

# Oral performance and voice of wisdom: Batswana songs to educate young adults about community health problems

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## Abstract

The Batswana form one of the largest ethnic groups in Southern Africa. They are found in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia and their language, Setswana, is the most widely spoken in the Southern African region. Batswana like singing and oral performance. They sing on various occasions and compose songs on all social aspects of human life – health [illness], love, marriage, divorce, birth and death. The oral performances of Batswana contain words of wisdom that covertly or overtly educate people about some specific aspects of social life. One important aspect of social life is health, and there are some circumstances and behaviours that can jeopardise the health of community members. This article discusses and analyses some selected Batswana songs that educate and warn the youth and adult community members about some actions that may put their lives at risk.

**Key words:** Batswana, health, oral performance, education, social, adults

## Introduction

There are many ethnic groups in South Africa, of which the Batswana is one. The Batswana form one of the largest ethnic groups in Southern Africa. The people

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of this ethnic group are found in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia and their language, Setswana, is the most widely spoken in the Southern African region. Within the borders of South Africa the Batswana are found in many provinces and their language –Setswana – is spoken in the North West, Northern Cape, Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. The Batswana are people of unique culture which identifies them as true Africans. There are many ways of projecting culture but a common one is through music of oral performance. Gracyk (2007) affirms that music has an important role to play in the social construction of identity. Quan-Baffour (2009) adds that musicality is an innate drive which is as fundamental as speech. The Batswana engage in singing and oral performance not only to entertain but also to educate community members on important social issues. The oral performers compose songs on all aspects of social life. Their songs cut across health [illness, diseases, abuse], love, marriage, divorce, birth and death. The oral performances of the Batswana contain words of wisdom that covertly or overtly educate people about some specific aspects of social life. They sing to warn, advise, entertain and rebuke community members on critical health issues.

An important aspect of social life is health, and there are some circumstances and behaviours that can jeopardise the health of community members. In the contemporary modern world, health has become a very important issue which touches individuals, families and communities at large. The life led by modern people brings various illnesses to them, their families and the communities. For example, the HIV/AIDS pandemic negatively affects every family and all community members one way or the other. There are individuals who might take too much alcohol and engage in actions that can put their own lives of others in danger. For example, when people take too much alcohol they can fight and get injured, injure others or engage in unprotected sex and contract HIV/AIDS. All these can affect family and community members. This article discusses and analyses some selected Batswana songs that educate and warn the youth and adult community members about some actions that may put their lives and those of their loved ones and community members at risk.

### **Songs expressing the fear and effect of HIV/AIDS**

All over the world HIV/AIDS is a threat to individuals, families, communities and nations at large. Every individual and family dreads HIV/AIDS because it is a disease without cure. This illness creates orphans and thus destroys the future of innocent children, who grow up without parents. The following song by Magic African Music titled *Bolwetse* (illnesses) describes the fear of HIV/AIDS because of its effect on children, families and communities. A few lines of the song are analysed below:

Re di khutsanyana  
 Ramasedi tlhe kgalema  
 Re tshaba AIDS  
 Kgaotsa  
 Bolwetse bo tlhasetse

[We are orphans  
 Please God intervene  
 We are afraid of AIDS  
 Stop AIDS  
 The illness is on the move]

The above song expresses the pain, sorrows, hopelessness and devastation that the HIV/AIDS epidemic brings to humanity. Children are crying because AIDS has rendered them orphans (*dikhutsanyana*). The phrase “the illness is on the move, attacking us” (*bolwetse botlhasetse*) expresses the hopeless situation in which children find themselves. Without parents, children have no future, but the illness is killing parents. As a result of the illness, the future of children is doomed. The song discusses the effects of AIDS and warns people (both the youth and adults) to protect themselves against AIDS because it has no cure but the effect is devastating – it makes children orphans and they grow up without parents. It is only divine intervention that can save the situation, hence the cry *Ramasedi Kgalema tlhe!* (God please rescue us!).

