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Play and Irony in the Kwaito Music of Post-Apartheid South Africa

Tuulikki Pietilä

“Kwaito” is a form of South African youth music that emerged at the time when the oppressive apartheid regime was coming to an end in the early 1990s. While both popular press and academic critics, as well as older generations, were morally concerned by the apparent hedonism and lack of socio-political awareness inherent in kwaito, township youth embraced it as an expressive mode of popular music that reflected their life and aspirations. This chapter investigates the humorous, comedic, and ironic aspects of early kwaito, arguing that they were central factors in young people’s passionate attachment to it. The subsequent evolution of kwaito and changes in society led some fans to lose their interest in kwaito; for them, contemporary kwaito is not a source of enjoyment anymore, but rather a source of parody.

“Kwaito” is a popular music genre that emerged in South Africa in the early 1990s. It combined foreign musical elements from hip hop, house, and ragamuffin with earlier South African music styles, such as *kwela*, *mbaqanga*, *marabi*, and *bubblegum* music (Boloka 98-99; Coplan 12; Steingo, “South African” 336). Even though a musical hybrid, kwaito fast became accepted as a distinctive expressive mode of youth in the black townships of South Africa. It is foremost a dance music with an ambience of fun and enjoyment. Its uninhibited indulgence in sparsely clad beautiful bodies, flamboyant fashions, and sensual and skillful dancing was suddenly and widely visible, as controls over media were loosened in the post-apartheid era. Indeed, coincident with the fall of the apartheid regime, the genre came to be identified as the sound of the new freedom, both in a positive and a negative sense.¹

Soon after its appearance, kwaito became enormously popular and, after gospel, the second biggest seller in the South African music market. However, while township youth enthusiastically

embraced it, many other people were alarmed by the genre's apparent superficiality and its lack of socio-political and historical awareness. Several academic scholars interpreted kwaito as a promotor of neoliberalism, consumerism, hedonism, and misogyny (for example, Peterson 210-11; Steingo, "The Politization" 33; Stephens 265). In an earlier article, I have extensively discussed popular and the academic criticism of kwaito as well as the reasons for its appeal among youth (Pietilä, "Body"). I argued that kwaito draws from and renews past and present performance styles that audiences recognize as their own. This article examines the popularity of kwaito from a slightly different angle, arguing that humor and comedy were initially essential elements in the performance and reception of kwaito and, indeed, central reasons for the craze it created. In what follows I will use kwaito songs, kwaito music videos, and material from my own interviews and casual conversations with township youth to analyze the humorous aspects of kwaito.²

Elements of Kwaito

Kwaito was created by producers and DJs. Its performance consists of chanted lyrics and dancing accompanied by electronic music. The chanting and dancing functions are usually mixed; the principal artist both chants and dances, while the supporting dancers also sing backup. Because dancing is a key component, the genre's performers are usually skilled dancers and some of the best-known early artists, such as Arthur Mafokate and Mandoza, were dancers before becoming kwaito stars; Mafokate had won dance competitions and Mandoza used to be a breakdancer in a crew called Chiskop. During their kwaito careers, Mandoza created his own signature dance style and Mafokate developed several dance choreographies that became hugely popular. Mafokate also discovered and mentored several future popular music stars, such as the kwaito group Abashante, the kwaito artist Chomee, and the afro-jazz artist Lira. Choreographies drew on Jamaican dancehall and several South African and African dance styles, as well as American hip hop. With swinging hips, female kwaito dancers are often perceived as sensual or sexually suggestive, even though they

are athletic as well. Men's styles, however, tend to focus more on the movement of the limbs, with a relaxed mid-body.

Kwaito was initially created in the Johannesburg area and its lyrics were sung in the street language of that city's townships. The mixture of Zulu, Sotho, English, and Afrikaans languages is often labeled *isicamto* by linguists. Colloquially, it is called *tsotsitaal* and considered a contemporary version of a gangster language first developed in the townships of the early twentieth century. Kwaito lyrics consist of a few rhythmically repeated catch phrases, and they are typically about fun, sex, dancing, and having a good time, but often, they also include invented and ambiguous expressions, which puzzle listeners and lead to multiple alternative readings.

