**Instrument building as a tool for the revitalisation and revaluing of traditional music transmission: An investigation in Tshandama and Mbahe in Venda, South Africa.**

by

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**Abstract**

This study stems from my experiences as a child who grew up playing herd boys' musical instruments from Venda, such as the *tshipotoliyo* (ocarina), and *tshitiringo* (flute). Importantly it also builds on my time working at the International Library of African Music (ILAM,) where the aforementioned instruments, as well as the *dende* (musical bow) and *tshizambi* (Vhavenda and Vatsonga mouth bow), are displayed in transparent glass cubicles with a note, "Do not touch, they are fragile". This phrase is painfully apt because, as a musician, I have observed a decline in the availability and performance of these musical instruments. The truth is that, other than at ILAM, these instruments are hardly in circulation, let alone being performed. This fact ignited my interest in relearning some of the musical instruments I used to play and make while herding cows in Giyani.

In the context of trends such as modernisation, rural–urban migration, and globalisation, I document my experiences as a musical-instrument maker, teacher, and performer in revitalising *dende*, *tshipotoliyo, tshitiringo,* and *tshizambi* through classroom practice, using Rhodes music students, instrument-making workshops, performances, and community collaborations as inspiration. I propose the development of crafting skills as a medium for revitalising and sustaining these musical instruments which serve as important identity markers of the Vhavenda people.

**List of abbreviations**

DAC- Department of Arts and Culture

City Of Ekurhuleni.

ILAM- International Library of African Music.

IMS- Instrumental Music Studies.

SAMRO- South African Rights Organisation.

UCT- University of Cape Town.

SATMA- South African Traditional Music Awards.

**Keywords**

**Revitalisation, Instrument building, Ecomusicology, Cultural identity, Craft skills, globalisation, oral tradition, deforestation, sustainability, *Tshitiringo*, *Dende*, *Tshipotoliyo*, chiefs, toy-building, environmental awareness.**

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

Working at the International Library of African Music (ILAM) in 2018 and 2019, I encountered instruments such as *tshitiring*o (flute), *tshizambi* (mouth bow), *khumbye* (flute), *mbilamutondo* (xylophone), and *tshipotoliyo* (ocarina)[1] stored in climate-controlled cabinets, protecting them from the public. Despite being an African music specialist and instrument builder, I have never seen these musical instruments being played by fellow musicians at music events in South Africa. Professor George Mugovhani, from the University of Pretoria, writes about the decline of traditional southern African instruments, including the *mbilamutondo*, and reports that, in Venda, there are no longer practitioners who play or make *mbilamutondo.* He concludes that many traditional musical instruments are facing extinction (2009). This observation spurred my interest in trying to relearn and build some of these instruments, specifically the *tshitiring*o and *tshipotoliyo*, as I used to play and build them while herding cows in Giyani, Limpopo, in my youth. My aim is to revive these musical instruments by relearning crafting skills through observing research partners, namely Vho-Matsheka, Vho-Chauke and Vho-Begwa,[2] who built and performed on these instruments in Mbahe and Tshandama villages in Venda.[3] Furthermore, as a professional instrument builder, my aim was also to immerse myself in instrument making and performance in Venda and thereby rediscover the musical past of the area.[4] Some of these musical (please see Figure.1.1 and Figure 1.2 below) forms as Andrew Tracey (2003) observed,

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[1] These are Vhavenda musical instruments believed to be played by herd-boys (Blacking, 1959).

[2] *Vho* is a prefix indicating respect that is used to address elderly people; it separates elders from young people (Begwa, 2019).

Vho-Chauke is a *mbilamutondo* maker who was born in Giyani but who resides permanently in Venda.

Vho-Begwa is a *tshipotoliyo* player and maker, and sculpture artist who carves various types of artifacts, ranging from wooden plates and spoons to walking sticks and the like.

Vho-Matsheka is a highly esteemed storyteller and master musician who makes and plays *tshitiringo* and *dende* bows and a visiting lecturer who taught Vhavenda traditional musical instruments at the universities of Venda, Limpopo, Pretoria.

[3] Tshandama is a village in the north of Venda where Vho-Begwa and Vho-Chauke reside. It is approximately 60 km from Sibasa, where the university of Venda is located. Mbahe is located further north in Venda, about 70 km from Sibasa. This is where Vho-Matsheka resides. (More information on these villages can be found in Section 1.5 of this chapter: Methods, procedures, and techniques.)

[4] Junod noted the first type of transverse flute among the Tsonga, who called it *shitloti*, and also noted that it is called *tshitiringo* by the neighbouring Vhavenda (Kirby 1934).

are closely interlinked with the practice of cattle farming. This observation resonates with my experiences during upbringing as a herd boy in Giyani in the 1980s. Together with my friends, I used to play *tshitiringo* (*xitiringo* in Xitsonga) and *tshipotoliyo* (*xiwaya* or *xibhuwewe* in Xitsonga) while herding cattle. Tracey further observes that such musical instruments were indeed played by boys, stating that "flutes made of reed (Venda *tshitiringo*) were often played by boys but are rarely heard now" (2003: 11). It has thus been necessary to rediscover this musical heritage, which is in danger of extinction (Blacking, 1967; Jones, 1992; Mugovhani, 2009).

Figure 1.1 Tshitiringo. Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in 2019 Mbahe village Venda.

Figure. 1.2. *Tshipotoliyo*. Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in 2019 Tshandama village.

Broadly, my research focuses on the revival of instrument building and performance in order to understand the past and future of indigenous music transmission in South Africa. It was conducted in two villages, Tshandama and Mbahe, where I had established research contacts who are still actively playing and building Vhavenda musical instruments. The specific instruments that I engaged with are the *mbilamutondo* (xylophone), *tshitiringo* (flute), *tshipotoliyo* (ocarina), *khumbye* (flute), *dende* (bow) and *tshizambi* (bow). An important additional goal was to establish whether these instruments are still being played and built, as documented by Blacking (1959) and Kirby (1934). Mugovhani (2009), in his research on the construction of the *mbilamutondo*, emphasises that certain indigenous instrument builders, and their instruments, will soon disappear and that there will be no practitioners who can skillfully play or carve them. I too fear that, in future, there will be no traditional music practitioners who play these instruments. Many scholars (Blacking 1959; Emberley & Davhula, 2014; Tracey 2003) have conducted research on Vhavenda music, though their focus has been on issues relating to music education, and the cultural activities associated with the music. Little attention has been paid to organology, the science of building musical instruments and their classification (Bijsterveld & Peters, 2010). Blacking (1967) describes how traditional music played a vital role in teaching Vhavenda society about culture, which I

understand as their way of life as realised or mediated in performance. He also advocated for traditional African music education in schools, in communities, and at university level. These findings provide solid ground on which to study the approach and teaching methods entrenched by my research partners when they built instruments and played them. With regard to the building of musical instruments, Davhula and Emberley (2014) emphasise how crucial dance and musical instruments and their function are in Vhavenda society. They argue that Blacking's (2014) descriptions of certain musical instruments reveal that the building and playing of instruments have long been central to the musical traditions of the Vhavenda . Blacking's interest in the building of musical instruments is evident from the field notes and diagrams in his book, *Venda Children's Songs: An Ethnomusicological Analysis*[1], in which he showed how *tshipotoliyo* were built, tuned, and performed (1967: 15). When my research partners started teaching me to build *tshitiringo, dende, mbilamutondo,* and *tshipotoliyo*, my observations on how these instruments are made were enhanced by the information provided by Blacking, which was used to draw comparisons.

As mentioned above, crafting is an important skill and method of teaching which played a role in my development as an instrument builder. Smith and Kotze (2010), Rossie (2012), and Mpako (1999) refer to the importance of crafting and toy building as tools which harness craft skills. According to their findings, toy-building activities have been in existence in Africa for many years. This is a tradition which ensured that children developed craft skills at an early age and was a key method of transmitting cultural traditions from generation to generation. This practice is no longer regarded as vital by these communities. Chisenga (2002) and Rossie (2012) stress that indigenous knowledge systems around the world, especially in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, are at risk of becoming extinct. Such systems are threatened by modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. Mukhavele (2017) speaks directly to some of the issues pertaining to the disappearance of African traditional instruments: he acknowledges that the *tshizambi* instrument builders and performers are gradually disappearing, seeing the increasing use of technology (television, video games, and so on) as playing a role in the decline of these instruments. Furthermore, Mukhavele (2017) touches on the organological component when he explains that, compared to other bows such as *xitende*, *umrhubhe*, and others, *tshizambi* is one of the more difficult instruments to play.

[1] This is a seminal work i.e., the first of its kind. It is based on his doctoral thesis. It is still extensively quoted internationally, as well as his important book, "How musical is man?".

### 1.2 Ecomusicology

Ecomusicology is a holistic approach that provides insight into and a wide scope of sound, music, nature, culture, and environment (Titon, 2018). It encourages the study of the relationships between music, culture, and the natural environment (Allen, 2011). This is all a component of a transformation of education which seeks to create a more just and sustainable world by teaching others about the essence of preserving and protecting endangered environments (Allen, Titon, & Von Glahn 2014). However, in Africa it is not just educating others about the preservation and protection of endangered environments but even intertwined culturally. According to Kirby (1968), the ecology of music possesses what he calls a double value, since it partakes both of the material [of the musical instruments] and spiritual [cultural beliefs]. This statement by Kirby affirms that ecomusicology is deeply tied to the indigenous knowledge systems, beliefs and rituals, which in some African cultures involves songs to appease spirits. In Nigeria for example,Ibadan to be precise, the NIgerian scholar Titus Olusegun, gave a summary that a reason for flooding in that area was caused by neglecting certain belief systems. He said, “calls for the return of indigenous knowledge as propagated in popular music could be a way forward in environmental crises currently experienced around the globe” (Titus, 2019:72). He went on to say that an emerging discipline like ecomusicology is an approach to the research which “draws on the value and significance of spiritual beliefs” (2019: 74). In other words, ecomusicology is an inseparable phenomenon from all cultures but as people we need to attune ourselves and our belief systems to activate it.

Given the impact of climate change, deforestation, species loss, and pollution in Venda, I was interested in observing how these factors affect indigenous instrument building and performance on these instruments. Through the lens of ecomusicology, I examine the relationship between instrument builders, the trees, and people in general in order to understand the importance of preserving certain tree species for the value they add to society. Part of this research involved investigating whether deforestation affected other plant species, such as the *nsala* (monkey orange) tree, which bears the fruits from which the *tshipotoliyo* and *khumbgwe* flutes are built. The *mbilamutondo* instrument is believed to have been made only from the *muonze* tree (Spirostachys Africana); however, I examined the possibility of using other tree species as it is believed that *mutondo* trees are difficult to find.

Kirby ([1934] 2013), Vho-Chauke (interviews, 2019), Vho-Begwa (interviews, 2019), Vho-Matsheka (interviews, 2019), and Tracey (1949) speak to the idea of instrument building with particular reference to understanding the science of wood. Especially when building *mbilamutondo* and *tshipotoliyo*, it is

important to dry out planks of xylophones and wet *zwipotoliyo* shells in order to increase their sound and playability. Hugh Tracey specifically refers to the fact that "it is left to us [scholars] who are undertaking research into African music to discover the science behind the rules of thumb which have served the native musicians so well" (1949: 18). In addition, and again referring to ecomusicology, understanding factors such as "density, elasticity, moisture content, grain and the speed of sound through that particular species of a tree" remain important (*ibid*.). When I was with my research partners in Venda, these were some of the aspects we observed closely, including understanding how density and moisture content in *dende* wood, *tshipotoliyo* shells, *tshitiringo* reeds, and *mbilamutondo* planks, affected tuning during the building and playing of these musical instruments.

With regard to these musical instruments being repositories of cultural identity, scholars (Ferdman, 1990; Moore, Dobney and Strachen-Scherer, 2015; Palmberg, 2002; Toner 2005) argue that musical instruments are used as tropes in the song text and in the performance style, which make reference to the instruments and their ancestral significance. These instruments carry the cultural identities of certain societies, and they serve as the national symbols of those societies. The observations of these authors were my point of reference when I interacted with my teachers in Venda to investigate the relationships formed with and cultural values ascribed to these musical instruments as cultural symbols of Vhavenda society. These scholars guided me in that I began to investigate the gender dynamics between female and male musicians in terms of who is allowed to play certain musical instruments like *tshitiringo* and *tshipotoliyo*, which is believed to be gender-based.

Finally, in order to locate my fieldwork and embodied research practice, I looked to the following scholars regarding instrument organology: Kirby (1934), Tracey (1947), Camp and Nettl (1955), Blacking (1967), Varnum (1970), Jones (1992), Mans (1997), and Hogan (2014). These sources are carefully discussed in the body of the text that follows.

### 1.3 Research questions

The following questions guide the main goals of my research:

1. What does the decline in the making and use of *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *tshizambi*, *mbilamutondo,* and *khumbye* reveal about the current and future state of South Africa's music heritage?
2. How can instrument building be an effective tool for reviving interest in them in general, thereby ensuring a future for the music?

3. How can skilled instrument making by university students in the classroom be an effective means of transmission and conservation?

### 1.4 Research goals

The main objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To learn to build and play *mbilamutondo, tshitiringo, tshipotoliyo, khumbgwe,* and *tshizambi* instruments as a means of developing transferable skills.

2. To understand the importance of instrument making as a tool for revitalising interest in musical values and transmitting them in the community.

3. To document and analyse my own experiences, during my research fieldtrips and at Rhodes University, of instrument building as a tool to revitalisation and for social cohesion.

Secondary goals include the following:

1. To learn about the cultural and organological histories of these instruments from culture bearers and community musicians.

2. To add to the collection of musical instruments at ILAM.

3. To re-value the craft skill of instrument building at Rhodes University through classes with the African Ensemble students.

### 1.5 Methods, procedures, and techniques

This research project employs qualitative methods through an ethnographic and autoethnographic lens, based on learning to perform musical instruments through embodied participation. Autoethnography is defined as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011. Reed-Danahay (2021) describes autoethnography as a method or form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is with this in mind that I systematically write about my personal experiences as a herd-boy and toy and tin guitar builder, reminiscing about how I used to build and play *tshitiringo* and *tshipotoliyo* and, in the course of this, analysing and highlighting the essence of craft skills as a necessity in early childhood development.

Autoethnographic research belongs to the family of research techniques collectively known as qualitative design and it seeks to "analyse data from direct fieldwork observations, in-depth, open-ended interviews, and written documents," which supports researchers in generating an informed research outcome (Bresler, 1995: 2). My fieldwork experiences alongside my analysis of my embodied experiences speak directly to this approach. Andoh and Amuah define embodied ethnographic research as a learning process in which "oral knowledge systems are transmitted through imitation and demonstration" (2014: 55). With the process of learning instrument building and playing in Venda involving "imitation and demonstration," I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the indigenous knowledge shared with me by my research partners and culture bearers: Solomon Begwa, Elvis Chauke, Solovin Matsheka – all of whom I refer to as "Vho"[2] – and also Samuel Mathonsi. This learning process allowed me not only to develop a deep understanding of the music and the instruments but also to maintain a good relationship with my research partners. In addition, I look to the field of ecomusicology, as defined above, to guide the development of the analytic frameworks of this research.

This study was conducted in the two villages, Tshandama and Mbahe, where Vho-Begwa, Vho-Chauke, and Vho-Matsheka, master instrument crafters and performers, work and reside. Like Tshandama, Mbahe has many trees in every yard, though it is situated next to a forest, where Vho-Matsheka lives, and in which indigenous wild fruits such as *mathunduluka (ximenia caffra)*, *marhompfa* (*Annona squamosa*), *makuwa (Ficus sycomorus subsp. sycomorus),* and *muramba (*Strychnos spinosa)[3] are abundant. To gain knowledge of instrument building and to gather data, I spent two months, mid-September to mid-November 2019, with my research partners, learning through observation and participation while taking videos and pictures (with my camera phone) and conducting interviews. The data collected during this time has been fundamental to my producing insightful analysis and informative research. In some instances, I used staff notation to analyse certain of Vho-Matsheka's other *dende* and *tshitiringo* tunes and songs and captured video clips of *tshipotoliyo* tunes in order to record how they are played. Furthermore, audio recordings of *tshipotoliyo* from Mozambique recorded by Hugh Tracey during the 1940s were used to analyse the playing and tuning technique for these instruments so that I could compare them with the current Vhavenda approach to *tshipotoliyo* playing. The *chigowilo* ocarina tune


(TR204-14 - and a video labelled Tape 04-04.mp4  from the ILAM archives provided

[2] In Venda, elders are always referred to as "Vho," which can be directly translated as "Sir" in English.

[3] Apart from *muramba*, which is Tshivenda, these are in Xitsonga names which do not have obvious English translations.

evidence of the *tshipotoliyo* playing technique[4] in Mozambique. Other video material taken during my field research was also consulted (Begwa VID-2019-01  ) and provides interesting insights into the differences between *zwipotoliyo* tuning and playing techniques.

In Venda, I was given the opportunity to relearn the *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo* I played in my youth. However, I could not find musicians who played *mbilamutondo* or made *tshizambi* (mouth bow) or *khumbye* (a flute constructed from reed and *muramba* fruits). Nevertheless, my research time was fruitful: From 9–13 September 2019, I learned to build and play *tshipotoliyo* with Vho-Begwa. I report on this experience in Chapter 5. Thereafter, I conducted interviews with him. During my second week of research, from 16 September 2019, I met with Vho-Chauke, a *mbilamutondo* builder who worked with the late Vho-Ravele, also a *mbilamutondo* maker, and Vho-Enosi Phalandwa, a sculpture artist in Tshandama. I then spent much of the following two weeks, from 17 to 27 September 2019, in Tshandama, learning, observing, and imitating my mentor in making *mbilamutondo.* Unfortunately, I was not able to play a piece on this musical instrument as Vho-Chauke is not a musician and could not tune it. However, I convinced him to let me work on the *mbilamutondo*, and then frame and align the planks on the frame he had made. Although I did not finish making the instrument, I learnt a lot from the visit. With time against me, I had to leave Tshandama for Mbahe village where Vho-Matsheka lives. While with Vho-Matsheka from 30 September to 11 October 2019, I learned to play and build *dende* and *tshitiringo* and conducted informal and formal interviews with him during and after our sessions.

The second part of the research took place from mid-October to November 2019 at Rhodes University, where I taught second-year music students In the Instrumental Music Studies (IMS) class to build and play their own *zwipotoliyo*. The goal was to ascertain whether young people were interested in partaking in the building and playing of African traditional instruments. Here, I also used qualitative data collection methods: formal and informal interviews were conducted with the goal of understanding both the students' perspectives, and those of my research partners in Venda, on building the instruments and performing on them. In the analysis, I used photographs, videos, and audio materials obtained in the field in Venda. From ILAM, I made use of archived video and audiovisual materials that I had personally recorded in Venda with Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka.

[4] The *chigowilo* playing technique from Mozambique is unique to Venda. The women blow and sing particular notes which are not available from the instrument to create a call and response form whereas they focus on simply producing notes without adding voice but the form still maintains a call and response.

Throughout the research in Venda and at Rhodes University, I researched the instrument-building sessions with structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews involve a set of predefined questions which form part of a questionnaire; unstructured interviews, on the other hand, rely on the social interaction between the researcher and the informant (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This allows the informant to respond freely without being intimidated by the researcher. At Rhodes University, I focused on a group of four students in the second-year music class because it was small enough to ensure that the instrument-building project was successful. The thought behind the conducting of unstructured interviews was to allow the student informants to express their thoughts and views freely. I also interviewed Vho-Enos Phalandwa, a sculptor who happened to build and play *tshipotoliyo*. Lastly, I met Mr Samuel Mathonsi, a pastor who was born in Mozambique. I interviewed him because he used to play *tshipotoliyo*[5] and *tshitiringo*[6] in the 1970s when he was a herd boy in Mozambique, and his views would help me understand the methods of playing and building these instruments. In addition, I interviewed Mr Elijah Madiba, a sound archivist and recording engineer at ILAM, to understand modes of transcribing African traditional musical instruments and to gain access to *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *dende*, *mbilamutondo*, *tshizambi,* and *khumbye* audio and video material. However, I was unable to find recorded materials for *tshitiringo*, *dende,* and *mbilamutondo* in the archive.

The data I collected from the students, Mr Madiba, and my research partners in Venda were then transcribed into written format. The names of the five music students remain anonymous for ethical reasons. They are simply named Students 1–5 in this work. Interviews with the students took place at the ILAM recording studio on 28 October 2019, while classes on learning to play and build *tshipotoliyo* took place from 16 to 28th October 2019.

### 1.6 Chapter outline

In Chapter 2, I explore the importance of the relationship between the environment and human beings, and how people rely on the environment – or how the environment relies on people – for protection. In general, I observe that relationships between human beings and ecosystems are inseparable and equally dependent upon each other. Specifically, as regards this research, these relationships are cemented further by instrument makers because of their epistemological understanding of which

[5] Known as *xigovia* in Mozambique.

[6] Also known a*s xitiringo* by some Mozambican people.

materials are suitable for certain musical instruments and which are not, an idea linked to organology. As such, this relatively new field of ecomusicology is important to this study.

In Chapter 3, I investigate the revival and development of crafting skills in order to understand the past and future of indigenous music transmission in South Africa by means of oral traditions. I argue that the concept of revitalising African traditional musical instruments cannot be achieved without the development of craft skills. I also strongly emphasise that these craft skills are harnessed through playing with hand-made toys such as wire cars, clay toys of human figures and clay pots and note how the tradition has faded away because of computer games, the urbanisation of rural communities in Venda, and exclusion of African traditional music from education curricula. However, other negative factors are the covid-19 pandemic, the so-called information era, and television. As indicated above, I taught second-year music students to build and play *zwipotoliyo* to illustrate that instrument building is a field untapped by some instrument builders at the university level and also stir their interest. Their responses in the interviews that followed guided me to suppress the assumption that young people are not interested in playing and building African traditional musical instruments, and to consider whether this new field has a niche market for those who might consider it a career. I analysed their views to determine whether instrument building could create a sustainable business in the arts.

In Chapter 4, by means of the embodiment approach, I attempt to understand how indigenous music transmission, by playing and building musical instruments of the VhaVenda people in South Africa, is achieved. I discuss in detail practical aspects of instrument building, from the type of material used and where it is found, to the historical background of *dende*, *tshitiringo*, *tshipotoliyo,* as well as how they are played, having learnt through observation and interviewing my teachers, Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka. I highlight the fact that *tshipotoliyo*, *tshizambi*, and *tshitiringo* are most commonly found in southern African countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa but that they have various names and even various shapes. For example, *tshipotoliyo* (Tshivenda) is also known as *xiwaya* (South African Xitsonga), *xibhuwewe* or *chigovia* (Mozambican Xitsonga), or *chigufe* (Shona).

In Chapter 5, I reflect on the idea that musical instruments such as, *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *dende*, *mbilamutondo*, and *tshizambi* are the repositories of cultural identity for the VhaVenda people and that they could be revived through live performances and instrument building, as well as be fused with modern instruments (guitars, keyboards, etc.) to create the self-identity of a particular artist.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the concept of revitalisation in relation to why is it important to revive craft skills as a part of indigenous knowledge before we even begin to talk about the revitalisation of musical instruments. I discuss how initiatives such as instrument building workshops, among others, can be used as a catalyst for the revitalisation concept.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss my findings, recommendations, and conclusions in relation to certain musical instruments – like *tshizambi*, *khumbye,* and *mbilamutondo* – becoming completely extinct because the people who played and built them had died without sharing their knowledge.

# Chapter 2

## Instrument building within the context of ecomusicology: The relationship between Vhavenda instrument building, natural environment, and musical instruments

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I demonstrate how instrument builders have an understanding of and respect for the natural environment in which they explore the importance of the relationship between it and human beings – and how people rely on the environment, and how the environment relies on people for its protection. In general, human beings and plants are inseparable, as can be seen in the way certain plant species provide medicinal remedies, food, shade, and energy in most rural communities. The same is true in the Vhavenda communities in which my research was conducted. Even though this study does not wholly concern describing medicinal plants, the topics explored in the following sections piqued my interest due to the relationships that exist between instrument builders and the plant species they use to make their artefacts. These relationships are cemented by instrument builders such as Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, who have an intimate understanding of which materials are suitable for certain musical instruments and which are not. As such, the relatively new field of ecomusicology is important to this study. As discussed in Chapter 1 ecomusicology is defined as "the critical study of music/sound and environment" (Allen and Dawe, 2015: 216). Ecomusicology is a discipline in the social sciences that started in Europe during the 1970s in order to arouse "interest in the relationship between humanity and the natural environment" (Allen, 2011: 391). Pedelty adds that ecomusicology is a matter of "researching environmental questions of direct public relevance" from a musical perspective (2013: 44). In my research, I found that the link between instrument builders and the environment concerns more than merely nature and people. Culture forms the third arm. A more elaborate definition of ecomusicology which accommodates culture is reads as follows: "the critical study of music and the environment [which] considers the interconnections between music, nature, and culture" (Challe, 2015: 12). Feisst concurs and writes that ecomusicology is a "field of interdisciplinary inquiry centering on the interrelationships between music, culture, and nature" (2016: 293). Both of these latter definitions speak closely to the opinions of both Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, my research partners. In Venda, many of the rules that govern indigenous material collection are deeply bound by tradition and culture. A good example of this is

that, before cutting down trees in Venda, one must obtain permission from the chief. For instrument builders to cut down big trees such as the *nkanyi (Sclerocarya birrea)*, *mutondo (*Spirostachys Africana), and *ntoma (Diospyros mespiliformis)*, as well as *musununu* bamboo (Phyllostachys),[7] they have to consult with a senior cultural leader, the chief, to ask for permission. The chief decides whether or not to allow it.

### 2.2 Instrument building, sustainability, and deforestation

This research falls within the realm of ecomusicology because, in order to understand instrument building, it is crucial to be aware of the environment from which the materials are sourced. An understanding of the respect and sense of protection that the instrument builders have for the environment is important. These issues relating to the environment include deforestation, sustainability, climate change, and drought. Indeed, beyond mere environmental impacts, sustainability has been defined as a tripartite concept that deals with debates in relation to not only the environment, but also to ethics and economics (Collin & Collin, 2010). Ethics concerns where, how, and by whom products are made and considers embedded inequalities or power dynamics that might exist between the various parties involved in the consumption chains. Economics involves the pricing of goods or natural resources. Fostering connections between these aspects can lead to more sustainable music cultures as musicians develop stronger understandings of their musical instruments, and of the people, labour, and natural resources required to make them. Additionally, greater direct participation of musicians in the building of their instruments can lead to embodied experiences, positive emotional investment, and relational learning (Anderson & Guyas, 2012).

There is a general lack of awareness by consumers of the processes required to craft musical instruments. Fostering connections between these individuals through more active consumer participation in development processes is one way in which this disconnection between concerned parties can be relinked (Moran, 2006; Renting, 2012). Greater awareness will foster a more environmentally considerate, and thus more sustainable, music-making experience. Teaching students to build musical instruments and to perform on them goes a long way to materialising the objective of developing a better understanding of environmental awareness. Smith (2018: 562) writes that reconnection through participation in instrument crafting allows students to experience the satisfaction of developing a stronger understanding of their instruments, and it fosters considerations of sustainability as they develop an awareness of the environmental and ethical impact of their consumption. One of the Rhodes University second-year music

[7] These are indigenous names used by the Vatsonga and Vhavenda people thus.

students, Student 2, expanded on this idea of building a musical instrument as a way to better connect himself with the instrument he created. He said:

> You are going to learn how the instrument was built, and I feel it makes you appreciate the instrument even more knowing that, okay, ... I actually made this thing, now I have to play it. So now it is a different experience: this is my thing, I made it; so it has to sound good. So it makes you appreciate music even more as an artist (interview, 20 September 2019).

Participation in instrument building, as outlined by the student, gives people a sense of the fulfilment of previously untapped abilities to achieve goals they never thought they could. Smith writes that "participation in instrument craft, then, is an educational process that develops human appreciation for both musical instruments themselves and the time and energy required to make them" (2018: 567). An ethnomusicology student, Student 5, said that instrument building is something which reconnected him to the environment. He added:

> What I learnt is that African musical instruments came about from normal, natural things that people live with; and that for me was fascinating – in that a reed can turn into a musical instrument, it depends where you cut it; how you cut it; where you punch certain holes; how you hold it; how it is dried (interview, 20 September 2019).

