

The Rain Praying Music of the Bakalanga of Botswana and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Bakalanga of Botswana and Zimbabwe are one people who share the same musical traditions. They were separated by political borders. This research was carried out in both countries regardless of these political borders. It takes into consideration rain praying musical types of *Bakalanga* from the two neighbouring countries. This paper is aimed at reporting information found out on *wosana* and *mayile* traditional music practiced by the *Bakalanga* located in the North East District of Botswana and Bulilimangwe District in Western Zimbabwe. The paper was conceived from a report compiled as a result of tribal collaborations between the researcher and the respondents in an effort to understand *Bakalanga* of Botswana and Zimbabwe *wosana* and *mayile* traditional *musics* and their uses among their tribal daily lives. The paper does not only pay attention to the music, but also to its traditional ways of transmission. Techniques by which musical learning transpires are described. The subject of learning styles being practiced among proficient musicians and aspirant musicians is discussed. Data were mainly collected by the researcher through oral interviews with the informants as well as internet search and other documented information repositories. The oral interviews were also recorded using an audiotape for the purposes of future reference by the researcher. Photographs of the practical music performances were also taken. Information repositories on these traditional musical types included books and other written information sources.

Key words: *Bakalanga*, Botswana, *Mayile*, *Mwali*, *Wosana* and Zimbabwe

Introduction

Having realized that Botswana's traditional music is becoming obsolete, the author of this article chose to conduct a research on one of the musical types of a tribe in that country, the *Bakalanga*. Documentation of this music will assist in the preservation and sustenance of knowledge transmission from one generation to the next. The *Bakalanga* are found in North Eastern Botswana, some parts of the Central District in Botswana and Western Zimbabwe in Bulilimangwe District. This article covers the *Bakalanga* rain praying musical types of the two countries regardless of the political borders. The article covers *wosana* and *mayile* music for rain praying. The qualitative (ethnographic) method was used in collecting data for this research. Open ended questionnaires were either completed by respondents or by the researcher through oral interviews. Information was also collected during seasonal ceremonies, rituals and cultural festivals.

Data collection

Data collecting took place in the North Eastern District of Botswana as Bulilimangwe district in Western Zimbabwe. This process included practitioner interactive sessions. The method of

collecting data was oral interviews with the informants. Photographs and videos were also taken with the permission of the informants and village elders. In some instances, the informants were prepared to demonstrate *wosana* and *mayile* performances, that is, dancing, hand clapping, drumming and singing patterns. In most cases the informants were performers delegated by the *kgosi* (village chief). These are the people the chief trusts to be the cultural custodians of the villages. The *Kgosi* believes that performers are knowledgeable in cultural activities and make a proper representation in its transmission without any distortion. The performances and interviews were not always conducted at the *kgotla* but also organized at a selected *Daka* or *Gumbu*. However, it appeared that these places are respected and regarded "holy" by the village *kgosi* hence permitted to perform and disseminate the cultural heritage with liberty.

Methodology

Data were mainly collected by the researcher through oral interviews with the informants as well as internet search and other documented information repositories. The oral interviews were

also recorded using an audiotape for the purposes of future reference by the researcher. Photographs of the practical music performances were also taken. Information repositories on these traditional musical types included books and other written information sources.

Music for Rain Praying

The *Bakalanga* of Botswana and Zimbabwe have two types of rain praying music namely; *wosana* and *mayile*. *Wosana* music is performed by male and female dancers whereas *mayile* music is performed by females only. During the performance of *mayile* music by women, men used to go on hunting for animals (before the enforcement of wild life restrictions) as well as collecting and burning objects that are believed to obstruct the *Bakalanga* Supreme Deity *Mwali*. In the past, meat brought from these hunting sessions was consumed at the *Kgotla* (village customary court). These two activities were conducted during the period of rain expectancy, that is, around the months of August to October. It is very important to note that presently,

Plate 1



An unconscious woman in trance being attended to by other dancers

However, this form of trance does not only occur to those who disobey the procedures of the ritual but also those who are newly called to the vocation.

