

The Significant Role Played by Long Social Connections and a Pleasant Interactive Experience Among Traditional Bapedi Music Practitioners

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Abstract

In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa, music is a form of communication and plays a functional role in the Bapedi society. Indigenous Bapedi music is often collaborative and requires communal undertaking and coordinated cooperation. Music and dancing are social activities in which almost traditional Bapedi music practitioners participate. Rhythm and percussive sounds are highly emphasized in indigenous Bapedi music, while the melodies and rhythms of the music usually form the song texts. The main objective of this paper is to examine the creative domain of musical performance among different traditional Bapedi music practitioners, and to share some insight on how traditional Bapedi music practitioners organize, conceptualize, and experience various aspects of their daily lives. The main question the study addressed is: what motivates traditional Bapedi music practitioners to work together, and to struggle for common goals? To achieve the objectives of this study, contextual approach was employed, and data was collected through observations, interviews and video recordings of rehearsals and performances during social gatherings. Relevant sources to the context of this study in the form of published journal articles, book chapters, books and theses were also consulted to compare and complement data collected from the field research. Closer investigation has revealed that music is not alien or extraneous to the Bapedi people, but part of the Bapedi culture. It was concluded that in Bapedi society, traditional music groups were also formed voluntarily with the primary purpose of music performance and dancing, by invitation at ceremonial occasions.

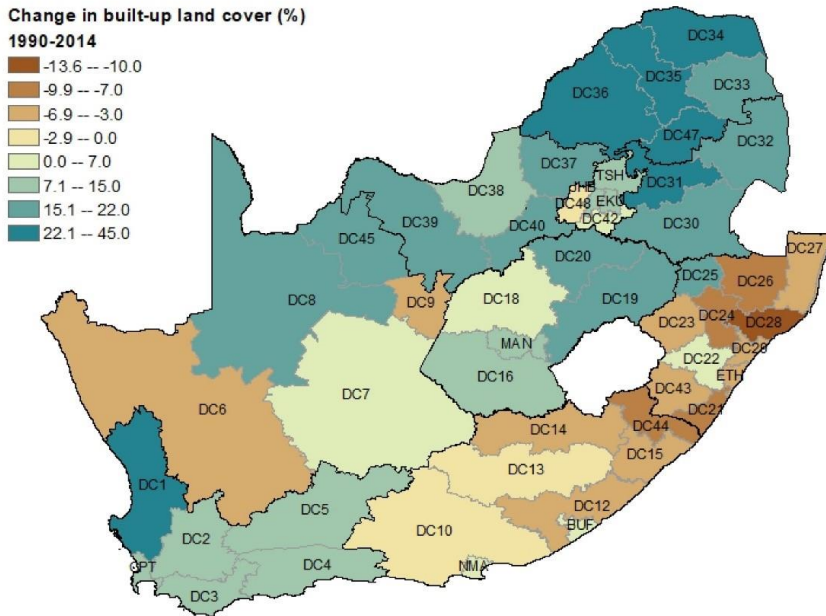
Keywords: Indigenous Bapedi music, Limpopo Province, South Africa, traditional music practitioners, music, and dancing

Introduction

In contemporary Bapedi society, music tends to bring traditional Bapedi music practitioners together. Mutual relationship and social cohesion play a vital role in knowledge sharing and skills' transference. Coming together and sharing their expertise afford them the opportunity to have joy, but they are also learning so much from each other or one another. The communalistic, interactive, communicative nature of music and dance creates a high degree of social cohesion. Within Bapedi people's cultural context, music and dance are the most potent means of expressing the values and fundamental structures of socio-cultural and economic life of contemporary Bapedi society. Fostering social cohesion is much deeper than just coming together and sharing expertise from one another, but it's about understanding the self and how traditional Bapedi music practitioners think as human race, putting humanity '*Ubuntu*' first above all. Music and dance thus play a key role in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and socialisation, and the mitigation and socio-psychological prevention of stress through the promotion of social communal cohesion and group solidarity.

