

Documenting Distinctive Features of Indigenous Bapedi Music

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Abstract

In the Bapedi music tradition, characteristics, and the role of indigenous music in the community is one area that requires scholarly attention. An investigation into the use and influence of pure, natural, and authentic indigenous music in the context of religion and wellbeing is inevitable. The purpose of this study was to investigate the significant role played by indigenous music in the daily lives of Bapedi people, as well as the characteristics of the music. To address the objectives of the study, the following primary research question was considered: what is the cultural relevance of indigenous Bapedi music? The primary sources for data collection include observations and oral interviews that were conducted through face-to-face interaction. The interviews were aimed at eliciting first-hand information on the knowledge of the subject matter. The secondary sources included among others, materials such as journal articles, books and theses, and of course personal experience. The results have shown that indigenous Bapedi music is a social activity in which everyone participates and requires coordinated cooperation. It was concluded that Bapedi people use a wide variety of sounds within a single performance. The impression created during observations and interviews was that music rhythm and percussive sounds are highly emphasized in indigenous Bapedi music.

Keywords: Bapedi people, indigenous music, Bapedi music tradition, religion, well-being.

Introduction

Bapedi people are found in Limpopo Province, but a large percentage of this ethnic group is situated in Sekhukhune area (**see figure 1**). Indigenous Bapedi music is unique. Performing indigenous music and making indigenous musical instruments is an integral part of the Bapedi community and it varies not only from traditional dance group to traditional dance group but from village to village. Indigenous Bapedi music is a total art form closely linked to dance, gesture, and dramatization. It permeates Bapedi people's way of life and has a function, and a role to play in the Bapedi society. Songs are used for religious ceremonies and rituals, to teach and give guidance, to tell stories, to mark the stages of life and death, and to provide political guidance or

express discontent. They also serve to entertain and are used in ceremonial and cultural festivals. Singing, dancing, and playing indigenous Bapedi musical instruments ensure that a dynamic event transpires. The impact of the music is tantamount; the beauty of it, like African sculpture, is secondary to the primary function. Performances may be long and often involve the participation of the audience and much of it is associated with a particular dance. Historically, indigenous Bapedi music was attributed to the collective society and not to individual musicians; and this is still happening, perpetuated by traditional music practitioners in contemporary Bapedi society.

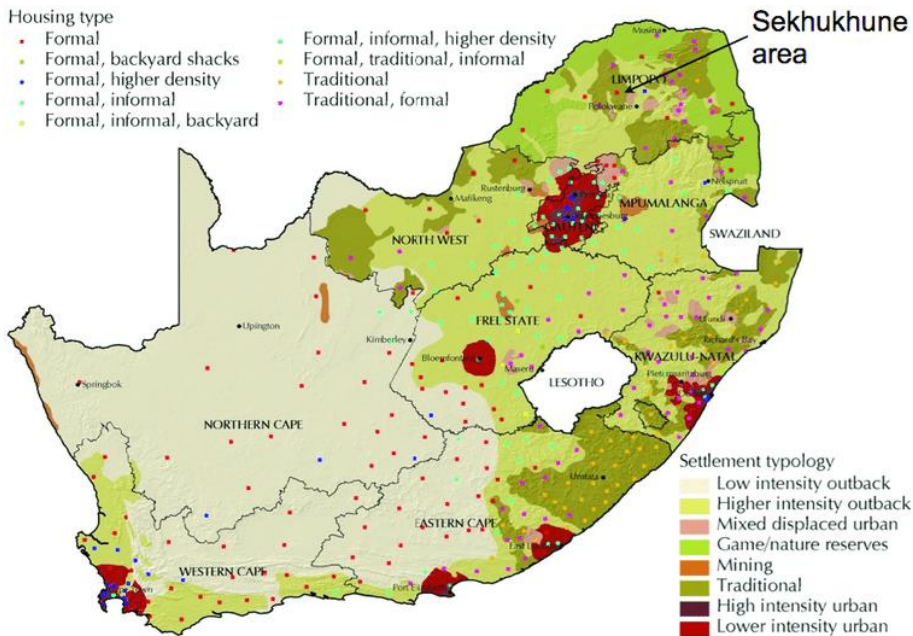


Figure 1: Geographical Location Map of South Africa showing Limpopo Province & Sekhukhune area.

https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enZA954ZA954&q=Local+municipalities+in+Sekhukhune+District&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&vet=1&biw=1280&bih=609&dpr=15; [accessed 07 February 2023].

