Borankana (Phathisi) Music Performance, Learning and Transmission among the Bakwena of Botswana

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at discussing the information contained in Borankana (Phathisi), traditional music practiced by the Bakwena in the Kweneng District of Botswana. The paper was conceived through the collaborations between ethnomusicology classes and their subjects/respondents in an effort to better understand Borankana traditional music performance, and its daily uses today. This paper addresses not only the traditional music, but also the traditional learning and transmission of the music. Data was gathered by author and students through kgotla (tribal administration) visits, oral interviews with the informants, as well as internet search and other secondary printed information repositories such as books and journals. Oral interviews were recorded using an audiotape for future referencing and photographs were taken of the practical music performances. It was evident in the interviews that for the Bakwena of Botswana, Borankana music was traditionally used for entertainment by both young and old people. However, it was also evident that dancing activities were largely dominated by men and boys while women sang, clapped hands and ululated. Historically, Borankana was performed during tribal activities only. Now it mainly used by men in day-to-day activities for entertainment with women accompanying through singing, hand clapping and ululating. Changes in costumes and the materials used to make instruments over time is also discussed.

Keywords: Learning and Transmission, Bakwena, Borankana, Phathisi, Molepolole, Botswana

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:


INTRODUCTION

This research is focused on the Borankana traditional music of the Bakwena Molepolole village, traditionally called Mosusupe, located in the Kweneng District of Botswana. As understood by most people in Botswana, Nhleki’sana and Kezilahabi (1998, p.172) observed that, Borankana is a generic term referring to all types of traditional dances and songs found in Botswana. These traditional dances differ from one ethnic group to the next and are deeply connected to different kinds of songs for different occasions. Borankana are artistic creations deeply rooted in Setswana ethnicity, traditions, rituals, and all other activities of a cultural nature. Other ethnic groups in the country use different names to refer to their dances, for example Setapa (Ngwaketse), Phathisi (Kweneng), Mmamarula (South East/Balete), Modokoda (Bayeyi), Ndazula (North East), and Dikhwaere (Kgatleng). This variety of artistic musical expressions has was highlighted by Tumedi et al. (2010, p. xvii), who noted that there are many types of songs in Africa and their classification varies from one culture to another. It is now common knowledge that the continent of Africa is not as culturally homogeneous as was
once (Nketia 1974, p.3). Botswana is no exception to this heterogeneity. The goal of this paper is to assess data pertaining to Bakwena traditional music, which is just one type of many found within Botswana.

Six consecutive annual visits were made to Molepolole village from 2005 to 2010. During the first five of these visits, Bakwena elders provided a non–practical oral interpretation of Borankana music. The only practical performance observed at the Molepolole kgotla was in 2010. Each year that the researcher visited Molepolole village more information was discovered, through the addition of new informants, and added to pervious research.

Based on the interviews conducted in Kweneng District, this paper will survey Borankana as a traditional musical genre practiced by the Bakwena tribe in Botswana. This music is commonly referred to as Phathisi. The name Phathisi has been acquired from the costume worn during the performance of the music. The Bakwena informants revealed to the researcher that Borankana music originated in Kweneng District and is one of their tribal identity symbols. The informants portrayed Borankana in two ways: Setapa sa Borankana ja Basimane ba tshameka Diphathisi literally meaning Setapa for boys performing Diphathisi, and Setapa sa bagolo ba nyadisa meaning Setapa for elders conducting weddings. It should also be noted that Batswana generally refer to wedding songs as Setapa songs. Most Setapa wedding songs depict Mafikeng town and marriage registration. In the past, weddings were registered in present day Mafikeng (currently in South Africa) which is the former administrative town of the Bechuanaland Protectorate now called Botswana.

Music making is generally organized as a social event. Public performances, therefore, take place on social occasions – that is, occasions when members of a group or a community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, for recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival, or any kind of collective activity (Nketia, 1974, p. 21). In this way, Borankana music is performed like many other music types found in traditional African societies. In addition, Bakwena elders viewed Borankana as entertainment that keeps children away from wrong doing or crime.

Borankana music is performed by men and young boys who are learning to be future performers. Borankana is performed by all but some people feel they are not capable or good enough and so become reluctant to perform. The role of music in contributing to children’s understanding of their culture is well recognized today, although not everybody sees it as the primary purpose of Borankana (Pugh & Pugh, 1998, p. 2). The research of Stokes (1994) supports this notion in its contention that the child begins to learn the musical style of his/her culture as he/she acquires the language and the emotional patterns of his/her people. Borankana is thus an important link between an individual and their culture, and later in life brings to the adult unconscious the emotional texture of the world which formed their personality. Campbell (2004, p. 7) contends that students who grow up with live music within their environment are acculturated into it and it is thus “natural” to be musically engaged. Plummeridge likewise argues that in the works of the great masters, folk songs or hymns are part of the symbolic order that constitutes society. Through them we gain a sense of cultural continuum that gives sense to our society.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to find and assess information on the Borankana (Phathisi) traditional music of the Bakwena of Botswana, specifically its learning performances, learning processes and transmission in the societal day to day activities of the tribe. This research also aimed to familiarize those ethnomusicology students involved in the research with Borankana music.

