



Enhancing the Description and Analysis of *Umaskandi* Performance: a tool for musicology

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Article History

Received: 2026-01-28

Revised: 2026-07-30

Accepted: 2026-09-02

Published: 2026-09-07

Keywords

Colonial education

Izibongo zomaskandi

Izihlabo

Usinga

How to cite:

Moloi, M., & Mapaya, G. (2026). Enhancing the Description and Analysis of *Umaskandi* Performance: a tool for musicology. *African Musicology Online*, 15(2), 16-28.

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Abstract

This study examines the limitations of existing descriptive and analytical frameworks in understanding *umaskandi* performance, an indigenous Isizulu musical tradition. Guided by Decolonial Theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and African musicology, the study critiques how Western analytical tools often fail to capture the cultural, linguistic, and philosophical dimensions that define *umaskandi*. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with experienced *omaskandi* practitioners and *umaskandi* producers, supported by document analysis. The investigation focuses on three key performance concepts: *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (*umaskandi* praises recitations). Findings reveal that *ukusetha* functions as a relational, emic process through which performers align their instruments to *ushuni*, the indigenous sonic system that anchors *umaskandi*. *Izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), emerge as diagnostic, identity-bearing cues that signal musical intention and orient both performer and ensemble at the beginning of a performance. Meanwhile, *izibongo zomaskandi* are shown to mark expressive, spiritual, and social climaxes within the performance trajectory, embodying heightened emotional and cultural meaning. Overall, the study demonstrates the inadequacy of Western analytical models for interpreting *umaskandi* and argues for culturally grounded, African-centred frameworks that better reflect its artistic epistemology, support curriculum transformation, and enrich African music scholarship.

Introduction

Umaskandi occupies a distinctive space in Isizulu expressive culture, rooted in *umculo womdabu* (indigenous music) and shaped by historical movements, identity formation, and rural-urban migration (Erlmann, 1996). Its lineage extends to bow music traditions such as *umakhweyana* and *ugubhu* (indigenous bow music instruments), which encode indigenous performance practices (Impey, 1983; Nketia, 1975). However, its evolution must also be understood within the long history of colonial and apartheid systems that systematically devalued African knowledge systems (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Nwanosike et al., 2011; Mhlauli et al., 2015). Recent scholarship continues to affirm Amazulu music's role in sustaining cultural identity, language, and diversity in contemporary contexts (Yende, 2024). At the same time, technological transformations, such as the shift from



analogue to digital recording, are reshaping *umaskandi*'s sonic identity without erasing its cultural foundations (Moloi, 2025). These developments highlight the dynamic tension between continuity and innovation, underscoring the need for analytical frameworks that respect indigenous epistemologies.

Despite increasing scholarship, Western analytic frameworks still dominate descriptions of African music, often imposing Eurocentric assumptions about pitch standardisation, metric uniformity, and form (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1975). These tools routinely misrepresent key *umaskandi* elements, such as *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (*umaskandi* praise recitations). They fail to account for concepts such as *ukusetha* (memory-based tuning) (Moloi & Mapaya, 2022), prosody-driven performance (Pooley, 2016), and spiritual-philosophical dimensions. Contemporary research affirms that these Western frameworks inadequately capture indigenous musical knowledge and often perpetuate extractive or marginalising academic practices (Mapaya, 2014). Furthermore, scholarship on indigenising African musical arts reveals persistent epistemological challenges within music education, where African performance knowledge remains undervalued or structurally sidelined (McConnachie, 2026). These misalignments justify a renewed call for culturally grounded analytical models that prioritise Isizulu worldview, language, and sonic philosophy.

Responding to these challenges and gaps, the study aims to critically appraise existing descriptive and analytical tools applied in *umaskandi* research, assessing their suitability for indigenous analysis. Secondly, it explores key performance elements such as *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (*umaskandi* praise recitations), as interconnected emic constructs central to *umaskandi*'s musical and philosophical identity (Ntombela, 2017). Thirdly, contribute to the development of an African-centred analytic approach grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, enriched by current decolonial pedagogical frameworks (Ngoma, 2024). Lastly, propose practitioner-derived indicators that can guide future scholarship, pedagogy, and cultural preservation, especially in relation to language-based musical concepts (Moloi & Mapaya, 2022; Yende, 2024).

