

## SESOTHO MUSIC: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

by

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In this article I wish to explore some of the shifts in the styles of Sesotho music-making that have occurred in recent years and to study the way in which modern identities are reflected in current modes of musical expression. It is my contention that style is inextricably linked to notions of identity and is mobilised as a means of objectifying values in form or performance. As such, the study of musical style can provide a valuable insight into the aspirations and values of a social group. Moreover, the study of such styles as they are transformed over time reflects the change in wider social influences that bring pressure to bear upon cultural expressions.

In studying Sesotho music, one is always impressed by the way in which contemporary events or aspirations are assimilated into older or more established forms. When new technologies and areas of social experience have made their mark on Sesotho culture, these too have been reflected in song. For example, a central feature of Sesotho culture this century has been migrant labour, where large numbers of men have been forced, by economic necessity, to seek work in the mines of Johannesburg or Kimberley. Subsequently, whole new forms of musical expression evolved in conjunction with migrant labour, with a new spectrum of experiential values to which they gave expression. One such instance of new experiences came with the introduction of train transport from Lesotho's capital, Maseru, to the mine centres of South Africa around the turn of this century. The train then became assimilated into the repertoire of song-subjects, and assimilated in a manner typical of Sesotho poetry, that is, through analogy with the natural world. In this song, composed in 1909, the singer compares the train to a millipede, a beautiful Morolong woman, and a stout bull:

*Lefokololi, lefokololi*

*Lefokololi la mahlabe ke leo*

*'Mamosi mosali e lolele*

*E molele e motle morolong.*

*Terene mpepe, terene mpepe oee!*

*Ke bakisa b'eso.*

Millipede, millipede<sup>a</sup>

There is the millipede, the stout bull<sup>b</sup>

The mother of smoke, long woman

The tall one, beautiful Morolong<sup>c</sup>.

Train carry me, carry me!

I am defying my family.

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally written for a catalogue accompanying a major exhibition held by the National Museum in Bloemfontein in 1994 concerning Sotho culture.

## Notes:

a: millipede/*lefokololi*. The physical appearance of the train is compared to a millipede. b: stoutbull/*mahlabe*. Perhaps the wild and snorting nature of the train. c: Morolong. In comparison to a tall (long) woman from the Barolong clan.

Similarly, work in the mines themselves became a topic for song texts:

<i>Hee! Banna e! Banana le Basali tlo boneng!</i>	Hey ! Men! Girls and women, come and see!
<i>Hee! Tsatsi la chaba mabone a tima</i>	Hey! The sun rose and the lights disappeared
<i>Hee! Eitse ha e teba e ea tlase</i>	Hey! When it descended, going down
<i>Hee! Eitse ha e fihla faefe-thene</i>	Hey! When it arrived at five-ten <sup>a</sup>
<i>Hee! Ra utloa a botsana makhina toeba</i>	Hey! We heard them ask one another, the mice with tied legs <sup>b</sup>
<i>A re keche a matha joang banna.</i>	They asked how life goes, men.
<i>Hee! Nka bua, nka baka mahlomola</i>	Hey! I can talk, I can cause misery
<i>Nka bosetsa ba bang litlokosi</i>	I can make others remember their problems.
<i>Hee! Banna ee!</i>	Hey men!
<i>U ea! U ea! U eang!</i>	You are going! You are going! Where are you going!
<i>Hee! K'hemele koana tlou li kholoanyane</i>	Hey! There at Kimberley the elephants <sup>c</sup> are bigger
<i>Balisa ba eona ke ba balelele</i>	The shepherds <sup>d</sup> are the tall ones
<i>Hee! Ba ba khutsoanyane ke liparaka</i>	Hey! The short ones are the stoppers <sup>e</sup>
<i>Makhafa ka lihamora, Maburu ka lichesele.</i>	The uses of hammers, Boers with chisels.
<i>Ha la likela la baka mahlomola</i>	The sun set and caused misery
<i>Ha likela kea bua le mang?</i>	When it sets, with whom do I talk?
<i>Hee! Banna ee! Basali le banana tlo boneng!</i>	Hey! Men ! Girls and women, come and see!
<i>Mafutsana meroala ea ba bolaea (x3)</i>	The poor ones are killed by burdens (x3)
<i>Hee! Ka tlaloa ke pelo ka utloa bohloko.</i>	My heart is full, I feel pain.

