

«Less Is More, My Friend!». Sibongile Kgaila and Solly Sebotso: Four-String Guitar Song Composers from Botswana

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Abstract

The acoustic guitar spread in Botswana in the early 1950s like in many other central African areas. At that time, mainly home-made instruments (*motontonyane*) were played because of the insufficient availability of industrially manufactured guitars, especially in the most remote villages. Nowadays, guitarists in Botswana play mainly on industrially manufactured acoustic and electric guitars equipped with only four strings. Furthermore, many of them fret the chord positions from above the keyboard of the instrument with their left hand and not from below.

This article is focused on two four-string guitar song composers from Botswana that I documented during my field research conducted in 2018 and 2019: Solly Sebotso and Sibongile Kgaila. I will investigate their musical formation and career, the different contexts where they perform, and I will analyse with musical transcriptions their individual styles. Furthermore, the article will examine the diffusion and development of four-string guitar in Botswana.

«Less is more, my friend!». Sibongile Kgaila e Solly Sebotso, autori di canzoni per chitarra a quattro corde del Botswana. *La chitarra acustica si è diffusa in Botswana nei primi anni '50 del secolo scorso come in molte altre aree dell'Africa centrale. A quel tempo, venivano suonati principalmente strumenti home-made (chiamati in lingua setswana motontonyane) a causa della scarsa disponibilità di chitarre di fabbricazione industriale, specialmente nei villaggi più remoti. Oggi in Botswana i chitarristi suonano prevalentemente strumenti acustici ed elettrici dotati però di sole quattro corde. Inoltre, molti di loro*

tastano le posizioni degli accordi con la mano sinistra da sopra la tastiera dello strumento e non da sotto.

Questo articolo è incentrato su due compositori e chitarristi a quattro corde del Botswana che ho avuto modo di documentare durante le mie ricerche sul campo condotte nel 2018 e nel 2019: Solly Sebotso e Sibongile Kgaila. Andrò a investigare la loro formazione musicale e carriera artistica, i diversi contesti in cui si esibiscono dal vivo e analizzerò attraverso l'uso di trascrizioni i loro stili individuali. L'articolo esaminerà inoltre la diffusione e lo sviluppo della chitarra a quattro corde in Botswana.

Introduction

This article is focused on two Botswana guitar song composers that I documented during my field research conducted in 2018 and 2019: Solly Sebotso and Sibongile Kgaila, both active particularly in the area of Gaborone, the capital city of the country. I had the possibility to conduct this research thanks to the three-year project (2018-2020) *Biographies and work analyses of East/Central African composers* (P 30718-G26) coordinated by Gerhard Kubik and financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). In the past, I had already dealt with guitarists from the African continent (Cosentino 2019a), in particular I dedicated my PhD thesis (Cosentino 2013) to the compositions of Christopher “Khilizibe” Gerald (1981-2019), finger-style guitar song composer from Malawi, investigating both his right hand thumb-index finger style (Cosentino 2019b) and the relationship with his master Donald Kachamba (Cosentino 2019c).

Thanks to the Austrian research project, I had the opportunity to investigate why Botswana guitarists only play with four strings and, above all, why many of them fret the chord positions from above the keyboard of the instrument with their left hand and not from below. In the summer of 2016, I watched a video posted on the Facebook page of one of my Italian guitarist friends who said: «Watch this African woman playing the guitar. I have never seen anything like it!». So I watched the video entitled *Botswana Music Guitar – Ronnie – Happy New Year*.¹ I was amazed, the woman was fretting the four strings of the instrument from above the keyboard using her left hand and at the same time she played melodies on the bass string using a very structured and elegant motional pattern characterized by a rotation of the left hand, first in one direction and then in the other, to fret the string alternately with the little finger and the thumb (Fig. 1a-1b). After reading the comments on the video, I learned that the guitar player was actually a man and not a woman, but the feminine traits and the bandana worn on the head by the performer had confused several users and, at first, also me. It was Ronald “Ronnie” Moipolai, a guitar song composer from Kopong, a village 30 km from Gaborone, whom I then had the opportunity to meet at his home on 8th July 2018. On that occasion, I video and audio recorded three of his compositions. Unfortunately, he was not in good health: he had a dull gaze and hollow facial features, and he died two months later (20th September) killed by the HIV.

¹ The video is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx4cRw6TIIg>> (last access: 9th July 2020).



FIGURES 1A-1B. Ronald “Ronnie” Moipolai performs his characteristic motional pattern by sequentially fretting the lowest string first with the thumb of the left hand (1a) and then with the little finger (1b). Frames from unpublished video by the author (Kopong, 8th July 2018).

Ronnie’s video was not the only one on YouTube that showed Botswana’s guitar style: one could find dozens of videos with other guitarists playing the instrument in the same unusual way, but Ronnie’s video was by far the most viewed (over a million times). There were so many questions to answer: why only four strings? Why fret them from above the keyboard? Had Ronnie been the first guitar player using this technique and had the



FIGURE 2. Map of Botswana.



FIGURE 3. Bontshetse Sebako playing her *setinkane* (Gaborone, 30th June 2018; photo: S. Montaquila).

others then imitated him after the success of his video? Or was that a way of playing the instrument which was already deeply rooted in Botswana?