This study contributes a culturally grounded analytic toolkit derived from practitioner knowledge, Isizulu philosophical categories, and contemporary decolonial research. Recent findings demonstrate the necessity of centring indigenous conceptual frameworks in music analysis, particularly where language, memory, and embodied knowledge determine musical meaning (Moloi & Mapaya, 2022; Yende, 2024). Moreover, current developments in recording technology and digital production reveal how *umaskandi* performers negotiate modernity while maintaining cultural authenticity (Moloi, 2025). Scholarship on Indigenous African Music pedagogy also emphasises the transformative value of Ubuntu-centred and community-embedded approaches (Ngoma, 2024). By integrating these contemporary insights, this study advances African musicology's shift toward epistemic sovereignty, cultural preservation, and the development of analytical frameworks that honour the depth of *umaskandi* performance.

The paper proceeds as follows. The literature review synthesises classical and contemporary *umaskandi* scholarship, highlighting the need for analytical approaches aligned with indigenous epistemologies (Moloi, 2022; McConnachie, 2026). The theoretical framework outlines a blended approach that draws on decolonial theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Ubuntu pedagogy, and African musicology (Ngoma, 2024; Authority, 2025). The methodology section describes the qualitative design, sampling, data collection and analysis procedures, following established interpretive research standards (Muzari et al., 2022). The findings and discussion section presents practitioner-derived insights into *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and



izibongo zomaskandi (umaskandi praise recitations), interpreted through the theoretical lenses above. The conclusion reflects on the implications for African musicology, curriculum transformation, and future research directions.

Literature Review

Scholarship on *umaskandi* has evolved significantly, moving away from descriptive Western accounts toward culturally grounded, practitioner-centred interpretations that prioritise indigenous artistic principles and conceptual systems. Recent studies critique earlier framings for overlooking *ubuciko Besizulu* (Isizulu artistic ability/ knowledge) and *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) as key methods of sound production and performance practice, thereby limiting scholarly depth (Moloi & Mapaya, 2022). Contemporary analyses further reveal how digital production technologies reshape sonic and structural traits while preserving stylistic continuity and fostering creative Edoson

Parallel shifts in African musicology embrace decolonial and Afrocentric paradigms, urging frameworks that centre community knowledge holders and local epistemologies against persistent Western dominance in analysis and pedagogy (McConnachie, 2026). Yende and Yende (2022) contends that true decolonisation demands treating African epistemologies as primary theoretical sources, not mere supplements, while Authority's Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory repositions rhythm, narrative, and performance as sovereign systems for restructuring music curricula (Authority, 2025). Pedagogical research reinforces Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), with Ubuntu-centred, community-based methods proven to boost student engagement and conceptual understanding in African music education, exposing the inadequacies of notation-driven Western paradigms (Ngoma, 2024). Barz and Cooley (2008) advocate oral, ecological, and community-rooted research tools as culturally aligned for dissecting performance traditions. Despite these advances, no integrated framework systematically links *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations), as practitioner-derived constructs in *umaskandi*, relying instead on isolated elements, external models, or insufficient emic data; a gap this study addresses by developing an *Isizulu* (Isizulu world view)-grounded analytic toolkit attuned to performers' internal performance logic.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a blended theoretical framework comprising Decolonial Theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and African musicology, each offering a critical lens for analysing *umaskandi* performance. Decolonial theory challenges Eurocentric analytical dominance by foregrounding practitioner worldviews, embodied knowledge, and Isizulu conceptual categories, aligning with contemporary scholarship that critiques structural inequalities in African music education and calls for epistemic justice (McConnachie, 2026). Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) frame musical knowledge as relational, embodied, intergenerational, and linguistically grounded, a view reinforced by recent work demonstrating the centrality of community-rooted epistemologies and oral traditions in African musical practice (Made & Breakfast, 2023). Similarly, IKS underscores that concepts such as *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation), *ukusetha*, *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) operate not simply as technical musical elements but as culturally encoded modes of knowledge embedded in language, performance praxis, and communal memory (Moloi & Mapaya, 2022). African musicology further contributes emic constructs that centre African ontologies and musical systems, resonating with recent arguments for curriculum transformation that position African musical epistemologies as foundational rather than peripheral (Yende, 2026). African-centred frameworks, such as Authority's (2025) Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory, emphasise rhythm, narrative, and performance as sovereign epistemological systems capable of regenerating and transmitting indigenous knowledge (Authority, 2025). Analytically, these