Theoretical Perspective

This study is underpinned by a Cultural Theory of Education as proposed by Frederick Gearing and his research partners (1975). The theory reflects the approach which tries to deal with most of the information which is used in the normal course of events by most of the people in a community (Gearing et al. 1975:2). The theory focuses on the development of relational competencies that are necessary to create and sustain social cohesion and growth-fostering relationships, such as the capacity to recognize and attend to the needs of others. It seeks to define heuristic concepts of culture. With

this theory, Frederick Gearing and his research partners tried of an investigation which is improbably ambitious. According to these scholars, their investigation addressed a contemporary community of some size and complexity; for example, a neighbourhood which is ethically heterogeneous and mixed in terms of economic class (1975:4). The theory also seeks to describe the community's total education structure, which is to say the full array of regularly recurring face-to-face interchanges through which all salient items from the community's full pool of cognitively organized information is regularly distributed and redistributed among the members of the community across the generations. According to these scholars, such an ambitious investigation required a team at work over some duration. Summarizing their consensus opinion, these scholars believe that cultural theory of education is far from "finished". They advocate that the cultural theory of education (in contrast to the individual empirical studies) reflects collective efforts (Gearing et al. 1975:9). Theoretically, this school of thought contributes to the notion that there is no individual who can live in isolation. This theory reminds us to belong to somewhere in the community and participate fully in any if not all cultural activities. The theory is applicable to this study because with this study, the author is trying to deal with most of the information pertaining to Bapedi music tradition. In approximation to the present study, the theory tries to create and sustain social cohesion and growth-fostering relationships, such as the capacity to recognize and attend to the needs of others. This study also addressed a contemporary Bapedi society of some size, and a complexity of different music genres found in the Bapedi society, but also described the structure of Bapedi people's indigenous music and their mode of transmission. The theory is adopted for this study, because indigenous Bapedi music is attributed to the collective society and not to individual musicians. Like the author's contention, the theory contributes to the notion of communal undertaking which promotes social cohesion, knowledge sharing and skills' transference.

Previous related studies

Multiple studies have been conducted to investigate the role of music in the community (Aluede 2012; Amlor 2016; Boer & Abubakar 2014; Breidlid 2009; Demmrich 2020; Ekanem 2012; Eze & Van der Wal 2020; Flandreau 2016; Frith 2004; Idang 2015; Ikechukwu 2013; Le Roux & Sauer 2016; Luhrmann et al. 2021; Maila & Loubser 2003; Mbaegbu 2015; Mkabela 2005; Ndemanu 2018; Ruud 2013; Silverman 2018; Stevenson 2018; Teffera 2006). In particular, Idang (2015:100) opines that culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects. He believes that while material culture refers to the visible tactile objects which man can manufacture for the purposes of human survival; non-material culture comprises of the norms and mores of the people (2015:100). Idang further postulates that culture is dynamic in the sense that it is continually changing. He is of the opinion that the value of a thing, be it an object or a belief, is normally defined as its worth (2015:100). Corroborating the above observations, Teffera (2006:44) writes that traditional musical instruments

among other things serve in the various kingdoms as court music instruments predominantly for the entertainment of the royal regalia. According to Teffera, additionally other music instruments such as gourd or calabash rattles, drums, and wooden concussion idiophones also play an important role in accompanying the flute or trumpet ensembles (2006:44). He has observed that aerophones such as closed bamboo flutes and open-ended calabash trumpets without finger holes produce a single tone so that a full melodic line will be created while playing together (2006:44). In the same vein, Ruud (2013:1) has observed that some people may sing, participate in a choir, dance to music, compose songs, play precomposed music, or play in a band as part of a reflexive strategy to improve their health and well-being. According to Ruud, music is used on a regular basis to refocus one's attention or address and align oneself with troubling memories to spark an emotional catharsis (2013:6). Ruud asserts that music therapists have traditionally resisted a concept of music as 'work' and have instead embraced more processual conceptions of music, where contextual, music-structural, and individual circumstances influence its interpretation and experience (2013:7).

