

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **The Basarwa melon throwing circle dance (Siqciru/Sigcuru): The case of Kaudwane village in Kweneng West District of Botswana**

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Received 4 June, 2019; Accepted 21 August, 2019

**This paper aims at examining the practical use of the melon dance by Basarwa (San) of Kaudwane village in the Kweneng West District of Botswana. Basarwa is a group of people who originate from the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve (CKGR). Taking into consideration the Basarwa traditional way of life, this research focuses mainly on women and girls as the main participants of the melon dance music genre. Some authors refer to this music as a game, whereas others refer to it as a musical genre. Basarwa women and girls have used this musical genre over the years to celebrate their hard work of search and gathering of veldkost from edible or medicinal plants. After two – three days of cumbersome work of gathering these plants, Basarwa women return to their place of residence to celebrate through melon song and dance. Data were gathered through several visits to Kaudwane village in 2008, 2010 and 2013 respectively to validate facts on this musical genre. Informants gathered at the village Kgotla (village customary administration center) for oral interviews by the researchers. It should be noted that the majority of the Kaudwane Basarwa speak Sesarwa which is their native language. To overcome this language barrier, a young lady who is the village pre-school teacher acted as an interpreter to the researchers. In addition to oral interviews, there were also video recordings and information from other repositories such as journal articles, books and internet searches. The informants also offered to practically perform the melon dance for the researchers to observe.**

**Key words:** Tsutsube, Melon Dance, Women, Basarwa, Kaudwane, Kgalagadi Desert.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first encounter the authors of this article had with the melon dance music was when they were at the former Lobatse Teacher Training College which was established in 1956 and closed down in December 2009 now being called Lobatse College of Education. However, the co-author was born and brought up in Kgalagadi Desert performing this music. This musical game used to be

performed by female teacher trainees most of whom were from Kgalagadi and were also in the college netball team. The student teachers performed this game to further advance their coordination, training, and ball catching skills. Through this experience, the main researcher, however, mistook this game for a netball game till in 2008 when he and his co-researcher both

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visited Kaudwane village where they met elder women performing the dance in a naturalist and realist context. This then led to the conception of this research article.

The people of Kaudwane village where the research was conducted are originally from CKGR in Kgalagadi. The first group of Basarwa came to Kaudwane in 1995, the second group in 1997 and the third group remained in CKGR. Elderly Basarwa at Kaudwane mainly speak Sesarwa which is their language. The village Kaudwane is situated in the Kweneng West District of Botswana. Kaudwane is adjacent to Khutse game reserve. For the success of this research, a young *Mosarwa* village pre-school teacher volunteered as an interpreter for the Sesarwa language speakers who could not converse in Setswana. This interpreter assisted in translating Sesarwa to *Setswana* wherever possible. The authors of this article discovered that all these different names from different authors were self-created as a description of how this music was performed. Some authors see it as a game whilst others see it as a musical genre. Basarwa melon dance is called differently by different researchers. Among other names, the authors of this article came across the following names; melon ball-dance, melon throwing dance, melon dance, and melon tossing game. Basarwa of Kaudwane calls this musical game *sighiru/segcuru* dance in their language. This particular music genre falls under the generic term *Tsutsube* which covers all musical types practiced by the Basarwa of Botswana.

According to Denbow (2006: 210) *Tsutsube* was originally a dance associated with the Kgalagadi and Gantsi Districts. It has however spread throughout Botswana and now practiced by people from different parts of Botswana and some parts of North Western South Africa. Denbow goes on to explain that, hunters dance the animal stories; for a while they are happy to enter a reality of the good olden days, when the world was still big, so big that there was plenty of space for the immense herds of animals searching for water and grass and providing food for the people. To a great extent this world is gone. What remains are the stories portrayed through dances and songs. As long as these stories are performed through dance and song the Basarwa soul is kept alive. Since Kaudwane does not have enough required wild fruits for the performance of the melon dance, compared to CKGR, the 15– 20 performers improvised and used available wild fruits such as; *mogorogorwane/gcuwa* fruit. These were used in the place of a wild melon which could only be obtained from the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve where this Basarwa group originated. The dancing group stated that they originally used *Mokapane/kgengwe* (wild melons). Under normal circumstances, the performing group needs traditional beer which acts as a catalyst to the dancers. However, in the case of Kaudwane village traditional beer is not easily accessible to the dancers. In the absence of wild berries, nowadays, women of Kaudwane village perform after the villagers have been

