

Songs of the harp from an African xylophone: Cries of deliverance

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Abstract

In this article I examine aspects of the Hebrew Psalms and relate them to African musical genres focusing on lamentation, protest, and resistance against evil and injustice suffered by the poor and weak at the hands of the powerful. The model of the Hebrew psalms and the instruments of the psalmists provide the basis for drawing parallels between Ancient Hebrew and African cultures. Suffering inflicted by the powerful on the lowly in society is universal, so resistance and the struggle for emancipation often take similar forms. I argue that although African Traditional Religion does not have a single founder and does not proselytise, its quest for justice where atrocities are committed is similar to that of established religions with a missionary nature. Lamentation and protest against evil committed by those in authority are part of a universal consciousness. In the article I investigate African music and constructs that energise people in their collective endeavour to attain authentic freedom. I also compare the roles of the Hebrew shofar and African horn in the struggle for justice. Musical constructs that satirise gender inequalities and attendant prejudices are also discussed.

Introduction

In reading Old Testament texts such as the book of Psalms, one needs a theoretical lens to locate one's interpretation grid (West 2000:29). At present, there are at least two established hermeneutic traditions according to which biblical texts are interpreted in the context of the African struggle for emancipation from a theology sponsored by European-based values (West 2010:1). These two traditions are psychological biblical criticism (Kille 2002:161) and an affirmation of a pre-Christian African worldview (Ukpong 2000:11). Both

streams use the Bible for their reading and liberating strategy. In this article I will cite numerous examples from Jewish and African traditions to illustrate similarities in human experiences of suffering.

During the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, for example, Christianity played a prominent role and many constructs of liberation were built around Christian concepts of liberation (West 2010:2). To this end, a variety of hermeneutic tools and perspectives were adopted to appropriate the biblical text for the purposes of the struggle. The first prominent approach employed by black theologians of the Black Consciousness Movement was psychological biblical criticism.¹ African scholars such as Itumeleng Mosala (1986:196), Takatso Mofokeng (1988:37–38) and Buti Tlhagale (1986) view biblical texts as products of a class struggle, in other words, as texts constructed by the ruling class in order to exercise control over the poor (Mosala 1989:1–42). Mosala in particular focuses on what lies behind the text, looking for evidence of an ideology which produced the text for self-interested purposes. This does not mean that these scholars reject the Bible, but they do view it as problematic in terms of some liberating strategies (Mofokeng 1988:37).

This approach to the reading of the biblical text employs psychological biblical criticism that attempts to read the world behind the text, the world of the text and the world in front of the text (Rollins & Kille 2007). A hermeneutic of suspicion is employed, which seeks to complement the search for the authentic and relevant meaning of the text and to avoid the hindrances of temporal and cultural distance between the analyst and analys and (Mosala 1989:40). Hermeneutic suspicion in a study of the Bible helps the reader to pose critical questions such as who wrote the text, what made them write the text the way it was written, and what their purpose was in writing what they wrote (Rollins 1999:77).

Kille (2002) warns that one should be wary in trying to reach the world of the text and of the historical persons who wrote it, since one may end up performing “eisegesis” (the personal interpretation of a text). The motive of the writer of the text is not always apparent: he or she might have been striving for transformation, repentance, or information sharing, or a combination of these, or indeed another purpose altogether. According to Kille (2002), the reader may be asking, “What is this book?”, while the book, in turn, may be asking, “Who is this that is reading?” As much as the original writers of the text carried the baggage of their values, experiences and a “conditioned” worldview, the modern readers of the text carry their own baggage, which may blur their vision of what is in the text, and colour their thinking about it. Reading ancient text places considerable responsibility on

¹ Psychological biblical criticism involves the scholarly intersection of three fields, namely psychology, the Bible, and the tradition of critical reading of the biblical text (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*).

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the shoulders of the reader, in the sense that the reader should strive for objectivity while recognising that he or she is being influenced by the subjectivity of his or her own world (Kruger, Steyn & Lubbe 2002:10).