## Notes:

a: five-ten/*faefe-thene*. A measurement of depth in the mines. b: mice with tied legs/*makhina toeba*. A poetic description of miners as mice, dehumanised and scurrying round underground passages, whose trouser legs are tied to prevent gold dust entering and irritating the skin. c: elephants/*(li)tlou*. A poetic description of the mechanical cranes at the mine shaft entrance; the lifting part of the crane is compared by allusion to the elephant's trunk. d: shepherds/*balisa*. Tall people are used to operate the cranes: as with shepherds they look after animals, in this case the elephant/mechanical crane. e: stoppers/*liparaka*. Those who grind stone at the bottom of the crane's reach.

In this song, the poet interweaves a description of mine life with warnings to those at home about the danger and misery involved. The imagery of darkness is associated with solitude and despair: "The sun set and it caused misery/ When it sets with whom do I talk?", and it is into darkness that the poet descends as he enters the mine-shaft. The rising of the sun, a symbol set in contrast to the gloom that pervades the song, is countered by the descending lift in the mine-shaft going down to "five-ten". In the physical and metaphorical darkness of the mine, having descended below the ground, he encounters the miners, "mice with tied legs", and the thought of the

scene brings back memories of his own experiences there: "Hey! I can talk, I can cause misery/ I can make others remember their problems". At the end of the song, the emotional stresses felt by the singer are emphasised by his triple repetition of the line: "The poor ones are killed by burdens". He is unable to sing any more: "My heart is full, I feel pain".

One may contrast the more 'modern' subject matter of these songs with those that remain attached to values or issues largely associated nowadays with pre-colonial Sesotho culture — issues such as the importance of loyalty to the chieftaincy, the heroism of cattle-raiding and warfare, and the central social importance of cattle. In the following war song (*mokorotlo*), for example, the singer joyfully describes a victory in battle between opposing groups in Lesotho using imagery of 'eating up'. Towards the end of the song, the leader quotes a Sesotho proverb concerning the rightful dispensation of justice from the chief to his subjects. The cow (chief) should moo contentedly at his place, indicating the proper order of social dispensation. One should not hear cows 'mooing' or commoners imitating the chief's role, in the small villages.

<i>Oe-e he-e helele khomo e-e</i>	Hey! Hey! Cow!
<i>Oe-lele he-e helele lia ba ja e-e</i>	Hey! Hey! They're eating them!
<i>Li ba ja li ba qetile, ho-ho khomo muu.</i>	They've eaten them and finished them! Hey! Cow! Moo!
<i>Oelele aho-ho khomo e-e</i>	Hey! Hey! Cow!
<i>Ke bua ka banna Litholobeng ho-ho khomo muu</i>	I'm talking about the men of Litholobeng, hey! Cow! Moo!
<i>Bo-Kahlolo oa Monahela ho-ho khomo muu</i>	Those with Kahlolo of Monahela, hey! Cow! Moo!
<i>Aho oelele ahe hoe jo lia ba ja</i>	Hey! Hey! Jo! They're eating them!
<i>Oelele ha-ho helele khomo muu</i>	Hey! Hey! Cow! Moo!
<i>Khomo muu e lle moreneng ho-ho khomo muu</i>	The cow should moo from the chief's place
<i>He e lla metsaneng ea tšabeha e-e khomo oelele</i>	It is wrong for it to moo in small villages

Music then is a vessel in which we invest experiential values and aspirations. As such, it is a constantly transforming means by which we define our equally transforming social identities.

Sesotho music in the 1990s illustrates precisely the constantly evolving nature of human expressions. Song-forms from days long gone are performed alongside recently developed forms: the old co-exists with the new. It is this co-existence of old and new, and the variations between them relating to areas of social experience, that I propose to study here.

Terms such as 'old' and 'new', whilst perhaps useful tags, are nonetheless too vague for use in anything but the most cursory examination. Conversely, I reject terms such as 'traditional' and 'modern' for dividing all too *neatly* the steady flow of

cultural expression into a binary opposition, often influenced by European notions of a pre-contact and post-contact state of affairs. Instead, I propose for this article an initial division of the range of Sesotho song-forms into a two-fold categorisation using the terms 'established canon' and 'emergent styles'.