combined lenses guided the coding scheme, prosody, identity cues, ensemble initiation, and trance markers, and supported the synthesis of *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations), as interconnected sites of indigenous musical knowledge grounded in African philosophical and aesthetic traditions.

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research design, which is particularly appropriate for exploring the cultural meanings, lived experiences, and contextual nuances embedded in *umaskandi* performance practice. Such an approach foregrounds participants' subjective interpretations and acknowledges knowledge as socially and culturally constructed. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with experienced *omaskandi* practitioners and *umaskandi* producers, allowing for both guided inquiry and flexibility in eliciting rich, narrative accounts. These interviews were complemented by document analysis, including field notes, archival records, and relevant scholarly literature, to deepen contextual understanding and support data triangulation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria based on demonstrable expertise in key performance components, including *ukusetha* (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations). This ensured that the study privileged knowledgeable voices rooted in practice, while deliberately excluding novice participants to maintain analytical depth and cultural specificity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

All interviews were conducted in Isizulu to preserve linguistic authenticity and cultural nuance, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed, and translated into English where necessary, ensuring careful attention to meaning and context. Data analysis employed a reflexive thematic approach, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives while being informed by the study's theoretical framework (Atieno, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To establish trustworthiness, strategies such as prolonged field engagement, member checking for validation, and triangulation across data sources were utilised to enhance credibility and dependability (Muzari et al., 2022; Gamage, 2025). The researcher's positionality as both an academic and cultural insider was critically examined through ongoing reflexivity to identify potential biases, maintain analytical rigour, and ensure interpretations were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than researcher assumptions. The dataset comprised both original 2023 interviews and archived 2017 interviews, with the latter verified for relevance by re-contacting participants to confirm the stability of their views on *umaskandi* performance, which most reported as consistent, reflecting broader trends rather than fundamental changes. This validation process provided longitudinal depth and historical context, strengthening the study's accuracy and comprehensiveness.

Ukusetha as a Cultural-Philosophical Practice

Analysis of the interview data indicates that *umaskandi* practitioners understand *ukusetha* (tuning) as more than the technical adjustment of instruments. Rather than describing tuning in terms of achieving a standardised pitch, participants consistently associated *ukusetha* (tuning) with establishing *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation), a culturally recognised sonic reference learned through experience and embodied musical practice. Their accounts suggest that *ukusetha* (tuning) is a relational process through which instruments are aligned with established *umaskandi* sound aesthetics, performance practice, and performer identity. One participant explained that *ukusetha* (tuning) begins with *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) to assess whether the instrument has achieved the desired sonic relationship. He states, "*uma uqala nje usetha, usetha ngazo izihlabo/ihlabo/intela ukuzwa ukuthi izintambo zakho zingenelene yini*" (when you start tuning, you use *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* to hear whether your strings are communicating or connecting) (N. Ntuli, personal communication, 5 May 2017).



This account illustrates that practitioners do not evaluate tuning through fixed pitch standards but through recognised musical passages that enable them to hear whether the instrument resonates according to *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation). The findings therefore suggest that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) functions simultaneously as a musical introduction and as an indigenous diagnostic method for evaluating sonic coherence.

