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# Identifications through Musical Expressions of Africanness in Slovenia\*

## Identifikacije skozi glasbeno izražanje afriškosti v Sloveniji\*\*

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### IZVLEČEK

### ABSTRACT

Članek predstavlja, kako je afriškost (kot reprezentacija in identifikacija z afriško kulturo) predstavljena v Sloveniji. Afriškost javno predstavlja bodisi afriška diaspora, ki etnično identifikacijo vzpostavlja preko kulture, bodisi ne-Afričani, ki so iz različnih razlogov vzpostavili kulturne vezi z glasbo in plesom. Članek prikaže, v katerih primerih glasba nudi prostor varnosti in samoidentifikacije, prostor fascinacije, estetske izraznosti ali kulturne rasti in obogatitve.

In the article I am interested in the ways that Africanness (as a representation of and identification with African culture) is musically performed in Slovenia. Africanness is being publicly represented either by African diaspora that is negotiating their ethnic identifications through culture or non-Africans that have established connections with African culture for various reasons. The article illustrates in which cases music offers a space of safety and self-identification, a place of fascination, aesthetic expression or cultural growth and enrichment.

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## 1. Introduction

In their music and dance production, public presentations of formally organized migrant communities often draw from traditional music and dance of their country of origin, due to the fact that on a global scale, traditional music has become (or remains), through various nationalization and heritage processes in ideology and rhetoric, a label for the representation of nationality or ethnicity. Therefore, such presentations often lead the mainstream society to a generalized understanding of migrants as “internally homogenous ethnic groups” or entities, and their culture as “simply the preservation of national/ethnic identity in exile”.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary research and debates often criticize such concepts and contribute to a constructivist understanding of identity dynamics, with cultural products such as traditional music and dance being merely a “basis for continuous construction and renegotiation of ethnic identities”.<sup>2</sup> In-depth studies based on qualitative case analysis show that attachments to ethnicity are often more complex, while representations of traditions can be a fusion of hybrid musical elements and genres, and result of transnational and global connections. However, those musical performances can be seen as “identity performances”<sup>3</sup> where identities as “points of temporary attachment to a subject-position”<sup>4</sup> are maintained, negotiated, and developed in their new settings through elements such as music, sound, gesture, movement, bodies, and atmospheres.

In this sense, this paper, which focuses on the musical activity of African migrants and their descendants in Slovenia, illustrates a series of dynamic processes that co-create musical representations of Africanness. The main focus of the paper is on contemporary production of the African diaspora and its most recognizable musical formation, the Sankofa Choir, which has been active in Slovenia for the last ten years. Having been present at some of their performances and talked with the choir members and leaders, I began to ask myself questions about the meaning and role of music in the context of their (ethno)identity identifications, about the means and processes of forming cultural identity expressions in the public space, about the internal causes for their music-identity performance, and the external factors affecting their expression.

This paper seeks to answer these questions by firstly presenting a brief historical overview of the cultural activities of African migrants in the Slovenian public space, since they have not yet been documented. In the second part, it focuses on the more prominent currently active cultural formation (Baobab Association and its Sankofa Choir) and further elaborates on the analysis of their membership structure and musical repertoire, as well as the related funding structures and contexts of public performances of the choir. Most of the information needed for the analyzes and interpretations presented in the paper was obtained through interviews and online communication with members of the choir, sheet music, music recordings, and web presentations of the choir.

1 Alenka Bartulović and Miha Kozorog, “Gender and music-making in exile,” *Dve domovini* 46 (2017): 40.

2 Rolf Lidskog, “The role of music in ethnic identity formation in diaspora: a research review,” *International Social Science Journal* 66 (2017): 23.

3 Linda Duits, *Multi - Girl - Culture: An Ethnography of Doing Identity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 35.

4 Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity?’” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd., 1996), 6.

## 2. Meanings and ways of organizing cultural activities of the African diaspora

Compared to many other European countries, the presence of African migrants and their descendants in Slovenia is small but noticeable. Due to their small number, active individuals or groups of the community identify themselves (when they do so) as 'African', and rarely associate their self-identification with a particular nationality, ethnicity or culture from which they originate. At the same time, their small number is most likely the reason for their need to emphasize common elements rather than differences, and the simplified Pan-African representation is also more attractive for public in terms of promotion. This self-identification certainly also stems from the position of the majority population which tends to generally perceive all blacks as Africans. In the following, I occasionally use such designation myself, mainly due to the fact that cultural formations appear under this term as community formations, and because the members of the community themselves generally did not stress their closer cultural ties with a particular country.

