

SAN MUSICAL FUTURES

Ethnographic Video 4

Using the Old to Forge the New: San Youth, Music, and Cultural Agency

Voice Narration by Lorraine Lionheart

SOAS University of London – PhD Music – (2020 -2026)

For the San of Botswana, music is not simply an art form. It is a way of remembering, a way of relating, and a way of sustaining life across generations. Songs, rhythms, and movement are learned not through formal instruction, but through participation — by listening, watching, and joining over time. Music carries histories of land, kinship, and survival that cannot be separated from the environments in which they emerge.

This video explores how San musical practice holds together continuity and change. It examines how young people draw on inherited forms while adapting them to new social, economic, and political conditions. Rather than treating tradition as something fixed, this research approaches music as a living practice — continually reworked in response to disruption, displacement, and possibility.

San musical sound is structured through dense polyphony: voices interweave rather than move in unison.

Singing is cyclical, often without a clear beginning or end, building intensity through repetition and collective participation.

Handclapping plays a central role. Through shared rhythm, it binds voices and bodies together, anchoring the music in collective participation. The body itself becomes an instrument — sounding, moving, responding.

San musical Instruments, like songs, emerge from the landscapes in which they are made.

A range of bowed strings, mouth bows, lamellaphones, and seed-pod rattles — referred to differently across San communities — are crafted from locally gathered materials, linking sound directly to place.

The making of instruments is itself a form of transmission.

Knowledge passes through hands as much as through sound — through bending wood, tuning

strings, and learning when an instrument is ready to speak. These processes connect young musicians to elders, to place, and to memory. Each performance becomes a living archive — not preserved in text, but carried forward through sound and participation.

In healing contexts, these musical forms extend through the night. Singers and clappers sustain rhythm while dancers move in and out of trance states, understood as moments of connection between the living, the ancestors, and the land. Music here does not accompany healing — it enacts it. Healing is not individual but collective, restoring balance within bodies, relationships, and community life. Illness is understood not only as physical, but as a disturbance in relational and spiritual equilibrium — one that must be addressed through sound, movement, and shared presence.

In community settings, these healing practices are not performances for an audience. They unfold according to local knowledge, spiritual authority, and collective need.

In tourism contexts or school stages, however, elements of these practices are sometimes demonstrated rather than enacted. What visitors encounter is often a curated form — shaped by time limits, expectations, and the demand for visibility.

This distinction does not make one form “authentic” and the other false. Rather, it reflects the different conditions under which music circulates today. San youth move between these spaces carefully — adapting performance when required, while retaining other dimensions of musical knowledge within community life.

Across Botswana, San musical practices are as diverse as the landscapes they inhabit. Communities in the north, near the Okavango wetlands, incorporate materials and movement aesthetics distinct from those in the drier western and central regions. Yet these variations remain connected by shared rhythmic structures, collective participation, and a common understanding of music as life.

Music is also a space where dignity becomes visible. While San voices are often dismissed in public discourse, their music commands attention across social boundaries. Through song, they compel a listening that speech alone is too often denied.

Perhaps this response stems from something older — a resonance that reaches deep into human memory. Often regarded as among the world’s oldest continuous cultures, the San carry in their music an ancestral echo that many listeners, regardless of background, connect with instinctively.

Listeners respond not only to sound, but to the intensity of collective expression — voices, bodies, and rhythm moving together.

This response is not accidental.

It reflects relational knowledge embedded in the music — knowledge shaped through endurance rather than spectacle.

Yet reverence does not guarantee protection.

Cultural Transmission and Music Education

Formal education has long disrupted musical transmission. As transmission shifts into schools, competitions, and staged events, musical forms inevitably change — sometimes through experimentation, sometimes through constraint

Boarding schools remove children from their communities, languages, and ceremonial life, interrupting the everyday processes through which songs are learned and renewed.

Many young people describe a tension between school and home:

their culture is largely absent from the classroom, yet remains central to who they are.

In some schools, teachers actively support performance, creating spaces where music becomes a source of confidence and belonging.

San musical transmission is therefore both fragile and resilient — sustained through commitment, yet continually shaped by constraint.

Cultural tourism introduces further contradictions.

For decades, Botswana's tourism industry has drawn upon San imagery to market national culture.

Yet performers often receive limited recognition, compensation, and control over how their cultural knowledge circulates.

Without clear protections, music that carries deep meaning can be reduced to entertainment.

Visibility offers possibility — but it also carries risk.

Despite this, music continues to function as a resource for endurance.

Young people form groups, organise performances, and create spaces where cultural practice sustains dignity, even within unequal systems.

National music and dance competitions offer one of the few formal platforms through which San groups can gain visibility and modest income.

Yet these competitions are structured around judging criteria that do not always align with San musical forms. Performances are evaluated within time limits, choreographic expectations, and comparative scoring systems that sit uneasily with musical practices historically oriented toward healing, participation, and continuity rather than competition.

Several groups described the strain of adapting their music to fit these frameworks — modifying rhythms, restructuring sequences, or containing trance practices to remain legible to judges unfamiliar with their cultural logic.

These adjustments are not signs of cultural loss. They reflect the labour required to navigate recognition within systems not designed with San aesthetics in mind.

Youth Musical Futures in a Globalising Botswana

Across Botswana, San youth are adapting musical forms to new contexts.

They combine ancestral vocal styles with genres such as hip-hop, gospel, and regional popular music such as kwasa kwasa.

Mobile phones and social media become tools for recording, sharing, and connecting across distance.

Rather than replacing tradition, these platforms extend it.

These hybrid practices are not signs of loss.

They reflect deliberate choices about how to remain present in a changing world — how to be recognised without surrendering meaning.

Globalisation does not erase tradition; it creates new platforms for reinvention.

Through performance, young people make culture visible again — transforming it into livelihood and statement.

Music and Political Agency

Music also operates as political visibility.

When San youth perform publicly, they assert belonging in spaces that have historically excluded them.

Performance becomes a way of being seen on their own terms — not as symbols of the past, but as contemporary actors.

Structural change unfolds slowly.

Cultural recognition does not automatically transform material conditions.

Within this long horizon of uneven change, music sustains political presence — quietly, consistently, and collectively.

The Future: Cultural Capital and Self-Determination

San youth are actively shaping the futures of their cultural practice.

They organise festivals, record music, and advocate for recognition of their creative labour.

At the same time, this work carries cost.

Endurance requires effort.

Visibility demands care.

Being listened to through culture can be both empowering and exhausting.
Quiet action is rarely chosen freely.
It is often the only available strategy.

Closing Reflection

San music endures as history, spirituality, and relationship.
It has survived displacement, appropriation, and neglect — carried forward through sound, movement, and memory.

Today, it exists between reverence and vulnerability, between recognition and erasure.

This video does not resolve these tensions.

It listens to them.

Through music, San youth continue to negotiate dignity, belonging, and the possibility of self-determination — one performance at a time.

As Botswana begins to embrace Indigenous inclusion, the question remains: will the nation invest in this cultural heritage, protecting it not only as art, but as a right?