Over time, kwaito changed, leading some researchers in the early 2000s to celebrate what they considered the emergence of a more mature and socially conscious brand of the genre (Allen 4, 102; Ballantine qtd. in Steingo, "Politization" 30). My township interlocutors acknowledged a change had taken place as well, but most viewed it negatively; for them, the "raw and hard" (DJ Rozzano) sound of 1990s kwaito had shifted towards the more melodic but bland sound of commercial, mainstream pop. Rhythmically, kwaito increasingly resembled house music, with its pace changing from the initial slowed-down tempo of 100 beats per minute to 120-126 bpm. At the same time, it lost its relevance for many of its early fans. Today, some artists attempt to keep kwaito alive as a separate genre, but in its sound and imagery, contemporary kwaito has become quite indistinguishable from commercial house music. At the same time, elements of the early kwaito can be found mixed with other musical styles in some of the emerging youth music genres.

My discussion will start with the early, or what many call the "old-school," kwaito. This chapter explores both intentionally humorous aspects of kwaito and elements that listeners found funny, even if they weren't necessarily supposed to be. I also examine disparate audience responses to the genre, based on my conversations with township youth. Much of the analysis will focus on

the work of Arthur Mafokate (henceforth called “Arthur,” his stage name), with added discussion on Boom Shaka, Thebe, Mandoza, and Spykos.

Delivering a Message

The struggle against apartheid intensified the production of political music in South Africa.

Emerging in the wake of this struggle, kwaito adopted a deliberately apolitical stance; instead, it borrowed from, and magnified, the buoyant mood of an earlier musical form called “bubblegum,” or township disco. Nonetheless, initially, some messages with socio-political weight were delivered through kwaito. For example, some songs by Arthur had serious content. In 1995, he released the song, “Kaffir,” the title taken from a derogatory term used for blacks in South Africa. The song is addressed to a white employer, in South Africa commonly called *baas* (boss): “Baas, don’t call me a *kaffir* ... *Ang’ vele kwa satane maan ... La wena never o rate ha nka go bitsa kare o Bobejaan* [Boss, don’t call me a *kaffir*! ... I’m not from hell ... You won’t like it either if I were to call you a baboon].”

The song became widely popular and sold hundreds of thousands of copies, but it was banned by several radio stations for the use of the offensive word. In 2009, “Kaffir” created controversy anew, as DJ Fresh played it on the national youth music radio station, the 5FM. The Broadcasting Complaints Commission ruled the song was grossly offensive in a country “where political correctness and sensitivity need to be practiced” and the radio station was fined ZAR 10,000 (about 1,000 US dollars). DJ Fresh reportedly asserted that the complaints to the BCC came from white people (see Steenkamp).

The song thus delivered a serious socio-political message that continues to raise emotional and political responses. Arthur’s manner of performing the assertive lyrics of the song is, however, playful. Singing in a mixture of languages, he elongates the words and sentences, creating an image of an employee trying to challenge and evade his boss in a teasing and comical manner. The boss’s

lines are authoritarian in content, but in some versions of the song, they are performed in such an angry and high-pitched voice that the boss sounds merely laughable. A danceable beat of synthesized music adds to the lighthearted, humorous flavor.

