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Observing and Recording Village Music of the Kweneng

by ELIZABETH NELBACH WOOD*

Description of the Area

To the west of Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, extends the large Kweneng District. Its shape is somewhat like an elongated quadrilateral, running east and west, with the widest part being at the eastern end, where there are rocky hills, grassy vales, thorn scrub, aloes, trees and river beds which seem to flow throughout the year if the rainfall is exceptionally heavy. Extending and narrowing far to the west over grassland and thorn scrub, the district becomes flatter and reaches into desert country along its western and northwestern borders.

Most of the people in the Kweneng are of the Bakwena tribe. There are small clusters of other tribes scattered throughout the district, particularly in the eastern portion. With the exception of the Bakgalagadi and the Basarwa (sometimes called Bushmen), all the people of the Kweneng come from the same parent stem in the Transvaal, (which is in the Republic of South Africa), and speak the same language. The Bakgalagadi, who for the most part are to the west and northwest, are of a related parent group and speak a slightly different dialect. Farther out, one finds the Basarwa whose origins, culture and language are entirely different from the people already mentioned.

In the villages throughout the district, there is a striking blend of old and new, with tribal customs and local government responsibilities sharing in the life of the people. Some men and women work in the civil service and in the private sector. Many of the young men work in the mines of Botswana and South Africa. However, the large proportion of the population is involved in the day-to-day tasks of village life. For the women, this includes domestic duties of home and family, and when the rainy season begins, there are traditional crop-raising responsibilities at the 'lands', the farming areas out beyond the village. The men assist in some of the agricultural activity, home and tool repair and building, but chiefly, their responsibility is in the care of the cattle — out beyond the lands at the 'cattle post'. Children help with all these tasks, and even when of school age, participate on week-ends and during holiday time.

A Description of the Places Visited, the People, and the Music Recorded

In the quest to gain closer understanding of the part music has played, and is still playing today, in the lives of the people of this selected area, several villages were visited. These include Gabane, Mmankgodi and Molepolole in the eastern portion of the district, Lephepe in the northeast, Letlhakeng to the west of Molepolole and at the edge of the Kalahari Desert, and in the far west of the district, Tsetseng. Also visited were groups outside Tsetseng, near the village of Kang, which is beyond the Kweneng border into the Kgalagadi District. I included the music recorded on the visit to Kang, because the music and the people seemed very similar to those of Tsetseng, and this gave me the opportunity to broaden the scope of the material I was able to gather. Some of the villages were visited more than once.

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Woman of Gabane Group Using Hoeing Stick in One of The Songs

In addition to recording the music, I interviewed several experienced and knowledgeable older people to obtain more background information. Much of this was borne out as I travelled throughout the district.

Gabane is a charming small village not far from the capital and off the Molepolole road. It is nestled against a curving hillside and possesses many tall, thick, shady marula trees. The people are of the Bamalete tribe. Here I recorded a total of twelve songs, all performed by a group of about fifteen older women. They were joined on one occasion by a male performer. He enriched the session with his dramatic flair and his bone whistle, a *lengwane*. He either danced or acted out some of the songs, blowing the *lengwane* as he did so.

The women had made matching skirts and head coverings, and some wore hats of jackal fur. They accompanied their songs with a variety of instruments, such as hand-made drums called *meropa*, wooden 'clappers', and leg rattles called *matlhowa*. One of the women trilled occasionally on a high pitch, called 'ululating', with exceptional ease and clarity. The clapping was strong, sharp and clear. All of their selections were early traditional examples and sung with great energy and enthusiasm. The subject matter was varied.

The early-traditional characteristics that one can identify readily are: a leader and group pattern (or 'call and response'), short phrases repeated many times, single line melody (no harmony) and a different scale — often five or six tone (in contrast to the seven tone diatonic scale).

The first song was a play song — often sung at the cattle post by young people for fun and relaxation — acting out the rounding up of the herd. It was during this song that the male performer pretended to be one of the cattle.

Next, a traditional rain song extolled the blessings of a heavy downpour. This was followed by a song relating through the use of metaphor some of the complex problems of adolescence. Even so, it was called a play song. I discovered that many of the songs of the adolescent age group, exploring a topic serious to them, would be categorized a play song, because the young people would express their feelings through group singing and dancing. A play song is often accompanied by dancing.

A girls' initiation song followed, and the words described the indications that a certain girl had reached puberty and was therefore ready to join the group for the initiation school where they received instruction about adult life and responsibilities.

Other songs included a rain-prayer song, a play song about a leopard, a sad song of the adolescent age, a work song for ploughing (with a humorous theme), one for threshing, and three other work songs, one with an unusual metre of seven beats to a measure. The unusual metre probably suited the particular occupational activity.

All of the songs were expertly performed, many were acted out, and the instruments used effectively.

The trip to Lephepe involved a greater distance and I stayed overnight at a new clinic recently completed there. I made the trip to this village with a medical team on its regular monthly visit. A primary school was expecting me and knew of the study. They were very eager to assist me. Some of the children had made skin costumes and were pleased to dress up and perform.

