

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Arts

Department of Musicology

**Mapping the Individual Musical Experience
in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Bio-Ethnography
of Township Dweller Lesiba Samuel Kadiaka**

Dissertation

**Mapování individuální hudební zkušenosti
v post-apartheidní Jižní Africe. Bio-etnografie
obyvatele townshipu Lesiby Samuela Kadiaky**

Disertační práce

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Introduction

This is an ethnography of an individual ordinary musician and Mamelodi township dweller for the past thirty-three years Lesiba Samuel Kadiaka (*1962), a father of six children, a husband and a partner, a constructor and a gardener, an accordion player, a songwriter and a song singer and Zion Christian Church member and priest. These are just some biographical frameworks relevant for the present study, which I have followed in order to understand his social and cultural positions in the world he had inhabited until the end of my research in 2011. As we became close friends during the six years of the research I have referred to him as Samuel in the text.

I got an opportunity to conduct this research in five periods during six years between 2005/6 and 2011 spending altogether over 18 months in South Africa and Lesotho, of which 12 were devoted solely to the research. Although the second half of 2005 studying at the University of Pretoria and getting to know the country cannot be called research in the strict sense, it was extremely important as pre-research, as a preparation period during which I not only got familiar with the environment, the field in which I later conducted fieldwork (and, of course, followed a number of courses on South African anthropology, history and music at the University), but also underwent an important change of perception which became essential for starting the project I write about here.

Writing biographically about an ordinary, working class, economically poor African man who is an average popular musician in the context of (South African) music and ethno/musicology does not make equal sense to everybody in and outside academia. As hinted in the previous chapter, my research seems to flag core predicaments and dilemmas in ethnomusicology and its sister disciplines. I now explore issues within the genre of what has become known as ‘bio-ethnography’.

In contrary to what may seem to be the reality, ‘bio-ethnography’ or biographically focused ethnography has been around some time. There was Crapanzano’s ethnographic study *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* based on individual interviews and ethnographic observations as early as 1980. Biographically focused research direction became more prominent since 1990s as one product of the wider discussion about the ‘crisis of ethnographic representation’ in the 1980s and early 1990s. Michael Herzfeld pointed out the potential of this kind of approach in the

introduction to his appraised study *Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis*:

The tactic of ethnographic biography allows us to move along the trajectory of a life that has bisected many histories and of a person who has dwelt in many communities rather than staying (as most conventional ethnography does) within a single place. (Herzfeld 1997: 1)

Herzfeld saw the potential of the bio-ethnographical or ethno-biographical approach in its ability to transgress cultural, social and geographical boundaries thanks to its focus on individual life in a diachronic perspective. Its potential has been realized especially by researchers dealing with people living in variously defined 'border' areas such as migrants or otherwise culturally or socially displaced or 'deterritorialized' people, to use Appadurai's term (Appadurai 1996/1990: 27-47). As such it proves to be a very useful perspective for studying social and cultural realities of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa where migrancy and various kinds of displacement and deterritorialization have become part of everyday life experience for a vast majority of the country's population, and since the 19th century. In the course of my research it transpired that a number of studies dealing with individual musicians have actually been published within South African musical studies, though they approach their subjects differently (Muller 1999, Erlmann 1991, 1996, Kruger 1997 and 2001, Lucia 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014, Olwage 2006, Muller and Benjamin 2011 et al.).

An obvious objection towards the individually focused approach would be the issue of *representativity*. Can such a research speak of broader social realities than one individual experience? Does it make any sense to speak about an individual today? Following up the research in anthropology we can see a return of an individual into the focus of the discipline (for a summary see Ortner 1984 and 2006: 107-154). It is not the old modern autonomous individual, neither is it the socially and culturally subordinated and determined subject as it was constructed in sociological and anthropological writing approximately till the early 1980s. While *subjectivity* is already conventionally seen as culturally and socially constructed today, there has been an enhanced interest in individual *agency* again in the past two or so decades. I have especially drawn on the practice theory as represented in the writing by Sherry Ortner (Ortner 2006: 1-18, 107-154). Conceptualization of an individual as both constructed *and* acting at the same time

answers the initial question. By studying shapes of individual negotiation of his or her position as an active social and cultural *practice* we generate knowledge by far exceeding the ‘minor’ scope of the individual and seemingly irrelevant personal story. Not only that it still makes sense to speak about an individual today, it opens up new perspectives and possibilities for the research as I am trying to show in this text.