Black Africans have furthermore drawn on the Bible as a source for their emancipation from colonial baggage in the form of a re-interpretation of African values discarded with the advent of Christianity in Africa (Mbiti 1977; Tutu 1983:124; Bediako 1993:7; Boesak 1984; Hastings 1989; Holter 2000, and many others). The aim of this approach is to promote the struggle for a social transformation of the conditions of inequality and oppression in Africa. However, there is more to it. Proponents of this approach affirm the Bible as the word of God and as historically relevant to the struggle, especially because they feel that the heartland of the Christian faith is shifting to the global South (Bediako 1993:8). In this they echo the African Independent Churches, who accept the language of the Bible as speaking to them directly as Africans (Adamo 2000:336).

The Bible remains a useful source of inspiration and a guide in the struggle. Whether exegetes are operating from the perspective of psychological biblical criticism or from an African integrative affirmation model in interpreting the biblical message in the process of liberation, the Bible is used to illuminate aspects of purpose and meaning in terms of the direction that the struggle should take. In this context, it is noteworthy that both the Psalms and some African individual songs are used to expose evildoing in society and to call for a change of heart by those who are committing evil in the form of oppression, injustice and wicked behaviour.

In this article I argue that there is a confluence and convergence of consciousness and experiences between the cultures from which the Old Testament psalms on the one hand, and African songs of transformation on the other, originated. Tutu (1978:366) has long argued for a partnership between African and Jewish cultures because, more than most cultures of the world, African culture has a real affinity with the culture of the people of the Bible. In this article I therefore attempt to analyse the message of the psalmists with due recognition of the rich African affinity with the Old Testament. Both traditions, the Hebrew and the African, view a person as wholly morally and spiritually responsible for his or her deeds (Killian nd:3), and accountable, as is suggested in Genesis 3:9, when God called Adam and asked: "Where are you?" As Hillel (1996:3) explains, God knew where Adam and Eve were in physical terms; what he was in fact asking them was where they stood morally and spiritually. Black Africans, when they greet one another, ask the same question: "Where are you?", which signifies "Where do you stand as far as our relationships are concerned? How is it with you as far as your whole being, physical and spiritual, is concerned?" Thus a belief in the intrinsic human ability to differentiate between wrong and right

and distinguish evil from good is embedded in an African ontological worldview.

African songs and the Psalms are soaked in a wisdom that conveys a plain message in forms that are direct and have an impact on society. Ezeogu (2012:3), one of the exponents of a direct affinity between African culture and Christianity, argues for a compatible model as a logical bridge between the Old Testament and African culture. In his view, a model of the Bible–African cultural relationship advocates for a dialogical assimilation with the potential to enrich both religious traditions. African religious experience forms a vehicle for conveying the biblical revelation to Africa (Tutu 1978:364–369) and for a God-given *praeparatio evangelica* (Mbiti 1986:201). Bediako (1993:8) expresses a similar view to Mbiti’s when he says: “Africans have been prepared by previous experience for the reception of the Gospel and ... their experience contains elements of high religious value.” A word of caution should also be sounded here: often African scholars operating in this tradition look to their Western counterparts rather than to their fellow Africans as their interlocutors (conversants).

Songs of the harp

The Psalms are found at the centre of the Hebrew Bible and have a unique message to share in terms of an African worldview. They are scriptures, *Chetoehim* (Rooze 2007:13), which express people’s responses to conditions around them in relation to the promises of God and expectation of goodwill from fellow human beings. They are poetic, prophetic, aesthetic and wise literature, and tell a story in a dramatic way that is consonant with African experience. The psalms range from testimonies of how poets were rescued from danger to providing the reason or grounds for not forgetting to thank God for help (Bullock 2001:43). The psalmists are in conversation with themselves, their God, enemies and fellow believers, giving reasons why the situation cannot be other than the way it is perceived by the psalmists. God is love, he is righteous and he judges the wrongdoing of and against his people.