Bapedi people are a diverse ethnic group with a rich history and fascinating culture. They are almost exclusively found in South Africa's north-eastern provinces which are Limpopo and parts of northern Mpumalanga. Bapedi tribe is the largest indigenous group in Limpopo Province in South Africa. Their tribal language is called 'Sepedi', one of the eleven official languages in South Africa. Bapedi people is primarily living in Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality (**see figure 1**), where they form the majority of the population. They are grouped according to the dialect of the language (Sepedi) they speak. In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, music and dance are tangible cultural expressions of human values, mores, and principles of life. Bapedi people's cultural, social, and ritual performances are primarily functional and communal.

Figure 4. Net percentage change in built-up land cover (tier 1) by district municipality, 1990–2014. District municipalities are assigned a DC and metropolitan municipalities are assigned a code associated with the municipality name



Source: Statistics South Africa, *National Land and Terrestrial Ecosystem Accounts, 1990 to 2014, Discussion Document: D0401.1*

Figure 1: Geographical Location Map of South Africa showing Limpopo Province & Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality (DC47).

In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality music is an inseparable part of culture, an organised way of life that includes customs, laws, morals, technology, beliefs, knowledge, religions, and other cultural habits acquired by man as a member of the society. Culture is seen as the state of intellectual development of a people. Although Limpopo Province is extremely diverse, there appears to be some shared moral ideas across many ethnic groups found within the province. Following next, research strategy and theoretical underpinning will be discussed.

Research strategy and Theoretical Underpinning

This research has endeavoured to utilize interviews and observation methods to supplement a literature study. Both oral interviews and observations were employed to gather data. Most of the interviews were informal and spontaneous. However, the researcher also carried out other interviews that were longer, more formal, and in some instances taped. Virtually, all the interviewing, formal and informal, revolved around questions emerging from my observations. Ultimately, the research is an investigation of the creative domain of musical performance among different

traditional Bapedi music practitioners, and to share some insight on how traditional Bapedi music practitioners organize, conceptualize, and experience various aspects of their daily lives.

The subjects for this study were interviewed (using Sepedi, a local dialect) independently from each other, in the confines of their respective homes. They were identified because of their knowledgeable and informative qualities. Specific ethnographic data were collected from four (4) villages, namely: Ga-Phaahla Mmakadikwe, Mohwelere, Ga-Marodi and Ga-Mmachacha. These villages are in Nebo area, in Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, approximately 13km North of Jane Furse. The sample size of subjects consisted of knowledgeable traditional music practitioners and members of their traditional music ensembles. The researcher also attended different social and cultural rehearsals and performances, and other relevant events that would further understanding of the significance role played by long social connections and a pleasant interactive experience among traditional Bapedi music practitioners. Ethnography¹ as the most common method and Contextual approaches were adopted in this study.

The present study is underpinned by Afrocentric theory of human personhood as advocated by Molefi Kete Asante (1985, 1987, 1999). This theory views a person as a person through other persons. This resonates well with the concept of '*Ubuntu*' in African context. My interpretation of Asante's theory in the context of this study is that there is no person on this planet earth who can live in isolation. According to Asante, Afrocentricity seeks to relocate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the mission of the fringes. In his view, the problem of cultural location takes precedence over the topic or the data under consideration. Asante provides an Afrocentricity theory grounded in the African context. He argues that Africans should view phenomena from the vantage point of an African worldview which is in turn informed by African culture. He observes that an Afrocentric worldview or the African-centered one is based on African cultural beliefs, practices, and values. Furthermore, Asante postulates that Afrocentricity implies the placement of African culture at the centre of any analysis that involves the study of African people. In his view, Afrocentricity is a perspective that allows Africans to be subjects of historical experiences rather than objects on the fringes of Europe. Further, Asante elaborates that culture-based indigenous knowledge should reflect the customs, beliefs, values, knowledge habits, skills, arts, and way of life of African people. As in this study, culture-based indigenous knowledge, which involves customs, beliefs, values, skills, and arts is reflected in the Bapedi way of life. The theory is adopted for

¹ Ethnography is the most common method. According to Gobo (2008), it is highly relevant because there is no other way to understand the role of music in diaspora than to investigate it in its real-life context, and this methodological approach provides a rich, detailed, and complex understanding.

this study because within Bapedi people's cultural context, a person is a person through other persons, and communal undertaking is central to Bapedi way of life.

