



## Re-Centring AfroAsia: Musical and Human Migrations in the Pre-Colonial Period 700-1500AD

Proposal to  
*The A W Mellon Foundation*

### Executive Summary

The Humanities is an indispensable field when producing new knowledge about cultural exchanges among groups of people across continents and languages. It is all the more critical when mapping movements that include diverse yet interdependent disciplines of music, history, anthropology, and sociology. *Re-centring AfroAsia* is a multi-pronged research, mapping, and archiving project that aims to not only revolutionise Humanities research in South Africa but also create an AfroAsian community of scholarship. It is informed by exploratory work on the movement of musical forms from and to Africa, Persia, Southern India, China, Madagascar, and Southern Spain, revealing patterns of cultural exchange. In this way, the research is intended to re-centre a knowledge project on an indigenous platform and make what hitherto has appeared to be marginal into a significant cultural contribution.

*Re-Centring AfroAsia* is planned as a supra-institutional project, housed at the *Centre for African Studies* at the *University of Cape Town*, in cooperation with the *Centre for Humanities Research* at the *University of the Western Cape*, the *Wits City Institute* at the *University of the Witwatersrand*, and the *School of Culture and Creative Expressions* of the *Ambedkar University*, Delhi. It will be directed by Prof Ari Sitas in collaboration with Professors Lungisile Ntsebeza, Premesh Lalu, and Noëleen Murray in South Africa and Professor Sumangala Damodaran in India.

We propose a multi-pronged three year founding project that seeks to:

- a. Map the movement of symbolic and material goods from the 7th Century to the 15th Century AD between urban centres
- b. Research, archive the movement of people, and collect the musical and poetic record that can be traced through Swahili, Nguni, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Malayalam, Hindi and Mandarin sources
- c. Build a new generation of Afropolitan researchers
- d. Publish in a range of African languages the findings of such research
- e. Establish a broader African network of researchers that will take the project further in years to come

A significant element of the project will be the training of an emerging cohort of researchers through Honours, Masters, and Doctoral bursaries. This speaks to the need for strengthening African scholarship since the nature of the project is such that it will attract students whose backgrounds bear resonance with the geographical spaces of enquiry. With these being areas in which specifically African perspectives are still scarce, building a stronger body of researchers in these areas will help to grow new understandings. The implications that such an initiative has for contributing to curriculum reform at African universities is therefore promising, with an equally assuring possibility for students of this project to eventually take leadership of the initiative in terms of succession.

*Re-Centring AfroAsia*, beyond its scientific worth, bears a deeper cultural intent in demonstrating the common heritage across contemporary and religious divides that have animated discord and violence. It is hoped that the findings will deepen inter-cultural competence, understanding, tolerance and cooperation, thereby addressing the multiple debates on identity (pre-colonial and

contemporary) that are so key for the establishment of any social cohesion within South Africa and across its real and imagined borders.

Given the focus of the *A W Mellon Foundation* on supporting Humanities research as a vehicle for venturing new knowledge systems, we ask that you consider support for *Re-Centring AfroAsia* over a period of three years to the value of ZAR10 819 000. Such support would be sufficient to break new ground with the project, while envisaging a second round with a decisive multi-country programme beginning in 2018. Funding will be held by the *University of Cape Town* but will be shared with the *University of the Western Cape*, and the *University of Witwatersrand*, covering research time for the main researchers as well as PhD, Masters and Honours scholarships. The *University of Cape Town* will guarantee fiduciary integrity for the project in cooperation with the other South African institutions. Prof Sumangala Damodaran is leading a different but related initiative of Indian scholars from Ambedkar, *Jawaharlal Nehru University* and the *University of Delhi* with resources for their own post-graduates and research costs.

## **Problem Identification and Background**

Recent historical, archaeological and sociological work has brought to light a remarkable new picture of the world: the long-distance movement of material and symbolic goods, the complex synergies of urban and rural populations from the 7th Century AD onwards has placed AfroAsian societies at the centre of such transmitting energies. This scholarship will be highlighted in the next section.