All of the songs were of a 'composed' or improvisational category, not early traditional. Because their origin was more recent, harmony was often present, as well as the balanced phrases often found in folk songs and hymns.

One was a sad, mournful love song, and obvious favourite. Another was a song describing an episode of tribal history. Next was a play song about an elephant, and lastly, a song about the new blue bus which ran between Molepolole and Kanye.

Because Lephepe is a rather dry, rocky, remote village situated near the border to the next district to the north, it was apparent that the school personnel and students enjoyed having visitors and were proud to point out the historic, man-made wells not too far from the school.



*Some of the Gabane women's singing group.
 Woman at right, wearing matlhowa on ankles and a fur hat of black-back jackal on her head,
 is about to start a dance movement.
 Woman in center with white necklace is principal ululator.*

They are still in use for the cattle, and it is said that Livingstone and Moffat, the missionaries, stopped here at this outpost village, during their explorations, to water their oxen. Because of the location, it was not surprising to be informed by the principal that, although most of the students were of the Bakwena tribe, some were Bangwato of the the Central District to the north, and a few were Basarwa.

The village of Letlhakeng was sixty-two kilometres west of Molepolole and considered to be just before the 'gateway to the Kalahari'. The village spreads out along a wide valley which runs east and west. Beyond the village, a road winds up over limestone outcropping northward to the Khutse Game Reserve. The people are considered to be mostly Bakgalagadi, and are closely related to the Tswana-Sotho parent group. They seemed to me to be exactly like those people I had been visiting all along, but I have been told that those well-versed in Setswana would be able to detect subtle language differences.

The entire primary school was ready in the school courtyard, dressed in their neat uniforms and very patient and courteous as I set up the recording equipment. They performed several songs within certain age groups.

The youngest choir (about eight to ten years of age) sang a hymn in three-part harmony, the teacher conductor singing along and helping with the lowest part. Next was a play song, probably brought from the mines by an older brother or parent. Although it described some of the difficulties in the life of a miner, it made light of the problems and was performed as a humorous song, with dancing by some of the boys, rapid leg and foot movements, and accompanied by clapping and a small metal whistle.

The intermediate choir, about ten to eleven years of age, sang a composed song, with harmony, describing their home at the edge of the Kalahari Desert, and their love for it. Next was a play song and dancing with intricate foot work, causing much merriment, and also accompanied by clapping.

The senior choir, aged eleven and twelve, sang two traditional play songs, with clapping and the metal whistle for accompaniment.

Before departing from Letlhakeng, I visited a group of older people who had gathered at a church for a service and were waiting afterward for me to hear them sing. I recorded a very old traditional song about cattle, sung by three elderly women. Another traditional song about the monkey was started spontaneously by one of the older men, and the others joined in as they recognized it. Their joy and enthusiasm for singing, as well as for the song, was a most rewarding experience. I felt fortunate to have been present and able to capture the delight of an impromptu performance of an old, much-loved traditional song.

Afterwards, the minister (moruti) of the church invited me and the member of the medical team who had transported me from Molepolole, to share dinner with him and his wife in their home.

Mmankgodi, the third largest village in the Kweneng District, is situated in rolling countryside with many good-sized shade trees. It is southwest of Gaborone and about an hour's drive. Many of the villagers, young and old, including the chief and his wife, were present for the afternoon's recording. The people are Bahurutse. All were assembled at the chief's large central meeting place called the *kgotla*. There was an almost festive atmosphere.

A large group of primary school students performed several songs, two of which I recorded. The first was a prayer song for the village with contemporary characteristics of harmony and balanced phrases. The second song was a greeting to the chief and his wife, and although contemporary in character, had traditional elements such as a 'call and response' pattern. Ululating, the *lengwane*, and a small metal whistle appeared as accompaniment.

Next, a small group of older women sang a traditional greeting song and one about the chief. Some of the men wore a circle of animal tails around their necks, seemingly of the cat family, and these flew out and up colourfully when the men jumped up high from time to time during



Woman of Gabane Group with Moropa - (drum)

the singing. One young man who played the *lengwane* was quite humourous, playing the role almost, of court jester.

A group of church and professional women sang several composed songs, some religious and others of a patriotic nature. They wore colourful matching clothes.

The final two songs were performed by a group of young men and women. The first, a melancholy song of unrequited love, gave them so much pleasure that they asked to sing it again. At the time of the recording, I had imagined it to be a song with a cheerful, happy subject. It was not until later, when I had gone over it labouriously with my translator, that I discovered it was really quite a woeful song! The second song had been composed at the time of the tenth anniversary of Botswana's independence, and emphasized the pride in developing the country's own currency. Both were contemporary songs, with harmony, although the second one had a 'call and response' pattern characteristic of early traditional songs.

I made several trips to Molepolole, the central village of the Bakwena and the Kweneng District. It is 54 kilometres west of Gaborone, and has a population of about 19000. Among the prominent people historically who have lived in the area were Chief Sechele I and the missionaries David Livingstone and Roger Price. The three were contemporaries and had known each other well.