Landed for the first time in Gaborone, the only contact I had was Tomeletso Sereetsi, journalist and former liaison officer of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM). Today, he is a very popular singer in Botswana and also a talented four-string guitarist as well as the author of a book about the guitar style that he calls Tswana four-string guitar (Sereetsi 2013). In this volume, Sereetsi provides a brief history of the Tswana style and transcribes all the possible chord positions of the four-string instrument; in the final part we can also find short biographies of the most influential Botswana guitarists.

Initially, the purpose of my field research was to document musicians and composers in two different areas: the one around the capital Gaborone and subsequently that of Maun, a village located in the north, much appreciated by tourists thanks to its proximity to the magnificent Okavango Delta (Fig. 2). In the two field researches of 2018 and 2019, I documented not only guitarists but also *setinkane* lamellophone players (Fig. 3) and players of *segaba*, the bowed string instrument of Botswana (Fig. 4).²

The Tswana four-string guitar

Tswana is the main ethno-linguistic group in the country – present also in South Africa. They speak Setswana, a Bantu language, which is the most spoken language in Botswana, but English is also widely spoken as the country was a British protectorate from 1885 to 1966. Kalanga and Sekgalagadi are other Bantu languages which are spoken in some areas of the country. Shona and Ndebele are other ethnic groups who live all over Botswana, whereas Khoisan live mainly in the west central part of the country, and they speak several Khoisan languages characterized by the heavy use of “click” consonants.

The acoustic guitar spread in Botswana in the early 1950s like in many other central African areas (Tracey 1972, Low 1982, Malamusi 1994, Kubik 1995, Kaye 2008, Schmidhofer 2009). At that time, mainly home-made instruments were played because of the insufficient availability of industrially manufactured guitars, especially in the most remote villages. The instrument was built using an oilcan as a resonance box inside which the carved wooden keyboard was inserted and the strings were fixed; they were usually obtained by unrolling bicycle brakes (Fig. 5). These home-made instruments were called *motontonyane*, *senara* or *serankure* in Setswana language. According to Sereetsi (2013) and the interviews documented in my field research, these instruments were equipped with only four strings. It is interesting to note that the shape and the way of making the instrument are identical to those of four-string home-made banjos “type A” described by Gerhard Kubik:

² The field research was carried out also thanks to the special help provided by the interpreters Mosako Sego Lee Rakobe in the Gaborone area and Anthony Molosi in Maun, and my wife Silvia Montaquila whose photographs are published in this article.



FIGURE 4. Thojane Ikageng playing his *segaba* (Maun, 11th July 2018; photo: S. Montaquila).

«LESS IS MORE, MY FRIEND!»



FIGURE 5. Home-made guitar kept at the Phuthadikobo Museum in Mochudi (July 2018; photo: S. Montaquila).

Between World Wars I and II the American banjo was introduced in various parts of Africa with ballroom dancing featuring jazz-derived music (Kubik 2017: 135).

After World War II factory-manufactured banjos and guitars were well within reach of the township population in southern Africa. This source for musicianship, however, dried up in the late 1960s. Suddenly, acoustic guitars and banjos, even strings, disappeared from the market in the countries to the north of South Africa (*ibidem*: 135-136).

Some youngsters began to build their own versions, but not all of them followed the construction details of the American banjo (*ibidem*: 117).

Type A possesses a tin-can resonator in one piece; usually an old kerosene can is used, into which a central hole is cut on the upper side, over which pass the strings. The resonator has no skin cover in this type. The body of the instrument is not round, but rectangular in shape. The wooden fretboard pierces the side of the can, passing under the surface to its front wall (*ibidem*: 121).

Furthermore, in southern Africa, particularly in the areas inhabited by South African Zulu, Khoisan and Tswana, a three- or four-string lute-shaped chordophone named *ramkie* was common from the early 18th century. This chordophone was a local adaptation of the Portuguese *rabequinha* or *cavaquinho*, which was introduced into South Africa thanks to European sailors. Even the name *ramkie* is derived from the Portuguese language (Kirby 1965, Coplan 2008, Kaemmer 2008, Kaye 2008, Kubik 2017).

Radio Botswana (formerly Radio Bechuanaland) was founded in 1965 as the only radio in the country, and in those years the operators of this newly born radio began to audio record traditional music of Botswana played in the studio and in the villages. They recorded numerous performances in some villages, at local festivals and events. Many of these recordings are kept on magnetic tapes in the archives of Radio Botswana and are waiting for digital transfer, and we all hope that time has not ruined these historical recordings. At the time of my last field research (July 2019), the tapes had unfortunately not yet been digitized.

Batho Molema was one of the most important operators of Radio Botswana and when interviewed by Tomeletso Sereetsi, he stated that when he arrived at the villages or at local festivals, the musicians were excited about being recorded. He was probably one of the first to document a Tswana guitarist; it was in 1968 and the musician was Omponye Ositilwe in Serowe (north-east of Gaborone).

