

Marapo (Bone-Striking) Traditional Music as Practiced by the Bangwato of Botswana

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Abstract

Highlighting the application of Ethnomusicology beyond the traditional boundaries of the academy, this paper aims at discussing information found out about *Marapo* (Bone – Striking) traditional Music as practiced by the Bangwato of Botswana located in the Central District. The paper was conceived from tribal collaborations between Ethnomusicology music classes and Bangwato tribal respondents in 2010 as an effort to understand *Marapo* traditional music and its uses in the tribal daily lives. The paper does not only pay attention to the music, but also to its traditional ways of transmission and its social and cultural explanations. The subject of learning styles among practiced and proficient musicians, aspirant musicians, participants is also pronounced. This paper seeks to promote and disseminate research that investigates experiences affecting musical acquisition, development, and participation across the lifespan. The research is also geared towards pointing out community factors that contribute to the nearing extinction of music practice in other parts of the District. Data was mainly collected through oral interviews recorded on tape with informants as well as practical performances observations. Other documented information repositories were also consulted during the exercise. The oral interviews were also recorded using an audiotape for purposes of future reference. Photographs of practical performances were also taken and will be found in the research. It became evident from the interviews that Bangwato of Botswana *Marapo*

music is mainly performed by women on day to day tribal societal activities for entertainment.

Keywords: Batswana, Bangwato, Serowe, Marapo (Cattle –Ribs), Regiment, Mahetsakgang.

Introduction

The paper was conceived after an ethnomusicology excursion to the Serowemain Kgotla on the 21st of September 2007. The main aim of this trip was to find out about the traditional music of the Bangwato and its societal significance. Bangwato have a number of traditional music genres, however, they confirmed that *Mminowa Marapoas* compared to other musical types originates from Ga - Mmangwato. i. e. Serowe and surrounding areas.

The research was carried out among a group of informants who gathered at the Ga – Mmangwato Main Kgotla in Serowe which is the main tribal administration centre of the Bangwato and the Central District at large.

Purpose of the Study

The main aim of this study was to find out about the main traditional music of the Bangwato and its societal significance. The study also aimed at familiarising student teachers to different traditional musical genres found among the Bangwato. The study also explored ways of documenting, preserving and teaching of this traditional music.

Methodology

Data were collected through performance observations and oral interviews with the informants. The group of informants comprised of a sample of 15 rib music performers, 6 ward headmen (representing their 6 different wards) and 2 representatives from the Serowe main Kgotla. The following wards were represented by the informants and their headmen; Bokone, Basimane, Botalaote, Mokowe, Gootshweu and Makanana.

All performers and informants in the exception of the headmen were from the Mahetsakgangregiment. There are two regiments which preceded the current one in performing *Mminowa Marapo* music namely Makgasaand Malekantwa. Mahetsakgang regiment learnt the music orally from Malekantwa. Like in any other African society, this music was transferred from one regiment to the other orally without any form of notation. The youth also copied the music from adult performers.

Since Serowe is far and the trip was going to be costly from Gaborone, an advantage of students' independence holidays travelling to the north of the country from this class emerged. A stop over at the Serowe main Kgotla (tribal administration Centre) was agreed for interviewing informants. Fortunately there was only one student who was remaining in the Southern part of the country and the majority of the class attended the interviews before proceeding to their respective villages for holidays.

Historical Background

Bones fall under the category of musical instruments known as Idiophones; (from the Greek *idios* meaning 'own'): A musical instrument in which sound is produced by causing the (rigid) material of which it is made to vibrate. This vibration may be effected by percussion or concussion, plucking, rubbing and shaking, Rault (2000:223) Idiophones can also be defined as instruments which are self-sounding, which make a sound without adding a reed, string or

membrane), Wood (1976: 211). According to Odwar (2006:58), idiophones are instruments in which the body of the instrument vibrates to produce sound. The body is set in motion by striking, shaking, purring, scraping, clashing together and in some instances by plucking. Norborg (2001:8) has this to say, idiophones are instruments of inherently resonant material. They are made to sound by being struck upon, by plucking or by friction. Struck idiophones are made to vibrate by being struck, directly or indirectly. They may be divided according to method of striking into concussion idiophones or clappers, percussion idiophones, stamped idiophones, shaken idiophones and scraped idiophones.

Solid bodies flat or curved plaques, hollow objects, boards and tubes as well as flexible bodies; blades, strings or membranes are capable of producing sound whether this is achieved by percussion, rubbing, plucking or blowing, Rault (2000:15). Some evidence exists with regard to bone music performance among some communities in the past. Marcuse (1964:170) states that, the *Amatambo*, clappers of the South African Zulu were made of cattle rib bones. The same author goes further to state that, they are similar to European bones (Goat rib bones) and quite possibly an imitation of them. The Zulu used them as a rhythmic accompaniment to singing and dancing and also played them on festive occasions. Kirby (1968:10) describes Batswana bones or *Marapo*, also made from cattle rib bones. The author has this to say;

I have not been able to determine whether the Zulu got the idea of using this instrument from the Europeans or not. The Chwana almost certainly did. The Rev. A. Sandilands, who has been for years a missionary in Bechuanaland, assured me that fact is admitted by the Chwana themselves.

In the past, cattle rib music was performed at a place called Sepane. Sepane is a river passing behind the current St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School in Serowe. The purpose of performing at Sepane was to obtain drinking water to quench thirst by performers. Long rehearsals took place at Sepane under the shades of big *Mokgalo* trees. Another significant mark that can be found at Sepanear ruins of the Bangwato royal families.