Cultural formations of the African diaspora in Slovenia can be traced back to former Yugoslavia and the first formally organized arrivals of African migrants to Slovenia. In the context of the Non-Aligned Movement,<sup>5</sup> which – among other things – enabled many African students to receive scholarships at Yugoslav universities, some of them found a new home or created families in Slovenia. Today, the majority of the African diaspora consists of these migrants and their (now second- and third-generation) descendants, along with those who have migrated to Slovenia in the last decade for economic, political or personal reasons.

There are few written records of the history of the cultural activity of the African diaspora in Slovenia,<sup>6</sup> so I present it in the words of one of the most active members and initiators of the founding of certain cultural communities, Max Zimani. Due to his position as an migrant, he felt the need to get formally involved in various s.c. African associations, which also resulted in his current business career,<sup>7</sup> and the ever-present cultural ties motivated him to perfect his musical skills. As he explains, he used to play drums in Zimbabwe, though entirely at the amateur level, whereas here, he has built on his knowledge both in this area as well as in the field of dance and singing. Upon his arrival at the student campus in Ljubljana in 1983, there was already a so-called Afro Disco operating in the basement of the Building 4 of the campus, but was soon afterwards shut down due to some problems. He and his two friends decided to bring it back to life, and the redesigned Afro Disco with its six DJs from different African countries gained recognition within the wider alternative scene of the time, both in

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5 The Non-Aligned Movement was founded in 1955, and the meeting was first held in Belgrade in 1961. The principle of the movement was to form a coalition of countries as an alternative to the division of world into blocks and the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia played an important role in the development of the movement.

6 The same is true of the Croatian area. In her master's thesis, Mojca Piškor mentions the International Students' Club, which was presented to her by her Ethiopian friend who used to attend such events during his student years. See Mojca Piškor, *World music i njegova recepcija u Hrvatskoj uz studij primjera recepcije i percepcije afričkih glazbi u Hrvatskoj* (Master's Thesis, Academy of Music, University of Zagreb, 2005).

7 Max Zimani is the founder and programme director of the Global Institute – Institute for Global Learning, and the founder and owner of Skuhna, a social enterprise.

Slovenia and beyond. Max explains the musical and social significance of the Afro Disco, both for the integration of Africans and for the opening up of Slovenian society to different cultural influences:

*We were a serious alternative to other music venues. People were visiting the disco from Austria or from Belgrade, not just Africans. [...] This Afro Disco was important in this sense, not only did it bring together Africans and Slovenians, assisting in the integration process of Africans, it was also a place where future partners met, many people met their future husband or wife here. [...] It was a very important place for socialization.*<sup>8</sup>

The official formation, the African Students Union<sup>9</sup> with sections in Maribor and Ljubljana, included a cultural section under which a folk dance ensemble operated in the 1980s. Max, who also presided the Ljubljana section and later the entire Union, was actively involved as a dancer and drummer. While one can observe considerable concern of folklore ensembles of Slovenian and other minority communities (especially from the former Yugoslavia) with the concept of “authentic presentations of original folklore”, Max describes their attitude towards the means of representation in the following words:

*We bought our clothes in Mali [...], and drums as well, we bought them there. Quite simply, we had a chance. We were very well aware of our limitations. [...] If you are an African folk dance ensemble [...] One has to reach an agreement, a sort of consensus. We were never too loud in proclaiming our Africanness, that we are everything African. No, it was a snippet, our contribution to these different cultures.*<sup>10</sup>

Even in later, even more recognizable formations such as Afrofolklor folk dance group (operated in early 1990s) and Kesukozi drum and dance group (operated at the turn of the millennium),<sup>11</sup> where Max was involved as a drummer, the concept of hybridization and improvisation prevailed (this is especially true for Kesukozi). As Max points out, each member contributed a piece of cultural knowledge from their own country, providing the group with the basis and structure for upgrading of their songs:

<sup>8</sup> Max Zimani, in discussion with the author, August 1, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> After the independence of Slovenia, African Students Union (sln. Zveza afriških studentov) came under the umbrella of the International Friendship Club (sln. Klub mednarodnega prijateljstva), which operated within Student Organization of Slovenia (sln. Študentska organizacija Slovenije). It had been active for a few years and also brought together migrants from other countries, though African were their most active members. After the turn of the century, African Centre Association (sln. društvo Afriški center), led by Max Zimani in 2005, was important to the African community. The African Centre Association added social content to the cultural presentation, such as helping new migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, mentoring training, social integration of Africans. In their words, one of their important achievements is the analysis of school textbooks that address African topics, and contributing to the changes in the colonialist and Eurocentric content in one of the textbooks. See, for example Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik, ed., *IN – IN: življenjske zgodbe o sestavljenih identitetah* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Max Zimani, in discussion with the author, August 1, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The name represents the initial syllables of the founding members' countries of origin: Kenya, Sudan, Congo and Zimbabwe.

*At Kesukozi, you had different songs from different cultures. What we tried to do was to always try to leave our mark. Kesukozi was a distinctly improvisational [group]. What we had was just a structure.*<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the public formation such as folk dance groups and the Kesukozi music group, Africans in Slovenia also created participatory cultural spaces, reviving drumming, dance workshops and “African nights” in the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium (in places such as Jazbina, Druga pomoč, Konkurenca bar, Gromka), and later complementing the musical segment in the form of concerts with educational content such as roundtables on pressing social topics or culinary experiences (e.g., Club Gromka).<sup>13</sup>

For some, amateur cultural formations represented a starting point for their further involvement related to Africa, including professional one. Max recalls many people, both Africans and non-Africans, whose journey began in the drumming or dance workshops or were permanently influenced by their visits to Afro Disco or later social events in the context of African nights:

*They perhaps attended some drumming class 20 years ago, or dance class, and they kind of grew fond of African culture, and later did something about it, and today they work with Africa. For example, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But now I am referring to concrete individuals, as I know that we were together years ago, and perhaps this is why they are now working in areas that somehow relate to migrations or with Africa, Africans. So this is the effect that I am talking about, it is very hard to measure it or prove it, but it does exist.*<sup>14</sup>

Africa Day was the central event of the African diaspora in the 1990s, which served as a framework for presenting their cultural activities. For the last 8 years, the organization of the event was taken over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The cultural programme is presented by invited cultural artists which represent African culture in Slovenia, but it is only presented as an accompanying programme of a business economic conference.<sup>15</sup>

Among the more visible associations organizing cultural activities of the African diaspora today is the African Village Institution (sln. Zavod Afriška vas) with their yearly festival African Village Fest and collaboration with individual performers in the context of the Africa Day event. The festival features music or theatre events (e.g., children’s theatre performance, guest performances by musicians, drumming performances), with the cultural programme complemented by culinary delights (African cuisine and drinks) and business activities such as stalls offering “exotic multicultural” tourist products (henna paintings, knitting, Mayan calendars, Brazilian Palo Santo wood, etc.).

In 2019, Africa Day, coorganized with certain cultural institutions, was celebrated for the first time by the Baobab Association (presented in more detail below). The event took

12 Max Zimani, in discussion with the author, August 1, 2019.

13 These activities also coincided with the active role of Max Zimani and some of his colleagues within the African Centre Society.

14 Max Zimani, in discussion with the author, August 1, 2019.

15 An example of an announcement for the 2019 event can be found at the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: [http://mzz.arhiv-spletisc.gov.si/si/medijsko\\_sredisce/novica/36939/](http://mzz.arhiv-spletisc.gov.si/si/medijsko_sredisce/novica/36939/), accessed August 9, 2019.

place in Maribor, with exclusively cultural events such as storytelling, drumming and dance workshops for children and adults, and drumming group performance. Today, there are some active members of the African community in Maribor as well (some of them were formerly active in Ljubljana), who are now reviving the new surrounding with the conscious intention of bringing the African culture both to adopted children from Africa<sup>16</sup> and to their parents, as well as to their offspring, the second- and third-generation African migrants:

*Above all, this activity is important for children of African roots, in order for them to search for their cultural identity, and to develop a positive self-image through their own engagement. This need is present both in the adoptive parents' community, as well as among the members of the African community who came to Slovenia for economic migration or humanitarian reasons.*<sup>17</sup>