One recent study showed the role played by long social connections and a pleasant interactive experience among traditional Bapedi music practitioners (Lebaka, 2023). In his study, Lebaka has observed that music is not alien or extraneous to the Bapedi people, but part of the Bapedi culture (2023:1). During his study, it has also emerged that among traditional Bapedi music practitioners, communal music-making plays a vital role in knowledge/expertise sharing, and musical creativity revolves around improvisation, recreation, and variation (2023:8).

Research strategy

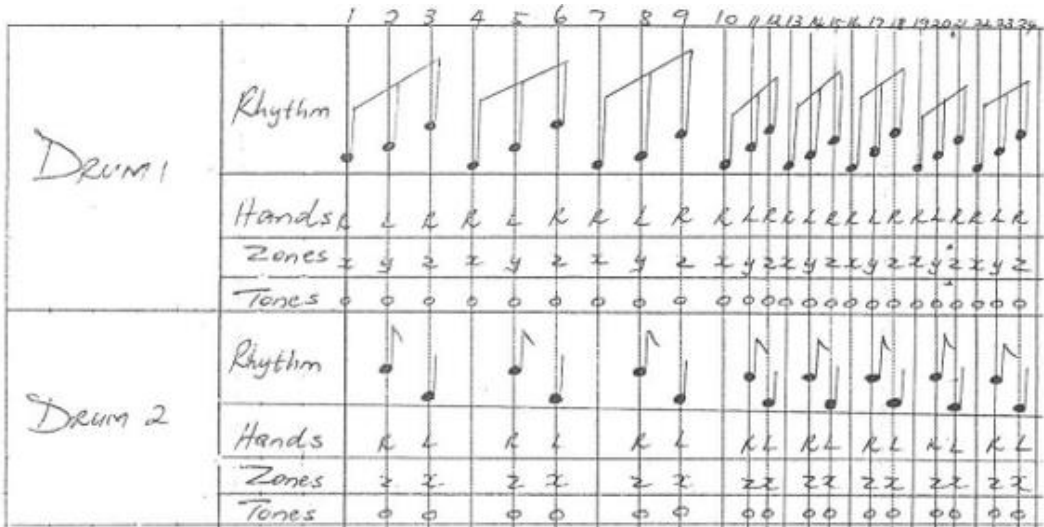
To achieve the objectives of the study, the primary sources for data collection included observations and oral interviews that were conducted through face-to-face interaction. The interviews were aimed at eliciting first-hand information on the knowledge of the subject matter. Participants were selected because of their knowledgeable and informative qualities. The secondary sources included among others, materials such as journal articles, books and theses, and of course personal experience. The main objective of this research study focused on the significant role played by indigenous music in the daily lives of Bapedi people, as well as the characteristics of the music. Therefore, special attention has been given to distinctive features of indigenous Bapedi music. Literary evidence has shown that very little has been documented about indigenous Bapedi music. To fill this gap in the literature, I aimed to study the relevance of indigenous music within Bapedi people's cultural context. My point of departure was to conduct field research in Sekhukhune area, to get first-hand information about the relevance of indigenous music in the Bapedi culture. My primary concern in this study is to appraise and reconstruct Bapedi culture and African culture in general. The study is primarily motivated by the fact

that indigenous music plays an indispensable role in the daily lives of the Bapedi people.

