

Chapter 3: Biographical history of Philip Tabane

CHAPTER THREE

Biographical history of Philip Tabane

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to research Philip Tabane's life as he lived it. To present a narrative study of his biographical background as a human being born and bred in South Africa whose work reflects a South African experience, and how it became significant to the lives of other human beings in the world. Tabane's biographical study is important in that it introduces him to the reader and thereby presents the backdrop to the social-ecological aspects of his early influences and the factors that define his choice of the music of Malombo.

Tabane's photo gallery and other documented evidence of his life have been included as Appendix 2. In accordance with the ethics of research, the researcher requested written consent from Philip Tabane to be able to carry out the research that covers his biographical aspects of his life. Appendix 1 presents evidence of the consent that Tabane granted to the researcher to conduct this research. The researcher has also verified biographical details, as well as all other aspects of his musical life with Tabane as agreed to in the written consent herewith included as Appendix 1.

3.1.1 Biographical background

Philip Tabane was born on 22 December 1947 at Ga-Ramotshewa in an area which was popularly known as, Riverside, South-east of Pretoria. His parents are Modise and Matjale Tabane. Tabane's parents relocated to 3814 Section M, Mamelodi, Pretoria in 1953. Mamelodi came to be known as one of South Africa's centres of jazz and home of Malombo music. Here is an excerpt of the early history of Mamelodi:

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Mamelodi, part of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, is a black township set up by the then apartheid government northeast of Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa. It was established when 16 houses were built on the farm Vlakfontein in June 1953 and later the name changed to Mamelodi, the name given to president Paul Kruger by the Africans because of his ability to whistle and imitate birds, also meaning *Mother of Melodies*. In the 1960s black citizens were forcefully removed from the suburb of Lady Selbourne in Pretoria to Mamelodi, Ga-Rankuwa and Atteridgeville.

Mamelodi is sometimes called the home of jazz, not only because of the number of great jazz artists it has produced but because it has played host to many festivals at its Moretele Park.

The biggest diamond in the world was discovered 12 km to the east of Mamelodi at Cullinan. It is the most affluent township in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. It is affectionately known to locals as “Mams” or “Flaka” (wikipedia).

At the time of this research in 2009, Mamelodi was still known as the ‘home of jazz’. This is the township in which Tabane’s talent was nurtured. It is worth noting that it was in this township where Tabane proved his commitment and love to his then fiancé, Thuli Molatlhegi by performing for the whole night at her father’s gate. This performance was so special that Thuli’s father, considered it an honour that Philip Tabane could, after performing on world stages in New York, come back to South Africa to perform a free show in front of his house as a token of his love for Thuli. Mr Molatlhegi therefore considered this honour, Tabane’s most fitting payment of *lobola* to his daughter. He therefore handed her daughter’s hand to Philip Tabane as his wife after the latter’s all night

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performance of Malombo music outside his gate. That is how much Tabane's presence and uniqueness was valued by the Molatlhegi family. The show was indeed considered as Philip Tabane's full payment of *lobola* to the Molatlhegi family that morning of 1973. Both are now blessed with two children, Nonkululeko and Thabang. Nonkululeko was born in 1977 and Thabang in 1979. Philip Tabane's home language is Sepedi. It is interesting that he chose a tshiVenda name, Malombo, to describe both the feel and genre of his music.

3.1.2 Family influence

The influence of Philip Tabane's brothers and sisters on his musical life makes for an interesting study. This is a classical case of the influence of a musical family on career paths of its members. Tabane's siblings, in order of seniority, comprised his eldest sister Ntibi who was a singer, his brother Lori who played guitar, his sister Mmaloki who played guitar, his brother Mabitisi who also played guitar, his sister Stephina who was a singer, Philip Nchipi Tabane himself who plays guitar, his sister Stella who was a singer, and finally Anna who was a vocalist. By the time of writing this thesis, of the five sisters and two brothers, all had passed on except for Stella and Philip.

3.1.3 Human contexts of early life

Tabane's family became the cradle of his food for his soul. It allowed him spirituality to grow safely and naturally, not threatened by a competing force. The entire family was unanimous about music being a natural and normal way of human expressiveness.

Tabane found an extended family and a home of music expression in Dorkay House. Dorkay House was an alternative arts education institution for the black people whom Bantu Education curriculum denied arts education. Philip Tabane,

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Hugh Masekela, Kippie Moeketsi, Jonas Gwangwa, are amongst many musicians whose music careers were nurtured at Dorkay House. It was at Dorkay where he got an opportunity to win creative music contests that became landmarks of his own life and in the history of music in South Africa.