Brueggemann (cited in Kotara 2011) identifies three models from which the psalmists operate: orientation (the correct way of living), disorientation (lack of alignment with what is right), re-orientation (returning to the right original position). The psalmists speak to God while their enemies are listening (Ps 23 and 139), challenging a dominant culture that has become disoriented in order for that culture to be reoriented. They see themselves as a fulcrum, a cross-roads where everything must change for God and his righteousness. God is challenged and reaffirmed as the basis of all justice and righteousness, and he is also exhorted to prove what he is in the midst of the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful.

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The African worldview too is firmly anchored on these principles, and calls upon those who are out of alignment to be realigned. Life is sacred and those who destroy it are cast out by society, regardless of their position. There is no room in African communal space for people who envy others to the extent that they use mystical powers to destroy them out of anger, jealousy or contempt, or for any other malicious reason. They should be identified, denounced and corrected, henceforward to live a life based on the principle of communality. There is no room for denial or self-deception. Humans should not be troubled about relationships, because they know God to be trustworthy, blameless and all-knowing. God has created the universe and ordered it well in order for it to be a reliable source of life for all; he has left no room for chaos. The prophets, psalmists and all God-fearing people should speak out in order to secure Creation and all that live in it.

The outcome of good conduct is presented, and the alternative, which is wickedness and its outcomes, is given (Ps 1:1–2). A call is made to the wicked to come back to what is righteous. The declaration of oneness with Creation and how resources should be shared among humans (Ps 24:1–4) is proclaimed from the high hills as an immutable reality that cannot fail or change. The reassurance for the poor (Ps 22:26), the cry and hope for the forgotten (Ps 9:18), the intercession for the poor (Ps 12.5), a recounting of God's intervention to rescue the poor (Ps 35:10), the defence of the weak and fatherless (Ps 82:3–4), the liberation of the oppressed (Ps 118:13) and many similar motifs run like a golden thread throughout the psalms. The central message of Psalms is one of hope, and the psalms themselves provide a demonstration of love and the unfailing direct intervention of the Lord in situations of oppression, pain, greed and exclusion (World Council of Churches 2013:1). The world was not created to be evil and exclusive in any way, but to be a household where every person should not only feel at home, but should also be in control. In this context, control does not mean control over others – it signifies freedom and autonomy, implying that no person is curtailed in his or her rightful existence (Duchrow 2013).

The Hebrew poets were not only brave in denouncing evildoers, but also praised God for deliverance from the hands of the oppressors, sometimes even before deliverance was in fact achieved. They acted in the firm faith and conviction that evil people will not prosper for ever. God is a God of justice and shows preferential treatment to the poor (Belhar Confession 1986). He stands on the side of those who are wronged.

There are many similarities and affinities between the Hebrew poets' experiences and African life experience, as I have already intimated. The psalmists share their life-experiences with their readers, who too are victims, and denounce those who are unrighteous and in power. They keep their eyes constantly fixed on God, who will never fail or disappoint them. They also express the anguish, pain and frustration they have gone through. It is not in

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their nature to pretend that there is tranquillity while there is suffering. They externalise their feelings to be read by God and those who are responsible for wrongdoing. Evildoers have to be shamed, and God is challenged to keep his promise of justice to the suffering.

The earth belongs to God and all that are in it – Psalm 24

The view of poverty from an African perspective is summed up in Psalm 24:1–2: “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it; the world and those who live in it; for he has established it on the solid foundations such as seas and rivers.” Rev Nhlizho (2012) relates a fascinating story about Zimbabwe’s first vice-president, Joshua Nkomo. When Mr Nkomo came back from the Lancaster House talks, during which the independence of Zimbabwe was negotiated in 1980, he asked ministers of religion in Zimbabwe for a biblical text that dealt with land issues. Ministers scoured the Bible, and finally identified Psalm 24. After Psalm 24 had been read to Mr Nkomo, he identified three messages: first, that the earth and all that is in it belongs to God; second, that the resources of the land (in that case Zimbabwe) and minerals should be shared by all people because God loves and cares for all people;² and third, that there must therefore be an equitable redistribution of land because the land cannot be commodified to benefit the powerful few. In Africa, no one should sleep with an empty stomach when there is a vast amount of land with all the resources people need. The earth is the great mother, the provider and sustainer of life who allows all her children to suck from her breast. This view is also reflected in many African religious beliefs and laws such as taboos, totems and myths that assist in preserving biodiversity (Boaten 1998:42).

