

# The Dual Nature of Setswana Wedding Songs: Expressions of Peace and Conflict within Families

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## Abstract

Songs are very important components in the folklore of Botswana as they accompany almost all social activity. Every occasion in which people come together has particular songs for the event, including work, wedding and funerals. This paper argues that Setswana wedding songs have a dual nature, that is they express peace and harmony, but they also insinuate conflict within families. Most of the songs talk about what should be done in order to have a peaceful marriage and a good relationship with one's in-laws. They also talk about possibilities of conflict that may arise in a marriage if one does not conform to the prescribed expectations. The paper analyses selected wedding songs thematically to exemplify the dual nature of these songs.

## Introduction

Marriage is an institution that is common to all human societies. It is a legally and socially sanctioned union between a man and a woman. However, in Botswana this union is not for the bride and groom only but it is also for their families. When two people marry they become kin and their families will also be tied by kinship. Marriage is also the basis for the formation of a family. The family is the smallest political unit which is often but not always riddled with problems. According to Gluckman (1965:56) the estrangements in the family are associated with the extension of ties to wider kinship groupings. These groupings support the family, but they are also inimical to the family.

Many Batswana live in extended families especially in the rural areas. However, the extended family is slowly being replaced by the nuclear family and single parent family although these families still keep in touch with their extended families (Makwinja, Molwane and Segobye 2000: 55). The material analysed in this paper is part of the research that was undertaken as part of my doctoral dissertation among the Bakgatla of Mochudi and Sikwane villages in Botswana. This paper starts by giving a brief overview of Setswana wedding songs, followed by an examination of the three main types of conflicts inherent in families. The paper will then analyse a few songs thematically to exemplify the dual nature of these songs.

### **A brief overview of Setswana wedding songs**

Among the Bakgatla, a wedding is celebrated with singing and dancing to Setswana wedding songs. By wedding songs I mean songs that are sung and performed at wedding celebrations and that deal with issues of love and marriage. Much as these songs are sung for entertainment they also play a significant role in socializing the bride and groom into their new status as husband and wife. Some of the functions of Setswana wedding songs are to teach the couple about marriage and married life in general; to express what is socially and culturally expected of them as husband and wife; to talk about the couple's new rights and obligations and to communicate messages about the cultural expectations for a peaceful and successful marriage.

Setswana wedding songs have a dual nature; they express peace and harmony but they also insinuate conflict within families. Most of the songs talk about what should be done in order to have a peaceful marriage and a good relationship with one's in-laws and they also indirectly talk about possibilities of conflict that may arise in a marriage if one does not conform to the prescribed expectations. Ideally, there should be peace, love and harmony but the songs also indicate that conflicts are inevitably present within this harmony. As it will be observed most of the wedding songs are directed to the bride thus giving the impression that the success or failure of the marriage is dependent on her.

### **Types and causes of conflicts in families in Botswana**

There are three main types of conflicts inherent in families namely, conflict between husband and wife; conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and between daughter-in-law and other members of her husband's family.

In addition, there are a number of reasons why conflicts occur in families. Some of the reasons for conflicts between husband and wife are; adultery, infidelity, infertility, lack of respect and support for each other, being unfaithful, irresponsibility or failure to provide the basic necessities of life, lack of patience and perseverance. Ideally, the couple has to be faithful and loyal to each other for the success of the marriage. The couple should discuss family matters together without any party feeling or thinking that he or she is superior to the other. It is the responsibility of the husband to take care of his family; he must provide them with financial and emotional support. He must also fulfil his sexual obligations to his wife. On the other hand, the wife is responsible for all the household chores including but not limited to cooking, sweeping, fetching water, taking care of the husband, the children and other members of the family.

The issue of power and power relations can also bring conflict in the family. Traditionally, the man is the head of the household and all decisions pertaining to the welfare of the family are taken by him with or without the consent of his wife. This can create problems when ideally one is supposed to be the head of the family but reality proves to the contrary, when one cannot support his family, maybe because he is unemployed or because his wife earns more than he does. The role of the wife (according to societal expectations) is to service what the head offers, for example, cook the food bought by the man and clean the house built by a man. But, if he is not able to provide these things for one reason or the other, that can bring conflict in the home because there is an imbalance in terms of prescribed family

power relations. When a man cannot live up to the expectations of the society, he becomes very bitter because he feels emasculated. In addition, failure to fulfil any of these responsibilities will result in conflicts between husband and wife.