Wosana Music

Wosana music will be discussed under the following sub-headings: *wosana* songs, *wosana* dancers (performers), *wosana* costume (past and present) and finally instruments.

the hunting activity has been discarded due to wild life restrictions on hunting. The only activity left is the collecting burning of obstacles such as animal carcasses and plastics hanging on trees. The performance of *wosana* music is carried out by men and women at specially chosen places known as *Ku Daka* or *ku Gumbu*. These places are regarded “hol y” and are normally a few kilometers outside the village where participants could spend a few days singing, dancing and praying for rain to fall.

A musical fact does not define itself only by its acoustic components and the technical means by which these are produced, but equally by its substance and by what it implies, by our grasping of a coherent set of criteria, a social and spiritual function, an attested psychological and possibly ritual efficacy, the role traditionally assigned to its producers and receivers, and, finally, the appropriate methods of learning and diffusion, Aubert (2007:1).

The *wosana* who do not honor the holiness of such places during performances, suffer consequences such as trance.

Wosana Songs

These are sung by a special group of people called *wosana*. This means that the word *wosana* has a dual meaning; dancers and the music itself. According to some informants, individual group members compose *wosana* songs in different ways. Any *wosana*, who is gifted and can think of a tune he/she can sing, dance and teach the group, is free

to do so. The author of this paper was made to believe through oral interviews, that some members “catch” the song when sleeping in the form of a dream whereas some tunes are copied from other places and relevant lyrics are fitted in. Like in all oral traditions, it should be noted that most of the *wosana* tunes were copied from composers of the past generations. This idea is supported by the quotation below;

Each nation aspires to discover and gather its own music. Every citizen of the nation enjoys the cultural legacy afforded by song. All nations of the world celebrate the universality of music by bringing their national musics to the international stage. The path from individual musical identities to world music passes through the nation; the cultural and historical crossroads beyond the local yields to the global, Bohlman (2002: 92 -93).

One informant stated that *Bakalanga* artists who are concerned with the dying away of their language and culture nowadays compose new *Ikalanga* songs. As such, *Wosana* songs are a plea, request and praise to the *Bakalanga* Supreme Deity *Mwali*, who is communicated to and pleased through song and dance. *Wosana* music is sung to ask for rain and good life for the *Bakalanga* people in general. *Wosana* ritual music and dances are performed when rain does not come at the expected time of the year, which in Botswana is usually around September to October.

According to Bourdillon’s (1976:30 1) observation of the Shona people in Zimbabwe, the rain praying ceremony is held at the beginning of the wet season to request adequate rains - either too much rain or too little can spoil the crops and lead to famine. Although the time for performing this ceremony may be as early as September or as late as February (the rainy season normally lasts from October to March), some ceremony to request good rains is an annual event throughout most of the Shona region. In some places, people may delay organizing the ceremony until there is reason for anxiety because the rains are late or sparse, but the early months of the rainy season are always an anxious time and the slightest abnormality in the weather can inspire

people to hold the ceremony if it has been omitted earlier in the season.

Wosana songs are also sung to praise the Supreme Deity *Mwali* as a *Bakalanga* traditional thanksgiving or appreciation belief, especially during years of good harvest. *Wosana* have special songs related to thanks giving such as “*Amnandi amabele*”:

Song title: *amnandi amabele*

Call: *Amnandi amabele* — Sorghum is nice/tasty

Response: *Amnandi* — It is nice/tasty

Call: *Amnandi siya wadla* — It is nice/tasty we are eating it

Response: *Wo wole ha woye amnandi* — *Wo wole* it is tasty

Call: *Amnandi siya wadla* — It is tasty we are eating it

Response: *Amnandi* -- It is tasty

The sorghum referred to in this song is traditional beer made from sorghum. So this is an *Isindebele* song metaphorically meaning “sorghum is nice or rich/plentiful”: harvest is good. It has to be understood that most of the *wosana* songs are in the *Ikalanga* language. Some are in *Isindebele* which is an intrusive culture to the *Bakalanga* of Botswana from the *Bakalanga* of Western Zimbabwe across the border, who seem to have been acculturated by the *Isindebele* speakers in their country. *Nambdzwa* is another dialect of *Ikalanga* cluster which is still a “living” language. It is in lesser danger of falling into disuse than perhaps even *Ikalanga* (the speakers of which are inclined to lean towards the use of *Isindebele*), Phibion (2003: 195 – 196).

