

## The Musical Bows of Sub-Saharan Africa

By Thobekile Ntomb'Yelanga Mbanda

**Introduction** Musical bows proliferate throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. From the Liberian Gbon-kpala to the uMakhweyana in the Cape, these simple yet varied instruments have formed a core part of the African musical oeuvre. Below are bows that have been transcribed by the IAM Project.

---

### Ugubhu



The Ugubhu bow is an unbraced gourd-bow originating from the Zulu-speaking people. It is described as an "old traditional instrument that people were playing during the time of King Shaka" (Mandela, 2005). The instrument's popularity declined in the early 20th century as the Umakhweyana (braced bow) gained prominence.

Zulu Princess Magogo preserved the legacy of the Ugubhu by using it to record traditional Zulu songs. In the early 1980s, researcher Dave Dargie, with the assistance of Zulu Benedict Brother Clement Sithole, discovered three more Ugubhu players in the Nongoma District: Mr. and Mrs. B. Mpanza and Mrs. Natalina Mhlongo (Dargie, 1986). Brother Clement still plays and teaches Ugubhu at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on a part-time basis.

The Ugubhu is crafted from a long stick from the Uthathawe tree (*Acacia ataxacantha*), a calabash, and a string made from twisted cow-tail hairs. Sound is produced by striking the string with a beater (Mandela, 2005).

---

## uHadi



The uHadi is a traditional Xhosa unbraced musical bow instrument. The wooden bow is strung with gut or wire and attached to an *iSelwa* (calabash), which resonates and amplifies the sound. The bow is played with *uMqungu*, a beater made from a thin stalk of grass, which is beaten against the string (Dargie, 1986).

The playing position of the uHadi is similar to that of the Zulu Ugubhu. The bow stave is held in the right hand (or left for left-handed players), near the lower end of the stave, so that the opening in the gourd resonator faces the player's chest (Mandela, 2005). Variations in pitch are achieved by pinching the string, while tonal variations result from shifting the gourd's position against the chest.

In the Eastern Cape, the uHadi is traditionally played by married women, though men and children occasionally play the instrument.

---

## uMakhweyane



The uMakhweyane bow has a gourd resonator mounted near the center of the stave. The string is metal (typically wire) and is divided into two sections by a wire loop, which is anchored inside the gourd and also wraps around the main string (Mandela, 2005).

The bow stave is held with fingers 3, 4, and 5, while the index finger is free to stop the lower string segment, usually with the knuckle. The playing action involves sharp, staccato-like strokes on the string segments. The calabash creates a distinctive overtone structure, adding to the unique quality of the instrument's sound.

Originally played by women, the uMakhweyane is now accepted as an instrument for all people. The same instrument can be found in Eswatini (Swaziland) and is widely played by older women.

---

## Umqangala



Umqangala is a 60 cm mouth-resonated, finger-plucked bow made from a hollow river reed, which is inflexible. It is strung with thin gut, tendon, or sometimes discarded fishing line (Johnston, 1980). Similar to the Xhosa *uMrhubhe*, the player beats it with a light reed, following the melody by resonating overtones with the mouth. The string is touched with the thumb or a finger to obtain a higher fundamental tone (Dargie, 2007).

---

## uMrhubhe



The *uMrhubhe* is a mouth-resonated stringed bow consisting of a flexible wooden stick, typically between half a meter and three meters in length. The stick is strung end to end with a taut metal or nylon cord and can be played with hands or a wooden stick. Unlike the *uHadi*, *uMrhubhe* requires the performer to use their mouth as a resonator.

The instrument produces two fundamental notes: *vuliwe* (open), where the string is not shortened, and *banjiwe* (held), where the string is pressed against the stick (Tracey, 2003).

---

## Segankura / Segaba



The Segankura (or Segaba) consists of a stout wooden stick, approximately six centimeters in diameter, hollowed out like a trough along most of its length. A wire string is attached, with a tuning peg at one end and a tin-can resonator at the other. It is played with a short bow strung with cow-tail hair (Brearley, 1989).

The bow is moved in a circular motion, passing up and down the string and across it, touching various nodes where harmonics occur. Occasionally, fundamental notes are included among the harmonics (Brearley, 1996).

---

## Xitende



The *Xitende* is a braced-bow instrument with a gourd resonator. It produces a loud and deep tone by striking the two distinct halves of the string with a light stick or reed. By bouncing the reed, fast repeated tones can be produced. The resonator is moved on and off the chest to alter the tone color (Johnston, 1985).

This large instrument (1.5m–1.8m long) is played by *xilombe* (wandering minstrels) who accompany their singing with social commentary and storytelling. The string is tuned a minor third apart and is struck with a maize stalk.

---

## Tshihwana Bow



The Tshihwana bow is a Venda mouth-resonated bow. It is made from a tapered wooden stave, with a thicker center section (Levine, 2015). The bow is played by holding it against the mouth, which acts as the resonator. The string is plucked with fingers or a small pick made from a thorn or wood.

---

## !Xuma



The !Xuma is a carved wooden bow using the mouth as a resonator. It has a single hide or gut string, which is divided unequally and held taut by a thong near the midpoint. The instrument is played by tapping it rapidly with a twig or grass stalk (Nurse, 1972).

The !Xuma braced mouthbow is mainly found in Namibia's Kavango and Okombahe regions, where it is known by various names such as *Kaworongongo* and *Noukhas*. In South Africa, similar bows were found among the Zulu (*Isiqomqomana*) and Xhosa (*Ugwali*), though these traditions have mostly disappeared (Dargie, 1986).

---

**Conclusion** Musical bows have played an integral role in African musical traditions for centuries. From the Ugubhu to the !Xuma, each bow carries its own history, playing technique, and cultural significance. The IAM Project's documentation of these instruments ensures that their rich legacy continues to be preserved and appreciated for generations to come.

## References

- Brearley, J., 1989. *Music and Musicians of the Kalahari*. Botswana Notes and Records, 20, pp.77-90.
- Brearley, J., 1996. *The Segankuru – A "Bush Fiddle" or a Bowed Bow?: Some of its Exponents and their Songs*. Botswana Notes and Records, 28, pp.121-144.
- Dargie, D., 1986. *Musical Bows in Southern Africa*. Africa Insight, Vol. 16, no. 1, 1-11.
- Dargie, D., 2007. *Umakhweyana: A Musical Bow and its Contribution to Zulu Music*. International Library of African Music, Vol. 8, no. 1, 60-81.
- Johnston, T.F., 1980. *The Mqangala and Xipendana Musical Bows of the Shangana-Tsonga*. Afrika und Übersee, 63, pp.2-1980.
- Johnston, T.F., 1985. *Meaning and Function in Shangana-Tsonga Musical Instruments*. Africa Insight, 15(4), pp.283-287.
- Levine, L., 2005. *The Drumcafe's Traditional Music of South Africa*. 1st ed. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Mandela, T., 2005. *The Revival and Revitalization of Musical Bow Practice in South Africa*. Master's thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Nurse, G.T., 1972. *Musical Instrumentation among the San (Bushmen) of the Central Kalahari*. African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music, 5(2), pp.23-27.
- Tracey, A., 2003. *Indigenous Instruments*. The Talking Drum, Issue no. 19, 8-10.