

THE USE OF METAPHOR AND CERTAIN SCALE PATTERNS IN TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF BOTSWANA

by

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Three salient characteristics observed in recorded music in Botswana have been of particular interest to me during four years of music research in this country — carried out in the Kgatleng, Kweneng and Kgalagadi Districts.* These are (1) the use of metaphor in the initiation song, (2) the appearance of the five-tone scale in Tswana traditional songs and (3) the presence of the four-tone scale in Basarwa (Bushman) songs and some of their instrumental music.

1. The use of metaphor

The message inherent in many initiation songs for young women is the admonition to wait until marriage for intimate relations with a man. Another related message is that women should not become pregnant except within marriage. Other messages include descriptions of labour, childbirth, and reference to time and season.

These ideas became apparent after careful translation of the words and discussion of their true meaning with the translators and interpreters assisting me. These ideas were conveyed through the use of metaphor. The words of a song seemed to describe a certain every-day subject, but actually referred to promiscuity, pregnancy, childbirth and other lessons of the initiation school or study period.

For example, one song contained the statement, through the leader: "Give me my shoe." The group answered: "I'm looking for it"

An older woman was the 'leader'; the young girl initiates were the 'group'. The question and answer, or 'call and response' were repeated several times.

The word 'shoe' referred to the girls' initial wholeness, innocence, or virginity. It also could have meant the menstrual period.

The final 'response' was that the 'shoe' was taken by a 'white-faced dog'.

In another song, a 'water snake' had taken or consumed all the water of its habitat. Here the words really meant that the force of evil, or temptation, referring to the 'water snake' and the girl, as well, had taken or absorbed the liquid, or semen, from the man. The song also referred to the loud warnings of the girl's mother:

"My mother is as noisy as the water snake." The word 'noisy' referred to the 'force' of the snake.

Another song alluded to a 'home-coming'. It described the girl-initiates' return home to the village from the initiation school, usually held for a prescribed period of time at a special place in the 'bush' away from the village. It mentioned the difficult climb up the steep hill, past the rushing waters, and the shortness of breath with the steep ascent and descent. The reference here had a double meaning, possibly three

*Ed: A record of this research has been published (1983) by Folkways Records, 632 Broadway, New York City 10012, U.S.A., No. FE 4371, entitled "Traditional Music of Botswana, Africa — a journey along Southern Botswana with tape recorder from Mochudi to Kang".

interpretations. It indicated the difficulties of the initiation school and then the triumphant conclusion. It also had a deeper, hidden meaning. It was a description of labour and delivery, including the difficulties, the breaking of the membrane containing the 'waters', the shortness of breath, and the final joyous result.

The place of origin of the song was the former home of this particular tribe (the Bakgatla) — a hilly area with rushing streams and waterfalls. These facts thus contributed to the imagery inherent in the song.

The paramount chief's wife, Mrs. Linchwe II Kgafela, who was one of the interpreters, told me that this particular song was one of the favourites of the initiates — that they loved to sing it, with all its rich, various meanings, as they returned homeward from the initiation school.

Another initiation song asked the question: "What month is it?" The answer each time was: "It is May."

However, the final answer was: "No, it is December." The meaning here was: "Is the initiation school nearly finished?" "No, it is still continuing." Then, the final answer: "No, it is not still continuing. The time is ending." The reference to December indicated the end of the year, or of the initiation school.

One of the men's songs seemed to be a straight-forward hunting song about the fierceness of the lion, a most dangerous animal, capable of killing or eating men. After further discussion with the interpreter of the men's songs, I discovered that it was a young men's initiation song. The 'lion' referred to women in general — that they could weaken, even kill or consume a man. Therefore, the young men were instructed not to be promiscuous, particularly just before battle or a hunt.

The reason for the use of metaphor in all these examples would seem to be to dramatise the message of the song, as well as encompass the subject with mystery and special significance.