Some of the *wosana* songs are even a mixture of the two languages, *Ikalanga* and *Isindebele*. This influence comes from *Njelele* hill in Zimbabwe (where people speak these two languages), which is the headquarters of Botswana and Zimbabwe *wosana*. This is the talking hill in which the Supreme Deity *Mwali* is believed to be living. *Njelele* hill is also commonly referred to by *Bakalanga* as *Ka Mwali* (meaning at *Mwali*’s place).

Wosana Dancers (Performers)

Wosana music performers, who are named after their music, are believed by the *Bakalanga* to have been specially chosen by their Supreme Deity *Mwali*. Except for a few cases, *wosana* normally come from the same families, that is, descending from adults to the offspring. A living example is

that of the *Ntogwa* family in *Ramokgwebana* village in North Eastern Botswana. In this family, most children grow up to perform *wosana* music.

The majority of *wosana* music performers are usually women and only few men take part. When the *wosana* start dancing, they all converge in the direction of sunrise towards the three drummers.

Plate 2



A group of *wosana* women converging towards drummers

This symbolizes that when *wosana* send messages and gifts to the *Bakalanga* Supreme Deity *Mwali*, they do not look in all directions. They have a particular direction to face at a specified period.

During the dancing process, anybody who feels highly entertained from the audience can throw or place some money on the dancing ground as a token of appreciation. This process is called *ku fupa bazani* (meaning to show appreciation to the dancers in the *Ikalanga* language).

The Wosana Costume

The *wosana* costume varies from one region to the next. The occasion on which the dance is going to be performed also determines the design as well as the color of the dancer's costumes. Another informant stated that, the *wosana zwitimbi* (beads) were locally made out of ostrich eggshells. After the arrival of the Portuguese and Arab traders, *zwitimbi* were bought from *Kilimani* (currently known as Mozambique). Van Waarden (1999:5) also confirms this fact in her research about the origins of the *Bakalanga*. *Wosana* costume is elaborate. On the other hand, according to some informants, in the past, *wosana* used to wear costumes made of the skins of wild animals, beads and ostrich eggshells. Nowadays the *wosana* costume has changed because of the newly enforced protection and conservation wildlife laws.

Professional mourners throughout Africa clothe themselves in black togas. A black band of cloth around the arm or black feathers worn in a tuft on the head is a sign of mourning (Kebede 1982:103). Not on the mourning scene, the Botswana *wosana* are commonly noticed in their black costume.

Plate 3

A group of *wosana* women ready for performance

Besides being used by *wosana* dancers to revere the *badzimu* (ancestors) who are believed to have invited the *wosana* into the profession, *zwitimbi* can also be used to ornament *malombe* (praise-singers) and small children's hips. In the past, certain types of *zwitimbi* were placed around the breasts of virgins. These had a special name known as *mammani* in the *Ikalanga* language. *Mammani* beads were not supposed to be touched by boys without an intention of getting married to the maiden who is wearing them. *Bakalanga* maidens had a cultural right of not taking the *mammani* back anymore if a boy forcibly touched them without aiming at proposing marriage to them. Touching *mammani* beads on the body of a maiden was equated to the proposal of marriage. However, this is no more in existence among *Bakalanga*.

Wosana costume is basically the same for men and women. During rain praying rituals, the *wosana* could be easily identified from the whole audience by black skirts with black cloths covering their heads and bodies before the commencement of dancing.

Plate 4

Wosana women listening to elders' speeches before performance

Wosana also put on *zwitimbi* for decorations on the heads and hips, and percussive *mishwayo* (leg rattles) made of the *zwigogoro zwe mababani* - plural (cocoons from silk worms) of a certain inedible type of *mopane* worm called *babani* - singular. These worms are associated with the *mopane* tree because they feed on its leaves. A few small stones are placed inside these cocoons for the production of a highly percussive sound during *wosana* dancing. A great number of cocoons are threaded together and wrapped around the dancer's ankles. The rhythms produced amplify the dance rhythm. Inter-rhythm improvised rhythms may emerge when a virtuoso dancer executes rapid stamping movements.

Wosana Dance Accessories

Wosana use a good number of accessories in music performance. The *phende* (flywhisk) is made from any of the following available animal tails: *mbizi ye shango* (zebra), *n'gombe* (cow), *pkhwizha* (eland) and *vumba* (wildebeest/ gnu or hartebeest). The zebra tail is mostly preferred because it is big, hairy and well decorated to attract the audience.