Participants further distinguished *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) from Western notions of fixed-frequency tuning. Rather than referring to a universal pitch standard such as A = 440 Hz, they described *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) as an embodied sonic orientation that performers recognise through listening and performance experience. In this sense, practitioners explained that "*omaskandi basetha ushuni*" (omaskandi tune according to a particular *ushuni*) rather than modifying instruments to create alternative tuning systems. For string instruments, the conventional tuning configuration remains intact while performers achieve distinctive *umaskandi* sonorities through culturally recognised relationships among the strings, performance techniques, and melodic organisation. Likewise, *inkostini* (concertina), although commonly tuned in G/C configurations, is adjusted by specialist makers so that its tonal character aligns with the sonic expectations of a particular *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation).

The interviews also revealed that *ukusetha* (tuning) extends beyond tuning to include indigenous approaches to pitch transposition. Participants described the use of *ibriji* (partial capo) as a practical innovation developed within *umaskandi* performance traditions to preserve *umsetho* (tuning) while accommodating different vocal ranges and performance contexts. One participant recalled the earlier construction of *ibriji*; he stated, "*ukuqala kwami besisebenzisa uthi ubophe ngentambo*" (when I started, we used a stick tied with a string), before adding, "*sekwabakhona awesilungu namhlanje sesisebenzisa wona*" (later commercially manufactured ones became available and today we use them) (M. Majola, personal communication, 4 April 2017). Another participant explained that the use of *ibriji* depends on the specific *ushuni* being performed, he elaborates, "*kukhona ushuni ophoqa ukuthi ngisebenzise ibriji, uma ngizodlala loshuni okuthiwa ispoynandi. Ngithatha ipulangi ngilivule isikhala ukuthi zibopheke zonke izintambo ngaphandle kweyesithupha*" (there is a particular *ushuni* that requires me to use *ibriji* when I play *ispoynandi*. I prepare a small piece of wood so that it holds all the strings except the sixth string) (N. Ntuli, personal communication, 5 May 2017).

These accounts demonstrate that *ibriji* (partial capo) is not simply borrowed technology but an indigenous adaptation whose configuration is determined by the musical requirements of particular *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation). The selective placement of the capo, including leaving the sixth string uncapoed when performing *ispoynandi* (*ushuni* found in *umaskandi*), reflects culturally specific musical reasoning rather than conformity to Western performance conventions.

Taken together, these findings position *ukusetha* (turning) as a culturally embedded practice through which performers establish sonic coherence, preserve stylistic identity, and negotiate relationships between instruments, performance, and community. Rather than functioning as a procedure for achieving standardised pitch, *ukusetha* (tuning) operates as an indigenous framework for organising sound according to the aesthetic principles of *umaskandi*. This interpretation resonates with Bebey's (1975) observation that African musical instruments may be tuned to reflect linguistic organisation and supports Nketia's (1975) argument that African musical systems are grounded in culturally specific aesthetic principles. Likewise, Moloi and Mapaya (2022) conceptualise *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) as an indigenous framework of sound organisation rather than an alternative tuning system, while Beaton and Scavone (2021) distinguish culturally situated tuning practices from universal fixed-frequency standards. Collectively, these studies reinforce the interpretation emerging from the participants' accounts that *ukusetha* (turning) should be understood



as a philosophical and epistemological practice through which *umaskandi* (umaskandi practitioners) organise sound, identity, and cultural meaning. Building on this understanding of *ukusetha* (tuning), the following section examines *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) as the performative medium through which practitioners publicly affirm *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) and articulate musical identity.

***Izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* as Signature, Tuning Confirmation, and Identity Display**

Analysis of the interview data indicates that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) occupy a central position in *umaskandi* performance. Participants consistently described these introductory passages as serving multiple functions beyond simply opening a song. Rather than being ornamental preludes, they explained that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) confirm *umsetho* (tuning), signal *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation), introduce the performer, and prepare both fellow musicians and listeners for the performance that follows. One participant explained, "*izihlabo/ihlabo/intela ukukhombisa into ozoyidlala, njengoshuni ozowudlala, futhi bonke umaskandi bangempela ingoma yakhe uyizwa ngezihlabo yena engakaculi, engakasho lutho*" (*izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* show what you are going to play, for example the *ushuni* you are about to perform, and every genuine umaskandi musician can be recognised through *izihlabo* before singing or saying anything) (T. Mbatha, personal communications, 5 May 2017).