The fundamental message of Psalm 24, then, is that the control and the wealth of the world should be distributed in God’s way (Blank 1992:6). All powers that claim a monopoly over the riches of the earth should be confronted by this reality and should be annulled. Christian faith makes the fundamental claim that God is present in all spheres of life, and that our lives, our family relationships, and our involvement in worldly affairs are subject to God’s judgement (Blank 1992:10). All human actions are subject to God’s grace, so the question that underlies the Christian teachings is this: “What is God’s will in our situation?” The fundamental message of the Bible is that God protects the rights of the least powerful and the neediest in the household of the house of the Lord (Blank 1992:7).

The biblical injunction of preferential treatment for the poor rests on a biblical notion of justice. God is deeply and firmly concerned with the

² Black African people will state that God is better than witches. Witches, to black Africans, are the embodiment of all people who are selfish and always plan evil for others (Rakoma 1971).

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economy of his people, the whole household and proper management of the household so that “all may have life and have it more abundantly” (Blank 1992:11), as stated in John 10:10. Blank (1992:11) argues that to live abundantly is to have a sense that one is not separated from God’s love and protection against the greed of fellow human beings. It means that one must have access to the necessities of physical life, including food, drink, shelter and human love within society (Blank 1992:12). The promise of an abundant life militates against the concentration of the riches of the earth in the hands of a few powerful people (or nations) in the world (Duchrow 2013:1). The effective functioning of the whole household of God requires a radical transformation and redesign of the present world order, which is marked by inequalities and the exploitation of the less powerful. Christian faith creates a moral context in which we are all called to affirm a stronger affinity to the poor and to strive to ensure that the poor are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve (Blank 1992:20). This is the plea the psalmists are making through their harps, and it is echoed by black African people through their xylophones as they engage God in their struggles.

Another fundamental dimension of Psalm 24 is integrity. In Psalm 24:3–4, the poet argues that only people of integrity can “ascend the hill of the Lord”. To ascend the hill of the Lord means to be elevated to a position of advantage over wicked and corrupt practice (Kgatla 2006:7). A hill has a biblical and almost universal military connotation of advantage or power. An army that occupies a high hill has a tactical advantage over the surrounding land – hence African chieftains’ residences were often established on high hills or at the foot of high mountains. To be on the holy hill of the Lord thus implies sharing in God’s power of unsearchable grace. David says that those who ascend the hill of the Lord and stand on the holy place are those with integrity. The requirement of clean hands³ cautions plaintiffs to ensure that when they come to the court for a remedy they must ensure that they in no way contributed to the wrongdoing.

The *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* describes integrity as “a quality of being honest and having strong moral principles, a state of being whole and not divided” (Hornby 2001:623). People of integrity do not speak with a forked tongue and do not have a double agenda, because they have “clean hands”. In Matthew 5:8, Jesus uses the expression “pure in heart” and further states that those who are “pure in heart” will see God. People with integrity do not compromise the truth or bend the laws, nor do they use power to advantage themselves. They walk securely (Ps 10:9). The psalmists call for above-board character traits in all God’s people.

³ The doctrine of clean hands refers to honesty, uprightness and righteousness. Today the secular courts, for example, in Canada, use the doctrine to justify judgments against people who wish to benefit from dishonesty by coming to the court without ‘clean hands’ (Sidlofsky 2007).

Power of lamentation and protest

The psalmists, like contemporary prophets, protest with a loud voice to the Lord and their oppressors against atrocities committed against them. They judge, criticise and make pronouncements against the rulers who divert and subvert the purpose of God in creating the earth to belong to all those who dwell in it. They lament, protest and even use imprecatory prayers against their enemies (the powerful) to call them to justice. The truth, according to the psalmists, manifests itself for everyone to know it and live by it. When this does not seem to happen and the God of justice seems to be silent about it, the psalmists lament and engage God in dialogue, challenging him to come out clearly on their side and demonstrate to the whole world what righteousness is. Lamentation and protest include an element of surprise about why the God of justice, whose actions in history are manifested in integrity, seems not to be intervening where he should (Williams 2014:1–13). The God of justice is expected by the psalmists to respond to suffering, fraud, cruelty and injustice, because it is in his character and nature to do so (Williams 2014:13).