Discussion

List of some informants		
Name of informant Birth	Ward Name	Date of
TsholofeloMadikwe	Bokone	1922
Moji Motalaote - Key Informant & Former Teacher	Botalaote	1923
ObonyeKeiteretse	Basimane	1931
MmoniemangkemongBadumetse	Botalaote	1930
KeinyatseKebarapele	Botalaote	1930
EnnieSereko	Mokowe	1935
MmakelebaleMotshwaedi	Makanana	1941
Keoswetse Modise (Daughter to Mrs Keiteretse)	Goothweu	1957

Chief Representatives



Ward Headmen (*Dikgosana*)



Rib Instrumental Manufacturing

Creating musical instruments involves respect for the materials sublimated in their construction; it means discovering and appreciating their acoustic and magical qualities. In this sphere perhaps more than any other, man has shown himself to be tireless and patient, proceeding methodologically and in harmony with his environment, coming to terms with local factors such as relief, climate, vegetation and animal species, Rault (2000:9). The cattle ribs are not bought; they are freely obtained after a beast has been slaughtered for an occasion. The instrument consists of two sections of cattle rib-bones, each being about 15-18 cm long and 3-5 cm wide. The cattle ribs are boiled in water with cooking oil to remove pieces of meat and harden them for durability purposes. Since cattle ribs are long, 4 Cattle ribs are cut to a reasonable size for each performer. The cattle ribs are later dried in a safe place where cats and dogs do not reach to pick them. The cattle ribs are boiled in water with cooking oil to remove pieces of meat and harden them for durability purposes and also to avoid rotting.

Dried Cattle Ribs



Cattle Ribs Ready for Performance



Who Performs the Bone Striking Music?

Cattle rib music is strictly performed by women ensemble belonging to the same regiment. Moreover, in bone striking music all performers are traditionally considered to be equal despite the fact that some individuals demonstrate higher levels of technical proficiency. These performers put on German print dresses. Traditionally the cattle rib music was performed by the local elder's in the form of group regiments. Youngsters though not from the same regiment from Institutions such as Sekgoma Memorial School of Nursing and Swaneng Hill School also performed this musical genre.

Nowadays the cattle rib music is performed during Wedding ceremonies with the two wedding families competing against each other, *go bolotswaletsema* (when the ploughing season is declared officially opened) and in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) Church of Serowe. One might wonder why at this church in particular and not the others. This church is the one which baptized the royals of Serowe during early missionary work. So, it is attached to the royal family. The leader of the regiment *Mme* – Naledi comes from the Bangwato royal family. Rib music is also performed during happy occasions such as; Presidential *Kgotla* meetings, independence celebrations and the chief's inauguration.

Performing Techniques

Each member of the bone - striking ensemble holds two ribs in the right hand whilst the other two are for the left hand. The two ribs are held surrounding the middle fingers in each hand with the outer sides away from each other, i. e. back to back. The player holds both plaques in one hand. One plaque is held between the forefinger and the second finger, the other between the second and third fingers. They are held near one end, and the opposite ends are tapped together. The longer side of the bone should be inside the hand for a sound and successful performance. The shorter side is placed between the performing fingers for easy handling. This is supported by Levine (2005:159) when she observed that, animal rib-bones are used as musical instruments to provide rhythmical accompaniment to singing. *Marapo* are made in pairs, are held in both hands and struck together. The striking of dry cattle ribs is accompanied by a whistle blown by the lead singer. The performers move heads, hands, and the torso. The legs are left still to maintain balance.

During this process, individuals develop listening and comprehension skills. Moreover, playing in a music ensemble encourages individuals to develop problem solving and teamwork skills through a different means of communication, McIntosh (2013:19). Such an approach not only allowed individuals to gain different perspectives from within the ensemble but it also facilitated the tutors to better understand, and discuss with each other, the processes involved in teaching and learning *marapo* music.

Oral Interviews with Informants



Performance Demonstration



Rib Holding Technique Demonstration



Singing and Practical Rib-Striking Performance



Example of Song

Nalediwee se robale

Re lebilemotsengwadinatla

(*Pina e eopelwa ha baya go tllhabana le babangwe* – This song is performed when the group is going to compete)

Conclusion

As a participatory musical activity, bone striking would encourage group learning and cohesion, as well as promote issues relating to individual and group perceptions of musical ability and creativity. Given that musical material is almost always taught in a group situation, this serves to promote a sense of collaborative learning among rib –striking musicians. Cattle rib music forms part of the Bangwato culture since they identify themselves with it. Since there is evidence that historically cattle rib music was performed in communities such as; Sekgoma Memorial School of Nursing, Swaneng Senior Secondary school as well as adult groups (Malekantwa and Mahetsakgang Regiments), these performances should be revived for preservation. The elders who perform Cattle rib music in Serowe are very old and some of them have passed on. The young generation does not find this musical type appealing to them, so they do not perform it. This might have an adverse effect to Cattle rib Music becoming obsolete.

Recommendations

Since the Botswana Basic Education Music syllabi (Primary Junior Secondary) calls for teachers to include traditional music of communities they teach in, teachers should take this opportunity to involve knowledgeable parents to assist them in traditional music teaching. Parents and teachers should liaise through Parents Teachers Associations to see to it that their music is preserved and not become obsolete since it forms part of their culture. Students should be encouraged to attend cultural musical group performances to learn.

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