The knowledge acquired through instrument building suggests an important aspect of learning that unearths certain skills which many students might not be aware of. It facilitates the process in which students appreciate what they have created and where the materials come from. Furthermore, it teaches people about the processes involved in building musical instruments. Smith writes:

> The labour required to build musical instruments results in their experiencing its difficult, tedious, and time-consuming nature. A large part of these realisations was the product of discovering certain less-enjoyable aspects of instrument craft (2018: 566).

This process starts with the builder arming himself with the knowledge of which kinds of trees to cut, and why others are not chosen. For example, according to Vho-Matsheka, "a perfect wood [sic] can easily be recognised by its tree bark, especially when it looks dark brown and not bent" (interview, 18 October 2019). Indeed, during my field-research in Mbahe, Venda, in 2019, Vho-Matsheka and I travelled about five kilometres on foot in the bush searching for trees that would be ideal for making *dende* bows. The

tree my mentor was specifically looking for is called *mufhata* (*brachylaena transvaalensis*). We had found a few of them, but they were not pleasing because their stems were too small, according to my teacher. Unfortunately, when we found large trees, their stems were twisted. Finding a suitable tree was not easy because they are very scarce, and because of the fact that some had grown bent or were too small. I was not shown the other plant species, *mutamba pfunda* or *muvhamba ngoma (*Albizia Versicolor),[8] which are similar in terms of instrument-production quality. I did not know the reason for my not being shown the other tree, but I suspect that it was because it was the first time that I was accompanying my teacher to the bush – tradition would not allow him to share this information. I was absolutely exhausted afterwards but I found this experience very moving and appreciated the importance of understanding the origins of the instruments and respecting the forest.

From what I observed in Venda, trees are essential because they provide shade when it is extremely hot, fruit for when people and animals are hungry, and materials for building homes and artefacts such as instruments. Concerning this observation, Paterson elaborates:

> From a socio-economic perspective, [trees] are equally important, providing numerous environmental goods and services to people living within, adjacent to or at a distance from forested areas. These include providing food for nourishment, wood energy (for heating homes, cooking food and sterilising water), construction materials for shelter, and employment in the formal and informal forest sector (2018: 121).

In addition, certain trees in the Venda landscape have a medicinal value, which I explore briefly below.

### 2.3 Additional uses of *mutondo* and *muramba* trees

Although this study is not an exploration of medicines, it is worth mentioning that *mutondo* and *muramba* also have medicinal value in Vhavenda society. This added benefit amplifies why the trees should be protected from deforestation.

Mugovhani writes:

> One of the materials used in *Mbilamutondo* music instruments, namely *Muonze*, also known as "Tamboti" (Afrikaans name) from the S*pyrostachys Africana* species, has medicinal value. The bark of this tree is used as a remedy for wounds. Over and above healing wounds and sores, it is

[8] I do not know their scientific names for these plants and so is Vho-Matsheka.

> reportedly also able to treat many different diseases such as cancer and menstrual problems (2009: 52).

It is common knowledge to some Vhavenda that *mutondo* plants are used by traditional healers.[9] Despite not practising medicinal healing, Vho-Matsheka also understands the medicinal value certain plant species can offer. He said to me: "Yes, yes, certain trees are used by those with powers [traditional healers] to heal but also both men and women often use certain trees such as *mushonga* [medicinal herbs] as a love potion and to make cattle stay in harmony and even multiply quickly" (interview, 17 October 2019). However, he reiterated that he was an instrument maker and therefore could not comment further.

Figure 2.1. *Muramba* (monkey orange) tree. Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in 2019, Mbahe village, Venda.

An online search shows that some people around KwaZulu-Natal know the *muramba* plant as a medicinal remedy. They utilise the leaves, roots, and fruit and seeds for this purpose. Others use root infusions as a treatment for snakebite and still others use the bark and unripe fruit. It is believed that the

[9] Vho-Matsheka did not detail what the *mutondo* plant is used for by traditional healers.

presence of strychnine in the bark and unripe fruit along with other alkaloids are responsible for helping overcome the venom of certain snakes, such as the mamba.[10]

Some people in Venda may have knowledge of its medicinal importance, but Vho-Matsheka is not one of them. He noted: "It is another issue [knowing whether it is medicinal or not]. What I can say is that it is only traditional healers who might know if it is medicinal or not. It is possible for an ordinary person like me to have knowledge about it, but others might know better" (interview, 17 October 2019).

In a country in which there is extreme poverty, the use of trees for energy and timber for constructing shelters has both positive and negative aspects because these are the same factors that lead to deforestation as there is a desperate demand for these types of materials. Other plants which provide another purpose in addition to their use for building musical instruments are those that are edible. According to Mathonsi (as explained in Chapter 5), during his childhood, they "used to eat *nsala (monkey orange)* fruits and also make *xigoviya* from the same *masala* shells, same as *marhanga* [tender jab pumpkin]. We eat and use its calabashes to make *xitende*" (interview, 15 September 2019). Vho-Matsheka emphasised how jab pumpkins play a pivotal role as a vegetable and as a musical instrument. He added: "People do eat pumpkin leaves and fruits while they are still tender. But when they get dry, they are often used for various things. They can be used as sound resonators for musical instruments such as *mbilamutondo* and *dende* instruments" (interviews, 19 October 2019).

### 2.4 The issue of deforestation in Venda

Professor Mugovhani, who has done extensive research on *mbilamutondo,* acknowledges that with the rapid cutting down of trees in Venda and world wide, the *mutondo* tree might face extinction soon. He writes: "with the advent of modern-day deforestation occurring on a large scale in some parts of the former Venda territory, there is now a great scarcity o*f mbilamutondo* building material" (2009: 52). However, protection of the environment has been in place in Venda for a very long time. Restrictions on cutting down trees that have been put in place by traditional chiefs in the community are not sufficient as people still continue to cut trees till to this day but these are some aspects that suggest that traditional leaders are aware of issues relating to deforestation. As Vho-Matsheka explained:

> All trees without thorns – for many years were not allowed to just cut them, especially big trees. If a person wants to do certain things with those, he must consult with the chief and say, "I

[10] Le Roux, L. 2005. **'***Strychnos spinos*e, *Lowveld National Botanical Garden'.* accessed on 30 April 2019 from http://pza.sanbi.org/strychnos-spinosa.

> want to cut such and such a tree for specific reasons," like making a Vhavenda *ngoma* drum. You must first ask permission before cutting. (interviews, 18 October 2019)

Mugovhani has made recommendations as to how the government can create awareness about the felling of trees. He stated that, unless the government helps in preserving these valuable indigenous trees, both by cultivating more of them and putting modalities in place to prevent large-scale deforestation, they face possible extinction (2009: 52).

Figure. 2.2 Mutondo tree. Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in 2019 at Vho-Phalandwas's home Tshandama, Venda.

In Tshandama, I met an elderly man, Enos Phalandwa, a sculptor who makes musical instruments such as Venda *ngoma* drums[11] and artefacts. However, the instruments that he makes are not central to this research. According to Vho-Phalandwa, "It is very difficult to find big *mutondo* trees in the forest to build big drums like these, and so we find alternatives and use other strong trees like *mufhata*" (interviews, 28 October 2019). Thus, although certain measures have been implemented by the chiefs or community leaders to prevent people from cutting down various trees, as Vho-Phalandwa affirms, the *mutondo* tree is becoming an endangered species. In addition, when Vho-Matsheka took me to the forest to look for *mufhata* trees, it was very difficult to locate them. The fact that we had to hunt for a *mufhata* tree in the deep forest among other entangled trees suggests that deforestation is occurring because

[11] According to Vho-Phalandwa, these Vhavenda drums are mostly used in various musical forms, like *malende* dance. They provide the bass sounds.

Vho-Matsheka has been making *dende* since 1989, and these trees were not scarce at all. The *mufhata* tree species is also slowly disappearing from his area. Deforestation presents a crisis in any society, and so strict measures by the government must be implemented in order to preserve natural resources. As part of preserving important trees like the *mutondo* tree, while I was at Vho-Phalandwa's home he showed me a *mutondo* tree which he planted. The act of planting trees suggests a concern and warning about the rapidness of deforestation in Venda and speaks to the idea of sustainability through small scale endeavours. The National Forest Act 84 of 1998 ostensibly provides a framework for the conservation management, protection, and utilisation of forest resources in South Africa. However, as can be seen, this is not working particularly well in Venda. People need to be taught about the importance of ecology in order to protect or stop perpetuating the environmental crisis which, according to Allen "is not only the fault of failed engineering, bad science, ecological misunderstanding, poor accounting and bitter politics [but] is also a failure of holistic problem solving, interpersonal relations, ethics, imagination, and creativity" (2011: 414). In Venda, the chiefs are responsible for instilling discipline in the communities they lead. Chiefs, in this instance, as Paterson writes, are seen as "community-based forest management" (2018: 123). This positive indigenous knowledge leadership shows how communities could be guided to adhere to a strict code of conduct and ethics and have an understanding of holistic problem-solving and a respect for nature. This type of intervention requires assistance though. Vho-Matsheka states:

> Cutting trees in Venda is not allowed; should you be found cutting trees, there will be certain fines for the perpetrators. The chief can allow instrument makers to cut only specific trees to make musical instruments, drums and *dende*, among others (interview, 17 October 2019).

Vho-Matsheka did not specify what kind of fines are issued to the environmental perpetrators, but the manner in which he expressed his sentiments suggests that it might be a serious punishment issued by the chief. How the chief manages the area without assistance from the government is the deeper issue. This relationship between humans and the forest runs in the veins of the instrument builders who understand the full value of the trees they use to make music. In the next section, I discuss this deep understanding and how it influences the quality of the instruments produced.

### 2.5 Understanding nature for music

Figure 2.3 Mufhata (Brachylaena transvaalensis) tree. Picture taken by Lou-Nita Le Roux in 2012.

Instrument builders like Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa have extensive knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of using various woods for instrument building. This includes which wood sounds good when struck and which wood bends easily to make a bow, as well as other important factors contributing to the choice of materials.

One of these is understanding which tree species are prone to problems in the environment, such as being eaten by termites. Vho-Matsheka commented: "*muthwa* (termites) really like soft wood. But dense wood, they find it hard to penetrate" (interview, 17 October 2019). Vho-Begwa added that "if dry *zwipotoliyo* are left on the ground where there are signs of *muthwa*, your instrument will be covered by termites and mud, and that would be the end of it" (interview, 22 October 2019). Uys describes termites as "the family *Hodotermitidae* [which] consists of the so-called harvester termites, which are among the most notorious pests of pasture, crops and structural timber" (Uys 2002, as cited in Sileshi, Arshad, Konaté, & Nkunika, 2010: 925). There are certain types of termites which can drill holes into the inside of calabashes, producing a powder, which ultimately weakens the calabash. These termites are called "powderpost beetles," a term used to describe several species of small (0.3–1.9 cm) insects that reduce wood to a flour-like powder (Sileshi et al., 2010: 925). Back home in Katlehong,[12] I stored some of my musical bows in one of the rooms, and I observed that one of my calabashes was being eaten by these insects. When I asked Vho-Matsheka for some advice on how to get rid of them, he replied: "I sometimes use Jeyes Fluid detergent or paraffin to prevent these insects from eating my calabash" (interviews, 18

[12] Located east of Johannesburg.

October 2019). As cruel as this seems, it is effective, and Snyder writes: “It has been found that coal-tar creosote acts as a repellent to adult powder post beetles” (1938:4). Coal-tar is the chemical used in most tar road construction. Due to its high viscosity, it would not work on musical instruments, and it can also leave black marks. According to Brammer, “fumigation is considered to be the most effective method of lyctine (beetle) control, but it is also the most costly” (2013: 4). Fumigation is an excellent method of instrument care, and I have noticed that most musical instruments at ILAM are fumigated to prevent powderpost beetles from damaging instruments; however, it is costly.

Other important knowledge held by instrument makers is how to propagate plants that are used for their materials. When we were in Mbahe forest, Vho-Matsheka showed me *mutondo* seeds; however, this tree can also be planted by cutting off a branch and propagating it. Vho-Matsheka explained how *mutondo* is planted:

> A *mutondo* tree is like any other tree that can be planted by cutting a branch. Just like with our rondavel houses, if you can use *mutondo* trees as pillars while they are still, a few months later you will see leaves starting to grow (interviews, 18 October 2019).

*Mutondo* trees are either male or female. Mugovhani writes, in an interview with two *mbilamutondo* builders, Vho-Ravhele and Vho-Munyai, that they had different preferences for which to use in terms of their sound quality. Mugovhani states:

> Vho-Ravele prefers the female … [because it] has more sap and produces more resonance. Meanwhile, Vho-Munyai contends that while the female … has got more sap, it is not as strong as the male … because the sap is thin, and it therefore offers problems when the wood has to be roasted in preparation for instrument building (2009: 47–48).

What Mugovhani is highlighting is that these instrument builders spend a great deal of time studying *mutondo* trees and other plant species, from how they are cultivated to how they are prepared when certain musical instruments need to be made. Balo, a scholar who completed research on *timbila* xylophones in Mozambique, witnessed instrument builders trying “to evaluate wood totally by suspending pieces loosely between finger and thumb and tapping at various points to hear nice resonance” (2011: 108). In 2018, at ILAM at Rhodes University, I observed a visiting musician, Vernancio Mbande (Junior) from Mozambique, a timbila player and builder, evaluating the resonance of the wooden ILAM instruments. Mbande removed one slat of the *timbila* and held it at one end and struck it at various points with a mallet to locate the strong resonance of the wood. Every aspect of the material is inspected.

Vho-Matsheka showed vast indigenous knowledge when it came to identifying suitable trees for instrument building. He summed up our conversation as follows:

> Good trees, when it comes to building instruments, are the ones that allow you to easily bend the wood and give you a certain shape. Especially with the bows, but above that they must not be prone to insects (*mutwa, zwiphehlwana*) that eat the wood. They must also be strong in the sense that they can allow sound to travel quickly without being absorbed. Good trees must not show cracks when they are being exposed to the sun. On the other hand, bad trees absorb sound; they break if you forcefully bend them and also are prone to insects. Over and above, bad trees are any trees with thorns because when you start bending them, they are prone to cracks and can easily break (interviews, 17 October: 2019).

Vho-Matsheka is pointing out a very crucial point which might be considered part of a checklist for building instruments as failure to consider these criteria may produce poor quality sound, and an instrument that may break easily.

This checklist we devised is summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Checklist – Types of wood and their characteristics.

| **Type of wood** | **Characteristics** |
|---|---|
| *Mufhata* tree | Strong, easy to bend, warm sound, resistant to cracking in harsh weather. |
| Any thorny trees | Crack easily and break easily. |
| Pine tree | Absorb sound, can break when bending. Prone to insects eating the wood. |

As an instrument builder myself, my instincts were affirmed, and I could relate to some of the experiences I encountered when I started building a *kora*, a West African string instrument. I used bad wood when I first started, which ended up breaking because it was not strong enough to hold the tension of the strings. Understanding these aspects, Dawe writes, “Musical instrument builders are literally ‘in touch’ with the material world. They are agents of a material reality that affects the construction of musical cultures at the most fundamental level” (2015: 109). This knowledge grows as instrument builders spend time studying and working, experimenting with various types of plant species they find. This indigenous knowledge is invaluable for producing a good instrument.

### 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how instrument builders have a deep environmental understanding of and respect for nature. They explore the important relationship that exists between ecology and human beings, as well as how people rely on the environment or how the environment relies on people for protection. Using the lens of ecomusicology, I have argued that human beings and plants are in an inseparable relationship because certain plant species provide medicinal remedies, food, shade, and wood energy in most Vhavenda communities. I also highlighted how instrument makers (Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa) showed a great understanding regarding the type of materials suitable for certain musical instruments and of the ones which are not. However, issues pertaining to deforestation need to be explored in more detail whereby other instrument builders, community members and local chiefs are consulted in order to gain a broader sense of the state of the problem and whether it is being managed properly by the government authorities.

In the next chapter, I highlight the importance of oral tradition as it is believed to be the oldest form of education in human development. I examine whether it is still being used in the 21st century in Venda.

# Chapter 3

## Revitalisation of oral traditions: Understanding indigenous ways of learning and teaching in our time

### 3.1 Introduction

> As long as African craftsmen continue to produce enough instruments to meet demand for the instruments, they will be active participants in what could become a lucrative industry (Euba, A.2002: 75).

Keeping a musical tradition alive is complex. At the very least, it requires one to have access to the instruments that are an integral part of the genre. This in turn means that there needs to be an understanding of how to craft these instruments. This creates awareness and demand which, in turn, offers financial sustainability for instrument builders. With this in mind, this chapter explores the indigenous skills required in the promotion and preservation of traditional musical instruments in order to service demand for African music practices. Musical instruments are the product of careful crafting, along with in-depth knowledge of acoustics , material collection, and culture. Thus, when it comes to crafting an indigenous instrument, one must have indigenous knowledge, which in most cases, is passed on through oral traditions or indigenous ways of learning.

As a means of understanding indigenous ways of learning and teaching, I weave into the study my childhood experiences of building and playing tin-guitars, building and playing with car toys made of wire, clay cow toys, and clay human-figurine toys, among other artefacts. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, I analyse the process and argue that indigenous ways of learning, or oral traditions, have a great impact on promoting early childhood craft skills and thus interaction. It is, hence, imperative to value traditional knowledge systems. Autoethnography, as discussed earlier, is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, 2011:273), and “endeavours to … scrutinise … dominant narratives, suggest alternatives and proffer viewpoints previously discarded as unhelpfully subjective” (Denshire, 2014: 831). As the name suggests, it draws from both autobiography and ethnography.

Autobiography assembles memories using hindsight, especially memories perceived to have had a significant impact on the trajectory of a person's life. Thus the researcher interviews him-/herself in order to explore his/her own lived experience. Ethnography is a study of a culture's relational practices, their common value systems, and their beliefs and shared experiences (Ellis, 2011). As such, the autobiography is analysed to better understand certain cultural phenomena, even if culture is loosely understood to mean shared phenomena or the "sociological knowledge" that can "illuminate those small spaces where understanding has not yet been reached" (Stahlke Wall, 2016:1) In this chapter, I thus share an understanding of the indigenous knowledge related to the skill production I engaged in with my research partners and comment on that experience.

My memories of making toys have directly influenced my research and life. The skills that I learnt then are an integral component of understanding instrument building and thereby sound production. One of the objectives of this research, as mentioned above, centres on craft skills as a means to revitalising the performance of rare indigenous musical instruments. In my opinion, the revitalisation of a music genre, as evidenced in instrument building, cannot be achieved without revitalising craft skills. Mpako writes that, "among African people, education through art has been the main method of transmitting cultural traditions from generation to generation. This involves designing and performing music, dance, drama and folklore" (1999: 4). This was my experience. By observing elderly people, such as my grandmother, making clay pots and grass mats, and playing music on a *xizambi* (mouth bow) while sharing in storytelling – and my older brother carving *nkombe* (wooden spoons), *nqwembe* (wooden plates), and *swipfalu* (wooden doors), I came to appreciate that oral tradition is a vehicle that can be responsible for revitalising craft skills from generation to generation. Vansina agrees and writes:

> The expression "oral tradition" applies both to a process and to its products. The products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message (1985: 3).

It is important to note that products can be tangible (like all artefacts and musical instruments) or intangible, including poems, stories, dance, and singing. A more careful definition of oral tradition is required to understand how the fundamental transmission of craft skills has been carried over generations in Africa.

## 3.2 Oral tradition

### 3.2.1 Introduction

In order to capture and understand the essence of this study, it is therefore crucial to unpack the word "oral tradition" as the instrument building is guided by such in order to fully represent the 'old' with the 'present'. Vansina defines oral tradition as "the presentation of the past in the present" (1985: xii). These presentations can take the form of songs, dances, lessons, stories, and many other social phenomena. Importantly, "oral traditions make an appearance only when they are told" (*ibid.*). These acts are repeated; as Finnegan (1970, in Thao, 2006: 14) notes, repetition is one function that helps oral people remember. This is true in my experience: Had I had not asked the Vhavenda instrument builders, Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, to share their experiences of how to build and play *tshitiringo*, *dende,* and *tshipotoliyo*, I would not have been able also to share the very same information with my music students at Rhodes University.

I reflect on my past and on my grandmother, who was a great storyteller. She would gather us at the *xitikweni* (fireplace), and start telling us folktales, some of which were terrifying. Others were engaging because of how she portrayed the characters in the story. In some instances, when she was not in the mood for storytelling, she would request one of her grandchildren to do so. I learnt them as a child because these stories were narrated to us almost daily. However, when I left the villages for Johannesburg at an early age, I forgot the folktales my grandmother had taught us. This is what happened to the skills that I needed to build and play instruments: because I had stopped cattle herding so long ago, I could not remember how to build and play *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo*. If these activities are not passed on, as Thao (2006) puts it, they become cultural memories in the absence of written language, and many people, especially those of the younger generation, lose touch with these activities. Thus, the storytelling, the building of wire-car toys, and the building guitars out of oil cans, among other things, will die out since the knowledge dies with those who have the skills to craft these objects. From these verbal messages embedded in storytelling and the repeated building of simple toys, we learn much about the intrinsic values that prepare us to appreciate and understand the culture when we become adults. Idang argues that "traditional music and dance in indigenous African culture was used to teach moral lessons. In recent times, African music, dance, and art have become infected with alien cultures which glorify obscenity" (2014: 319).

### 3.2.2 The influence of the information era on the preservation of oral traditions in general and on instrumental craft in particular.

Vho-Matsheka concurred with this statement, saying “children of today’s generation do not even ask elderly people about the things they used to do when they were young”(interview, 18 October 2019). When I asked Vho-Matsheka about why the younger generations are not interested in learning to build and play *zwipotoliyo* and *zwitiringo*, he said, “because they [the youth] are always on their phones, and I do not know what they are learning from spending the whole day pressing phones” (interview, 17 October 2019). The issue of young people not taking the responsibility to serve as custodians of their culture leaves us with questions about who will teach the next generation when they are less informed about issues of indigenous knowledge or when knowledgeable cultural custodians die. Who should stimulate interest in cultural knowledge for the younger generation? Unfortunately, for all these issues, I see a lack of cultural music education in schools, while the department of arts and culture fails to promote indigenous knowledge activities, such as organizing instrument building workshops in order to spur interest in those keen to keep these art forms alive.

### 3.2.3 Apprenticeship methods and other matters

According to Idamoyibo and Achieng’Akuno (2019), it is easy for any participants to follow an apprenticeship method of observation, imitation, and practice. Had support been given to people like Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka to conduct music workshops on the building of rare musical instruments in schools or on television, I am sure many young people would have taken a stand to promote them rather than waiting for someone to save certain traditional musical instruments from disappearing. Baumann (1999) writes:

> The impulse to keep alive or to revitalise traditions that are disappearing is a postulate that predominantly came, and still comes, from outsiders. Outsiders discover these “unknown” traditions and integrate them into a rather pessimistic world concept of culture in decline. Travellers, intellectuals, and researchers “discover” folk traditions with which they previously were not familiar.
>
> Outsider interest starts to attribute values to these “old” and “orally transmitted” traditions (1999: 74)

Indeed, when I visited to Mali in 2011 to learn about the *kora* and *kamale ngoni,*[13] and to Senegal in 2019 to learn how to play and build *djeli ngoni,*[14] a traditional Mande lute played by the *jelis*,[15] I noticed people from Europe conducting research on traditional instruments. I then met Toumani Diabate, a world-famous *kora (*see Figure 3.1 below*)* griot, in Bamako. We had an informal conversation in which he said: "It is interesting to see young people from other African countries seeking to learn about traditional music; it is time that we start investing in our culture because there is so much value in African music here in Mali and abroad" (25 February 2011).

Figure 3.1. Kora. Picture taken by Joe Makhanza at Rhodes University in 2019[16].

As Africans, community leaders, and musicians, it is necessary that we involve ourselves in teaching. As Evans asserts, "for an African to reproduce his/her own collective knowledge as an insider can be a vital contribution to the development of new indigenous information for teaching purposes" (2017: 108). Indeed, it is worth investing time and effort in preserving traditional musical instruments so that future

[13] West African traditional lutes.

[14] Also part of the lute family but played like a guitar – the left hand determines which notes are produced, while the right hand plucks those notes using the index finger and the thumb.

[15] Mande griots (*jelis*) are more than just musicians. To this day, they are the proud keepers of Mande cultural heritage, the oral historians of Mali's glorious past that is rooted in the thirteenth-century empire of Sunjata Keita (Lobeck, 2001: 173).

[16] This is one of my instrument building projects that I sold to a client.

generations can have access to them and continue with this process. Okpewho writes: “When they [elderly people] die, [the] information they have will never be retrieved.” He continues: “In Africa, an old man dying is like a library going down in flames” (2007: vii).

I experienced this scenario when I was conducting my research in Venda. After I showed Vho-Begwa Percival Kirby’s seminal book, first published in 1934, *The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa*, which contains information on Venda musical instruments such as the *mbilamutondo, khumbye* flute*,* and *tshizambi*, he looked at me, shook his head with sadness in his eyes, and said: “There was an old man who was a master player of *khumbye* flute, but he died three years ago. As for *tshizambi*, I have not seen anyone playing this instrument” (interview, 17 October 2019). This confirms that the extinction of certain musical traditions is occurring. In my opinion, insufficient effort is made by all of us (researchers, instrument makers, community leaders, chiefs, and the government, among others) to protect knowledge about these musical instruments.

### 3.2.4 Why does oral tradition disappear?

Factors such as urbanisation, technology, and political influence in the education system lead to the decline of oral tradition. Idang points out that

> The decline of African heritage is due to the African natives who have been exposed to Western civilisation through socialisation, education and indoctrination which sometimes takes a swipe at their indigenous culture without giving any care to its positive dimensions and its system of values (2014: 315).

This lack of knowledge of people in charge of policy-making and in government, among other stakeholders in the arts fraternity, prevents people from seeing the relevance of cultural values and oral traditions. In addition, migration has involved people moving from villages to urban areas for job opportunities. Evans argues that as people migrate from rural to urban settlements in search of jobs and a better life, indigenous African music heritage is less practised by many communities (2017: 107). Okpewho observes that

> Certain pieces of oral tradition have tended to disappear because occasions for their performance no longer prevail and their performers have moved on elsewhere to pursue more viable occupations. So how do we determine whom to select for the job of preservation? Maybe

> the genre in question is dying out because it was closely integrated into a set of socio-economic relations that have been revolutionised (2007: xvii).

This is an issue not only in Africa. The decline of oral traditions and indigenous practices is also noticeable in developed countries such as Canada. Mawere writes that the status and importance of indigenous knowledge has changed in the wake of the landmark 1997 Global Knowledge Conference in Toronto, which emphasised the need to learn, preserve, and exchange indigenous knowledge (2015: 57). In my opinion, the preservation of indigenous knowledge may soon be a formidable challenge if we do not strike a balance between what technology presents to young people and what culture can offer. The youth are the only possible carriers of cultures. Based on my observations, video games and cellular phone technology have replaced most traditional games (such as building clay toys or wire-car toys). The culture of playing with toys has faded away and has been replaced with technology. For example, video games and social media – Facebook and WhatsApp among others – are considered new toys today. Idang stresses that "the advent of Western culture which is technically based on science created several problems and changes in the lives of African people" (2014: 315). Mpako describes a similar scenario:

> The present socio-economic state of the community places more emphasis on playing with ready-made toys than on children making their own. There is not much to make because play cars, dolls, play houses, clothes, and play furniture can be purchased. Children do not value these toys because they know they can still get new ones if they get lost or old and they do not aspire to create their own (1999: 7).

Even though the world today revolves around technology, one needs to strike a balance because, as Karolyi writes, the "justifiable fear which one might have about the future of African ... traditions is that they are in great danger of losing their identity and relevance in an urbanised environment" (1998: 5). In some parts of South Africa, like Giyani, there seems to have been a disappearance of oral tradition, and musical instruments such as *tshizambi*, *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, and their builders are hardly to be found. It is for this reason that I strive to revitalise and preserve these practices – because "no culture should be neglected or marginalised" (Thao, 2006: 10). Where a culture of instrument building becomes prevalent and is taught in government primary schools as a specialised craft skill – this is where cultures will be kept alive. These activities can help solve the problem of the shortage of African traditional musical instruments in South African society.