The second song, *Seru* (epidemics), by Kabelo Mogwe and group also discusses and laments the effects and dangers of diseases such as HIV, diabetes, cancer and hypertension. A few of the verses are discussed here:

Helele wee re wetswe ke seru  
 Seru sa malwetse wee  
 Bana ba rona ba golela mo bohutsaneng  
 Moreri 3: Sengwe le sengwe se na le motlha  
 wa sona o wa rona motlha o botlhoko.  
 Batsadi ba rona ga bayo re setse  
 mo lefelleng, mo bohutsaneng  
 Repholose Messia!

[There is an epidemic, an epidemic of illness they don't meet their parents alive  
 Ecl. 3: says: for everything there is a season  
 but for us this time is a bad one.  
 Our parents are already dead  
 They left us in sadness  
 Please save us, Messiah!].

The above song laments the effects of diseases in general and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in particular. It is a lamentation by children and family members who are infected or affected by the incurable disease. HIV/AIDS brings with it a stigma,

making infected people isolated and sometimes rejected by family members and community members alike. The stigma makes victims confused and they sometimes think of taking their own life. The phrases “I have two hearts” (*pelo tsa ka di pedi*), “one tells me to kill myself” (*e nngwe ya re ke ipolaya*), indicates how hopeless, confused and frustrated an AIDS victim could be. The song calls on community members to pray and calls for God’s mercy and intervention. The incurable and dreadful disease is killing parents, leaving orphans to fend for themselves (*Batsadi ba rona ga bayo, re setse mo bohutsaneng*). The song teaches adults to be careful with their lives because the disease has no cure. If parents are infected, they die, leaving their children in sorrow. Since the disease has no cure, the only remedy is prevention, because prevention is always better than cure. People should also seek divine intervention to enable them protect themselves and know how to live with the pandemic, hence the refrain: please Messiah save us! (*Repholose Messia!*)

### Song that warns adults against infidelity

In modern times many marriages are dysfunctional due to the behavior of the partners. There are women who neglect their partners because of money or deception or other men. The song *Dibelebejane* (appearance is deceptive) warns women to be careful because leaving your man for others could lead to misery, illness or death. A few of the lines are as follows:

Ke tshaba bontle bo nale dibelebejane.  
 Bagolo bame nthuseng  
 e sa le ke tshwaetswe ke le monnyane  
 Ka tsaya tse supileng ka di romela bogadi.  
 Maropeng go a boeloa  
 Poela ea bolaya  
 Ke lala ke isitse maoto

Kwa godimo le fa ke re ke nyetse  
 [Appearance is deceptive

This wife is mine

Elders help me

I paid a dowry for her

People do return to their marriage

But sometimes you go back to die.

I sleep alone like a bachelor

As the woman does not give me my matrimonial rights]

The song is a lamentation by a man whose wife leaves him for other men. Although the man has paid a dowry for her the woman goes to other lovers because she is deceived by the appearance of such lovers. The man needs intervention from the elders for his wife to come back to him, but he is afraid of contracting HIV/AIDS

from a woman who sleeps around. This fear is expressed in the phrase "sometimes you go back to die" (*Poela ea bolaya*). The song advises women to stick to their men and provide them with the matrimonial rights they (husbands) have paid for. Going to other men and leaving the husband to sleep alone can lead to illness and death. The woman can contract AIDS and infect her husband when she goes back home. Again, because the man is neglected, he might also go out and look for lovers. These actions can all lead to the contracting of HIV/AIDS. When parents get infected they can't work to feed themselves and their children. They will die and leave children as orphans with no one to care for them. Infidelity and neglect of a husband is emotional abuse. It can lead to disintegration of families and mental problems, for example stress and psychosis. The song warns modern women to take marriage seriously because it is not a game for one to walk out and come in when one likes. Marriage is a life union and one should not get married when one is not prepared to stay put.