On one of the visits to Molepolole, I recorded four songs performed by a group of about 30 Girl Guides who were in their mid-teens. It was a vivacious, dynamic group and they sang with a full, rich tone and fine sense of legato. Some of the girls had designed and made their own 'traditional' clothes — consisting of a short skirt of skin with a matching halter top. They had dyed the skins in warm earth tones.

The first song was a traditional play song about keeping the birds away from the fields of corn. They used clapping, ululating and the metal whistle. Next was a traditional play song referring to a former chief. The third, a composed song, was about the University fund-raising drive called "BUCA", which took place at the time of Botswana's tenth anniversary of independence. The final song was a traditional play song advising the girls to wait for marriage before becoming pregnant. The girls told me afterward that this was one of their favourite songs. A few of the girls wore the dried laced cocoons called *matlhowa* around their ankles as they danced during the play songs.

On a return trip to Molepolole later on, another group of Girl Guides, some dressed in skin costumes they had made, sang three additional songs for recording. At the beginning of the first song, four of the girls walked in formation around the inside of the semi-circle formed by the rest of the singers. On the heads of two were baskets of meal. The other two girls carried *kikadi* (stamping blocks) on their heads and each held two pounding sticks. An energetic song was sung during this movement. At the end of a verse, one of the other girls gave a signal by whistling. The four girls stopped and at additional whistle signals, set down the *kikas*, emptied the meal into them and commenced pounding. This was done to the accompaniment of another song which provided the necessary strong rhythmic accents. It was interesting to discover later that the words had nothing whatever to do with carrying or pounding meal, but rather were concerned with going to the mountains and describing a white calf. In other words, the songs provided background for the action.

Next was a play song about a stomach pain and was accompanied by clapping and ululating. One of the girls wore *matlhowa* around her ankles and danced in front of the others who had formed a semi-circle.

The last was a lengthy praise song about a favourite black cow, with accompanying dramatic action.

On yet another visit to Molepolole, I recorded songs performed by a group of young men and women. One was a traditional adolescent play song. The words referred to their interest in personal relationships. It is against tradition to engage in sexual experience before marriage, but the subject is often discussed through songs and dancing. Another song was a composed



*Woman of Gabane group fastening matlhowa to ankles prior to performing.
Moropa visible at upper right (drum made of large empty paraffin container.)
Woman at left has "hoeing" stick in hand.*

song created at the time of World War II, describing the soldiers gathered at the *kgotla*.

On another return visit, I recorded a traditional play song about a rope, sung by three elderly women, as they recalled a happy activity of their childhood.

A woman of advanced age and partially blind sang an initiation song quite spontaneously which she had learned in her early teens.

Two lullabies were then sung by the elderly women. One of the singers was actually caring for her grandchild. The old traditional song worked its magic and the baby was soon asleep!

At another time, a mixed group sang several traditional festival, wedding and thanksgiving songs. An interesting fact about this group was that it had formed spontaneously and was very generous and gracious with its musical offerings, when it heard that the group I had intended to record had had a mix-up in the proposed date and had not appeared.

On the final visit to Molepolole, a group of older men which the chief had gathered in the *kgotla*, sang a collection of traditional songs about cattle, the hippo, sharing one's blanket with the grandmother to shield her from the cold, and one describing the enjoyment of traditional beer at a festive occasion.

One of the men, the leader of the group, moved rhythmically with the music, swinging his arms up and down and occasionally jumping into the air. Two elderly women joined the group for some of the songs, showing much pleasure in doing so.

Tsetseng, with a population of 580 is the western-most village of the Kweneng District. It is 354 kilometres from Gaborone, 300 kilometres from Molepolole, and 50 kilometres from Kang, where I was based for this part of the study. From the map, it might appear to be another border post village, functioning originally as a look-out point against aggression. Most of the residents are either Bakgalagadi or Basarwa. These are the two groups of people who were living formerly to the east as well, but moved westward when the Bakwena began arriving at about 1720 into what is now the Kweneng District. However, Tsetseng may be regarded more accurately as a remote desert village, rather than an outpost.

The Kalahari Desert spreads down to Tsetseng and to much of the land south-west and to some extent to the east. The soil is a very fine, light-coloured sand.

Coarse grass and ground cover are present, as well as low bushes and thorn scrub. The terrain is fairly flat, occasionally mildly undulating, and there are a few acacia trees. One realizes that this is very dry country, with low annual rainfall, and no natural surface water.

I had travelled to Kang over-night on a lorry transporting building materials to Hukuntsi, the next large village. The nurse in charge of the clinic at Kang was expecting me and had offered hospitality and the opportunity to accompany her on a clinic visit to Tsetseng as well as into the area near Kang where she was well-acquainted with the people. I had planned to stay about a week.

The recording of the first group of Basarwa took place in the large courtyard of one of the family groups, a few kilometres through the rough bush from the health post at Tsetseng, to which I had been transported the first day. I had read a great deal about the Basarwa and now looked forward to meeting some of them and hearing their music and language first-hand.

There were about thirty in the group, a few elderly women, many younger women, some with nursing babies, adolescent girls, and several much younger girls. This comprised the singing group, and they sat on the ground in a semi-circle two or three deep facing the tape recorder. About nine or ten men stood or sat at the edge of the company. Several of the very young girls formed a small dancing circle to the side and moved rhythmically with the singing.