The phrase 'established canon' refers to an *internally recognised (and created) complex of song styles or aspects of culture that have, or are thought of as having, their location in the past*. Songs from the established canon of musical styles tend to be associated in contemporary Lesotho with performance contexts that are thought to represent or contain values relating to past experience. Such contexts in Sesotho society usually centre around a rural, village-based existence, characterised by factors such as communality and the chieftaincy.

Songs from the established canon exist alongside more modern song-styles, that are labelled here as 'emergent styles'.<sup>2</sup> These are styles that have evolved over the last 150 years and which are popularly performed in present-day Lesotho. The term refers to aspects of culture, such as performance styles or social values, that have not yet been fully accepted into the canon of established styles or values. Whereas the established canon then refers to self-consciously recognised aspects of culture thought to have their origins in the past, emergent culture refers to recently evolved organic continuities of performance style which have evolved in modern performance contexts, usually with foreign influence. Such performance contexts may be school concerts, and the mine compounds of South Africa with the associated shebeen life there and in Lesotho.

Naturally, songs from the established canon tend to be performed today as self-conscious references to the past. But such a conception of the past is reconstructed and selectively filtered according to modern-day values. In opposition to more recent changes, the notion of a 'tradition' is mobilised to provide cultural identity in the present. As a corollary to the static connotations of tradition, the past then becomes reified and fluid modes of expression become timeless statements of national identity. Older song-styles such as *mohobelo*, *mokorotlo* and *mokhibo*, though performed quite rarely today, are nonetheless identified as explicitly Sesotho, and more so than forms such as *monyanyako* which are actually more representative of modern-day performing experience.

Moreover, songs from the established canon are not without modern influences, both in their musical structures and in the social and experiential values to which they give expression. I shall give two examples to illustrate this, both of which I recorded during research in Lesotho in 1992 and 1993. The first song was recorded at the graduation ceremony of a male initiation school near the King's village of Matsieng.

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<sup>2</sup> A term originated by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and literature*, Oxford University Press 1977.

On these occasions, the newly-initiated men sing leader-chorus songs (called *mangae*) that mirror their status as adults and give expression to some of their current preoccupations and aspirations. In the past, the texts of such songs tended to centre around allegiance to the chief or heroic definitions of oneself as a warrior. However, the following song has a very different subject-matter:

<i>Ke toeota, ke toeota, ke toeota, koloï ena</i>	It's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, this car
<i>Koloï e tsoeu, mabili a matšo</i>	It is white, the tyres are black
<i>Ke toeota, ke toeota banna</i>	It's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, men.
<i>Ke toeota, ke toeota, ke toeota, koloï ena</i>	It's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, this car
<i>Ke ela e potela ka har'a motse</i>	There it disappears into the village
<i>Ke toeota, ke toeota banna.</i>	It's a Toyota, it's a Toyota, men.

In this *lengae* references to warfare, cattle or chiefs have been replaced by a descriptive commentary of a Toyota car, even down to the colour of its tyres.

Alternatively, other contemporary song-texts in established forms may refer to recent events in Lesotho. The following text was sung to a Nguni (Zulu or Xhosa) 'war dance' called *ntlamo* (*ndlamu* in Nguni). Far from initiating warfare or preparing men for battle, as the song-form would suggest, it instead refers to a visit to Lesotho by Pope John Paul II in 1987:

<i>Fofane sena se hana ka Mopapa</i>	This aeroplane didn't bring the Pope
<i>Koloï tsena li fihla ka Mopapa.</i>	These cars arrived with the Pope.

As we have already noted, more modern issues may be assimilated into older, established forms without affecting the conceptualisation of that song as embodying values from the past.

Concerning musical structures, 7-note scales and harmonic progressions clearly influenced by European styles are common in established children's forms such as *moqoqopelo* and *lipina tsa mokopu*, which are nonetheless thought of as having their origin in a time before European influence. The whole complex of the song-style, however, remains located within the internally-created concept of the established canon. Thus while modern developments, musical and experiential, may affect the 'inner' stylistic features of a song (scales progressions), the conceptualisation of that song as part of the established canon remains the same.

