

The Kgatla *Bojale* Drums: Lost or Simply Discarded?

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Sometime in 1971 I was using a list drawn from Hugh Tracey's book, *Ngoma, An Introduction to Music for Southern Africans*, to ask Amos Pilane about the traditional musical instruments used by the Bakgatla. I reached 'drum' (*moropa*) and pre-empted him by saying, 'of course, you do not have them' – because at that time not a genuine drum was to be seen or heard in Mochudi. To my surprise he said, 'of course we have them'. I then asked if we could see them, indeed could we go and see them now? To both questions Amos agreed, and we got into my truck and drove to the *kgotla*. We went to the abandoned *lelapa* (yard) behind the *leobo* (shelter). Amos went straight to the overhang of the larger of the two rondavels and pulled aside some junk, I remember an old galvanised bath, and a long-discarded sewing machine, and there were the two drums lying on their sides. Both were in poor but not disastrous condition, the surface of both of them being pitted – presumably by termites.

The *lelapa* was one in which Amos had lived as a child and it had later been owned by his sister, Leburu Pilane (from whom the Phuthadikobo Museum bought it in 1976). Amos said that Kgosi Linchwe II did not know of these drums – so a message was sent to him. When he arrived, he confirmed that he had not known about their existence. This particular story was covered by the Botswana government-owned *Kutlwano* magazine in its issue of October 1971. I reproduce it here because it is the only published source of information of that time.

The National Museum and Art Gallery has recently made an interesting addition to its cultural collection. Chief Linchwe's recent trip to Botswana from New York coincided with the discovery of two traditional Bakgatla drums which form part of the tribe's legacy. The drums were in the care of Mr Amos Kgamanyane Pilane, a senior member of the tribe. The Museum were made aware of their existence and showed an immediate interest. Chief Linchwe agreed that they should be on temporary loan to them.

Mr Pilane, at 82, is one of the few Bakgatla who are a link between the past and the present way of life of the tribe. He says the drums were brought over to this country when the Bakgatla moved from Saulspoort (in the Transvaal) to Mochudi. They are probably hollowed out of marula trees and have rough exteriors and chiseled out handles making them easily transportable. The mouths are covered with cow hide and fastened with wooden pegs. As these fell off they were re-fastened with steel nails. They were used traditionally for *bojale* songs and dances, the ceremonies of adolescent girls who were being initiated into womanhood. 'They were used solely for this purpose and were put away until the next regiment [*mophato*] was ready for initiation, usually in the Chief's household', said Mr Pilane. They were brought over in the care of Mma Kgamanyane, grandmother of Chief Linchwe I. Linchwe I became a Christian during his reign, but he nevertheless saw one regiment, the *Makuka*, through their initiation before he finally stopped the practice'.¹

The only other information that we possess about the drums is my quickly recorded recollection of what Rre Pilane said to me at the time.² The *Kutlwano* report is riddled with factual errors and we cannot even be certain that the reporter had correctly quoted Rre Pilane. Nevertheless, concentrating on the direct quotations from the two sources, we can/should note that:

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1. The drums were brought from the Transvaal (in 1871) in the care of Linchwe I's grandmother, Mankube.
2. They were last used in 1902 by the Makuka age group. Having converted to Christianity, Chief Lentswe then put a stop to the practice.
3. Traditionally they were put away until the next regiment was ready for initiation, usually in the Chief's household.
4. Older people had probably forgotten about their existence and younger generation were not even aware of their being part of the Bakgatla lore.

Prior to my questioning on that particular day, Amos had not thought that the existence of the drums was worth mentioning to Kgosi Linchwe or to anyone else. Nor when we located the drums, under a pile of thrown away junk, was there anything to suggest that Leburu had ever been conscious of her role as a custodian of such extraordinarily important cultural artefacts. Had they been initially left with her to be stored safely away or had their safe keeping been entrusted to Leburu's husband, Sedumedi Pilane, the son of Bogatsu, he being Kgosi Kgamanyane's younger brother.³ Was he sufficiently royal, therefore, to be made responsible for the safe keeping of the drums?

Of the two possibilities, it has to be assumed that, for whatever reason, the drums were entrusted to her and not to him. But when she moved after marriage, to Mosanta area of Mochudi, she would have taken her more valued possessions with her but would have left behind, as unwanted junk, the galvanised bath, the old sewing machine and the two drums.

In interviews with Elinah Grant,⁴ Leburu Pilane (Matshego) and Washa Gare (of Machama regiment) confirmed that the drums were used when they were initiated in 1928 but neither was able to explain how it happened that the drums might have been later unused? Leburu said that, as far as she could remember, there were only the two *bojale* drums which were always kept in the *lelapa* behind the *kgotla leobo*. Asked why they were kept there and not at any other place such as the home of the Chief's wife, Mme Pilane explained that it was Kgatla tradition that the drums be kept at the *lelapa* of the youngest male member of the family – in this case, the Kgamanyane family. She said that people in general were not allowed to handle the drums although specifically she could only remember two old ladies of her mother's *mophato* who did so but this was because they were able to play them. Neither of these ladies came from Kgosing (royal ward).

Mme Pilane also explained that before they went for initiation, every woman who was breast feeding at the time had to, '*gamela mashi a lebela*' – release breast milk inside the drum. She was not able to explain why they did this or how it could happen that breast-feeding women were accepted for initiation? In those days, she said, they did what they were told without seeking explanations. Anthropologist Isaac Schapera confirmed Leburu's statement when he noted that in 1938 'some of them (the initiates) were already married and even mothers' and that 'among the Kgatla, at the present time, the girls' initiation is a very simple affair', a comment that could only have been made in respect of the 1928 women's initiations.⁵

Kgosi Molefi who was initiated in that year (Machama) and installed as Chief in 1929 must, at this stage, have known about the drums. In 1933 he married Motlatsi but his post marriage behaviour was so erratic that in 1936 he was deposed by the British Administration with his brother, Mmusi installed as Acting Chief in his place.