The Tswana society of the time classified the four-stringers as *dikopa* (losers). The typical guitarist was a herdboyc who took care of his master's cattle. The irony, Molema points out, was that the *dikgosi* (tribal leaders) would invite these "losers" to add value to their hallowed functions through song. And like many other folk artists of the time, after a recital the guitarist would beg for a cow in return. The four-stringer was then paid with the alcoholic sorghum brew at drinking holes/shebeens [...]. At the time of independence, a period of change when urban centers cropped up complete with their new cash system, a lot of performance artists toured across the country. They typically lived on the road moving from shebeen to shebeen. They were not attracted to formal employment or farming, which was the main economic activity of the time. They never had a permanent address. This irreverence for socio-economic conventions ensured them a position on the fringes

of society. The four-string guitar like most musical instruments in Botswana was largely about recreation (Sereetsi 2013: 11-12).

The guitar was therefore also played for personal pleasure, in particular to fight boredom during the long downtime of cattle breeding. Like the people living in other central African areas, also many Tswana workers left the villages to go to work in the South African mining centres where they could experience an urban environment full of new cultural stimuli and meet workers from different areas of the continent. These mining centres were a multicultural and variegated environment where, among other things, industrially manufactured guitars could also be purchased.

Between the 1950s and 1960s, South African music genres such as jive and *mbaqanga* were very popular in Botswana and in the southern part of Africa. There is no doubt that these music genres had a profound influence on the first Tswana guitarists, particularly the melodic lines played on the electric bass guitar, always in the foreground in *mbaqanga* music, and the electric guitar parts characterised by a crystalline timbre (Meintjes 2003). These instrumental features were reproduced on a single instrument, i.e. the first home-made Tswana guitar. With the addition of the voice, a guitarist became a one-man band reproducing the melodies and the sound of *mbaqanga* and jive compositions, so popular at that time (see next paragraph).

Just like the home-made banjo tradition in southern Africa documented by Gerhard Kubik (1989) and Moya A. Malamusi (2011, 2015), the home-made four-string guitar tradition in Botswana was an expression of a youth culture in rural and semi-urban areas and intended for «self-entertainment, solo playing activity» (Kubik 2017: 117). However, as previously mentioned, some guitar players moved from one village to another playing on street corners for a little money, adapting their repertoires to popular music played by local radios.

Nowadays, four-string guitarists in Botswana play mainly their own compositions on industrially manufactured acoustic and electric guitars. They use a thick electric bass string (the fourth) and the three highest guitar strings, frequently tuned following the sequence B – G# – E – E (from the first to the fourth string). The vocal and instrumental melodies emerge mainly from a harmonic progression based on the I-IV-V chords. Tswana guitarists use a plectrum held in the right hand to pluck the strings; it is often home-made, as we will see later.

Sibongile Kgaila

The two four-string guitar song composers dealt with in the following pages are certainly among the best known and most appreciated in Botswana. I had the pleasure to meet them for the first time on 2nd July 2018 at their homes together with my wife Silvia and the interpreter Mosako Sego Lee Rakobe, who is also a popular Botswana hip-hop singer.

As soon as we reached the village of Thamaga located about 50 km east of Gaborone, we contacted Sibongile by phone to get directions to his house. It was not at all easy to find him, as the indications he gave us were rather vague and, moreover, he mentioned “big trees” and the sound “grr” produced by the rumble strips located on the road as reference points at the entrance to the village. Once we found the house, we first met a dozen children, including his sons and grandchildren, who led us to Sibongile and his wife. The guitarist was dressed in a particularly elegant way: white shirt, grey trousers and red moccasins. Then, he proudly showed us the well-kept garden outside his house; he loves growing fruit and vegetables and he also delights in creating life-size figures of animals using pieces of old cars and metal sheets. In the garden there are some of his creations as well as a very elegant swan that he made by cutting a white flowering shrub (Fig. 6).

We started talking while sitting in the garden. He told us that he was born in Thamaga on 11th January 1966 and that he started playing the guitar when he was 16 years old. He never went to school and he taught himself to read and write. Since he was a child, he had been attracted by the guitar, particularly by listening to Congolese rumba and South African *mbaqanga* music broadcast on the radio. In that period, he fell in love with the songs performed by the Tswana guitarists Andries Bok and Kotoeshele; he was also a fan of the Zimbabwean guitarist Leonard Tazvivinga Dembo and he furthermore began to like American rock and blues. This music has undoubtedly influenced Sibongile’s guitar style which is entirely personal and unique. His first instrument was a home-made *motontonyane*, he told me on that occasion:

Four strings are perfect; on my first instrument I started out with four strings and not six, also because those hand-made instruments would not have supported the tension of six strings. Are you familiar with the musical instruments of Botswana? *Segaba* is like a violin with only one string, nevertheless you can play a lot of notes. Then, *setinkane* is like a piano with fewer notes. The Tswana guitar has only four strings but you can perform as a one-man band without other musicians because you have the bass string for the rhythm and the three high strings of the guitar for the melodies. Less is more, my friend!³

I remember that these statements deeply affected me and they were fundamental for the development of this paper. “Less is more”: a well-trained *segaba* player can play different overtones from two or three fundamentals, for example by rubbing the bow in different ways and varying the pressure on the string. As for the guitar, the musician turns into a one-man band thanks to the groove played on the bass string and the chords and melodies on the three high strings. Then, he continued:

When I listened to *mbaqanga* and Congolese rumba on the radio, I thought that all the sounds were played by a single musician, so I learned to play all the musical parts on only one instrument: my *motontonyane*. My father, however, was not happy that I played

³ All the statements by Sibongile Kgaila and Solly Sebotso cited in this work were collected in Setswana language during my first field research (2018). Mosako Sego Lee Rakobe translated them into English.