Results and Discussion

Polyrhythm

During observations and interviews, it was established that within Bapedi peoples' cultural context rhythm and percussive sounds are highly emphasized. It was further observed that several different rhythmic patterns are played at the same time and repeated over and over (see figure 2). It is worth noting that indigenous Bapedi music such as 'Salane' (see table 1), is characterized by many rhythms such as interlocking rhythms, inherent rhythms, etc. It has emerged from the interviews that *malopo* songs do not have the same ritualistic value, and the song 'Salane' is regarded by Bapedi traditional healers as the most important vehicle to communicate with their ancestors. It is a truism that these rhythms may vary from one song or performance to the other. This viewpoint is endorsed by Mbaegbu (2015:176), who notes that black Africa shows certain cultural unity. In a similar vein, Ruud (2015:7) postulates that there are many ways of conceptualizing music. He contends that different disciplines within musicology are linked through shared underlying assumptions about the very nature of music (2015:7).



The image shows a handwritten musical transcription for the song 'Salane'. It is organized into several horizontal sections across a series of vertical staves. The top section is labeled 'DRUM 3' and contains four sub-sections: 'Rhythm' (with a series of dots and lines), 'Hands' (with letters 'L' and 'R' indicating left and right hand patterns), 'Zones' (with numbers '1' and '2'), and 'Tones' (with circles and lines). Below this is a section labeled 'FEET' with a series of notes and lines. The bottom section is labeled 'CLAPPING' and 'CLAPPING' with 'x' marks indicating clapping points. The entire transcription is written in black ink on a white background.

Figure 2: Transcription of the song ‘Salane’ (my transcription); drumming, dancing, and hand-clapping rhythmic patterns.

Song text and translation

Sepedi	English
Ngwakong wa tate go na le madulo a mantšhi	In the house of my father, there are many dwelling seats.
Rena ka Sione re ka se ye	We shall never go to Zion.
Re ya gae ga Mmotla	We are going home at Mmotla’s place.
Ga Mmotla wa kgoro ya boraro	At Mmotla’s home in the third kraal
Re ile go hwetša tatago rena	We are going to see our father.
Hlabirwa se hlwela boroko	Hlabirwa, who is always asleep.
Sebodu sa mapompana se kae? Mogatša Pheladi	Where is the laziest person? Pheladi’s husband
O phasitše bongaka, o phasitše lehu la gago	You have qualified as a traditional healer; you have passed your death.

Table 1: Malopo song ‘Salane’.

Explanation of the symbolism

The song ‘Salane’ is only sung when problems seem particularly difficult to surmount. It is sung when traditional healers encounter problems with respect to the divination bones. In case the traditional healer cannot interpret the divination bones, or during the healing process, there is slowly recovery by the patient and during the first step (*go tielwa*) of the training session when the trainee does not fall and disclose what the personal ancestor requires from him/her. The primary purpose of singing this song is to summon the ancestors to intervene in case problems are encountered. During my field research I have observed that always when traditional healers and their trainees enter the homestead where *malopo* ritual is to be performed, this is the first song to be sung, to invite their ancestors to join them and protect them against any harmful effects which may prevail. It is also sung when the ritual is over, especially when participants disperse to their respective homes. By singing the song, both

traditional healers and their trainees invite their ancestors to protect them on their way back home. The central message of this song is that:

You have trained as a traditional healer, satisfied all the requirements as a traditional healer, and qualified as a traditional healer, but take care and look after yourself because you have qualified for your death, for other traditional healers will be jealous in case you are good, prosperous and productive, and have many patients, making a lot of money. The assumption is that they may attempt to kill you. Take care and look after yourself.

Call & Response

It has emerged during the study that in the Bapedi culture, traditional music practitioners compose their indigenous music through frequent rehearsals which are open to criticism from their listening participants/audience. Much of what they do when they interact with others during communal music-making is based on call-and-response technique, as well as imitation.

According to Morogwa Angelinah Tshela (personal communication, 25 July 2016), some songs give equal or greater weight to the words than the music, while others give more attention to the structure and form of the music than the words. Based on the above observation, it is evident that during communal music-making, the context of music-making whereby call-and-response pattern is employed, is a natural way of combining enjoyment with education.

