

REPORT ON RESEARCH IN LESOTHO

by

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I have been in Lesotho pursuing active research for over six months now, with the aim of collecting as much information on the musical life of the Basotho as is possible. This research is funded by a bursary from the South African government, which is tenable up to December 1992, after which I am seeking further funding. Using a video camera, I have recorded over 10 hours of film footage of songs, dances, praise-songs and healing ceremonies. I have interviewed around 30 musicians and non-musicians, and have taken over 350 photographs, the majority of which have been given back to their subjects (though I keep the negatives...).

Like many aspects of life in Lesotho, the indigenous music is caught up in a process of rapid and fundamental change, and as Hugh Tracey noted in his report on a recording tour of Basutoland (Lesotho) in 1959, there is a "steady decline" in "original music-making".¹ But music, like any aspect of culture, is constantly in a state of flux. As old forms disappear, so new ones evolve to suit the new lifestyles and demands of society. The urge to make music is always present – it merely adapts itself to suit the ever-changing environment.

Since Hugh Tracey's tour two new forms of music have appeared in Lesotho, conditioned by the different ways of living and entertaining one's self in recent times. Whereas Dr. Tracey recorded a large number of *Mohobelo* and *Mokhibo* song-dances, and many songs from female and male initiation schools, the vast majority of music-making in Lesotho today centres around the *Coriana le Sekupu* (accordion and drum) music of the miners, and the *Monyanyako* songs of schoolchildren.

The closely-knit village life that gave rise to *Mohobelo* and *Mokhibo* song-dances is relatively rare nowadays – disrupted by the migrant labour system that extracted men from the villages to seek recruitment in towns for work in the South African mines. At the mines, however, *Coriana le Sekupu* music evolved among the Basotho workers as an expression of national and cultural identity in an alien environment. The accordion (*coriana*) was taken from Boer folk music, to which was added a drum (*sekupu*) made out of a 25l oil drum with a car inner tube as the head, and a singing style that originated in the songs, *mangae*, and self-praises, *lithoko*, of boys' initiation schools.

These initiation schools, called *lebollo*, are now relatively rare, especially in the more populated lowland region. Western-style primary and secondary schools have taken their place, and instead of the initiation songs (*mangae* and *malingoana* for boys and girls respectively), today's schoolchildren are commonly seen singing *Monyanyako* songs (literally 'songs for enjoyment'). Like *Coriana le Sekupu* music, these songs are the product of diverse influences, adapted by the Basotho to suit their own purposes. The 4-part choral style of *Monyanyako* songs, the 7-note scale, and the common I-IV-V harmonic progression, are all influences from the tonic sol-fa Christian hymns of the

1 Tracey, H., "Report on the ILAM Basutoland recording tour", *African Music* 2/2, 69-76

missionaries, called '*Mino oa Linoto*' by the Basotho. The *Monyanyako* genre actually originated with the Xhosa-speaking people of the Transkei, who would improvise 4-part songs (which they called a 'sound') as a warm-up, whilst walking to and from the stage during choral festivals or competitions. On the stage, however, '*Mino oa Linoto*' would be sung. Between the 1950s and 1960s this new style found its way into Lesotho, and has since become the most popular and prevalent choral style in Lesotho. *Monyanyako* songs are passed on orally, and new ones are constantly being composed; with lyrics predominantly concerned with current affairs and modern aspirations, schoolchildren are much more favourably disposed to this type of song than to the songs of initiation schools which are often couched in archaic and obscure metaphorical language.

However, this is not to say that all traditional music has died out. In the less accessible mountain regions, traditional styles of music-making are still being practised, and taken up by the younger generation. But, it is unfortunate to say, in the country as a whole, the majority of young Basotho have a tendency to look towards America and Europe for cultural models, despite the popularity of their own *Coriana le Sekupu* and *Monyanyako* styles. Fortunately, steps are afoot to establish a Lesotho Academy of Arts that will provide tuition and encouragement in music, dance and the plastic arts, with an emphasis placed on traditional models and the re-establishment of a Sotho cultural identity. Equally, various members of the Ministry of Education are keen to re-structure musical education in Primary Schools to include more exposure to indigenous forms of music.

In some ways, though, little has changed here since Dr. Tracey's recording tour. Just as in 1959, "in view of the forthcoming constitutional changes, it was not surprising to find that local conversation was pre-occupied with the political situation rather than the culture",² we find Lesotho in 1992 again with its attention turned towards the nation's political future, rather than showing concern about cultural change. The country not only awaits the imminent return of ex-King Moshoeshoe II at the time of writing, but also this year's democratic elections – the first since 1970.

In spite of Dr. Tracey's call for "a small group of sensitive and active persons who are prepared and equipped to undertake the necessary work"³ into researching and cataloguing music here, it seems that there has been no-one willing to perform such a task in the 33 years since that appeal was made. Valuable research has been conducted by David Coplan and Veit Erlmann into specific areas, but nothing has been published concerning the whole spectrum of musical life in Lesotho.

While I make no claims about writing a definitive account of Basotho music, I do intend to publish, next year, a small, general reference work on the subject that, it is hoped, will serve as a springboard for further research by other interested parties, particularly Basotho.

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2 Ibid p. 69.

3 Tracey, H., "The future of music in Basutoland", *African Music* 2/2, 10-14.