What would we like to know about someone in order to generate bio-ethnographical knowledge and how can we find out? Musical bio-ethnographic research is first of all an ethnographic research (Barz and Cooley 2008). A long-term and ideally repeated ethnographic research thus becomes an essential method. The core of the ‘bio’ strategy within the ethnographic framework is (1) following the individual musician’s activities as closely as possible and for as long a period of time as possible and (2) conducting repeated deep ethnographic interviews focused biographically, but also unfocused occasional discussions. By ‘activities’ I mean *all* kinds of musical performances the individual musician participates in but also other related activities. In case of Samuel I not only focused on his solo compositions and performances, though they were already quite diverse, but I included his participation in collective choral performances within and outside of religious structures of the Zion Christian Church he belonged to as well as the music he liked to listen to on the radio or from commercial recordings. It was equally important too to map the environments and places where he spent time: his several homes, work place public transport he used and performed in and so on.

The biographical as well as previously thematically unfocused interviews were conducted along with the observations so that the observational part could have been closely reflected in the interview part. The main aim of musical bio-ethnography – as I came to understand it in the course of my research – is getting to understand the links between, intersections of or discrepancies in various social and cultural positions and world views as expressed verbally in the interviews, on the one hand, and the observed musical and other practices *as* expressions of these positions and world views, on the other. Both sources of knowledge shed light on each other as both are expressions of a single subjectivity. My main research aim was to understand various musical activities Samuel took part in as places of his wider cultural and social negotiations. I try to see various repertoires and performance contexts as maps of wider social and cultural experience. I see them as both media functioning to construct Samuel’s social and

cultural subjectivity as well as media through which he re-shaped and re-constructed these wider social and cultural frameworks he found himself in.

Following an individual does not, however, mean excluding other people from the research. By its very definition, ethnography is an open social activity and the environment an open one. Following Samuel naturally meant meeting dozens of people both related to him as family and friends as well as rather strange to him, during a great number of occasions and activities and in different social and cultural settings. It has been through his musical engagement with them and his involvement in variously socially and culturally structured performances that I got an opportunity to observe him, so that I could understand bit by bit how he negotiates his own position within wider social field and constructs his multilayered and complex subjectivity – as a solo musician, as a Zion Christian Church member and priest, as a father and a partner, as a son and brother with his strong ties to his rural home in Ga-Mphahlele, as an inhabitant of Mamelodi's various quarters and a member of its local communities, and as an unskilled male labourer and daily train commuter between Mamelodi and Pretoria.

By focusing an ethnomusicological study on an individual average black popular musician I believe I do more than just chose a different or yet another new subject within the usual and common framework. I write against standard practices of music scholarship in musicology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies and other disciplines. I try to consciously write across disciplinary borders which are still institutionally well maintained even now in the 21st century to keep musics, people and ways of scholarly thinking apart. If I seem to *con/fuse* methods and approaches common in musicology and ethnomusicology – namely individually focused biography and collectively focused ethnography – I do so deliberately as I strongly believe that presenting things in an other than the usual way enables some problems to emerge more clearly. It has a potential similar to a contrast medium in medicine; it makes visible what would have otherwise remained invisible or hardly visible, that is namely persisting stereotypes of different kinds within our disciplinary practices and in general. I, however, suppose that just *doing* it is not enough therefore I would like to *formulate* and *articulate* the problems as I see them and position the whole undertaking in the relevant theoretical context.