### 3.3 The development of instrument-building craft skills

My crafting skills can be attributed to my childhood experiences, which drew on playing with hand-made toys, such as cars made of wire and cows moulded from clay, among others. The 1980s and 1990s represent a period in my life that was filled with an abundant number of traditional African activities ranging from *nkaringana* (storytelling), *ku vumba tihomu ta ridaka* (moulding cows from clay), and *ku endla timovha ta madaradi* (building wire cars). These activities were an important part of my memories and my skill development. According to Kamp, "some of the important early stages of learning may even be viewed as play by children and/or adults" (2001: 427). These hand-made toys have been admired by many. Serpell (1994) writes that these wire cars were popular all over central and southern Africa and that they are mostly constructed by boys between the ages of six and fourteen, without any instruction manual or any guidance from adults. In my memories, the youths who were building wire-car toys were engaged in a competition to build the best quality car toys. As young boys, we were compelled to build our toys since we could not afford to buy them. In some instances, it would happen that some of my peers were struggling to build their toys. Then someone with experience would offer to help build the *movha* (car). In my view, this practice is a central feature of how orality can assist in the learning of crafting skills. Serpell affirms that "adults and older children provide guidance and feedback on the child's activity and interpret these interactions in terms of a shared system of meanings, which the developing child gradually appropriates as his or her own" (1994: 160). My elder brother and experienced peers would show me how to bend the wires, assemble them, cut wood to make wheels, and make patterns on moulded clay cows and cars, among other things. To build wheels for the wire cars, I would chop a branch of a marula tree, which has soft wood. None of us was allowed to use someone else's toy as unnecessary fights would have erupted. I felt happy while play-driving these cars because they helped to kill time when my parents sent me to fetch or deliver something from family members two or more kilometres away. Finding myself running behind the steering-wheel of my toy car made me believe I was driving a real car. Serpell reflects on a similar scenario while he was completing his research on wire-car toys in Lusaka: "in almost every neighbourhood, I would meet a group of boys driving the skeletal model cars built from scraps of wire" (1994: 158). This is a precise description of what my childhood was like. Elderly people, some not even close relatives, would send me to places far away to deliver a message or fetch something, knowing I would not mind because I could run behind my toy car. Sometimes I could load things on the base of the toy. Figure 3.2 provides an illustration of a wire car.

Figure 3.2 Wire car (source unknown)

Wire-car toy building games were an effective way of equipping children with craft skills, something that might be considered for the future. For example, I observed that some people who were involved in making wire cars used extra accessories like waste wireless batteries, bicycle hooters, and small bulbs collected from old cars to make their car toys look more like real cars (they were able to switch on lights and hoot). There was real skill involved in this. When I reflect on these playing experiences, I am aware that they equipped many young men with a deeper understanding of technology without them even being aware that they were involved in learning. Kamp writes, "we should not automatically eliminate the idea that some individuals may achieve considerable competence in craft production at a relatively young age and may be important producers" (2001: 427). It thus follows that those who used clay toy items could now be engaged in businesses relating to those skills. My *tshipotoliyo* teacher, Vho-Begwa, was also exposed to carving and is creating employment for himself by selling his pieces

Mpako writes that "this process [learning] continues the skills and intellectual abilities refine with age and through continuous production" (1999: 4). The point Mpako is making resonates with what Vho-Matsheka told me: that the building and playing of *zwitiringo* and *dende* were things that he started when he was young, and that were refined because he had not stopped practising up to the present day (interview, 17 October 2019). Growing up in an environment where the making of toys was prevalent prepared me to carve musical instruments, make clay pots, and make cars of wire. This is a skill I teach my children even today.

These skills were also adapted. As boys of about eight years and older, we were no longer confined to building car toys but could also make musical instruments such as *gitari ya xigogogwana* (tin guitar), and

*nkombe*.[17] When my brother was not engaged with daily chores such as herding cattle or *ku pana tinkavi* (pairing oxen for harvest) during ploughing season, he would carve *minkombe* (plural: wooden spoons) and *gitari ya xigogogwana.* Building tin guitars became very popular with his peers, so much so that everyone in his age group would be seen learning to build and play them. Vho-Matsheka (2019) said the same about the situation when they were growing up. He said, "the building and playing of *zwipotoliyo* and *zwitiringo* became fashionable during my time as I would sometimes walk in groups while herding cattle and playing these instruments as though we were competing" (interview, 17 October 2019). My brother and his peers would play their tin guitars while herding cattle or going to a river to swim, *kuhloteni* (hunting), and *ku ringeleni* (fishing). Constantly watching them playing and building *zwitiringo* and *xiwaya* motivated me to build my first tin guitar at the age of eight. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show, respectively, a *churi* (wooden mortar) and a tin guitar from ILAM, which are some of the artefacts and musical instruments that my brother and I used to build. These images show the extensive skill, knowledge and time which had to be invested in building these instruments.

Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3

Figure 3.2: a *churi* (photograph taken in Tshandama, Venda, on 22 October 2019 by Joe Makhanza). Figure 3.3: a tin guitar (photograph taken at ILAM by Joe Makhanza on 25 July 2019).

Being looked after by my grandmother, *gogo* Sindo Dlakude, while my mother and my siblings went to the field to plant *mihlata* (sweet potatoes), *mitsumbula* (cassava), *timanga* (peanuts), and mealies during rainy season also exposed me to many crafts that my grandmother was capable of, such as making clay

[17] Carved wooden spoons made from edible trees, like morula trees and others.

pots and grass mats. Laridon et al. (in Mogari, 2004: 118) write that "the techniques and procedures used when constructing cultural artefacts are usually learned informally, by first observing the more skilled artefact-makers and then engaging in 'hands-on' activity in accordance with the observed procedures and techniques." So it was in my case. All the procedures and techniques used to make clay pots and grass mats I learnt by watching my grandmother when she made them. I used to see my grandmother going to the nearest valley to dig clay suitable for moulding *swihiso* (clay bowls) and *tinjomela* (clay pots), among other items. She would mould these items with her hands and smooth the surface with wet *rikatla*[18] and put them in the open air to dry completely. After two days or so, once they were completely dried out, she would take dried grass (preferably the type used to thatch roofs) and wood, and fully cover these items with them. She would then start a fire, let it burn, and then remove the items when they turned red. My grandmother used to say that if the clay had not been properly mixed or not fired properly, the clay pots would break easily. This is an example of indigenous knowledge that has stayed with me until today. This oral traditional way of learning is something I experienced in Venda while I observed Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka building and playing *dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo*. Not only was my grandmother a clay pot and *masangu*[21] maker, she was also an accomplished musician who played *xitende* (bow) to accompany her storytelling in the evenings when all her grandchildren were back home from their daily chores. What I did not witness was her building an instrument. However, because she was the only elderly person in the family and because my mother was not musically inclined, part of me believes that she made her own musical instruments. All these echoes from my upbringing support the fact that oral tradition remains an effective way of learning – my teachers in Venda are still using it today.

The importance of skills development through play has long been documented. Hill writes that "much knowledge was imparted through play or acquired by imitation but … at times in the early years there was a great deal of pressure placed upon the child. Learning to make pottery was left up to the child" (1982: 137). As has been noted previously, playing with handcrafted toys seems to have been part of many childhoods in Africa. This phenomenon was documented by Deregowski who writes: "black children of Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and in some of the neighbouring countries are keen makers of toys constructed from a variety of materials, mainly from either clay or iron wire" (1980: 207). Serpell points out that "these wire cars are popular all over central and southern Africa. They are constructed by boys between the ages of six and fourteen, without any instruction manuals or any guidance from adults" (1994: 158).

[18] Loose mussels found in some riverbanks and in the sea (Xitsonga).

[21] translated as grass mats.

### 3.4 The importance of skills development

Despite some researchers, such as Allais, arguing that "there is no such thing as 'skills', only different relations between a knowledge base and a practice" (2012: 640), I believe differently. To me, these debates yield only confusion. I choose to follow the example of Buckingham and Coffman, who define skills and skills as follows:

> a capability that can be transferred from one person to another, this means that skills are more concerned with the art of knowledge application. So an attempt to strengthen the capacity of the [person] should not only be on creating knowledge workers but also on assisting the [person] to acquire the art of being able to apply knowledge towards the success of the [task] (1999, as cited in Chelechele, 2009: 45).

This definition addresses the fact that, as a human being, one ought to have a certain level of craft skills. Another clear definition by Adams, Johansson de Silva and Razmara, reflects that "skills for work and life are the result of learning in settings that range from public and private schools to the non-school domains of home, community, and workplace" (2013: 63). This definition fits in both oral tradition and formal education. When I was a herd-boy, I first built my tin guitar while at the field herding cattle; and when I was in primary school, I learned about drawings. Adams et al.'s (2013) definition attempts to show that any type of skills can be acquired in formal learning or in an informal environment.

### 3.5 Types of skills

There are various skill types that are important for every individual's personal growth. Adams et al. (2013) observe that there are three types of skills:

1. Cognitive skills are shaped early in the life cycle, for example, by family, nutrition, and nurture in early childhood and by formal education.
2. Noncognitive skills, in contrast, are acquired from birth onward by observing the behaviour of family members and peers, participating in community activities, obtaining classroom experience, and learning in the work environment from the behaviour of others. Learning to work with others to achieve goals, for example, occurs in settings such as a play school, an athletic event, a school project, a community activity, or a work setting.
3. Technical skills may come from formal education; a training center outside formal education; or the workplace through an apprenticeship, enterprise based training, or experience on the job. (2013: 64)

These skill types provide some examples of how I acquired knowledge while playing with self-made toys, and then translated that knowledge into instrument making. In my case, these non-cognitive skills were shaped by watching my older brothers and peers making musical instruments and toys. Kamp emphasises the importance of skills: “craft production activities such as flint knapping, weaving, and making ceramics are among the life skills that may be acquired at a very young age” (2001: 427). Considering the skills I acquired from my early childhood, I have no doubt that, because of their nature (making things with their hands), they should be classified as craft skills. Toy-making activities as part of oral traditions handed down through generations have been a catalyst for transmitting craft skills in the early stages of childhood development for many years. As Rossie asserts, “since thousands of years ago until present times, children have been making toys with natural materials (such as sand, clay, stones, pebbles, flowers, plants, leaves, branches, sticks, reeds, bark, [and] ear of maize…)”(2019: 4). This suggests that toy-making is still available in some parts of North Africa (the location of that study) even today. However, in South Africa, as my research in Venda shows, this type of interaction with traditional knowledge is not found easily. Rossie (2012) concurs, pointing out that, “in general terms, the predominance of self-made toys is declining in towns, with the exception of toy cars or toy weapons made by boys” (2012: 274). In South Africa, children have become like children from Western societies. As per Smith and Kotze:

> In general, Western societies have become accustomed to purchasing the artefacts required for day-to-day living. Examples are a desktop computer for keeping track of investments, plastic toys for babies, plastic containers for storing food, a plastic toothbrush for brushing teeth, and an oven for preparing food. (2010: 5)

Rossie points to an issue similar to that raised by Smith and Kotze: that children rely on buying toys rather than building their own. He says: “in contemporary markets and small shops in North Africa, there are now many toys manufactured in China, alongside a continuing proliferation of second-hand toys” (2012: 274). Therefore, these skills are bound to be lost. Chisenga concurs, writing that “indigenous knowledge systems around the world, especially in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, are at risk of becoming extinct. IKSs are threatened by modernisation, urbanisation and globalisation” (2002: 17).

In the 1980s, children (myself included) built their own toys, like elephants and antelopes, lions, reptiles and birds, with clay and other natural materials available in their environment (Smith & Kotze, 2010: 5). All the points highlighted by the scholars mentioned above indicate that toy-making may be

important for early childhood skill development in Africa. For example, Rossie asserts that “North African children’s play and toy heritages are clearly linked to the cultural and social contexts of the families and communities in which the children grow up” (2012: 17). Smith and Kotze confirm that “the children of Africa design and craft sophisticated hand-made artefacts such as wire cars” (2010: 4). This suggests that once craft skills have been acquired at an early stage, children may be in a position to build anything with their hands, including musical instruments. The discussion by Smith and Kotze, therefore, suggests that teaching crafting skills to children, or even to older people, can help in reproduction of any African traditional musical instruments that are on the verge of disappearing.

The fact that our children today are confronted by a large amount of technology-based stimuli rather than spending time developing embodied skills such as building toys and musical instruments suggests that, in the future, we may not be able to produce indigenous musical instruments. This leads to them not being able to craft traditional musical instruments, which inevitably sounds the death knell of their continued existence.  the extinction of the rare musical instruments mentioned here, as well as of others that are not part of this research. All the scholars cited in this chapter, including myself as an instrument builder, suggest that crafting skills are intrinsic to our personal advancement. This is affirmed by Allais, who writes that “skills training, public works, work placements, and apprenticeships are posited as a ‘bridge’ into a world of formal employment which firstly, does not exist, and secondly, where employment does exist, does not lift people out of poverty” (2012: 15). In this instance, crafting skills are essential because, to some extent, they allow people the opportunity to survive independently of formal employment. They are intrinsic values because they help us to alleviate poverty. Thao echoes that “the full potential of the role craft traditions can play in the development process, and specifically in the generation of income has only recently begun to be appreciated ” (2006: 56). It is my opinion that we need crafting skills not only for financial gain but to keep our cultures alive – by constantly reproducing indigenous items such as musical instruments. Liebl and Roy argue as follows:

> Some types of knowledge and skills … are worth preserving. These would, minimally, include those that by virtue of their intrinsic beauty, cultural meaning, or value as a knowledge base represent a precious resource and also those that may have unrealised potential to generate viable income and to preserve traditional lifestyles (2004: 56).

In this instance, I advocate crafting skills as likely the best way to generate income for interested parties and to prevent African traditional musical instruments from becoming extinct. There is a need to revive craft skills in order to generate mass production of African traditional music to generate income and

to revive Vhavenda culture. Crafting skills can help generate business opportunities to be explored because “currently, there are various [instrument makers] in Europe and the United States from which one can purchase musical instruments imported from Africa” (Euba, 1999: 75). This statement by Euba makes reference to the avenues for business which are created by those who craft musical instruments. In the same way, the *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, and *dende* could be commercialised – like other musical instruments – to attract global markets.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed oral tradition, which in the context of this research, is crucial to transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. This informal way of learning has been effective in ensuring that children are equipped with crafting skills related to instrument building, carving, and the making of their own toys. I have also stressed that oral tradition has become disengaged as a result of various factors, such as urbanisation, modernisation, globalisation, and technology. When most people began moving from villages to towns searching for jobs, they did not want to be seen as village dwellers who would gather for traditional events to showcase various artforms – like, dance, music, and poetry, among others – in order to keep these alive. The acquisition of craft skills was discussed and is linked to the theory of what David Kolb (2014) calls 'experiential learning’ whereby, the watchers favour reflective observation, while the doers favor active experimentation (2014: 4). In this chapter both types of learning experiences were explored through reflections of my childhood as well as in Venda when I was completing research with my teachers. Experiential learning in my opinion, is such a successful tool because it allows participants to digest everything after the session and try to replicate the experience thereafter.

In the next chapter, I discuss the cultural identity embedded in the African traditional instruments of the Vhavenda people, and how they carry culture through performance, museum archives, and recorded music. I also highlight the importance of fusing modern musical instruments like guitars, drums kits, keyboards, and others with traditional ones to create an eclectic sound which can be interpreted as the development of the musical identity of any individual artist.

## Chapter 4

# The construction of cultural identity and meaning in traditional musical instruments: Reflections based on performances, recorded music, and museum archives

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter highlights the essence of musical instruments as significant cultural artefacts invested with a wide range of meanings and powers. As Doubleday writes, "Through their presence and through the sounds they produce, they have a special ability to transform consciousness. To possess or play a musical instrument is to wield power" (2008: 3).

We cannot begin to discuss musical instruments without having a basic understanding of terms such as culture and identity. In addition, it is important to understand why certain musical instruments hold power in a society, and why certain musical instruments are ascribed societal gendered meanings. These particular questions arise in special reference to *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *dende*, and *mbilamutondo*, among others.

### 4.2 What is culture?

The definition of culture is fluid, and therefore it is difficult to pinpoint an exact meaning. Culture is understood, as Awoniyi (2015: 3) explains, "a way of life of … people including their tangible and intangible products, habits, customs, thoughts as well as the arts, technology, music, literature, theatre, health, drama and education." He continues by saying that "culture is both stable and dynamic, explicit and implicit, shared and learned, ideal and manifest, covert and overt, organic and supra-organic, corruptible and reforming" (2015: 4). From Malinowski's perspective:

> Culture is a functioning, active, efficient, well organised unity, which must be analysed into component institutions in relation to one another, in relation to the needs of human organisms, and in relation to the environment, man-made as well as natural. (Malinowski, 1931, as cited by Awoniyi, 2015: 4)

From this viewpoint, culture has many ways of being defined; what is intriguing about culture is that it is founded on the basis that "a person inherits cultural heritage from the preceding generation which they use, add to and pass on to the succeeding ones" (Adegboye & Olagunju, 1996: 236). From this perspective,

culture is viewed as a catalyst which tends to promote the cultural identity of people along many avenues including, as is key to this study, musical instruments.

**4.3 What is Identity?**

Palmberg, while conducting his research on Cape Verdean music, found three fundamental meanings of the term identity. He describes them as follows:

> Identity firstly, is about the "unique individuality of each person," for example, personal ID numbers give certain authority for banks, corporate companies to identify a person with, without which you will be treated as a nobody…The second concept of identity is about sameness, belonging to a community. (2002: 117).

The first meaning refers to the individual, the lonely space we occupy when we consider who we are. This can be affected by gender, race, physical ability, taste, aptitude, and attitude. Musical instruments are often performed by people who are drawn to their sounds (taste), who can physically play them (large hands, strong arms), and who can manage the mechanism thereof (finger coordination). Once a person plays an instrument for an extended period of time, their entire identity can become formed around it. Musicians are often identified by their instruments, such as Vho-Matsheka, who is sought after by the University of Pretoria and the University of Venda to safeguard musical instruments of the Vhavenda people.

The second concepts of identity correlate with the notion of how meaning and identity are reconstructed through music or musical instruments within a group. For example, feeling a sense of belonging within a genre of music, or instrument type, allows us to identify with one another. In addition, we can expand this idea of meaning to the uniformity or groupings of the tree species used to make certain musical instruments. In relation to this, Vho-Begwa commented, "If you want to make *tshipotoliyo*, all *muramba* shells have to have a particular size, so that it sounds beautiful" (interview, 22 October 2019). From my observations, the process of finding the right tree or materials in order to conform with the original identity of the instrument is vital to the process of making it correctly. When I was in the forest with Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka, I had to look for the trees which looked exactly like the ones they normally use to make *tshipotoliyo*, *dende*, and *mbilamutondo* – not just any tree. I had to identify them within many entangled trees and see which ones looked like *muramba*, *mufhata*, and *mutondo* trees and which were the right shape.

The question is, what are the musical features that create identities? The answers to this question are numerous and complex; the first is directed to the musical instruments which people use when performing at various cultural activities (e.g., parties or ceremonies). For instance, if *dende* or *tshitiringo* are being played at a particular party, you may identify the community as Vhavenda people. Furthermore, the use of language and text within African traditional music are also indicators of culture. Toner writes that "musical instruments are used as tropes in the song text [and performance style], which make reference to the instruments and their ancestral significance" (2005: 1). In other words, by listening to any traditional musical instruments (African or Western), one can identify the culture to which those instruments are related. For instance, the *mbira* and *hosho* (thumb piano and hand shakers made from a calabash, respectively) are regarded as the traditional musical instruments of the Shona people. These instruments are played all around the world, but they are still identified with Zimbabwe. As Berliner points out, "the *mbira* has had an important function in Shona culture for hundreds of years" (1993: xiii). *Zwitiringo* and *zwipotoliyo* musical instruments have become a national symbol of the Vhavenda and Vatsonga people. Moore, Dobney and Strachen-Scherer (2015) put it explicitly, saying that "some musical instruments serve as national symbols" (2015: 14).

Even though musical instruments create the national identity of a particular culture, anyone can play any musical instruments of their choice. For example, when I taught Rhodes University students to play and build *zwipotoliyo*, *dende* and *zwitiringo*, they did not have a direct cultural connection with the Vhavenda or Vatsonga musical instruments because most students come from various parts of Africa. However, some felt that the experience gave them a better understanding of the new culture and even found some similarities with instruments they have at home. Maxwell writes that "the differences in orthography of the instrument reflect intra- and extra-streams of communication and cultural contact between different groups of people" (1999: 63). Mugovhani writes about the *mbilamutondo* being able to represent certain people or a specific cultural group:

> The *mbilamutondo* was also significant for honouring great people amongst Vhavenda. *Mbilamutondo* music featured prominently during the installation of Vhavenda royal leaders such as King Malilele Nethengwe of Thengwe village, Chief Mphathele Takalani of Mukula, Chief Masindi Ravhura of Makonde, King Rambuda of Dzimauli, King Ramaremisa Tshivhase of Mukumbani and Chief Ratshalingwa Tshivhase at Muhuyu (2009: 49).

While performing in various venues locally and internationally, I have observed that, in some of the concert venues, many people can trace the culture associated with the musical Instruments being played

simply by looking at them. For example, when people see me carrying a *kora*, *djeli ngoni*, *kamale ngoni*, or others, which are West African musical instruments, they inquire as to whether or not I come from West Africa . However, I also observed that when one performs on those instruments, people who are familiar with West African music( Mali, Senegal, Gambia among others) can easily pick up that a particular musician does not come from that country. Ferdman (1990) writes that "when a group [of people representing certain culture] perceives that its cultural features compare favourably with those of other groups, it should come to hold a more positive image of itself" (1990: 190). The features of musical instruments, sonic reference, as well as the use of language, stand out the most in portraying and carrying a national identity of a particular group of people. Pops Mohamed,[19] in one of the interviews I had with him at his home in Woodmead in Johannesburg, while completing my undergraduate degree in 2007, emphasised the use of language and musical ideas as important aspects that cement identity, whether that is your heritage or the development of something new. He argued as follows:

> If you do not know your roots, you cannot promote your country, your music or your language. If you go overseas and you cannot speak your own language from your own town, you do not have a foot to stand on, let alone with the music. If you go overseas people want you to give them something that they do not know. Through your music, whether it is African or Chinese, it does not matter, but through the music they get to know you and your country better, you know what I am saying. You cannot go to America and play American jazz, Hip-Hop or R&B stuff like that, because that is the stuff that they have already given us. So taking it back to them does not make sense, you see? (interview, June 2007)

As mentioned earlier, identity can be constructed through the use of the language spoken by members of a society. Music is similar. Nketia (1986) writes that the music of Africa, like its languages, is ethnically bound: each society practises its own variant. Thus we may find that there are similarities within a larger group but more cohesion within a smaller society. This sense of belonging is sometimes fierce, but as is

demonstrated in Vho-Matsheka's video, M2019-02  musical ideas are borrowed from various cultures to eradicate the sense of cultural ownership. Here Vho-Matsheka uses the Xitsonga language instead of Tshivenda. The cultural identity being promoted in this video is that of the Vatsonga

[19] A South African musician who has incorporated Khoisan music into his work throughout most of his music career. For example, his album, *How Far Have We Come*, features many Khoisan singing samples.

rather than that of Vhavenda even though the *dende* is believed to be of the Vhavenda people. In my opinion, through the fusion of these features (language and *dende*), Vho-Matsheka creates his own identity as a musician.

Music and musical instruments, as has been indicated above, function as mirrors of a particular culture, and they also establish their unique sonic reference to most artists across the world. These are important musical details that enable people (especially those outside the artist's culture) to identify the cultural background of an artist. Music can embrace symbolic meaning regarding the artist's origins or place of birth.

### 4.4 Cultural identity

Language, music and, thereby, musical instruments became inseparable from community activities. This establishes what Palmberg calls "cultural identities" (2002: 118). According to Hall, "cultural identities" are explained in terms of a "shared culture which provides us with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (2014: 222). Cultural identity thus includes an individual's internalised view of the cultural features characterising his or her group, together with the value and affect that the person attaches to those features (Ferdman, 1990: 193). From this research perspective, the *mbira* could be used as a continuous reference and meaning tool for Shona people from Zimbabwe, while *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, and *dende* are so for Vhavenda and Vatsonga people – and the didgeridoo again provides a tool for the cultural identity of peoples among the Australian Aboriginal groups. Through these shared cultural references, cultural identity is defined as a mirror which

> reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (Hall, 2014: 222).

In my research, I have found that these cultural codes and historical experiences are shared through the musical instruments of the Vhavenda people, who are able to identify themselves through the artefacts and the performances in which they use them. Hall (2014) comments: "Cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, history, and time. It undergoes constant transformation. Identities are the ways we position ourselves within the narrative of the past" (as cited in Palmberg, 2002: 118).

This is intriguing because it resembles how Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka position themselves with reference to narratives of the past which inform future generations. It is their opinion that making

Tshivenda traditional musical instruments will ultimately recreate the cultural identity of the Vhavenda and Vatsonga people (interviews, 2019).

### 4.5 Musical instruments and gender-based identity behaviour

When we talk about the construction of meaning through musical instruments, we must consider that anything can have social meaning. As Lessig writes:

> Any society or social context has a social meaning – the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context. If an action creates a stigma, that stigma has a social meaning. If a gesture is an insult, that insult has a social meaning (1995: 951).

Thus, these socially constructed meanings in music may reveal the reasons for who it is that builds musical instruments, and why certain musical instruments are supposed to be played by a specific group of people or gender.[20] Importantly, it is the people who decide to attach meanings, according to their own understandings., Dawe echoes this, noting that, "however much we study an instrument out of its original context in a laboratory or lecture hall, we will never be able to capture the full meaning that it had for the people, society, culture, subculture, tribe, clan, family, or individual that produced it" (2001: 228). For example, the cutting of *musununu* has deep underlying meanings that are understood by only those who cut these reeds. When I asked Vho-Matsheka why this was so he explained to me that, "the place where *musununu* grows it is like *magandzelo* [shrine] and only chosen elders or people of Tshawulu, close to the chief, are allowed to cut it" (interview 17 October 2019). Although difficult to understand if you are not part of the culture, taboos are usually a strong deterrent in communities. Doubleday elaborates on this idea, and highlights gender dynamics as a possible root of these taboos:

> Through the agency of monopolies and taboos, one group may claim possession over an instrument to the exclusion of another. Gender is one of the most important parameters in human power relations, influencing most aspects of life, and the power play between humans over musical instruments is often enacted along gender lines (2008: 4).

These social dynamics in Venda (the instrument makers are mainly men) seems to have been there for years as they are premised under the concept of culture. As Doubleday asserts, "gendered meanings are invested in instruments" (2008: 3). Cultural dynamics play an important role in the musical culture of

[20] As in the case of Vho-Matsheka who builds *zwitiringo* and *zwipotoliyo*. These are musical instruments predominantly played by males.

the Vhavenda, as was confirmed by Vho-Matsheka when he said that "*dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo* are musical instruments that were and are played by boys, but other musical instruments, such as ngoma drums, are mostly played by women" (interview, 28 October 2019). These power dynamics are apparent in musical scenes in which female musicians hardly play *mbilamutondo*, *tshizambi*, *tshipotoliyo,* or *tshitiringo* because that is how "some social meanings are constructed" (Lessig, 1995: 951). According to Koskoff, "the symbolic content of musical instruments, often expressed through gender-based metaphors, frequently discloses complicated and ever-changing relationships between men and women" (1995: 121). Interestingly in my experience, gender bias is more prevalent with regard to instruments than it is with regard to voice. Koskoff concurs when he writes that women's "performance on musical instruments is often bound up with cultural notions of gender and control in ways that vocal performance is not" (1995: 114). Dournon writes, "in Africa we may observe how the playing of instruments reflects the separation of men and women. In extensive cultural areas, many instruments are reserved for men, while some are exclusively played by women" (2000: 36). For example, in Venda, women play only *tshinzolo* and *mirumba* (drums), while men play *zwitiringo*, *mbilamutondo*, *tshipotoliyo*, and *tshizambi*.

While in Venda, Tshandama and Mbahe villages, I observed that the making of musical instruments is something that is done strictly by men; however, according to Vho-Matsheka (2019), the playing of instruments is undertaken by both women and men – although I did not come across both men and women playing musical instruments together. It must be noted that, despite this fact, Vho-Matsheka highlighted a different view in terms of how women can also participate when he told me that "there is a group in Mbahe called Vho-Makhadzi, which consists of both men and women who playing various traditional musical instruments at various functions, both private and public" (interview, 17 October 2019). Nevertheless, as Koskoff argues, "one cannot help but notice that women's opportunities to perform on musical instruments are limited, relative to those of men, across cultures and time" (1995: 121). This I noted myself.