Plate 5



The woman on the extreme left holding a flywhisk

The zebra is also regarded as a fast and rare animal. This tail, compared to the other two, satisfies the whole purpose of a *phende* in the dance, which is meant to decorate and capture the audience's attention.

Hand clapping is regarded as a body percussive accompaniment that helps to bring out the simultaneous rhythms of *wosana* music. The singing carried out by both performers, is another aspect of paramount importance in *wosana* music. During this singing, in some cases, the main dancers in *wosana* music dance with a *ludozo* (*Ikalanga* word for a walking stick). In other instances some *wosana* dancers use a gun-like stick (see plate 5). However, both types of sticks are acceptable and simply meant to decorate the dance.

Wosana use three drums of different sizes namely; *tjamabhika*, *shungana ne shumba* and *dukunu*. The *wosana* drums are made from two different trees of light wood. These trees are *nlidza dumba/mpiti* (*erythrina abyssinica*), *ngoma* (*schinziophyton rantanellii*) and in some cases *nthula* (*marula* — *sclerocarya caffra*). These light drums enable performers to carry them around with ease.

Plate 6



Three differently sized drums and a gun-like dancing stick in front

Wosana Drum Communication

The *wosana* drums are sometimes used as speech surrogates to the *Bakalanga* Supreme Deity. Their language is centered on the rain *wosana* are praying for. One informant explained the messages conveyed by *wosana* drumming patterns as listed below;

Drum 1 – the largest is called *tjamabhika* – literally meaning what you have cooked.

This drum produces the lowest pitch.

The message communicated is:

Zwitimbi, Zwitimbi literally meaning - Beads, Beads.

Drum 2 – the medium size is called *shangana ne shumba* – literally meaning meeting with the lion.

This is the middle pitched drum.

The message communicated is:

Matshime, Matshime literally meaning - Water fountains, Water fountains.

Drum 3 - the smallest is called *dukunu* – literally meaning small one.

This drum produces the highest pitch of the three.

The message it is said to be delivering is:

Vula, Vula interpreted to mean - Rain/Water, Rain/ Water, (*Bakalanga* use the word *vula* to mean both rain and water), Phibion (2003:202 – 203).

Mayile Music Performance

Mayile is the second type of rain praying music. This type of music is only performed by women whilst men have gone to hunt obstacles to the Supreme deity *Mwali*. This music is usually performed at the Village *Kgotla* (Customary Court). In performing *mayile* music, any woman who feels like joining the dance is accepted. *Mayile* songs are short and repeated. The singers are divided into two groups of call and response. Hand clapping results in a communion pattern because of these two groups that clap interchangeably.

Van Waarden (1991:100) calls *mayile* a passing dance because one woman approaches the opposite and passes her moving round in an anti-clockwise circular form. Whilst running, hand clapping and singing, the performers also criss-cross in turns around this circle. This criss-crossing style is said to be imitative of some birds associated with rain by *Bakalanga*. Some of these birds are; *njelele* (eagle), *nyenje* (white stork), *makololwani* (storkbirds) and *nyenganyenga* (swallows). These birds are normally seen around the rainy season.

Plate 7



A group of women performing *mayile* dance

Unlike *wosana* music where nobody is allowed in the dancing circle, in *mayile*, female *wosana* dancers are allowed to join. However, men and young children, both boys and girls, are not allowed in the dancing ground. They can only be spectators. The *Mayile* rain-praying dance normally takes place at the local village chief's court called *lubazhe gwa she/khuta* (Customary Court). Sometimes this dance takes place at the *nzeze* (*peltophorum africanum*) tree *Ku Daka* where the *wosana* normally perform their dances when praying for rain. According to Waters (2000:32), traditionally women would perform the rainmaking songs called *mayile*. In these songs, the words are not important; the hand-clapping and dancing are the primary focus. In fact, words can be added or dropped at the discretion of the performers. Despite the fact that *wosana* music is performed by men and women, *mayile* by women only, these two musical types finally converge by serving the same purpose of praying for rain.