Arthur released another song with a socio-political message in 1996, entitled “Die Poppe Sal Dans.” The lyrics tell of black men travelling in various regions of the country to do piecework – KwaZulu-Natal, Orange Free State, and Pretoria are mentioned – and wherever they go, “*uBaas, ebethanda ukuthi: ‘Die poppe sal dans jou klein kaffirtjie’* [the boss used to say: The dolls will dance, you little kaffir].” The lyrics repeatedly ask, without response, what the boss means. Listeners, however, will recognize that “Die poppe sal dans” is a well-known threat in Afrikaans, which predicts trouble or punishment, and means “I will show you,” or “You will see.” In the music video for the song (2006), Arthur sometimes appears wearing a huge Afro wig and dressed in checkered jacket and pants, sometimes in prison uniform. In one scene he and other men steal jewelry from a home. At times, white men in khaki clothing, carrying guns, chase Arthur’s character and his companions; the dress of the white men suggests they are Afrikaner farmers, the bosses. The protagonist’s putative grandmother and grandfather are also featured, initially sending their grandson on his way with benign smiles, hugs, and small monetary contributions, but towards the end they appear increasingly concerned and disappointed. The overall tone of the video is comedic; Arthur’s character is clown-like and carefree, always smiling, even when chased by the white men with their guns, and in prison, he dances and plays board games with other prisoners.

A common theme in “Kaffir” and “Die Poppe Sal Dans” is a kind of cat-and-mouse game between a boss and his employee. The latter does not fear the former’s authority, but challenges and evades him in a jesting and teasing manner, making the angered boss look ridiculous. Another type of a power relationship is portrayed in the video to Arthur’s song “Oyi Oyi” (1997). It depicts a confrontation between a man (played by Arthur) and his girlfriend. In the lyrics, the man blames the girlfriend for thinking she is better and smarter than he is, and for cheating on him. Mostly he calls

the woman “my darling, my baby” (*mazuzu, mavuvu*), but also a “slut” (*usikhabarakheshe maan*). In the video, set in a dimly lit back alley where a band is playing, the man tries to confront the woman, who dodges and sways, and at times responds to his accusations with a defiant, bold, and direct stare straight into his eyes. Another woman appears – performed by the (now late) popular kwaito artist Lebo Mathosa³ – who sings the same lyrics as Arthur, but seems to be on the girlfriend’s side. From time to time, the video features choreographed group dancing. It ends with the man and his girlfriend making peace and embracing each other. This music video is obviously inspired by Michael Jackson’s video “The Way You Make Me Feel” (1987); both feature the protagonist chasing a woman around a car, group dancing, a concluding reconciliatory embrace, and a setting of shadowy back alleys.

“Oyi Oyi” presents another example of fearless, yet evasive, confrontation between a subordinate and a more powerful antagonist. But, while “Oyi Oyi” (both song and video) are not as obviously comical as “Kaffir” and “Die Poppe Sal Dans,” several people I talked with considered the video humorous. One young man explained: “The manner he is saying it [that the girl is mischievous], it isn’t aggressive, but playful. Even the acts in the video, how they play around each other. That was funny because in the township if you were cheating on your boyfriend, that would not have been funny at all! Either your boyfriend would beat you up or his friends would trap the girl and throw her in the boot of a car and drive away with the girl, and God knows what will happen to the girl” (Mngadi).

Interpreting Meaning

The songs discussed above have quite clear meanings. The lyrics of most kwaito songs, however, are obscure and polysemic. Part of the reason is that they draw on the ever-evolving township street language while inventing new expressions, which are not comprehensible to people unfamiliar with the version of *tsotsitaal* practiced in Johannesburg-area townships. Often, however, even those in

the know struggled to decipher the meanings of lyrics, which were often deliberately vague or open to many readings; trying to make sense of the words became social entertainment in and of itself. Several interlocutors described to me how, for instance, they were confused by one line in particular in the song “It’s About Time” (1993) by the well-known kwaito group Boom Shaka. Rapped by Thembi Seete, the English-language lyric was heard by some as “You gotta sneeze the knees to disease,” while for others it sounded like “You gotta cease the needs that disease with ease.” Nor was there any one interpretation of the line’s meaning; some people believed it was about feminine power, while others claimed that the song still makes them laugh, because they cannot make sense of it, no matter how hard they try!