Previous related studies

The significant role played by traditional music in African context has been rehearsed by different scholars such as Aasoglenang (2014); Casimir et al. (2015); Ekpo & Onyeji (2020); Gobo (2008); Kawooya (2010); Lebaka (2018); Lebaka (2019); Lebaka (2019); Lidskog (2017) and Mapaya (2014). In particular, Aasoglenang et al. (2014:5) opine that indigenous African music has an enormous impact on its indigenes due to the messages (communication) it carries across all fields of endeavour because music is intimately linked with language. According to these scholars, music and dance have utilitarian function as it is used for everyday activities: for a child's naming ceremony, tutelage, initiation rites, hunting and fishing practices, agricultural production, national ceremonies, war times, religious and other auspicious occasions. These scholars are in agreement that the central role of these ceremonies is to recount history, define and ascribe lineage, transfer knowledge and skills, challenge and motivate action through praise singing. All these roles apply in the context of this study, and this is precisely what is happening in the Bapedi culture (2014:17).

Attesting to the above observations, Ekpo & Onyeji (2020:4) observe that traditional heritage of which music is paramount, informs the ethnic groups. Ekpo and Onyeji write that African music to the owners, is as simple as the air they breathe (2020:4). These scholars further mention that the posterity and complexity of the elements of African music, as well as the classification of the instruments which in most cases form the different ensembles are found in Africa (2020:3). In agreement with Ekpo and Onyeji's words, Casimir et al. (2015:136) state that the importance and role of music in the growth of a child cannot be over-emphasized. Casimir et al. believe that philosophy gives us the meaning and provides the sense of solutions that help humanity to know why we exist or why performing certain activities in life (2015:142). According to these scholars, the concept of music in an African cultural context encompasses more than patterned expressive sounds analogous to felt life (2015:144). These scholars emphasize that Africans view their music as the aspect of their traditional life, which provides repositories of traditional beliefs, ideas, wisdom, and feelings (2015:145). They emphasize that these beliefs, ideas, and wisdom and feelings do not just throw light on the music in the strict referential sense, as enhancing the meaning of music, but they are about a half of what is meant by "the music". Based on the foregoing, they assert that what constitutes meaning in music is an essential aspect of the music educator's philosophy (2015:145).

Other scholars such as Mapaya (2014); Nethsinghe (2013); Trehub et al. (2015); Southcott & Joseph (2006), share insightful information on the concept '*Cross-cultural perspectives on music and musicality*'. In particular, Trehub et al. (2015:4) assert that songs also function as a repository of knowledge and cultural values that can be

transmitted across persons and generations. These scholars write that music is ubiquitous in caregiving. They observed that carers across cultures sing to infants and have done so from time immemorial (2015:4). They believe that conjoining music, dance, and ritual language within an event that addresses the existential concerns of the community is the most universally valued of musical activities (2015:4). They are also of the opinion that making music together is simultaneously building a community together, which is considered by many to be the most adaptive and evolutionarily significant aspect of musical experience worldwide (2015:4). These scholars advocate that prosocial consequences are evident even when synchronous activity occurs without music (2015:5). They are convinced that synchronous action is one route to social bonding and prosocial behaviour in childhood (2015:6). They also believe that for members of many small communities, past and present, musical rituals have meanings that are transparent within the native community but opaque to others (2015:6).