given their monthly food ration by the Botswana government 2016 (*go sena go phakiwa dijo*). The music is also performed during some national events such as the independence celebrations after which meals are prepared for the day as an appreciation to all who attended. These events have replaced the celebrations which used to take place after the days gathering in the desert. The performers expressed unhappiness for having lost their original musical performances.

## METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research, the researchers chose two qualitative approaches namely ethnography and case study. According to Creswell (2016: 264), the basic idea of an ethnographic study is to describe how a cultural group develops patterns of action, talking, and behavior from interacting together over time. On the other hand, Creswell (2016: 265) in describing a case study, he states that a case could be a concrete entity such as a group, an individual, an organization, a community, a relationship, a decision process or a specific project. So in this study, the researchers borrowed some aspects of both ethnographic and case study methods. In this study, the case is the community of Kaudwane village. In conducting this research, empirical evidence was obtained through fieldwork from participants at Kaudwane village *Kgotla* (Village Administration Centre). For data collection, prior arrangements were made in writing through consultations with the local village chief. Through this arrangement, the researchers would find participants waiting for interviews and performances and the village customary Court/administration Centre known as the *Kgotla* in *Setswana*. These interviews and performances were conducted in the afternoons after villagers had completed their chores that mostly took place in the morning. The normal chores that took place in Kaudwane village were paid for government self-reliance activities commonly known as *Ipelegeng*. It was at these organized *Kgotla* gatherings that performances and oral interviews took place from volunteers.

The participants gathered at the *Kgotla* for oral interviews, practical performances and participant observations for three consecutive visits over a three year period. During this research, there was a language barrier. People of Kaudwane speak Sesarwa (Basarwa language) which the researchers did not understand. To solve this problem, there was a pre-school teacher who intervened as an interpreter. During this data collection process, in addition to the oral interviews, additional information was also collected from information repositories such as books, internet sources and journal articles.

## Aim of the study

Basarwa of Botswana music genres were not regarded as important for a long time by most people in the country. The music was looked down upon considering the Basarwa lower class status and inferiority as was the case in the past. The aim of this study is to find out the role and importance of this music among Basarwa women of Kaudwane as a sample of Basarwa women at large. Since Basarwa of Kaudwane are now away from their original environment which was conducive for the performance of this music genre, the possibility of it becoming obsolete is very high. So another main aim is to have this music genre researched, documented and preserved for future use by learners, teachers and other stakeholders as well as creating the ground for future interested researchers and generations at large. As part of re-education, the melon dance is performed by the elder women who

are cultural custodians to celebrate a good harvest of veldt foods. This accords an opportunity to the younger girls and women to learn the dance from elders. In the process of performing, performers have fun and develop skills requiring strength, coordination, endurance, cooperation, and wit to solidify their bonds of friendship. The researchers found it necessary to conduct research among the people of Kaudwane to capture their music before it becomes obsolete for the purposes of documentation and preservation as stated earlier on. The research also aimed at sharing information with readers locally, regionally and globally. This also enhances music preservation as part of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This fact is emphasized by the Botswana Vision (2036: 22) under the section Sustainable Utilisation of Natural Resources which states that, as a nation, we recognize that some of our natural resources are non-renewable and should be allocated equitably. Renewable natural resources can be depleted if they are not exploited responsibly. We, therefore, recognize our role and obligation as caretakers of these resources, and of the need to preserve them for future generations. By doing so, we will be able to preserve and promote their cultural heritage through research and documentation. In this particular case, the research conducted for Basarwa music will help in the preservation of music as part of IKS.

