

Traditional Music of Botswana: A Memoir

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In 1988, my then partner (referred to in this article as “Han”) was one of the first-wave grads of the University of Toronto’s International Development Studies (IDS) Program. Post-graduation, he and his cohorts were placed around the developing world to gain practical experience. Han’s placement was in Botswana, working for well-known anti-apartheid activist Patrick Van Rensburg (b. 1931). In the late ’50s, Van Rensburg acted as South African Vice-Consul in the Belgian Congo. However, he resigned shortly afterwards in protest of SA’s apartheid policies. He moved to the UK and began organizing a campaign to boycott the import of South African goods to the UK and the Netherlands. Upon returning to SA in 1960, his political actions were not met without consequences: the government confiscated his passport. Van Rensburg fled over the border to Swaziland and later, in 1962, to Botswana.

It was on the Botswana border town of Gaborone (or “Gabs”, as it is fondly known) that Van Rensburg eventually set up an organization called Foundation For Education with Production (FEP). It was with FEP, and as Van Rensburg’s right-hand man, that my partner spent the years 1988 and 1989.

In Gabs, Han had met a Canadian school teacher named Carol. Botswana was just starting to introduce music as a formal subject in school, and both the UK and the US generously donated songbooks to the cause. Carol, however, was frustrated because the English and American song content was often too out of context for the Botswana school children to understand. How could children who lived in the Kalahari Desert, who had never seen rain in their lives (the drought was going on 20 years at the time), possibly understand the song “London Bridge is Falling Down”? (“Teacher, what is a bridge?”) Neither could the students make any sense of the song “Yankee Doodle Went to Town”. Carol wished that the children could use their own traditional music in lessons, for them to see what it looked like written down, but she was not a musician and needed someone to record and transcribe songs using Western notation.

At the time, I was an MA student at the Centre For Applied Cognitive Science at OISE. I’d been a musician all my life, and my MA research involved developing models of both expert and novice approaches to learning music. This research was later to appear in the book *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry Into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*.¹ Although my absence from the research team – even though it was to be in the summer – was deeply

frowned upon, the lure of doing fieldwork in Africa assuaged any hesitations I may have had.

My partner had passed on to me contact information for a Christian organization in Maryland who might be amenable to partially funding my trip. I received a small grant from them – generous, I thought, seeing as I was a Canadian. Armed with my small grant and a tape recorder, I bought a ticket to Gabs and readied myself for life in Southern Africa. I arrived on the first day of June – the first day of a life changed forever. Below are excerpts from the diary I kept while I was there; my culture shock and assumptions about unfamiliar musical practices are evident, and reveal the initial responses one has to a new environment.

June 1, 1988

The first day of the month and my first day seeing Botswana. Han and I go for a long walk and he shows me the sights. Here are my observations from this first day:

We go to a food market tucked away in the industrial part of Gaborone (near the train station). Long tables are set up under shelters and metal bowls are full of warm food (unfortunately, all meat). The vendors cook their food over little portable stoves. We are the only non-Africans in the market, and everyone stares curiously at us.

As we sit at a bench, two little girls run up to us shyly to flash us enormous smiles and to say hello. They run away quickly, giggling, to hide behind a stall. From there, they peek out at us, laughing and ducking when we look at them. We beckon them to come to us but this just causes another explosion of laughter and more hiding. I repeatedly beckon and finally one of the little girls comes over. We give her two pieces of chewing gum and tell her to give one to her sister. The little girl ran away quickly and shares the gum. After this, the girls hover around the area in front of us, happily chewing and grinning at us from time to time.

In the Mall (the outdoor strip of stores in Gabs) we enjoyed watching some street musicians. Speakers were perched on a car and from them, a complicated array of wires hooked up to homemade instruments. One musician, wearing a navy blue mechanic’s jumper, was hunched over a guitar made from a piece of wood and four pieces of wire. The tuning pegs were huge and crude. The other musician sang into a microphone and played a “bass guitar” – a

sound box with four leather thongs and two little cymbals attached. The music was wonderful. The guitarist strummed simply and the bass player played a repeated riff based on I, IV, V changes by hitting the thongs with a stick and pressing on the thongs with his fingers to change pitch.

The first few days were spent getting acquainted with Botswana and getting reacquainted with Han, who had left Toronto for Botswana several months ahead of me. Our separation was excruciatingly slow: three weeks for a letter to get to me, and three weeks for my reply to make its way to him. Shortly after he arrived in Botswana, he sent me a small pair of crude malachite earrings. The envelope arrived torn and taped back together, the earrings missing, of course. This was to become the new normal.

Once in Botswana, I couldn't have been happier. Han already knew many places, people, customs, and some of the Setswana language, and I mentally devoured everything he wanted to show me and talk about. Although Gabs was the capital, there were no buildings higher than two or three stories at the time, and no real hustle and bustle. There was an "expat" club, which we both avoided, in the town centre. This is also where the "mall" was. The Mall was an outdoor strip of shops. It contained a "real" grocery store, which we nicknamed "The Lekgoa [white person] Store". Most food shops, however, were small, understocked affairs. The Mall also contained a bookstore, which I visited at every opportunity, a hairdresser/barber, who found Han's straight hair an unsolvable mystery to cut, and copious shops. Sitting in the streets with their blankets unfolded were villagers, who had come into town for the day to sell such items as handcrafts and what was soon to become my favourite treat – paper cones filled with salty ground nuts!

June 2

The highlight of today was a trip to some villages. First we drove to Odi, where there is a weavers' coop. We wove our way along a dirt road strewn with rocks and lined with goats. Children would wave or run up to the truck or, as one girl did, perform a seductive little wiggly dance for our benefit.

