

INDABA—FIELDWORK, JIVE AND PHENOMENOLOGY

It was March 1995, in a remote ward in north-western Namibia. That ward was Omirora ('the place where riverbeds meet'), a place at some 125 kilometres from Opuwo, the region's main centre, which still bore the scars of a former apartheid garrison town. A few days before I had arrived from Windhoek for a first round of fieldwork and in Opuwo I had met with Rafael, my field assistant for the months to come.¹ Earlier that morning the party that brought us to Omirora—it took us two days to negotiate the road—had left, and we were busy putting up our tent and organizing our stuff. The soil was still wet after the heavy thunderstorm the day before, and I remember that in the years that followed I tried to remember the smell of ozone in the air, or the feel of wetness whenever you picked up a branch or tried to put something away. Little did I know that it would not rain until December of the following year. The famous words by Malinowski (1966 [1920]: 4) rang in my ear. 'Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach.' The dry mountain savannah of Omirora wasn't exactly a beach, and I certainly was not alone, but for a brief moment I could imagine it to be.

That moment did not last very long. From his bag, Rafael dug up a worn radio-with-tape-player, connected a heavy duty 'brick' battery and popped in a tape. The beach evaporated and made way for a heavy, steady 4/4 beat, a pumping Hammond organ and frivolous guitar work, and two voices singing in close harmony in a language I did not understand.

I really hated that tape (or better, those tapes; as it turned out, Rafael brought more than one). He sometimes played it early in the morning—the first thing he did at sunrise—and sometimes late at night. When they heard that sound, people I was trying to interview stood up and left, leaving me in the middle of a sentence that probably did not make much sense to them. The tapes also made our fireplace very popular with the youngsters from the ward, whereas I, at that stage at least, especially wanted to talk to older people. Moreover, my field assistant was regularly unavailable as he had to entertain the crowd with his improvised DJ booth and with strong stories from the liberation war. Rafael was a player, and very popular with the young (and older) women in the vicinity who visited us just to listen, talk and dance.

I had brought a careful selection of my own music—three tapes, by the Pixies, Neil Young and Tom Waits—which I thought would get me through these first months of fieldwork, but they were nowhere near that popular (on the contrary, I saw my own lack of connection reflected in the eyes of the very few who were brave enough to ask what I was listening to). Besides, my Walkman, which doubled as my recorder, was no match for Rafael's radio-tape combination.

So I did the only thing I could do: wait for the battery to die down. Inevitably, one day I noticed that the pounding bass drum radiated less energy and that the pitch of the unison voices was dropping, and I rejoiced in the demise of my enemy (in my diary I noted,

‘at last time to do some real work. Starting tomorrow’). A trick: apparently you can squeeze the last bits of energy from these batteries by gently warming them. And a lesson to learn: after, finally, the battery gave up, Rafael crawled into our tent, opened his bag, and out came a brand new brick. That evening I listened to Tom Waits’ ‘Closing Time’.

A brief note, before I continue; I know that the problem was me, not Rafael or his tapes or batteries. Nor was the problem just alienation or culture shock. It at least partly derived from the discrepancy between what I had read and was taught at the time—the grand theories on kinship and ritual, the beautifully laid out cosmologies and structural oppositions versus the messiness of fieldwork. Moreover, back then, teachings in qualitative methodology at my home university were limited to the proverbial ‘take a big stick for the dogs and lots of marmalade’ (Jackson 1990: 24), and to anecdotes exchanged over dinner. My supervisor had warned me to stay close to the older men and that there was no room for anything frivolous like having fun or dancing (or romance, for that matter). Fieldwork was, first of all, *serious* business, and hard work. The best advice I got, from a Swedish colleague of his, was ‘to keep a diary’. Luckily, things have changed drastically in that regard.

As I am writing this, I am looking at my music library. The Pixies, Tom Waits and Neil Young are still there, but are flanked by recordings by soukous, jive, highlife, kwaito and mbaqanga musicians, by Nigerian psychedelica and African funk, metal from Botswana, rap and any combination of these. Among these are a number of albums by the Soul Brothers, the South African mbaqanga band that authored the two tapes that Rafael had brought to Omirora. In the late 1990s they were at their

artistic peak, and immensely popular in their home country and in Namibia until today. To date, the band has recorded 42 albums, exerting a defining influence on southern African urban music,² and in 2018 Moses Ngwenya, after the death of lead singer David Masondo in 2015 the only surviving member of the original line-up, toured South Africa together with Kwan Laka, the South African jazz prodigy.³

Back in the 1990s the band also caught the eye of the editors of the Rough Guide Series, who devoted an album to an overview of their career, and of the Earthworks label that released a selection of their recent work, together with recordings they made for BBC One’s Andy Kershaw when the band toured the UK in 1995.⁴ This is also the album I picked to discuss here—my first Soul Brothers record, also one that is available outside southern Africa.