In addition, conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law may be caused by laziness of the latter. A daughter-in-law is expected to work hard, and perform most if not all the household chores; therefore laziness on her part is not tolerated. Another plausible cause is insecurity and jealousy, which usually emanates from the fact that the mother-in-law more often than not finds it difficult to acknowledge that her son is now a married man and so has full responsibility for his wife and children. The arrival of a daughter-in-law is seen as a threat to the relationship between mother and son for he now has to devote his attention, love and finances to his wife. In some cases the mother-in-law fails to welcome her daughter-in-law and constantly harasses her for one thing or the other. The mother-in-law is always in the background causing tensions in the family by either bullying her daughter-in-law, ordering her to do this and that and keeping her under constant scrutiny, or by interfering with the running of her son's family and controlling her son in one way or the other.

Further, conflicts may occur between the daughter-in-law and other members of her husband's family. This type of conflict is succinctly explained by Max Gluckman (1965) who says;

the success and happiness of a marriage does not depend so much upon the couple but also upon his parents and other relatives that they may live with. While she generally manages to get on fairly well with them, it happens now and then that they become jealous of her and begin to dislike her; especially if they feel that her husband is devoting all his attention to her and is not supporting them as liberally as before. They may accuse her of being lazy, disobedient, snobbish, etc. She on the other hand, may complain of the burdens and workload they thrust upon her, of calling her names, disrespecting her etc. If a man is too devoted to his wife, they say she has bewitched him out of his senses (Gluckman 1965: 59-60).

Furthermore, conflict may crop up between daughter-in-law and sisters-in-law especially those who are not married but have children and live in the same compound because they feel that their brother is obliged to support them and their children. They may even accuse the daughter-in-law of ill-treating and discriminating against their children.

In addition, the main function of marriage is procreation, all societies require children if they are to continue their lineage. Therefore, lack of children usually causes conflicts between husband and wife and between daughter-in-law and her husband's kin (Schapera 1994: 155). Interestingly, they always blame the wife for this defect even if they do not have any medical proof for their accusation.

*Bogadi* (bride price) is cattle given to the bride's family by the groom's family as a token of appreciation for being allowed to marry their daughter. *Bogadi* has been

cited as one contributory factor to marital problems; however this issue will not be dealt with in this paper.

#### **Analysis of Setswana wedding songs**

The following is an analysis of some Setswana wedding songs to show the dual nature of these songs.

*Dikuku di monate*  
*Dikuku di monate*  
*Lenyalo le boima*  
*Rona re a tsamaya*  
*O tla sala o di bona*

*Mosadi ntlo ke e o*  
*O sale le yone*  
*Rona re a tsamaya*  
*O tla sala o di bona*

Cakes are very sweet  
Cakes are very sweet  
Marriage is difficult  
We are leaving  
You will experience the difficulties alone

Woman there is the house  
Stay in the house  
We are leaving  
You will experience the difficulties alone

The above song talks about the dual nature of marriage that it can be pleasant and difficult at the same time. It is a song about the realities of life. It introduces the couple and precisely the bride to the institution of marriage.

Bakgatla, like other ethnic groups in Botswana, are patriarchal and patrilocal. This patrilocality means that when a woman gets married she has to leave her family and move and live with her husband and his people. By virtue of this displacement the woman is likely to encounter problems with her in-laws. So this song prepares her psychologically and emotionally that marriage is not all rosy, it can be sweet at times and bitter at the same time. She must not use the jubilation and excitement that is prevalent on her wedding day as a true reflection of what marriage life is all about.

The dual nature of marriage is expressed by the contrasting words *monate* (nice/sweet) and *boirna* (hard/difficult). The *dikuku* (cakes) are nice but *lenyalo* (marriage) is difficult. *Dikuku* (cakes) are symbolic of the festivity of the wedding day because on this day there is usually lots of food to eat. When a marriage is sweet it means there is peace, love and harmony but once problems come up it becomes difficult and hard, giving room to conflict and disharmony. The opposite verbs *tsamaya* (go) and *sala* (stay) also reinforce this dual nature.