During the advent of Black Consciousness, affectionately known as BC in South Africa, most musicians, writers, sculptors, painters, and activists who were housed at Dorkay House left to form a Federated Union of Black Artists, popularly known as FUBA. This is where Philip Tabane came into contact with Gerard Sekoto, one of the leading visual artists in South Africa. Tabane got to interact closely with talented writers like Aggrey Klaaste and Can Temba that he himself got to write a play. This is where his writing skills were sharpened and where he got to understand politics of power and how the arts can play a role in emancipating the oppressed. This context at FUBA made it easier for Tabane to collaborate with Nana Mahomo in New York on an anti-apartheid film called *Last Grave at Dimbaza*.

More than Dorkay, and FUBA, his family accounts more for Tabane's mental resoluteness and spiritual sternness. His family is still the pivot of his early spiritual foundation and creativity. There is no better way to explain the journey of his spiritual creative life than to describe and analyse the spiritual link he had with his mother's healing powers. His mother was a soothsayer who healed spiritual imbalances in people through song. She had a gift of clairvoyance that helped her to give people advice about their own lives. Philip Tabane got to be like her, and he expressed this gift of healing through music and he consciously named his music Malombo, 'the spirit force of healing the troubled soul'.

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3.1.4 Early childhood music education

Philip Tabane received his elementary education at the AME Riverside Missionary School. He only attended about one year of schooling. Asked about his education Tabane says: *'Nna mos le B ga ka e fetsa ne!'* Loosely translated it means that "in fact I did not even complete sub-standard B at school". This is interesting because this stereotype about knowledge acquisition from formal schooling is a paradox in the story of Philip Tabane. His life exemplifies the reality that one's social milieu constitutes the crux of one's outlook on life. By virtue of being born in such a family, his very birth imbued him with the sheer gift of musical philosophy, psychology, faith, discourse, ideo-musicological constructs, and a style of music.

To Tabane, therefore, music was not a mere art form, but a way of life. It was a way of laughing, talking, crying, pondering, and a spiritual path through which he found metaphysical balance. Growing up in such a family made him not to see music as a career but as a family identity. As he grew up, his key mission was to protect the identity, integrity, and legacy of his family so much that he paid very little attention to the protection of his own copyright. It is important that a good institution should follow up his copyrights because they are his life, they are more than family estates, they are the soul of the Tabane's, and nobody else except the Tabane's must own them. Those in the music industry who benefited from his ignorance of the statutory rights of his intellectual property must be tracked. They must return the rights of the Tabane's. These rights are naturally theirs. They are merely guaranteed by the relevant copyright laws of South Africa. His music is a product of his set of beliefs about music and humanity, a set of maxims and a system that defines precisely what he essentially is about.

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He says he does not see himself as a musician, but one who carries forth a divine mandate of his collective family, especially his mother's.

3.1.5 Music knowledge background

Tabane owes the enormous knowledge of music to his family background. He owes his strong sense of self-concept, discipline, hard work, and mentorship to his family. His mother was his first mentor. She is the one who has deeply nurtured Philip Tabane's musical spirituality. It was from her that Philip aspired to retain the spiritual link with ancestry which pervaded his musical purpose and expertise. This nurturing affected Philip's musical concept so much that it affected the naming of his genre, and the business deals overseas.

The strong links with the ancestral spirituality gave him strength and inspiration to compose more music even if he did not acquire the skills to read and write music from formal state education. Secondly, it accounted for his naming of the music concept he has inherited as Malombo. He was very clear about what he meant because he constantly refused when journalists called it Malombo Jazz, and told them to remove the 'jazz' tag from the label of the music concept he was pursuing. He felt that it was fitting that in his creation of an extension of his mother's lived sacred practice of healing human ailments, he had to guard against losing it to media sensationalism. This is a very strong and clear sense of self concept and clear understanding of the psychology and philosophy that encapsulates a genre and discourse.

The other factor that contributed to Philip's acquisition of knowledge of music was that he grew up amongst active music practitioners from his extended family. To date, Tabane desists from hanging around people defining themselves as musicians. He says that there is often no healthy discussion amongst

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musicians themselves. He finds it spiritually unedifying to join a crop of musicians who feel important when they quote a long list of prominent musicians of the Americas and of Europe as if they are role sole models of creativity in music. He would rather strive to be original through embodying the creative spirit of his own mother.

For Tabane, it is important to enrich and develop the humble experience of African spiritual life. He always avoids chronic debates of ‘who is great between Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespy, Wes Montgommery, and George Benson’. Tabane (2008) feels that instead of engaging in this endless adjudication over the merits of American musicianship, more time should be spent on strengthening and mainstreaming African indigenous music idioms. For Tabane, it is a waste of time arguing out the socio-political contexts that gave rise to the music of the Diaspora because this is often done at the expense of searching for the real sound of African music and entrenches the undue profiling of jazz in South Africa.

