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# **The Understanding of Indigenous Knowledge as Indigenous Practice, Skill and Know-How: The Case of Communal Music-Making in Bapedi Culture as a Social Practice**

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## **Abstract**

In Bapedi culture, understanding of indigenous knowledge as indigenous practice, skill and know-how, is largely related to musical preference and inborn talent. Bapedi people regard indigenous music and ancestral beliefs, as a complement to their cultural identity. Indigenous songs accompanied by dancing, handclapping, ululation and different types of percussion instruments have traditionally played a prominent role in preserving Bapedi people cultural heritage. The enculturation process of indigenous knowledge is oral memory-based. The following research question is raised for the study: Why is communal music-making in Bapedi culture regarded as a social practice? In this article, the author attempts to provide the relationship between indigenous knowledge as indigenous practice and communal music-making as a social practice within Bapedi people's cultural context. Such an investigation has hitherto not been attempted and this article is meant as a contribution in furthering knowledge in Ethnomusicology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The present study investigated innovation and communal composing as a social practice, creative imagination, interaction of music and choreography, as well as issues of interest in the philosophy of indigenous Bapedi music. The study was conducted in two phases; the first phase involved visiting and interviewing traditional musicians who are still performing the indigenous Bapedi music. The second phase included library search to determine what others have written on the same issue. The study has revealed that learning music is part of the socialisation process and imitation forms an important part in the transmission process. Individuals

contribute ideas about song texts, polyphonic organization, melody and overall form. The resulting composition is therefore their song, not a named individual. The results have also shown that through music, Bapedi people not only learn the music itself, they also learn about their own local culture and as such preserve the Bapedi cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Bapedi people, indigenous knowledge, indigenous practice, social practice, communal music-making.

## Introduction

This article presents a case study on the understanding of indigenous knowledge as indigenous practice, skill and know-how within Bapedi people cultural context. Bapedi tribe is an ethnic group located in Limpopo Province in South Africa, but a large percentage is situated in Sekhukhune district (**see figure 1**). Culture of Bapedi people is largely based on oral tradition and the popular use of songs and story-telling. In the Bapedi society, communal composing is common. Indigenous Bapedi music education practice is not based on competition, but rather on cooperation and collaboration. The creative music-making takes place during a process of interaction between the participants' musical experience and competence, their cultural practice and their instructions. Altogether this forms the *affordances* in the creative situation. The talent for composition is based on musicality, together with certain influences that have been of importance in the development of the necessary motivation and mental attitudes such as the inspiration of composer-performers. The art of composing requires a reliable musical memory. This article takes a critical look at communal composing as a social practice. The discussion will move to highlight the creative imagination and the interaction of music and choreography. Subsequently, a brief look at issues of interest in the philosophy of indigenous Bapedi music will be used to highlight how communal music-making promotes cohesion among Bapedi people.



**Figure 1: Geographical Location Map of South Africa showing Sekhukhune district in Limpopo Province.**

Source:<https://municipalities.co.za/overview/127/Sekhukhune-district-municipality>. Date: 18 June 2019. \* Sekhukhune district is situated in Limpopo Province.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study is based on four schools of analytical models for gaining insight into musical structures as proposed by Nettl (1975:14-16). First, Nettl advocates for the linguistic model for gaining insight into any musical structure. He asserts that this model is effective in treating the linguistics and basic transformational grammar of music. Second, he also suggests a model of Cantometrics, which focus on performance practice such as parameters of the use of voice and the interrelationships between musicians and ensemble members, with less emphasis on relationship between tones and scales, which have received much analysis. Third, Nettl's notion of music in his philosophical work includes specific method, which deals with specific style of classification for each culture based on its own perception

and musical characteristics. Fourth, regarding music-making as a social practice, Nettl (1975:15) goes on to stipulate that culture's own cognitive map considers recognised views of the culture in its classification, social function and other behaviour. In the context of this study, all the four schools of analytical models recommended by Nettl (1975) apply. The Bapedi context is ideal for Nettl's notion of music in his philosophical work since, when communal music-making in Bapedi culture as a social practice is analysed and examined through the theoretical framework of this study, the linguistic model focuses on the communal composing, rules, context, structures, performance styles (genres) and interaction of music and choreography. The choice of language usage in composing indigenous Bapedi songs is encouraged by the fact that indigenous Bapedi music is meant for communal music-making. Furthermore, intellectual understanding of music in Bapedi culture involves concept formation and understanding of musical language. The traditional philosophy of indigenous Bapedi music forms the basis for musical and language resources in Bapedi cultural practices and performances. My interpretation of a model of Cantometrics in relation to Bapedi context is that, in communal composing the lighter and finer part of singing is left to the fair sex. While the female soloist sings the opening stanza of a strophic song, the men grunt, in a 'masculine' manner, something which they repeat over and over not because that is how they avoid strain. There are also organized groups, in which roles and responsibilities are distributed among members in some kind of associative relationship. Such performing groups are more or less permanent units within the social organisation. It is the creative individual who builds up the repertoire or re-creates it, but those who learn and perform it on social occasions sustain the tradition and make it a part of the common heritage.