However, sometimes these social dynamics tend to be subverted, for example, in cases where in a family there is only a girl, and she is forced to do cattle herding (which is usually done only by boys) . Indeed, as explained above, culture and therefore behaviours change – currently, women also play those musical instruments which are believed to be played by men alone. In relation to this, I interviewed

Mathonsi,[21]who lives in Palmridge on the East Rand,[22] and he adds that "yes, women do play *xigovia* (another name for *tshipotoliyo* in Mozambican Xitsonga) and sometimes can do fist fighting with boys in the field" (interview, 17 September 2019). Moreover, in a decontextualised space, such as universities, these gender-based behaviours are often absent because female students may choose to learn to play musical instruments which were preconceived as exclusively the domain of men. Despite this being a sensitive issue, the reality is that this is happening.

### 4.6 Musical instruments as a repository of cultural identity

With regard to the issue of musical instruments as the repository of cultural identity, Evans reflects that:

> In Venda culture, …a king can never address the crowd before the *tshikona* music is performed. This is a Venda cultural practice before the king speaks to the people. Tshikona music must be performed before the king stands up from his chair as a Venda cultural custom (2017: 110).

In 2007, when I was still doing my undergraduate degree at Wits University, together with fourth-year ethnomusicology students and our lecturer, we went to Hamakuya (a rural village beyond Tshandama) in Venda where I first saw the *tshikona* reed dance performed by both men young and old. I can attest that this *tshikona* music is regarded as the royal music used to somehow evoke spirits if performed repeatedly. As may be observed, musical instruments and dance are cultural symbols which also promote and maintain social cohesion within a society. DjeDje, in her article titled "The Fulbe Fiddle in the Gambia: A Symbol of Ethnic Identity" provides an example of how the fiddle is used to signify the cultural identity of the Fulbe culture in Senegambia. She writes as follows:

> The Fulbe have always lived in multicultural settings where they rarely constitute a majority. Therefore knowledge about the fiddle allows one, in turn, to learn more about Fulbe culture, history, and identity (1999: 14).

This is an interesting point that I can relate to. As someone who performs on West African traditional instruments (*kora, djeli ngoni*, and *kamale ngoni*), during many of my performances, I find that people sometimes ask me if I come from West Africa. In South Africa, I stand out from many musicians as the

[21] A pastor from Beulah Church, located to the east of Johannesburg, who grew up in Mozambique as a herd boy, and a *xigovia*, *xitiringo* player and builder.

[22] Ekuruleni, east of Johannesburg.

instruments I play are identifiable as coming from further up the continent. I no longer carry only my cultural identity of the Vatsonga people but also that of West African people. In relation to this, Euba writes:

> In establishing an African identity, the musicians employ: (a)stylistic elements of traditional music, (b) local indigenous language for song text, and (c) indigenous musical instruments, among others. Language and instruments have a high profile and are often crucial to establishing an African identity (1999: 69).

I agree with this statement. Vhavenda and Vatsonga people in South Africa are minorities; therefore, promoting their musical instruments – *dende*, *tshitiringo* and *tshipotoliyo* – within the mainstream will also promote their cultures. Euba says that "among the types of popular music that feature African instruments is the juju ensemble, whose idiom is largely defined by the western guitar and the hourglass talking drum" (1999: 69). He goes on to provide an example, Taarab, a musical genre in which traditional instruments feature prominently (1999: ibid.). These two examples give us a sense that it is possible to use traditional instruments with Western instruments in order to promote African traditional musical instruments and prevent them from disappearing.

### 4.7 Revitalisation of cultural identity through live performances

Traditional African music has suffered an identity crisis in the last century. Mugovhani writes that with the decline in the performance and promotion of indigenous musical arts and the musical instruments associated with them, their continued existence may not be guaranteed (2009: 52). Thus, due to the decline of performances, many African traditional musical instruments might face extinction. Masasabi writes that this has been as a result of globalisation, which has seen the adaptation and appropriation of African folk melodies by popular artists, and a present generation which hardly attends to authentic African music (2007: 1). This is prevalent among the present generation of Vhavenda people: the current population is disinterested in the promotion and preservation of their own cultural heritage, and *mbilamutondo* music practice has therefore become one of the most endangered traditions (Mugovhani, 2009: 52).

How then can one change practice in society? I believe that transformation can be achieved through the repeated use of, or performances with, musical instruments by a group of people. For example, in Zimbabwe, *mbira* music regained popularity in the 1960s, both in the context of traditional spiritual

ceremonies and in the growing market for commercial recordings (Jones, 1992: 28). Due to continual and persistent input from interested parties, from people playing at traditional ceremonies to those with an interest in recording commercial songs, "the *mbira huru* now enjoys widespread popularity, locally as well as internationally" (Jones, 1992: 28). Thomas Mapfumo (who is based in Europe), the late Chiwoniso Maraira, and many others are examples of artists who have been promoting the playing of *mbira* in

Europe. Locally, we look at musicians such as Tlokwe Sehume.[23]

While I taught at Rhodes University in 2018 and 2019, students built *tshipotoliyo* musical instruments in the African musical arts course. Students performed on their musical instruments for their practical exams in both first and second term. They were excited to build and learn about these instruments. I, therefore, challenge the notion that young people are disinterested in promoting culture. However, I am aware that ILAM is one of the few spaces in South Africa where African musical instruments are played and introduced to other cultures. Of course, we must keep in mind that when performing with an African traditional musical instrument outside the original performance settings, "we will never be able to capture the full meaning that it had for the people, society, culture, subculture, tribe, clan, family, or individual that produced it" (Dawe 2001: 228). Thus, when a mixed group of students performed with *zwipotoliyo*, the social meaning of the music was compromised, because *zwipotoliyo* are normally played by boys while herding cattle (Kirby, 1934). This reflects the idea that identity is a non-static concept. As Abbey and Davis explain, "it is a perpetually developing form that is never final nor consummate. Identity is then considered as a dynamic concept representative of a more general process of construction" (2003: 70). Even though identity is always changing, the fact remains that *zwipotoliyo* are a reflection of Vhavenda and Vatsonga cultural identities, and that "identity is intimately connected to performance, since music as the cultural expression only exists in and through performance" (Akrofi, Smit & Thorsén, 2006: iv). Vho-Matsheka highlighted that, "in Venda, they support culture because every year Phalaphala FM and Radzambo Cultural Foundation hold the traditional-dance competition at Makhura Stadium" (telephonic interview, 30 October 2019). This project was initiated by Chief Livhuwani Matsila 30 years ago and aims "to teach young children about the value of culture and the importance of restoring it" (Chief Matsila, as cited in *Limpopo Mirror*, 2019). Nengovhela (2018) writes that Phalaphala FM supports dance forms of the

[23] He is South African Composer, Arranger, Director, Producer, Poet, Multi-instrumentalist,who is adept at playing Western musical instruments, double bass, flute, guitar, and classical African musical instruments *dipila* (mbira), *Mvet*, meropa ya Africa (Africandrums).

Vatsonga, Bapedi, and Vhavenda cultures. Minister of Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, who also attended the 2019 event, emphasised that "many people think that playing indigenous musical instruments lowers one's dignity, which is not true. I am proud of my culture and that is why I don't feel shy when I play my music"(cited in Nengovhela 2018)[24] The fact that government officials support these events suggests that there is hope for the promotion and preservation of Vhavenda cultural heritage.

### 4.8 Revitalisation of cultural identity through fusion of traditional instruments with modern instruments

Due to the fact that *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *dende,* and *mbilamutondo* musical instruments have been neglected for many years, and it is only now that we are trying to revive them, there are no available commercial recordings so far. The archived material available at ILAM are all traditional tracks and use only traditional instruments. However, this is changing. There are many artists who use African traditional musical instruments blended with modern instruments. In what follows, I use the example of Pops Mohamed[25], who has explored this idea extensively. However, the truth is that many artists all over Africa combine modern and traditional instruments. Euba (1999) states that African churches in Yorubaland use international pop instruments such as guitars, saxophones, electric keyboards, and drum kits in combination with Yoruba drums and other percussion instruments as a way of promoting evangelism. This suggests that modern sounds and instruments can be exploited to keep African traditional instruments alive by acquiring new sounds and constructing a blended self- and cultural identity of a particular artist.

Scholars such as Palmberg and Kerkegaard talk about the change and continuity in African traditional music which is believed to be "tied up in the proceedings and happenings of the global arena, while at the same time the music makes the statement on the local ground" (2002: 11). In other words, different musical elements from various parts of the world can be used to add musical uniqueness to an artist's worth. Furthermore, an artist can make use of his own language or instruments to make a local statement. Dawe confirms the idea of fusing African traditional instruments with non-African ones and writes as follows: "the evidence is clear that musical instruments, as played today, might fruitfully be incorporated into various sound-culture models or, rather, models of the soundscape that prioritise the cultural value"

[24] Nengovhela,K. 2018. 'Phalaphala FM - Winners receive their prizes'. accessed 05 October 2019 from https://www.limpopomirror.co.za/articles/entertainment/48722/2018-11-22/phalaphala-fm-winners-receive-their-prizes.

[25] Pops Mohamed falls into the special category of being a pan-Africanist in his musical instrumental expertise. He is as adept at playing the kora of the Gambia as he is at playing the kalimba of Zimbabwe, not to mention the myriads of South African indigenous musical instruments at which he is also adept.

(2012: 196). During my undergraduate degree, I completed a project on Pops Mohamed, a South African musician who is a multi-instrumentalist. I want to use Mohamed to draw out an example of how musical instruments are used to create meanings about the self-image of an artist. When Mohamed went to the Kalahari Desert to search for the indigenous sounds of the Khoisan people, he was searching for part of himself. For example, bow instruments in Xhosa and Khoisan culture might share similarities. Coplan argues that "Pops Mohamed plays Khoi (pre-Bantu herders) stringed instruments in an explicit attempt to musically reconstitute his self-avowed Khoi ("Hottentot") aboriginal origins" (1985: 105). By using various African indigenous instruments, he tries to find his constructed cultural identity in the sounds created by those instruments. It is clear that musical instruments are vital in creating and sustaining the cultural meanings of any artist. In the same breath, musical instruments may reveal personal information about the person who is exploring or playing those instruments, Dawe argues that:

> Whatever knowledge and information musical instruments reveal about themselves in relation to data collected from "the field" (itself a problematic place), musical instruments out of place must also reveal things about their location. They can be problematic in a new setting. They become part of the new place, where curators and visitors interact with them, redefine and transform them and where the original owners, builders and performers of the musical instrument are not "in the way." (2001: 223)

Magowan, in his article entitled, "Playing with meaning: Perspectives on Culture, Commodification, and Contestation around Didgeridoo", argues that "the didjeridu has crossed national and international boundaries through adaptations of its shape, tone, and rhythmic contours, and it has taken on new cultural histories as a result of its global appropriation by non-indigenous peoples" (2005: 20). Magowan gives us an account of how indigenous music in Australia was altered in order to make it commercially viable. There is an emergent trend that indigenous musical instruments are breaking loose from the confines of their cultural /geographic boundaries, and are rapidly acquiring eclectic status in the world of music. For example, here in South Africa, people like Tlokwe Sehume and Pops Mohamed have utilised African musical instruments with electronic instruments. Instruments that belong to a particular culture are now being brought together with exotic ones to form new cultural histories without losing their original link to culture and community. This idea can be used by people with a deep understanding of African music so that other musical instruments do not dominate. There is always a danger that, when you appropriate exotic elements, this can result in the depreciating of the original or indigenous identity; however, at the same time, it allows one to broaden one's artistic horizons. Brusila argues that

> music becomes reconstructed as an object of new forms of knowledge, meanings and ways of thinking. This reconstruction does not mean that old conceptualizations will die out, but their interpretations can vary during the continuous reinterpretations of identities and histories that are currently happening at increasing speed (2002: 35).

With regard to the use of African instruments with electronic sounds, this interesting point made by Brusila does not qualify one to say African instruments will fade away. However, this view could link to what King and Levine call "capital accumulation," the fundamental determinant of economic growth (1994: 259). In the case of Mohamed, it seems as though he wants to sell his music, not merely to one group of people, but to attract a large number of people, locally and abroad. Nyamnjoh and Fokwang (2005) point out that the fusion of African traditional musical instruments with modern ones makes African music much more appreciated abroad, as world music.

### 4.9 Museums as repositories of cultural identity

In the future, musical instruments kept in museums will provide instrument makers with an opportunity to study, develop research interests, play, and reinvent them. For example, in my case, the idea to research *tshipotoliyo*, *mbilamutondo*, *tshizambi*, *dende,* and *tshitiringo* only came about when I saw these instruments in the ILAM archives. Munro writes that "music comes alive in the museum as this is not simply a place to show off a collection but to study each instrument, see how it was built, where it originated and most important of all hear its sound and listen to music being made" (2018).[26] Euba adds that, "in the process of preserving African performing arts, … the museum must be a support system rather than the sole repository of living traditions" (1999: 68). Indeed, museums must actively educate people. For example, there is a new private museum that opened recently in Johannesburg, called the Drum Cafe and Museum, which presents demonstrations of the playing of African traditional musical instruments. As Munro outlines, "the museum combines a demonstration of each instrument and its unique sound, plus a drumming session together with the opportunity to participate and become a drummer" (2018).[27] Not only do we view and learn about our cultural identity from these museums; they can also provide ideas for instrument building if one can see the exhibits closely.

[26] Munro, K. 2018. 'South Africa's newest African heritage and Music Museum'. accessed 06 October 2019 from http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/south-africas-newest-african-heritage-and-music-museum,.
[27] Munro, K. 2018. 'South Africa's newest African heritage and Music Museum'. accessed 06 October 2019 from http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/south-africas-newest-african-heritage-and-music-museum,.

### 4.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have dealt with the issue of identity and meaning mainly by referring to the use of musical instruments and language. I have argued that musical instruments can be used to create a better sense of cultural identity, national identity, and self-image. This chapter has also introduced and discussed the idea of merging African indigenous instruments with electronic instruments, such as in the case of Pops Mohamed, in order to gain commercial viability and visibility in the current popular music scene. However, in the cases of Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, I have indicated that their musical instruments (*dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo*) are not sufficiently visible in performance spaces. There are opportunities for them to be revived through live performances and to fuse their sounds with those of modern instruments in order to popularise them so that even young people can begin to utilise them in house or dance music.

In Chapter 5, I discuss my engagement in an embodied learning programme in which I partake in observing Vho-Begwa, and Vho-Matsheka, building and playing *zwipotoliyo*, *zwitiringo*, and *dende*. I also provide a detailed analysis of their tuning, tone ranges, and scale.

# Chapter 5

## Revaluing traditional instruments: reflection on learning to build *mbilamutondo* (xylophone), *tshitiringo* (flute), *tshipotoliyo* (ocarina), *khumbwe* (flute) and *tshizambi* (bow)

### 5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse my embodied experiences in order to understand how indigenous music transmission – the playing and building of musical instruments – might be approached. Mavilidi, Ouwehand, Schmidt, Pesce, Tomporowski, Okely, and Paas, (2021) explain embodiment learning as an approach which involves "gestures, simulation, whole-body movements, and physical activity" (2021: 183). This process highlights the importance of the community in teaching and learning and points out the vital role, as discussed in Chapter 1, that elders play in crafting skills development, because "it ensures the continuation of the community and its knowledge" (Owiny, Mehta, and Maretzki, 2014:237). In addition to using a critical lens to describe my learning, I discuss detailed practical aspects of instrument building, from the type of material used and where they are found to the historical background of *dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo* and how they are played. This information was gathered through observation and interviews[28] with my teachers, Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka from Venda, and a friend, Tshilidzi Bobodi, in order to obtain an overview of how language use, the sharing of musical instruments, and intermarriages between the Vatsonga and Vhavenda have impacted on Vho-Matsheka's music. Lastly, I also interviewed Samuel Mathonsi in order to obtain an understanding of his approaches to *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo* and his playing techniques (as he was born in Mozambique). From an historical point of view, I highlight that *tshipotoliyo*, *tshizambi*, and *tshitiringo* are common in countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa, but that they appear with various names or even in different shapes. For example, the traditional ocarina made from *muramba* fruits is called *tshipotoliyo* (Tshivenda), *xiwaya* (South African Xitsonga), *xibhuwewe* or *chigovia* (Mozambican Xitsonga), or *chigufe* (in Shona).

In the following section, I use a narrative approach to describe my fieldwork and experiences in Venda in 2019 as a student of indigenous instrument building in South Africa. McCormack (2004) defines a narrative approach as telling stories which frequently involve in-depth conversation with participants by analysing and interpreting those conversations. These narrative approaches can be regarded as formats for self-creation which can be used to promote self-understanding and interpersonal effectiveness (Dean,

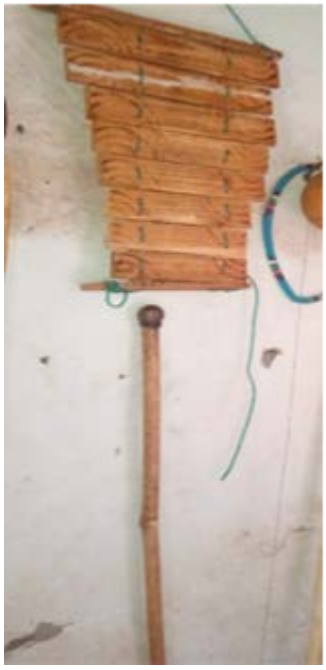
[28] Forinash described them as "the fundamental principle of mixed methods research" (2012: 141).

1998). In most cases, the narrative approach focuses on people who construe their own lives as evolving stories that aim to reconstruct the past and imagine the future in meaningful and coherent ways (McAdams, 2005). In this instance, I seek to describe the (near) past musical instruments of the Vhavenda people by immersively participating and observing my teachers building and playing them.

These fieldwork responses were written while I was in the field and, I believe, captured the lived emotion I was experiencing. In order to give as authentic a voice to this research as I could, I have left the reflections unaltered but have interspersed my thoughts with the very limited research that there is on this topic from authors such as Kirby (1934), Tracey (1947), Camp and Nettl (1955), Blacking (1967), Varnum (1970), Jones (1992), Mans (1997), and Hogan (2014).

### 5.1.2 Fieldwork responses

It was on 17 October 2019, a Friday, at 11 a.m. when it was already scorching hot, that Vho-Matsheka welcomed me to his home in Mbahe to introduce me to the building of *dende* and array of various African musical instruments shown in Figure 5.1. He had just led me to a room with a thatched roof where he stored his *dende* and *zwitiringo.* I marvelled at his beautiful crops and at the livestock in his yard. Inside the house, I noticed many *dende* hanging on the wall*,* close to 15 of them in a variety of sizes. On the wall adjacent to the one with the mounted *dendes*, there were many *zwitiringo* in sizes ranging from 2,5 m to 3,8 m in length. I also noticed a more sophisticated type of *tshitiringo* called a *khumbwe*, which appears to "combine certain features of the stopped transverse flute and *tshipotoliyo"* (Kirby, 1934: 182). However, the instruments have "no finger holes made on the fruit shell itself; instead, a hollow reed or cane 30 cm long [is] inserted through a hole opposite the mouth hole" (Jones, 1992: 49). The flute below the mini *mbilamutondo* in Figure 5.1 looks very similar to the *khumbye* flute except that the embouchure is placed on the side, as with a *tshitiringo*, rather than on the *muramba* shell. Figure 5.2 shows another flute Vho-Matsheka built from calabash stems.



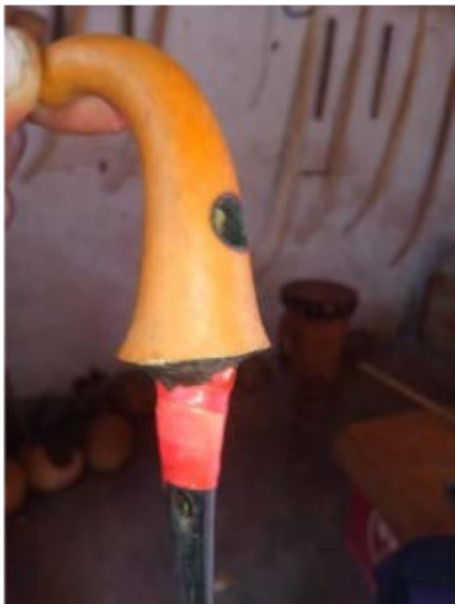


Figure 5.1 A lookalike *khumbye* flute. Figure 5.2 A pumpkin whistle. These pictures were taken by Joe Makhanza at Mbahe village in Venda 2019.

There was also a small *mbilamutondo*, *zwitiringo*[29](Figure 5.1) and other whistles built from the pumpkin stem of the calabash (in figure 5.2). I was fascinated to see these beautiful instruments. I then asked for permission to take pictures of his musical instruments and of him. As I was preparing to put my camera down, Vho-Matsheka took one of his *dende* from the wall and started playing.

The first piece he played was a song he wrote in 2018 called "*Hlengani i xigevengu.*"[30] What was interesting was that the song was in Xitsonga rather than in Tshivenda. While in Venda, I had observed that Vhavenda and Vatsonga often live in the same areas.[32] Because of this observation, this song made me think about the possibilities of intercultural sharing or appropriation and the borrowing of musical instruments between Vhavenda and Vatsonga people. According to Rasila and Musitha (2017), intermarriages between Vatsonga and Vhavenda are frequent. Johnston (1987) points out that numerous

[29] These flutes have different keys, and sizes because of unequal internodes. there was a distinct flute which looked like *khumbye* flute.

[30] I do not have a recording of the song, but I captured it on a video camera phone. [32] Some Vatsonga people live in Elim, among other villages in Venda.

Vatsonga songs are shared with neighbouring tribal groups, such as the Vhavenda to the north of them. Both music and intermarriages cement these cultures together. The song Vho-Mathseka performed is a perfect example of how the Vhavenda culture has influenced or been influenced by other cultures in terms of the language usage of xiTsonga. The following lyrics are written and sung in Xitsonga,[31] a mixture of cultural identity between Vatsonga and Vhavenda (see Chapter 4). The lyrics of the song which he sang are as follows::

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mativa hina mangava bhuti x 2* | (You know we have a problem, brothers) |
| *Chorus: huwelela x3* | (shout) |
| *Hina mangava oho* | (We have a problem, oho) |
| *Hlengane ixighevenga mativa x 2* | (Hlengane is a troublesome criminal) |
| *Nikombela vaswihlangi x2* | (I am pleading with the parents to protect their children) |
| *Leswi swa rilisa ma tiva* | (This is really heart-breaking, you know) |
| *Chorus: huwelela* | (shout) |

This song speaks about crime affecting people's lives on a daily basis. The song attempts to convey the outcry of the community about Hlengani's criminal acts. The general message of the song reminds the community of its obligation to keep exposing and shaming criminal acts at all costs.

On the day, this song set the mood and tone for the interview and guided the interview process. As he was singing, I observed how emotionally attached he was to the song; at some point, he closed his eyes and allowed the music to wash over him. I then joined in, singing with him, and ended up being carried away to a place I never knew existed.[32] Because he played beautifully, I was convinced that Vho-Matsheka is a *dende* virtuoso. According to Vho-Matsheka, "As Vhavenda people, when we have a visitor or visitors, we welcome them by playing music and dance" (interview, 29 October 2019). Not only did he welcome me with great singing but there was food too. This resonates with my Tsonga upbringing: that you do not greet a visitor without food because that person might be hungry or coming from afar.

[31] The fact that Vho-Matsheka is a muVenda but sings perfectly in xiTsonga suggests a great influence from the vaTsonga speaking people.

[32] A place that is filled with happiness and a tranquil atmosphere.

Figure 5.3 A picture of a finished *Dende* musical bow. This picture was taken by Joe Makhanza in 2019 Mbahe village, Venda.

### 5.1.3 The history of *dende*

As indicated above, the instruments researched in this study may go by other names, and it is therefore important to be precise when describing what we are dealing with. Blacking describes *dende* instruments as

> A bent piece of wood with a metal string strung between the two ends. Halfway between the ends a metal string is attached that tightens the primary string to the instruments. A calabash gourd is attached to the middle of the instrument with the opening facing away from the instrument" (1967:17).

Kirby (1934), Blacking (1959), and Vho-Matsheka (2019) confirm that *dende* belongs to the Vhavenda people. However, a similar type of bow can be found in central Africa. As Camp and Nettl elaborate, bows with separate resonators, can also be found from the south of the Congo, "among the Chwana, Hottentots [sic], Berg-Dama, Bushmen of Angola, Tonga, and Ba-ila people" (1955: 66). Hogan (2014) points out that *dende* is also found in Mozambique among the Chopi, Thonga, Sena, and many others. In South Africa, Camp and Nettl write that "it is found only among the Venda, Thonga, Transvaal Sotho, Swazi, and Zulu, Ba-Ila, Lamba, and Balubedu" (1955: 66).

What I understand from these scholars is that it seems no one knows the origins of *dende.* However, Dietz and Olatunji describe musical bows with reference to their ancient origin: they "are pictured in the rock paintings found by archaeologists" (1965: 71). Hirschberg elaborates, saying that, "rock engravings and paintings in South Africa can with certainty be attributed to the Bushman" (Hirschberg, 1934: 449). Indeed, the instrument is speculated to have originated as a hunting weapon. Camp and Nettl note that "the bushmen used an ordinary hunting bow with the string tied back (braced) to the stave" (1955: 55), while Kirby writes that "a hunter, after having made a kill, would, to pass the time while waiting for his companions to come up to him, lightly tap his bow-string with an arrow" (1934: 193). Karolyi also confirms that a bow can serve two purposes: it can be a weapon to shoot an arrow or an instrument on which to play (1998: 38). The information outlined above provides a basis to argue that bows were mostly used by men since they were possibly the chief hunters. Vho-Matsheka also confirmed that *dende* were indeed at some point used as weapons. He remembered as follows: "My father told me that *dende* was sometimes used as a weapon. They would take an arrow and attach it to the bow string and shoot the animal" (interview, 20 October 2019).

Camp and Nettl (1955) categorise musical bows into the following groups: (a) bows with separate resonators, (b) bows with resonators attached, and (c) bows using the human mouth as resonators. As I observed, *dende* falls under the first group, (a) bows with separate resonators, while the second and third groups include bows such as *uhadi* (Xhosa bow), *xipendana* (Vatsonga bow) and *tshizambi*.

Summit and Widess mention that, originally, the strings were made from plant or animal materials, though now, they are made from wire material stripped from car tyres, although medium gauge piano wire is also deemed suitable (2000: 5). The bows which Vho-Matsheka makes utilise wire bought from Tshibasa hardware store, a local shop. However, other materials like the wire from car tyres and sinew are often used to tie the ends of the bow stave after the carver has finished carving to help maintain the bow shape.

These are placed when the bows are completely dry (interview, 20 October 2019).

### 5.1.4 The building of *dende* musical bows: material and tools

In order to build *dende* the following items are needed:

(a) a wet branch from a *mufhata* tree that is between 1,10 m and 1,50 m long and around 35 cm thick,

(b) a length of wire,

(c) a calabash (size varies),

(d) a thin grass reed, and

(e) tools, such as a pencil, sharp knife, hacksaw, machete, a small flat file for wood and *mbadwana.*[33]

Building a *dende* is a challenge due to the amount of expertise involved in understanding how to make an instrument that sounds good. As mentioned earlier, one has to have knowledge of the type of tree, the size of the calabash, and the type of wire used, which varies according to the wood that one finds. When carving the wood, Vho-Matsheka prefers to use tools such as the lasher, that is, the *mbadwana*, and a knife because they are lightweight and easy to work with. He gave me a *mbadwana* and a knife and instructed me to cut the stick we brought from the bush.[34] I watched the entire process of

[33] An adze, a cutting and carving tool made from the leaf springs of a car undercarriage.

[34] Vho-Matsheka and I walked a distance of approximately 5 km on foot from his house to look for *mufhata* trees to build a *dende*.

instrument making unfold. He started by cutting both ends of the sapling as it was too long (about 1.8 m). Vho-Matsheka then encouraged me to pay attention as this is a crucial process, and he reiterated that "the best way to learn is for you to watch me and see how I am doing it and thereafter imitate what I am doing so that I can correct you when you make mistakes" (interview, 20 October 2019). Though it was my first time building a *dende* bow, meticulous observation and experience with making other instruments made it simple to learn. As described by Laurier (2010), participant observation gives a researcher a better understanding of what is happening in the culture and lends credence to one's interpretations of the observation. In addition to this, DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) point out that it improves the quality of the data collected and its interpretation and facilitates the development of new questions or hypotheses.