### Ethical considerations

In conducting this study, permission was sort from the Kaudwane village chief through an official request letter. During this study, the researchers avoided collecting harmful information as supported by Creswell (2016: 51). The participants of this study participated on a voluntary basis. The study was conducted mainly to serve musical learning and teaching purposes. The researchers also took into consideration sensitivity to the needs of this vulnerable and marginalized group of people. There are no specific names mentioned for participants in this research. The study only refers to the Kaudwane traditional music group. This is for protection and security purposes for the participants.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is eclectic so as to enable researchers to deal with the complex analytical issues that they encountered while investigating a verbal art form that transcends a single discipline. The researchers' notion of this process was in line with the ethnomusicological studies that focus on music making as a process rather than on the music itself as a product, Ampene (2005: 4). As stated by Crawford (2017: 345) quoting Kingry – Westergard and Kelly, 1990, similarly, the framework and methodology for this research are informed by community-based participatory approaches to research and contextual approach to knowing, which emphasizes that understanding behavior requires us to attend to varied constructions of meanings in context. In conducting this research, researchers were guided by certain critical questions as posed by Drewal (1992: 172) quoted by Omojola (2009: 48). According to her, in order to move beyond a 'social Darwinist' perspective on gender, it is necessary to ask whether 'the construction of gender in African performances is always, in fact, asymmetrical and whether power always resides in the male half of that structure'.

### Background

The term San was historically applied by Basarwa's ethnic relatives and historic rivals, the Khoikhoi. This term means "outsider" in the Nama language and was derogatory because it distinguished the

Bushmen from what the Khoikhoi called themselves, namely the "First People". Western anthropologists adopted the term 'San' extensively in the 1970s, and it remains preferred in academic discourse. According to Levine (2005: 240), the term 'Bushmen' came into existence with the arrival of the Dutch settlers. They called the San "Bushmen or Bosieman", a derogatory term meaning low-class status or inferiority. The term Bushmen is widely used, but opinions vary on whether it is appropriate because it is sometimes viewed as pejorative. With the arrival of the first Europeans, settlers in 1652 in Southern Africa sparked clashes as they sought new territory they exterminated the San whom they deemed to be inferior like wild animals. They called them "Bushmen" and proceeded to wipe out 200, 000 of them in 200 years. They also sold them in slave markets and to travelling circuses. While men and boys spent days hunting for wild animals for meat, traditionally, bushman women spent 3- 4 days a week gathering *veldkost* (wild plants), often going out in groups to search for edible or medicinal plants. Furthermore, before the advent of trade with Bantu or white settlers, all tools, construction material, weapons or clothes were made of plants or animal products. About 400- 500 local plants and their uses were known to Bushmen, along with the places where they grew- not only providing balanced nutrition, but also moisture from roots even in time of drought.

This study is backed up by The Botswana Vision (2036: 18) under the aspect on culture which clearly states that culture represents a unique, dynamic and irreplaceable body of values, traditions, and languages. Culture is a critical ingredient of nation-building and attainment of national cohesion. This section goes on to emphasize that Batswana will be recognizable by their cultural heritage and identity. Botswana will maintain institutions that promote our cultural and traditional practices to achieve our objective of achieving an inclusive and equal opportunity nation. Botswana culture will enable our communities to freely live, practice and celebrate their diverse cultures. We will preserve and promote our cultural heritage through research and documentation.

Botswana's Vision (2036: 20) states that marginalized population groups will be empowered to positively contribute to the country's development. Through social inclusion, Botswana will provide opportunities for decent employment, comprehensive social protection, and social safety nets. No one will be disadvantaged on any basis, for example, gender, age, or background. Opportunities will be provided for the poor to help themselves with their own efforts. In this case, the research conducted for Basarwa music helps in the preservation of IKS.