Furthermore, *rona* (we), those who are having fun that is, the guests, friends, and relatives will leave but *o* (you/the bride) will stay and experience the bittersweet character of marriage alone. The duality is also expressed through the comparison of time, that is, the present and the future. We are enjoying ourselves now but the difficulties and challenges of marriage will come later or in the future. There is also the idea of collectivism versus individualism in the sense that the people at the ceremony are enjoying themselves collectively but the bride will face whatever problems she will encounter alone. The song is therefore preparing her for whatever she may be faced with in the future, be it pleasant or sorrowful.

A song with a similar meaning is found among the Tsonga of Mozambique and the northern Transvaal region of South Africa. In a study carried out by Thomas F. Johnston (1975) he states that on her wedding day, "the bride is escorted to the village of her future husband and the assembly sings a song, they tell her that after they have finished enjoying themselves, she will commence a life of hard work" (Johnston 1975: 20). Therefore, the song talks about the joys and sorrows of married life.

Finally, *ntlo* (house) is symbolic of the home and family that the couple is expected to build together. *Ntlo* also refers to the family, that is, the husband, wife and the children that will come out of this marriage. Part of the wife's duty is to take care of these people together with her in-laws. The home they are going to build can be bearable or demanding depending on the relationship between *mosadi* (wife) and her in-laws hence *o tla sala o di bona* meaning "things will unfold as time goes on". This phrase is usually used to refer to unpleasant experiences. The song does not say what those experiences will be, but I was told they are numerous, for example, an irresponsible husband, difficult in-laws, infidelity, physical and mental abuse and so forth.

Several scholars have observed that the early years of a woman's marriage are hectic and tough because she is expected to render a lot of services to her in-laws. Rose Kadende (1997) says that in Burundi one of the duties a newly married woman is expected to perform is the grinding of grain. She argues that grinding grain should not only be viewed as a menial task, but as a task that tests a woman's physical endurance and her skill in converting grain into meal. It is an indispensable task which will bind the woman or a newly married daughter-in-law for the rest of her life. Her skill and endurance will also determine her relationship with her in-laws and protect her from shame in the eyes of the community (Kadende 1997: 68).

On the other hand, in Zimbabwe, the bride, through performing various tasks, accepts her future duties and her relatively low initial status in her new home. However, the low status is elevated after she gives birth to a child and when a new daughter-in-law arrives (Oyomoyela 2002: 101).



According to Bakgatla, the first day after the bride has been taken to her husband's home she is expected to wake up very early in the morning and sweep the whole yard. By the time everybody wakes up the household must be thoroughly clean. Obviously, the yard is very dirty on this day because of the festivities of the previous day. But, she is not supposed to get help from anyone no matter how huge or dirty the yard is. This is reinforced by Isaac Schapera (1936) who asserts that "the broom

has a long held significant meaning for the various Africans, symbolizing the start of homemaking for the newly wed couple" Schapera (1936: 34).

The next song focuses on the importance of the performance of the daily chores in the household. It talks about sweeping, a female chore in Botswana. Sweeping in this song does not refer to the sweeping of the house only but to all the household chores. If these duties are performed there will be peace and harmony in the household, and if they are not, then there will be conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

*Fiela fiela*

*Fiela fiela fiela ngwanyana*

*Fiela ngwanyana o se jele matlakaleng*

*Matsale ke chobolo, chobolo ya mosadi*

*Fiela ngwanyana o se jele matlakaleng*

Sweep sweep sweep girl  
Sweep girl do not eat in a dirty place  
Mother-in-law is a bully, a bully of a woman  
Sweep girl do not eat in a dirty place

This task of sweeping is like an initiation into her new home. Sweeping the courtyard is a tedious and boring task, but it also tests her endurance level. It also indicates her dutiful willingness to help her in-laws with housework. But sweeping can also be seen as an indirect test on the bride's ability to do other household chores. In addition to sweeping, she must get ready to do all the household chores for the day. On the other hand she is told that her mother-in-law is a bully, which indirectly tells her that she must do what is expected of her well otherwise she will be in trouble.

The words of the song have double meaning, literally, *fiela* means "sweep", *ja* means "eat" and *matlaka* means "dirt". Basically, the song is echoing a societal expectation of a daughter-in-law which is to keep the household clean. However, these words can also be interpreted metaphorically, *fiela* means "to get rid of something", *ja* means "to have sex" and *matlakala* means "boyfriends" or "any unwanted or unbecoming behavior".