Structure of Arguments

The dissertation is structured into three main parts. In the first part of the **'Introduction'** I deal with my wider experiential and intellectual development leading to my current interest and with various predicaments of my position as a Czech ethnomusicologist writing about South African popular culture within Anglo-Saxon and Czech academia. In the second part of the introductory chapter I introduce bio-ethnography as a method. I discuss the wider anthropological theoretical context of studying individuals within social and cultural structures. I show the treatment of individuals in the ethnomusicological and South African music research within which I position my writing. I problematize biographical writing as a literary construction. And finally I introduce the details with regard to research data collected and to people, places, and times when the research was conducted. Here I discuss the relationship between me as a researcher and Samuel as a research subject, too.

The second part **'Constructing a Bio-Ethnography'** consists of three large chapters further structured into subchapters. In the first chapter, 'Sites of Ethnography' I describe and reflect upon the beginning of my stay in South Africa as a student and later as a researcher. I particularly focus on the problems relevant for the dissertation's theme as the latter gradually emerged out of the initial setting. I also problematize the notion of the 'field' in doing this kind of ethnography. In the second part I describe the typical ethnographic setting of my research, dwelling in detail on one research day in Pretoria.

This flows into the second chapter, 'Moving in Urban Spaces: Sites of Memory' where I discuss in great depth one particular ethnographic interview. This interview analysis introduces key themes relevant to the study of Samuel's social and cultural positions that are developed later on in the text. From a biographical point of view it deals with variously intertwined (pre)histories of people (Samuel and his parents) and urban places as historical and cultural places. It also carefully situates the production of ethnographic knowledge within a particular research setting.

In the third chapter, 'Trying out the Bio-Ethnographic Method' I re-construct Samuel's life in a biographical and mostly chronological form, which is based on interviews, ethnographic observations, and analysis of photographs Samuel took in the 1980s and early 1990s, which are all reflected upon and contextualized within the broader issues and problems of historical as well as anthropological research. Careful

attention is paid to the situatedness of the knowledge, here in the particular moments of its ethnographic or historical production.

Finally, the third part, '**Samuel's Musical Worlds**' deals with Samuel's diverse music-related activities as places where specific cultural meanings are constructed. It consists of three large chapters further structured into subchapters. In the first chapter, 'Samuel as a Member of the Zion Christian Church' I discuss Samuel's musical activities as related to his membership of the Church. I begin with a general discussion of the Church's repertory based on my ethnographic experience and the available literature. Then I introduce Samuel's conceptualization of the Church's musical repertories. I provide an ethnographic description of a typical religious service in a small congregation in Hazeldean and I briefly discuss other musical representations of the Church in printed and audio-visual media. In the last part of the chapter I describe, analyse, and interpret in considerable ethnographic detail Samuel's musical involvement in one particular Church performance, where he appeared both as a member of a collective musical body and as a solo musician. This section examines the various implications and consequences of these two kinds of musical involvement with regard to the central themes and concerns of Samuel's social and cultural negotiations.

In the second chapter of part three, 'To Entertain and Educate: Samuel as a Songwriter and a Song Singer' I introduce Samuel as a solo musician. I demonstrate continuities between the religious and secular sphere, discussing his conceptualization of musical 'inspiration' which, I argue further points to his concept of a song as (verbal) text rather than music (sound). I analyze his narrative about the beginnings of his solo performances. I examine his conceptualization of musical inspiration and composition. I discuss the process of his preparations for and recording of his first solo album, *Mmamona* and closely analyze all ten songs' texts as they appear on this album along with Samuel's narratives about them, focusing on the central themes of his social and cultural negotiations with which these narratives resonate.

The third and final chapter, 'Samuel on the Stage of the Suburban Train' deals with one particular performance context within which many of Samuel's performances took place on a daily basis – the suburban commuter train between Mamelodi and Pretoria. I examine in detail one particular segment of the wider context of South African labour migration as represented by collective and solo performances on the train. I write about the train as a stage for Samuel as a solo musician as well as for collective choral performance activities. I study these performances as means of

overcoming the inhospitable environment of these trains and the way the train provides certain liminal and transitional spaces between home and the capitalist work place. I analyze Samuel's conceptualization of these train performances and the various implications of these for his self-evaluation as a musician. I end by identifying and interpreting the clash of cultural worldviews expressed through Samuel's train performance, which is paradigmatic of his wider social and cultural position.