FIGURE 6. Two art creations in Sibongile Kgaila's garden (Thamaga, 2nd July 2018; photo: S. Montaquila).

the guitar; I always had to hide it. He destroyed two of them; he stopped only when I bought my first expensive industrially manufactured acoustic guitar [laughs]! Nowadays, however, I prefer electric guitars, I love that sound also because I can perform without any problem in noisy places where people scream and have fun. I make a living thanks to the guitar; I can feed my family which also includes my elder sister's children as she passed away a few years ago.

Sibongile Kgaila usually performs live both at cultural events organized by the Botswana government and at bars around Thamaga, sometimes with other guitar song composers



FIGURE 7. Sibongile Kgaila before one of his shows (Kweneng, 30th June 2019; photo: S. Montaquila).

of the area. In particular, he loves performing with his friend Solly Sebotso for whom he has great esteem and admiration:

I met Solly for the first time in 1996; we grew up together with music. We immediately became friends; there is a great understanding between us both in music and life. Solly is a very talented guitarist, I have probably never heard him play a wrong note on the instrument! When you perform live with him on the same stage you are perfectly aware that you are in the company of a great artist.

On 30th June 2019, I had the opportunity to attend a concert of Sibongile and Solly at Kings Garden Bar in Kweneng, close to Molepolole. Colourful hand-made advertising posters were affixed along the main roads in the Gaborone area and, just like important boxing matches, “vs.” was written between the names of the two guitarists (Fig. 8). We reached the concert venue in the early afternoon; just next to the bar there was an enclosed stage where Sibongile was setting up the sound system.

Once the soundcheck was over (Fig. 9), the guitarist from Thamaga started to play. The audience was predominantly male; almost all of them were completely drunk and danced in a rather agitated way (Fig. 10). During Sibongile’s performance, in a moment of euphoria generated by the guitarist who played the instrument behind his shoulders (Fig. 11), a young man threw an empty bottle violently on the ground, breaking it into



FIGURE 8. Hand-made advertising poster (Molepolole, 30th June 2019; photo: A. Cosentino).



FIGURE 9. Sibongile Kgaila (left) and Solly Sebotso (right) during the soundcheck (Kweneng, 30th June 2019; photo: S. Montaquila).



FIGURE 10. Sibongile Kgaila and his audience. Frame from unpublished video by the author (Kweneng, 30th June 2019).



FIGURE 11. Sibongile Kgaila plays the guitar behind his shoulders (Kweneng, 30th June 2019; photo: S. Montaquila).

a thousand pieces. The two bartenders immediately shut themselves in the bar to avoid trouble and they reopened the bar doors only when things had quieted down a bit. During the last song, a guy from the audience took the stage and put a 10 pula note in the guitarist's hand, congratulating him with great enthusiasm. During Solly Sebotso's performance – on that occasion he played his red Ibanez electric guitar (Fig. 13) – the audience became very annoying towards us, excited by too much alcohol, so much to our regret we decided to leave the concert.

In addition to some industrially manufactured amplifiers, Sibongile owns several amplifiers that he made himself by modifying old cassette players or turntables. He always performs on his green Palmer electric guitar model PE-LPS whose body shape is inspired by that of the popular Gibson Les Paul: «I love my guitar. In the past I used to play with different tunings, then I realized that it cost me too much money because I continuously broke the strings! So, I learned to play all the chord positions with one tuning». Regarding his compositions, he said: «they are about events I see around me. I like writing songs; melodies come to me like fruit falling from trees».

Analysis of the song *Tika molamu*

After the interview, we moved to the front of his house where Sibongile placed a 250 watt audio speaker designed by Dixon with a 15 inch cone and a 6-channel mixer to which he connected his guitar and a microphone to amplify the voice. As soon as he had put the sound system in place, the guitarist cut his plectrum from a Cerebos salt container. According to Sibongile, the soft plastic, particularly that of the central area of the container, is excellent for playing the instrument. The guitarist from Thamaga had to get used to this home-made plectrum because of the scarce availability of industrially manufactured plectrums in the villages of Botswana.

On that occasion, and the following year also at the Kings Garden Bar in Kweneng, Sibongile played his four-string Palmer electric guitar with the following tuning: $C_4 - A_3 - F_4 - F_2$ (from the first to the fourth). He normally inserts the bass string in the space reserved for the fourth string of the guitar in order to fret the chord positions more easily with his left hand from under the keyboard (see [Video example 1](#)). The highest one is always placed by Sibongile between the second and fourth strings, which is quite unusual.