Our own recent exploratory work on the movement of musical forms from and to Africa, Persia, Southern India, China, Madagascar, North Africa, Southern Spain undertaken to explore the feasibility of this project brought into the limelight the important role of women who were in servitude or slavery as important carriers of culture and more particularly musical form.

What has been apparent is that a listener who is interested in tracing common nuances and inflections in musical expression and in the words of songs across vast geographies and cultural formations is bound to come across an astounding set of melodies that bear a similarity to each other: an “arc of the blues” or a series of minor notes that constitute a form that animates songs of sorrow and lament. It then depends on where hers and his sensory acuities were located to start with: starting from the Indian subcontinent and neighbouring regions, the nuances would travel through West Asia to reach Mali via the Mediterranean and Ethiopia, Nubia, Southern Europe and North and East Africa. Or s/he could start the other way around, from Southern Africa to travel to Eastern Africa, Madagascar, Zanzibar and from there to Baghdad and to the Punjab, covering vast landscapes.

In West Africa it was to be in conversation with another arc as the years unfolded, one whose cardinal point was firmly located in the vicinity of the slave plantations of Bahia, Alabama or Cuba. In turn at each point of such a tracing, there would be melodic loops stretching backwards as well, from each of these places to others, indicating crisscrossing movements and encounters. It is our strong contention that if we listen carefully for soundscapes and their associational clusters, although instrumentation, arrangements and notation differ, there was and is a familiarity that is uncanny. There appears to be a common aesthetic constellation that defines musicality.

We argue that this constellation is a creation of human interactions of the long duree of 700-1400 AD, a product of long distance trade and travel in a world (in the words of Janet L. Abu-Lughod-1991) that was quite vibrant “before European hegemony.” What might be this history of interaction and travel and why is it important? How would this be related to the manner in which such an aesthetic constellation emerged? A realisation that this arc of sorrow and loss in music

and the words that accompany its singing show remarkable commonality, despite significant variations from Kashmir or Kerala to Mali, and that interrogating how this might have come about might lead to new directions in understanding music, societal change as well as emotional landscapes.

*Re-Centring AfroAsia* therefore intends to reconstruct the creative actors and cultural formations of this long duree that made all this possible and to bring them out into sharp relief, as far as possible that archives and scholarship permit- to reconstruct their lives, their social servitude, their creativity, work, their actual words and where possible, their music. Such work will have to understand all cultures and faiths from all imaginable slave routes, it will be trying to deepen the already exciting insights that, for instance, Suzanne Meyers Sawa (2002) has brought to light in her work. Also, as historical and musicological work increases, a more refined picture is emerging too: F. Mathew Caswell's recent book (2014), "The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyani in the Early Abbasid Era" confirms our sense that women from everywhere including North and East Africa were at the epicentre of creativity in poetry and performance.

The broader music we are aware of after all "talks" about migration, separation, refugeedom, persecution and intense nostalgia, and expresses itself, in varied ways, through combinations which in the Indian tradition are classified under the Bhairavi family of scales. It would be closest to the natural minor scale in Western classical music, the Phrygian scale in ancient Greek music and corresponding to the Hijaz Makam in Turkish, Persian or Egyptian classical music systems and the songs of sorrow in East African and Southern African music. Further, across these distances, it also underpins contemporary musical expression around these themes, indicating a historical trajectory across space and time that left deep imprints through emotion and the power of the forms that might have travelled. So, from the Heer in the Indian subcontinent to the Amanes or Rembetica in Greece, Cyprus or Turkey to the Nuba, Melhun or Muwashshah in Egypt, Tunisia or Morocco, to the Soleares, Segiurias or Bulerias flamenco songs in Southern Spain, or as the recent work by Neo Muyanga and the flamenco maestro Paco Pena (2012) for the Royal Albert Hall in London, the affinity between Zulu and Flamenco choral inflections was uncanny. This work is located as it should be at the intersection of Creative Work and Aesthetics, Poetics and Musicology and the Historical Sociologist's and Anthropologist's craft.