Another song whose meaning remains unclear to many is Arthur’s “Koti Koti” (1997). The title is obscure: some suggested it referred to the sound of a knock on the door; others believed it referred to the rattling noise of metal drink cans. Another recurring word in the song, *skomorok*, was unintelligible even to many township dwellers; some wondered whether it was a name. One young woman I spoke with initially did not have any idea of what the song means, but concluded after watching the video and seeing a particular, repeated, hand movement, that the word *skomorok* possibly refers to masturbation. When I asked a couple of young township men about the song, they immediately responded that *skomorok* means masturbation, one suggesting that *koti koti* is probably a version of *kot kot*, which means “over and over.” Indeed, it became common that new kwaito songs would be open to multiple interpretations, to the extent that fans would often wait for the video to be released, sometimes supporting one interpretation of the song’s meaning, while challenging others, and sometimes suggesting whole new meanings.

A number of the lyrics and videos of kwaito songs were sexually charged and this led to popular criticism from a number of sources. One target was Thebe Mogane’s song “Bula Boot” (2001). In township slang, the title can mean a request for a girl to “open her ass.” In response to the critics who read the song this way, Thebe released a video that made use of an alternative reading of

the title Bula Boot to refer to opening up of a car boot (for North Americans, the trunk). The lyrics in the video say: “Brother, open up the boot” (Awu buti bula boot). The video came out at a time when young men aspired to have good sound systems in their cars, so that they could attract people to dance and party around their vehicles by blasting their music through opened car boots. The humor in the video emerges from the contrast between the protagonist’s aspirations (attracting young women to party around the symbol of his masculinity, the car) and the reality of his clapped-out Morris Mini-Minor that breaks down frequently. In the video some young (blue-collar) women are attracted to him, not because of his fancy car or sound system, but to repair the vehicle (although they dance around it afterwards), thus reversing typical gender roles. A further humorous and telling suggestion of the protagonist’s lack of success is the parade of SUVs smoothly passing by his dilapidated car. Another song by Thebe from the early-2000s, called “Mbobo,” was also controversial. The literal meaning of *mbobo* is a hole, any hole, but the video for the song suggests that the mbobo in the song refers to a vagina, because the camera focuses on girls’ lower bodies as they play pool in bikinis and move in a provocative manner. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) banned the video.

Similarly, over time, Arthur Mafokate’s videos were considered by many to have become increasingly one-dimensional, with an emphasis on sexuality. Perhaps his most controversial, but extremely popular, video was made for the song “Sika Le Khekhe” (2005). The literal meaning of the title is “slice the cake,” but the suggestive dance moves of skimpily clad female dancers jumping on a bed—and filmed from below—emphasize one of the township slang meanings for “slicing the cake,” which is euphemism for sexual intercourse. Simultaneously the video introduced a particular gesture to accompany the verbal expression, of moving one’s hand close to one’s crotch. Both the song and the hand gesture became very popular with young dancers and fans of kwaito.

Township Ways

Kwaito fans found the guesswork and debates about the meaning of the songs amusing and entertaining. Moreover, the embodied emphasis in kwaito resonated with the ways of communicating in townships, where words often need to be accompanied by a certain gesture or a grimace to deliver their meanings. Linguistic playfulness and the invention of ever-new expressions are appreciated by township youth, because “kwaito-speak” (see Satyo) continues the township tradition of displaying street cleverness through linguistic performance and creativity .

Kwaito thus resonated with youth because it reflected what people often call “kasi” ways (township ways). Familiar talk, behavior, issues, and aspirations performed by dazzling, skillful, and assertive artists boosted pride among young people. While critics saw the self-praise of some kwaito artists and songs as egotistical, fans regarded it as an indication of, and a model for, respecting one’s township background and efforts. Among such efforts was a township man’s ambition to rid himself of the humiliation and emasculation created by the apartheid regime. The kwaito star Mandoza, in particular, established the persona of a physically strong, potentially violent, and emotionally tough “boss,” “top dog,” and “focused thug” (*sgelekeqe*). He emulated the figure of the *tsotsi* (township gangster), but shifted its connotation to endorse “hustling” as an active, and as such respectable, aspiration of finding one’s own means of livelihood and success instead of idly waiting for handouts. Like much kwaito, Mandoza’s lyrics required some interpretive work from audiences, but there was nothing humorous about his self-presentation or music videos—he maintained his pose of the serious and unfailingly tough guy. One of Arthur’s songs “Inja” (2006), promotes a similar image of a township man as “the Man,” “the Boss,” “the top dog.” But in contrast to Mandoza’s consistently serious macho figure, the playfulness, self-irony, tongue-in-cheek quality in Arthur’s and Thebe’s early productions emphasized the incongruity between masculine aspirations and reality.