The sizes of *zwidende* we made ranged from 1 to 1,5 m in length. The one made by my teacher was about 1,2 m long. As I was receiving instructions from him, I cut the wood to a length of 1,2 m and peeled off the bark so that I could measure the thickness of the wood. This is important because the diameter should be around 2,5 cm in order to sustain the tension of the string. Vho-Matsheka held his piece of wood between his legs while his left hand gripped the bow stave. He then marked the bow with a pencil at about roughly 25 cm along, without even using a tape measure. This showed my teacher's confidence and evidence of his years of experience in instrument building. Watching Vho-Matsheka complete these tasks was like seeing a complete manual detailing every step.

Vho-Matsheka then carved the wood from where he placed the markings and tapered it towards either end of the bow so that it could bend easily and thereafter used a knife to *kulutedza*.[35] The bow was squeezed firmly from its bottom end between the legs, allowing the maker to *kulutedza* its other end. According to Vho-Matsheka, a bow needs to maintain this shape at both ends of the because the sound vibrations start there and then travel through the calabash (interview, 18 October 2019). While doing this, the left hand keeps turning the wood so that the knife can scrape it all the way around. Figure 5.4 shows what the ends of the *dende* should look when work on the bow component has been completed.

[35] *Kulutedza* is a Tshivenda word which means to shave rough lines using a sharp knife in order to make wood smooth.

Figure 5.4 A *dende* with work on the bow component completed (Picture taken by Joe Makhanza on 10 September 2019 at Mbahe village, Venda)

As I watched the building of the *dende* unfold, I realised that it is thicker in the middle than other bows that do not have the wood carved at either end. In order to bend a *dende* into a bow shape, the sharpened edges of the *dende* wood are put through two parallel branches of a tree, and Vho-Matsheka then pulled slowly towards them towards him, changing position as he did so. Normally, an instrument maker would start by bending it at the area where he had placed the mark (when he started carving), moving towards the end of the stick. I observed that cutting the wood shorter than 250cm (as prescribed by Vho-Matsheka), made it difficult to bend. Some of the wood broke that day, but Vho-Matsheka carried on trying with others.

When both ends of the stick are bent properly it is advisable to "tie a strong wire or a cord between both notched ends, pulling the bow into a smooth curve" (Jones, 1992: 60). For some of the bows I made with Vho-Matsheka, we used *mufhata* bark fibre to tie the wood. The middle part of the bow is not carved; however, a knife is used to *kulutedza* it and smoothen it when it has completely dried out.

Vho-Matsheka has extensive knowledge of organology;[36] an understanding of the science behind instrument making. He told me that "the only way to achieve quality sound with the *dende* instrument is for the wood to be completely dry. If it is wet, it will only dampen the sound, and so it is advisable to leave it to dry for three months, but never expose it to the sun as it might develop cracks" (interview, 18 October 2019). Andrew Tracey agrees, writing that "the instrument makers found that the uncured wood was dull

[36] Magnusson (2021) defines organology as the study of musical instruments, including descriptive analysis, social history and classification.

and non-resonant, and each has developed a local method of curing which converts the inert slat into highly resonant musical notes" (Tracey, 1949: 17). Although Tracey refers only to people who build xylophones in northern Mozambique, how these instrument makers acquire knowledge is important and notable. The expertise and understanding of instrument building shown by Vho-Matsheka would seem to have taken years to attain. What is highlighted by Tracey also suggests that "musical instruments usually revolve around how they are shaped in the minds of those for whom they become emblematic and how makers create them" (Dawe, 2015: 109). When Vho-Matsheka builds a musical instrument, he seems to have an idea of what the instrument should sound like; he confirmed that "when I make these flutes or any other musical instruments, I already have a sound in mind or know what it must sound like" (interview, 17 October 2019). This important skill, handed down by generations, speaks to the importance of mentorship and cultural skills transfer.

### 5.1.5 The importance of the calabash

The calabash can be used as a sound resonator for various instruments, such as xylophones, fiddles, drums, and bows, among others. In Venda, I watched Vho-Matsheka using calabashes to make his *dende* bows. Summit and Widess confirm that calabashes are used for various purposes and describe them as "a squash with an extremely hard shell, a close cousin to the pumpkin and zucchini. It is used by people from various cultures for different purposes" (2000: 2). Jones highlights the importance of calabashes as containers. She adds: "the shell of the gourd is suitable for carrying food and liquids as well as providing a natural resonating chamber for rattles, rasps and drums" (1992: 2). In addition, in my personal capacity, I have seen many calabashes in the presence of my sister, a traditional healer, who uses calabashes as containers for storing liquid herbal medicine which is referred to as "*gona ra nhunguvana"* (sacred medicine). The sizes that gourds grow to may vary depending on the temperature and the type of soil. For example, when I was in Senegal in July 2019, I noticed that calabashes that grow in West Africa are much bigger than the ones we have here in South Africa. Not only do they differ as regards their size –their texture, thickness, and strength also differ. Vho-Matsheka made a clear distinction between smooth and rough calabashes, saying that "calabashes with a rough surface are much stronger than the smooth calabashes" (interview, 20 October 2019).

### 5.1.6 How to cut the calabash

Vho-Matsheka went out to his mini-museum and came back with four calabashes of different sizes, some with smooth and some with rough surfaces. He gave me a calabash with a rough surface and took

the other one with a smooth surface and started tapping them with his index finger to check their strength. Vho-Matsheka highly recommends the following advice: “pick up the gourd and examine it thoroughly. Look for a solid symmetrical shell that does not have obvious damage from bugs or disease” (Summit & Widess, 1999: 11). At the back of my mind, I had convinced myself that the thickness of the calabash is what matters when testing its quality. However, I was wrong; in fact, “the actual thickness of the shell is not as important as the density; it should be firm when you press or tap it” (ibid.). In other words, it might be thick but not strong.

Vho-Matsheka used a pencil to mark the calabash[37] from the top of the neck, which connects to the stem because that is where the sound hole is cut. The shape of the calabash is important, and the bottom of the squash is flat, which allows the bow to fit well when it is attached by means of a loop of wire. When he had finished marking the calabash, he ran the knife along the line he had marked to open a hole. Once this part had been cut open, all the seeds and the soft whitish sponge foam on the inner wall was removed. Vho-Matsheka said that the foam “can be removed when the shell is put in boiling water or cooked” (interview, 20 October 2019). On this day, however, due to time constraints, Vho-Matsheka could not go through this process and instead a knife was used to clean the inside. With my teacher’s guidance, I then started cutting mine, but I was warned not to open a big hole because “the calabash *ayikho imba zwabudi* (will never have nice resonance)” (Vho-Matsheka, interview, 20 October 2019). This made me realise that if the calabash produces unsatisfactory resonance, the problem could be caused by this factor. At the back of the calabash, where it is flat, two tiny holes are made in order to insert a looped wire. When attaching the loop of wire, it is important to check the length because if it is too short, people with long fingers will find it uncomfortable to bend their fingers to place their knuckle onto the bow string, and if it is too long, people with short fingers would not be able to reach the bow string. From my calculations, it must be a minimum of 47 cm long in order to accommodate both short and long fingers. Vho-Matsheka would constantly remind me, as I was inserting the loop, that “the of loop wire should be measured according to your fingers” (interview, 20 October 2019), which is approximately 50 cm. Mukhavele provides the same description, sourced from a bow instrument maker in Mozambique, Ernesto Mathusi, and he writes that “when an instrument is ordered, the builder will consider the size of the client’s hand” (2017: 78). Whether you have short or long fingers, the loop is measured in such a way that it fits their size. Indeed, as I witnessed on one occasion when we were building *umakweyane* bows at Rhodes University in 2018, one of the students mistakenly made her loop too long, which made her bow difficult

[37] So that he would know where to cut when opening the sound hole.

to play because her fingers were short. However, if the loop wire is made correctly, one should be able to control and produce clear pitches by knuckling the bow strings.

When tuning *dende*, the calabash must be carefully placed in order to produce what my teacher described as “pleasing sounds.” I watched, observing how Vho-Matsheka was tuning his *dende.* He made sure, as described by Summit and Widness, that the “gourd bowl was carefully selected to fit snugly against the outer curve of the bow, and secured by means of a string loop which firmly grips both the bow and the metal string” (2000: 5). He then started sliding the calabash back and forth to locate where there were nice warm sound resonances. I noticed that the string loop was the same size as the one that was used to tie the ends of the bow. Vho-Matsheka believes that “if the string loop is thick, sound would not travel well” (interview, 18 October 2019). After taking a thin dried bamboo or grass stem and striking the wire of the bow while singing, he would finalise the knot when he was convinced that he had found the desired sound. If the instrument sounded pleasing and he could pitch with it, he would put a mark on the stave of his *dende* so that he could locate that position again. These marks are often made to remind the performer of specific tunings for specific songs. Thus, an instrument can have several marks which are used as locators.

When Vho-Matsheka had completed cutting the top off the calabash, he took one of his bows hanging on a wall of his mini-museum, removed the calabash that was attached to the instrument, and attached one of those we had made. The idea was to experiment with the calabashes we were cutting to see if they would have good resonance on that bow. Vho-Matsheka kept on emphasising that “the size of these calabashes plays an important role, and one of them must be selected because not all of them will give us nice resonance” (interview, 20 October 2019). Summit and Widess note that “when selecting a gourd for any musical project, the first criteria will be the size and shape” (1999: 11). After my teacher had tested all the calabashes on that one bow, he eventually found one with high resonance and immediately put it aside so to use on one of the bow staves hanging on the wall. Trying to hear which ones had high resonance was a considerable challenge for me simply because my ears still needed more training in this.

Those fundamental pitches require sensitive ears to pick up the little details.

#### 5.1.7 *Dende* tuning technique and register limitations

Watching Vho-Matsheka tuning his *dende* was something that I never experienced before as an instrument builder. He could tune his musical instruments from memory without a keyboard or a tuner. To me, that suggests that he has an embodied memory of his craft. This was confirmed in one of the

interviews when he said, “before you make or create any music, you need to hear musical notes in your head first and play the instrument until it matches with the song” (interview, 20 October 2019). This kind of tuning style is more personal than anything else because it is only he who hears the pitches before the instrument is played. It seems that Vho-Matsheka decides upon a type of tuning that he wants to explore. This notion is elaborated by Jones when he states that “a traditional instrument-maker would normally copy the tuning of an existing instrument or, in the absence of a model instrument, would select pitches that sound right to his/her ear” (1992: 44). Vho-Matsheka uses is slightly a different approach as he does not copy tuning from any existing instrument but uses sound images of songs he already knows to tune the *dende*. For example, he used one of his songs, titled “Hlengani I *xigevengu*”[38] for tuning this *dende*. He would start humming the melody while striking the wire of the instrument to find the perfect melodic and harmonic combination. In addition, he understands sound images of cultures other than Xitsonga, such as isiZulu and Sepedi, among others, to reference his tuning. Vho-Matsheka further elaborated by saying, “with *dende* bows you can play any tune you want, but you need to achieve a level of musical maturity; master the instrument first” (interview, 20 October 2019).

This tuning is done manually. I observed that if the string of the bow is loose, he would start by stretching it and then tie it again to the end of the bow. However, some bows, similar to the that I had seen at ILAM, have been slightly modified by incorporating wooden tuning pegs in order to achieve almost perfect tuning. As Bleibinger writes, “in most cases, new developments are aimed at refining the timbre, at improving the tuning, at increasing the dynamics, at widening the range and making instruments easier to play” (2017: 86). Vho-Matsheka’s *dende*, which were hanging on the wall, do not have tuning pegs to refine timbre to a specific key or tuning system. However, as Bleibinger writes “performance contexts and situations may also lead to the modifications of instruments. In the old days and under normal circumstances one could hardly find musical bows, such as the *umrhubhe* (mouth bow) played in groups” (ibid.). When Vho-Matsheka was playing and tuning his *dende*, it seemed as though he did not feel compelled to use tuning pegs. He was concerned only with his voice range complimenting the sound of his instrument, and that was used as a new key of the song. He outlined why he does not feel the need to modify his instrument by saying, “I always play *dende* alone when practising, and even in performance spaces; maybe I will consider the idea when the time comes [to play with an ensemble]” (interview, 20 October 2019).

[38] Hlengani is the name given to male children. It is a Xitsonga song which means Hlengani is a criminal, and the community is complaining about his acts of crimes that it makes their communities uncomfortable.

Figure 5.5 provides an idea of how he uses the sliding of the gourd along the stave to find a new key. The first mark on the right is the third position, the middle one marks the second position, and the one on the left, the first position.

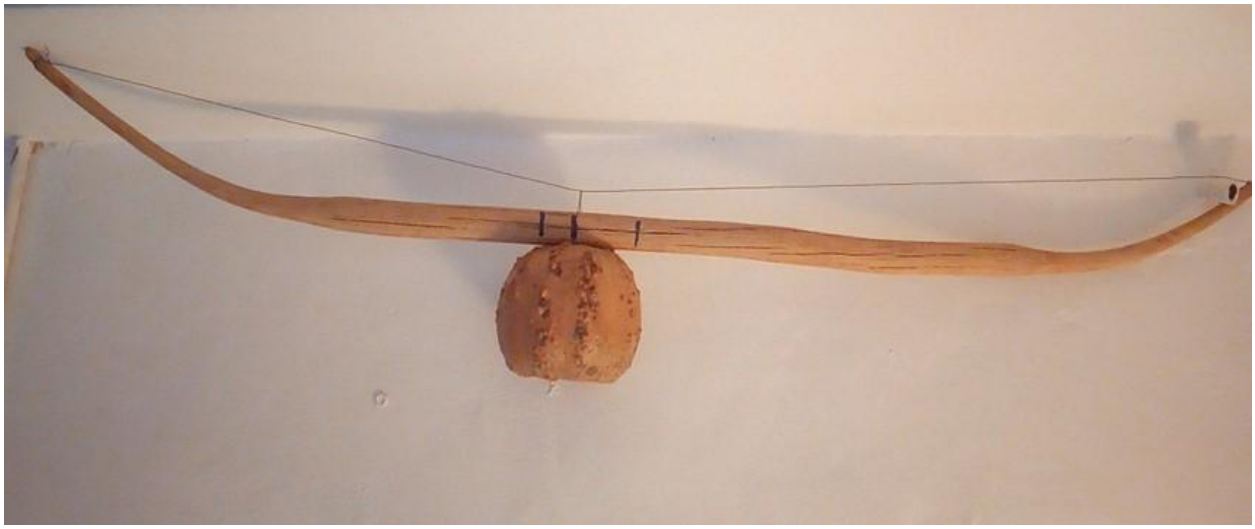


Figure 5.5. A finished and Specifications of the *dende*. The total length of the bow is 118 cm, and the calabash has a 13 cm diameter. The hole in the calabash is 8 mm in diameter. This *dende* was given to the researcher by Vho-Matsheka after he finished building it. (Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in Mbahe village 9 February 2020).

As instructed by my teacher, I too marked different tunings for different songs. The first song, "*Hlengani i xigevengu"* is tuned to A major on my *dende* when the wire loop is placed on the middle marking on the bow stave, as shown in Figure 5.5. When the loop wire is put in the marked position, these two open strings are 61,5 cm (longest) and 55,6 cm (shorter) apart from each other. When these two strings are struck by a strong grass stem they produce A and B open strings (a major second) which is similar to the Zulu bow, *umakhweyana*. When one starts using a knuckled index and middle finger to put pressure on the shortest string, you can sound a C and D, which allows the instrument to ultimately produce a four-note scale: A, B, C, and D.

The second song, "*Makonde*," was played on the same *dende* but tuned to A flat major. When the loop wire is put on the first marked position on the short string on the left, the distance between these two open strings is 71 cm (long side of the string) and 46 cm (short side of the string). The pitches which these open strings produce without knuckling are A flat and E flat, a perfect fifth apart. Now the knuckled fingers (see Figure 5.6 below) on this song are used only on the longest string, producing C and D flat. When played together with open strings, they produce a four note scale: A flat, E flat, C, and D. This tuning

method allows Vho-Matsheka to explore and imitate certain musical arrangements played by various instruments. According to Vho-Matsheka, "there is no huge difference between a guitar and *dende*, which is why this song is tuned according to guitar styles (interview, 20 October 2019). Even though he did not specify which guitar styles he was referring to, as I listened to the song, I had to acknowledge that the sounds he was producing indeed sounded like a guitar in terms of his playing technique.[39]

Figure 5.6. A knuckling bow finger technique.

(Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in Venda in 2019 at Vho-Matsheka's place, Mbahe village)

The third song, "*Zwitho*," still on the same *dende* (118 cm), is tuned to A major. When the loop wire is put on the middle position marked on the bow, the distance between these two open strings is 67 cm (long side of the string) and 48 cm (short side of the string). The fundamental notes on these open strings are A and D, a perfect fourth on a scale of A major. The complete scale, including knuckled notes, is A, B, C#, D. An interesting fact relating to Vho-Matsheka's approach to playing *dende* is that you can play notes on either the short or the long string, though this is determined by the particular song. For example, I observed with both the second and the third song that the longer string gets knuckled when

[39] Vho-Matsheka knuckles the longer string, instead of the shorter one because the loop wire tends to give us a perfect fifth and unusual placement of the wire on the bow. the nuckling technique gives him an opportunity to explore more possible tunes.

Vho-Matsheka plays *dende* in video M2019-02  .

### 5.1.8 Performance setting and repertoire

Musical bows are played singly or in pairs (Kirby 1934). Blacking (1959) also highlights that *dende* is a solo instrument which can be used to play simple melodies, though performers can sing and accompany themselves too. Observing Vho-Matsheka playing his *dende* bow, I noted that he can play it without singing but mostly he accompanies his singing with a *dende* bow.

According to Vho-Matsheka, “most repertoires are likely influenced by many factors such as socioeconomics, crime, and politics, which somehow affect the community daily” (interview, 20 October 2019). Though I did not get a chance to see him perform all his songs, some I did hear, such as “*Hlengani i xigevengu*,” attest to the significance of poverty and crime. The song becomes socioeconomically inclined because most people commit crimes because of a lack of jobs. While I was with Vho-Matsheka, I noticed that every time he wanted to tune his *dende*, he played his songs. Although I was eager to hear him singing folk songs to hear if those songs were developed in terms of melody, harmony, or lyrics, Vho-Matsheka claimed not to remember any folk songs he used to play during his childhood (interview, 2019).

The best way to protect instruments, particularly bows, is to hang them on a wall and to remove all the calabashes from the bows as they are fragile. As for the bow itself, it must not be directly exposed to the sun because even though the “*mufhata* tree produces strong wood, when it is exposed directly to the sun it can starts developing some cracks” (interviews, 20 October 2019).

Figure.5.7. A finished *tshitiringo* flute. (Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in Venda in 2019, Mbahe village).

### 5.2 The history of *tshitiringo*

The *tshitiringo,* a traditional flute made up of a length of pipe with holes, is not a mainstream or well-known instrument (Kirby, 1934). The embouchure is where you place your lips against the hole and blow across to produce sound. It is worth noting that I use words like mouthpiece or mouth-hole interchangeably to refer to an embouchure hole. It is important to describe the makeup and historical context of the *tshitiringo* so that one can make comparisons with other types of traditional flutes in Africa. This is undertaken to trace its origins and attain a better understanding of how it can be played with other African traditional instruments. I begin this section by describing Southern African flutes in general to understand how the Vhavenda flute is built and played and what materials are used. Lastly, I unpack its cultural context and performance settings to understand, amongst other aspects, gender roles at play between men and women.

*Tshitiringo* is a Venda word (Xitsonga: *xitiringo*) referring to one type of flute made from pipe and *musununu* bamboo reed.[40] The plural form is *zwitiringo.* It is a word used by Vhavenda to refer to *musununu* flutes played by boys. Mans describes a flute as follows: "a flute is a tube with an end which may be open or closed. The sound of a flute is produced by blowing air obliquely over the edge of a blow-hole" (1997: 89).

Flutes are ancient. Fryer writes that "there is good reason to believe that the flute is one of the most ancient instruments of sub-Saharan Africa" (2003: 106). Kirby concurs: "flutes and whistles are indigenous to Africa and are characteristic of the particular races (sic.) who use them, or of some neighbouring or allied race from whom they may have derived them" (1934: 173). It is interesting to note that transverse flutes are known in both Southern and West Africa (Varnum, 1970: 465). However, these flutes may appear in different shapes around Africa and may differ in the manner in which they are played. Varnum writes that their shape and size differ and that some are open-ended, while others are stopped; some are end-blown, others side-blown, and they seem to be widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (1970: ibid).[41] Norborg provides morphological details about certain types of flutes in Zaire and notes that they are both end-blown (vertical) or side-blown (transverse). She writes: "The player himself creates a ribbon-shaped stream of air with his lips by blowing obliquely across the edge of a blow-hole" (1987: 69). Mans describes southern African flutes: "flutes usually have holes which may be stopped by the fingers, thereby creating different pitches. When they have no holes, the open end is usually stopped by a finger" (1997:90). In my observation, terms such as end-blown or side-blown are only used by scholars when they are describing instruments. When it comes to vernacular names for traditional flutes, descriptive information about how they are played is not readily provided. For example, *tshitiringo* or *xitiringo* are merely names given to these instruments – they do not seem to bear any specific meaning. The exception is *msengere,* which refers to a flute made from reeds or bamboo (Mathonsi, interview, 17 September 2019).

These types of flutes are not confined to Africa but occur globally as well. Blench writes that "globally, the most common transverse flute probably has no finger-holes and depends on the player opening and closing the distal end as well as exploiting the overblown harmonics" (2009: iii). Kirby (1934) calls flutes without finger holes "whistles." Examples of flutes without fingerholes in South Africa are *tshikona*

[40] A rare bamboo reed found only in Tshaulu village in Venda which looks similar to bamboo but has brownish and cream white spots. This reed, according to Vho-Matsheka, is used to build *tshikona* pipes, preferably from the thin reeds because they produce a high pitch (interview, 20 August 2019).

[41] The information rendered here by these scholars gives us a sense that flutes are ancient instruments of Africa, but we are lacking archaeological evidence. There are no recorded dates linking these African flutes.

(Tshivenda), *dinaka* (Sepedi) and *impempe* (isiZulu). The geographical distribution of these instruments is wide, ranging from the Limpopo Province to the KwaZulu Natal Province.

The transverse flutes of the Vhavenda and Vatsonga people of South Africa are most likely to have been acquired from the north and passed on to the Pedi of what was the northern Transvaal, around what is now called Polokwane (Kirby, 1934: 174). Kirby continues, *"shitloti* [another name for *tshitiringo* in Xitsonga] appears to have been borrowed from the Tsonga by Swazi in whose hands it is modified somewhat, and later by the Zulu, among whom it is rarely seen" (ibid.).

There are different types of playing techniques for different flutes. Mans writes that "some flutes in other regions [are] even blow[n] through the nose" (1997: 89). However, this playing technique is not wide-spread and is not found in South Africa. *Tshitiringo*, like transverse flutes, "are held vertically with the upper end resting against the lower lip. A finger is placed against the hole at the lower end, and by manipulating this finger as one blows, the pitch may be changed" (Mans, 1997: 91). This playing technique described by Mans was exhibited by Vho-Matsheka.

All flutes in Africa are classified as aerophones. Norborg writes:

> Aerophones [are instruments] in which the vibrating air is confined within a more or less cylindrical, conical, ovoid or globular air cavity. The sound is produced by directing a narrow stream of air against the edge. The quality of air, and thus the pitch, may be changed by means of finger-holes. Flutes are blown through the player's mouth or nose (Norborg, 1987: 69).

The most common material for transverse flutes worldwide is cane or bamboo, which is naturally hollow (Blench, 2009: 3). However, it is also important to note that other materials may be used for manufacturing flutes. Traditionally, African flutes are carved from wood or made from bamboo or the husks of cane or millet stalks (Fryer, 2003: 106). In Kenya, flute makers take a tree branch and slowly pull a tube of bark off of the branch to make a *mutuririu* flute (Larue, 2016: 129). Other makers, particularly in West Africa, use *"tambin* vine which runs through trees, along the forest floor and down into the water" (Fula flute online). Other instrument makers prefer to use wood, metal, or clay which is easily shaped; but bamboo is very nearly immutable (Grame, 1962: 8). I often use bamboo because it is so well adapted to musical purposes that one might almost say that it is only necessary to cut a piece to produce a musical instrument (Grame, 1962: 8). Here in South Africa, there is a family of bamboo called *musununu*, which, according to Vho-Mtasheka, "is stronger than ordinary bamboo and sacred because it is very much

protected and is not to be used by just anyone" (interview, 17 October 2019). The only problem with this plant species is that it is very scarce – it can only be found in Venda. This is interesting because it links to the concept of ecomusicology as it highlights the environment in which it is found and the fact that it is restricted as it is considered sacred in the Vhavenda culture. The making instruments from the *musununu* plant is raising many sustainability concerns because little has been done about replanting the species as it is believed to be sacred.[42]

### 5.2.1 The building of *tshitiringo:* material and tools

To build *tshitiringo* was one of the most difficult projects I experienced as an instrument builder simply because it is very technical. It is technical because of multiple factors, including measurements, such as the distance between the mouthpiece and finger-holes, and the sizes of both the mouthpiece embouchure and the finger-holes. All of these need someone with experience to demonstrate how wide or narrow they must be. If these holes are not completed properly, there is a possibility that overtones , which Bain describes as "a set of frequency components that appear above a musical tone" (2003: 1), would not be achieved. In other words, it would produce squeaky or hissing sounds. I asked my elder brother, who used to build and play *tshitiringo* (Figure 5.8) in his childhood in the 1980s, to build one for me but he could not remember anything about it since he had come to Johannesburg to look for a job.

Figure 5.8. A *tshitiringo* (Photograph taken by Joe Makhanza on 18 October 2019 in Mbahe Venda)

[42] There are plans to plant it in a safe place chosen by chiefs since it is tied to the cultural beliefs of the Vhavenda people. Planting more such plants would serve future generations of the Vhavenda people.

Before I went to Venda to meet Vho-Matsheka, I had attempted to build flutes from simple reeds from the river with Rhodes University music students. I would first open an embouchure hole and then cut the reed to the desired size.[43] I had done so in preparation for my fieldwork to Venda so that I would have an idea of how it was done. The biggest challenge was to know where to place the finger-holes and the mouthpiece holes. Not knowing the correct sizes of and distances between each finger-hole also created a dilemma. However, when I met with Vho-Matsheka, the flutes he built were completely different from the ones I attempted to build. The ones I built had one closed end and had pentatonic pitches in a key of C Major, utilising notes such as C, E flat, F, G, B flat, and a repeated C. However, *tshitiringo* has natural nodes[44] at both ends; these segment the internodes of the *musununu* plant. The *tshitiringo* is a flute which is based on four notes or five pitches (a repeated note at the top). For example, in the key of F Major, these would be F, G, C, D, and F.

In order to build a *tshitiringo*, you need the following items:

(a) 6mm round bar steel,

(b) fire,

(c) 1.8 cm diameter *musununu* reed, and

(d) a hacksaw.

As mentioned above, there are various materials available that are suitable for building African traditional flutes, but for *tshitiringo* it is recommended that one uses the *musununu* plant because it is considered a stronger than regular bamboo (Vho-Matsheka interviews, 2019). Musununu has long internodes separated by nodes, and is much stronger, thicker, and heavier than regular bamboo or river reeds. The distance between each internode varies, sometimes ranging between 240 and 400 cm. To build *tshitiringo*, it is recommended that one use "a relatively moderate *musununu* reed with at least 1.3–1.6 cm inside diameter, because it will make a nice mellow and rich sound" (Vho-Matsheka, interview, 18 October 2019).

The Venda method of building a flute wastes a lot of reed material because it is not ideal to start by cutting the piece you want to work on, but rather cut it when all holes (finger and embouchure holes) have

[43] The shorter the reeds are, the higher the pitch.