After Odi, we drove to another village, Machudi. There we sat on huge rocks and looked over the village, enjoying the fading warmth of the setting sun. At sunset we descended. Here are the things we saw:

A group of adults dancing and singing in harmony.

Several people, mostly women, visiting a well, filling up huge buckets with water and carrying them to their rondavels on their heads, using no hands!

A small boy (5 or 6 years old) constructing a kite from bits of plastic bags that he'd collected. One bag was fastened to some sticks; other bags formed the tail and were strung together using long, needle-like thorns from a "wait-a-minute" bush. It was so moving to see the resourcefulness of this small child in making a toy for himself.

Everywhere the smell of wood and smoke rising to create a mystical view: silhouettes of mountains and people walking through veils of smoke.

Two adolescent girls on their way home from school, smiling shyly and giggling when they see us. What amazes me is how all the villagers manage to look so neat. We saw hundreds of school children in sweaters and pants (the boys) or skirts and dresses, dress shoes, and even little purses – all so neat and clean in spite of the fact that they live in mud and dung huts with no running water or electricity and there is sand everywhere!

Whereas I feel quite hot as I walk around Gabs, the locals dress in sweaters, toques, and sometimes, winter coats! One man at the food market was wearing a parka.

Home was in an expat neighbourhood outside of the town centre. Our house was a modest, one-story affair made of stuccoed cinder blocks. We had a small yard with an umbrella clothes dryer and a small provision-less outbuilding that a German lived in. We shared the house with several German researchers—or at least they said they were researchers. From time to time, Han would also get requests from some undisclosed grapevine to harbour someone from the anti-apartheid movement for a night or two. This made me very nervous, and there would be long discussions between Han and me about whether or not to do it. The border between Botswana and South Africa was a precarious place to be in 1988. The air still reverberated with the Raid on Gaborone (also known as Operation Plecksy), in which South African Defence Force troops crossed the border into Botswana and attacked the offices of the ANC military wing. Since then, resistance to apartheid continued to mount. As much as I would have liked to, I wasn't allowed to travel to South Africa with Imelda, a FEP employee who I'd become friends with. The politics were just too volatile.

Our house was always bone-chillingly cold at night, as it tends to be in deserts. There were no floor coverings save for the cement. Our bed was a mattress on the floor. Although I felt guilty doing so, I couldn't resist having a bath every night (contrary to the hardier Germans, who managed with only one or

two baths a week). It was the only way I could chase the cold that inhabited my bones. As I bathed, the ubiquitous sand of the Kalahari would leach from my pores and turn the bathwater red.

June 4

Visited the village of Serowe. Saw a number of creatures this morning: a baby "cobra", which was soon pulverized by a group of girls and a man (the Batswana are deathly afraid of snakes; they're all deemed to be deadly "cobras" and are made short order of), a frog that had skin like a lizard and that had only two forefingers, a giant locust that looked like a stick until I saw it leap into the air, a fairly large lizard that scuttled around Llana and Gary's rondavel, and a Heron.

Also on the drive up to Serowe, there was a snake on the road. It was about a metre long, with a watermelon pink belly and green-grey skin.

We hitchhiked home from Serowe. Hitchhiking is an institution here. It seems few people have cars, and those that do finance their travels with payments from hitch-hikers. The rate is 3 Pula² per 100 kilometres. We were picked up by a couple with a pickup truck. We found a place among a breastfeeding woman, two other women, two men, various suitcases, and a large number of melons.

There are two prevailing impressions I have of being a Lekgoa in Botswana. There are many times when I feel vastly uncomfortable. It's painfully obvious that the expats are the elite here. Both times we've gone out to dinner, we have found ourselves in a restaurant full of ex-pats being waited on by locals. I didn't want to look around or make eye contact with the other Whites. I didn't feel any solidarity with them. Instead, I felt uncomfortable about our relative wealth and leisurely lifestyle – this is spite of the fact that we were dirt-poor students back in Canada.

At the cinema, the balcony seats were 99% occupied by whites. The Batswana sat in main-floor (cheaper) seats. Next time I'll sit downstairs, too. Not for the purpose of making some kind of statement, but Han says that the seats are just as good down there, and I don't necessarily like all the hobnobbing elitism in the balcony.

It is the convention to have a maid here. At first I was shocked at the idea – not because I don't believe in maids, but because to have one is a further example of expats being better off than the locals (Isn't this the opposite of America, where foreigners work for the locals?) Apparently, though, you are considered hostile if you refuse the services of a maid. This is seen as a refusal to help a less privileged local earn a living. According to a conversation that I had with other expats, newcomers are flooded with requests.

Maids will arrive daily, knocking on your door, until someone is hired.

Across the sandy road from us was a South African couple. Unlike ourselves, who had no fence at all, our neighbours had a "fortress" enclosed by an 8-foot-high iron fence. We didn't know much about our neighbours except that the wife was always calling for her Rottweiler "Maulty". Maulty was a huge beast who managed to scale the fence each night to join the band of wild dogs who ran and yelped all night long in pursuit of some poor female dog in heat. It was incredibly disturbing. One would fall asleep to the soporific cooing of the neighbourhood dove, only to be yanked back to the waking world, where the rest of the night would be spent tossing and worrying for the poor dog being pursued. Sunrise brought the daily capture of Maulty, and all was quiet on the home front until the next nightfall.

References

Bereiter, Carl and Marlene Scardamalia. 1993. *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry Into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.

Notes

¹ Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, 1993.

² As a testament to the value of rain in Botswana, the currency is named *Pula*, the Setswana word for "rain".