That day, I video and audio recorded five of Sibongile's compositions: *Dineo*, the cyclone that hit Botswana and other African countries with violent storms in 2017; *Mandela road* dedicated to Nelson Mandela, who was a great source of inspiration to Sibongile; *Gladies*, a song about the marriage celebrated in Maun between his friend Gladies and a rock star; *Khama*, dedicated to Seretse Ian Khama, the fourth president of Botswana, and *Tika molamu* (Throw the knobkerrie). The term *molamu*, in Setswana language, refers to the knobkerrie, an over a meter long wooden stick with a rounded head. It is common among various South African ethnic groups (Zulu, Khoisan, Tswa-

na) and in the past it was used as a weapon. In more recent times, *molamu* is mostly used for hunting purposes as Sibongile says in the lyrics of the song.⁴

Tika molamu is about Sibongile's life as a guitarist, presented through a first-hand experience. During a trip from Gaborone to Molepolole, he came to a place called Tika molamu. To those who asked him where his *molamu* was, he replied that he was there not to hunt rabbits but to play the guitar. His "weapon", therefore, was not the *molamu* but a four-string instrument. Nonetheless, he was forced to throw the *molamu* too, with the help of Twege, his guitar. In the central part of the song, Sibongile stops singing and playing and performs an imaginary dialogue with the instrument that "answers" his questions through notes produced on the highest strings.

<i>Tika molamu</i>	Throw the knobkerrie
<i>Maloba ketswa ko Gaborone</i> <i>Ka tsena kgaolong ya Molepolole</i> <i>Go nale kgaolo ebidiwa Tika molamu</i> <i>Monna oe rate</i> <i>Ko Tika molamu go monate</i> <i>Erile ke goroga ba mpotsatsa:</i> <i>«Bare molamu o kae?»</i>	When I was in Gaborone I went to Molepolole There was a place called Tika molamu You should love that place Tika molamu is nice When I went there, they asked me: «Where is your knobkerrie?»
<i>Kare nna batho: «ga kena molamu</i> <i>Ke letsa katara yame</i> <i>ga kea ta go tsoma mono go tsoma</i> <i>mebutlanyana</i> <i>ga kea ta go tika molamu</i> <i>ke letsa katara yame»</i> <i>«Rre Sibongile Kgaila, tika molamu!»</i>	Then I told them: «I haven't a knobkerrie I play my guitar I am not here to hunt rabbits I am not here to throw the knobkerrie I am here to play my guitar» «Mr. Sibongile Kgaila, throw the knobkerrie!»
<i>Aa ke lapile kego tika molamu thata waitse</i> <i>Go botoka ke bitsa Twege go nthusa go tika</i>	I am tired of throwing the knobkerrie I'd rather call Twege to help me throw it
<i>Twege!</i> <i>Oko ka e kentsa ke letsa gantsi osa arabe ne</i> <i>mama?</i>	Twege! Where are you, I was calling you and why didn't you answer?
<i>Wa re oko kae ne Twege?</i> <i>Omo kitcheneng?</i> <i>Wabo o ntse o koma sukiri yotlhe Twege?</i> <i>Mma?</i> <i>Bona nthuse go tika molamu ka lentshwe le le monate</i> <i>ota kgona Twege!</i> <i>Wa utlwala mama</i>	Where are you Twege? In the kitchen? Are you eating sugar as usual, Twege? Well? Help me to throw the knobkerrie with your beautiful voice, Twege! I hear your beautiful voice, my love

Tika molamu is one of Sibongile's most popular songs; during live performances, the audience sings loudly the lyrics of his song as I had the opportunity to experience at Kings Garden Bar in Kweneng. Also during the performance I documented at his own house

⁴ Mosako Sego Lee Rakobe transcribed the Setswana lyrics of *Tika molamu* and *Rampoka* by Solly Sebotso (see below) and translated them into English.



FIGURE 12. Sibongile Kgaila and his “home audience” (Thamaga, 2nd July 2018; photo: S. Montaquila).

([Video example 1](#)), his wife, children and grandchildren sang along and heartily laughed when the musician started speaking to Twege, his guitar (Fig. 12).

In order to transcribe Sibongile and Solly Sebotso’s songs (Musical examples 1 and 2), I used the same four-section structure (three staves and one guitar tablature) that I devised to transcribe the songs by the Malawian guitarist Christopher “Khilizibe” Gerald (Cosentino 2013, 2019b, 2019c). The highest staff contains the musical transcription of the vocal line: the number placed at the beginning of each staff indicates the number of elementary pulses contained within the cycle; below this staff the lyrics of the song are transcribed. In sub-Saharan African music, elementary pulses are the smallest time-units between the actions of the musicians and the performers. The elementary pulse-line is isomorphous and unaccented; it can be totally silent and merely present as a subjective awareness shared by all participants during the performance. This elementary pulse-line is divided into cycles marked by formula numbers (for further details see Kubik 1983, 1999: chapter 3; 2010: vol. II, chapter 6). These cycles are melodic-harmonic segments constantly repeated during the songs by Sibongile and Solly, and each cycle contains a certain number of elementary pulses.