Other participants similarly emphasised the introductory function of these introductory passages, highlighting, "*izihlabo/ihlabo/intela zibalulekile ngoba yizo ezikuvezayo*" (*izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* are important because they introduce you) (V. Nondala and S. Ndwonde, personal communications, 10 April 2017). These accounts demonstrate that participants understood *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) as sonic identifiers through which performers establish their musical identity before any lyrics are sung. Recognition therefore occurs through sound itself rather than through verbal introduction, with experienced listeners able to identify both the performer and *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) from the opening instrumental gestures alone. The findings suggest that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) function simultaneously as declarations of artistic identity and confirmations of the successful outcome of *ukusetha* (tuning).

Participants also associated *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) with evaluating the relationship between performer and instrument. As discussed in the preceding section, these passages enable musicians to assess whether the strings resonate appropriately according to the selected *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation). In this respect, *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) perform both expressive and diagnostic functions, providing performers with an aural confirmation that the instrument has achieved the desired sonic coherence before the song begins.

The data further suggest that while each *umaskandi* performer develops distinctive introductory patterns, these individual expressions remain grounded within shared stylistic conventions of the genre. Participants described *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) as spaces in which technical proficiency, personal style, and cultural knowledge converge. Their observations indicate that individuality in *umaskandi* is not achieved by departing from tradition but through creative expression within an established indigenous musical framework.

These findings correspond with Davies' (1994) description of *izihlabo* (introductory passages) as rapid, largely unmetred passages performed through *ukupika*, the characteristic thumb-and-index-finger guitar technique of *umaskandi*. Davies argues that these passages function as expressive displays while simultaneously preparing the transition into the main body of the song. The present findings extend this interpretation by demonstrating that practitioners themselves understand *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) not only as displays of virtuosity but also as culturally meaningful practices



through which *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation), performer identity, and instrumental coherence are publicly affirmed.

Participants further indicated that although contemporary *umaskandi* ensembles frequently incorporate additional introductory gestures, including *inkostini* (concertina) flourishes, bass ostinati, and *ukubiza ingoma* (vocal calls), these developments do not diminish the significance of *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages). Instead, such additions complement the established introductory framework while preserving the central role of *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) in initiating performance. This finding supports Ntombela's (2017) observation that *umaskandi* performance practices continue to evolve without abandoning their foundational aesthetic principles.

Viewed more broadly, the participants' descriptions reveal performance principles that resonate across Amazulu musical traditions. Rather than relying on external conductors or hierarchical direction, performers described initiation as emerging from within the ensemble through recognised musical cues. Similar performance logics have been documented in *indlamu* and *ingoma* (Isizulu music and dance compound), where solo performance prepares collective participation (Ngema, 2007). This is seen in *umbhaqanga* (a genre of South African music), where introductory keyboard passages establish the musical trajectory of the performance, and in *isicathamiya* (a genre of South African music), where vocal leaders provide tuning cues that coordinate ensemble entry without external direction (Erlmann, 1996). These comparisons suggest that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) participate in a broader indigenous philosophy of ensemble coordination grounded in relational attunement rather than hierarchical control.

Izibongo zomaskandi

Data analysis indicates that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) occupy a distinctive place within *umaskandi* performance. Participants described these praise recitations as emerging spontaneously during performance rather than being delivered at predetermined moments. They explained that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) often arise when performers enter a heightened emotional or spiritual state associated with *usinga* or *amadlingozi* (a trance into the spiritual realm), enabling them to express personal identity, historical memory, and social experience with greater intensity. One participant explained, "*umaskandi ayaye azibonge ngisho kungekho muntu, engabonwa muntu, kuyazifikela nje ngoba phela kusuke sekuvuke usinga sekungathi usungasho noma yini*" (umaskandi practitioner may recite praises even when alone and unseen because *usinga* has arisen, creating a feeling that one can express anything.) (N. Ntuli, personal communication, 5 May 2017).