With regard to specific method, the theory is applicable to this study because Bapedi cultural heritage is rich in various indigenous music genres such as dipepetlwane, malopo, etc, and these genres are based on their own perception and musical characteristics such as repetition, improvisation, call and response, cycles, sound elements, rhythm and effects, etc. With reference to culture's own cognitive map, in the context of this study, the communal composing whereby traditional music practitioners belonging to a specific music genre come together to compose indigenous songs, and participants are at liberty to share ideas about song texts, polyphonic organization, melody and choreography.

From the above discussion, it may be accurate to say that Nettl relied too heavily on music listening and music-making. Music listening and music-making in specific cultural contexts becomes for Nettl, music as a diverse social practice and music as a human activity. In the next section, previous related studies will be discussed.

### **Previous Related Studies**

Numerous studies on African Indigenous knowledge have been published such as those by Bakan (2007); Bennett (2016); Botangen; Vodanovich and Yu (2017); Breidlid (2009); Bruchac (2014); Eyong (2007); Kaya and Seleti (2013); Keane;

Khupe and Seehawer (2017); Lebaka (2014); Lindh and Haider (2010); Maila and Loubser (2003); Matsui (2015); Nettle (1975); Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013); Ragavan (2001); Sillitoe (1998); Simeon et al. (2017); Zaruwa, Barnimas and Apampa (2014). These studies have provided general information on the preservation of indigenous culture. Ragavan (2001) briefly discussed the issues involved in attempting to protect, as intellectual property, the traditional knowledge prevailing within traditional societies. Eyong (2007) also expanded on some challenges Indigenous Knowledge Systems face and how they can be addressed. Zaruwa, Barminas and Apampa (2014:4) reported that “there is a long history regarding the study of African indigenous knowledge systems even though the term might appear to be recent”. According to them, this long history has always been intimately linked to the way foreign minds have come into contact with the African mind and system of thought.

Traditional knowledge, which is described by Ragavan (2001:4) as knowledge, possessed by indigenous people, in one or more societies and in one or more forms, including, but not limited to, art, dance and music, medicines and folk remedies, folk culture, biodiversity, knowledge and protection of plant varieties, handicrafts, designs and literature forms part of a corpus of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Whilst some scholars have focused on the relationship between culture, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), sustainable development and education (Bredlid 2009, Eyong 2007, Lindh and Haider 2010), Maila and Loubser (2003:276) argue that “the inherited Indigenous Knowledge within a cultural setting is therefore essential for that community”. Furthermore, they elaborate that “not only does that particular community benefit from such knowledge, but other communities, near and far, may also be drawn by the ‘magnet’ to these cultural capitals, and be influenced whilst influencing them too” (2003:276). From the research findings of the scholars cited above, one can understand that Indigenous Knowledge Systems are an integral part of the Arts and Culture and are embedded in the cultural and historical milieu of different people. In what follows, this article discusses research method.

## **Research Method**

The study was conducted in two phases; the first phase involved visiting and interviewing traditional musicians who are still performing indigenous music. The second phase included library search to determine what others have written on the same issue. Both primary and secondary sources are referred to in the discussions. Of the traditional musicians interviewed, 8 were male and 7 were female. The ages of the traditional musicians ranged from 18-66 years. The present study employed ‘participatory’<sup>1</sup> approach which allowed the researcher to interact with traditional Bapedi musicians to establish the research working relationship. Participants’ cultural activities were observed, and some traditional Bapedi musicians interviewed so as to obtain first hand information. During the research visits, the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mji (2013:3) describes ‘participatory’ approach as a strategy which allows professionals to learn with, by and from indigenous communities and to create a working relationship in which people’s priorities and values become more fully expressed in research.

researcher was that of both a participant and an observer. This afforded the participants the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise in indigenous Bapedi music with the researcher, and hence enabled the researcher to obtain the widest possible range of information. These participants were selected because of their knowledgeable and informative qualities.

## Results

Observations made on the communal music-making are listed and discussed below.