Results and Discussion

The socio-cultural background of Bapedi music

In Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, music and dance play a prominent role in Bapedi people's ability to communicate and celebrate social, cultural, and religious ceremonies, with an array of sounds announcing important ceremonies. In the Bapedi society, music is a social activity in which almost everyone participates. Music highlights Bapedi cultural values and norms, with various music genres accompanied by a melody. Numerous ceremonies of importance are celebrated with music, whether it is a ceremonial rite of passage, birth, or marriage. There are songs recounting history, and songs of praise and criticism. Indigenous Bapedi music is often collaborative and requires coordinated cooperation, in which traditional music practitioners belong to 'constituencies' that are not similar but complementary. Rhythm and percussive sounds are highly emphasized in indigenous Bapedi music. The above observations are endorsed by Lebaka (2018:501) by stating that Bapedi musical instruments are used in both vocal and instrumental dance ensembles, in festivals, religious rituals or funeral processions, as often as in musical entertainment. According to Lebaka (2018:501), the instruments used in these ceremonies and rituals are *meropa* (drums), *dinaka* (whistles and reed pipes), *dithlwathlwadi* (leg rattles) and *phalafala* (sable antelope horn). Sharing more insight on the Bapedi music tradition, Lebaka postulates that in the Bapedi culture, like in many cultures in Africa, traditional musical instruments have many functions and significances besides that of making music (2018:502). In his view, among Bapedi people, music making on ceremonial and ritual occasions may be integrated with the event characterised by symbolic actions which are dramatic in character (2018:503).

Communalistic, interactive, and communicative nature of music and dance

It has emerged from this study that in Greater Sekhukhune district municipality, music-making is a social performance, even when performed or listened to alone. The solidarity performer often has an audience in mind. Because musical performances are socially and culturally situated, they come to be ethically saturated as well. It is noticeable that in this culture music is often ascribed to spiritual or supernatural aspects of the natural world. Congruent to the above viewpoints, Trehub et al (2015:1) opine that music is universal, transmitted through generations, usually performed in the presence of others, and of extreme antiquity. These scholars believe that all peoples engage in activities that we would call music, often in relation to play, and everywhere in relation to ritual (2015:1). Furthermore, they contend that music-making is necessarily a cultural performance because conventions about the structure of music, its instrumentation, context of performance and meaning are all learned (2015:1). They argue that music-making is a system of communication transmitted through ongoing transgenerational interaction (2015:1). In the same vein, Mapaya (2014:2008) observes that *mmimo wa setšo* (indigenous music) has been in existence from the time immemorial. He believes that most African music genres are in fact song-dance compounds (2014:2010). In his view, Africa has its own indigenous systems that deal with the metaphysical and the epistemological aspects of their existence, despite the threat of epistemicide, these systems have persisted while coded in orality (2014:2012). Furthermore, he asserts that the systems are encoded within the African languages, both specialised and ordinary, and in this regard, besides burying these epistemologies within specialised language forms, other strategies exist which fulfil the function of maintaining intellectual integrity of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (2014:2012).

Music and dance as the most potent means of expressing the values and fundamental structures of socio-cultural and economic life

From the interviews, it was established that Bapedi people's history has also stimulated the sporadic but continuing search for historical perspectives in Bapedi music tradition, and to some extent, influenced the transmission process of indigenous Bapedi music. Informal discussions have also revealed that indigenous Bapedi music is such an integral part of social and cultural life as well as a functional element of Bapedi people's Local Knowledge System, and its history is bound to have both a stylistic and social dimension. In consonant with the above viewpoints, Lebaka (2019:62) writes that participation in the transmission process of indigenous Bapedi music has been the most salient example of the traditional music education practice. Lebaka contends that Bapedi songs establish mutual relationships as well as cementing friendships, but also communicate social and ethical values within Bapedi culture (2019:63). Lebaka further postulates that music and dance are fundamental

to the Bapedi ways of life, and culture is everything that characterizes Bapedi society (2019:68).