Kiema (2010: 142-143) observed that, in his home village in the Kgalagadi Desert, the elders who try to sing find it difficult to hear themselves and dance because the volume of music from the bar 400 m away is so loud. As the trance dance and other forms of traditional music and dance have been overpowered, some people have deserted their land board- allocated residential plots to move a few kilometers out of town in order to make spiritual connections.

However, according to Monaka (2010: 15) gathering dances are done mainly by women and young people in the evening. After the community has a good feel of the day's collection of eatables, there is often spontaneous singing which is the onset of a fully-fledged dancing session throughout the good part of the night. The elderly can join in to teach new songs and sometimes to demonstrate ancient dances.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here, findings of the female melon dancing group in Kaudwane village is discussed. The information which informs the findings was obtained through oral interviews and practical performance observations that were also video recorded for further follow-up and data validation

purposes.

### Contexts of performance

Findings of this research confirmed that there are two main purposes for performing the melon dance. Firstly, it is performed using a small desert melon, which is so important for the Basarwa people and the animals in the desert and it is sometimes the only source of water to survive. This means that the melon throwing dance is a traditional dance meant to celebrate finding water where women would throw a melon between them and dance in appreciation. Throwing of this melon is done through the right hand and catching through the left. Secondly, as part of re-education, the melon dance is performed by the women of the clan to celebrate a good harvest of veldt foods. Some of the dance ceremonies are performed during moonlight as a mark for the girl's first menstrual cycle. Tanaka and Sugawara (2010: 83) allude that, part of the ritual dance demonstrating the figure on an eland marks the puberty celebrations. The traditional dances are also performed during the official visits of senior government officials such as the State President and Ministers during the village *Kgotla* (Village Administration Centre) visits and meetings. This gives an opportunity to the younger women to learn the dance from elders. The younger girls also learn chores such as; preparation of veldt foods, stamping, cooking and mixing of the salads and other foods gathered during the bushwalk. This informal learning process traditionally took place from one generation to the next. The melon dance is performed as an unselfconscious and free-spirited traditional dance representing the joyful celebration of a successful harvest around the afternoon fire. During this dance, this is an opportunity for Basarwa women to show off to the men they wish to attract. This musical performance also acts as a source of entertainment for Basarwa women. There is also an annual *Kuru* Dance Festival which consists of collective Basarwa ethnic group from the Southern African Region where they enjoy the melon dances on the variation of their lyrics, styles, and dancing techniques. Nowadays, young girls are less interested in traditional music and dances, especially which in the past food gathering acted as a motivational factor. The interest of the youngsters has been captured by modern music which makes them think and interpret traditional music as an old fashioned activity meant for old women.

### Performance and age – mixed, noncompetitive nature of the melon dance

Since Kaudwane does not have enough required wild fruits for the musical performances as compared to CKGR where these Basarwa women came from, a group

of 15-20 performers improvised and used accessible wild fruits such as; *mogorogorwane* – (*Setswana*) which is also called *gcuwa* fruit in Sesarwa to perform music in the absence of their traditional melon. The melon can only be obtained from the CKGR where the group originated. They originally used *Mokapane/kgengwe* (wild traditional melons). As a matter of fact, some participants confessed that melon dance performers need traditional beer as a catalyst in their performances to be more active.

Nowadays, in Kaudwane village, this music is performed *go sena go phakiwa* (they perform the music after getting their monthly share of food supplied by government) instead of celebrating the days gathering in the early evenings as it was the case in the desert.