Many of the township youth who initially loved kwaito, were gradually alienated by what they considered its increasingly commercialized nature. For example, one female interlocutor maintained that, over time, “kwaito stopped being about the grassroots, about being black in the township, and started selling the easiest commodities: sex, fun, and fantasy” (Mbongwa). Critics also noted a change in the way women and their bodies were portrayed in Arthur’s videos. Whereas in his earlier performances and videos, women were certainly sexy, they were also seen to be “more powerful, more in charge” (Mavi). In Arthur’s later productions, women were largely seen to serve male fantasies. In general, kwaito was perceived to have become part of a wider commercial music scene that, as DJ Rozzano put it, “thrives on the chick’s legs, skimpy outfits, making of fast, easy money. It’s like a strip show.” While contemporary kwaito music videos still portray some elements of rough township life, they increasingly resemble those of contemporary commercial house music, which depict laid-back, lavish lifestyles of partying, drinking, and dancing in the beach or a club, the men surrounded by beautiful, eager girls, or commercial hip-hop videos with their emphasis on brand-name clothes and luxury cars.

Many of the young people most critical of contemporary kwaito were initially fans of the early kwaito, but now embrace more explicitly socially conscious genres, such as conscious hip hop and performed poetry, in which lyrical content and message are important. Those who remain fans of contemporary kwaito and other commercial youth music do not accept allegations that these genres are superficial and sexist, even though they acknowledge that some individual songs may fit this characterization; instead, they assert, regardless of their gender, that the music represents township life. For instance, producer and artist Mtezman reported that he likes kwaito, commercial house, and some commercial hip hop because they provide something that “we [in the township] can relate to.” He explained that he is not attracted to the “very deep feel” that conscious rappers put in their songs. Mtezman’s experience as a producer living in a township was that hit songs are made of lighter subjects, such as “fast cars, easy girls, and drinking.” A female music fan, Nobuhle

Keswa, maintained, “I don’t think kwaito is sexist or empty, it talks about *kasi* stuff; it’s music with which the youth express themselves and their life in townships.”

Sharlene Swartz has noted that, in South Africa, the term *kasi* often refers to township habits that are considered morally dubious, yet widespread (65, 74). Such habits include familiarity with street life, drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, partying, having multiple sexual partners, and possibly dropping out of school and being involved in petty crime. However, many of my interlocutors used the term not only to refer to morally dubious behavior, but also to a cool or street-smart attitude; this latter connotation of *kasi* ways was also emphasized in kwaito.

The evolution of what the critics considered an increasingly commercial kwaito has led some to parody the genre. For example, comedian Tshepo Mogale created an artist called Spykos, derived from a township slang expression for “junk food” (*spykos*). In his two popular songs and the accompanying videos, released in the early 2000s, he imitates and emphasizes the superficial features of contemporary kwaito. His song “Siya Swima,” for instance, asserts that “*Spykos* is delicious” and “I’m a swimmer.” The video portrays party-goers standing in a tiny crowded make-shift pool, with perhaps ten centimeters of water, in ascetic township surroundings. One of the guys is dressed in swimming trunks, a bathing cap, and (fake) gold chains. He nearly drowns in the little water in the tiny pool, and needs lifesaving measures. The irony of the song and the video lies in its shallow content, and also in the fact that pool and beach parties are a staple of contemporary kwaito and commercial house music videos, even though many township dwellers do not know how to swim. In “Birthday Yam,” Spykos repeats “it’s my birthday” and that he will celebrate it with girls, balloons, champagne, cake, and presents. The lyrics are set to a slow and monotonous kwaito beat. The music video shows party-goers alternately dancing or gathered around a table bearing cocktails and a disco ball. The men wear ballcaps and floppy *pantsula* hats, familiar from kwaito and commercial house productions. For some, Spykos’s songs and videos were hilarious, simply because they were so silly; others discerned, and were greatly amused by, their parodic nature.