### **Innovation and communal composing as a social practice**

Using videos, it was recorded that among the Bapedi people, practice is a known and accepted fact of the traditional musicians' life, and all traditional musicians say they practice, if not every day, then at least twice a week. Interviews with both female and male interviewees showed that it is difficult to determine the duration of such practicing sessions, as they differ from one group to the other, but in theory, at least, it is fairly substantial, amounting to two or four hours a week at the minimum, according to the traditional musicians. The learning process of indigenous Bapedi songs reflects communal composing whereby a group of traditional musicians belonging to a particular traditional dance group meet to assemble communally new compositions for specified occasions (**see photo 1**). Learning music is part of the socialisation process and imitation forms an important part in the enculturation process. Individuals contribute ideas about song texts, polyphonic organization, melody and overall form.



**Photo 1:** Cultural festival (Dikgageng village; Sekhukhune district, Limpopo Province, 24.09.2018), Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka

Participants were asked why is communal music-making in Bapedi culture regarded as a social practice. They felt that indigenous Bapedi music convenes the community participation and accompanies cultural and religious rituals. It is in this light that traditional Bapedi musicians compose their songs through frequent rehearsals which

are open to criticism from their listening participants/audience. The context of the performance is a natural way of combining enjoyment with education. The resulting composition is therefore their song, not a named individual. A new composition does not come from 'outside', no matter how much individual traditional musicians borrow ideas and strategies from others. The compositional voice always and ultimately emanates from within. Some songs emerge as some are abandoned. After assembling the composition, the group selects the soloist/leader. The above observations are endorsed by Eyong (2007:125) who writes that every society has a history behind its knowledge resources, which guides its development process. Furthermore, Eyong elaborates by stating that Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) have suffered for decades from several strategies of disinformation embedded in western centric, colonial and post-colonial education and western religion, science and technology (2007:131). He further asserts that it is widely known that colonialism largely inhibited the development of indigenous technology in Africa and de-stabilized some of the existing processes of technical growth and the indigenous manufacturing capability was deliberately undermined to facilitate European exports (Eyong 2007:131).

### **Creative Imagination**

**Skills:** With regard to skills, it was found that the art of music-making involves some skills and activities, and skills in activities require direct involvement in listening, movement and making rhythm as well as improvising (**see photo 2**). From the observations and interviews, it was established that intellectual understanding of music involves concept formation, understanding of musical language and engaging music thoughtfully through listening. Using videos it was recorded that knowing how to listen, and what to hear, are parts of what constitutes creative imagination.



**Photo 2:** Cultural festival (Dikgageng village; Sekhukhune district, Limpopo Province, 24.09.2018), Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka

During my field research in Sekhukhune district, I have also observed that indigenous Bapedi music is characterized by joy and happiness, affording the participants the opportunity to dance, sing, and learn different drumming rhythmic patterns and the audience response is demonstrated either by dancing to the music or by acknowledging the creative ability of the musicians/performers by clapping hands or giving them gifts. From personal observation and interviews, it was established that creative imagination plays a vital role in communal music-making in Bapedi people's socio-cultural context (see photo 3).



**Photo 3:** Cultural festival (Dikgageng village; Sekhukhune district, Limpopo Province, 24.09.2018), Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka

Interviews conducted and activities observed in the Bapedi culture indicate that music-making involves learning the why and how of musical creativity. From the forgoing, one can discern that musical creativity revolves around making musical sense and making musical meanings. Based on this understanding, to traditional Bapedi musicians, music is an inborn talent enhanced by informed learning during communal music-making and/or enculturation process. As told by Lethabo Machika (Informant: 24 September 2018), musical intelligence involves its own rules and thinking structures, not necessarily linked to other kinds of intelligence, and creativity is thus manifestly a cultural process. From these observations, it is clear that communal music-making requires organizing, listening and communication skills.

**Demonstration:** During my field investigation at Dikgageng village, in Sekhukhune district, for instance, at the time to revalidate my data, I have observed that traditional musicians within the group were free to give creative and imaginative corrections to each other or one another, and the corrections were usually taken with gratitude. The investigation has also revealed that among Bapedi people the learning process is oral memory based, organized, direct and instructional. Within this understanding,

demonstration implies some definite mode of instruction, and there are a number of examples of such instructive techniques. It was further observed that different rhythmic patterns are demonstrated within the footwork, movements and gestures of the dance. It is noticeable that call-and-response pattern is employed in communal music-making and this pattern allows for spontaneity and self-expression. Attesting to the observations above, Aluede (2012:78) observes that music making in sub-Saharan Africa is a form of exercise in that musical activities go with dance, drumming, hand clapping or other forms of instrumentation. Aluede further mentions that music as a collective human activity in Nigeria is known to be commonly combined with dance whether under the entertainment, religious or ritual situation (2012:78). In his view, dance is a strong concomitant with music.