2. The use of the five-tone scale in traditional Tswana songs

An obvious feature of these songs was that they were based on a five-tone (pentatonic) scale consisting of these pitches, in Solfa: mi re do la sol.

The melody did not always descend, but because the direction generally was descending, I express it this way. Another way of describing it would be to say that this scale uses the first, second, third, fifth and sixth tones of the seven-tone diatonic scale, or: do re mi so la. The fourth and seventh tones, or 'fa' and 'ti', do not appear.

The following are outlines of various traditional Tswana song melodies. The first three are girls' initiation songs and were among those described in section 1 of this article. I was told that these songs are sacred to the tribe, never sung in public, and traditionally just at the time of the initiation period.* The fourth is a men's war song. Following the Tswana words with English translation and the outline in Solfa syllables, each song is written out in detail in staff notation. Many of the characteristics of traditional music are present, in addition to the five-tone scale: the 'call and response' pattern, single-line (monophonic) melody, and intervals often of the perfect fourth or

*I would ask readers of this article to respect the restricted nature of these songs (Nos. 1, 2 and 3), and to ensure that they will not be sung in public, copied or used out of context in the Tswana-speaking area. E.N.W.

fifth the few times when two parts come together at the end or beginning of a leader or group melody.

Song 1. Kgwedi ke mang? (What month is it?)

<i>Basadi, kgwedi ke mang e?</i>	Ladies, what month is it?
<i>Ke Motsh'ganong</i>	It is May
<i>O yele Sedimonthole kgwedi 'le</i>	Oh! Oh! This month is December
<i>Kgwedi e Sedimonthole, Motsheganong</i>	This month is December, (not) May

Leader: Mi sol mi, mi mi mi re do
 Group: Mi mi do do
 Mi mi mi re do
 Mi mi do do (Leader starts just before final do)
 Sol sol sol, sol re do do do sol mi re
 Sol do do so la la sol sol mi, mi re re re do.

This exchange is repeated several times to the song's conclusion, with slight variation. Now follows the song in detail, with do as C. All additional examples will follow this notational approach as well.

The musical notation is presented in two systems. The first system shows the Leader's part (treble clef, 4/4 time) and the Group's part (treble clef, 4/4 time). The Leader's lyrics are "Ba - sa - di kgwe - di ke mang e?" and "Kgwe - di ke mang e?". The Group's lyrics are "Ke Motsh' - ga - nong". The second system continues the notation, with the Leader's lyrics "O yel - e Se - di - mon - tho - le kgwe - di 'le" and "Ba - sa - di". The Group's lyrics are "Ke Motsh' - ga - nong", "Kgw - di e Se - di mon - tho le Mo - tshaga - nong...".

Song 2. Nneeleng sethako (Give me the shoe)

<i>Nn' leng we he, nn' leng we he</i>	Give it to me, give it to me
<i>Ke a batla</i>	I'm looking for it
<i>Nneeleng sethako</i>	Give me my shoe
<i>Nneeleng tlhakwana sa me</i>	Give me my small shoe
<i>Tlhako sa me se tserwe</i>	My shoe has been taken
<i>Se tserwe k'mpja tshumu</i>	It has been taken by a white-faced dog

Leader: Mi re do
 Group: La la la sol
 Mi re do
 Re do la la do.
 Do do la do do la do

This exchange is repeated with variation several times to the song's conclusion. Now follows the song in detail:

Leader Nn'leng we he Nn'leng we he Nnee-leng se - tla - ko Nneeleng tihakwana sa me

Group Ke a ba - tla Ke a ba - tla Ke a ba - tla Ke a ba - tla

Tihako same se tserwe se tserwe k'mp-ja tshumu

tla Ke a ba tla Ke a ba tla Ke a ba tla

Song 3. Koo gae re etla (We are coming home)

Koo gae re etla, re'tla koo teng Home we are coming, we are coming there
Ahe re'tla koo teng Yes, we are coming there
Re etla koo teng We are coming there