In 1939, Mmusi, in Molefi's absence, attempted to organise a gap filling *bojale* but quickly ran into major problems. Schapera states that 'Mmusi had trouble...over the formation of new regiments... and it was only after considerable difficulty... that the new regiments were formed.'⁶ It can only be conjecture that this *bojale* was poorly organised and possibly fore-shortened with the lead figure, Mmamorema, being

probably unaware that the drums even existed?

In 1942 both Molefi and Mmusi joined the Second World War effort. At the end of the war, Molefi, in recognition of his exemplary service as a Regimental Sergeant Major, the most senior post held by any Motswana, was restored as Kgosi by the Resident Commissioner. In 1947 he organised both *bogwera* and *bojale* ceremonies (*Mafiri*) and again in 1955 (*Mangope*) but this time without *bojale*. Could the drums have been used in 1947 if they had not been used in 1939? It seems improbable.

There appears to be nothing to indicate that Molefi, with or without Motlatsi, bothered to secure and safeguard the drums at Sethobong, bearing mind that Motlatsi lived there until the end of her troubled life? Had he done so, Gasetswane, who Molefi married in 1957, would most certainly have been aware that the drums were at her new home. It would follow, therefore, that both Linchwe who lived there until his marriage, and his sister, Tshire, whose life long home this became, would also have known about the existence of the two drums.

Why then did Molefi make no move to safeguard the drums? The most probable explanation is that he saw no value in them. He organised only one *bojale* during the interrupted years of his chieftaincy, the *Magata* of 1947.⁷ Who could have been the lead figure of that exercise who might, perhaps, have been concerned about the drums, Motlatsi being mentally disturbed and Gasetswane yet to appear on the scene? If there was anyone who might have had strong views about the drums, it would have been Seingwaeng, Kgafela's [Molefi's father] widow. Whilst she was most definitely involved in Mmusi's 1939 *Magata* exercise, it is unlikely that she then possessed the drums. If she did, it would have been she who left them in Leburu's *lelapa* at the *kgotla* prior to her banishment by Molefi from the Kgatla Reserve.

It may be that with his riotous way of life, Molefi would have been little concerned about bits and pieces inherited from the past which would, for him, have been of only minimal relevance. This view, as we have seen, was shared by both Amos and Leburu who had never viewed the drums as being in any way special and for this reason, had never thought that Linchwe needed to be informed about them. That being the case, they may very well have reflected the views of many other people. Older people, as Amos had noted, had probably forgotten about their existence and younger generation had never even known about them.

From today's viewpoint, with the Mochudi drum being recently deemed to be sacred,⁸ the only possible assumption has to be that they were inexplicably or perhaps accidentally lost, the notion presumably being that what was sacred today must have been sacred yesterday. The more likely explanation, however, is that they were never lost, they were dumped as unwanted junk. The idea may seem absurd to those world-wide who are concerned about safeguarding the fabric of the past. The reality in this country, as has been repeatedly demonstrated during the last 50 or so years, is that the past is an embarrassment and that material evidence of it, of whatever kind, needs to be discarded in order that it does not block the way towards modernisation.⁹

In that sense, it can be better understood that the abandonment of the drums was a representative action, not something that was exceptional. It also needs to be understood that an article which is today regarded as being of great cultural importance may not necessarily have been viewed in the same light by an earlier generation. Culture, in so many of its forms, is fluid. The temptation to encase it in a fixed, frozen time frame should always be resisted.

Endnotes

1. *In 1971 the National Museum in Gaborone was the only museum in the country and it made good sense for Kgosi Linchwe to place the drums there on temporary loan. When the Phuthadikobo Museum was established in 1976, immediate moves were made to have the drums returned. For whatever reason,*

and it may have been by agreement -there appears to be no record on the subject -only one drum came back to Mochudi, the other remains with the National Museum in Gaborone. It appears to have posed no difficulty for bojale leaders during the revival years in Mochudi that only one of the two drums has been available to them whether for the seven bojale exercises conducted by Linchwe or the two led by his son Kgosi Kgafela II.

2. Personal interview 13 August 1971.
3. Kwapeng Modikwe to me 24 July 2014.
4. Personal interview 22 August 2002
5. Schapera, I 1980. *A History of the Bakgatla ba ga Kgafela. Mochudi: Phuthadikobo Museum. p.27.*
6. Schapera, I, *A History of the Bakgatla ba ga Kgafela*
7. Schapera, I 1977. *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom. London: Frank Cass, p.116*
8. Setlabi, KG 3 July 2014. *Bojale Drum: Material Culture in Living Contexts*, *Curator*, vol. 57.
9. See, for instance, Grant, S 2002. *'The Campaign to Save Kgosi Bathoen's 1914 Office and the Historic Kgotla in Kanye'*, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 34 .

Table 1: Female Mephato 1902 to 1963

Year	Mophato Name	Commander
1902	Makuka	Mosadiathebe Lentswe
1911	Machechele	Matlhodi Kgamanyane
1915	Mafatshwana	Kgomotso Kgamanyane
	Maatlametlo	Maramane Pilane
1922	Madima	Mmatalane Pilane
1928	Machama	Mathuba Pilane
	Matshego	Motlatsi Pilane
1939	Magata	Mmamorema Pilane
1947	Mafiri	Marokeng Moremi
1962	Malwelakgosi	Tshire Pilane
1963	Maisakoma	Khukhwanyane Pilane

Figure 1: The Drums, as they were when found in 1971



Source: Photo by Sandy Grant