This account suggests that participants did not understand *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) merely as prepared poetic texts performed for an audience. Instead, they described them as spontaneous expressions that emerge from an altered performative consciousness. The performance of *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) is therefore not dependent upon audience response but upon the performer's internal state, where *usinga* or *amadlingozi* (a trance into the spiritual realm) activates memories, emotions, and forms of expression that might otherwise remain unspoken.

Participants further described *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) as moments through which performers articulate relationships with family, ancestry, place, and community. These recitations frequently reference rivers, mountains, homesteads, clan affiliations, and *izinduna* (chiefs), allowing performers to situate themselves within broader historical and cultural networks. The findings therefore indicate that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) function not only as personal self-praise but also as performances of collective memory and cultural belonging.



The data further suggest that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) contribute significantly to the overall trajectory of *umaskandi* performance. Participants described these recitations as intensifying the emotional and performative energy of the song, often preceding heightened *ukugiyi* (dance) and increased interaction between performers and accompanying musicians. Rather than interrupting musical flow, *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) become integral to the unfolding dramatic structure of the performance, reinforcing relationships between spoken poetry, instrumental accompaniment, bodily movement, and communal participation.

These findings resonate with Ntuli and Makhambeni's (1998) observation that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) differ from earlier praise traditions because they are performed alongside musical instruments. Their integration into instrumental performance enables performers to combine spoken praise with melodic and rhythmic accompaniment, producing a distinctive expressive form within *umaskandi*. Similarly, Msimang (1986) observes that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) encompass historical narratives, identity markers, praise, and social commentary, functions that were consistently reflected in the participants' descriptions.

The participants' accounts further demonstrate that *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) cannot be understood solely as verbal texts. Their effectiveness depends upon the interaction of speech rhythm, vocal inflection, instrumental accompaniment, bodily movement, and performance context. This interpretation aligns with Nketia's (1975) argument that the meaning of African praise poetry is realised through performance rather than through text alone. Likewise, Fikeni (2006) characterises *izibongo* (praises) as integrating social, political, historical, and spiritual dimensions, while Ngema (2020) argues that their metaphorical richness often exceeds the explanatory capacity of Western analytical categories. The present findings extend these perspectives by demonstrating that *umaskandi* practitioners associate *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) with *usinga* or *amadlingozi* (a trance into the spiritual realm), emphasising their experiential and spiritual dimensions alongside their poetic and historical functions.

Taken together, the findings position *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) as culturally embedded performances through which identity, memory, spirituality, and community are negotiated simultaneously. Rather than functioning as decorative interruptions within a song, *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) emerge as climactic moments that connect verbal artistry, instrumental performance, bodily expression, and spiritual consciousness. The participants' descriptions therefore challenge analytical approaches that isolate musical, poetic, or choreographic elements from one another. Instead, they support an indigenous understanding of *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) as holistic performances in which multiple forms of knowledge and expression converge.

These findings further suggest that analyses of *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) should attend to the interaction between speech prosody, melodic contour, rhythmic organisation, performance timing, and bodily movement. Such an approach foregrounds practitioner knowledge and provides a more culturally responsive framework for understanding *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) than analyses that privilege textual transcription alone. By situating praise poetry within its performative and spiritual context, researchers are better positioned to appreciate its significance as a central expression of *ubuciko Besizulu* (Isizulu artistic ability/knowledge) and as an important site of indigenous musical knowledge.



Umaskandi performance structural features

The structural features of *umaskandi* performance are closely tied to its historical development and the socio-cultural conditions that shaped it. Several scholars argue that the genre emerged in response to significant socio-economic transformations within indigenous South African communities, while others trace its lineage to *umculo womdabu* (Isizulu musical practices and performance logics), particularly bow traditions such as *umakhweyana* (Rycroft, 1977; Impey, 1983; Nhlapo, 1998). Early accounts show that *umaskandi* initially existed as a solo tradition performed with a one-string guitar, emphasising the intimate relationship between the performer, the instrument, and personal narrative. Ntombela (2011) notes that early *umaskandi* was performed alone, a point supported by Ntuli (2017)'s assertion that "*umaskandi qobo lwakhe ubungathakwa nalutho, bekuba isiginci nephimbo lomuntu*" (the original umaskandi was not mixed with anything; it was the guitar and the person's voice). (N. Ntuli, personal communication, May 05, 2017).