Therefore, the food that is being eaten can refer to sexual intercourse. Food becomes palatable and enjoyable when served and eaten in a clean and decent looking place and so does sex. The sweeping and the resultant cleanliness have some sexual connotations. It could mean that now that she is married she should not indulge in any sexual activity with anybody except her husband. In addition, if she had boyfriends before she got married, she is told to get rid of them.

Thus, this song is preaching fidelity and discouraging promiscuity. If the daughter-in-law is unfaithful her mother-in-law will obviously be very unhappy and consequently she will make her daughter-in-law's life very miserable. The song also describes the mother-in-law as a *chobolo* (bully) thereby warning the daughter-in-law to behave well and perform her duties diligently because failure to fulfil these expectations will result in conflict between her and her mother-in-law. Obviously to be bullied is not a good experience; it can lead to a stressful and painful marriage.

So the best thing for her is to avoid any confrontation with her mother-in-law.

*Heela mmatsale*  
*Heela mmatsale*  
*Mmatsale, tlogela dipitsa tseo*  
*Mong wa tsona*  
*Mong wa tsona ke yo o o etla*  
*Heela mo sutele*  
*Mo sutele mo sutele mo sutele*  
*Heela mo sutele*  
*Mo sutele ke yo o o etla*

Hey you mother-in-law  
Hey you mother-in-law  
Mother-in-law leave those pots  
The owner  
The owner is coming  
Give her space  
Give her space give her space give her space  
Give her space  
Giver her space she is coming

The song above is usually sung when the bride arrives at her husband's home. It is based on another female chore, that is cooking. The arrival of a daughter-in-law is supposed to be a form of relief to the mother-in-law because she now has a helper who will not only cook but perform other household duties as well. The song is addressed to the mother-in-law but it talks about her daughter-in-law. It is a song about the transference of labour and power in the household from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. The *dipitsa* (pots) are linked to the hearth which is also symbolic of the whole household and the related chores that the bride is expected to perform in her new role as daughter-in-law. It is assumed that before her son got married the mother performed all the household chores but now that she has a daughter-in-law, she is expected to relax and let the latter take over.

However, the above does not literally mean she should not help her daughter-in-law or even treat her as a beast of burden. Actually, she is expected to introduce and acquaint her with how she does things in her home. The mother-in-law is therefore supposed to be the daughter-in-law's mentor not her tormentor. Realistically most mothers-in-law ill-treat their daughters-in-law. The mother-in-law has to acknowledge the presence of her daughter-in-law, hence *mo sutele mo sutele* (give her space). She has to give her space to run the affairs of her home. In addition, she must get out of her son's life now that he is a married man. If she complies with these expectations then peace will prevail but if she does not then conflict will occur.

Unfortunately, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter in law is most of the time not a good one. No matter how hard the daughter-in-law tries to please her mother-in-law, the latter is never happy. She is forever complaining about this and that. For example, she may complain that the house is not properly cleaned, or that the daughter-in-law cooks dinner late and so forth. Probably, the mother-in-law has to live to the expectations of the society; she has to fulfil how the society

generally perceives of her, just as the daughter-in-law is expected to work hard so is she expected to be a bully, to give commands to her daughter-in-law and to keep her under scrutiny all the time. By being a bully, she is fulfilling the words and message of the wedding song. As a married woman in a society one has to behave in a certain manner because the welfare of the household is dependent on you. Evidently, wedding songs are one of the vehicles that define women's lives, and their relationships within marriages.

The above songs are examples of gender discrimination that is prevalent among the Bakgatla and the Botswana society at large. All the songs are addressed to the bride and they express what is culturally expected from her, but the songs say nothing about the societal expectations of the groom. One wonders if marriage is a union between two people, why then is the success and welfare of this relationship placed on one person?

I believe that these wedding songs perpetuate and encourage gender biases between men and women. They also place women in the subordinate, inferior and dependent status whereas men are given the superior and independent status. This is obviously influenced by the patriarchal nature of the Botswana society. Tapologo Maundeni (2000) argues that women are supposed to work hard for the benefit of others and to persevere to keep their marriages intact. She further argues that "wedding songs are therefore, a medium through which culture is transmitted, it is also a medium through which the subordination of women is perpetuated. It is also probably due to this engrained ideology that women stay in abusive marriages" (Maundeni 2000: 37).