In the biblical laments, there is an expression of trust in the character, power and previous actions of God, which showed his unwavering steadfastness in matters of justice and fairness. The psalmists submit their complaints and requests to God, who, they believe, will not fail them (Williams 2014:1–13). At the same time, they reveal their human frailty, as they cannot wait for another moment for his response because of the pain and anxiety they are experiencing. In this experiential disconnectedness between their suffering and their certainty of the truth of God's promises to bring redemption, the lamentation songs of sorrow which acknowledge their helplessness and loneliness serve as an emotional resource (Williams nd:1–13) that helps them to wait on the Lord for justice. They are re-energised to face injustices and pronounce God's judgement on their oppressors. God gives justice to the weak and to the orphans, maintains the rights of the lowly and destitute, rescues the weak and the needy, and delivers them from the hands of the wicked (Belhar Confession, in the Confessional version). God is the God of the poor and the most vulnerable.

In a similar way, lament, protest, complaints⁴, resistance and grieving are common features in African songs⁵ as a way of revolting against evil.

⁴ Cf. African songs of protest such as *Senzenina. Sono somuntu ubumnyama iAfrica*.

⁵ These songs take the form of expressions of grief or grumbling and speaking the truth to the powerful in such a manner that they cannot be confronted. In Africa when a person is or a group of persons are doing difficult work, they sing. As long as what they sing is not defamatory but informative, they cannot be taken to task. Since those songs were refined and well thought out when they were composed, they convey messages in an impactful way. These songs became communication channels that were employed at strategic times to

African songs of lamentation, protest, resistance, struggle and revolt

In African songs of protest and sorrow which acknowledge conflict, unfair treatment and abuse, it is usually women's voices that are most prominent. African music of lamentation and protest includes a degree of satire, which uses coached language in order to "critique societal ills and expose any deviant members of society, or ridicule leaders for their wrongdoing" (Idamoyibo 2005:2).

During the struggle for liberation, art, in the form of songs and dances such as the *toyi-toyi*, were used as a form of protest, and at the same time rallied people, energising them and articulating their opposition to what had been done to them (Van Schalkwyk 1994:1). The performance of the *toyi-toyi* was a way to rally black people in order to transform them as individuals, and integrate them into a formidable force that would, so to speak, "march to Pretoria", the seat of government, to claim their deliverance.⁶ This and other musical and social constructs helped black people to use their creative imagination to animate their struggle, for it was unimaginable to abandon the struggle without liberation. For that reason, finding a united voice and resolve was paramount to forging their resistance until, as it were, the walls of Jericho crumbled.

Gender performance

In an African patriarchal setting, where women are relegated to hard labour and oppression, they often sing lamentation and protest songs that serve to satirise men who abuse their positions of power. Jordan (2010:148) recorded the following lyrics as sung by the Xhosa women:

Hey friend, you don't know what you want (repeat)
Hey, friend, you don't know what you want (repeat)
I give you my hand, I give you my arm, I give you my breast
You don't really know what you want.

This is a typical song of lamentation and protest, often sung by a woman as she grinds corn on a grinding stone. Protest songs are vehicles through which a woman can protest at the treatment she is receiving from her husband or her family-in-law. Instead of confronting them about the gossip, slander and

address the powerful, who would not get the message except by way of this mode of communication.