Normally, the men would have danced in a circle around the seated women who would have been in a circle around a central fire. This is the traditional format for their long, therapeutic performances. However, since it was known that I wished to record some songs on my one afternoon with them, the men observed the recording from the side. A gathering of Bakgalagadi, mostly older girls, sat nearby to listen, and there were young and older men, many neighbours and passersby who became part of the audience.

After a short discussion and a few tentative starts, the singers gradually got going with a song, starting first with clapping.

The musical characteristics of the song were unlike any of the other vocal music I had recorded thus far in the Kweneng and Kgatleng districts. I had of course anticipated this. Instead of a flowing, sing-line melody, often following a descending pattern and full of rhythmic variation, or the short melodic phrases of very early traditional songs, this song consisted of the repetition of a four-tone melody in contrapuntal style, as in a round. The effect was continuous and angular, as the individual singers made separate, delayed and repeated entrances of the same melody, sometimes fragments of the melody. For this song, the tune consisted of 'Do so fa re', in descending order. In subsequent Basarwa songs, other combinations of four tones would be used, sometimes the four tones resembling those of a dominant seventh chord, such as: 'So fa re ti'.

When all the singers were performing and following the song's four-tone pattern, it sounded intricate in texture and most unique, but probably not impromptu. The singers seemed to know exactly what they were doing, and each song seemed a separate entity. Another characteristic was that at times a singer would suddenly go into a head tone or 'falsetto' and then right back to the note an octave below.

Usually, the clapping followed a regular, steady beat with no evidence of strong accent, although I felt it could be 2 4 or 4 4 metre. As the song or verse neared end, the clapping grew louder, the beats doubled up in a contrapuntal manner, and all clapping stopped on a final string beat. It might have been a signal, but perhaps it was part of the song. The clapping itself had a sharp, staccato quality and this continued throughout the song, ending in the manner described. One might say that the clapping started and ended the song.

There seemed to be no words to the songs, at least to the inexperienced listener, but rather a series of vowel sounds, mostly "qh", "ah", "ay" and occasionally "ee" or "oo". Each song seemed just a little different, so I assumed a possibility of words or sounds with meaning, and certainly a mood or subject. I learned later that these vowel sounds do indeed have meaning. Altogether, I recorded six songs, and the group enjoyed hearing them played back to them.

When I asked the group of Bakgalagadi who were sitting close by if they would like to sing, several primary school students formed themselves into a 'choir', stood in a shallow semi-circle, and sang three school songs. These followed the pattern of many of the school songs I had previously recorded — contemporary in form and mode in major keys with harmonisation and balanced phrases and cadences. The harmony was mostly three-part, and occasionally four-part, when one of the young men felt confident enough to join in with the singing. Through the interpreter, I learned that the first song was patriotic, the second about a baby, and the last a greeting song to the mothers.

The next day, I visited two small Basarwa family groups outside of Tsetseng and closer to Kang, but of the same general area and people. Here I had the opportunity to record the playing of the thumb piano. This instrument is called *stinkane*, because some of the players use an empty tin can under the instrument during the playing, to provide resonance and a larger tone. The instrument consists of metal bars or keys mounted on a metal frame which is fastened to a rectangular piece of wood about half an inch thick, but thinned down under the bars. The bars are tuned to the tones of a instrument selects the particular combination of the four tones to suit his preference. The instrument is held in both hands and the bars are stroked with the thumbs, occasionally with the forefinger.

The first performance was by the man who had made the instrument. It had been carefully constructed and the interpreter relayed the information that the metal bars had been formed from fencing material, perhaps first heated, then hammered flat and shaped to the appropriate length to achieve the proper pitch. There were two rows of bars, fifteen in all, seven in the upper row, eight in the lower — in alternate pattern, beginning and ending with the lower row.

I asked the maker of the instrument through the interpreter how he decided what tones, or pitches, to use. The answer was: "From my head" and "From above". At the front of the instrument were two short rows of small round circles of metal strung along two separate curved metal bars. These made a light jingling sound as the instrument was played.

The performer played a tune which I realised used a four-tone scale, and it was apparent that the instrument was tuned to four different pitches. Because there were fifteen keys in all, many

were octaves of the same pitch. The music was immensely pleasing to the ear. It seemed to ripple along and was almost bell-like in tone. One of the other men in the group then played a selection, followed by one of the young women taking her turn. She sang along as she played, and the gracefulness and skill of her performance were outstanding. Toward the end of her selection, one of the men began to sing and stood up to dance. After she had finished, I was informed that all these pieces were about the hartebeest, and antelope of the area. It was the first time that an actual subject has been mentioned.

A fourth and final piece was played by one of the other men — and it also was about the same antelope. Occasionally, a young man was inspired to stand up and dance. An elderly grandmother sat to one side, watching with great interest, and all the while making a necklace of ostrich egg shell pieces.

All of the melodies followed a descending pattern. The rhythmic base for each one was regular being either 2/4 4/4 or 3/4 metre. The young woman's selection seemed to be a combination of 6/8 and 4/4 metre.

