

# 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

## 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, Nhlekisana 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), *Mmamarutla* (South East/Balete), *Modokoda* (Bayeyi), *Ndazula* (North East), and *Dikhwaere* (Kgatleng). This variety of artistic musical expressions has been highlighted by Tumedj 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 previous 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 *phuduhudu* (steenbok) skin known as *motseto/mongato*. These shorts were decorated on the front and back with thin pieces of leather (also from *phuduhudu* 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*, *Matlhekethheke*, *matheketheke*, *matseketseke*, 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 *phuduhudu* 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/matobel/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

Museum. The use of *makaba* was abolished in 1955/56 by kgosi Kgari Sechele II of the Bakwena when he returned from school. Bakwena elders expressed different reasons for this abolishment. Some believe that he wanted his power to be felt as new Paramount Chief whilst others argued that he realized the importance of cattle as providers of beef and cash when sold to the newly opened Botswana Meat Commission (BMC). Transport to *Borankana* performances was replaced by donkeys whose meat was not edible.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE DANCE

As Nhlekisana and Kezilahabi (1998, p. 173) observed, *Borankana* dances are usually performed in the following costume: almost all dancers tie *mathowa* (stringed leg - rattles) around the ankles of both legs. These give rhythm and rattle in sync with the clapping of hands. While one leg follows the basic rhythm, the other leg is free to add variation.

Traditionally, the dancers danced barefooted but today some of them put on very thin hunting sandals called *dikhube* for ladies and *mpheetshane* for men, to keep their feet safe from pieces of broken bottle, glass, stones and thorns. The 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 *letlhaka* (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 rhythmic 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 *mphatlalatsano*) 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 re ye 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 hwapa 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.

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