Documentary evidence suggests that the genre took shape in the late 19th century and underwent significant transformation by the mid-20th century. When John Bhengu (Phuzushukela) recorded his early works in the 1950s, studio producers, familiar with the commercial *umbhaqanga* (a genre of South African music) sound, encouraged the inclusion of additional musicians to enhance the recordings' marketability (Ntombela, 2011; Davies, 1994). This intervention marked a shift from a solo practice to an ensemble-based format, incorporating instruments such as bass guitar, drums, concertina, and later keyboards. These changes coincided with the commodification of *umaskandi*, drawing it into the broader music industry value chain and reshaping performance expectations through capitalist imperatives (Ntombela, 2011).

Within performance, *umaskandi* aims to evoke a sequence of psychological and spiritual states described by Mapaya (2013), "heightened consciousness, artistic excitement, and ultimately a spiritual climax" (Mapaya, 2013, p. 141). These progressive states reveal *umaskandi* as more than entertainment; it is an artistic-philosophical practice through which performers express emotion, intentionality, and spiritual insight. This perspective aligns with the article's broader argument that *umaskandi* operates within an African epistemological system that integrates emotion, worldview, identity, and spirituality.

Structurally, most *umaskandi* performances begin with *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), usually delivered on guitar, functioning as sonic identifiers and setting *ushuni* (*umaskandi* concept of sound organisation) for the performance (Ntombela, 2017). As Ntombela (2011) explains, after *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), the ensemble gradually enters, with instruments often conversing before the vocal lines emerge. Performers momentarily introduce themselves through musical or vocal gestures, an act intertwined with identity and artistic legitimacy in *umaskandi* tradition. While commercial studio practices have influenced standardised song structures, live performances often remain fluid. In these contexts, length and form are not predetermined; instead, the performance builds organically toward a climax, commonly marked by the onset of *izibongo zomaskandi* (*umaskandi* praise recitations), before concluding in various personalised ways (Ntombela, 2011).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that existing musicological frameworks remain insufficient for analysing *umaskandi* performance because they privilege Western conceptualisations of musical structure, tuning, and form. As several scholars have shown, Western analytical paradigms tend to universalise their assumptions about pitch organisation, metre, and form (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1975). This study reinforces those critiques by demonstrating that key *umaskandi* performance concepts,



ukusetha (tuning), *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), and *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations), are rooted in indigenous epistemologies that foreground memory, relationality, prosody, spirituality, and performer identity. These dimensions fall outside the scope of conventional Western analytical tools, underscoring the need for a culturally grounded analytical framework.

The discussion of *ukusetha* (tuning) reveals that tuning in *umaskandi* functions not merely as a technical adjustment but as a culturally embedded process tied to *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation), a sonic and philosophical reference system that guides performers through embodied memory. Unlike Western standardisation practices such as A=440 Hz, *ukusetha* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation) draws on relational attunement between the instrument, performer, and community. This aligns with Bebey's (1975) argument that African musical instruments may be tuned to enhance linguistic comprehension rather than adhere to externally imposed pitch norms. The study's findings extend this discourse by showing how performers use *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) diagnostically to confirm string resonance and coherence with *ushuni* (umaskandi concept of sound organisation). These insights deepen our understanding of *ukusetha* (tuning) as an epistemological practice shaped by worldview and cultural meaning rather than acoustical precision alone.

Similarly, the study demonstrates that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) perform far more than introductory or ornamental functions. Their role as identity markers, ensemble cues, and tuning-confirmation gestures challenges analytical traditions that treat preludes as mere embellishments. Field evidence confirms that experienced *omaskandi* (plural of *omaskandi*) can identify a performer through *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) even before the lyrics begin, reflecting the semiotic and cultural density of the performance. This supports Davies' (1994) observation that *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) serve both expressive and structural roles in performance. Their comparison with analogous introductory devices in *isicathamiya*, *umbhaqanga* (genres of South African music), and *indlamu* (Isizulu music and dance compound) reveals a broader indigenous aesthetic in which performance leadership emerges organically from within the ensemble through relational cues rather than hierarchical direction (Erlmann, 1996; Ngema, 2007). This underscores a performance ontology rooted in communal attunement and interdependence.