**Aural-recall:** This is how the participants remember music by ear. Memorizing music helps them to develop a mental 'map' of the music. By using their ears to execute different rhythmic patterns, they can memorise long cycles of patterns with signals, breaks, responses, etc. It is noteworthy that traditional Bapedi musicians regard the ear as their first musical instrument. It has to be worked and practised in the same way as any instrument. It has been observed that indigenous Bapedi music allows traditional musicians to test and develop their capacity to recall aural patterns in a very enjoyable way.

**Imitation:** From the observations and interviews, it was established that participants are encouraged to imitate one another and respond playfully to dance ideas. They were also encouraged to move into the centre of the circle to perform a movement of their own. The participants responded positively to all such efforts. During the study, it was further observed that various techniques are employed, for example, conscious imitation and observation approach. Phrase by phrase method is applied in communal composing. The participants sing the phrases after the leader. It has emerged from this study that when teaching drumming, the leader who is usually an expert takes the drum and sets the example to be followed. The learning process is executed cycle by cycle. Thereafter the participants attempt to put the cycles or variations together. The leader/instructor may also teach the participants how to put the drum in proper playing position and how to place the left hand on the rim to depress the membrane and effect muting or stopping to generate higher tones. This may include a guide on how to use the drumstick to give strong and strokes in order to generate two or more tones on the drum. When a certain level of mastery is achieved, the leader/instructor takes one other drum and tries to play together with the participant to give him/her the experience of coordination. Based on the research findings of this study, it is very clear that with a good deal of repetition during the training session, personal practice at other times and participation at general rehearsals, a higher level of mastery is gradually attained.

## Interaction of music and choreography

Bapedi cultural heritage is rich in various forms of indigenous dance music such as *kiba*, *makgakgasa*, *mantshegele*, *lebowa*, etc. Indigenous dance music is often accompanied by dancing, drumming and ululation. It is built on a repetitive rhythmic pattern with a simple melodic stream. Dance music and musical instruments are among the key aspects that shape the Bapedi cultural identity. As the songs are sung and the singers move to the music in an increasing tempo right to the end, music helps them to create an opportunity for social interaction. The duration of the performance is not fixed and depends more on the number of performers. It has become evident from the interviews that indigenous Bapedi music and choreographies were inherited and became inspired through time with many of the traditional dance music pieces still practised by the tribe up to the present day, especially among the older generation.

**Improvisation:** Reviewing the results yielded thus far, it is clear that traditional Bapedi musicians tend not to be interested in any music which lacks improvisation. From this study, it is evident that improvisation can be executed through singing, dancing, ululating, handclapping and drumming. It was further observed that participants on their own, drawing upon their creative intelligence, use improvisation and gestures to make their performances impressive. It is noticeable that among Bapedi traditional musicians in particular and Bapedi people in general, improvisation tends to be a dominant practice, reflecting a cultural ideology which promotes the goals of communal music-making informed by indigenous Bapedi music creators rather than professional musicians' practices.

**Gestures and Actions:** Analysing the data, it was found that during communal music making different movements are choreographed into complete performance. The investigation has also revealed that during communal composing, every level of creative musical ability is put into best possible use through the development of singing, instrumental and dancing skills. Using videos, it was recorded that participants on their own, drawing upon their creative intelligence, use improvisation, variation, recreation and gestures to make their renditions impressive. During observations and interviews, it was also established that participating actively in music making, enables the participants to understand indigenous Bapedi music artistically and contextually. In view of the above findings, it makes perfect sense to say; communal music-making in Bapedi culture as a social practice, and as a living art form, is largely dependent on improvisation, recreation and variation.

**Coordination:** During my field research in the Bapedi community, I have observed that during communal music-making, there is coordination in relation of sound structures with particular gestures and actions, an associative process. This view is based on the transfer of knowledge and understanding between people. During observations and interviews, it was further established that after all participants have mastered the songs, knowing them by heart, they can be afforded the opportunity to

start dancing. The dance is repeated innumerable times until all participants have mastered every detail. When asked the question, is it possible for traditional Bapedi musicians to compose indigenous Bapedi songs individually or in isolation? All interviewees have agreed that it is not possible. They perceived that among traditional Bapedi musicians, music composing is not necessarily an individual process. They all agree that the learning process is a group activity, and it is both a pleasure and a recreation rather than a chore.