Through the travels of this minor note based melodic family, we seek to demonstrate the following:

1. Understanding the emergence and transformation of musical traditions or more generally art traditions has to necessarily be about a critique of canons, of the 'ethno' of ethnomusicology and of various centrisms, whether Euro -, Indo-, or Islamo-centrisms. Further, it is necessary to understand cultural formations as having historical roots, rhizomes and influences that go far beyond what are commonly understood as links between people and their cultures. Thus, the cultural influences in the Iberian peninsula, or 'Islamic' North Africa, Southeast Africa and Madagascar or the Indian subcontinent can be seen, through music, to be constituted by connections that are more extensive and involving more categories of people than what is known and acknowledged in historical or musicological work. This is important not only for dealing with arguments about cultural essentialism, but also to make sense of actually observed forms, to get to the root of what constitutes and changes them over time.

2. Over and above the critique, it is necessary to provide a spatial mapping of how music and people moved and how each setting mimicked, transformed, enhanced and nudged it all through long-distance movement of goods (symbolic or material) and people. It is the mapping of such aesthetic constellations that, we believe, provides interesting ways of understanding cultural transformations.

3. The carriers of the music as above mentioned, across all locations, were to a large extent slaves, people in servitude, nomads and various other 'subaltern' people, large numbers of them being women, although the histories of the creation of musical traditions usually attribute their development to male rulers, conquerors and male-centered traditions, especially for the medieval period. Thus, the debates around Iberian or Andalusian music are trapped within the Abrahamic traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism; what is known as 'modern' and 'rational' European music attributes its qualities to refined tastes of white bourgeois societies; and debates around Indian music are mostly about Hindu or Islamic influences, without an ability to break out of such straitjackets. However, careful listening as well as an unbiased uncovering of historical detail brings out clearly the role that the slaves, the wanderers, the street performers and nomads played not only in carrying music forms but also in contributing to the development of musical canons, philosophies and perspectives.

4. Thus, what is seen as Hindustani or Carnatic is perhaps a profound sedentary elaboration of such travelling soundscapes; what came to be known as the European classical tradition perhaps needs to acknowledge influences from numerous 'others'; what occurred in Ethiopia between the 7th and 10th centuries and China during the Tang dynasty might be fascinating mutations of the very same and so on. Therefore, we need a non-essentialist understanding of music as always on the move, borrowed, elaborated, transformed, revolutionised, and passed on within and across boundaries. We also need to understand musicians and composers as bearers of an aesthetic acuity which is open to the world of formed and transformed sound. Of course, in certain historical periods a canon becomes fixed, deviation is abhorred and masterful repetition of it becomes the marker of good music.

5. Most importantly it is to bring Africa into this world of transactions and symbolic flows and enhance the work of scholars who are active in trying to reconstruct the pre-colonial dimensions of Africa's development. The easier part of this is the re-tracing of the Ethiopian, Sudanese, Zanzibari and North African dimensions as records and texts are quite voluminous, especially in Arabic and Swahili. The more difficult task is to connect properly the East and Southern dimension of these flows where documentation is scant and therefore, the reconstruction has to rely on Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Malay and Indian sources.

In arguing the above, we can only present tentative narratives at this stage around the development of musical traditions in and between four centres: Persia from the 6th–7th century AD, Kochi/Kerala 7th to 9th century AD, Baghdad and East Africa from the 9th–11th century AD and Cordoba from the 9th century AD onwards. From there, creativity fans out in multiple directions. Along with the narratives, we will touch upon what might have been the innovations at each point but we will avoid at this stage technical musicological discussion. It is hoped that through this, we can begin to talk about the acuities and sensibilities that are at the heart of all music and also arrive at an egalitarian and self-reflexive understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and society.