In the Bapedi culture, personification is so common that it has become a common place expression in everyday language of the society. In this culture, indigenous songs are characterized by a call and response singing technique pattern. The chorus is mainly done by all participants (respondents), the soloist exclusive, but some villagers attend many rehearsals and performances during social, cultural, and ritual ceremonies and can also join in the chorus. Villagers mainly support the singers and dancers by hand clapping.

Repetition

During interviews and observations, it was established that indigenous Bapedi music is repetitive. A large percentage of the songs have short phrases (**see table 2**), and very easy to memorise. The repetitive, structured, often danced –with sounds of music are found in almost every society – along with language. There is something deeply human about music, but deeply cultural about it as well. Congruent to the above observations, Demmrich (2020:36) writes that monotony, repetition, and simplicity of the ideally purely instrumental music – as we know from drumming, gonging, or clapping – stimulate neuropsychological processes (theta brain waves), which in turn elicit religious experience. Demmrich further notes that in contrast, vocals and especially meaningful words are seen as an intellectual stimulation that can disrupt religious experience during music listening (2020:37). In his view, a

disruption due to less repetition and simplicity can also occur during Christian organ music, which can stimulate religious experience only slightly among church-socialized individuals (2020:37).

Song text and translation

Sepedi	English
Ba bolaile Mmangakane Mosadi o moso, moloi Lentsu la ka ke makgwakgwa Le gana ge ke goeletša Mmangakane moloi	They have killed Mmangakane. A black woman who is a witch. My voice is not clear. I am unable to call louder. Mmangakane, you are a witch woman.

Table 3: *Malopo* song ‘*Mmangakane*’.

Explanation of the symbolism

The song ‘*Mmangakane*’ is dramatic. The singers (traditional healers and their trainees) feel bewildered and lonely. They think of all their loved ones, within and outside the family circle. They are lamenting that when they call their ancestors, their voices are not clear. They are frustrated because they cannot call louder and seemingly the ancestors cannot hear their call. The message put across here is that they feel lonely because all their loved ones from both immediate and extended families have passed on. They are earnestly appealing to their ancestors to bring them back, unfortunately ancestors cannot hear them as their voices are not clear and not audible enough for the ancestors to come to their rescue.

Improvisation

After interacting with the traditional Bapedi musical practitioners, I have no reason to doubt that Bapedi people tend not to be interested in any music which lacks improvisation. Seemingly, the rhythm is in their blood. They like movement, moving to music and cannot sing or play instruments without moving to the music. It has emerged from this study that participants are not interested in any music genre whereby their creativity and innovation is suppressed. During observations, it was evident that within Bapedi people’s cultural context, participating actively in music making, when needed, enables the participants understand Bapedi reed pipes’ music artistically and contextually (Lebaka 2017:145). It was further observed that Bapedi reed pipes’ music as a living art form, it is largely dependent on improvisation, re-creation, and variation (**see photo 1**). These observations are endorsed by Teffera (2006:39), by asserting that the use of the hocket technique is very important in constructing a complete melodic line. According to Teffera, the hoquet style in combination with the creation of polyphonic and polyrhythmic patterns is widely spread and applied in East African aerophone ensemble performances, as well as in other instrumental and vocal music practices of East African traditional music (2006:39).



Photo 1

Reed pipes' players, on their own, drawing upon their creative intelligence, use improvisation, re-creation, variation, and gestures to make their performances impressive (Ga-Marodi village, 20.10.2007), Photographer: Jukka Louhivuori (Lebaka 2017:145).

Drumming/Hand clapping

In the Bapedi culture, like in African culture, the drum is generally regarded as the heart of the community. It is the most significant instrument as it reflects people's moods and emotions, and its rhythm holds dancers together. Indigenous Bapedi music like African music, is founded on drumming, accompanied by handclapping, and sometimes replaced by handclapping (**see photo 2**).