Leader: Mi mi re la, re re mi re do
 Group: Sol re, do do re do la
 Mi re re mi re do
 Sol re, do do re do la sol

Now follows in detail this part of the song:

Leader

Group Koo gae re 'tla Re 'tla koo... teng A - he re 'tla koo... e tla koo... teng

teng A he re 'tla koo... etc. teng

The following example is part of a men's war song:

Song 4. Ditawana, bana ba tau re tswa go bidiwa (We, lion cubs, children of the lion, have been called up)*

<p>Ditawana, Ee, bana ba tau re ts'o bidiwa</p> <p>Re ts'o bidiwa, ehe</p> <p>Leader: Do do mi mi</p> <p>Group: Rē — do la sol do do la do la do do do } x2 La la do do la sol sol } x2 Same as before } x2</p>	<p>Lion cubs Yes, we, children of the lion, have been called up</p> <p>We've been called up, yes</p>
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There is a third phrase which appears next (but after a repetition of Phrase 1). Then the whole song is sung through several times, occasionally lasting as long as 4 or 5 minutes! Now follows the first portion of the song in detail:

The musical notation consists of three systems. The top system is for the Leader, in 9/4 time, with notes for 'Di:ta wa-na'. The middle system is for the Group, also in 9/4 time, with notes for 'Ee... ba-na ba ta-u re ts'o bi-di'. The bottom system shows a bass line in 9/4 time with notes for 'Re ts'o bi-di wa e he' and 'Ee... ha-na ba ta-u re ts'o bi-di'.

In conclusion, the presence of the five-tone scale was quite common in the traditional songs of the Batswana I studied. In fact, it is a method of identifying an authentic traditional song, in addition to the other characteristics. The seven-tone diatonic scale, with its accompanying basis for chords and harmony, appeared later. Some of the more current songs may still retain some of the old traditional structure, such as 'call and response', but these songs cannot be considered 'traditional' in the true sense.

3. The Four-tone scale as used by the Basarwa

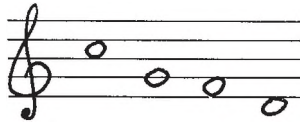
The four-tone scale of the Basarwa was a discovery made after visiting areas near Kang and Tsetseng to record examples of their music. These two villages are in the

*Ed: This song can be heard on the record mentioned earlier, side 2, track 4

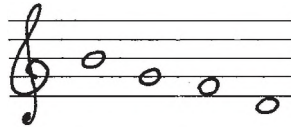
Kalahari Desert of south-central Botswana. A nurse from New Zealand, Ngaire Reid, was in charge of the clinic in this area and knew the people well and was admired and trusted. She introduced me to many of the groups and explained the nature and purpose of my study, thus making it possible for me to obtain many recorded examples as well as photographs.

Later on, after returning to Gaborone and listening to the songs several times in close detail — to understand the intricacies of the unique counterpoint — it became evident that all the songs were based on a four-tone scale. It was also noticeable that the intervals were seldom the same for each song, but rather, a variation each time of a four-tone scale.

For example, one song was based on these tones: do sol fa re (in descending order). With do as C, the tones of the scale could be represented in this way:

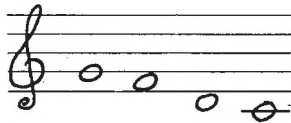


Another song used this four-tone scale: ti sol fa re, which on the staff is represented thus:



The preceding particular combination of tones seemed to me to resemble the tones of a dominant seventh chord.

Another song used this four-tone scale pattern: sol fa re do — represented in staff notation in this way:



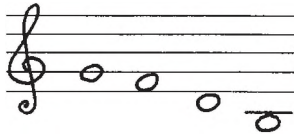
Occasionally, a performer would sing a tone an octave above in a quick shift to a head-tone, or falsetto, and then immediately return to the former level.

