny is to render that identity vulnerable... To ponder the identity in question is to render contingent what must be assumed as necessary and inescapable if it is to found an ethic of virtue. (1991:63)<sup>6</sup>

But a critical (and negotiated) approach to identity seems to be, on the contrary, a very characteristic of the choral tradition we have been studying: all new influences are creatively sieved through before incorporation. Poole assumes, rather than argues for, the inevitable hegemony of the picture of persons as isolated individuals freely choosing from an otherwise value-neutral range of aims and behaviour patterns – over against the picture of the individual as participant. In contrast to this, other studies argue that the expression of meaning supplying an internal link between individual and group, perhaps through religion, or cooperative community projects, or traditions such as *amakwaya*, is an enduring need which if denied results in all kinds of social dysfunctions, and indeed constitutes ‘a threat to our society’s fundamental democratic values’ (Elchardus and Siongers 2001:197).<sup>7</sup>

The institutional aspect, it is true, can always corrupt the practice.<sup>8</sup> The institution – here, for instance, the set up of choral competitions – is structured by means of a set of rough-and-ready public rules for the

allocation of external goods of power, status and financial rewards. If the internal goods are achieved, all benefit; but in the matter of external goods, one individual is in competition with others – only one can achieve first place, the others must be content to be second. The ethos of any practice – its promotion, for example, of loyal ways of behaving – is designed to guard against being overtaken by the desire for those external rewards, money and position. In a particular kind of commercialised society traditions and their sustaining ‘visions’ will only be maintained with difficulty. Iris Murdoch, in her study of art and Plato, insists that ‘a sense of beauty diminishes greed’ in pointing us ‘in the direction of the real and the good’. It has a certain authority which overcomes egoism ‘in its protean forms of fantasy and illusion’ (Murdoch 1977:34-35, quoted in Kerr 1997: 88). This contention seems to be borne out by our study of the choral tradition which is expressive of, and forging a fragile identity beyond, the self-interested isolations of the past.

## **Conclusion**

It is our contention in this paper that if the choral tradition is to flourish under present conditions, the dangers of the detraditionalising forces of the global market, coupled with the fact that the institutional goods of any social practice may be a disintegrating force, need to be taken into account and realistically dealt with. But if one has followed the description above tracing the maturing tradition it will be clear that the tradition has its internal resources. There are many voices within the tradition critical of the current emphasis on competitions. And the same time the competitions have always been tempered by an encompassing meaning-giving vision, an aspect which is uncharacteristic of what is understood by ‘modernity’. We hear of choristers overcoming obstacles of time, money, and marginalisation, to attend regular voice classes at the university in order to learn ‘how to care for our voice, what exercises to do, how to project’. And they re-affirm the negotiated nature of the choral tradition, inclusive of African music, of wedding songs (included in order to please the audience), and of the challenging ‘advanced Western music’. ‘It is the love of music that gives us the energy,’ they enthuse.

## **Notes**

1. This paper emerged from a conversation between ethnomusicology (Detterbeck), and philosophical ethics (Giddy), and was presented in shortened form at a symposium in Pietermaritzburg in April 2003 organised by the University of

Natal. The historical analysis and the documentation of the development of the repertoire, as well as the theme of identity, are based on Markus Detterbeck (2003). Because of this overall indebtedness no further detailed page references to that document will be made here.

2. The term *amakwaya* is used to distinguish the choral practice of the mixed black choirs that emerged from the mission stations in the nineteenth century, from other South African vocal and choral traditions, such as *isicathamiya* or Gospel.
3. Personal communication to Markus Detterbeck, Mariannhill, November 5, 1999. All interviews referred to in this paper were conducted by Detterbeck (henceforth cited only as 'personal communication' or else 'interview questionnaire') and took place between 1999 and 2001. More detailed references can be found in Detterbeck, 2003.
4. The idea which we are putting forward in this paper, that it makes sense to speak of an authentic tradition, clearly takes issue with the contention that any such categorisation is 'essentialist'. There is no space in this paper to discuss this point of view (which would render pointless our attempt to show that certain trends in contemporary practice are not fully in the spirit of the tradition). We can however mention just one writer on our side, the philosopher Joe Ndaba at the University of Zululand, who draws on hermeneutical philosophy to make his point. Ndaba (2001) argues at length that disallowing some such notion as authentic tradition is characteristic of the neo-logical-positivist philosophy which would exclude the examination of the 'life-world' of the African and he argues that on this issue 'the African philosopher cannot afford to be neutral'. This is because such a view would undermine the much-needed project of cultural and philosophical dialogue. 'In the light of our central quest for dialogue between traditions, the contemporary philosopher's task should be how to synthesise the insights located in the background of indigenous philosophical resources with those harvested from the African philosopher's institutional education handed down by the historical circumstances of western colonialism' (2001:37). In an earlier article Ndaba (1999) carefully delineates the helpful from the unhelpful sense of the term 'traditional' (he is talking about philosophy) which is needed in order to challenge 'valorised' Western rationality; and its use should not at all imply that Africans (traditional) were void of 'rationality'.
5. To illustrate the difference to the standard western rhythm one can think for example of the regular (say, four-beat) metre of any church hymn: polyrhythm (or cross rhythm) can be thought of as juxtaposing that with a three-beat metre to create a new and more complex rhythmic grouping. The Nigerian music scholar Meki Nzewi (1997) objects to these terms which suggest a prior canonic *norm* from which the African rhythm is seen to be diverging, and offers instead the term, 'inter-rhythm'.

6. But see his more developed and positive views on the implications of our 'meaning-giving' human condition, in Chapter Two of his 1999 work, *Nation and Identity*.
7. In their survey of young people in Brussels during the years 1996 and 2000, the authors tested the hypothesis that questions of meaning in a detraditionalised society might be either trivial or of a transitory nature, an attitude that would seem implicit in the above-mentioned analysis of South African society to be found in Glaser. They found that, on the contrary, such questions are important from the point of view of people's well-being and society's health too.
8. See the very useful analysis of the two dimensions of any social practice, in Alisdair MacIntyre's celebrated study *After Virtue* (1981:181).

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