Conclusion

Kwaito and its fans have evolved alongside developments in the wider South African society. What was initially considered new and revolutionary in kwaito has become increasingly viewed as part of the hegemonic, materialistic zeitgeist. Early kwaito's fun-loving and humorous mood represented, and coincided with, the sense of freedom created by the dismantling of the oppressive apartheid regime. After the political music of the anti-apartheid era, Boom Shaka and other kwaito groups seemed to declare that "it's about time" to celebrate. Arthur Mafokate's early songs were "passing a message, but making the message lighter [than the music of the struggle-era]" (Mahlase). Fans of the genre delighted in the ways kwaito conveyed fabulous and inventive – if normatively controversial – township ways of living, dancing, and communicating. Audiences greatly enjoyed seeing, and came to expect, ever new and amazing dance and fashion styles that they would imitate. Comedy formed an intentional part of Arthur Mafokate's early productions, poking fun at the foolish qualities of his characters.

Playing with the meanings of existing and invented expressions from township slang was a source of constant amusement for kwaito artists and the audiences. In addition to portraying the reality of township youth, kwaito addressed their aspirations of breaking out of poverty and becoming "somebody." The gap between the aspirations and reality was expressed by some kwaito artists through irony and self-irony. The failing tiny car in Thebe's "Bula Boot" is an example, as are the efforts of Arthur's male characters to throw off their subservient *kaffir* status or to claim superiority by chiding a mischievous girlfriend. A recurring theme is a township man failing to be the boss, the top dog—an aspiration and role model promoted in more or less all of Mandoza's and in some of Arthur's recordings.

Kwaito evolved along with a mentality of growing materialism in wider society and among parts of the emerging black elite in particular. This was reflected in kwaito becoming more one-

dimensional and simultaneously less humorous and ironic in mood. Simultaneously, by the early twenty-first century, it became more apparent that in post-apartheid South Africa, freedom and wealth were enjoyed by the established white elite and the new black state-related elite, while the predominantly black masses continued to live in poverty. For some township youth, kwaito still portrays and celebrates *kasi* life and values. For others, kwaito and other commercial youth music genres have started to appear as the soundtrack for people celebrating a frivolous, careless, and acquisitive mentality (Pietilä “Discursive”). Those critics who once found in kwaito a revolutionary potential have moved towards more socially conscious genres; for them, the party is over and the struggle continues. The invented artist Spykos revived kwaito’s humor, but now the target of the humor was kwaito itself. Spykos’s songs and videos parody what kwaito has become, mocking its lacking sense of irony.

At the same time, early kwaito has become so ingrained in the social and musical memory that recognizable kwaito elements—the bassline, the beat, the groove—can be traced in some of the emerging youth music that mixes diverse styles to create new ones.

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Notes

1. The population categories of Black African, Colored, Indian/Asian, and White were created during the apartheid era. In this chapter, I will use the words black, colored, and white, without quotation marks or uppercase letters, even though I acknowledge that they are categories created to artificially classify and differentiate people. My usage reflects the fact that the labels continue to be used in the post-apartheid statistics and popular parlance.

2. Racially segregated areas, called townships, were established as part of the apartheid policies, and people of color were forced to move there, while the best areas were allocated to whites.

Townships became labor reserves with poor infrastructure and very low level of services; they were huge monotonous areas from which blacks and coloreds (and to an extent, Indians) had to commute to and from their white-owned workplaces. Post-apartheid improvements in housing and infrastructure in parts of the townships have not abolished the historical legacy of relative and absolute poverty in these locations.

3. Lebo Mathosa was a member of the early kwaito group Boom Shaka and later embarked on a solo career.

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