Today, the Baobab Arts and Cultural Association is one of the more prominent associations in Slovenia, focusing primarily on music, dance and theatre in connection with African cultures. It is based in Ljubljana, but is expanding its activities to Maribor due to the relocation of some of its members to that area. The association organizes dance and drumming classes, workshops, and events for children. A member of the association, a descendant of the second-generation migrants, founded the Sankofa Choir in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Diversity of choir members and their motives for membership

Sankofa Choir was designed as a choir intended exclusively for African migrants, their partners and descendants, which is one of the reasons for the diversity of the membership structure also in terms of attachment to African culture. Over the last decade, the choir, whose structure and membership numbers have varied, consisted of: a) first-generation African migrants (dating back to the times of politically motivated African migration to Yugoslavia), b) second-generation African migrants, c) Slovenian women, mostly partners or ex-partners of African migrants, as well as mothers of children resulting from these relationships, and d) recently arrived first generation of African migrants.

The membership of the choir is very unstable, in the sense that a considerable number of members leave the choir after a certain period of time (some members often go on longer visits to African countries, others have relocated from Ljubljana, etc.). The choir usually consists of a relatively small number of singers (compared to the "traditional" choirs in Slovenia),<sup>19</sup> which also poses a certain challenge, both in

16 There has been a slight increase in the number of adopted children from African countries over the last decade. In informal conversations with parents of adopted children (two families), I learned that because of their children, they like to attend events connected with African culture, as well as to meet, exchange experiences and help those who are dealing with adoption.

17 "Spoznavanje in ohranjanje kulturnih izročil Afrike. Medkulturni in medgeneracijski pevski zbor," Vetrinjski dvor, accessed August 5, 2019, [https://www.vetrinjski-dvor.si/dogodki/medkulturni-in-medgeneracijski-pevski-zbor\\_4](https://www.vetrinjski-dvor.si/dogodki/medkulturni-in-medgeneracijski-pevski-zbor_4).

18 The name Sankofa is derived from the Ghanaian symbol that signifies taking something good from the past and use it in the future (<http://www.baobab.si/o-zboru>, accessed August 5, 2019).

19 At the time of my first interview, there were around 10 members of the choir, and at the time of my last interview, the number rose to almost 20. This was mainly due to the upcoming commemoration of the choir's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a concert.

terms of working on the repertoire and in terms of the songs that have to be constantly arranged for the changing ensemble (and sometimes also for joint performances with instrumentalists or dancers). At the beginning of my research in 2018,<sup>20</sup> the membership structure with regard to the country of origin was as follows: two singers were born in Africa, while the others were descendants of migrants or partners of African migrants, born in Slovenia.

Different social relations and cultural connections to Africa influence the members' impulses and identification motives for their participation in the choir. For many of the singers, children represent an important aspect in the formation of the choir, with many of them actually feeling an increased need to transmit cultural values and knowledge after they have their own children. Initially, the children were present at the rehearsals, as the choir members wanted their children to be part of their activities, as is very often the case in Africa. However, as one of the singers put it, "in an African spirit, it is just fine for our children to be with us, but here, children are raised as they are [...]. They need more attention. In Guinea, I never say children interfere with the creative process."<sup>21</sup> Eventually, they provided care for the children, but they still remain close by, and the choir gives them a small performance at the end of the rehearsal, helping children to get to know the repertoire from an early age.

Thus, one of the former singers of Slovenian origin (a single mother) emphasizes the importance of transferring music culture and language, and also tries to learn some of the phrases online: "I feel it's the only thing I can give her, at least to an extent. I cannot contribute in any other way. I haven't even been to Zimbabwe, I know almost nothing about the culture."<sup>22</sup> At the same time, she also emphasizes the pragmatic reason for attending the choir: the childcare that was provided enabled her as a single mother to attend the rehearsals, and at the same time, her child had the opportunity to interact with other children of African origin. Much in the same way, another member of the choir, also a single mother, emphasizes the importance of childcare that allows her to attend the rehearsals as a very important factor in her decision to join the choir.<sup>23</sup>

The descendant of the second-generation migrants and the founder of the choir points out that for her, singing in the choir also represents "searching for her roots".<sup>24</sup> While blaming her father for not introducing her to African culture and especially to the language of his origin, she started to seek connections with Africa by herself as an adult woman. For her, singing in the choir represents the establishment of a new connection with the culture of her ancestors, both through music and through language (lyrics in African languages), as well as social ties with Africans and their descendants living in Slovenia. When asked how she came up with the idea to found a choir, she replies:

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20 I obtained the research data mainly through interviews with members of the choir, the founder (and also a member) of the choir, and some choir leaders, who also provided me with sheet music and sound recordings. Other material includes attending some choir performances and online information.