Photo 2

Mathasana (trainees) playing the drums placed between and held by the legs; Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka (Researcher); Place: Kotsiri

village; Schoonoord area (Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality); Date: 22 July 1998.

During my research study of indigenous musics of all cultures in South Africa, I observed exceptional characteristic of the Ndebele music tradition, whereby drumming is replaced by a whistle to regulate the beat or tempo. Sharing insightful information about drumming in East African courts, Teffera (2006:37) writes that predominantly, drum sets have intensively been used in many East African courts. According to Teffera, apart from their use as typical signal instruments for transmitting messages to the masses (for example in the kingdom of Buganda in Uganda), their presence in almost all musical events has always been very common (2006:37). Furthermore, he states that using drumming to accompany songs and dances, processions, state proclamations, and royal coronations has been a very common practice (2006:37). In the same vein, Ruud (2013:6) observes that it seems that music is used on a regular basis to refocus one's attention or address and align oneself with troubling memories to spark an emotional catharsis. Ruud reminds us that music offers itself as a mirror of an inner state and thus help the person to recognize, identify, distinguish, and finally tolerate the emotion that was produced in his/her interaction with the music (2013:9). He believes that music is used in the everyday life to regulate, maintain, and improve health (2013:10).

Democratic

During the study, it was noticeable that in the Bapedi culture, music is a social activity in which almost everyone participates. Within Bapedi people's cultural context, it is democratic. Democracy implies the government of the people by the people and with the people. That simply implies that indigenous Bapedi music is the music of the people by the people and with the people. Indigenous Bapedi music is often collaborative and requires coordinated cooperation, in which participants belong to "constituencies" that are not similar but complementary. These observations are endorsed by Le Roux and Sauer (2016:165), who posit that music can be viewed as a metaphor for wholeness, symbolizing restoration, transcendence and relationships.

Melody

From the cultural perspective of the Bapedi people, music highlights African values with various traditions accompanied by a melody. Many events of importance are celebrated with music, whether it is a marriage, a birth, or a ceremonial rite passage. There are songs that accompany grinding of corns, digging, chopping, and harvesting. There are songs of praise and criticism, and songs recounting history. As a result, music is often performed outdoors, in the streets, courtyards or village squares. Traditional Bapedi music practitioners use a wide variety of sounds within a single performance. A singer may shift from an open relaxed tone to one that is tighter and more constricted. Supporting the above views, Mbaegbu (2015:177) is of the opinion that the term 'music' means sounds made by playing instruments or 'singing'.

According to Mbaegbu (2015:177) African music also includes any sound produced by the Africans with their mouths popularly known as the 'African voices' (2015:177). He further opines that the most important thing about any type of African music is that it has beauty of form and is intended to communicate some emotion (2015:177). He is convinced that music is not alien or extraneous to the African, but part of their culture (2015:177).

Emotions

During observations and interviews, it was interesting to learn that indigenous Bapedi music can also tap into empathy inducing emotions that are assumed to be felt by the performers. This is supported by literary evidence that 'music with a fast tempo has been found to evoke positive emotions, such as happiness, excitement, delight, and liveliness, while music with slow tempo evokes negative emotions, such as sadness, depression and gravity' (Ruud 2013:7). Ruud (2013:9) states that music is very helpful in the emotional work that is necessary to integrate feelings of loss with other concomitant emotions. He is of the opinion that the impact of musically induced emotions is important (2013:9). In his view, research on music and emotion points to an element of emotional contagion when listening to or playing music (2013:9). In agreement with Ruud, Demmrich (2020:36) notes that people can cope with existential fear by identifying themselves with the two cultural symbol systems, music, and religion, since they represent a continuity of their own belief system beyond the limits of their own personal existence. Attesting to the above viewpoints, Le Roux and Sauer (2016:162), note that a whole person has physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. They believe that emotions are often mediators of spiritual awareness (2016:164).