As already mentioned, there is a pressing need to bracket ethnomusicology away, if this journey is to achieve its intended goal – to fathom out how music moved and moves. This is a philosophical and socio-historical imperative and not an attempt to demean the work of the ethnomusicologist as such. Bruce Nettl's (2005) wonderful introduction to the field *The Study of Ethnomusicology: 31 Issues and Concepts* is both convincing and hearty, and the credo that it is "the study of music in culture" (2005:12) and that it is a "study of the world's music from a comparative and a relativistic perspective" (2005:13), which is respectful and egalitarian is noteworthy. As a field it has spent the last two decades reflecting seriously about its own limitations and the ideas it has projected about musical "others". There would be very few that would deny that the ethnomusicologist's gathering of tones and semitones from the "out there" has enriched our lives and the cultural contextualisation has helped in making difference and variety a fact.

There is a formidable scholarship on many of the spaces we will be visiting – Persia is unthinkable without the introductory work by Ella Zonis (1973) *Classical Persian Music: An Introduction*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), Hormoz Farhat's (1990) *the Dastgah Concept in Persian Music*, (Cambridge: the University Press); and Bruno Nettl's (1992) very own, *The Radif of Persian Music*, (Champaign Ill: Elephant and Cat.) Our Baghdad station would have been lost without Farmer's (1925 and 1929) work on Arabian music, Don Michael Randel's (1976) work on Al Farabi; Owen Wright's (1978) *The Modal System of Arab and Persian Music* and Dimitri Sawa's (1989) *canonical, Music Performance Practice in the Early 'Abbasid Era 132-320 A.H/750-932*.

Andalusia/Andalus has also a growing cast of eminent scholars, Anwar G. Chejne (1974) Amnon Shiloah (1991), Owen Wright (1992), Jareer Abu-Haidar (1993) and Nadir Marouf (1995) provide enough of a portraiture and analysis to make the nuances of the emerging cultural formation sensible. Yet, the bits in isolation of each other make the comprehension of the arc difficult and stifle any attempt to comprehend movement and change. Here the historical dimension of Africa's musicality (as opposed to the contemporary musicological plethora) is scant and relies heavily on the Baghdadi schools of Philosophy and Aesthetics. The 32 volume recording of the music of the 9th to the 10th centuries, Al -Isbahani's masterpiece and the description of the performances, the musicians and their lyrics that it contains will be a vital starting point. This is available only in Farsi.

A bracketing of ethnomusicology, as argued above, has to go hand in hand with the rejection of the West-centric idea of music and its relation to modernity. This is drenched in a high-brow and an elitist conception of the music of the Western Imperium and has been sharply articulated in Max Weber's *The Rational Foundations of Western Music* and was perversely supported by scholars like Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno. For Weber, the "beautiful", the "profound" and even the "ugly-as-sublime" was to be found in the West's compositional culture, that is, in the tension between the rationality and organisation of its harmonic structures and the intensified, lyrical expressivity it permitted and controlled at the same time.

To quote: "without this quality modern music would have been neither technically nor meaningfully possible. Its meaning rests on the fact that tone successions are not treated as an indifferent series of semitones..." (1969: 101-2). Weber's (1969: 88) contrasting "other" was demeaning. It was the "unorganised conglomeration of nonrational tone successions". Each word carries with it a little devastation: "unorganised" as opposed to "organised", "conglomeration" as opposed to "composition", "nonrational" as opposed to "rational", "tone succession" as opposed to "harmony" and to quote: "only the elevation of many-voiced music under notational art created the composer proper and guaranteed the polyphonic creations of the Western world in contrast to those of all other people, permanence, after effect and continuing development". All this needed a make-over as it is no longer enough to ascribe achievement and rationality to the West and cast the rest's contribution as what Weber calls the "nonrational tone successions".