The other three sections below the vocal line are dedicated to the guitar: the notes are transcribed both on the “normal” staff and on the elementary pulse grid elaborated and constantly used by Gerhard Kubik to transcribe African music. It is fundamental

to deeply understand how the isomorphous and unaccented grid seamlessly flows in the performer's mind. Inserting the notes into the grid, we have a more detailed view of this cognitive process. This structure, therefore, takes into account both the customs of Western guitarists and the conceptualization of African musicians.

The fourth and final section is dedicated to the specific guitar tablature; the space between the lines indicates a string of the instrument (the highest string is on the top) and the numbers written in these spaces correspond to the frets of the keyboard. Regarding the two songs analysed in this article, I decided to transcribe all the melodic-harmonic sections played by the musicians; each of these, in particular the vocal melodies, is slightly varied during the performance in order to rhythmically and melodically adapt the vocal melody to the lyrics. Every section is marked with a double vertical line at the end.

Unlike most Tswana guitarists, Sibongile Kgaila plays the guitar exclusively by fretting the strings with his left hand from below the keyboard of the instrument ([Video example 1](#)). *Tika molamu* is in B major key, it is based on the I-IV-V chord progression (see Musical example 1). The song can be divided into cycles of 16 elementary pulses; the tempo is rather fast, around 114 bpm. The first melodic section (bars 1 and 2) is characterised by a very regular bass line, played on the fourth string of the instrument: one note every four elementary pulses, always on the beat. The musician then produces chord positions and off-beat melodies on the three high strings; the vocal melody rhythmically and melodically follows the high strings of the guitar in a very accurate way. The second section (bars 3 and 4) is characterized by a guitar part played only on the bass string. It is a very fast melodic line played on every elementary pulse, on which Sibongile sings a melody characterized by several off-beat accents.

In the third melodic section (bars 5 and 6), the guitarist from Thamaga stops the bass string with the tip of his left index finger while he plucks the string every four elementary pulses with the plectrum in his right hand. This technical expedient allows Sibongile to “change” the overall sound of the song. It seems like the “bass player” of the band stops playing for a while, leaving the instrumental support to the “guitar player” accompanied by the “drummer” who only marks the beat on the fourth string (see [Video example 1](#)). It should also be noted that in this section the melodic line of the voice is rather off-beat, and it performs a very interesting “interlocking game” with the notes played on the guitar.

In the fourth section (bars 7 and 8), Sibongile plays only the fourth string of the instrument, every four elementary pulses, first the twelfth and then the second fret alternately, while the voice sings the words that give the song its title. In *Tika molamu*, the guitarist and composer from Thamaga exhibits his extraordinary melodic creativity and instrumental technique. In the end, the instrumental interlude (bars 9 and 10), characterized by a sequence of chords played in an “obsessive” way on each elementary pulse, shows the influence that rock and blues music has had on his individual style.

Solly Sebotso

Solly Sebotso is definitely among the best known and most appreciated four-string guitarists in Botswana. He was born in 1977 in Letlhakeng, a village 50 km from Molepolole where he currently lives, and he speaks both Setswana and Sekgalagadi and a few words of Afrikaans. He learned to play the guitar when he was 11 years old; Mapesani, a friend of his, taught him the first chord positions on his home-made *motontonyane*. When Solly was a boy, he guarded the family cattle and to fight boredom he learned to play *segaba* too.

The first time I met Solly in 2018, he told me that his father, just like Sibongile's father, was not happy at all that he played the guitar, because he found that it was only a waste of time and also because guitarists did not enjoy a good reputation in Botswana. Nevertheless, Solly did not care and did not give up playing the guitar, so his father finally had to accept his son's will. In 2018 he confessed to me: «I wasn't doing well at school... I was struggling a lot, but playing the guitar was so natural for me. I knew it was my way».

The inhabitants of Letlhakeng were his first audience, and later he started to perform in the streets and shopping centres of Molepolole and Gaborone. He said: «in the village where I was born the inhabitants are happy to hear you play the guitar but, unfortunately, they do not support your art. To earn some money, I had to move to Gaborone, it was my only chance to make a living from music».

Like many other Botswana musicians, Solly gained local success thanks to the first prize won at the prestigious President's Day Competition (2009). These competitions were established by the former Botswana President, Seretse Ian Khama, to celebrate his father Seretse Khama, Botswana's most active independence leader and first President of the country in office from 1966 to 1980. The aim of the President's Day Competition is to promote and support local artists and craftsmen with rich cash prizes.

Organized by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture to promote Botswana talents, the competition includes a regional preliminary level and a grand final in Gaborone. The categories are: Traditional Songs and Dances, Contemporary Music, Choral Music, Traditional Instruments and Visual Arts and Crafts. The Tswana four-string guitar is considered a traditional instrument along with the already mentioned *setinkane* and *segaba*. The winner of each category receives a prize of 10.000 pula (about 850 euro), an amount that many musicians invest in their career. For example, in 2016, Batlaadira Radipitse, a popular Tswana guitarist in Botswana, used part of a first prize to record his first studio album (Cosentino 2020).