Ideally, marriage is regarded as a permanent tie in many societies, but divorce nowadays is very common. There are many causes of divorce some of which are, adultery, desertion, infertility, irresponsibility of either party, physical and emotional abuse, to name a few. Despite the escalating rate of divorce in Botswana, the society still does not condone divorce. Amongst the numerous wedding songs, there is one that talks about divorce as shown below:

*Ha go le boima*  
*Ha go le boima Matshediso*  
*Boela gae*  
*Ha gole boima Matshediso*  
*Boela gae*  
*Selo se lenyalo le thata*  
*Selo se lenyalo le thata*

When it is tough Matshediso  
Go back home  
When it is tough Matshediso  
Go back home  
This thing called marriage is difficult  
This thing called marriage is difficult

The above song is a song of advice. It tells the bride what to do if she experiences marital problems. The song is short and repetitive like most other Setswana

wedding songs. The words of the song are also precise and direct. The difficulty of marriage is expressed by the two words *boima* (tough or difficult) and *thata* (hard or difficult). The song tells the bride to *boela gae* (go back home) in times of difficulty. It also acknowledges the fact that marriage is difficult hence *selo se lenyalo le thata* (this thing called marriage is difficult). But, like the other songs it does not say what it is that makes marriage difficult. Matshediso is the name of the bride. Using a girl's name indicates that it is usually women who are faced with marital problems. Since they move to their husbands homes upon marriage, consequently they are the ones to leave when problems arise.

The song under discussion seems to encourage divorce, but my informants were adamant that it does not. They argued that the song basically informs the bride of what she should do in case unbearable marital problems arise. They said that divorce is an embarrassment to the family so they cannot encourage it; it is also their hope and wish that no marriage reaches that level.

Bakgatla, like other ethnic groups in Botswana, have channels that one needs to follow if marital problems arise. It is only after all the channels have been exhausted that one can opt for a divorce. These channels are always explained during the counselling sessions. The following is a brief explanation of that cultural procedure.

First and foremost the couple is expected to try and resolve the problem between themselves within the confines of their home before they can involve other people. If the problem persists and talking to the culprit does not help, then the complainant has to report the matter to his or her in-laws. The in-laws would make a judgment and try and reconcile the couple. If the parents cannot solve the problem, they call the uncles and aunts who were involved in the negotiations for the marriage. Should they fail to resolve the dispute then the complainant's parents are notified and a meeting between the two families is convened to try and resolve the problem. If they also fail, then the case is taken to the headman of the ward. If he also fails then the matter is referred to the chief who will either dissolve the marriage or reconcile the couple.

Evidently there is a discrepancy between the ideal and reality. Ideally, one is supposed to report to her/his in-laws if there are any problems, but realistically people report to their own parents, thus creating animosity between the two families. Nowadays people have agency, that is, individuals decide or make choices of what they want to do and not to do in relation to cultural prescriptions or with their lives and by doing so they are actually constructing a new culture. This agency is becoming more and more visible in the lifestyles of the younger generation in Botswana. Most of them do not follow or live to the expectations of the society such as living in the same compound with the in-laws and following the traditional channels of resolving conflicts when they arise. Most people do not care much about the dictates of the society but rather about their own personal happiness and well being. This attitude has led to a high divorce rate in Botswana.



## Conclusion

This paper has shown that while Setswana wedding songs express peace, love and

harmony, they also indirectly talk about conflict that is prevalent in most families. Most of the songs talk about what should be done in order to have a peaceful marriage and a good relationship with one's in-laws. The songs centre on the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. An analysis of the songs clearly indicates that the mother-in-law is always in the background causing tensions in the family by either bullying her daughter-in-law around, ordering her to do this and that and keeping her under constant scrutiny, or by interfering with the running of her son's family and controlling her son in one way or the other. This therefore means that if the two women can live happily together, then peace and stability will prevail in the home.

The songs also indirectly talk about possibilities of conflict that may arise in a marriage if one does not conform to the prescribed expectations. But, the songs are not explicit about what the problems will be. The paper has also shown that because of the extended kinship in Botswana, the success and or failure of a marriage is not solely dependent on the relationship between husband and wife but also on the wife's relationship with other members of her husband's family. Ideally, there should be peace, love and harmony, but the songs also indicate that conflicts are inevitably present within this harmony in marriage.

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