21 Excerpt from an interview with a choir member, March 18, 2018.

22 Excerpt from an interview with a choir member, February 2, 2018.

23 Excerpt from an interview with a choir member, August 20, 2019.

24 Excerpt from an interview with a founder and a member of a choir, April 12, 2018.



*Because I love to sing ... I totally missed some kind of contact with my father's homeland, and with Africa in general, so to speak ... And it also seemed a very good opportunity to keep in touch with African culture through singing, through music. So I rang up all the Africans and their descendants I knew.*<sup>25</sup>

The aforementioned Max Zimani, a member of the first generation of migrants, who has been involved in various African cultural initiatives in Slovenia, also explicitly emphasizes (in addition to stressing the importance of culture as a means of eradicating stereotypes, recognizing, and entering into a dialogue with Slovenian culture) the significance of the intergenerational transfer and integration: "It seems to me that it is important for us Africans to have our own choir, not only for ourselves, but also for our children, in order for them to be able to feel this culture."<sup>26</sup>

For some, the amateur cultural activities also represented a link between (trans)cultural capital and economic capital, providing many of those who are today professionals or semi-professionals in the field of music or dance with the chance to enter the cultural artistic expression or education of others. However, the second generation<sup>27</sup> seems to be the one who saw the focus on cultural intersections as a tool to overcome political and social injustices. Their strong inclusion in society, which has been enabled since their childhood, gives them the power in a culture that they know well to fight against intolerance to differentiation, and they have developed strong critical thinking on social and political attitudes towards cultural diversity in Slovenia. To summarize the above in the words of theatre director Kim Komljanec, who directed the musical *Sunlighting*, produced by KUD Baobab:<sup>28</sup>

*The main drama character of the performance comes from Africa, whose culture with music and dance is in Europe – especially in Slovenia – still unknown enough to be attractive and unthreatening for the majority population. Through the story of an migrant from Africa, the performance also speaks of all other migrants, which Slovenian society has difficulties accepting, and often aggressively rejects: about Albanians, Macedonians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Roma, Kurds, Syrians, and others ...*<sup>29</sup>

25 Excerpt from an interview with a founder and a member of a choir, April 12, 2018.

26 Max Zimani, in discussion with the author, August 1, 2019.

27 The author is aware of controversial generalization of the "second generation" concept in writing and thinking about assimilation in migration contexts. Contemporary studies on further generations use the concept of segmented assimilation which considers the assimilation processes as subject to several factors (family sources, socio-economic status, job opportunities...), therefore, migrants are assimilated into different segments of society. In the article the (second) generation concept is used to differentiate members that are artistically expressing African cultures as well as to identify their relations towards those representations. In the specific case the second generation appears to be mostly involved in critical reflective discourses on racism and discrimination.

28 As an example, some of the performances produced by KUD Baobab: *Born Outside Her Village*, *Sunlighting*, *A Visit To an African Village*, or participating at the *Project for intercultural dialogue*, part of which was the music video "Žive naj vsi narodi - Dobrodrelna Zdravljica," Youtube video, 4:45, posted by "Žive naj vsi narodi," December 3, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kUGvhU\\_mnI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kUGvhU_mnI).

29 "Ko se Afričan zaljubi v Slovenko, a ne tudi v Slovenijo in Evropo," *MMC*, October 28, 2011, <https://www.rtvlo.si/kultura/oder/ko-se-african-zaljubi-v-slovenko-a-ne-tudi-v-slovenijo-in-evropo/269425>, accessed August 5, 2019.