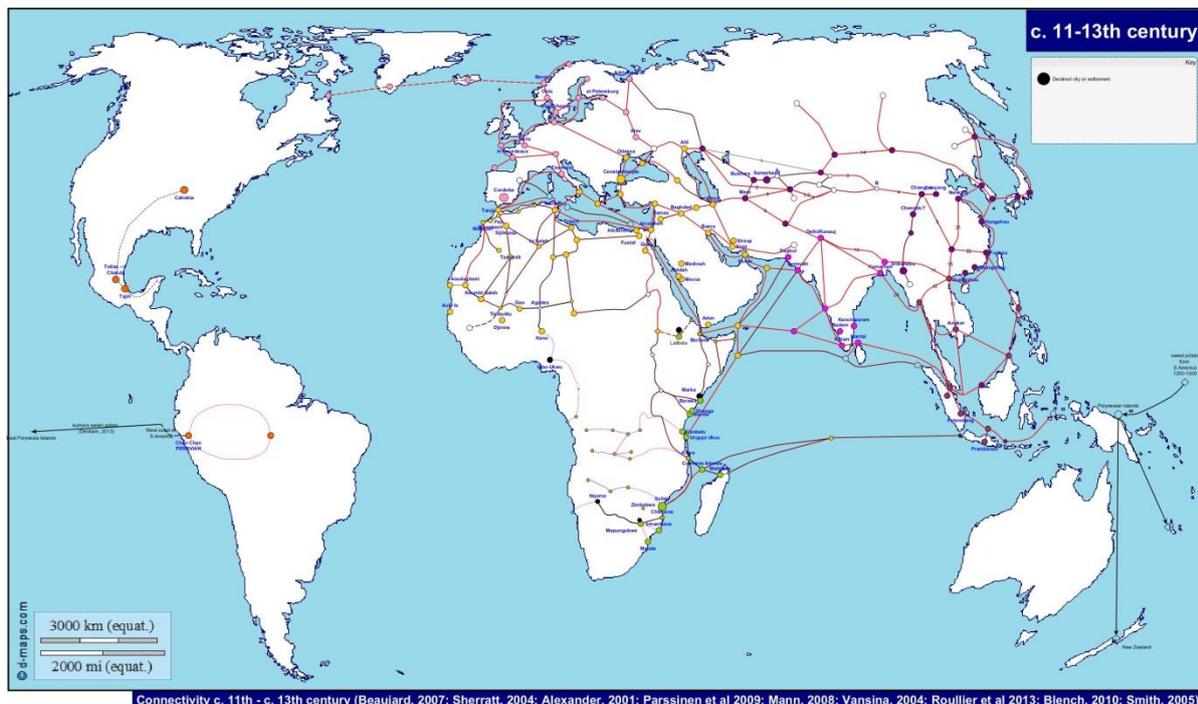
Something distinctive did in fact occur in Europe that enhanced compositional and organisational processes during the rise of bourgeois society. The road from the violin and the piano to Beethoven has been more than impressive. Theodor Adorno has a point (2001: 342) in his *Aesthetic Theory* when he states that: "Beethoven's music is as much a part of the revolutionary emancipation of the bourgeoisie as it (also) anticipates the latter's apologia". The achievement of a complex polyphony in his work was at the same time an uneasy acceptance of a declining status quo. Yet even this achievement was not a virgin birth, unrelated to the world around it. The greatness in compositional form from the 17th Century onwards in Europe until the late 19th century is not only based on a Bakhtinian appropriation of forms from lower classes as it has become fashionable to say, but also from many peculiar 'others'.

Understanding how “musicality” moved over land or boat thus requires us to note that there were fascinating connections between far flung places through music and musicians, connections that are not adequately acknowledged in historical, sociological or musicological work.