In one way or the other, it is anticipated that students will be exposed to certain types of Botswana’s traditional musical during their upbringing. In Botswana, with its diverse cultures and musical traditions, young adults who have enjoyed music in the home, in the community in which they grew up, and through opportunities at school, tend to achieve a high level of musical accomplishment and engagement throughout their life. Campbell (2004, p.10) suggests that when the teacher uses the modeling-and-imitation strategy he or she becomes an artist-in-residence within the classroom. By making students familiar with their traditional music, facilitate their future interest and learning in “professional” music education. Indeed, there is a sense that many children cannot help but bring this music with them into school, and it is just a matter of whether or not teachers notice, build on it, and help students to share it with their peers. Swanwick (1999, p. 100) emphasises that, “most communities have rich seams of music-making ready to be mined”. Mills (2005, pp. 187-188) agrees but argues for a metaphor that speaks more of collaboration, and of opportunities to learn from community musicians, rather than one associated with mining and potentially with resource exploitation.

**METHODOLOGY**
Data for this study was collected through oral interviews in Molepolole village with community leaders, musicians and performers. Purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained through other techniques such as random or probability sampling. A group of 10-15 performers or individuals selected by the village kgosi (Paramount chief) were tasked with participating in oral interviews on stipulated dates. Based on the fact that the village kgosi knows his/her tribe well and so assigned appropriate informants, the researcher found the information provided by these informants to be representative of the Bakwena tribe and its traditions. In addition to audio recordings, photographs were also taken of the musical activities and performances. Internet and other secondary information repositories were also accessed in the execution of this research.

THE ORIGINS AND MEANING OF PHATHISI- SINGULAR – DIPHATHISI - PLURAL

Performances of Borankana among the Bakwena are estimated to have started between 1914 and 1916. Borankana represents a type of tradition that is handed down from generation to generation. Historically, the name Phathisi came from men who were tying the lowest part of the trouser with a peg when cycling. In the past men who worked in the South African mines traveled by bicycle (and were wealthy enough to afford bicycles) and had to clip the bottom of the trouser to keep it from becoming trapped in the bicycle chain thereby tearing the trouser or falling the rider. The same process of pegging the trousers was traditionally used when men were performing Borankana. Later on male Borankana performers transitioned from pegging trousers to wearing shorts made from phudu(hu) (steenbok) skin known as motseto/mongato. These shorts were decorated on the front and back with thin pieces of leather (also from phudu(hu) skin) known as motlampana. Borankana performers also used to put on Diphathisi made from old goat/sheep skin. These skins were cushioned by old one shilling blankets pieces. These blankets formed a protective layer called semphusu. Phathisi is also the term used for the clip that keeps washed clothes on a washing/drying line.

Borankana costume

In contrast to the aforementioned costumes, Borankana male performers today often wear purposely torn and shortened dark trousers (either black or grey) called Matsekana, Matleketheke, matheketheke, maseketseke, or mathekethe. These names are used interchangeably in different parts of Kweneng District. Girls below the age of 14 dress their bottom with makgabe (ravels) and leave their top undressed. Women aged 15 and above dress in skirts made from phudu(hu) skins called diphaeyana. These girls and women are often used as ornamental features in Borankana performances. They are also an active part of the celebration, singing and clapping along with the dancers. Elders wear maratshane (a two piece skirt). Borankana performers today may also wear Diphathisi made of a taut calf’s skin with a protective layer dikgare/matobelo/semphusu from pieces of old blankets around their shins. Often young men performing Borankana are forced to covertly kill calves in order to obtain the materials for their Phathisi. When asked why cow skin could not be used, respondents noted that it is found to be too hard and could injure the performers. Although there is no documented evidence of it, it is interesting to consider the possibilities of Bakwena men who are sent to work in mines using Gumboots to improvise a new version of Phathisi music.