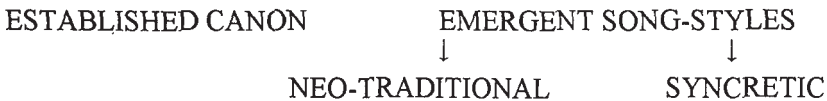
What becomes clear then, is that the established canon of song-styles refers more to a broader complex of associated value orientations than to actual stylistic features. Texts and certain scale features may show recent influence but the over-arching concept of the song remains rooted, in contemporary Sesotho thought, in the past.

Emergent song-styles are not articulated by Basotho as being songs 'from the past'. In them are clearly recognisable syntheses of aspects from European and

Sesotho musical traditions. Features adopted from a foreign culture, such as the European song-style of hymns or Afrikaans *boere-musiek*, are blended with retained Sotho features. Of particular interest, however, is the extent to which these emergent song-styles in Lesotho vary according to the experiential values of those groups of society that perform them. It is these variations that I wish now to explore. I hope to illustrate how, in modern day Lesotho, differences in social identity are reflected in the variety of emergent song-styles.

As synthesis is a conscious creation, the extent of adoption/retention is determined by the value-orientation of the particular performance group, and how they choose to express themselves. Certain groups of society may choose to utilise forms that mobilise in greater proportion features from established cultural song-styles, whereas other groups may prefer forms that rely more upon features that arrived with foreign influence. In this way, musical style is a resource for marking notions of identity.

Broadly, differentiation among modern song-styles popular in present-day Lesotho centres around two areas of social experience. As a consequence, two stylistic sub-sets within modern song-styles emerge. These sub-sets then form two categories of modern song-style, which can be labelled as **neo-traditional** and **syncretic**. That is to say, under the imagined category of modern emergent song-styles one would find a further categorisation thus:



In this context, neo-traditional refers to those song-styles that consciously mobilise established aesthetic values and styles in a greater proportion than foreign influences. They are performed by members of society who wish to root themselves deeply within culturally-established notions of Sotho identity. Examples of such song-styles would include the *lifela* of migrant workers and their *famo* songs: *lifela* are unaccompanied solo male epic songs, and *famo* is the often rowdy accordion and drum music with extemporised vocal sections over the top.

By contrast, 'syncretic' refers to song-styles where the foreign influence is stronger than the internally-established influence, and the term acknowledges the greater importance attached to the inter-cultural contact out of which the styles emerged. Syncretic song-styles would include the songs of J.P. Mohapeloa, *monyanyako* and *mbube*. Mohapeloa was Lesotho's most acclaimed composer of this century (in a European sense), who combined European and Sesotho idioms in his popular songs for mixed-voice choirs, sung widely across southern Africa. *Monyanyako* are 4-part schoolchildren's songs, often with co-ordinated dance

movements, and *Mbube* are male-voice part songs.<sup>3</sup>

Differences between neo-traditional and syncretic song-styles exist in the formal features of the songs themselves. Neo-traditional songs tend to use the pentatonic scale, whereas the syncretic styles tend to use the 7-note heptatonic scale. A pentatonic scale is more readily identified as Sesotho or 'traditional' because of its prevalence among established Sesotho songs, whereas the 7-note scale is associated with the European hymn-style introduced by missionaries during the 19th century. Equally, neo-traditional songs feature leaders' parts that replicate more closely the free recitative style of singing found in leaders' parts in established song-styles such as *mokhibo*, and in self-accompanied bow songs. By contrast, syncretic styles tend to follow more closely the European mode of singing, and even though 'antiphonal' features may be superimposed upon a European-derived harmonic framework, all parts tend to sing in the same, pitch-focused manner.

Moreover, because Basotho tend to conceptualise songs in terms of the related situational context, the difference between the two stylistic sub-sets of modern song tends to centre around associated performance contexts. Naturally, the performance context in which a song is sung will influence the style of that song. Not only is the song itself moulded to suit the actual physical performance event but, equally, the song's style is determined by the experiential and social values of its performers, composers or audience.