I do not remember when my conversion happened (the vernacular expression is *okuritanaura*, ‘to turn oneself around’); I guess it was a slow process over the weeks after the evening Rafael emerged from the tent with his spare battery, but by the end of my first fieldwork stay, in May 1995, the Soul Brothers had become my fieldwork soundtrack, also and even more so in the years that followed, in the bars, the nightclubs and in the streets of Opuwo. From the liner notes of the album *Born to Jive* (1997) we read:

The lightest horn section in Africa joins in the uninhibited dancing when not engaged in blowing their famous riffs. Moses Ngwenya’s wailing and rumbling Hammond organ screams the blues, while the guitar showers musical sparks; all on a platform of driving drum rhythms and huge—and I do mean massive—bass. (Herman 1997: 2)

I rest my case. Hearing that Hammond organ on the first bars of *Indaba* ('News', the opening track) is enough to put me back into fieldwork gear (Barley 1986).

But the Soul Brothers also taught me another lesson or two. The first is that I really like old-fashioned, analogue tapes. A second, more profound one, is that the Soul Brothers' music led me to phenomenology: despite the fact that I do not speak isiZulu (neither did the young women and men in Omirora or in the bars and nightclubs in Opuwo), still these songs carry meanings. You can listen or dance to them, appreciate them without knowing what they are about, and you do not need to understand the lyrics in order to feel or know the music. Obviously, this tension between (intellectual or discursive) 'understanding' and (bodily or embodied) 'sensing' is also a technique often applied to western-style popular music. Just one example (but there are so many others): 'I Want You' by Elvis Costello was a floor filler for couples wanting to make out on the dancefloor of the youth clubs of my childhood and was often played as an opening dance at weddings. Yet the lyrics breathe jealousy and anger at the infidelity of the partner, and throughout the song the lyrics suggest a violent encounter, contrapuntal to the melody and whispering voice.

This means, first of all, that music is not just about making music, but also about listening to it (via an old and worn tape player perhaps) and partaking in it (as Merleau-Ponty suggested, our perception ends in objects). This is why Christopher Small (1998: 9) proposed to talk about 'musicking' (all activities and things involved in its production and reception).⁵ Secondly, as understanding lyrics differs from

understanding music, it also points towards Kofi Agawu's observation that music refers to different ways of 'knowing'. His argument does indeed refer to differing epistemologies (how to know what to know), but it is also useful in this context: the story about my fieldwork soundtrack illustrates that musicking (placing a tape in the deck, listening to it, dancing to it, bringing spare batteries), as such, already involves different ways of knowing: cerebral knowledge, for sure, but also a practical, embodied one next to an experiential one, not to mention the affective dimension that 'knowing' (the gerund, as in musicking) has. In this, one of the quotes I cherish comes from a book I read after returning from my third field trip in 1998.

The fetishized products of intellectual activity all too often assume a life of their own, reinforcing the illusion that life can be possessed, controlled, captured, and pinned down. Our aim is to do justice to the lived complexity of experience by avoiding those selective redescrptions, reductions, and generalizations which claim to capture the essence of the lived in underlying rules or overarching schemata yet, in effect, downplay and deaden it. ... One may disengage from the world the better to grasp it, but this disengagement is not transcendence. (Jackson 1996: 8–9)

All this, of course, does not mean that by having acquired a taste for mbaqanga and other forms of musicking that I now know what my interlocutors know. It does mean that I know *that* they know. Many of them do not *believe* in, say, ancestors; they *know* they are around.

NOTES

- 1 A pseudonym.
- 2 As evidenced by their prominent presence on a number of important compilations, such as *Jive Nation: the indestructible beat of Soweto, or the History of Township Music*.
- 3 The Forty Years Soul Brothers Anniversary CD was released a few months after Masondo's tragic death, and was dedicated to his memory. It was sponsored by a life insurance company.
- 4 In 1993 the band performed at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, when Nelson Mandela and Frederik W. De Klerk jointly received the award, and from 1995 to 2001 Soul Brothers won the South African Music awards for best mbaqanga album six times in a row. Just to say this is not your average South African band.
- 5 Small (1998: 9) defines 'to music' as 'to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing'. Not without reason, Small also writes that the meaning of music is impossible to determine, a remark that I will strategically avoid here. Yet I see a strong analogy between musicking and what anthropologists claim they study. One can take this analogy quite far (using, for instance, Actor-Network-Theory or social phenomenology), but the point here would be that meanings do not necessarily coincide with exegesis, a point of which Victor Turner (1974) has already reminded us.

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STEVEN VAN WOLPUTTE
PROFESSOR
INSTITUTE FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL
RESEARCH IN AFRICA
KU LEUVEN
steven.vanwolputte@kuleuven.be