### Issues of interest in the philosophy of indigenous Bapedi music

The impression created during observations and interviews was that traditional Bapedi musicians employ sound effects, several figures of speech, proverbs, parables, idioms, forms of imagery, metaphorical and proverbial language in their communal music making. Indigenous Bapedi music in its nature context and practice, adopts the use of these elements. Interviews with all participants showed that communal music-making, more than being a process of social practice of communication, is a product of the art itself. As a product, it exists to provide certain functions and as well serve as reference source in the society.

**Sound elements, rhythm and effects:** As music resembles poetry, sound effects in poetry arise from expressions made in certain organised order and clever use of words that would sound in some desired forms. The singers deliberately organize words, syllables and lines in patterns that will generate similarity in sounds, create audible sensitivity and stimulate more curiosity and emotionality. Traditional Bapedi musicians are capable in creating images in the imagination and minds of the audience by imitating and representing sounds of objects and characters so described in order to stimulate emotional responses from audiences. This is achieved by use of some sound elements and verbal techniques that appear in various forms of repetition, parallelism, rhyme, etc., to enable traditional musicians present their witty ideas with great effects on the listeners. The effects then make the songs more easily memorable both to the performers and the audiences. The following song is an illustration of these sound effects.

### Song text and translation

Original Sepedi stanzas	English translation
Katse swara legotlo	Cat catch the rat
Legotlo tšhaba katse	Rat take care of the cat
Katse e swere legotlo	The cat caught the rat
Legotlo le swerwe ke katse	The rat is caught the cat

**Table 1:** Sepedi with English translation of '*katse swara legotlo*' (cat catch the rat) song to illustrate the use of sound elements, rhythm and effects. The song was recorded by the author, at Dikgageng village, Sekhukhune district in Limpopo Province, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2018.

In indigenous Bapedi songs, most themes are educative. The reiterative nature of the songs serves the purpose of emphasizing the messages. The singers of the above song recycles the theme in order to fix both the names of the characters and the principal ideas firmly into the minds of the audience. The two names in the song (*katse* and *legotlo*) end with the vowels 'o' and 'e' to produce a masculine sound that would emphasize the theme of a dreadful capture. The names are interchanged within the lines. One name begins a line and the other ends it each time. While the names create internal rhymes within the lines, they also form end rhymes that make the lines sound similarly at the end. Sounds of words, when they are properly organized, create rhythm and accentuation that give strong effects in tone and movements.

In indigenous Bapedi music, while the rhythm and dynamics of these sound elements play aesthetic roles, they also perform communicative function. No word is wasted in indigenous Bapedi music; they are all aimed at communicating specific messages, proverbially, metaphorically, idiomatically or directly to the audience. Bruchac (2014:3814) endorses these observations by stating that knowledge is often passed on through regular indigenous performances – including oral traditions, song, dance and ceremony – that convey both literal and metaphorical truths about these relations. He defines 'Traditional Indigenous Knowledge' as a network of knowledges, beliefs and traditions intended to preserve, communicate and contextualize Indigenous relationships with culture and landscape over time. Bruchac elaborates by observing that oral traditions whether communicated as historical narratives or mythical stories, constitute a form of traditional knowledge that can teach, carry, and reinforce other knowledges. On the basis of these findings and discussion, it is arguable that "the development of individuals' creative musical abilities to the highest possible level is woven into music-making" (Lebaka 2014:40). Similar to Lebaka's argument, Simeon et al (2017:107) rightly highlights that traditional musical instruments and the dance music, contribute in some measure towards a better understanding of cultural arts and heritage.

## **Conclusion**

This article provided a discussion of the understanding of indigenous knowledge as indigenous practice, skill and know-how. The results yielded thus far have shown that through communal music-making, modern traditional Bapedi musicians are helpful in preserving the Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. The investigation has also revealed that through these musicians, the past is living in the present. Music composed by these traditional musicians is a compendium of the gamut of cultural flows that constitute an actual Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. It has emerged from this study that indigenous Bapedi music is inevitably a social practice. Basically, the results suggest that in the Bapedi culture, traditional Bapedi musicians who make music in the appropriate way, finds human worth and significance in music a meaningful way of interacting. The findings which have been presented in this article will help us to understand that indigenous knowledge as indigenous practice is part

of communal music-making in Bapedi cultural context as a social practice, but is also part of culture and at the same time forms culture. From this study, it appears that music-making as a communal activity in the Bapedi culture serves as an avenue for the development of group solidarity, contact with reality, relief from self concern, socialization with peers and avenue for exercise.

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