⁶ *Amandla! Mayibuye iAfrika!* (Power. Bring back our Africa) was called out, with clenched right fists held in the air.

abuse she is receiving from them,⁷ she may vent her frustrations at the grinding stone, and she may not be called to account because she is doing it in a non-confrontational manner – she is merely singing while working. Such songs show that women have power that is normally not acknowledged. The songs spell out the power women have against men’s controlling position, including sexual behaviour. They satirise men’s foolishness and lack of appreciation for the good things women are doing for them (for example, in the lyric quoted above, the husband who is abusive is addressed as a friend; humour is used in order to show how foolish or wicked men are for being ungrateful when women are good to them). Such songs transcend social moral boundaries and are immune from prosecution. African individual or collective songs sung in the cause of and during the execution of their duties have no consequences and leave the singer(s) blameless⁸ because they are beyond the kind of functional analysis that would apply if the same words were spoken plainly in conversation (Avorgbedor, cited in Idamoyibo 2005:3). These songs are thus common “social tools for checking and maintaining socio-moral balance, peaceful co-existence and patriotism”. They help to serve as controlling tools to maintain the values and norms of the society and shape the character of deviants to conform to societal standards (Idamoyibo 2005:3).

Jordan (2010:149) sheds more light on the significance of African women’s songs of lamentation and protest when he says that African traditional songs allow outside readers an opportunity to enter the world views of black Africans. When women sing and dance as they go about their daily tasks, whether agricultural work such as hoeing the fields, collecting wood and drawing water from rivers, or doing the washing, they are re-living their daily lives. They express their innermost emotions through songs of lamentation and protest. One of the most misunderstood African women’s songs is *Wathinta umfazi, wathinta imbokoto*,⁹ often loosely translated into English as “you strike a woman, you strike a rock”. This translation is flawed, as it does not provide the right contextual meaning for black African women (Jordan 2010:149) – the translation as it stands is mainly for the consumption of western readers. According to Jordan (2010:149), a more accurate translation of the song would be: “touching a woman is like touching a crushing stone – *imbokodo*”. A crushing stone (*ishilo* in Northern Sotho, *imbokodo* in isiZulu)

⁷ Often the family-in-law discuss the behaviour or wrongdoing of a bride in her absence to avoid confrontation. The bride, upon hearing the gossip, will respond to it through self-composed songs.

⁸ Whatever is mentioned in a music performance situation, no one is expected to take offence. If anyone is offended and plans to take action against the singer, society will protect the singer from recrimination, for what the singer sings is always assumed to be a truth that cannot be told except through music (Idamoyibo 2005:4).

⁹ This song/insult was directed against Prime Minister Strijdom on 9 August 1956, when 20 000 women handed in a petition protesting against the pass laws (Schmidt 1983:13).

is a smooth, semi-flat and roundish stone that is used for grinding sorghum into the smooth flour that is used for porridge. The song metaphorically conveys the power of women that is embodied in the crushing stone. The embedded meaning in the song is that if you touch a woman you become like flour in her hands on the grinding stone.

Venda art is also full of songs and dance-enactments that largely comment on life in general, and are often very critical of people in powerful positions, such as chiefs and women's male counterparts, voicing metaphorically what people feel but are afraid to say to them in public (Kruger 1993:39). African songs are universal oracles that are protected from retribution or persecution, as I have already indicated. Like their Hebrew counterparts, African songs are pregnant with meaning that can only be conveyed in fitting oracular vehicles, the songs. Things that have the potential to cause injury and grief to the community are issues of primary concern to African musicians (Kruger 1993:8).

Imprecatory language in the Psalms and their African equivalents

Included in the book of Psalms are various forms of speech that include direct appeals to God to unleash his wrath on the poet's enemies. Laney (1981:35) classifies these psalms as "imprecatory psalms", defining 'imprecation' as an invocation of judgement or a curse uttered against one's enemies, or enemies of God. The fundamental intention behind the imprecatory psalms is to increase God's glory and appeal for His retributive justice, as they call for vindication against the wicked. The imprecatory poetry fits well with the worldview of the psalmists (Shepherd 1997:1) and an African worldview. The basic message they convey is that every person is created in the image of God and is thus expected to act in the manner befitting his or her creation.

One does not need to be taught that killing another person is wrong and evil; one should know it through intuition: it is knowledge that is within. This inborn knowledge is called *zichronot* (remembrance) (Killian nd:3). This knowledge that resides within humans makes them choose between good and evil even before people are taught what these are. Therefore, there is no excuse for committing crime. Laney (1981:41) lists six purposes for which the imprecatory psalms were composed. The most important one is that they invoke judgement against evildoers in order to re-establish righteousness. As God judges the wicked, he is also re-establishing righteousness among people. Righteousness among people is a foundational principle everyone should strive for.