Conclusion

I ethnographically followed an individual musician in this research. This ‘following’ was constituted of long-term ethnographic observations, interviews and various kinds of collaborations. Its aim has been to construct a plausible academic narrative drawing equally on the genre of ethnography and biography. The arguments are all ethnographically-based. The overall way of presenting them is framed as a biography given the individual focus of the project. The research produced different kinds of sources on which my arguments are based. Besides the data acquired via ethnographic observations such as field video and audio recordings of musical performances and interviews, ethnographic notes or transcriptions of songs’ texts, historical sources such as Samuel’s family photographs were used too.

Unlike collectively-focused research my perspective allowed for a close-up study of active individual cultural and social negotiations in a diachronic perspective. Understanding subjectivity as constructed allowed for generating ethnographic as well as historical evidences of broader than strictly individual currency.

These negotiations were studied on various levels: on the level of Samuel’s narratives about past and presence concerning a wide range of topics, on the level of musical as well as non-musical behaviour as observed during the research or studied from historical photographs, on the level of studying songs’ texts, and on the level of studying musical performances and musical sound structures as cultural structures. Individual chapters were balanced in order to provide space for different kinds of sources and ways of approaching them. All these areas were understood as representing places of social and cultural negotiations and thus potentially offering rich sources for wider theoretical argumentation. Not all aspects studied were directly related to musical activities but they were complementary to them as parts of one whole of individual social and cultural negotiations mutually shedding light on each other.

Various music-related activities became the core of my argumentation. Based on the common ethnomusicological understanding of music as culturally embedded I studied Samuel’s musical activities as being part of as well as producing particular cultural meanings. Thus music – Samuel’s ideas about it, his musical behaviour and the musical sounds he produced (following Merriam 1964) – could become a prominent source of knowledge about the nature of musical performance as an expression of particular social and cultural position and as a specific way of social and cultural

negotiation. Various music-related activities were studied as places of such negotiation, hence the term ‘mapping’ in the title of the dissertation. These findings were continuously confronted with and complemented by knowledge acquired via studying different areas of Samuel’s life based on other sources.

Partial results were formulated in the course of the argumentation in particular chapters. As a result I am able to articulate some prominent features of Samuel’s positioning in the world. Samuel’s subjectivity was complexly historically structured participating in various social and cultural worldviews at the same time. All his belongings found expression in the music he composed, played and sang as a songwriter and song singer as well as in the religious choral musical performances he took part in actively as a performer or just “passively” as a listener or an observer as member of the Zion Christian Church. I tried to demonstrate how cultural meanings were produced, maintained or re-constructed in these repertoires in various ways based on various sources.

Using the potential of biographic ethnography to cross variously constructed borders and to capture continuities as well as discontinuities in a diachronic perspective I tried to highlight the continuities between various musical repertoires as expressions of parallel continuities in worldviews and social and cultural positions pronounced in other realms of life. I believe that the bio-ethnographic strategy helps to bypass the usual anthropological dilemma of heterogeneity (as analyzed by the researchers) and coherence (as felt by the research subjects) by emphasizing the diachronically based construction of this coherent ambivalence (Coplan 1994: 245). I offer it as one possible solution to the problem.

The study represents a contribution to a number of research areas. Within the context of South African music studies it introduces a completely new kind of project. Not that there would not be studies of individual musicians of comparable social status but none of them has designed its goal the way I did to my knowledge. It is a contribution to South African anthropology where individuals of Samuel’s kind have been studied more often but, obviously, without the musical dimension of their existence. It contributes to township studies on more general level as it maps in great detail contemporary and past properties of daily life in the township and its social and cultural dynamics. On the level of the discipline it contributes to the growing body of ethnomusicological and anthropological literature on individuals as actors in social and cultural processes. At another level it exposes important details about musical structures

in particular musical repertoires as well as about concepts (and conceptions) of music. It deals with the seemingly most obvious, everyday and most widely popular segments of South African music, but segments notoriously understudied, maybe precisely because of their commonsensical nature and popularity. And obviously, it overlaps with a number of other research areas, such as anthropology, literary studies, African languages, and sociology.

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