The first generation of political and economic migrants is the least active in the society, despite the fact that the Sankofa Choir was established as part of the project Expressive World of African Culture (EWAC), which aimed to “promote African culture through the active involvement of migrants from Africa and their descendants in training in the field of dance and music. The target groups of the project were African migrants and their descendants who are marginalized in Slovenia.”<sup>30</sup> But this original idea was quite unsuccessful. As the organizer stated: “We imagined they would come, we would train them in dance and percussion ... In this way, they might even make a living in Slovenia. But there was no interest.”<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain the information about the social groups and the number of Africans that have migrated to Slovenia in the last ten years (since the establishment of the choir). However, as I found out in conversations with the choir members, that very few of them joined the choir and subsequently left it. The reason for this could be later departures of these migrants from Slovenia, or perhaps their (non)involvement in cultural activities is influenced by their age, gender, or economic status. It is also that in their active period of employment or raising a family, people – and women in particular – tend to be less active in extra cultural activities. The singer also highlighted the fact that it is possible they are not doing enough to get in touch with recent migrants.<sup>32</sup> Most migrants did not take part in social activities or even left the community, and it seems that despite positive intentions, the vision of the community is far from the real needs of the migrants.

An explanation for this can be found in the study that was made among migrants from the former Yugoslavia living in Slovenia, which could also be applied to the members of African community. It establishes the interdependence between the deteriorating socio-economic situation of migrants and the interests and motivation for their cultural engagement, “whereas the level of social vulnerability, in turn, means the greater need to integrate into existing social networks, but at the same time it represents the greater obstacle to the actual involvement in such networks”.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the reasons for the non-involvement of recent migrants in society and the choir can also be found in some studies<sup>34</sup> which show that the concepts of integration are very differently understood by those ‘others’ who wish to integrate migrants into the existing community.

In order to maintain their social ties, the choir members initially insisted on the membership only being available to Africans and their descendants. However, mainly due to the diminishing number of members and difficulties in maintaining the African migrants’ and their descendants’ interest in singing, the choir eventually began accepting non-African members. On the other hand, non-Africans have been entrusted the position of choir leaders from the very beginning (currently, the choir has their fourth leader), with some of them moving to this position from their original status as choir members.

30 “Izrazni svet afriške kulture,” Isak, accessed August 5, 2019, <http://www.isak.si>.

31 Excerpt from an interview with a founder and a member of a choir, April 12, 2018.

32 Excerpt from an interview with a member of a choir, August 19, 2019.

33 Janja Žitnik Serafin, *Večkulturna Slovenija: Položaj migrantske književnosti in kulture v slovenskem prostoru* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2008), 117.

34 Floya Anthias, Maria Kontos, Mirjana Morokvasic-Müller, ed., *Paradoxes of Integration: Female Migrants in Europe* (Springer: Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York, London, 2013) and Marita Eastmond, “Egalitarian Ambitions, Constructions of Difference: The Paradoxes of Refugee Integration in Sweden,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 277–295.

For example, one of the later choir leaders stated that she accepted invitation to join the choir due to their lack of tenor singers. Though she found African music interesting, she had never been musically involved in it before entering the choir.

The musical and aesthetic criteria set by the choir required them to search for a competent, formally musically educated person, even if they were not connected to Africa of African music. This was confirmed in my conversation<sup>35</sup> with a formally educated composer who used to lead the choir for some time. She emphasized the need for vocal skill of the singers, as well as for new singers, especially tenors which are usually being replaced by female voices. For this reason, she hosted singing workshop as part of the project, and some of the participants later joined the choir. This engagement of choir leaders<sup>36</sup> who had no ethnic affiliation with Africa also affected the choir's working methods and its repertoire structure.

#### 4. Hybridity of choir's singing repertoire

The choir's repertoire was initially composed in accordance with the knowledge and skills of the existing choir members and their leaders. Different choir leaders were confronted with the same questions: how to present the diversity of African music in public presentation in Slovenia; how to create an artistic bond with a culture that is basically unknown to them; and finally, a very pragmatic question: how and where to get a repertoire?

During conversations, some interlocutors said that despite their willingness, they find it difficult to identify with the country, let alone the regional or local culture of their origin. Most of them speak no African language, nor are they familiar with the musical culture to improve their repertoire. In addition, the choir bring together individuals who have ties with a wide variety of African cultures and languages. Despite their outwardly "Pan-African" identification, they are trying to break up the persistent stereotype of a single Africa. For example, they emphasise the fact that they are presenting music of African cultures (plural), and sometimes complement their programme with an educational insert, commenting on the songs and their context and explaining their origin.