It further points us to the fact that this period, from the 6th to the 14th century AD also happens to be the period where philosophies and theories of music performance practice were beginning to be written, reflecting and articulating many of the pathways. While this is the beginning, also, of canon formation and exclusive identification as ‘Islamic’ or ‘Indian’ or various other identity-linked characterisations, apparently distinct and unrelated essences and rules, the texts themselves are beginning to reflect the varied influences on the musical forms and, importantly, the kinds of people who created and carried the music.

## Rationale

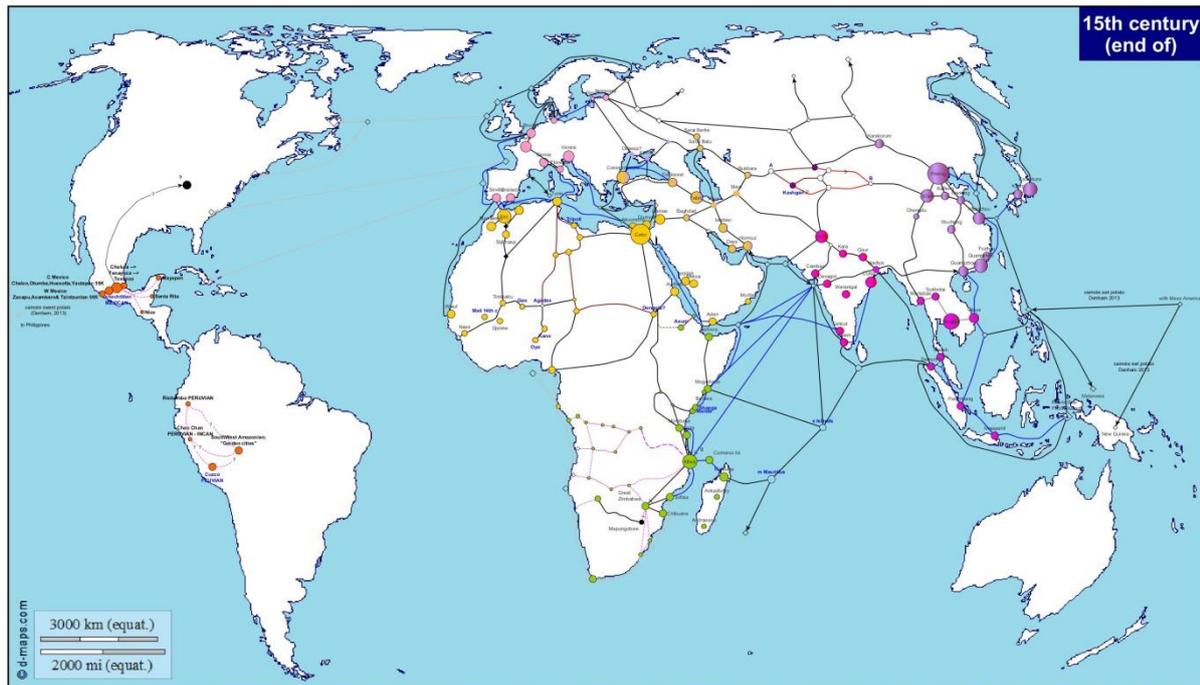
However difficult the explorative work for this project might have been, it was made easier by an impressive proliferation of archaeological and historical work that has shaken out the very Eurocentrism that rendered most of the world an opaque mush awaiting four Portuguese ships to round the Cape so that it could be discovered. Most useful was work on long-distance trade and urban supply routes that by now spans millennia. For the novice, Andrew Sherratt’s (2004) *ArchAtlas* project is a quick demonstration of what makes our claims obvious. It visually reconstructs in 500 year intervals such long-distance and urban supply routes from 3500 BC to 1500 AD. Our story is captured by three, the map of 500AD, the map of 1000AD and the map of 1500 AD. Using that as a base-line, Kershan Pancham has added archaeological work and further research on flows undertaken by Dr N Jade Gibson to demonstrate the following patterns of flows of material and symbolic goods:



By the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is apparent that there are networks that run all across Eurasia, but also across North Africa, East and Central Africa, and possible networks in the Americas. The activity is clustered Eastwards, from North Africa, then-Europe, through the Baghdad cosmopolis, connecting to the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, all the way to the South East Asian islands. Southern Africa, stemming from Mapungubwe and Sofala, is already connected to this ‘world

network' by this time. Ethnobotanical evidence shows the camote sweet potato arriving in the Polynesian islands from South America around this time. Austronesians have made contact with Madagascar by the sixth century. A once of exploration to Northern America by Europe occurs by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but no trade follows at that time.