### **Song expressing dismay and consequences of teenage pregnancy**

Teenage pregnancy is a big social problem which can lead to death of both the teenage mother and the child. There are some Batswana oral performance songs which detest it, warn the youth and point out the consequences of falling pregnant before appropriate time. One such song is *Selankanyane* (name of a girl). A few of the verses are reproduced below:

Wa ntlha ngwana ke phoso  
 Wa bobedi ene otswa kae  
 Rraagwe ngwana okae?  
 Ke a botsa  
 O ntshegisa ka baditshaba  
 O itseelwa ke mongwe le mongwe  
 Ga o na nnyaa  
 O ya kae?  
 Oi a timela  
 Ga o na nyaa

[The first is a mistake  
 Where does the second one come from?  
 Where is the child's father?  
 You make me a laughing stock  
 Everybody does it and go  
 You don't have no!  
 You are lost!  
 What a waste!  
 You will see the consequences]

The above song is a lamentation by a parent who seems frustrated and betrayed by her teenage daughter. Most teenagers do not obey their parents. They visit shebeens [illegal bottle stores] and sleep with anyone without thinking of the consequence. In some cases parents and family members might regard the first pregnancy as a mistake, hence the expression *wantlha ngwana ke phoso*. The song warns teenagers, especially girls, to avoid such mistakes because teenage pregnancy has many social problems. For example, it can waste a girl's time and spoil her future. It also leads to unplanned children and malnutrition which can lead to the children's death. At this time of HIV/AIDS teenage pregnancy or sleeping around with everyone can make teenagers contract the disease. Once HIV/AIDS is contracted, the teenager will die and leave orphans behind. Parents make efforts to ensure that their children become better in the future, but most teenagers waste their lives and the opportunities parents provide for them; hence the parents' cry: "You make me a laughing stock, what a waste you are, lost". The song warns teenagers about the dangers and consequences of a wayward lifestyle. Disobedience can lead to poverty, illness and death. The song therefore advises teenagers to be obedient, careful and serious about life and the future.

### **Song that detests women/child abuse**

Abuse – of wives, girlfriends, husbands, boyfriends and even children is very rife in today's relationships. This detestable behaviour can include physical assault or the infliction of psychological pain. There are some men and women who abuse their partners on a daily basis, resulting in dysfunctional relationships with serious social consequences. The unfortunate thing though is the fact that society only publicises the abuse of women, and turns a blind eye to the abuse of men by their spouses. Abuse in relationships, whether it is done by the male or female partner, is unacceptable because it may lead to illness, injuries, death, divorce, poverty and destitution. When parents fight, children are always caught in the cross-fire and the effect on children can be enormous. They might take sides and hate either the father or the mother. As the breadwinner, a father who perceives the children as allies of their mother might either beat them or refuse to have anything to do with the children. Such a situation can negatively affect the father's relationship with his children. One traditional Batswana oral performance which detests and laments the effects of women and children abuse is titled *Mmapula*. A few lines of the song are reproduced and analysed below:

Fa ke gopola Mmapula  
 Mosadi yo o bone metlholo  
 Le leseana la gagwe  
 Ba le mo sekakeng  
 Lefatshe ba la motlhamogela ga nna go ntsho

A leka ka gotlhe go leba gae  
A nna melapong le dinokeng ttse di kgolo

[when I remember Mmapula.  
This woman saw miracles  
With her son, they were in the desert  
She tried to go home  
There was no happiness in her life  
She stayed in rivers and lakes]

The above song is a lamentation for the plight of a woman who was abused, beaten and chased away from home by her husband. The poor woman suffered serious physical and psychological abuse and pain. The phrases “no happiness in her life” and “her life is in turmoil” (*lefatshe la mo tlhanogela ga nna go ntsho*) epitomise the ordeal of the woman. She was ejected from the house together with her only child who walked with her for days in the desert, scorching sun, rivers and lakes without food or place to rest as she attempted to reach her parental home. This experience made the woman and her son vulnerable to illnesses such as flu, depression, hypertension and even attacks by rapists who could take advantage of her situation. As a mother without money or anything, she could not feed her child who might cry for food and exhaustion. The expression this woman saw miracles [*mosadi yo obone meitholo!*] amplifies the extent of her misery as a result of the abuse from her husband.