The repertoire is put together in various ways. They sing the songs that "they get their hands on", trying to take into account the geographical, musical diversity and the aesthetic preferences of the singers. The founder of the choir, who is not a choir leader, but has always been actively searching for the repertoire, said that finding a suitable repertoire is very demanding, as the choral literature mainly consists of the adaptations of African songs in the European choral style. Some of the songs were contributed by Zimbabwe-born member from his memory, others were found on YouTube and arranged for the choir, some were taken and arranged based on the animated film *The Lion King*, and the rest were acquired from visiting African musicians or from Africans living in Europe hosted by the EWAC project and arranged for the choir. The latter was singled

35 Excerpt from an interview with a choir leader and a member of a choir, March 31, 2018.

36 Choir leaders conduct rehearsals, however, during singing and performing, they stand in a semicircle formation with other singers and sing with them.

out by the choir members as the best way of transferring the musical repertoire, because by learning directly from the musicians, they not only felt the song, but also their way of performing, found it easier to learn the correct pronunciation, and found out about the textual meaning of songs.

Due to the lack of repertoire, lack of understanding of the languages of certain African cultures, and her own need to be musically creative, one of the choir leaders herself put together an interesting part of the repertoire, which was also possible due to her university degree in composing. She arranged part of the repertoire and composed some of the songs, adding fictional lyrics in fictional language to her own music. The reactions have shown that people do not notice the difference between her songs and the templates of other songs, as her songs have been well received by both singers and audiences, and really “caught on”.<sup>37</sup> In teaching the song, she also conveyed a fictional content of the song to the choir members in order to encourage them to interpret the song in a more sensitive way.<sup>38</sup>

The decision to create their own compositions in “African style” was also influenced by the choir’s participation at the Ljubljana choir show. By participating at such events, the choir gets additional points for the selection of the funding of further projects under the Etn call.<sup>39</sup> The choir show requires the submission of sheet music before the performance, which has been a problem for the choir, since they perform many songs by ear or accompany the usual sheet music with improvisational parts, solo inserts which are in line with the current composition of the choir. To this end, the choir leader wrote down the compositions and created the afore mentioned original composition with a fictional text to meet the condition of the call to perform one song by a Slovenian author.

## 5. Conclusion

The musical and dance culture of the African diaspora in Slovenia creates a sense of imaginative homeland and sense of belonging for the members of the choir. For migrant offspring and adopted children, it has a significant influence in their negotiation of identity, generating an identity bond with Africa in a unique way.

Due to their choice of repertoire, their appearance and the contexts of their performances, the musical presentation of Africanness by the Sankofa Choir acts as an identity marker for the maintenance of group boundaries. It strengthens the sense of belonging and a sense of differences for the participants of the group, and plays an important role in identity formation. It is a cultural capital for the choir members and their descendants and through the different contexts of musical performances seeks to “re-territorialize their space” (e.g., African Village Fest, African Day) in order to “re-create and strengthen their assertion of identities (who they feel they are) within the host society.”<sup>40</sup>

37 Excerpt from an interview with a founder and a member of a choir, April 12, 2018.

38 Excerpt from an interview with a member of a choir, August 20, 2019.

39 The call is discussed in more detail by Urša Šivic, “History of Public Call for Funding in the Field of the Cultural Activities of Ethnic Minority Communities and Immigrants,” *Muzikološki zbornik* 55, no. 2 (2019): 133–153.

40 Maheshvari Naidu, “The Social Face of Networks: The Features of Maintaining Self in Migrant Space,” *Sociological Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (2014), 45.

Initially, the aim of the choir was to include only African migrants and their descendants, demonstrating their original tendency to establish their own space of belonging. In doing so, they were in a sense maintaining the boundary between “us” and “others”, despite the fact that pragmatic reasons to include non-Africans (at first, choir leaders, and later singers as well) existed from the very beginning. By opening the door to “others” and with their public representations, the choir members are bringing the message of the presence of migrants or about the coexistence of African Culture in Slovenia, as well as raising awareness of African culture in general,<sup>41</sup> thus becoming both active citizens who are contributing to society, as well as “active change agents in the fields of identity politics and anti-racism struggles”.<sup>42</sup>

African cultural formations in Slovenia are never inclined to seek the so-called authentic representations of cultural elements of their home countries, as evidenced in the first formations such as folk groups and Afro Disco. In the Sankofa Choir, singers and their leaders meet their own need and the expectations of others through ethnic clothing, stage movement, or by singing songs that “sound African”, even though they are taken from a variety of transmitted sources of Africanness (film music, popular music events) or are based on new music compositions. In some ways, however, the functioning of African choir is no different from other cultural formations that are not ethnically defined. On the one hand, their activities can be seen as a pure musical and aesthetic fulfillment of their musical ambitions and the need to develop their musical abilities, while at the same time, the choir with its regular weekly rehearsals functions as an element of socialization for singers and their children.