We went next with some of this same group to find a young woman, a member of one of the households, who could play a mouth bow called a *lengope*. She was just two or three kilometres distant, at the lands of one of the neighbours. She went at once to the place where she kept the *lengope* and proceeded to string the bow carefully with a length of sinew which had also been carefully stored. In order to make the sinew supple and pliant while being strung, she reached up and gathered a few green leaves from a bush overhead. With these, she stroked the sinew. When she felt that the sinew was sufficiently taut, she sat down and played two pieces, also about the hartebeest.

Her technique for playing was to hold the slender bow of about two and a half feet long, along her left arm, with the lower tip resting in the palm of her left hand. The upper end of the bow was held at the right edge of her mouth. The sinew faced outward. With the forefinger of her right hand, she plucked the sinew in a steady series of strokes. There were two pitches for the song — the open string and one a whole step higher — which she produced by touching the sinew a certain distance from the end of the bow with the edge of a finger of her left hand. Her lips were slightly parted, and the mouth cavity provided a resonance. By changing the size and shape of the cavity, it seemed that overtones were produced.

The instrument called *lengope* by the Bakwena and Bakgatla is made of a hollow reed, not a slender bow, and the sinew is struck with a slender stick. Otherwise, the characteristics and playing technique are the same, and customarily it is played by just the women. This is the only *lengope* I had actually seen.

The following afternoon, we found a Masarwa gentleman who played the *segankure*. It had two wires and two tuning pegs and also an empty tin at the upper end. He played two pieces, one called: "The player of the *segankure* is happy". He sang along from time to time. The second piece was: "The boys are looking for the cattle". His wife joined him occasionally in the singing, and their grandchild sat nearby, watching contentedly.

The gentleman told us that the owner and creator of the instrument was away. This person was very proficient, quite a virtuoso, at playing the *segankure*, and the gentleman felt it was unfortunate that the real musician was away. He himself could play only a few simple tunes. We were most appreciative and thanked him sincerely for his efforts.

This final visit completed the recording for this study and I returned to Gaborone, this time by light plane, the journey taking just about one hour. I had been offered a lift because of a vacant passenger seat.

The Characteristics of the Music

With the exception of the Basarwa, who have lived in this part of Botswana for centuries, traditionally as hunters and gatherers, the people of the Kweneng came to this area from the Transvaal in the eighteenth century and brought their music with them. This consisted of songs and dances which they knew well from memory and which passed on down through the generations. New songs and dances were created along with the old ones. They had brought instruments, too, but this art has not survived as well as the songs and dances.

Many of the songs of the historically traditional style follow a 'call and response' pattern with

the leader starting the song and the group answering. The response could be direct imitation, either following the leader melody, or in overlapping style, or it could be a contrasting response. The melody is often based on a five or six tone scale, and is usually single-line or monophonic. If two parts are heard during the overlap the interval would be that of either a perfect 4th or 5th. To the listener, there seems to be a great deal of repetition. As one becomes familiar with the song, and learns the word meanings and the general interpretation, there are subtle changes from one verse to the next, and thus interest and enjoyment are maintained and even increased.

The song leader must have a strong, expressive voice, and must know the songs well. The dancing is as important as the singing. Some have mentioned that it is even more important, the movement of the legs being the focal point of the dance. Trousers and jackets and aprons of skin decorated with beads and feathers, are the traditional apparel for the performers. One often sees layers of dried cocoons filled with seeds or pebbles, laced around the ankles and worn for rhythmic effect. These are called *matlhowa*. There is a high trilling sound called ululating which the women do, for emphasis and encouragement, and the women often accompany the singing and dancing with clapping.

Depending upon the tonal or key foundation, some of the songs lend themselves readily to harmonisation, when strongly major or minor. This, the people do very well and with obvious pleasure. This natural ability to harmonise without training is considered by some of the people I talked with to be "a gift from God". The songs using major or minor keys are the result of a natural musical development and progression, and also demonstrate the influence of people from other countries living here (from their folk songs and hymns). The songs using a five or six-tone scale and having the characteristics mentioned earlier are older and considered more traditional in an authentic and historical sense.

Each age group has its own songs. Young children, from about the age four to twelve, always have action or dancing in their songs. Some of the songs will be games, to please themselves and exercise their bodies as well.

Adolescents, from about age thirteen to twenty, have their songs and dances, more mature in subject matter, often accompanied by action and dancing, not so vigorous as those of the younger children, but more active than those performed by adults. Although their songs are heavier in meaning, humour and fun are often expressed as well.

There are special songs just for the women. They include lullabies, occupation songs, wedding songs, mood songs and songs for festivals. For example, when the cattle are brought to the bride's place, there is much joyous singing and ululating by the women. Some of the occupation songs are for threshing, stamping, hoeing and winnowing. During thanksgiving or *dikgafela* time, there are songs just for the women to sing when they take the corn and brewed beer to the chief.