The song advises spouses, particularly husbands, to refrain from abusing and ejecting wives and children from home because that can lead to illnesses and death as a result of poverty, destitution, vulnerability to prostitution and its concomitant consequences – HIV/AIDS. When women are ejected from home and have no place to go, they might indulge in sexual relationships with strange men. With the wife out of the house, the man might also engage in sexual relationships and contract HIV/AIDS. In cases where the spouses sort out their differences, they might infect each other with HIV/AIDS, TB and other contagious diseases, some of which are incurable. When parents die, children could become destitute, poor and vulnerable to hardships and social vices such as stealing, drug peddling and prostitution. The song therefore teaches spouses to learn to sort out their differences without resorting to physical attacks or driving wives and children from home, because abuse leads to terrible social consequences.

### **Song expressing fear for a spouse**

Human beings – male or female, young or old, rich or poor, powerful or less powerful – by nature fear death. In view of incurable diseases such as hypertension and HIV/AIDS in the contemporary modern world, many adults are very much concerned about how their partners lead their lives. For example, when a spouse contracts HIV/

AIDS it might be passed on to the partner and since there is no cure both would not survive. One oral performance among the Batswana which expresses this fear is titled *Ke itewa ke letswalo* [I have fear]. A few lines of the song are reproduced and analysed in the following paragraphs:

Ke rila ke nyala mosadi  
 Ka nyala so na senakangwedi  
 Banna ba mmatla botlhe  
 Ke itewa ke letswalo  
 Ka baka la moratiwa wa me  
 A basidi ba fedile?  
 Fa lo setse mokapelo wa me morago?  
 Ke ipotsa gore fa a seyo a gone  
 O tla boela gae  
 Bosigo ga ke robale  
 Ke itewa ke letswalo

[I decided to marry a woman  
 and married a shining star  
 All men wanted her  
 I have fear brought about by my lover  
 Are women finished?  
 I ask myself whether she will come back home  
 When she goes out  
 I do not sleep during the night because  
 I am fearful of my lover]

The above is a husband's expression of jealousy and fear for his beautiful wife. This song teaches men not to marry women on account of their physical beauty because such women always catch the attention of other men and can easily fall prey to their advances. Some of the young spouses of today do not take their marriages seriously and may easily betray their spouses because of promises of money and better things from other men. In the era of dangerous illnesses such as hypertension and HIV/AIDS a beautiful wife who is not committed to her husband might be a source of fear, trouble, diseases and even death; hence the worried husband expresses his fear – I do not sleep at night [*bosigo ga le robale*].

This fear has made the man not to trust his wife because she is the talk of the town. Many men literally run after her, hence the husband asks himself if women are finished [*a basidi ba fedile?*], because men do not stop running after his wife? The song teaches beautiful wives who are not stable to be careful for the sake of their marriage, children and husbands. Once they contract incurable diseases such as HIV/AIDS their family could be infected and the consequences might be devastating.



## Conclusion

This article explored the social consequences of some actions taken by [young] adults. Through oral performance the attention of the public, especially young adults, is drawn to the effects of infidelity, casual sex and women and child abuse in our midst. Spouses who engage in such actions might not only hurt wives, husbands and children but also an entire community and the nation at large. The lesson which this article has for adults is that whatever they do they should be mindful of consequences and who might be affected by their actions. The article concludes that adults should make responsible decisions in all actions taken in relation to domestic matters, because the effects of what they do to their spouses might affect a whole clan, community and the nation.

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