Borankana Performances and Transport

Borankana performances commenced late to allow those from far away to arrive. Whilst waiting for the experienced performers, young boys called bathaaphiri performed as curtain raisers. They were accompanied by young girls who sing and clap for them. These performances went on until about eight or ten o’clock at night when the older performers would come on and perform until the early morning. Some parents were very strict and did not allow their children to attend the overnight Borankana performances. However, boys often devised plans with their peers to attend Borankana performances nonetheless. They used a mortar and wooden boat to resemble a sleeping person in their bed and when the elders called on them to keep the overnight fire lit, a friend would protect the one gone to the Borankana performances and rekindle the overnight fire on his behalf.

Different types of traditional food obtained from the local harvest were used to feed the performers. Some of these foods were magapu (water melons), mmidi (maize) and dinawa (beans). Food was donated from the participants’ fields.

Traditionally Borankana performers used oxen known as makaba for transport. These oxen were tamed by punching the middle part between their nostrils. A control rope was placed in this hole to direct the ox by its rider. In some cases, an ox wagon called a mmakgotlhokgotlho was used, an example of which can be seen in the Molepolole
pounding legs is heard. Their entrance into the arena is usually very spectacular. The audience notices at once the vigour, picked up by the rest of the group. The performers clap hands leaning slightly while at the same time moving their knees prop used to beautify the movements along with the wooden barreled ones. The best dancers hold fly whisks along with the whistle.

Body tops to cover their breasts. This is quite modern a modern addition. Traditionally, they danced with the upper part of the forefront rubbing her breasts to ululate thus giving the dancers courage to dance more vigorously. The dancers, Kezilahabi (1998, p. 175) and Wood (1976) observe that the clapping of hands is in sync with the pounding of the feet, clapping is done with fingers closed to each other and hands in a position like that of hands in prayer. Nhlekisana and expression is also used together with other gestures, all of which add to the beauty of the song and dance. In again. In some songs they dance in pairs.

In Borankana, male dancers wear diphathisi (a goat skin filled with small pieces from an old blanket) around their shins. This part of the leg is beaten with the palms of the hands to produce bomb-like sounds. Girls wear diphaeyana (leather skirts) and body tops to cover their breasts. This is quite modern a modern addition. Traditionally, they danced with the upper part of the body bare. They also wear dibaga (beads) made from ostrich egg shells around the neck or as head bands. The best dancer normally wears leratsha (long beads). Sometimes girls wear cross beads just to beautify themselves. Boys wear metseto (loincloths) and hand bands which are also made from ostrich egg shells. The costumes of both male and female dancers allow for the free movement of legs, hands and shoulders.

A hand bag made from animal skin is another important prop worn by both sexes. It is worn across the shoulders and dangles below the armpit. Male dancers dance in quick rhythmic steps with one hand holding a stick stuck in the sand, so as to emulate elder Basarwa dancers who use it to maintain balance. The seditse (fly-whisk) is the most spectacular prop used to beautify the movements along with the wooden Borankana phala (whistle). The whistle is the principle earophonic instrument that sets the rhythmic pattern of the feet’s movements at an opportune time. This whistle was traditionally made from trees such as moroeye, motubane (produces white flowers during winter) and mhutikwane. In some instances, the phala was made from lethaka (river-reed) or lerapo la motwana wa pudi (goat’s shin bone). The latter phala was called a Limpopo. Nowadays whistles used by Borankana performers are metallic double and single barreled ones. The best dancers hold fly whisks along with the whistle.

As Nhlekisana and Kezilahabi (1998, p. 174) observed, dancers are usually positioned in a two line semicircle with women in front. The back line is usually reserved for male dancers but it can also be for a mixture of the two sexes. Performance is initiated by one girl setting the rhythm of the dance with a hand clapping pattern. This pattern is then picked up by the rest of the group. The performers clap hands leaning slightly while at the same time moving their knees in and out rhythmically. This is followed by the song, which again is started by one performer and picked up by the rest. By this time the audience’s expectations and emotions are tuned in and set, and the audience is ready to enjoy and share with the dancers their ontological experience of being.

The entrance of the dancers is heralded by an instrumental whistle, after which the rhythmic leg rattle on pounding legs is heard. Their entrance into the arena is usually very spectacular. The audience notices at once the vigour, strength, confidence and pride of the dancers. Their entrance may call for ululation and mouth whistling from the audience. Normally the dancers enter the arena from the front of the semicircle but sometimes a boy may pick a girl who is at the centre of the back line. The selected girl then enters the arena from where she is. The exit is even more spectacular than the entrance. It often leaves the audience clapping their hands with a sigh after being temporarily suspended in a world of unreachable by knowledge. One or two of the dancers may make phatic sounds to show appreciation and enjoyment of the music. About three sets of dancers dance in every song, each group showing its elegance. The sequence differs with the group, but the most common type of sequence is boys, then girls and then boys again. In some songs they dance in pairs.