The pitches are represented as they seemed to me with my 'western' musical background and 'ear'. An in-depth study made with proper accurate tuning instruments could gauge the exact pitches. Therefore, the tones mentioned are approximations. However, the fact that there are four distinct separate tones in each song is readily apparent.

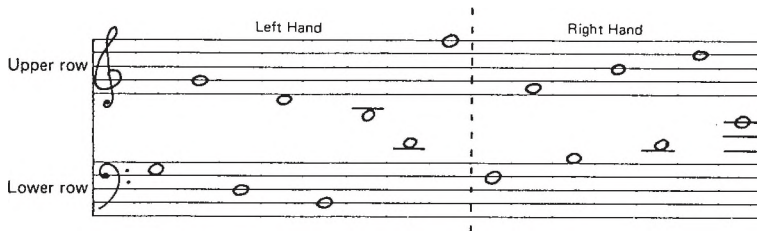
While in the same area in the Kalahari, several selections were performed on a *setinkane* (mbira or 'thumb piano'). This is the keyboard instrument consisting of a series of metal strips, or keys, mounted on a metal frame which, in turn, is fastened to a wooden base or platform. The wood base, which can average about eight inches long and six inches wide, is often shaped for resonance and also decorated. The metal bars, fashioned from available articles such as fencing material, nails, spoons or even umbrella staves, are heated and shaped to attain the desired pitches for the four-toned assemblage of the creator's imagination. There may be as many as twenty or more 'keys'. The instrument is held between both hands and the keys struck, or stroked, with the thumbs, occasionally the fore-fingers.

The instrument I recorded had been constructed by one of the men of the band, or group. This person and another male member, and also one of the women, each performed on this *setinkane*.

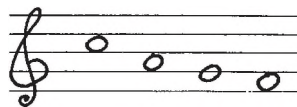
There were two rows of keys — seven in the upper row, eight in the lower row. The fifteen keys were tuned to just four pitches, including several octave and unison duplications. The pitches were: sol fa re ti. They may be represented in staff notation in this way:



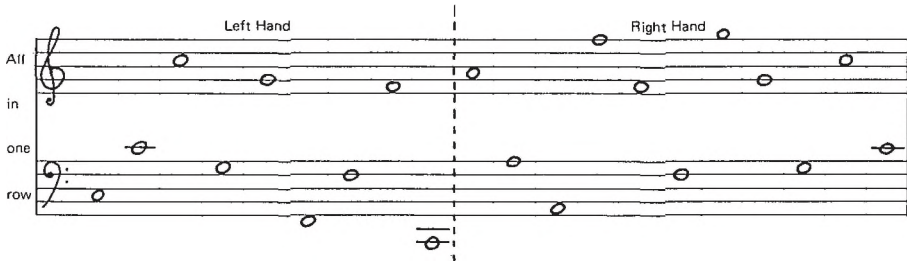
A small empty floor wax tin was held underneath the *setinkane* for resonance. The placement of the keys was carefully planned, I am sure, contributing to the over-all aesthetic quality of this remarkable instrument. Below is the key lay-out:



Another 'thumb piano' which I own came from the Ghanzi area, northwest of Kang and Tsetseng. The quality of the metal for the keys is superior, producing a bell-like, ringing tone of exceptional beauty and clarity. Here again, although there are twenty keys present, there are just four different pitches. The instrument was tuned in this way: do la sol fa (in descending order). Of course, there is pitch repetition as well as octaves of the same pitch. The pitches are represented in staff notation in this way:



Below is the key lay-out for this *setinkane*:



It is of interest that the outside keys (those on the left and right edges) correspond in pitch to a large degree and grow deeper in octaves toward the centre keys.

These are specific observations of Basarwa music, so far as I have studied it. There are many other fascinating characteristics, as well, but I chose the four-tone (tetratonic) scale to describe in particular, because it is a basic element of the music.

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