Men traditionally have sung before and after a hunt or battle. Brave hunters are praised in song. Returning from battle or a difficult hunt, often one man would come running ahead, singing the news, and the women would ululate and gather at the chief's place. The mood of the song reveals victory or death following a hunt or battle. If a hunt has been successful, usually the skin of an animal is brought to the chief's place. Sometimes, the men would gather spontaneously at the chief's place early in the morning and sit around the fire to share ideas, including how best to treat their wives, etc. They would sing and enjoy themselves, with the chief often treating them to beer. Some of the men would play instruments, usually of the reed type, at these times.

There are certain times when the men and women sing together. At the cattle post, there are women who cook and wash for the men. When they are all relaxing, they often sing together. There is a song they sing about cattle, with their arms raised up to signify horns. Men sometimes help with the threshing and join with the women in song for this. After a wedding, there is a dance which the men and women do together while some of the women clap and sing. The men would wear the laced dried cocoons, *matlhowa*, around their ankles, and occasionally during the dancing would jump high in the air and twist themselves about. This is a happy time for all.

Another happy time is when a chief is installed. There would be festive pageantry and song, and new songs composed for the occasion. Always at this time, there will be songs asking for rain, or giving thanks for rain and a good year.

After a woman's confinement period, there will be happy singing when she appears to the rest of the family with the new baby.

There are happy and sad love songs, and songs about animals and birds and other creatures.

When a chief dies, or when a man has died on a hunt or in battle, there are special mourning songs. A skin not properly treated (not soft) would be dropped in the front yard of the deceased's family. When a child or mother has died, there are special mourning songs. There are also songs of a spiritual nature.

When Christianity became a part of the religious lives of many Bakwena, the initiation school no longer was a part of the tradition, but before this occurred, the adolescent boys and girls had their traditional regimental and initiation songs and dances.

There are two major festival times of great importance to the Bakwena. These are at the time of thanksgiving or *dikgafela* which comes after the harvest, and the large festive gatherings and performances at Christmas time.

The thanksgiving tradition covers several stages. First, the women take sorghum to the chief's place. This is carried in baskets on their heads, and the wife of the headman of each kgotla leads the procession. A green leaf standing up in the middle of the corn signifies a good year. As they walk along they sing special songs of thanksgiving, particularly if they had good rains, which means a good year. If there had been a drought, they would not have this celebration. Beer is brewed from the grinding of the corn with the husks on. When the women take the brewed beer to the chief, there are songs for this also as they move along. Often the songs are about rain, either asking for rain, or giving praise or thanks for good rains. Depending on the harvest, these activities of *dikgafela* may last from one to two weeks, with much merry-making, feasting, singing and drinking.

At Christmas time, it is customary in Molepolole and other villages of the district to have a big song festival. After church, they gather at the chief's place while many groups perform — children's choirs, with the children in uniform or in their new Christmas clothes, or men and women singing alone, or singing together. All kinds of songs will be sung, and all kinds of groups will perform. Sometimes the groups will have been practicing for this since October, but there is also spontaneous singing as well. It is an occasion marked by joy and festivity with not only seasonal and religious songs, but songs especially composed for the celebration. Often the newly composed songs will describe the highlights of the year, particularly if it was a good one. The young people of each kgotla will compose songs unknown to the other kgotlas and surprise them. Another activity of the young people is to compose songs for a concert at the village hall. This would be accompanied by a fund-raising effort for the school or other organisations, and is really a fun time. These concerts are usually very informal and largely uncoached. Sometimes, old tunes but with new words are the result, or a completely new song will come forth.

The Basarwa songs followed a structure using a fourtone scale and contrapuntal style. Clapping was an important part, or base of the song. Words, such as we would identify them, seemed non-existent. Vowel-like sounds were used which none-the-less had a very decided and distinct meaning for the singers. As was suggested to me, the songs are so old that the words, over the many hundreds of years, or more, have been lost or forgotten, but not the meaning of the song. However, it might also be possible that for the songs of the Basarwa, there is a special tonal language, entirely separate from the spoken one.

A random comment in regard to the contrapuntal character of the vocal music of the Basarwa might be of interest to some. Many years ago, long before I had heard of Botswana, or had any idea of the character of the Basarwa music, I remember reading an article in the New York Times about a group of anthropologists from Sweden who were living with and studying

“the Bushmen”. They had brought a battery-operated phonograph and records, and proceeded to play a variety of classical selections and other types as well, to observe the reactions of the group being studied. Of all the music, the Bushmen reacted most strongly to the music of J.S. Bach — clapping, laughing and singing along with this master of advanced counterpoint.

(Another cross-cultural random comment: ‘The rounding up of the cattle’ play song recorded in Gabane with drum accompaniment, seemed reminiscent of the music of the American Indian.)

When I inquired about their traditional instruments, I observed that there were many of the same ones that were played by another tribe I had recently studied — the Bakgatla in Mochudi, closely related to the Bakwena.

In the idiophone section of instruments (those that are self-sounding and not requiring a string, reed or membrane) are the *matlhowa*, laced dried cocoons worn around the ankles, and wood ‘clappers’, flat pieces of wood, held one in each hand and struck together. Later on in my visits, I observed the *stinkane* or thumb piano, a small keyboard instrument held in the hands with the thumbs striking the keys. This instrument here employs the fourtone scale. Elsewhere, it is known by different names: *mbira* or *sansa*.