Black Africans also use imprecatory songs in order to convey indignation against unfairness in society. Songs with lyrics of imprecation are sung while dancing, and sometimes while drinking beer. Ceremonies involving

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dancing are joyous occasions, and satirical songs are often sung, providing licence for speaking about the abnormal and annoying truth without fear of repercussion. The art of African songs lies in their capacity for saying impolite things in polite ways, pointing out imbalances in the community – expressing the inexpressible (Idamoyibo 2005:3). Often African songs contain insults directed at specific person(s), even mentioning the genitalia of the culprit as a way of expressing indignation and anger. They are capable of exposing the culprit's inhuman conduct, showing that it is deplorable, and in that way calling on him or her to experience a change of heart.

The *shofar* and African *lepatata* (kudu horn)

One of the main functions of the Psalms is to shout out to God and his enemies for justice for the poor. In Psalm 44, the psalmist cries to the hill tops to denounce evildoers for their oppression, while petitioning God for intervention in conflict situations (Rom-Shiloni 2008:685). The cries and anguish of the psalmists are clearly conveyed as a means to scare the evildoers into repentance, because the God of justice cannot leave their atrocities unpunished. Shouting and pronouncing the wrath of God on sinners and calling for the vengeance of God on those whose actions have become a mockery of justice can make those who are guilty of unjust acts think twice and give up on their oppressive deeds (Charney 2012:2). Similar strategies are used by Africans to scare their enemies and secure their freedom.

The uses of the Jewish symbols of the *shofar* and the Northern Sotho kudu horn, *lepatata/photwane* (recently replaced by the vuvuzela), are compared in this section to indicate the significance of the instruments used in singing the Psalms and African songs to scare enemies. Baboons, which are deemed vermin or pests among rural people, who rely entirely on subsistence farming for their livelihood, provide a good metaphor. Baboons can wreak havoc of untold proportions on agricultural fields. They study people's movements and know how to strike when least expected. The battle between the farmers and the baboons is won by making a noise to scare them. When baboons plunder grain fields, they are as quiet as possible, and any unexpected noise will scare them into flight. Realising this weakness, farmers employ loud noise-generating instruments such as the kudu horn and, more recently, its cheaper derivative, the vuvuzela. Baboons judge their enemies by size¹⁰ and not by how capable they are in a fight. A loud noise signifies how huge the generator of such a voice is, and thus the louder someone is, the bigger the threat they pose.

¹⁰ I have been reliably informed by hunters who make their living by hunting with dogs that baboons will not attack a dog that is larger than they are, but they will ferociously attack any dog smaller than they are.

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A *shofar* is a musical instrument made from a ram's horn. It was used on important Jewish public and religious occasions (Killian nd:2). In biblical times it was used to sound the Sabbath, announce the New Moon and proclaim the anointing of a new king (Killian nd:1). Psalmists used them with their harps. According to Rabbi Dr Greg Killian (nd:2), the Ancient Hebrew *shofar* was made from the horn of a ram, because the *shofar* was closely associated with the story of Abraham's binding Isaac to sacrifice him. The sounds produced by the *shofar* have the properties of "stirring [the] heart to penitence and repentance" (Killian nd:3). The instrument was also used to sound Israelite camp alarms, to convene assemblies, to announce a Jubilee Year, and at the coronation of kings (Wilson 2014:2). The *shofar* functioned as an instrument which produces mystical sounds that called its listeners to the essence of God, to the *kairos* moment, to the moment of truth; "It was blown to call people together, to announce an important event, to rally the troops, to announce God's presence, and to praise and worship Him" (Killian nd:3). The *shofar* was used to proclaim liberty (Lv 25:1–19), to call to war (Jdg 3:27), to declare victory (1 Sm 13), and to give thanks (Nm 10:10) (Jewish Voice Ministries International). The use of the Jewish *shofar* by the psalmists in proclaiming God's judgement is described thus in Psalm 98:7–9:

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it, the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

The significance of the *shofar* and the African horn

The *shofar* displays some striking similarities with the African kudu horn and its function. Just as earthly kings had horns and *shofars* to blow for important events or to announce decrees, so African kings used kudu or other animals' horns to announce important events. Just as the *shofar* was blown as a war-alarm when the temple was destroyed, African kings blew animal horns to signal coming danger or even alert their subjects to impending war. The animal horn would also be blown to summon people to an important meeting or announce *sebatakomo* (the call for maximum alert) to face the coming danger. *Sebatakomo* is a Sepedi word comprising the parts *kgomo* (cow) and *sebata* (predator – a lion or leopard). The cow in the term represents a large domestic animal, and the large predator is illustrative of the magnitude of the danger. The call is made to indicate that something ferocious is approaching the village, and it calls on all men to stand up and defend their homestead from this danger. Delius (1986:2) describes the *sebatakomo* call as an announcement of something extraordinary. *Sebatakomo* signifies "a lion

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among the cattle” or “a lion under the blanket”. A call of “a lion among the cattle” means a danger in the midst of defenceless entities. The concept of a “lion under the blanket” conveys the meaning of a serious threat where people expect it least.

The *sebatakomo* call is an urgent emergency call for deliverance. It is also a call for resistance against an evil system. Southall (1983:109) describes how the *sebatakomo* call was made to announce the Pedi resistance and revolt of the 1950s that spread from the Sekhukhuneland homeland to Johannesburg against the introduction of the bantustan (homeland) system. The *sebatakomo* call was also made during forced removals and the arrest of black people during the imposition of the pass system (the use of identification books to restrict the movement of black people) in 1954. *Sebatakomo* is an “exclamation of danger or war” approaching. The *sebatakomo* call is usually made at night when it is quiet, and the voice of the horn can travel far. When the call is made, the inhabitants of a village are expected to take heed and be on maximum alert; those who do not comply are usually seen as collaborators and on the side of the encroaching enemy. *Sebatakomo* is a high alert call: in literal terms, there is a predator among the cattle.

Delius (1986:102) conveys the notion of an attack on the Pedi kingdom through the title of his book, *A lion amongst the cattle*. In 1986, during the struggle against apartheid, when victory was perceived to be certain, when threatened with the imposition of the homeland system, the black youth became “unruly and violent”, calling *Sebatakomo* (Delius 1986:103). Traditional chiefs and homeland leaders were seen as standing in the way of democratic rule, and a great deal of conflict ensued in the struggle for the African National Congress to ascend to power.

During the same period, accusations of witchcraft abounded. The Comrades saw those who did not espouse the freedom struggle avidly enough as enemies of the people, and *sebatakomo* was called to declare them sell-outs and therefore witches. During this period, a “witch” was anyone who was seen as a public enemy, regardless of whether the person was performing sorcery or not – not going along with the Comrades’ call for solidarity in fighting the regime was enough. Once the *sebatakomo* call is made, community warriors are placed on maximum alert and any suspicious person or the person about whom the call is made is summarily killed. This response to presumed evildoing is similar to that found in Leviticus 24:16, where a person that is a danger to society is put to death.

A *sebatakomo* call goes with particular songs of struggle or encouragement of speedy accomplishment of the task at hand. When men are working at a difficult task that needs more energy, they may start a song that will give them more courage to finish it. The *toyi-toyi* is another example of performance enactment that inspired and unified black people to resist apartheid (Van Schalkwyk 1994:4).

Conclusion

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, remains a source of inspiration to African culture because of its poetic and symbolic language, which resonates among black African people. There is in particular an affinity between the book of Psalms and black African songs of protest, lamentation and deliverance. Psalms were used during times of stress, when things seemed hopeless and difficult, in order to call on God for deliverance while scaring the enemies of the Israelites and invoking God's justice. In this article I have traced the message of the Psalms and their similarity to African songs of deliverance. The psalms of lamentation and protest were also compared with their counterparts in African music and art.

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