[44] Janssen (2000) defines a node as a diaphragm and circular ring on the outside of a bamboo stem in which branches grow from. The distance between two nodes is called an internode.

been opened. To make these holes, Vho-Matsheka made a fire and then placed a 6 mm thick rod into the blaze until it turned red hot. This was then inserted into the reed to burn holes. I observed Vho-Matsheka take the entire 1.8 cm diameter *musununu* reed and start making the embouchure and finger-holes in the thickest part of the reed, which forms the base of the stem, rather than in the upper part, which is thin. Vho-Matsheka then took the red-hot rod and started opening an embouchure hole in the first node of the reed approximately 15 cm from the top. Thereafter, he worked on the first finger-hole which was burnt into the length (at about 250 cm from the top). This was then followed by the second and the last hole, with a distance of 27 cm between them. No formal measurements were made by my teacher, but that appeared to be his usual way of doing things. Merriam also notes this, saying that "no arithmetical measurement was made in burning the holes; rather, they were burnt in what seems to the maker to be "'normal' finger positions" (1957: 2). Kirby concurs with this, writing that "the other three finger-holes are bored in the same way, the spacing being suited to the fingers of the maker" (1934: 174). Even though accurate measurements were not encouraged while building the instrument, I was compelled to use a tape measure for the purpose of this research.

When Vho-Matsheka completed the flute he was building, he asked me to study and copy the entire

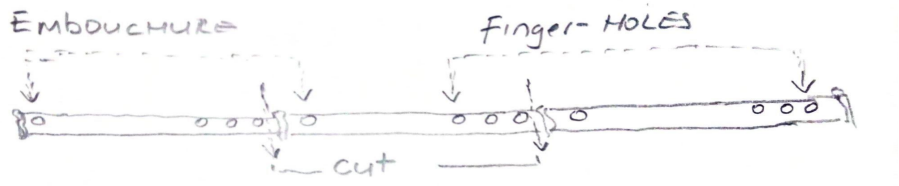



Figure 5.9

process. I then took the length of *musununu*, which was the second internode from the same *musununu* material used by Vho-Matsheka, but I found that the internodes were a bit longer than those of the first flute. The important part was to calculate the distance from the first node line to the point where I needed to place an embouchure hole.[45] All of these calculations were supposed to happen while carrying a red hot poker and, since I was not familiar with working without a pencil and a tape measure, I had to do it slowly and carefully to avoid making mistakes or burning myself. It is crucial that, as soon as you finish piercing through all necessary embouchure and finger-holes, you then blow on each so that you know whether the instrument makes the required sound. When my flute was completed, I handed it to Vho-Matsheka so that he could test it and tell me if it sounded good or not. As he was running the tests by blowing the flute, I was paying attention to the clarity of all the pitches. He played his flute and then

[45] Pencils and tape measures are not really encouraged at all when opening finger-holes or embouchure holes.

played mine in order to compare them. Though my ears were not familiar with the tuning of instruments, I picked up that a note on his flute sounded incorrect when he was playing the tuning song he had chosen. When he played on the flute I had built, he confirmed that, "*heyo tshitiringo zwi khou yimba bhabi* – your flute sounded great for the tune I was playing" (interview, 18 October 2019).

During this construction process, the first flute and the second flute had a shared node. This is why it is difficult to cut a piece of *musununu* internode before the actual flute is finished. If it happens that both flutes sound good, a choice has to be made. You have to destroy one of the two because they share the same node. The sketch below in Figure 5.9 depicts the process I attempted to explain above.

I found discarding a part of the instrument is difficult because the *musununu* plant is scarce and expensive. A bundle of *musununu* which comprised five reeds cost R 400. I bought this plant at the house of chief Tshawulu,[46] the main chief in Tshawulu village. I was asked by one of the headmen why I needed to buy this plant as the chief allows only people who builds musical instruments like *tshikona*[47] pipes and *tshitiringo* to use it. Since the chief knows Vho-Matsheka as a musical instrument builder, he instructed one of his headmen to give it to Vho-Matsheka.

### 5.2.2 Register limitations

The pitch range of *tshitiringo* is not wide . According to Kirby (1934), African performers do not use the extreme notes but are usually satisfied with a restricted range or register of not much more than an octave. As I was watching Vho-Matsheka playing his tune, I noticed that the choice of notes he was using were not varied. The melody is repeated or played cyclically with a few variations.[48] The tonal centre of this tune was always B flat, but most of those repeated notes seemed to appear on the second register of *tshitiringo*. The melody illustrated in Figure 5.9 transcribed by myself and Elijah Madiba at ILAM, but written by Vho-Matsheka, illustrates that not all the notes are used when he is playing his *tshitiringo.* The performer always choses notes that are comfortable with when playing the flute.

[46] Chief Tshawulu gives the headmen orders regarding how many musununu plants are to be cut and sold and who must buy them. According to Vho-Matsheka, this plant can be sold only to people who build *zwitiringo* and *tshikona* pipes, among other instruments.

[47] According to Emberly and Davhula ( 2014), *tshikona* is a national reed pipe dance played by a group of men. Each player blows a single reed pipe in interlocking rhythmic patterns.

[48] The tune he was playing when testing flutes for good sound quality was newly composed and, as a result, did not yet have a name.

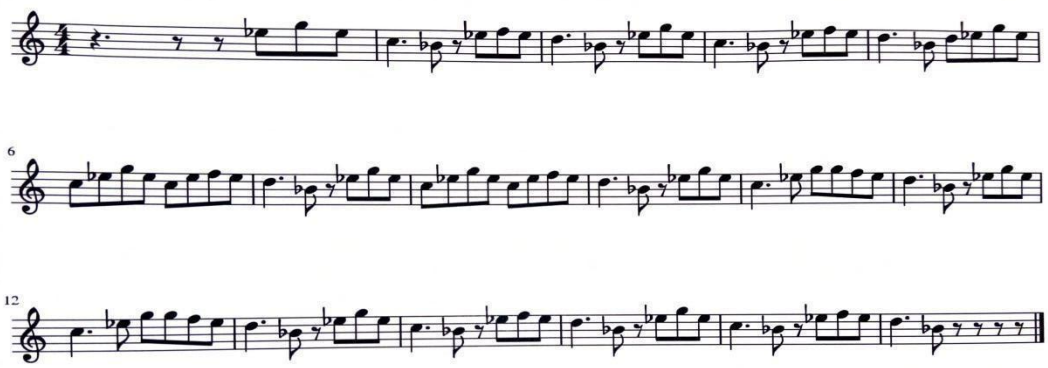


Figure 5.10. Transcription by Joe Makhanza and Elijah Madiba at the ILAM recording studio of a *tshitiringo* tune played by Vho-Matsheka.

The *tshitiringo* I built with my teacher is tuned to C (below middle C), and it produces an unusual scale. When you start blowing with all the finger-holes closed, you get a C below middle C, but when you open the first finger-hole, the note that follows is B *flat*. For the second finger-hole, the note is middle C, and on the third finger-hole, you get D above middle C. Pitches on the second and third register are produced by overblowing while maintaining the finger position for the lower register. In some instances, notes E and F do not produce absolute pitches. An E note might sound in between two pitches, E *flat* and E; F, on the other hand, is in between F and F#. The scale this instrument produces is thus C, B E *flat*, C, D, G, B *flat*, c, d, e, f, g, b. However, for the last note, which is b minor, on the scale, it is difficult to get a definite sound because all flutes are different.

Figure 5.11 depicts the range of *tshitiringo* I built in Venda.

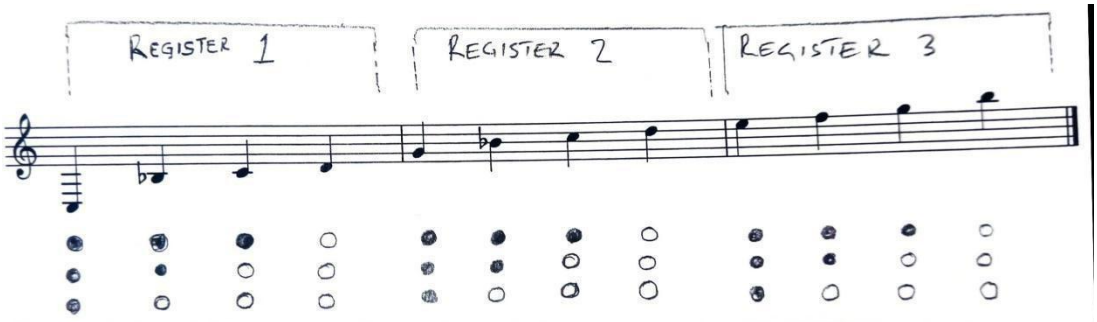



figure 5.11. A hand-drawn sketch mixed with staff notation I had done using Maestro software on my phone, showing exactly how many ranges *tshitiringo* can play.

### 5.2.3 The *tshitiringo* tuning technique

For tuning *tshitiringo*, I have found no literature on this particular subject. However, by watching Vho-Matsheka enlarging the embouchure and finger holes while playing his tune after he finished building his flute, I started developing an understanding of how *tshitiringo* is tuned. I concluded, like Varnum, that "the size of the embouchure hole is a matter of personal preference for the quality of tone and the ease or difficulty with which the instrument speaks" (1970: 464). Simply because songs are subjective and personal. Varnum (1970) further explains that it is sometimes very difficult for one player to play on another person's instrument because the tunings will vary from player to player. When Vho-Matsheka was tuning *tshitiringo*, he used his tuning method of playing a song from memory, as when he was tuning his *dende*. While Vho-Matsheka was building *tshitiringo*, I observed a few factors which sometimes make *tshitiringo* sound poor or unsatisfactory. These include the size of the finger-holes and the distances between each. He had to constantly enlarge holes and increase or decrease the distances between them when piercing the holes in order to finalise a pure-sounding instrument. Kirby (1934) writes: "*tshitiringo* differs considerably in pitch … owing to variation in the bore of the tube and the position of the finger-holes, the length of the material used and so do the scales." Vho-Matsheka, while I was building my flute, would warn me to enlarge a few tone-holes until the flute sounded well. What I discovered from this process is that if an embouchure hole is not big enough, when you start blowing you tend to apply air pressure unnecessarily; but if the hole is big enough, you put less effort into blowing when playing.

Every element of the chosen material affects the sound. Blench writes: "the materials of which a flute is made can sometimes affect the morphology of the instrument" (2009: 1). In the case of Vhavenda flutes, I noted that their fundamental keys, or root note, are controlled by the natural internodes and the thickness of the bamboo. The internodes might be short but, if the bamboo is thick, between 20–27 cm diameter, the flute somehow sounds too mellow. For example, a *tshitiringo* of 240 cm internode long with a 20 cm diameter that I built after I returned from Venda field trip sounded more mellow than the 280 cm internode long flute with a 16 cm diameter because of unequal sizes of diameters. This mellow sound is not desirable. As Vho-Matsheka expressed: "when building *zwitiringo* there is no guarantee that it will sound good; at times you do not get what you want to hear [in the key you are used to]" (interview, 18 October 2019).

After I left Venda with a few *musununu* reeds, I decided to explore how to effectively tune the flutes. When I attempted to build my first flute on my own, I discovered that if you make the mouthpiece hole too small, when you start blowing, the instrument produces a hissing sound, and it requires too much air to produce sound. For example, a 6 mm embouchure hole will cause more hissing sound than an 8–10 mm

embouchure hole, which will produce a nice clean sound. When the mouthpiece is enlarged, the root note is also raised and sometimes pitches produce hissing sounds, but the scale pattern does not get affected (Kirby, 1934). However, when the finger-holes are enlarged, both the tone and the scale change. For example, if the scale was on B major, when the finger-holes are enlarged, it is possible to end up with C major.

### 5.2.4 Performance setting and repertoire of traditional African flutes in Africa

Most performance settings of traditional African flutes like *tshitiringo* or *xitiringo* and *tambin*, among others in Africa, seem to be male dominated because of the fact that they are cattle herders' instruments. Varnum writes: "since cattle herding is exclusively a male occupation, the playing of flutes is part of the male domain" (1970: 463). There are also certain ceremonies associated with the playing of flutes. Mans writes that "in the northern regions [of Namibia] Kwanyama men use the *epoli* flutes during the annual cattle-gathering ceremony called *amaludi eengombe*. When the cattle are brought in for this ceremony, the young herders blow their flutes in a small group" (1997: 93). In relation to the Venda flute, Vho-Matsheka acknowledged that "it is also a musical instrument of young herders" (interview, 17 October 2019). He did not make any correlation to any cultural ceremonies involving *tshitiringo* but always maintained that they were merely mere herd boys' musical instruments. Another interesting point to note regarding why flutes are historically played by males is that "male children are taught by their peers and fathers to play and construct flutes" (Varnum, 1970: 464). As I recall my childhood, this was the main way of learning and processing information, an idea that speaks to the notion of oral tradition.

The playing of flutes by boys while herding cattle could both provide entertainment and therapeutic stimuli for human beings and animals. Varnum tells a story to the effect that "one manner in which *Kuria* herdsmen ensure the well-being of their cattle is through the playing of flutes" (1970: 463). Another scholar, Leroux (2003), writes "*tambin* [flute] is also known as a shepherd's instrument used to communicate with the herd, grazing in the mountains. At the end of the day, the shepherd might blow into his flute to call the sheep or cow home" (2003: 2). I find this statement interesting because, in an interview that I had with Pastor Mathonsi, who was once a shepherd in Mozambique, he mentioned : "when herding cattle it is important not to play *msengere* flute[49] while they are still grazing because once they hear the sound of the flute, *tita ncuza*, they know it is time to go home" (interview, 15 September 2019). I can attest to this scenario from my own youth. I used to see my elder brothers and their peers in Giyani

[49] Mathonsi explained that "in Mozambique any type of flute made from reeds or bamboos are referred to as *msengere"* ( interviews, 15 September 2019).

playing *xitiringo* at around 16:30 when it was time to herd the cattle home. Sounds created by flutes seem to have a considerable impact on animal species (Alworth & Buerkle, 2013).

As mentioned before, flutes are used to accompany certain ceremonies, such as men's circumcision, at which only men are present or used for entertainment and to transmit a certain message (Varnum, 1970: 464). Vho-Matsheka made mention of the fact that flutes are used by boys while herding cattle. However, Varnum suggests that skilled musicians were sought after in the community to entertain people. He writes: "this art [flute playing] is not confined to playing while only tending cattle; certain performers are recognised as being more proficient than others. Often a man will play during the evening for the entertainment of his beer drinking companions" (1970: 463). In addition, elderly people who once played flutes, are not excluded from playing with boys again. Kirby writes: "It [the flute] is generally played by boys when herding cattle, although occasionally older men, particularly when they are expert performers, will use it" (1934: 175). These statements by Varnum and Kirby reveal that there was constant sharing of knowledge between elderly and young people which could be interpreted as mentorship. This suggests that the youth were presented with a chance to learn traditional tunes which were once played by these master musicians when they were younger. Vho-Matsheka also regards the sounds that are produced by *zwitiringo* as stimulating sounds which provides amusement. He explained that "*zwitiringo* sounds only provide entertainment to most herd boys. There are hardly repertoires available for *zwitiringo*" (interview, 20 October 2019). In my opinion, this statement by Vho-Matsheka suggests that *zwitiringo* tunes were created spontaneously and might be performed and exist only for a day.

### 5.2.5 Learning to play *tshitiringo*

In terms of a repertoire, Vho-Matsheka did not mention any traditional songs that he used to play during his childhood. The fact that he did not have songs or tunes to teach me created the freedom for me to learn new tunes on my own; however, on the other hand, it created limitations in terms of knowing what Vhavenda folk tunes might sound like.[50] The tune presented in Figure 5.9 above is one of the works that he played while testing and tuning the flute as there were not any folk tunes that he could remember. In one of the interview conversations he said that "if you are an artist, you should be able to play any tunes without me having to teach you a particular song. The more you spend time with your instruments practising or playing – this is when a new song will begin to erupt within you" (interview, 18 October

[50] Especially tunes he played as a herd boy.

2019). As I continued learning to play *tshitiringo* on my own, I truly discovered what Vho-Matsheka outlined here. Many tunes erupted while practising on my own. This is usual, as both Mathonsi (interview, 2019) and Vho-Matsheka (interview, 2019) remarked that "*zwitiringo* or *msengere* are only played by one person."

### 5.2.6 The maintenance of *zwitiringo*

On a recent trip to Senegal, I noticed reed flutes decorated and wrapped in leather, with tiny copper threads of wires, and so on, particularly on the part that is cut open. Reinforcing the body in this way has the dual purpose of protecting the flute and making it more responsive while enhancing its appearance; other maintenance consists of periodic oiling (Le Roux 2005)[51]. This same idea, used by Senegalese instrument makers, was used by Vho-Matsheka even though he did not make use of leather. Interestingly, he used fats to protect the shafts from developing cracks, which simply highlights the different ways of protecting musical instruments. Vho-Matsheka said: "Fats from animals, cow or goat, are used in order to protect reed instruments: the flute is cooked with the soup of meat" (interview, 18 October 2019). It is not surprising that most bamboo flutes develop cracks as "it is popularly known as the main problem with bamboo drying out and cracking for a more permanent instrument, [and] wood is the next choice [to avoid cracks]" (Blench, 2009:2). Vho-Matsheka said that the main factor causing most *tshitiringo* to develop cracks "is when instruments are exposed in the sun" (interview, 18 October 2019).

As I conclude, building and playing *tshitiringo* has been one of the hurdles I had to cross in this study because of the unpredictable nature of *musununu*'s internodes, which come in various sizes. This can prevent the instrument builder from obtaining the key of your choice, knowing the exact measurements of the hole sizes and distances between each finger-hole. Indeed, it is very difficult to control the nature of the flute that is created. In the next section, I discuss another flute with a very different physical appearance.

[51] http:/www.fulaflute.net/fula_flute/music/reviews/03_nyfc_nwlr_art.pdf), accessed 20 October

Figure. 5.11. *Tshipotoliyo.* (Picture taken by Joe Makhanza in Venda in 2019, Tshandama village).

### 5.3 The history of *tshipotoliyo*

*Tshipotoliyo* (*chigufe* in Shona) is a very old and common type of vessel flute made from the shell of a hard fruit such as the wild orange (Jones, 1992: 49). Jones (1992) adds that they are called ocarinas in English. Even though we may not be able to trace any specific dates in the literature by Jones (1992) and Blacking (1959) concerning the origin of *tshipotoliyo*, they give an indication of where the original idea of playing and building *zwipotoliyo* came from. The findings indicate how human beings over the years discovered certain parts of their bodies can be used as musical instruments. According to Jones, "mouth whistle *chiporiwo* was a method based on cupping the hands around the mouth and chin to produce whistled notes" (1992: 48). Blacking adds that "it is possible to make similar sounds by cupping the hands blowing from the top and manipulating the fingers to alter the pitch. Venda boys often do this, and explain that they are playing *zwipotoliyo*" (1959: 17). Before he built *zwipotoliyo* for me, Vho-Begwa demonstrated this method of making a whistling sound. However, he could not produce any sound and claimed it was due to years of not playing *zwipotoliyo*. Kirby (1934) affirms that ocarinas made from *muramba* shells are found in South Africa among the Thonga [Tsonga] people, though they can also be found as far afield as the Congo. Conversely, Blacking (1959) stated that these flutes belong to the Vhavenda people and were played primarily by shepherds or herd boys for their own entertainment while herding cattle. The origin of

these musical instruments is not clear; what is clear is that these instruments are found all over the world. Jones confirms that a similar instrument, *gorwe* (Ndau), is often made of clay and that these instruments (*chigufe and gorwe*) were most likely played in pairs or in groups" (1992: 49). All these scholars have different views about the history and origins of *tshipotoliyo/shiwaya*. However, Blacking is the only one who was adamant enough to claim that "the Venda ocarina (*tshipotoliyo*) has not been previously reported and it had not been recently borrowed from the Tsonga, who live next to and amongst the Venda, and whose *xiwaya* ocarina has been reported by Kirby" (1959: 16). What is interesting about Blacking's point is that he acknowledges the fact that Vatsonga and Vhavenda live among each other. In Venda, for example, Bobodi[52] said "there are villages called Vhuwane, Nkuzana, Masiya, Njakanjaka, Mashamba and Elim, where Tsongas and Vendas are mixed" (telephonic interview, 07 April 2019). As I have been to Elim with my friend, Vho-Bobodi, I concur that in these villages people speak with each other interchangeably in Tshivenda and Xitsonga; there is thus also the likelihood that they share musical instruments, food, and the like. There is a good possibility that even neighbouring countries, like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, there are people who share musical instruments and diets. Maluleke writes: "the Vatsonga people in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland, share a heritage stretching over 800 years" (2019: 4). Hogan also confirms that "the people of southern Mozambique share similarities with southern Africans" (2006: 2), including South Africans. The assertions made by these authors present a strong case for a possible cultural influence in all these neighbouring countries, including as regards their musical instruments.

On the other hand, there seems to be a collision of facts or different perspectives from various authors regarding Vatsonga, who are widespread in the southern region. Johnston writes: "Tsongas from Mozambique and from Transvaal [now part of Limpopo province] appear to be linguistically and culturally distinct from the Tsonga of Zimbabwe, Zambia, and the Inhambane area" (1982: 247). I differ with Johnson's view because, while there may be linguistic differences, based on my observation, instruments such as *tshipotoliyo*, *tshizambi*, *dende*, and *tshitiringo* appear to be shared with the neighbouring countries mentioned above.

Kirby (1934) and Blacking (1959) note that *zwipotoliyo* were played mostly by boys while herding cattle. Blacking goes further, stating that he never saw nor heard girls playing them (1959). It does not mean that this never happens. A perfect example is one that I witnessed when I was a cattle herder in

[52] Bobodi is a close friend of mine in Venda, a musician and sound engineer whom I have known since 2006 when I was studying at Central Johannesburg College.

Giyani during the 1980s. There were some families who did not have a boy child, and the girl child would automatically take on the responsibility of herding cattle. Thus, because those girls mingled with boys in the field when the boys played *tshipotoliyo*, they would play along with them. In addition, Blacking in a book titled, *Looking back looking forward: Vhavenda musical life as documented by John Blacking,* (edited by Emberley and Davhula in 2014), shows a photograph of a girl demonstrating how to play *tshipotoliyo* (1959: 15). Another example illustrating that *zwipotoliyo* can be played by women is found at ILAM – a female voice is singing while blowing *tshipotoliyo* (see Sound of Africa Series,C*higowili* tune TR0204-14).

### 5.3.1 The building of *tshipotoliyo*: The scientific name for the *muramba* or *nsala* tree and places they are found in South Africa

It was on the 20th of October 2019 at around 08:25 in the morning when I drove from Nzhelele[53] to meet Vho-Begwa at Tshandama Freedom Arts.[56] With me I carried four two-litre bottles of Coca-Cola because it was hot on that day, and it would be a good gesture on my part to give them something. When I arrived at Tshandama, I gave Vho-Begwa those beverages to drink with his friends. On my arrival, there were many sculptors at Tshandama Freedom Arts busy with their sculpting works. These artists came to greet me at a rondavel thatched house where I was sitting with Vho-Begwa.

They welcomed me and greeted me in Tshivenda, and I was introduced to them by Vho-Begwa. After that warm introduction, Vho-Begwa took me to a place which looked like an abandoned cemetery. The place was fully surrounded by an abundance of *muramba*, shrubs, thorns, and other trees. We started looking for *muramba* trees which had small fruits, which are good for instrument making. A few of the trees had fruit which were too ripe to use. While we were on our search, Vho-Begwa arrived in the middle of the cemetery and that is where I saw a *muramba* tree with small and medium fruits which, according to Vho-Begwa, were perfect for building *tshipotoliyo.* This was because, in order to make these instruments, you need to have two sizes, "one small and one big," so that they can complement each when two people are playing together (Interview, 20 October 2019). With guidance from Vho-Begwa, I picked quite a number of *muramba* fruits as I would need to use them when I got back to Rhodes University, where I planned to teach music students to build and play *zwipotoliyo*.

Research by Sitrit et al. (2003: 6256) indicates that "the green monkey orange (St*rychnos spinosa Lam., Loganiaceae*) tree is indigenous to tropical and subtropical Africa." Orwa writes that "monkey orange

[53] The name of the village where I was staying in Venda at Vho-Bobodi's house. [56]
Tshandama Freedom Arts is a place where sculptors work.

trees occur in savannah forests all over tropical Africa, in open woodland and rocky hills. The tree is found in Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Zimbabwe" (2009: 33). This is true in my experience. For example, during my visit to Mozambique in 2016, in a place called Macandza, I saw a number of these plant species. Also, in South Africa, "monkey orange prefers well-drained soils in the bushveld, riverine fringes, sand forest and coastal bush in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces" (Louw: n.d)[54] The *muramba* plant is known by different local names, including spiny monkey orange/green monkey orange (English), doringklapper (Afrikaans) *morapa* (Northern Sotho), *umkwakwa* (siSwati), *nsala* (Xitsonga), and *muramba* (Tshivenda) (Le Roux 2005).[55] However, I must clarify the misunderstanding by Le Roux in this article: the "spiny monkey orange" differs from the "green monkey orange." In Xitsonga we call the green monkey orange *nsala*, and the spiny monkey orange *nkwakwa*. These plants may be confusing as they look identical to a person who cannot differentiate between the two. The *nkwakwa* leaves look pale or light green. Their fruits, which we call *makwakwa* in Xitsonga, are bright yellow outside and inside when they are ripe. However, the leaves of the *muramba*/*nsala* plants become dark green during summer. The fruits which we call *masala* in Xitsonga look slightly yellow with some greenish elements on the outer shell but are light brown inside when they are ripe. Figures 5.11 and 5.12 show unripe fruits. It is easy to see the difference when you look closely. The *nkwakwa* fruits in Figure 5.11 tend to be pale green when not ripe, whereas the *muramba* fruits in Figure 5.12 are completely green when not ripe.

[54] Louw, M. n.d. 'Monkey Orange- From Music to Wines, Indigenous South Africa Fruit'. accessed on 2 May 2019 from http://southafrica.co.za/monkey-orange-fruit.html.

[55] Le Roux, L. 2005. **'**Strychnos spinose, *Lowveld National Botanical Garden'.* accessed on 30 April 2019 from http://pza.sanbi.org/strychnos-spinosa.

Figure 5.11

Figure 5.12

Figure 5.11. The fruit is known as *macuacua* by the local people in the Machaze district of Mozambique (photographer unknown). Figure5.12. A picture of *Nsala* or *muramba* fruit taken by Joe Makhanza in Manhica town, Mozambique in 2016.

In Venda, it is crucial to note that when building *zwipotoliyo*, one of these trees is preferred over the other even though the shells tend to look identical. When building these musical instruments, durability is one of the most-considered factors. Vho-Matsheka explained why *mukwakwa* are not ideal for building *tshipotoliyo*. He said: *"mukwakwa* shells are not strong enough compared to *muramba/nsala*; they break easily during construction and afterwards you have built one" (interview, 18 October 2019). Durability is an issue because one cannot keep having to build new musical instruments because one is using the wrong material. It is a good idea to keep musical instruments for as long as possible after they have been built.

In Venda, *muramba* trees are plentiful, though they are not found in some parts of other villages such as Nzhelele and Tshawulu. According to Kirby (1934), Vho-Matsheka (2019), and Vho-Begwa (2019), there are two seasons (December and July) in the year in which these plants start bearing fruits. When I was at Vho-Matsheka's place in Mbahe village in October 2019, I observed a *muramba* plant beginning to bear fruits, then still as tiny as a marble. What is noted above by these authors suggests that some of these

plant species vary in the seasons in which they bear fruits – some start in May and others start around October.

### 5.3.2 The building of *tshipotoliyo:* material and tools

In order to build a *tshipotoliyo*, you will need the following items:

( a) Two green *muramba* shells, one big and one small,

(b) a U-shaped flat wire,

(c) two knives, and

(d) pairs of dry sticks.

During the learning process, I observed that while building musical instruments like *zwipotoliyo*, one needs a lot of patience, especially when working with small *muramba* shells as they are still tender and soft, unlike the big ones which are more solid. As I was watching Vho-Begwa making *tshipotoliyo*, the first shell broke because he applied too much strength. I also observed him making a U-shaped tool from 2 mm thick galvanised wire. To make the tool, he began hitting the wire with a hammer on an anvil until it was flat like a flat screwdriver. This he then bent into a U-shaped hook. A piece of 6mm thick stick was then sharpened with a knife so that it was also like a flat screwdriver. A sharp knife, the U-shaped hook, and the stick are essential tools when building the *tshipotoliyo*. The knife, in this instance, is used to open a mouth and embouchure on the shell; then the U-shaped wire and the dry stick are used to scoop out the seeds.