The findings regarding *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations) further illuminate the limitations of Western analytical perspectives. The study shows that these mid-performance recitations, often triggered by *usinga/amadlingozi* (a trance into the spiritual realm), operate as cultural and spiritual climaxes that merge oral poetry, personal history, and communal memory. Their dense metaphorical language and prosodic variation resist translation into Western categories of text-music relationships. This aligns with Pooley's (2016) interpretation of praise poetry as context-dependent social rites, and with Fikeni's (2006) observation that *izibongo* (praises) interweave political, spiritual, and historical dimensions. The findings support a prosody-centred analytical approach that integrates speech-tone patterns, rhetorical devices, and structural placement, elements typically marginalised by Western music theory frameworks.

Finally, the study's analysis of *umaskandi* structure affirms its fluidity and responsiveness to socio-historical forces. While early *umaskandi* existed as a solo tradition centred on the intimate relationship between performer and instrument, commercialisation introduced ensemble expansion and new instrumental textures (Davies, 1994; Ntombela, 2011). Nevertheless, despite these changes, core indigenous principles, particularly the sequencing of *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), ensemble entry, and climax through *izibongo zomaskandi* (umaskandi praise recitations), remain intact. This persistence suggests that even in modern contexts, *umaskandi* performance continues to be shaped



by African epistemologies that prioritise emotional, spiritual, and communal expression (Mapaya, 2013).

Collectively, these findings reinforce the argument that African musicological analysis must prioritise local worldviews, language, and practitioner-derived meanings to avoid misrepresenting indigenous musical traditions. The study contributes to this agenda by proposing analytical indicators grounded in emic perspectives, which can be integrated into music education, research, and cultural preservation. Such an approach not only advances epistemic justice but also aligns with broader calls to indigenise musicology (Yende et al., 2024; Mapaya, 2014).

Conclusion

This article appraises current descriptive and analytical tools for *umaskandi* musicology, music-making, principles, and practices. Providing more flexible, adaptable analytical tools can enhance our understanding of *umaskandi* performance. As such, this article has covered some of the reasons that have impeded our understanding of our African concepts and, thus, our way of life. In the case of *ukusetha* (tuning), it was found that while it is similar to tuning an instrument, its concept is different since *omaskandi basetha ushuni* (*omaskandi* tune their instrument according to a particular *ushuni*). They use *ibriji* (capo) to raise or lower the pitch to play in different keys using the same *umsetho* (tuning). The study's findings on *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages) show that they played a multifaceted role, confirming *umsetho* (tuning), introducing *ushuni ushuni* (*umaskandi* concept of sound organisation), introducing *umaskandi*, and introducing *umaskandi* performances. The role of *izibongo zomaskandi* (*umaskandi* praise recitations) was also highlighted as a key characteristic of *umaskandi* performance. Finally, structural features of *umaskandi* performance were also discussed. *Umaskandi* performances begin with *izihlabo/ihlabo/intela* (introductory passages), which serve, among other things, as an introduction, followed by the body, and then the ending.

This research underscores the value of adopting a holistic, culturally sensitive approach to examining indigenous musical traditions, ultimately expanding our understanding and fostering greater appreciation for the cultural diversity of our world. Recognising and incorporating the practitioners' worldview and language is not only a matter of academic rigour but also an ethical imperative. It promotes a more profound understanding of African music, contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage, and ensures that research is conducted in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner. It is recommended that researchers should actively engage with their study communities and prioritise their knowledge and perspectives. Going forward, research should focus on developing and evaluating indigenous, practitioner-informed analytical frameworks to deepen understanding amid the ongoing evolution of *umaskandi* performance.

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