As noted by one of the singers, cultural formations are not about preserving African culture, but rather about keeping in touch with African and musical culture. Disco, folklore or choirs are meeting places, spaces for creating identifications according to one’s own reasons, abilities and wishes. Africanness is being created in a unique way, providing community members a safe place for their self-identification, while at the same time giving meaning to the identity ties of their descendants who are facing these questions early on. On the other hand, to the descendants of Africans and to nonAfricans participants, the choir can simply represent a place of fascination with African music and culture, or a place for their aesthetic expression, cultural growth and enrichment. Ethnicity can therefore be an important element of identification for an individual and their involvement in a cultural area, but it is by no means the only one, the most powerful or important in creating the individual’s reality and their position in society.

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41 This is mainly related to the Max Zimani’s narrative of numerous Slovenes whose participation at African cultural events led them to professional engagement with African or other cultures, and to the active cultural involvement of some migrants and their descendants in the fight against intolerance and differentiation.

42 Anna Rastasa and Elina Seyeb, “Music as a site for Africanness and diaspora cultures: African musicians in the white landscape of Finland,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2016): 82.

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## POVZETEK

Glasbene in plesne predstavitve etnično samodefiniranih manjšinskih ali migrantskih skupnosti se pogosto navezujejo na tradicijsko glasbo države 'izvora'. Te predstavitve vodijo v posplošeno razumevanje, da so priseljenci homogene etnične skupine, ki s svojimi prezentacijami ohranjajo nacionalno in etnično identiteto v 'novi' državi'. Vpogledi v strukture javnih nastopov, kot so na primer glasbene karakteristike glasbe, repertoar, prostori izvajanja, vzgibi za izvajanje in načini izvajanja, podajajo kompleksnejšo sliko o identitetnih dinamikah posameznikov znotraj skupnosti, razkrivajo pa tudi, da je tradicija navadno le referenčna točka identifikacijskih procesov.

V članku so kulturno-identitetne dinamike prikazane na podlagi javne reprezentacije afriške glasbene kulture v slovenskem prostoru. Sprva je podan krajši zgodovinski pregled kulturnega udejstvovanja afriške diaspore v Sloveniji. Osrednji del članka je namenjen strukturam znotraj pevskega zbora Sankofa, ki se javnosti predstavlja s petjem t. i. afriških pesmi. Podrobno je analizirana struktura članstva ter glasbenega repertoarja, v zvezi s slednjim pa tudi povezanost s strukturami financiranja društva

in konteksti javnih nastopov pevskega zbora. Večina podatkov je pridobljenih na podlagi intervjujev in spletne komunikacije s članicami in člani zbora, notnega gradiva, glasbenih posnetkov ter spletnih prezentacij zbora. Članek razkriva vprašanja identifikacij in prezentacij afriškosti, problemov pri strukturiranju repertoarja, pri iskanju poti med socializacijskim prostorom in glasbeno estetskimi potrebami pevcev in vodji zbora.

Glasbena in plesna kultura, ki jo ustvarja afriška diaspora v Sloveniji so prostori srečevanja, prostori ustvarjanja identifikacij po lastnih vzgibih, možnostih in željah. Afriškost se kreira na svojstven način in članom skupnosti predstavlja varno zatočišče samoidentifikacije, hkrati pa osmišlja identitetne povezave njihovim potomcem, ki se s temi vprašanji srečujejo že zgodaj. Po drugi strani je predvsem potomcem Afričanov ter Neafričanom, ki sodelujejo v zboru, lahko zgolj prostor fascinacije nad afriško glasbo in kulturo ali prostor za estetski izraz, kulturno rast in obogatitev. Etničnost je torej lahko pomemben element identifikacije za posameznika in njegovo delovanje v kulturnem prostoru, vendar pa nikakor ne edini, najmočnejši ali pomembnejši pri kreiranju posameznikove realnosti in njegovega položaja v družbi.