Neo-traditional song-styles are performed in contexts that are felt either to have more resonance with established notions of Sesotho identity, or which consciously utilise such notions in order to define modern identity as explicitly Sesotho. In the 1990s, a predominant context which is felt to define Sesotho culture is, somewhat paradoxically, migrant labour. While no doubt an effect of European influence, the migrant experience has been internalised by Basotho as something essential to the formation of adult male Sesotho identity in much the same way as, for example, warfare and cattle-raiding may have been in the 19th century. Moreover, the complex of values which tend to accompany migrant experience, such as initiation school (*lebollo*) as a preparation for the hardships of migrant life, are rooted in customary Sesotho practice. Migrant workers tend to have passed through *lebollo* in a higher proportion than other members of society.

Thus, expressive forms learnt in *lebollo*, such as *mangae* and the *lithoko tsa makoloane*, influence the migrants' songs more than the songs of school- and mission-educated groups. Passing through *lebollo* tends to create a notion of

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed examination of these song-styles see Robin Wells, *An introduction to the music of the Basotho*, Morija Museum and Archives, 1994.

established Sesotho identity, more so than the European-style schools, and in turn predisposes the graduates to root themselves more deeply in established cultural forms. Moreover, the very nature of migrant life itself paradoxically entrenches established notions of Sesotho identity, or notions that mould resources from the past into a symbolically reconstituted past. Though migrant labour does offer opportunities for cultural mixing and exposure to new performance styles (and these have influenced *famo* songs to a degree), the apartheid system and ethnically-organised divisions in the mines tend to consolidate or even create notions of cultural identity based around ethnic or geographical origins.

Equally, the geographical distance between the migrant and Lesotho adds to the internal reconstruction of Sesotho culture as a means of defining one's identity in an alien environment. As noted by Lye and Murray, the migrant worker must leave Sesotho society in order to perpetuate it.<sup>4</sup> Such an apparent contradiction exists on both economic and performance levels. It is through the active mobilisation and re-ordering of elements from the established canon into new performance genres that the migrant is able to overcome the duality inherent in his oscillating existence, between life in Lesotho and life in the mine compounds of South Africa.

Syncretic styles, on the other hand, have evolved in European-inspired performance contexts. Church services, school concerts and singing competitions shaped the development of Mohapeloa's songs and the *monyanyako* and *mbube* song-styles. In these, Sesotho stylistic features are included within a wider framework of performance and perception that remains more heavily European. Modes of harmonic progression follow the tonic-dominant pattern rather than the bitonal shifting-root pattern of older Sesotho *lipina* and scales are heptatonic.

Basotho do not use a term equivalent to syncretic to describe song-styles such as *monyanyako* and *mbube*. Indeed, the very absence of such a term tends to point to the organic and implicit evolution of these songs, as is the pattern with most cultural development. By contrast, the songs of the migrant labourers (*difela* and *famo*) are beginning to be described as *lipina tsa Sesotho* (Sesotho songs). They are consciously-created vessels of constructed Sesotho identity. The active utilisation of stylistic resources from established song-styles is a deliberate consequence of the value orientations, and particular circumstances, of the migrants who perform them. *Lifela* and *famo* songs are explicitly identified as Sesotho music in contrast to such styles as *monyanyako* and *mbube* and in contrast therefore to the range of social and experiential values that accompany syncretic song-styles. Thus, among song-styles that have emerged over the last 150 years, resulting from inter-cultural contacts and shifts in the nature of society, a difference pertains between these styles based around

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<sup>4</sup> Lye and Murray, *Transformations on the highveld*, 1980.



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the values with which they are imbued by the differing members of society who perform them.

In conclusion I would suggest that studies of African music can no longer be directed solely towards a set of musical styles defined as 'traditional' to the exclusion of more recent developments if they are to portray adequately the musical culture of a society or nation. Modes of human expression, such as literature, aurature,<sup>5</sup> the plastic arts or music, change in conjunction with the dynamic transformation of society as a whole and thus are constantly evolving areas of human experience. Equally, nor can one suppose that the music of a nation or a population group is some unitary static block of practices common to all. Music is, and always has been, a means of marking social identity that functions on two levels — whilst defining the social identity of the group as a whole, it also provides a vessel in which to articulate one's place within that group.