Ululation

It is worthwhile to mention here that ululation is one of the most familiar sounds in the Bapedi music tradition; a wailing or high cry formed with the mouth and tongue that changes between two or three notes and is used to show emotion at a ceremony. Singers will sometimes whisper, hum, grunt, yodel, shout and even imitate animal noises. It is noticeable that indigenous Bapedi music also combines aspects of dancing and playing instruments that are interwoven into the fabric of life. For example, the core of *malopo* rituals is vigorous dancing motivated by ululation. Spectators or audience ululate in support of ancestor worship and indeed men will not execute this, it is specifically meant for women.

Cycles

During observations it was evident that much of indigenous Bapedi music is circular (see figure 3). This circular concept of time ultimately defines a structural set. The set represents a structural module from which the entire performance is derived. The performance consists of a steady ostinato framework of multi-concentric rhythms on which various manipulations of the set are realized by a leader (e.g., a lead drummer).

It is in these complex structural manipulations (against a background of a steady ostinato referent) that Bapedi music tradition finds its finest rhythmic qualities. During observations and interviews, it was also established that most of indigenous Bapedi songs are short and repetitive (see table 3), and the melodic phrases are mostly repeated in a cyclic form. Tones an interval of a fifth apart (i.e., that have a kind of tonic dominant relationship or ‘soh-doh’ relationship) were often heard almost in all the songs, produced by beating on the drums. This tonal relationship is expressed in the notation, by placing the drum pitches on two different visual levels. An example of such drumming patterns heard at Ga-Maloma village (Schoonoord) area is the following:

Example of drumming patterns

Name of the song: ‘Šibišana Mašabela’.

Form number of the cycle:

14: 3+3+3+ [3+2]

The image shows a handwritten musical transcription for the song 'Šibišana Mašabela'. It consists of several horizontal lines representing different rhythmic elements over a 14-measure cycle. The top line is a melody line with notes on a staff. Below it is a 'DRUM' section with two lines: the first line has notes labeled 'd' and 's' (representing different drum pitches), and the second line has letters 'L' and 'R' (representing hand positions). Below the drum section is a 'FEET' line with 'L' and 'R' notes. Below that is a 'CLAPPING' line with 'x' marks indicating clapping points. At the bottom is a line for 'Clapping patterns in conventional notation' with notes and stems. A 'Zones' line is also present with 'z' and 'x' marks. The measures are numbered 1 through 14 at the top.

Figure 3: Transcription of the song ‘Šibišana Mašabela’ (my transcription); drumming, dancing, and hand-clapping rhythmic patterns.

Song text and translation

Sepedi	English
Šibišana Mašabela	Šibišana Mašabela
Ke moswa Mmakwapa	I am the youth called Mmakwapa
Ba re ka re ka bitša ga ba nkarabe	I call to my ancestors, and there is no response.
Badimo ba mphuraletše	Ancestors are angry with me.

Table 3: Malopo song ‘Šibišana Mašabela’.

Explanation of the symbolism

The song *Šibišane Mašabela* is sung during the first step (*go tielwa*). It is performed as a call to the ancestors to inform the patient (*lethasana*) of their demands. It is at this stage that the patient must disclose to the traditional healer what the personal ancestor expects from him/her. For example, a goat or cow with specific colour. In case some *malopo* songs are sung and there is no response from the personal ancestor, then this song is sung. In case disclosure fails, the last song to be sung will be 'Salane'. Performing this song guarantees that the patient will fall and disclose what the ancestors are demanding from him/her. Seemingly, 'Salane' is the most appropriate song to summon the ancestors especially when problems seem particularly difficult to surmount.

Concluding Thoughts

The results have shown that indigenous Bapedi music is a social activity in which everyone participates and requires coordinated cooperation. It was concluded that Bapedi people use a wide variety of sounds within a single performance. The impression created during observations and interviews was that music rhythm and percussive sounds are highly emphasized in indigenous Bapedi music. It was further observed that participants and observers learn more quickly and with less effort when they are enjoying themselves. Based on the research findings of this study, it is evident that in the Bapedi society, the transmission of knowledge with special reference to indigenous music is centred on a systematic aural-oral learning progression.

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