Vho-Begwa then grabbed the *muramba* shell in both hands and removed its *khutu* that he could start opening an embouchure hole from where the stem had been.[56] According to Vho-Begwa, “the stem of the *muramba* shell is considered to be the strongest part of this fruit as it connects the fruit to the branch of the tree. It is always important to open an embouchure hole at this part” (interview, 22 October 2019). Due to it hardness, Vho-Begwa applied a little more power when opening a hole here. A sharp knife pierced through the *muramba* shell and was then turned until the hole was the width of an index finger. The contents of the fruit were removed through this hole. It was interesting to watch Vho-Begwa

[56] *Khutu* is a Xitsonga word referring to the observable spot on the *muramba* fruit which is visible when the stem has been removed.

completing the process, scooping out the whitish flesh and seeds with the U-shaped wire and the flattened stick.

### 5.3.3 The *tshipotoliyo* embouchure and index finger-hole sizes

As Vho-Begwa was busy making a *tshipotoliyo*, I observed that some of the seeds were not coming out from the embouchure hole. When that occurred, the hole was then enlarged so that they could come out easily. Out of curiosity, I took a few seeds he had removed and measured them with a tape measure to determine the exact size of the seeds and the size of the mouth-hole. Some seeds were as big as about 12 cm in length and 7 cm in width. The smallest seeds were about 6 cm in length and 4 cm in width. As I observed when Vho-Begwa was making a *tshipotoliyo*, the size of the embouchure hole is determined by how big the seeds are. While still removing the seeds, Vho-Begwa was constantly blowing on the embouchure hole of the instrument to test whether a good sound was being produced. When the inside of the *muramba* shell was completely cleaned out, "two slightly smaller finger holes were made on either side of the mouth-hole, in a position handy for the index fingers" (Jones, 1992:49). I was fascinated watching him measure the playability of the instruments before he could open index finger holes. Vho-Begwa would look thoroughly at the imaginary markings before he opened any holes. After piercing each hole, Vho-Begwa would play a tune known by him on *tshipotoliyo* until all the holes were complete. It is recommended that one begin opening the index-finger holes using a sharp object like a knife. According to Vho-Begwa, "if sharp objects are forcefully inserted, this can easily damage the shell or spoil the hole" (interview, 20 October 2019). I noticed that the builder decided to stop enlarging the holes when the tshipotoliyo was able to play the tune nicely without any hissing sound. After I had carefully measured the seeds and observed Vho-Begwa enlarging the holes, I concluded that the size of mouthpiece holes were sometimes determined by the size of the *muramba* seeds. In addition, if the builder enlarges the holes without paying attention to whether the instrument sounds good, this will likely affect the instrument's sound production. Figures 5.12 and 5.13. reflect the fact that Vho-Begwa was not paying attention to the embouchure hole. The roughness of the edges of the embouchure is an example of the extent to which details were not taken into consideration.

Figure 5.13.

Figure 5.14

Using Vernier callipers to measure the embouchure or mouthpiece of each *tshipotoliyo* (Photographs by Joe Makhanza, Venda, 26 October 2019)

Both *zwipotoliyo* had different size mouthpieces, but, in essence, they were supposed to be tuned equally since they were supposed to complement each other when played together. The mouthpiece and small index finger holes are not of equal size. The embouchure hole of the big *tshipotoliyo* in Figure 5.14 is about 19 cm larger, while the index finger holes are 5cm each. The embouchure hole for the small *tshipotoliyo* in Figure 5.13 is 16 cm, and the index finger holes are each 5cmI.

When the *zwipotoliyo* were complete, Vho-Begwa began playing on the small *tshipotoliyo* and then eventually played on the big one. He gave me the big one so that we could play together. We did, but I got lost in the middle of the tune as I had not been given any specific melodic or harmonic sequences to play.

The video B2019-01 , shows my excitement – but, at the same time, a bit of confusion regarding not knowing how to play *tshipotoliyo* with my teacher. Even though I was showing some elements of confusion in this video, because I was determined to learn to play *tshipotoliyo*, I ended up

playing with conviction. Vho-Begwa kept smiling when he realised I was able to blow and follow some melodic patterns.

### 5.3.4 Performance settings and repertoire

According to Vho-Begwa, *zwipotoliyo* are not used in the context of playing songs. As we finished our session on building and playing *tshipotoliyo*, I asked if the tune we played had lyrics, Vho-Begwa stated:

> *Eeee a si nyimbo, yovha ndila ya ho bidza mungana a tshili kholomoni* – no we do not consider them songs; we simple play any tune as a form of communication with our friends while herding cattle out in the field. We play *tshipotoliyo* to call or send a message to other boys. Upon hearing this sound, they will respond by playing a *tshipotoliyo* sound (interview 22 October 2019).

Vho-Begwa's statement is in line with that of other authors (Leroux, 2003; Varnum, 1970; Mathonsi, 2019; Norborg, 1982; and many others). Musical instruments like *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo,* they agree, provide us with an analogy which transcends our expectation of merely regarding them as instruments that provide entertainment to human beings; they refer to a more spiritual realm that is partially perceived by human beings and nature. This view speaks to the theme of ecomusicology which is closely linked to the idea of sounds and nature which evoke emotions that transcend people to enter the spiritual realm. As noted by Vho-Begwa, at times, human beings start attaching meanings and functions to *tshipotoliyo* sounds to send certain messages. This is a really interesting correlation between human beings, sound, and nature, and a means to explore how we as beings are truly inseparable from nature.

Even though I was unable to play as perfectly as my teacher, the tune was fairly simple. Blacking notes that "the tunes which the Venda [boys] play on *zwipotoliyo* are not complex, and the melodies are much influenced by the physical properties [the size of the shell and the size of the sound holes, among others] of the instrument" (1959: 16). However, after Vho-Begwa repeatedly played the tune, his playing abilities started to improve because he could now play complex patterns which I ended up not being able to play with him. My teacher seemed to have a sharp memory because he could suddenly remember tunes he used to play as a cattle herder. The nature of interlocking patterns in this tune gave me an idea to expand them when teaching the university music students to play z*wipotoliyo*.

### 5.3.5 The playing technique and pitch problems of *tshipotoliyo*

Kirby (1934), Blacking (1959), Tracey (1983) and Jones (1992) all provide insights into *tshipotoliyo* performance. Jones states that "sound is produced when the breath is directed across the mouth hole, and

different pitches can be produced by covering and uncovering the holes or just leaving them open" (1992: 49). *Tshipotoliyo* falls into the woodwind instrument family because the sound is produced by blowing. According to Blacking (1959), *tshipotoliyo* can be played solo or in pairs, which was demonstrated by Vho-Begwa when we played together. As explained above, the Vhavenda people believe that "it is important to consider sizes of *muramba* shells as the instruments are made in pairs because '*zwi khou bvumelana bhadi'* – they sound nice in pairs" (Vho-Begwa, interview, 21 October 2019). Blacking adds that *zwipotoliyo* "duets are played more often than solos, and therefore it is necessary to select pairs of instruments which sound well together" (1959: 17).

Vho-Begwa did not show me how to hold or blow *tshipotoliyo*; I had to watch him play and wait for the cycle to end so I could join him. In relation to this, Dontsa writes that "because African music is basically practical, the performer does not learn the theory but, instead, he or she observes, listens to the other player and then imitates" (2008: 178). Despite the fact that I learned by watching Vho-Begwa, I struggled to get the first note right and, even when I did, I got a bit dizzy for a few seconds after playing because I was not breathing properly. Learning to play *zwipotoliyo* involves challenges such as using a proper blowing technique, which, according to Vho-Begwa, has to do with air control or breathing control. Vho-Begwa, after playing *tshipotoliyo*, found it difficult to sustain air release because of his age and said, "I cannot blow for too long because my lungs are no longer strong enough to push to a certain limit" (interview, 20 October 2019). Besides the issue of not being able to produce any pitch on the instrument, I also could not manage to play fast and control the sounds with my index fingers. When playing *tshipotoliyo*, Kirby notes that "the smaller of the two finger-holes is stopped by the first finger of the left hand, and the remaining finger-hole by the palm of the right hand" (1934: 181). I find Kirby's explanation workable because, ever since I started practising on *tshipotoliyo*, I have been exploring this idea; it gives me more control to play certain notes. For example, playing fast notes is more achievable when using the thumb rather than using index fingers. However, watching Vho-Begwa playing, I noticed that he was using both index fingers to control the pitches. Another important point is that in order to achieve high quality sounds and clarity on certain notes, it is necessary that "the instrument is thoroughly wetted before performance and four notes may be elicited from specimen of the *shiwaya*/*tshipotoliyo*" (ibid.). I observed that when the shells are still green, they do not need to be wetted. They can produce bright sounds because the insides of the shells are still wet. When Vho-Begwa finished building the *tshipotoliyo*, he played a tune, and its sound resonance was very good because the shell was still wet inside. However, when the shell is completely dry, it requires water in order to provide moisture for easy playing.

### 5.3.6 The tuning technique and register limitations of *tshipotoliyo*

There are two things happening when tuning *zwipotoliyo.* I observed Vho-Begwa while building these instruments: the first step of tuning *zwipotoliyo* takes place when the instrument is being made; where the instrument builder tunes the instrument according to a desired sound or tune he wants to play by enlarging all the holes until it sounds good. Expanding on the issue of pitch, the two small index finger holes have a substantial impact on the pitch because they control the flow and direction of most tunes. Blacking notes that "if the two [index] holes on the side are not smaller than that at the top [the embouchure], the instrument will not sound well (1959: 16). This means that the sounds the instrument makes will be discordant. As I was experimenting with a few *muramba* shells I brought back from Venda, I attempted to make both index finger holes almost as big as the embouchure (16 cm), and both index holes (13 cm). I would blow while uncovering and covering both index finger holes properly, but I could only achieve two pitches; the fundamental note was B when all index finger holes were covered, and F# when uncovering either the left or the right index finger hole (because both index finger holes were the same size).

I observed from Vho-Begwa that *zwipotoliyo* can be tuned (besides by enlarging the holes) by tilting the position of the mouth so that the instruments complement each other when they are played in pairs. Blacking (1959) too found the tilting playing technique a workable plan for the musicians: "in some cases

[musicians are] able to adjust the pitch of an instrument by altering the position of the mouth" (1959: 18). This tilting technique I observed happens when the instruments are played by a group of two or more – the embouchure is tilted towards the lips and away from the lips until the performers find nice harmonies. In the first part of this tune, the performers are playing similar notes and then branch out to their

individual notes, creating complex melodies using cross-rhythms  Again, Blacking expressed a similar observation to mine:

> When playing Tune 1 with ocarinas 2 and 3, they said that the combination was unsatisfactory because ocarina 2 was pitched too low (i.e. "too big"); later, when playing the same tune with ocarinas 3 and 2 (i.e. 3 now took the leading part), they said that the combination was unsatisfactory because both ocarinas sounded alike (1959: 19).

In the Jaco Kruger video collection (tape 04-04. mp4, from Mozambique), I watched two old men playing *tshipotoliyo*. They were able to produce more than three different tones by using a technique I call "scoop in and out," while women were singing harmony. In the case of Venda, *tshipotoliyo* players seem "to make no attempt to produce melodies that are more akin to the general style of their music by breaking the bonds imposed upon them by the instrument" (Blacking, 1959: 22). Figures 5.15 and 5.16 shows how the scoop in and out technique works. In Figure 5.15, the *tshipotoliyo* embouchure hole is pushed away from the lips to produce a higher pitch, while in Figure 5.16, it is pushed towards the lips of the performer and produces lower pitch. These notes can be any scale, depending on how the performer scoops his or her notes.

The pitch of *tshipotoliyo* differs according to the size of the finger-holes and the *thuzwu*[57] fruits of which they are made; thus it is virtually impossible to produce an instrument of determined pitch. Furthermore, "the same player does not always produce the same tones each time he plays an instrument, so that there may be some variation in pitch between one performance and another" (Blacking, 1959: 21). Temperature also affects the tuning of *zwipotoliyo*. For example, Blacking notes that "the tendency for some tunings to rise may be due to an increase in the temperature as the test progressed throughout the day" (1959: 18).

Figure 5.15

Figure 5.16

[57] these shells looks almost identical to *maramba* fruits but they do not grow big as *marambas*.

A demonstration of the “scoop in and out” technique. (Photographs taken by Joe Makhanza at ILAM on 28 October 2019)

### 5.3.7 Various sizes of *muramba* shells and embouchure holes determine fundamental pitches

To determine the sizes of the *muramba* fruit shells, I purchased a set of Vernier callipers from a hardware store in Makhanda. I measured them to determine if the size of each shell has a specific sonic relationship to the pitches. After I returned from Venda in October 2019, I made a few *zwipotoliyo* and discovered that the fundamental pitches are determined by three things: the size of the shell, the size of the seeds, and the size of the embouchure hole. I experimented with two *zwipotoliyo* (sizes 60,8 mm and 50,7 mm) which had been made by my teacher. Bigger sizes produce low pitches and smaller ones high pitches. As mentioned above, the size of the *tshipotoliyo* embouchure is dictated by the size of the seeds, which are normally around 15 mm long and 8 mm wide. The standard embouchure hole size for both small and big shells is 14 mm. If you make a smaller embouchure, the seeds will not come out at all and the shell might end up breaking. If the seeds are bigger, the hole then will need to be bigger too. I learnt this while I watched Vho-Begwa struggling to remove seeds; his only option was to enlarge the hole.

Using the same *muramba* sizes (60,8 cm and 50,7 cm diameter) which Vho-Begwa used to build *zwipotoliyo* for me, I experimented with the size of the embouchure holes and those of the index fingers to see if the pitch would be affected . The result for this exercise was pleasing as it was clear that the pitch can be manipulated. Looking at these instruments Vho-Begwa built, it was easy to spot the cause of the problem – the embouchures were extremely large. These two *zwipotoliyo* are a semitone apart, from E flat to E natural, because of the unequal size of the embouchure holes and the difference in their diameter. When Vho-Begwa and I were picking *muramba* shells, he told me “to choose from the small and the big ones, as they would sound nicely together” (interview, 18 October 2019); but when he taught me the tune, as I was joining him, I felt that these instruments almost sounded the same in terms of the pitch though they looked unequal in size. To explore this pitch problem, I had to make my own *zwipotoliyo* using *muramba* of the same diameter, but with different sizes for the mouth hole. I started with a 60,8 mm diameter, made the mouthpiece of 17 cm in diameter, and discovered, after blowing and playing the note on the piano, that the fundamental note was middle C. This actually sounded a bit lower than 19 mm diameter mouth hole. Both the index finger holes I made were 14 mm, so I was able to determine the real issue which causes the pitch to be problematic.

I opted to use four different sizes of *muramba* fruit shell to also determine whether they can be played in a group of three to six rather than just as a duet. I gathered five different sizes from the largest to the smallest of the fruit shells and started measuring them one by one. The diameters were as follows, from largest to smallest: 80 cm, 60,8 cm, 60 cm, 50,7 cm, 40,7 cm. The *tshipotoliyo* of 80 cm can be paired with one of 60 cm to produce a two note chord, A below middle C and middle C, without opening the index finger holes. Sizes 60.8 cm, 50.7 cm, and 40.7 cm can be paired together to produce a triad chord: E above middle C, G above middle C, and B above middle C. However, if the embouchure holes are not placed properly at the lips of each performer, even though the sizes of embouchure holes may be equal, they might not sound harmonious when played together as a chord. Again, to correct the pitch problem, it is advisable that the performer keep fine-tuning by using the scoop in and out technique before playing with others.

I adapted the very same *tshipotoliyo* tune Vho-Begwa had taught me in Venda and explored by adding some harmonic patterns in order to accommodate more than two people playing together. I then taught this tune to a group of five students playing together. This ended up creating an interesting and complex hocketing melody. Every person within the group was encouraged to listen to the original melody and find his or her own space in it. Then each person entered at their specific entry points (the song is cyclical). As Blacking, (1959) outlines regarding the pitch problems of *zwipotoliyo*, I had to ensure that each *tshipotoliyo* played by each student had only two pitches rather than four in order to avoid problems when playing together, which may sound perfectly in sync together (video M2019-03).

### 5.3.8 Testing new ideas on blind *tshipotoliyo*

Out of curiosity, I made one *tshipotoliyo* with only an embouchure hole. The idea was to explore whether I could produce various pitches without having to make index finger holes. I opened an embouchure hole of about 15 mm in diameter and then started blowing across it. It was a very interesting exercise because I discovered that when you keep shifting positions by scooping in and out, you can actually achieve three pitches in total. The size of the *muramba* shell of *tshipotoliyo* I experimented with was 6.8 cm, which produces E flat above middle C without index finger holes. However, when you blow using this scooping technique you can achieve a semitone scale, for example, E flat, E, F, and F sharp if you blow really hard. With a *muramba* shell of 5 cm with an embouchure hole of 16 cm you could produce B, C#, D, and E when you want to play as though there are index finger holes.

### 5.3.9 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I used a first person reporting approach to analyse my experiences of building and playing *dende, tshitiringo*, *and tshipotoliyo.* In addition, I included information from in-depth conversations with my teachers, analysing and interpreting those conversations to reconstruct the past into the future in a meaningful way. I used an embodied learning approach in the course of which I had to observe what was done by my teachers in Venda and participate at the same time. I reported on how to choose good materials when building *dende, tshipotoliyo*, and *tshitiringo* as they play an important role in producing the sound quality of these musical instruments. I discovered that these instruments are found in neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and other sub-Saharan countries, where they are known by various indigenous names. I highlighted that the process of tuning *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo* is challenging because there are no manuals, and producing a sound is based upon various factors, including the size of the original materials and the size of the finger and mouth holes.

In Chapter 6, I discuss why is it important to revive the rare musical instruments of the Vhavenda and highlight initiatives taken by Music in Africa in 2020 and by the arts and culture division of the City of Ekurhuleni in 2011 and 2022 to convene programmes such as instrument-building workshops, of which I was part, which aid in the revitalisation of African musical instruments.

# Chapter 6

## Sustainable avenues to promote African traditional instruments: a case of *dende*, *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo*

### 6.1 Introduction

This study has made me, an instrument builder, aware of the importance of continuously recycling one's knowledge through research, arts education in schools and in communities, instrument-building programmes, and live performances in order to maintain healthy, sustainable art forms in South Africa. Research, arts education in schools, instrument building, and live performances where traditional musical instruments take centre stage are some of the initiatives which can help revive any cultural art forms. Cayou (2012) argues that music, dance, and poetry, among others, are cultural expressions which broaden the base of existence of human beings. Not creating platforms which can assist in keeping these art forms alive can be associated with halting human existence completely because any community that lacks cultural expression is in danger of losing its identity.

### 6.2 The need for the revitalisation of cultural artforms

The decline in the transmission of oral traditions and indigenous knowledge has various causes, such as socio-economic factors, political landscapes, and educational systems. Indeed, urbanisation has created a shift in lifestyles and, as Levine highlights, "traditionally, the majority of South Africans who played instruments lived on grassy plains, and their economies and socio-political lives were closely linked with cattle" (2005: 25). Similarly, Jones states that **"**herdboy instruments such as the musical bows and flutes also declined in popularity as the need for herding declined" (1992: 27). Evans writes that as people migrate from rural to urban settlements in search of jobs and a better life, indigenous African music heritage is less practised by many communities (2017: 107). Boateng comments to the effect that:

> Politicians, educators, and other observers have attributed the increasing deterioration of intergenerational communication in Africa and other parts of the world to systems of education introduced by Western colonial powers. The traditional role of African cultural education – that of

> bridging the gap between the adult generation and youth – is gradually giving way to the development of "creative" individuals who are completely removed from their traditions (1983: 321).

As a result, in South African public schools, we may observe that African music is not catered for because the people involved in implementing policies are likely to be detached from cultural activities. However, Idang argues that there have been many calls for the revitalisation and revaluation of African cultural values. He says that "such calls for the revitalisation of indigenous cultures and values can only be sustained when we realise that there are positive dimensions of the African cultural past that are still useful to the African people in the modern world" (2014: 315). Thus, revaluing needs to be part of revitalising. A general definition of revitalisation, according to Van Niekerk and Wolvaardt, is to "imbue with new life and vitality" (Oxford South African concise dictionary 2010: 1011). A new life can only be given to something that has already lost its meaning or died. Many scholars (Jones, 1992; Tracey, 2003; McConnachie, 2016) have expressed similar concerns: that indigenous African music and musical instruments are slowly disappearing. This is even though, as Dournon writes, "it is extremely rare to come across a civilization, culture or people without instruments of their own creation or borrowed from others" (2000: 12). Therefore, although I think it is imperative to continuously advocate for change in this modern world, it is also important to find ways to preserve older traditions, whether through remembering, performances or, as in my case, the making of these musical instruments. Dournon states that "the benefit of collection, study and preservation of musical traditions that are bound sooner or later to change or vanish will be immediately apparent. That is why many institutions throughout the world are dedicated to this task" (ibid.). The idea of collecting and preserving musical instruments has been at the forefront of the work done at ILAM, where they have programmes involving the creation of podcasts and residencies for musicians across Africa to share their skills pertaining instrument building and playing.

As highlighted above, Venda traditional musical instruments such as *tshipotoliyo*, *mbilamutondo*, *tshizambi*, *khumbye*, and *tshitiringo*, amongst others, are facing extinction (Kirby, 1934; Mugovhani, 2009; Mukhavele, 2017). It is therefore important to take responsibility and, following Wallace's definition of revitalisation – "a deliberate, organised, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956: 265) – to take action. As a society, we must safeguard and promote these revitalisation processes to keep traditional and indigenous musical instruments alive. Indeed, as I reflect from my childhood experiences, revitalisation seems like a process that depends upon activities performed by members of society both young and old. Modernisation and urbanisation have taken their toll. During my youth in the 1980s, activities such as traditional dance, storytelling, and music took place every day.

These activities were carried over by the older generations, but today, it is rare to find this happening in South Africa because, in my experience, the youth are not interested. Another example: the making of wire-car toys, among others, were activities carried over from older generations and passed down to us. Thus, it is up to the current generation to continue passing on this knowledge, despite the apparent lack of interest by the youth. As Idang says, "revitalisation of indigenous culture presupposes its revaluation in an effort to strengthen and sustain the cultural values that are necessary for Africa's development" (2014: 319). This notion, according to Louw, is one of the major critical issues of debate in Africa. He writes that the question of revitalising African cultures in South Africa "has been given the name of African renaissance, and it is perceived as a continental ideology" (2009: 18). My research, dealing with revitalising craft skills in order to revive musical instruments, is vital within this framework. The master musicians with special skills need to be approached in their villages so that they can share what they know.

### 6.3 The essence of revitalising African music

While watching the Metro Awards and SATMA Awards,[58] I have often heard fellow South African musicians and music compilers referring to many music genres (especially the ones which only use Western musical instruments, such as guitars and keyboards) as African traditional music. These kinds of discussions leave me with many questions: What qualifies certain music genres in South Africa to be labelled African traditional music? Is it because the people who are creating the music are in Africa or because of the use of African languages? I believe that when we refer to "African traditional music," we need to take a holistic approach that encompasses the use of African traditional musical instruments and language, in addition to the use of Western musical instruments, to validate the term "African traditional music" as that is what creates cultural identity. As Agawu writes:

> In terms of what now exists and has existed in the past, African music designates those numerous repertoires of song and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, are performed regularly as part of play, ritual, and worship, and circulate mostly orally/aurally, within and across language, ethnic, and cultural boundaries (2014: xiv).

Grant highlights that "music and language are two intangible manifestations and expressions of culture, both often transmitted orally, and both grappling with challenges to vitality and viability resulting

[58] The Metro Awards is an award ceremony that celebrates excellence in the South African music industry by honouring musicians who do exceedingly well in their field (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/15th_Metro_FM_Music_Awards). SATMA is an abbreviation for South African Traditional Music Awards.

from similar forces within the local and global environment" (2012: 34). Let us remember that "the use of language and music is certainly embedded in social and cultural interaction" (Jackendoff, 2009: 195–196). This helps to solidify cultural identity (as explored in Chapter 4), which is constantly changing and evolving.

Thus the boundaries that we use to delineate genres have become blurred.

### 6.4 Initiatives to address the extinction of African traditional musical instruments

The aim of this study has been to understand whether instrument building can revive rare musical instruments; in this vein, Louw's comment resonates: "it is difficult to escape references to the past and in particular to pre-colonial Africa when speaking of renaissance" (2009: 18). The central reason for the need for an African renaissance is the damage that was done to African culture by colonialism. We find that despite decades of African independence, indigenous African culture in many countries is suppressed and degraded and a Westernised culture is imposed (Louw, 2009: 18). Although the issue of the revitalisation of African music heritage was supposed to be tackled on basic education platforms, this is not happening in South African schools (McConnachie, 2016). However, Rhodes University is determined to address this situation by inviting cultural practitioners from the villages , including those from Venda, to share their skills in building and playing *tshipotoliyo*, *dende*, and *tshitiringo* as part of its residency programme. At the university, there is a clear goal to protect and promote indigenous knowledge and, "if there is some form of protection, local people will feel comfortable sharing their knowledge for current and future generations" (Owiny, Mehta, & Maretzki, 2014: 237). This point is a working plan, as Vho-Matsheka echoes that "there should be a shared relationship between the universities and us to maximise a balance of knowledge shared by professors and us. Professors might be good in covering theoretical aspects but, as for practicality, it would work better if they involve us in music workshops" (interview, 17 October 2019).

Reviving indigenous knowledge across the globe is occurring, as Chisenga writes:

> Currently, major efforts towards capturing and documenting IK in Africa are a part of larger global projects for the documentation, preservation and sharing of IK being conducted by international organisations (2002: 18).

Positively, as I observed and have heard from my fellow artists who play African traditional instruments, organisations such as the South African Music Rights Organisation SAMRO and the City of Ekurhuleni are addressing the making and playing of African traditional musical instruments as an urgent matter of revitalisation. This is very important and not happening in South Africa alone. Levine writes that "university music departments specialising in indigenous music are being set up all over the world, and

young musicians are becoming familiar with many previously marginalised art forms" (2005: 22). This is true, and institutions like ILAM are key players when it comes to the issue of revitalisation. In both 2018 and 2019, I observed a number of music students from the University of Cape Town teaming up with Rhodes University music students to advocate the revitalisation of musical instruments through performance. For example, Dizu Plaatjies, professor of African music at UCT, brought students to collaborate with Rhodes University students to showcase some of the marginalised African traditional instruments, such as a *tshizambi*, which according to Plaatjies, were bought at the Bow Conference in 2018 in Durban from a Mozambican *xizambi* player, Ernesto Mathusi.

Levine (2005) highlights that even the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) has been playing an important role in trying to promote African traditional music. She says:

> arts and culture organisations have started to place emphasis on reviving traditional art forms through research programmes and projects. With the overarching objective of preserving and promoting South Africa's cultural heritage, their investments have started to pay off, and the positive impact on a number of communities is evident (2005: 22).

Another project, designed for instrument making, in which I was involved in, was funded by the City of Ekurhuleni's arts and culture division. In 2011, the City of Ekurhuleni (COE) initiated an early childhood development project for township schools during which I shared instrument-building skills with unemployed youth between the ages of 20 and 35 years. The project was run in East Rand township schools, in Tembisa, Katlehong, Daveyton, and Springs. The project aimed to introduce learners to traditional musical instruments and to teach unemployed youth from each township to play and build musical instruments. As part of training those youth, we collected waste material such as tin cans to make shakers and small *kamala ngoni* (lute harp from West Africa) to be used by children in preschools and primary schools. The project was a success – every year around mid-May, the City of Ekurhuleni hosted concerts to which parents and dignitaries were invited.

In 2011, SAMRO established the Mobility Fund project and invited artists from across the country to submit proposals related to music. Those who succeeded were required to identify disadvantaged public schools around the East Rand as venues in which to conduct workshops. Concord Nkabinde, a prolific South African bass guitarist, was one of the artists whose proposal was approved, and he invited me to be part of his band, which was tasked with conducting music workshops in public schools around the East Rand. In my opinion, these kinds of projects need to be promoted in many South African public schools

because, according to McConnachie "most schools do not offer music as an examination subject in Grade 12 and although the music is prescribed in the lower grades, it is often neglected" (2016: 1). If policy implementers in the education sector do not put measures in place to see to it that forms of African music stay alive, it might present problems, as Evans argues:

> The methodology of oral knowledge preservation in Africa presents a challenge to the indigenous music heritage because it means that most of the existing knowledge is undocumented. The challenge often leads to the devaluation of African indigenous knowledge, the exclusion of African indigenous knowledge as part of education curricula, and less and less African indigenous knowledge being preserved and shared in the society (2017: 112).