Of the aerophones (wind instruments), there were the *lengwane*, whistle made from hollow reeds or wood, and the *lepatata*, signal horn made from the horn of the sable antelope. In my journey around the district, I observed a small metal whistle as well.

In the chordophone (string) family, there was the *lengope* a long hollow reed with a sinew tightly fastened from one end to the other, held at the corner of the mouth at one end, while the sinew, or string, was struck with a short, slender stick. The mouth acted as a resonating chamber.

Also, there was the *segwane*, a stringed bow with a calabash fastened to the string and held against the chest for resonance while the string was struck with a stick.

There was also the *serankure* or *segankure* — called *sebinjolo* by the Bakgatla and *segaba* by the Bangwato. This was made from a long, thick, slightly curved and grooved stave, with a single wire strung along its length from a tuning peg at one end and fastened to the other end, where there would be an empty tin can secured, for resonance. The instrument was held up against the shoulder for playing, usually with the resonator (tin can) at the upper end. The wire was stroked with a small bow to which hairs from an animal’s tail had been strung, end to end.

Of the membranophones (sound produced by striking or vibrating a skin stretched and fastened to a receptacle), there was the drum or *moropa*. In the Kweneng District, it was usually fashioned by stretching a skin over the open end of a stamping block (the piece of hollowed-out wood which is used for holding the grain while it is pounded into a fine meal). Another type of *moropa* was made by securing a skin over the top of a large empty paraffin container. Usually, these *meropa* were played by striking the taut surface of the skin with the hand or fingers.

Of the instruments mentioned, not many remain. I observed the following on my visits to the villages: the *matlhowa*, the *lengwane*, both kinds of *moropa*, a pair of wood clappers, a small metal whistle, the *lengope*, the *sengankure* and the *stinkane*.

While in Lephepe, I noticed a hand-made three-string guitar-type instrument. The resonating chamber was an empty floor-wax tin. The maker of this instrument was a young man who was blind. He found great satisfaction in having made the ‘guitar’, and sang and accompanied a group of young student nurses while they sang. He had tuned the strings so that he could play major and minor chords. This type of instrument is sometimes called a *ramkie*. It is not considered to be a traditional instrument, but illustrated the creative, improvisational qualities in some of the people.

Summary

This study of the music of the Kweneng district is an outgrowth of an earlier study made in Mochudi, the central village of the Kgatleng District, home of the Bakgatla tribe. At that time,

I became acquainted with the characteristics and types of songs, the use of movement and dance, various kinds of musical instruments, and the trends in the field of traditional music through the years.

The old traditional songs follow the 'call and response' (leader and group) pattern, usually adhere to a pentatonic, five-tone scale (occasionally a six-tone scale), and have short repetitive phrases. The melodies are single-line or monophonic. Sometimes, when there is an overlapping of two part in the call and response, one may hear the interval of the perfect fourth or fifth. The more recent songs employ the seven-tone diatonic scale, have harmony encompassing two, three or more parts, and have a more formal, balanced structure.

The songs of the Basarwa employ the four-tone scale, a contrapuntal style and unusual word form.

Some contrasts in the musical heritage were anticipated, because of the variety of topography and some differences in cultural and historical background throughout the entire area, but the similarities were pronounced, because the large proportion of the people are either of the same tribe or of the same over-all parent group. Any large differences were noticed at Tsetseng and Kang, which I had anticipated.

In passing from one village to the next, it became apparent that the people had a great deal in common with each other in their music, including those of different tribal background such as the Balete in Gabane and the Bahurutse in Mmankgodi. The two villages are only a few kilometres apart. With the exception of two groups farther to the west, all the people of the Kweneng come from the same parent stem, which would explain the similarities.

Of the two with different origins one is the Bakgalagadi, with is very slight, and the difference in the music seems to be negligible. The subject matter of their composed songs might reveal their Kalahari Desert location, as an example. The other group is the Basarwa. Here the origins and cultural differences are great and the musical characteristics equally so, particularly in the songs. Otherwise, in all the afore-mentioned groups, there is a common thread which may be readily discerned.

It was interesting to discover that some groups knew songs of other distant villages and would sing them with much similarity. For instance, a group of school children in Letlhakeng sang the same ploughing song that a group of women had sung for me in Mochudi, during an earlier study. The Girl Guides in Molepolole also knew it. A mixed group in Letlhakeng sang a praise song about the monkey (*kgabo*). In Gabane, the group of women who sang mostly older traditional songs, performed the same song as a work song, with an altered rhythmic structure to fit the beat of the occupation (threshing). In the Letlhakeng version, there was no regular metre. If one considers that *kgabo* is the totem of the Bakgatla, there is, of course the possibility that the song may have originated with these people, or refers to them. Out in Lephepe, a song performed by the school choir was about the Bakgatla. It had been taught to them by their teacher who came from a nearby small country.

All of this illustrated how much the music has travelled around with the movement of the people, and that the people are closely related.