In Borankana dancing, almost every part of the body is used. The hands are used for clapping; the feet for stamping/dancing; and the head and shoulders are moved in sync with the rhythm of the song. A great deal of facial expression is also used together with other gestures, all of which add to the beauty of the song and dance. In Borankana, clapping is done with fingers closed to each other and hands in a position like that of hands in prayer. Nhlekisana and Kezilahabi (1998, p. 175) and Wood (1976) observe that the clapping of hands is in sync with the pounding of the feet, “creating an exciting and titillating rhythm pattern”. During the singing and dancing an ululator sporadically comes to the forefront rubbing her breasts to ululate thus giving the dancers courage to dance more vigorously. The dancers,
especially the boys, blow whistles or mouth whistles and play with the fly whisk while dancing. All of the singers move their feet and bodies to the rhythm of the music. Each of the songs transpires in a call and response pattern.

**Borankana Performance Dismissal**

The dismissal of the overnight *Borankana* performances was traditionally marked by the rising of the morning star (or the *mphatlalatsane*) which was used as a time telling sign. Before the dismissal of the *Borankana* performance, a number of things took place. This was the time when adjudication by the audience occurred to offer a token of appreciation to the best dancer. These tokens were in the form of porridge *bogobe ja sebube* (porridge cooked with milk), a goat or a cow. A goat or cow was normally given as a present to the *Borankana* overnight overall dancing hero.

The early morning hours were the times when performers would sneak away with their lovers. This was marked by the leader singing songs of love making such as *Naledi ya masa e dule ntshuna ke go sune*, literally meaning the morning star is risen kiss me and let me kiss you. Finally the leader would shout “*A setapa seye monyweng se ye go bina se kaname*” literally meaning let the dance go to the dew and be danced upside down. This lovemaking was, however, done very carefully. If by mistake a boy impregnated a girl, he would be punished severely by the elders since *Borankana* was meant for entertainment and crime prevention not mischief. To escape this punishment, he would immediately flee to work in the South African mines before the elders discovered the pregnancy. He would only come back when the child was long delivered and the elders’ tempers in most cases would have calmed down.

Below are a few examples of *Borankana* songs from the interviews. The songs were metaphorical and free from vulgar language. Some songs were also used to communicate messages to the society as well as to praise and advise dikgosi (chiefs).

**Praise Borankana song for the chief**

**Setswana**

*Are yeng Mokwena*

*Re ye go bona kgosi Kgari wa Bakwena*

*O tshwana le naledi ya masa*

**English Translation**

Let us go to Mokwena

To see Chief Kgari of the Bakwena

He is like a morning star.

**Praise Borankana song for the tribe**

**Setswana**

*Are tsamayeng reye kwaga Mokwena, re ye go bona Bakwena baga Kobokwe.*

**English Translation**

Let us go to Mokwena to see Bakwena of Kobokwe.

**Wedding song**

**Setswana**

*Fa ke wela wela le dithotanyana lwapo la ga mme le tla sala le mang.*

**English Translation**

When I move through the hilly path who will remain with my mother’s home.

**CONCLUSION**

*Borankana* is the traditional music practiced by the Bakwena of Botswana. This music is popularly known as *Phathisi* because of its costume. Batswana use the word *Borankana* as a generic term encompassing different types of traditional
music. However, in this article, as Bakwena elders articulated, Borankana means a musical genre practiced specifically by the Bakwena. Borankana is performed by men and women. Boys and girls are also allowed to learn to be future performers. Borankana music is associated with happiness and is an overnight performance. This music is usually performed when there is good harvest in the fields. In addition, Borankana music is performed during kgotla (tribal court) meetings and independence celebrations. Borankana music has survived through the years because of its support from the lineage of the Bakwena Paramount Chiefs. Like most African music types, Borankana is not notated. It has survived through oral transmission from one generation to the next.

Borankana stresses coordination, dance movements, rhythm, pause, and vital force. The movement of legs sideways and forward is properly balanced by rhythmic beats and hand clapping patterns and leg rattles. It is pause that brings in the element of the unexpected surprise and suspense, but it is its vital force that is most admired by the audience, including the muscles of the dancers, the thickness of the chest and thighs, the height of the dancer, and the size of the body. All of this, coupled with individual skill and style, the handling of the fly whisk and the movement of the hands, make the dance a harmonized and polished organic experience for both the dancers and audience. Borankana has a good amount of rhythmic repetition of isorhythmic structure but it is not lacking in variation. According to Dundes (1965), “the use of variation is perhaps the greatest single diversifying factor to balance the many unifying elements in folk and primitive music”. Nowadays Borankana is performed by a few elders, a number of schools in Kweneng District and contemporary bands such as the Machesa who have modernized it.

REFERENCES


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