Fostering social cohesion, mutual relationship, social connections and sharing expertise through music and dance

The results yielded thus far have shown that when traditional Bapedi music practitioners have performances, they sing and dance together. Based on research findings, it is evident that creative music-making involves retention of musical ideas, gestures, and actions (Lebaka 2019:67). The results have also shown that musical creativity revolves around improvisation, recreation, and variation. From observations and interviews, it was also established that indigenous Bapedi songs are accompanied by dancing, handclapping, ululation, and different types of percussion instruments. Communal music-making (**see photo 1**) plays a vital role in knowledge/expertise sharing among traditional Bapedi music practitioners.



Photo 1: Cultural festival (Dikgageng village; Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province, 24.09.2018); Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka.

These observations are endorsed by Casimir et al. (2015:136). These scholars observe that African music manifests core African values as embodied in African philosophy. According to them, the traditional systems of the African society philosophically consider music to be an indispensable part of education and therefore a valuable component of the traditional education of indigenous communities and families before the onset of colonialism and its educational systems (2015:136). Casimir et al. further emphasize that musical performances also constitute a dynamic forum through which members of a society respond and adapt to new conditions through the retention of relevant elements of existing tradition and assimilation of new ideas (2015:138). They argue that religious and social engagements, initiation and funeral rites, naming and marriage ceremonies provide occasions for members of the traditional societies to engage in communal music-making and share together a rewarding and satisfying musical experience (2015:140). These scholars also believe that such occasions also provide a means of expressing group solidarity and transmitting traditional norms and beliefs from one generation to another (2015:140). They are convinced that it is within such contexts that much of the socialisation process which music provides takes place (2015:140). In agreement with Casimir et al., Kawooya (2010:iv) attests that historically, traditional music in Africa was attributed to the collective society and not to individual musicians. He is of the opinion that customs reflect peoples' ways of life, resources around them and the community's rules of engagement, but also set parameters of acceptable and unacceptable conduct (2010:27). Furthermore, he emphasizes that music in traditional African societies plays different roles and retains the core evolving character based on the old (2010:72).

The most important finding of this study is that in Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, music is a form of communication and plays a functional role in the Bapedi society. Indigenous Bapedi music is often collaborative and requires communal undertaking and coordinated cooperation. The study contributes to the notion that music and dancing are social activities in which almost traditional Bapedi music practitioners participate. Based on lived experience, indigenous Bapedi music is a total art form closely linked to dance, gesture, and dramatization. It permeates Bapedi peoples' way of life and has a function, a role to play in the Bapedi society. Closer investigation has revealed that music is not alien or extraneous to the Bapedi people, but part of the Bapedi culture.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Based on observations, interviews and viewpoints by different scholars cited in the text, it can be concluded that in the Bapedi society, music-making is a social performance, even when performed or listened to alone, and traditional music groups are also formed voluntarily with the primary purpose of music performance and dancing, by invitation at ceremonial occasions. The impression created during

interviews and observations was that music and dance are the most potent means of expressing the values and fundamental structures of socio-cultural and economic life of contemporary Bapedi society. It has become evident from the interviews that indigenous Bapedi music is such an integral part of social and cultural life as well as a functional element of Bapedi people's Local Knowledge System, and its history is bound to have both a stylistic and social dimension.

It has emerged from this study that Bapedi people sustain and strengthen Bapedi cultural heritage and identity through music and social connections. Based on these findings and discussions, it is arguable that within Bapedi cultural context indigenous Bapedi music is used to entertain, inform, to promulgate Bapedi cultural tradition and values, as well as to educate. In the light of the findings and discussions of this study, the over-riding recommendations of the study are that 1) a research study of this kind should be taken seriously in South Africa for an exploration of indigenous values influencing the preservation of cultural heritage and identity; 2) Bapedi people should keep and perpetuate their valuable heritage, which is still needed for survival and for the welfare of our next generation. It was concluded that in Bapedi society, traditional music groups were also formed voluntarily with the primary purpose of music performance and dancing, by invitation at ceremonial occasions.

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