Oral knowledge, according to Evans' sentiments, should be protected so that tomorrow we may have a reference point to continue searching for that knowledge in order to advance ourselves as instrument makers, as musicians to shape the future. Therefore, "it is important for Africans to resist the meanings assigned to their culture by colonial discourse and to re-establish the meanings that they had before the advent of colonialism" (Louw, 2009: 18). As Louw outlines, it is upon ourselves as cultural practitioners to keep promoting our cultures rather than to blame the impact of colonialism. There needs to be a shift in terms of how we want to implement the change we want for ourselves.

### 6.5 Instrument-building: An avenue for economic independence

The entrepreneurship aspect, when it comes to instrument building, does not seem to have been considered as a niche business market in South Africa, though this may change if more instrument builders are trained. Steiner argues that "the value of indigenous knowledge lies in its ability to deliver social and economic goods; that certain traditional practices if popularised, and integrated with modern knowledge systems, can help to alleviate poverty" (2008: 9). However, Vho-Begwa disagrees, stating that "young people are not interested in learning about a sculpting business, they say it is only hard labour, it is good for old people" (interview, 29 October 2019). Vho-Begwa has beautiful artefacts such as wooden mortar, wooden plates, wooden spoons, and walking sticks, among others. When I saw these interesting artworks, I asked myself why Vho-Begwa would be so determined to make these cultural products if there were no monetary gains. In my opinion, there is a niche market for his craft. Vho-Begwa affirmed my suspicions: "I sell these things to everyone interested in buying them but, in most cases, the University of Venda and *tshigombela* music groups buy musical instruments like *ngoma* drums"[59] (interview, 20 October 2019). As

[59] Big Vhavenda drums played by hand or with sticks.

for Vho-Matsheka, he seems indecisive about whether to sell crafts: “musical instruments are very personal to me; therefore, I am not certain, maybe I might consider doing it if an opportunity avails itself” (interview, 18 October 2019). However, I have seen differently. When I went to Mali in February 2011 to learn to play the *kora*, I met Amadou Diabate, a *kora* and *djembe* maker who supplies musical instruments to universities, cultural organisations, and schools in both Europe and Mali. He had a thriving business which was able to cater to the global market. This made me realise that craft skills are indeed able to give individuals financial freedom.

In my own experience, when I was commissioned by the City of Ekurhuleni to do and participate in an early childhood development programme in schools in 2011, I had to source musical instruments such as the *endingidi* (one string fiddle) and *adungu* (eight to twelve string lute) from Uganda and *mbiras* from Zimbabwe because I could not locate instrument makers in South Africa who make these instruments. Thus, gathering facts from the interviews I conducted with Vho-Begwa and Vho-Matsheka, and from my own experience, it is apparent that young people in South Africa neglect craft skills. I believe that they need to invest time in craft skills to tap into this craft business. This could be a business opportunity, one that begins with exploring where African musical instruments are placed in the global market. Craft skills coupled with a knowledge of technology, having to sell instruments on websites, could then become a lucrative career. As a student stated, “it is also in the making of those instruments that bring out those performances. So instrument making for me was an insightful course that can also become a career for someone very passionate about making instruments” (interview, 20 October 2019). This statement suggests that if instrument making can be considered a career, then the selling of traditional instruments by default becomes an inevitable revitalisation process because as more people buy them, they automatically become popularised and accessed by various societies.

### 6.6 Technology: a changing factor for today’s children

In my observation, the youth who were born in the new millennium (from 2000) might find handcraft skills irrelevant because, as Evans writes,

> Most children are now using video games and social media as part of their entertainment, the only place they could learn about African music is through integrating it in education curricula because there might be few musicians at home to impart knowledge” (2017: 113).

Because the other challenge is that there is no interest from the youth to learn such instruments, "which is distressing to most artists who play indigenous instruments, because they are unable to pass the knowledge to future generations" (2017: ibid). Vho-Matsheka (interviews,18 October 2019) and Vho-Begwa (interview, 20 October 2019) expressed views similar to Evans's sentiments: that the new generation is not interested in learning about things related to culture. However, when I interviewed Rhodes University students about instrument making, they shared perspectives different from those of Evans, Vho-Begwa, and Vho-Matsheka. One of the students, Student 2, views the internet as something that can aid in promoting African traditional musical instruments because it is "a cool thing just to put information out there ; videos of us students performing, making musical instruments together. People get excited about these little things" (interview, 20 October 2019). This is a positive response because it suggests that with online resources, musical instruments can transcend the realm of locality to become a globalised phenomenon.

### 6.7 African music revitalisation projects: The case of ILAM

The International Library of African Music in Grahamstown, South Africa, has played an invaluable role in the collection and preservation of traditional African music and oral arts since its establishment in 1954. Since then, "there has been a revitalisation of the archive with active digitisation projects and online accessibility" (Still-Drewett, 2011: 158) and the Travelling Museum, in which it features community outreach activities such as free concerts to community musicians, ILAM tours, workshops on African music among others. Currently, there are many active projects, including instrument making, the revitalisation of recorded music, and a podcast series. Some are new projects from 2018 (instrument making), which I introduced, and 2019 (the Afro-loops podcast series), introduced by Dr Boudina McConnachie, a lecturer and course co-ordinator for African Music Studies. The success of the instrument-building course looks to have turned it into a long term project because it is now running as a subject of African Music Studies and is taught by many visiting musicians to ILAM – people from Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa.

Through the use of recorded music, technology plays an important role in the revitalisation projects at ILAM. The revitalisation of recorded music means two things: reviving old music through digitisation and relearning to play old tunes with the same musical instruments or others. These recordings are held at archives, which "Institutions such as universities, libraries and tribal organisations across the world have established ..., particularly since the 1950s, with the purpose of preserving materials for teaching, study and research" (Nettl 2005, as cited in Kawunde, 2012: 194). They are not merely used for preserving

cultural heritage but also to promote cultural identity. For example, Elijah Madiba, the sound engineer at ILAM, revives old Nyanga panpipe music from the archive and *amadinda* music from Uganda by teaching Rhodes University students to play the instruments. Jones argues that "another way of learning about music and musical instruments is by listening to recorded music" (1992: 21). Thus, Madiba makes music students listen to archived music before they are engaged in playing. The idea of having the students listen to the music, in my view, is crucial because it allows them to improve their listening skills and to embody the music more easily. When I started teaching students to play *zwipotoliyo,* I used this teaching model. I made them listen to *chigowilo* ocarina tune II TR204-14 

, which was recorded by Hugh Tracey in 1945. Here a female *tshipotoliyo* player sings and blows at the same time. The resultant sound translates into an intricate melody and rhythmic patterns. Many of the students had never played nor heard the sounds of *tshipotoliyo*, and so I needed to focus on a simple tune that I was taught by Vho-Begwa in Venda. I had the students watch the videos which I recorded with my cellphone while Vho-Begwa was performing live before I interviewed him. A feature of African traditional music, as Karolyi points out, is that "African music is an orally transmitted tradition which is vividly practised to this day" (1998: 5). Listening to recorded music is something that is encouraged by Kahunda. He relates his personal experiences with some of his research informants in Kenya, illustrating how recorded music is revitalised:

> In 2008 I met the royal trumpeters of Alleluya Group; performers listened to the recordings of amakondere with excitement, and commented that the recordings contained more songs than they knew. They also acknowledged that they needed to improve their skills and play like the players they had heard in the recordings (2012: 203).

In my opinion, improving aural skills will enable music students to improve their listening skills, which in turn can make them better musicians, able to master African music, since most songs are not scored.

Elijah encourages this learning method and points out that

> Using videos and audio recordings as a form of teaching seems very close to the idea of oral transmission because we rely on our ears to transcribe sonic material. An ideal experience, as precious researchers like Hugh Tracey, Dave Dargie, and Andrew Tracey have explored it before (interview, 29 October, 2019).

The International Library of African Museum uses an embodied aural approach to understanding the theory of African music studies. Every lesson of African music commences with a listening session and is followed by analysis of the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic aspects of the song. I used *chigowilo* ocarina

tune II TR204-14 from Mozambique and a video (B2019-01  ) I took in Venda while learning to play and build *tshipotoliyo* so that we could understand different approaches of playing *tshipotoliyo* in South Africa and Mozambique (these instruments occur in both these countries). Once we had listened to these recordings, I then chose a *tshipotoliyo* video (tune B2019-01) because it was simple to play. It was fairly simple for me to demonstrate the playing and building since I had brought enough *muramba* shells from Venda.

### 6.8 Reviving musical instruments through performances and teaching at Rhodes University

The teaching method I experienced in Venda with my teachers is based on a form of mentorship where dissemination of knowledge, as in many African societies, is orally transmitted (Chisenga, 2002). This traditional oral teaching approach at ILAM, which brings master musicians from different parts of Africa to teach students about African traditional music. They do not rely on a music score to teach, but teach and perform songs they have been taught by their elders. Some of these musicians are instrument players, as well as having exceptional crafting skills which they share with students. Evans explains how crafting and performing skills of African traditional instruments are transmitted::

> Indigenous instrument specialists of indigenous music would include a performance with some virtuosic ability by the artist or artists playing a particular indigenous instrument. Such instruments vary from culture to culture, and they are played by few artists in many communities. Most of these artists are very scarce, and they are also very talented in many ways. They are able to understand intricate information about the instrument, such as the special turning of the instrument they play; they also have the ability to make or design the instrument themselves from scratch. They are also regarded as knowledge keepers in their communities, as they are teachers by default of the instrument they play. They are also very important in the community because they retain the educational aspect of teaching the instrument to others. (2017: 110)

The teaching approach noted by Evans might be the best method because the knowledge is “most commonly exchanged through personal communication and demonstration: from master to apprentice, from parents to children, from neighbour to neighbour, from priest to perish” (Chisenga, 2002: 17). Some instrument specialists like Vho-Matsheka are interested in sharing knowledge with university institutions.

He believes that “if professors work together with us [cultural practitioners], the government might begin to take us seriously” (interview, 18 October 2019). This statement by Vho-Matsheka gives a sense of

hope because it comes from someone with knowledge of crafting skills. He noted that he already worked closely with several universities and "even Evans came here in 2017 to learn about *dende*" (interview, 18 October 2019). This suggests that Vho-Matsheka is a walking encyclopaedia of African indigenous knowledge – he is sought after by scholars and everyone in Venda. The passion for imparting crafting skills and playing skills is what drives him to be a good teacher.

I observed that my teachers were not confined by time constraints when they start playing and building musical instruments as they believe that learning to play and build unfamiliar musical instruments "'*zwa konda'* – is a difficult thing to do" (Vho-Matsheka, interview 2019). Apportioned time in higher learning institutions such as Rhodes University poses challenges because students cannot attend the whole instrument building and playing session – their timetables do allow for that. With regard to this issue of time allocation, one of the students said, "I wish I could just not attend other classes and focus on this subject because I love it, it is therapeutic" (Student 1, interview, 28 October 2019).

When learning to play *tshipotoliyo*, one has to account for things like breath control. Therefore, when teaching *tshipotoliyo*, one must be cognisant of the fact that it requires special breathing effort. When Vho-Begwa taught me to play this instrument, I struggled for the first few minutes because my breathing technique was not very good. What I mean by this is that I had not considered important factors such as drinking water, doing breathing exercises, and making sure to eat before playing. These factors need to be addressed before students start playing *tshipotoliyo*. *Tshipotoliyo* requires stamina, especially if it is being played for more than three minutes. Unfortunately, there is often an element of dizziness and an illusion of hunger that comes with it.

During our learning sessions, I had to encourage students to continuously take five-minute breaks to allow those who were experiencing dizziness to gather their breath. However, this situation only lasts for a few weeks or months, depending on how quickly each individual adjusts to this factor. Student 1 outlined that "through exercises, constant practice and playing, eating properly, drinking water, as our teacher Makhanza advised us, now I am enjoying playing *tshipotoliyo* unlike before" (interview, 28 October 2019).

Another student, Student 1 added that:

> My experience of playing *tshipotoliyo* was challenging, but I just had to work on my breathing techniques, and after I got that then it was smooth. Now, I have actually played an instrument classified as an "aerophone;" now, I am able to play an aerophone because I can control my breathing technique, I know how to circle it (interview, 28 October 2019).

Moreover, I noticed that, through teamwork, a real group spirit, which the students found most stimulating, developed in the class. As Student 2 highlights, “when I am in class and playing with my peers, teamwork is something to remember – you are not only playing for yourself; you also make it sound ‘not defeated’ because it is teamwork and not being selfish” (interview, 28 October 2019). Still on the issue of teamwork, another student said, “teamwork is essential when it comes to African music because the whole synergy of a group, whether performing, whether listening, in African music everyone is a participant: the audience, the singer” (Student 1, interview, 02 November 2019).

For a way forward in reviving interest from young people who might have the misconception that African traditional musical instruments are not stimulating, we can make the instruments appeal to the youth by combining them with Western musical instruments. Idang writes:

> “Change” means a significant alteration or marked departure from that which existed before. Invention, discovery and diffusion are some of the ways by which a culture can change or grow. Invention, for instance, involves the recombination of existing cultural elements to fashion new things (2015: 106).

Idang’s argument provides us with a scenario in which African traditional musical instruments can be promoted and can escape the risk of disappearing. Levine takes this further by saying that “new and established artists are looking to the past for the exciting creative possibilities offered by merging the traditional with the modern” (2005: 22). This idea of merging musical ideas was epitomised by a group of second-year Instrumental Music Studies students at Rhodes when they fused their made instruments into performances. One of them performed on his hand cupped *tshipotoliyo*, an African traditional drum and marimbas. The way in which music students were receptive to the idea of combining African traditional instruments with others shows their musical growth can expand.

What I deduce from performances which involve students is that the more African musical instruments and instrument making are taught in higher learning, the more this can help facilitate the process of the revitalisation of African music. Once students develop an interest in playing and making African musical instruments, they can spread the word.

### 6.9 Revitalisation of musical instruments through instrument building at Rhodes University

Before I started making any musical instruments with students, I discussed the history of the instrument, the place of its origin, performance settings, how it is made, and how they are received in today's society. However, when it came to teaching students instrument making, I had limited material to make *tshipotoliyo*, *dende*, and *tshitiringo.* As a result, I omitted *dende* and *tshitiringo.* After I played *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo* to my students in class, the amazement in their eyes was an indication that they have never heard the sounds of these instruments before. The idea of introducing the instrument before students can start making and playing it is indirectly encouraged by Jones: "students can ask their parents and older relatives about instruments and instrument makers" (1992: 21). She goes on to say that, "if possible, invite musicians or instrument makers to your schools to demonstrate their craft" (1992: ibid). This idea raised by Jones is also advocated by Rhodes University and Vho-Matsheka for the benefit of students, and even lecturers, because "the making and playing of [indigenous] instruments has long been central to the musical traditions of the Vhavenda" (Davhula & Emberley, 2009: 14). After I had explained to students that some of the musical instruments I play are facing extinction because of a lack of instrument builders and players, one of them commented: "I think learning to play and make these instruments will introduce us to other possibilities of learning other musical instruments. You see, this course is relevant to us" (Student 2, interview, 28 October 2019). It gives one hope to know that there are young people who are interested in promoting musical instruments by means of taking instrument making as a subject in higher learning.

### 6.10 Podcast project: Afroloops

In 2019, ILAM launched a podcast series project called Afroloops. This was undertaken by a group of Music Culture and History 3 students and was funded by the University of Cape Town and Rhodes University with an aim of benefiting Rhodes University students, and anyone else, by "disseminat[ing] research in an accessible manner to those who cannot access academic writing" (McConnachie, telephonic interview, 28 October 2019).

In a broader spectrum, Afroloops:

> looks at the development of African instruments in southern Africa and around the continent. The group of students in the course picked instruments – some of them are held at ILAM – and they did some research on those instruments. Each one of them had to present an episode on the

> instruments they had chosen. Instruments like *timbila*, *mbira*, *amadinda*, *djembe*, *uhadi* bow, and the like
>
> (interview, Student3, 28 October 2019).

This podcast project, in my view, is another way of repatriating sonic material, with musical instruments used to produce those sounds. This project exposes music students to learning more about a variety of African musical instruments and their sounds, which are available at ILAM. As I gathered interview data from students, it was clear that the internet is the most effective way to reach out to young people in their numbers. As Student 3 said, "I think, from our point of view, one of the ways we want to make it viral is through things like Facebook and sending links to WhatsApp and other social media platforms" (interview, 28 October 2019).

Though a few students noted that the podcast is likely to benefit high schools and the university students, there are some limitations to reaching primary school learners. Student 4 noted that "some primary school learners do have cellphones, but most of them are not of the age to have cellphones. I think us reaching out to them would need face-to-face encounters and physically being in the classroom for certain lessons in creating an awareness of African music" (interview, 28 0ctober 2019). It is my opinion that a blended approach would work best: take musical instruments to schools as well as sending them podcasts of recorded material. Students who participated in the podcast project will have a deeper understanding of the instruments they have chosen as "some of them [the podcasts] go as deep as when it was first heard, who recorded it the first time, and the types of material that are used to make it, and in some they talk about the sound" (Student 3, interview, 28 October 2019). This makes them advocates of this cultural heritage, which may in turn encourage others to explore these sounds. The Afro-loops podcast revitalises mindsets and encourages people to do more research on African traditional musical instruments.

### 6.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to present a wide variety of solutions for revitalising African traditional music. These include instrument building workshops, podcasts, live performances, and many others, so that musicians, researchers, and instrument builders can identify the gaps and begin to provide solutions that would prevent the extinction of Vhavenda and other African musical instruments. Even though solutions have been presented, the stumbling block we face as a country is our government, which

is struggling to formulate an accessible means to include African music in curricula and to accommodate arts practitioners to assist teachers at schools in South Africa. Music practitioners, especially the ones who come from the villages, have knowledge pertaining to instrument building and the playing of African traditional musical instruments. I argue that the best way to revitalise musical instruments is to use crafting skills and to pass them on, as I did in the African music programme at Rhodes University. Such transfer of skills is among a few approaches that are successfully being used to revitalise traditional music in the Eastern Cape.

In Chapter 7, I summarise the findings, provide recommendations, and present conclusions regarding the building of Vhavenda musical instruments and the impact this has on the revitalisation of African traditional music.

# Chapter 7

# Conclusion, Findings, Recommendations

## 7.1 Conclusions

Indigenous knowledge systems have been in existence for millennia, and yet, in academia, we have only recently begun to understand how invaluable these ways of thinking and knowing are. Through this research, I have been able to embody this knowledge through a series of mentorships with respected knowledge-bearers, namely Vho-Matsheka, Vho-Chauke, and Vho-Begwa in Mbahe and Tshandama villages in Venda. Learning to either build or play, and in some cases build and play, traditional instruments, including *mbilamutondo* (xylophone), *tshitiringo* (flute), *tshipotoliyo* (ocarina), *khumbgwe* (flute), and *tshizambi* (bow), has been one of the greatest honours of my life.

Employing an ecomusicological approach, this study demonstrates how instrument builders have deep environmental understanding of and respect for nature through which they explore the important relationship that exists between ecology and human beings. I argue that the relationships between human beings and plants are indissoluble because certain plant species provide medicinal remedies, food, shade, and wood energy, such as in the communities where this research took place. I also highlight how instrument makers, specifically Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, my teachers, show a great understanding of the natural materials suitable for the building of the musical instruments that were researched in this project.

Much of this research content was based on oral tradition. To this end, I have advocated that this indigenous approach to teaching and learning was, and remains, crucial in transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. This informal way of learning was effective in ensuring that children were equipped with crafting skills related to instrument building, carving, and building of their own toys. Although this tradition is not practised throughout South Africa, I highlighted the important role that I believe it can play in revitalising traditional music through instrument building. These oral traditions are being decentralized by various factors such as urbanisation, modernisation, globalisation, and technology. It is for these reasons that people, specifically the youth, move away from villages to towns in search of jobs. An unfortunate result is that they no longer want to be identified as village dwellers who gather for traditional events to showcase various artforms, such as dance, music, and poetry.

The outcomes of this research were drawn from materials collected and reported upon using ethnographic, autoethnographic, and embodied approaches. This was effective as it facilitated in-depth conversations with my teachers which I could later analyse and interpret in order to reconstruct the past in the future in a meaningful way. The results all point to the fact that the continuation of the traditional musical styles represented in Venda are dependent upon the building of *dende, tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo.* The approach to the writing of the results, for which I used my field-notes, interspersed with secondary research materials, allowed me to include the reader in an authentic experience of the embodied learning, in which I had to observe what was done by my teachers in Venda and participate therein at the same time. This was fascinating for me and, through their teaching, I was able to record various items of practical knowledge, such as what constitutes good material when building *dende, tshipotoliyo,* or *tshitiringo*, why this is, and how it plays an important role in producing the good sound quality of these musical instruments. In addition, I was able to record the history of *dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo*, reporting that congate instruments are found in neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and other sub-Saharan countries and are known by various indigenous names. I have also highlighted that the tuning processes of *tshipotoliyo* and *tshitiringo* are challenging because no manuals are used. I described the playing of the various instruments as well as problems that may arise. Furthermore, I analysed their range, finger-hole sizes, and the musical scale. I discussed how certain musical instruments' performance practice is gender-based, but also how, in current times, these lines have become blurred.

Importantly, I argued that African traditional musical instruments can be used to create a shared sense of cultural identity, national identity, and self-identity, either when they stand alone or when they are fused with modern instruments such as keyboards and guitars. I discussed the fusion of African indigenous instruments and electronic instruments, such as in the case of Pops Mohamed, in order to gain commercial viability in the popular music scene. In the cases of Vho-Matsheka and Vho-Begwa, I directly highlighted that their musical instruments (*dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo*) have never been visible enough in performance spaces. There is a good chance that they can be revived through live performances and possibly be fused with modern instruments in order to gain popularity so that even young people will begin to utilise them in house or dance music.

This study has attempted to present a wide variety of solutions to prevent the further degradation of traditional music practices in South Africa. The solutions include tertiary programmes, instrument-building workshops, podcasts, and live performances using the instruments. It was noted too that even though

there are solutions, the stumbling block we are facing as a country is that our government is not able to effectively include African music in the schooling system, nor accommodate arts practitioners to assist teachers in teaching African music. Music practitioners, especially the ones who come from the villages, have knowledge pertaining to instrument building and the playing of African traditional musical instruments. I argue that the best way to revitalise musical instruments is to develop crafting skills so that one can keep producing more musical instruments. As a result, those who want to learn to play these instruments could start using them to promote, preserve, and reinvigorate the musical styles that the various cultures in our rainbow nation are proud to call their own.

### 7.2 Findings and recommendations

This thesis revealed that some of the musical instruments such as *mbilamutondo*, *tshizambi*, and *khumbye* are no longer practised much in Venda because the musicians who used to play and build these musical instruments have passed on. The findings revealed that *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo*, *dende*, and *mbilamutondo* are the only musical instruments left in Venda which sustain the cultural identity of both the Vatsonga and Vhavenda people. These musical instruments are still being played at events hosted by the chiefs in Venda. The research shows that there has been very little information written on *dende*, *tshitiringo*, and *tshipotoliyo.* The main authors who have contributed to this knowledge – John Blacking (1959), Percival Kirby (1934) and Hugh Tracy (1949) – are all deceased . This suggests that there is a wide gap that needs to be filled by continued academic research.

In addition, after many years of building and selling African musical instruments, I discovered that there is a niche market for instrument making in South Africa. I discovered that there are organisations like the Music in Africa Foundation and the Samro Foundation and entities like the City of Ekurhuleni which continue to promote and preserve African traditional instruments in South Africa, though it is happening at a small scale.

Due to financial constraints, my research had to be completed within two months. As reported, this was not ideal, and I am certain that had I been able to remain in the community, I would have discovered richer and deeper findings. I therefore recommend that more research is undertaken in the same area, and if possible, with the same research partners and teachers. The amount of information that I needed to absorb in two months left me with a feeling that I was rushed, and my teachers felt this too. Indeed, I needed more time to learn how to properly play and tune the *dende*. However, being able to go back to the Rhodes University Music Department and ILAM and teach students the skills that I developed capped

the success of the project, one that can change the trajectory of traditional South African music performance practice.

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**7.1 Index- name of trees and thier images**

| **xiTsonga** | **tshiVenda** | **English** | **Scientific species names** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Nsala* | *Muramba* | Monkey orange | Strychnos spinosa |
| *Nkwakwa* | *Mukwakwa* | Green monkey orange | Strychnos spinosa |
| - | *Mufhata* | Forest silver-Oak | Brachylaena transvaalensis |
| *Musengere* | *Musununu* | Bamboo reed | Phyllostachys |
| *Mbheswi* | *Mutamba pfunda /* *Muvhamba* ngoma | Poison-pod albizia | *Albizia versicolor* |
| *Ndzopfori* | *Mutondo* | Tamboti or Jumping bean tree | Spirostachys Africana |
| *marhopfa* | | Sugar apple | *Annona squamosa* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Mathunduluka* | | Large sourplum | *Ximenia caffra* |
| *nkuwa* | | Fig tree | *Ficus sycomorus subsp. sycomorus* |
| *Ntoma* | *musuma* | Jackalberry | *Diospyros mespiliformis* |

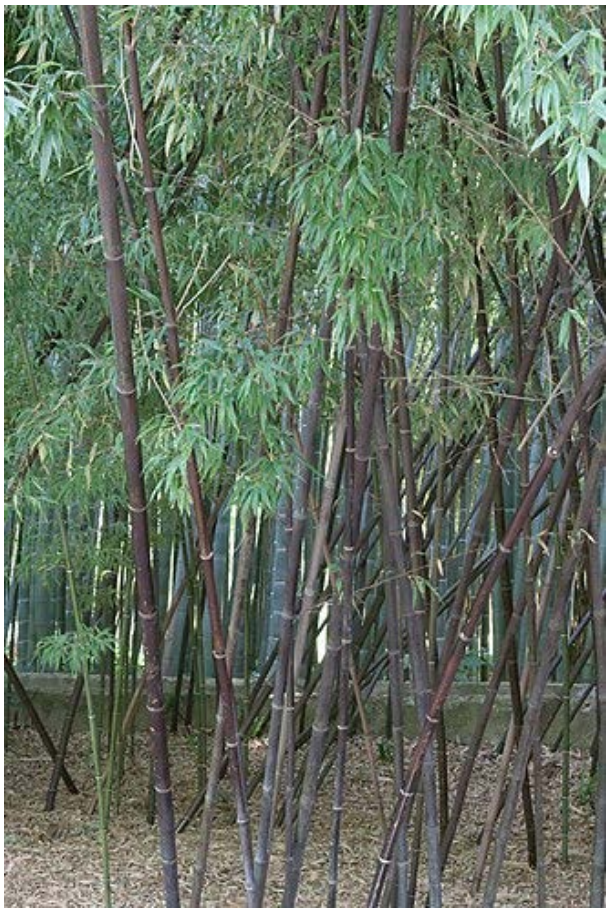
**Muramba**(green monkey orange)

**Nkwakwa** (spiny monkey orange).

**Mutondo tree** (Tamboti or Jumping bean tree)

**Mufhata** (Forest silver-Oak)

Mutamba pfunda/Muvhamba ngoma (Poison-pod albizia). Picture taken from http://pza.sanbi.org/poison-pod albizia.



**Musununu bamboo** (Phyllostachys) photographer unknown.

**Rhompfa** (Sugar apple) Picture taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sugar-apple

**Mathunduluka** (Large sourplum). Picture taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ximenia_caffra.

**Nkuwa** (Fig tree). Picture by Geoff Nichols in 2019**.**

**Ntoma/Mgula** (Jackalberry) Picture by Thompson Mutshinyalo in 2007.

**7.5 Table 1: Checklist – Types of wood for building *dende*, *tshipotoliyo*, *tshitiringo* and their characteristics**

| **Type of wood** | **Characteristics** |
|---|---|
| | |
| *Mufhata* tree | Strong, easy to bend, warm sound, resistant to cracking in harsh weather. |
| Any thorny trees | Crack easily and break easily. |
| Pine tree | Absorb sound, can break when bending. Prone to insects eating the wood. |
| *mutamba pfunda* | Strong, hard wood and it has warm sound. |
| *muvhamba ngoma* | Very strong it cannot be bend easily but when it does it will provide a good sound resonance. |