In attempting to isolate some real differences in the music of the various villages, these differences would be in the singing groups themselves — in their size, their vocal timbre or tone colour, and in their interpretation. The songs of the Basarwa were distinctly different in structure, style and language.

A general observation of the singing after visiting several of the villages is that it is a most joyous activity. It is true that some of the old songs are not being passed on, and many of the old instruments are gone, but the love of singing is still very evident. Those who still own and play an instrument, demonstrated great pride in it. One is keenly aware of the vitality of the music and the singing. One feels completely caught up in all the enthusiasm.

It was the intention in this study to look for and record just the authentic early music of these people, the music of their origins. However, there have been transitions and changes over the years, and one cannot help but notice these in the songs. Because all the music was performed

with such affection and zest, I have not eliminated all of the more contemporary-sounding songs. Many of them have retained their traditional flavour.

There are two reasons why trends and other sources can be noticed in the vocal music. First, there is a great deal of improvisation and composing among the people, and this seems to be going on much of the time, especially for a particular occasion, place or event, or in the honouring of a special person. It is the older people who know the early songs best, as would be expected. Some of the younger people have mentioned that they do not know the songs that an older group might be performing. This is not always the case, but it is a revealing fact, and probably is a part of the changing times.

Secondly, the folk music of other countries, as well as the madrigal and the hymn, brought along with people who came here to live, may have had an influence on the traditional music. The songs which are strongly in the major and minor modes may illustrate this possibility, although the normal evolution of musical development, is to be considered. Another example of this influence, or because of a natural evolution, might be found in the structure and form of some of the songs, in the balanced and measured phrases and cadences (phrase endings).

The people enjoy singing all these songs, from the old ones to those more recent, and when a group of mixed ages sang for me, there could be quite a variety of early traditional and newer-type songs and combinations of both.

Other similarities throughout the district and also in comparing with my previous study, were in the instruments. In most cases, all the instruments used were similar to those I had heard or heard about in Mochudi. A minor difference was in the *moropa*. It was made from a milk jug with a handle in Mochudi, but in the Kweneng, from a *kika* or from an empty paraffin tin. The *sebinjolo* of Mochudi was called *serankure* in the Kweneng, and farther to the west, was called *sengankure*. The *matlhoo* of Mochudi was called *matlhowa* in the Kweneng District.

Some instruments which had been present or had been talked about in Mochudi were not mentioned in my talks with the Bakwena. The *lepatata* was the only horn mentioned in the Kweneng. Instead of the hand-held bones, called *marapo* in Mochudi, there were the flat wood 'clappers' in the Kweneng. They did have some of the other strings — the *segwane* and the *nkokwane* — instruments patterned after the hunting bow, but not the 'earth bow', which had been described to me in Mochudi.

The thumb piano or *setinkane* which I saw and heard near Kang had not been mentioned by my informants, possibly because at the time of our conversations, I did not know that I would be going so far to the west.

The *setinkane* and the 'mouth bow' are traditional instruments of the Basarwa. It was called *lengope* in the Kang area, possibly because it closely resembled an instrument of that name played by the Batswana. The *segankure* may not be a traditional instrument of the Basarwa, but possibly has been adopted by those living near the Batswana.

It is true that the instruments, throughout all the areas visited, with the possible exception of Kang, have been gradually fading from sight, sound and use over the years, due to the changing times. This was also the case in Mochudi. It would seem almost imperative to try to locate all the existing ones, or at least examples of each, and preserve them carefully perhaps in a village museum. It is fortunate that there are a fairly representative number of them in the National Museum in Gaborone. To re-kindle interest in making and playing them could be a rewarding and valuable project. The sound of some of these instruments when played by an artist and expert is truly beautiful, and their preservation and continuity should be encouraged.

The old traditional songs are being lost to advancing modern ways. The radio and the phonograph, and the movement away from the village to more lucrative positions or posts, all add to this trend.

The love and enthusiasm for singing, and for improvising and composing are still strongly evident, but the early songs are slowly passing although not to the extent of the instrumental music. I recorded sixty-eight songs in the Kweneng District and just seven separate instrumental selections. Some of the songs were accompanied by instruments.

The traditional music I heard in all the areas visited had a strong appeal in its vitality, energy, imagery, wide variety of subject matter, and in some cases, in its beauty and subtlety. The decline of the old traditional songs and instruments makes it more important than ever to seek out, record and preserve these treasures of the past.

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Authors's Note

A complete description of all the villages visited and the singing groups and instrumental performers, whose music I recorded, can be found in a detailed field report at the Botswana Society office in the National Museum and Art Gallery in Gaborone; the Ministry of Local Government and Lands (research section), and the Botswana National Archives.

Included in that report are translations of the sixty-eight songs recorded and a description of the seven instrumental selections. With this report are the tapes of the recordings. These consist of two reel-to-reel tapes at the Botswana Society office and two cassette tapes at the other two locations.

The songs are numbered in the field report and also verbally on the tapes, so that one may easily follow along with the music while reading the words and translations in the report. In addition, the tapes — including each side — are identified verbally at each beginning.

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