Comparison of *Wosana* and *Mayile*

Tumedi et al, (2010:55) asserts that, *wosana* music is a spiritual dance which is said to be performed by *wosana* priests and priestesses of *Mwali* only. Other people accompanying them just sing and do not take part in the actual dancing. The *wosana* dance only takes place during those special occasions when the *wosana* priests and priestesses go to the mountain to ask for rain from *Mwali*. This could be due to the late rains or the drought period when people are having a hard time surviving without crops or water for their livestock.

The songs sung by *wosana* are said to be praise songs for *mwali*. When dancing, a *wosana* would put on leg rattles. According to one informant, a *wosana* wears black only, with a lot of differently coloured beads around the neck, on the hands, and on the legs. These clothes cannot be washed or taken care of by another person; a *wosana* always takes care of his/her own clothes. When a *wosana* passes on, there is a special way of dealing with the clothes, some of which are buried with the person, while others remain in their room or hut.

Just like *wosana* music, *mayile* can be performed both in the village and at *Mwali's* place (at the mountain). The *mayile* rain – praying dance normally takes place at the local village chief's court. Sometimes it takes place at the *nzeze* (*peltophorum africanum*). *Mayile* according to the informants is a dance which took place during the day at a time when others had gone to the mountain to ask *Mwali* for rain. This dance is characterized by the clapping of hands accompanying song. The dancers move in parallel rows in opposite directions, criss – crossing imitating the movement of swallows in the sky. The clapping of hands is said to be distinct from that found in the other dances. This dance is said to be performed by old ladies who would have remained behind.

Unlike *wosana* music where nobody is allowed in the dancing circle, in *mayile*, *wosana* women are allowed to join. However, men and young children, both boys and girls, are not allowed to join. They can only be spectators.

***Wosana* and *Mayile* Music Performed during Annual Cultural Festivals**

When realizing that traditional music is deteriorating, the Government of Botswana embarked on the revival of preserving it. The North East District Council of Botswana, which mainly constitutes *Bakalanga*, hosts its cultural festival normally held on or around the 21st of May annually. The event is called *Tjilenje* (*Ngwao Boswa*) in Setswana language, literally meaning culture is heritage'. This event is organized by the Ministry of Labor and Home Affairs through the Department of Arts and Culture.

The *Tjilenje* Cultural Festival is composed of any *Ikalanga* singing group from all over North East and Central Districts. All kinds of *Bakalanga* community and school cultural groups are allowed to attend this festival. Schools hold their own cultural competitive festivals at different times and venues. They are sometimes invited to the adults' performances as entertainers during short breaks. Ritual music such as *wosana* and *mayile* serve a

different purpose in these festivals. They are meant to entertain people and promote and preserve the *Bakalanga* culture.

Groups of other cultural backgrounds from any part of the country are welcome to perform in these festivals, mainly for cultural exchange. The most popular group that attends this festival from outside North East District and the *Bakalanga* culture is called *Dipitse tsa Bobonong*, literally meaning “horses of Bobonong”. This is a non-*lkalanga* speaking group coming from Bobonong village and is of *Babirwa* culture in the Central District. Their costume resembles the colors of a zebra hence the group name *Dipitse tsa Bobonong*.

It has to be noted that this annual cultural festival gives all performing groups an opportunity of practicing and presenting each other’s music types outside the ritual concept. This also helps in the cultural and musical cross-fertilization as well as preservation from one group to the other. It becomes very interesting, for example, to see a *wosana* dancing a different music and vice versa. This shows a sense of inter-cultural music appreciation among different groups.

Conclusion

There are two types of rain praying music practiced by *Bakalanga* of Botswana and Zimbabwe namely; *wosana* and *mayile*. These two musical types are practiced when the *Bakalanga* feel that there is not going to be sufficient rainfall for their crops and livestock. The performances are normally carried out during the period when rain is expected to fall around the months of September and October. *Bakalanga* have much trust in their Supreme Deity *Mwali* that he could provide help in difficult times. Through this trust, they send representatives annually to communicate with *Mwali* at Njelele hill in Zimbabwe near Matopo hills. It is tradition that annual ceremonies are conducted in both Botswana and Zimbabwe during the period rain is expected in small branches known as *Ku Gumbu* or *Ku Daka*. However, there is always a final visit to Njelele by the selected and trusted *wosana* from the two countries to convey people’s needs to the Supreme Deity *Mwali*. These *wosana*, in most cases, go

through or are accompanied by the people’s messenger to *Mwali*.

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