Solly Sebotso also won the national competition in 2010, 2012 and 2018. Thanks to his success, Solly was hired to perform in various cultural events organized by the government and, as described above, also in private concerts taking place in bars and shebeens. In connection with cultural exchange initiatives organized by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, he travelled to Sweden and China where he promoted the four-string Botswana guitar in various music schools. Nowadays, Solly teaches some young students from Molepolole and Letlhakeng to play the guitar, but he does not do



FIGURE 13. Solly Sebotso performing at Kings Garden Bar (Kweneng, 30th June 2019; photo: S. Montaquila).

it for money. At our first meeting, he said: «when you are a young boy, it is very hard to have a nest egg; my students thank me as they can, sometimes their interest is enough». Solly does it because he recognizes the influence that the most experienced guitarists can have on a young musician, in his case particularly Tlhabano Molatliwa and Stampore, who have both passed away:

I was lucky to have met Stampore before he died, because we shared many musical performances and I learned a lot from him. However, the fact that I am now receiving invitations to cultural events that Stampore used to attend does not mean that I am receiving favours [laughs]. Almost all the best guitarists have died; they were something unique, something else. Nowadays, we only have “imitators” of the guitarists who have passed away; the new guitarists simply emulate the old compositions changing only the lyrics. Sibongile Kgaila is one of the few original and authentic guitarists we have today in Botswana. He plays the instrument in his own unique style, so distinguishable and very hard to imitate. It is a pleasure to perform with him also because he is much loved and appreciated by the audience.

Solly is very serious when he performs live, he rarely winks at the audience and almost never looks at the instrument: «if you have to look at your fingers while you are playing, it means that you are not talented. My fingers know well how to play my “tricks”». In 2018, I asked Solly why he played the chord positions with his left hand from above the

keyboard and used only four strings. He said: «the guitarists I learned from were already playing like this, it is the Tswana style. I play all my songs like this. When I perform live, I don't need other musicians because I can play the melodies on the three highest strings and the rhythm using the fourth string».

Analysis of the song *Rampoka*

On 2nd July 2018, I met Solly Sebotso at his home in Molepolole, where he still lives with his wife and children. It was only three days after his victory at the President's Day Competition, and the day before he had performed in a bar close to Molepolole, so was still a bit sleepy. Before recording, we therefore took a walk around the village drinking a coke. That day I documented three of his compositions: *Chaba Bakweni* (Fear of the Bakweni), a song that celebrates the battle won near Molepolole by the Bakweni ethnic group against the Bakgalagadi; *Branaveil* (Brandy), a song in Afrikaans in which the guitarist "recommends" his friends to stay away from his brandy; in the end, *Rampoka*, one of his most popular songs: it is about a policeman who resorted to hiding in a culvert because he was frightened of a thief. These are the lyrics in Setswana with translation:

<i>Rampoka</i>	Rampoka
<i>Rampoka o robetse mo kholobeteng</i>	Rampoka is sleeping inside the culvert
<i>Gotwe a latele motho ka kwa</i>	He was sent to arrest a thief
<i>Ga tsena ka kwa aba amo tshaba</i>	When he went there, he was afraid of him
<i>A tsena kahateng ga kholobete</i>	Then he hid inside the culvert
<i>Rampoka wee</i>	Rampoka wee

Solly tunes the guitar with the following sequence $F\sharp_4 - C\sharp_4 - A\sharp_3 - F\sharp_2$ (from the first to the fourth), he usually inserts the bass string in the space reserved for the sixth string of the instrument leaving a "double empty space" between the third and fourth string. This instrumental adaptation allows him to fret the strings more easily with his left hand from above the keyboard, especially the bass string which is fretted with the proximal phalanges of the index, middle and ring fingers (see [Video example 2](#)). During the recording session at his home, he played a Sanchez acoustic guitar, but he prefers his red Ibanez RG electric guitar, when he performs live in bars or for the President's Day Competition (Figure 13). With both instruments, he plucks the fourth string with the thumb of the right hand while the three high strings are plucked with a home-made plastic plectrum put on the index finger as if it were a ring.

Rampoka is in the key of B major and is based on a I-IV-V harmonic progression (see Musical example 2). The song can be divided into cycles of 16 elementary pulses; the tempo is rather fast, about 124 bpm. As for the song by Sibongile, the first section (bars 1 and 2) is characterised by a very regular bass line: one note every four elementary pulses, always on the beat. On the three high strings, Solly plays melodies often off-beat

containing the notes of the melodic vocal line. The voice thus melodically and rhythmically overlaps the pattern performed on the guitar. This feature of the Molepolole musician's style is equally evident in the second section (bars 3 and 4): in this section, it is the bass string to produce the melody sung by the voice. Solly plays this melody with the index-plectrum and not with the thumb of his right hand (see [Video example 2](#)).

Final remarks

Thanks to the field research I conducted between 2018 and 2019, it emerged that the four-string guitar is an instrument deeply rooted in the musical culture of Botswana, so much so as to be considered a "traditional instrument" included as such in the categories of the President's Day Competition. The four-string guitar is a demonstration of how an imported musical instrument can be modified and locally adapted with various transformations over the years. That is also why the "syncretic result" is considered "indigenous" and "traditional" by both guitar players and the audience, and even the government.