The activity in the Southern African cluster 'moves' from Schroda (9<sup>th</sup> century) to Mapungubwe (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century) then Great Zimbabwe (13-15<sup>th</sup> century). This 'moving' could be explained by Sherratt's flowering-calyx model of old settlements seeding new settlements in a dispersal fashion. Kilwa takes over dominance from Sofala, and begins significant trade with 'Arabia' and China (via the Indian regions) by the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Connectivity by end of 15th century (Beaujard, 2007; Sherratt, 2004; Alexander, 2001; Parssinen et al 2009; Mann, 2008; Vansina, 2004; Roullier et al 2013; Blench, 2010; Smith, 2005)

This work needs to be consolidated as the record is still under construction and as a number of catalytic projects are trying to fill in the emerging proximities and movements within Africa, represented here by dotted lines. It is obvious that this work will help not only begin to imagine further connections but gradually become an important corrective to prevailing orthodoxies.

The key rationale though is to create scholarly communities in South Africa who in tandem with colleagues on the continent and in the broader Asian worlds of scholarship will start re-defining the sense of historical evolution and challenge the Humanities towards actual indigeneity and its meanings. Such communities will be creating knowledge as opposed to be deconstructing the European ideas that have thus far defined Africa's contribution to world civility.

## Research Aims

*Re-Centring AfroAsia* aims to research, archive and collect the musical and poetic record that can be traced through Swahili, (where possible Nguni), Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Malayalam, Hindi and Mandarin sources. The movement of goods and people, the proliferation of urban centres and the

centrality of the stations of our journey is more than obvious. Of the 14 cities with more than 100 000 people in 1 000 AD the only one in today's Europe was Cordoba at 450 000. The megacity of the time was Baghdad at close to a million people. They both decline by 1500. Kerala is an epicentre both in 1 000 and 500 AD and in the latter case in a world that is highly bunched towards Persia. By 1 500 with 7 major centres in 1 000AD, China in the Ming period is at the heart of all long-distance trade. One of our tasks will be to construct an equivalent mapping of music and its wanderings.

Re-centering Africa in this musical journey will be the most challenging and rewarding of the research process. Not only were Africans participants in these trans-local connections but for example the famous Baghdad-nurtured maestro of composition, Zyriab was of African descent. He had to leave Baghdad and cross Northern Africa to arrive in Cordoba to proceed to create the Andalus school of music that runs down the years as one of the most influential hubs of creativity in world music. It is plausible to re-trace the routes followed by Zyriab's parents as creative slaves who ended up in Baghdad before they were manumitted. The 11th century map displayed above immediately points to three possible passages from the southern Sudanic regions. One that follows the Nile river, one that follows the Ethiopian/Axum/Adulis/Aden route and one that might tug further south to the epicentre of such a passage between Kilwa and Zanzibar (the heart of the "Zanj" passages). What is unexplored is the connection of such epicentres to the more southern parts of the continent: the Madagascar/Nguni/Mapungubwe/Zimbabwe space.

We hypothesise that there was a connection although the musical evidence at the moment is more linked to the 14th and 15th centuries. The East African bow so central to Nguni musicality (and common to Tanzania) is to be found in Kerala, Angola and through the slave trade as the Birembau in Brazil. There is at the moment a sense that the minor note lament is connected to the "call" part of the codas in Southern Africa and Madagascar but, to arrive at some musicological certainty will be an enticing challenge and a research challenge worth taking.