During the actual demonstration of the dance, one woman would spin the melon and toss it behind her to the next performer behind in an anticlockwise moving circle. As stated earlier, the melon dance is only performed by women and girls. In this spectacular dance, women are divided into two groups of singers who are also clapping hands as well as performers who move around the circle to catch the melon in turns. Performing women form a circle which moves counter-clockwise as each woman, in turn, runs to the center of the circle where she dances several steps and tosses the melon to the next woman behind her at the proper moment in the song. They would dance artistically for several seconds holding the melon while co-participants clap and sing with rhythm to accord the dancers an opportunity of showcasing their dancing techniques. This adds variation in styles from one dancer to another depending on one's individual's talent. The melon dance is performed all according to specific rules, while simultaneously keeping the melon moving from one dancer to another by tossing it backward, over one's head, to the next person in line. This dancing technique was supported by Biesele (1986: 342) when she observed that, women dance while tossing a melon in an intricate pattern. The game requires sure hands and high concentration since the thrown melon will take unexpected bounces. If the woman behind drops the melon, chaos, and laughter ensue, and then the game resumes, or a new song is sung. The speed of the dance is determined by the performers. Performers can either agree to move slowly or fast.

The goal is to keep everyone in harmony with everyone else and keep the melon moving without dropping. The game could be played in a competitive manner by saying that anyone who drops the melon is "out," but it is not played that way. The goal always is cooperation, not competition. One implication is that players must not dominate or bully each other, because people who feel dominated will quit. Another implication in those players must attempt to satisfy the needs and wishes of all the other players, at least sufficiently to keep them from quitting, (<http://scholarpedia.org/article/Hunter-gatherers-andPlay->).

This phenomenon is in line with the Suzuki

characteristic number 9 of music learning. The characteristic as stated by Hoffer (2009: 147) goes thus; "Cooperation, not competition, is fostered among the students. Students of all levels of advancement play together and older students help the younger students. An attitude of mutual respect is maintained among parents, teachers, and students." In the case of the *Basarwa*, it is the women and girls instead maintaining this attitude.

### Educational implications

Since traditionally this musical genre was taught to girls by elder women and passed from one generation to the next orally, nowadays elderly women can be outsourced into schools by teachers as cultural custodians to teach this music before it becomes obsolete. Unfortunately, the approach in teaching at this new village will never be the same as that one of the Kgalagadi Desert where all accessories were available. Lots of improvisational tools will be accommodated to keep the musical genre alive. The current teacher training system in the Botswana education system does not prepare teachers to handle traditional music from communities. Another reason being that the system of posting teachers does not take into consideration one's place of origin. Botswana teachers are deemed fit to work anywhere in the country hence posted to different diverse cultural villages.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- (i) The melon dance music can be taught in schools using knowledgeable elders in the village to teach both teachers and pupils from early childhood.
- (ii) Traditional music can be infused in the curriculum under cultural studies as well as Creative and Performing Arts which are currently subjects taught in primary schools.
- (iii) Traditional music can also be extended into aspects of extracurricular activities for students' performances outside the classroom with knowledgeable teachers volunteering to carry out the activity.
- (iv) When children grow up seeing this music performed among them, this will encourage them to appreciate it from a young age.
- (v) The melon dance emphasizes the Suzuki characteristic number 9 of music learning. The characteristic as stated by Hoffer (2009: 147) goes thus; "Cooperation, not competition, is fostered among the students. Students of all levels of advancement play together and older students help the younger students.

### Conclusion

The *Basarwa* of Kaudwane village no longer has original

accessories to practice and perform their traditional music because of relocating from their original place which is the CKGR. However, they do improvise with other forms of material to keep their traditional music alive. The purpose of *Basarwa* performing music is not to establish winners and losers, but to have entertainment and fun. In the process of having fun, the players develop skills requiring strength, coordination, endurance, cooperation, and wit to solidify their bonds of friendship. If the focus were on competition, the pressure to win could reduce the playfulness fun and creativity of the music. Instead of cementing friendships, competitive musical performances produce arrogance in the winners and envy or anger in the losers as well as the migration of some *Basarwa* to other Districts where they may be temporarily engaged as coaches for dances and their songs to some Batswana groups. This migration may lead to abuse and the breaking up of *Basarwa* village dancing troupes. The most targeted might be the best dancers and most active, and this can weaken rather than strengthen the community.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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