The two songs analysed in this paper show that both Sibongile and Solly become one-man bands when they play this instrument, with no need for other musicians to perform with them. The sound of their songs is characterized by a continuous interlocking game between the very regular bass line (rhythm and groove) and the melodies played on the three high strings, whose notes are also frequently sung by the performing musicians. Many guitarists fret the chord positions with their left hand from above the keyboard of the instrument, the way they learned it from the old masters. Those who prefer this peculiar way of playing usually insert the bass string in the space reserved for the sixth string of the guitar in order to fret it more easily with the proximal phalanges of the index, middle and ring fingers.

Thanks to their creativity and individual styles, Sibongile Kgaila and Solly Sebotso are leaving their mark in the varied Tswana four-string guitar milieu. Through their very different technical approaches to the instrument (tunings, use of the left hand, chord positions, and plectrums) and their individual compositional creativity, they have been able to create their own styles easily recognized and much appreciated by their audience and other Tswana guitarists.

Like many other four-string guitarists, Sibongile and Solly are professional musicians; they make a living with music thanks to performances at bars, cultural events organized by the government of Botswana and above all the President's Day Competition. Some musicians told me that they can survive for one year on the Competition's prize money, and that is why some of them decide not to perform live as they choose to wait and participate at the President's Day Competition with an unreleased song every year. Some traditional musicians are thus supported by the government of Botswana and, thanks to various initiatives, they manage to lead a decent existence. Once again: "less is more, my friend!".

Video examples

1. **Tika molamu** (*Throw the knobkerrie*). [06:10]

Performed by Sibongile Kgaila. Filmed by Alessandro Cosentino in Thamaga (Botswana), on 2nd July 2018. *Tika molamu* is one of Sibongile's most popular songs, it is in Setswana language. The term *molamu* refers to the knobkerrie, an over a meter long wooden stick with a rounded head. In the past it was used as a weapon; in more recent times, *molamu* is mostly used for hunting purposes as the guitarist says in the lyrics of the song. Sibongile plays his four-string Palmer electric guitar at his own house.

2. **Rampoka**. [04:35]

Performed by Solly Sebotso. Filmed by Alessandro Cosentino in Molepolole (Botswana), on 2nd July 2018. The song is in Setswana language, it is about a policeman (*Rampoka*) who resorted to hiding in a culvert because he was frightened of a thief. Solly plays his Sanchez acoustic guitar at his own house, fretting the chord positions from above the keyboard of the instrument with the left hand.

Musical example 1. *Tika molamu* by Sibongile Kgaila.

♩ = 114

Voice

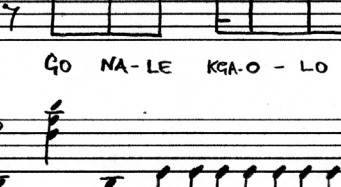
MA - LO - BA KE - TSWA KO GA - BO - RO - NE

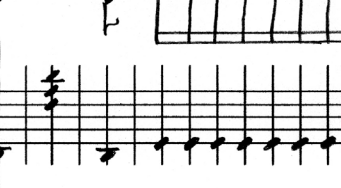
Guit.

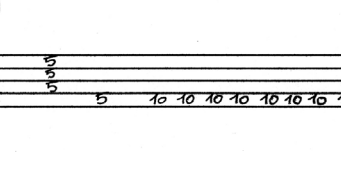
Guit.


TAB

3

V. 

G. 

G. 

TAB 

«LESS IS MORE, MY FRIEND!»

5

V. $\text{GA KE-NA MO-LA - MU}$ $\text{KE LE-TSA KA-TA - RA YA - HE}$

G. $\text{GA KE-NA MO-LA - MU}$ $\text{KE LE-TSA KA-TA - RA YA - HE}$

G. $\text{GA KE-NA MO-LA - MU}$ $\text{KE LE-TSA KA-TA - RA YA - HE}$

TAB $\text{GA KE-NA MO-LA - MU}$ $\text{KE LE-TSA KA-TA - RA YA - HE}$

7

V. TI - KA TI - KA $\text{TI - KA TI - KA MO-LA - MU}$

G. TI - KA TI - KA $\text{TI - KA TI - KA MO-LA - MU}$

G. TI - KA TI - KA $\text{TI - KA TI - KA MO-LA - MU}$

TAB TI - KA TI - KA $\text{TI - KA TI - KA MO-LA - MU}$

COSENTINO

9

V.

G.

G.

TAB

The musical score is written for a vocal line (V.) and two guitar lines (G.). The key signature has two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor), and the time signature is 9/16. The guitar parts are highly rhythmic, featuring many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The tablature section at the bottom is organized into four staves, each corresponding to one of the four guitar strings (1st to 4th from the bottom). It uses numbers 0-10 to indicate fret positions and 'x' for natural harmonics. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second notes, as well as rests.

Musical example 2. *Rampoka* by Solly Sebotso.

$\text{♩} = 124$

Voice

RAH-PO- KA O RO- BE- TSE MO KO-LO BE- TENG

Guit.

Guit.

TAB

3

V.

RAH-PO- KA WEE RAH-PO- KA

G.

G.

TAB

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