Due to the views that Tabane holds about jazz and other sounds of the Diaspora, the research had to dedicate a short moment to investigate the development of jazz in America. The research discovers that early slave music in the Diaspora was dance music, African music. Jazz historian Alyn Septon, identifies the first use of the term in print as occurring in San Francisco in 1913, when it was used to “describe a dance music full of vigour and “pep”” (Septon in Gloag and Gloag, 2005).

The American theorist, historian and composer Gunther (1968: 89) points out that in the early twenties, in America, Armstrong’s *West End Blues* became the pivot upon which future jazz trends were to evolve:

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When on June 28, 1928, Louis Armstrong unleashed the spectacular cascading phrases of the introduction of *West End Blues*, he established the general stylistic direction of jazz for several decades to come. Beyond that, this performance also made quite clear that jazz could never again revert to being solely entertainment or folk music. The clarion call of *West End Blues* served notice that jazz had the potential capacity to compete with the highest order of previously known musical expression.

Gloag and Gloag (2005) point out that “jazz is a broad term that envelops a wide range of musical practices”. The research therefore argues that it is ironic that while the term jazz envelopes a wide range of musical practices, it is the latter that is over time thrown into oblivion. The research therefore agrees with Tabane’s view that it is not right to hold the music discourse and practice that was observed and reported on in San Francisco and New Orleans only in 1913, as the role model of popular music of Africa that existed centuries before 1913.

The research finds it important to make the point that African musical thought and practice predate 1913 and 1928 respectively. It further argues that, in 1913, some of the highest order of previously known musical expression in Africa included, amongst others, *Kiba*, *Mshongolo*, *Indlamu*, *isiShameni*, *Amegubo*, *Mehobelo*, *Domba*, *Tshikona*, *Malende*. These genres are amongst South Africa’s greatest crystal musical thought products that survive to date. Therefore Jazz, as a pidgin of different African indigenous music expressions, cannot be greater than its own constituent genres. It is therefore valid for Tabane to maintain that to him, jazz cannot be greater than Malombo music, because the latter is his personal, natural, and authentic spirit of cultural expression. For Tabane, his immediate cultural milieu, is the textbook from which he must learn.

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Apart from the immediate family background, Philip Tabane's own passion for music and the hard work he subsequently put into it accounted for his solid musical expressiveness. He was determined to master the guitar, flute and voice. His passion for music and determination to advance his family's sacred musical tradition gave Tabane the enthusiasm to approach musical practice from the framework of his indigenous music idiom. This allowed him a great sense of originality and technique in playing the guitar.

Tabane points out that he used to lock himself in the house most of the time to learn how to play the guitar and flutes. So he experimented on guitar, flutes and voice until he increasingly acquired the skills necessary to enable him a freer expression on these instruments. This then accounted for his style and approach later in his musical life.

Apart from the innate passion to learn music and to map out the music concepts and approach, Tabane felt he needed the additional skill to read music. Tabane points out that it was General Duze who taught him how to read music.

Apart from learning from his family and Duze, his guitar mentor, there was a relatively favourable milieu for enrichment in music for Tabane. The availability of the Mamelodi Community Centre provided a good platform for cultural interaction. The other centre which Tabane used to rehearse and to perform own projects was Dorkay House which is still situated in Johannesburg. It was here where he was able to interact with the Union Artists.

There were competitions like the Castle Lager Jazz Contest of 1963 held at Jabulani Amphitheatre, and [the](#) 1964 Castle Lager Talent Search held at Orlando Stadium, that saw Philip Tabane's passion, hard work and commitment

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rewarded. Philip Tabane won first position for both contests. These are the two talent search endeavours that changed the music of South Africa for good. Never were there other talent search projects which were held out in the stadium, and never were there talent search projects that rewarded originality and uniqueness of indigenous musical exploration. Winning these two awards confirmed the uniqueness of the music concept whose depth was in its strong links with the sacred sounds of the healing sounds of Malombo ritual music.

Later, it was a successful international career that confirmed his hard work, passion, and uniqueness in the world. Tabane was subsequently invited to present workshops at universities abroad between 1971 and 1987.

The table in Appendix 6 is a summary of Tabane's hard work in developing a music career for himself since 1940 when he was only seven years old.

3.1.6 The early career path of Philip Tabane

Much as music met Philip Tabane more as a way of life and a home language than a career, it certainly did turn out at the end as a career. First, he started experimenting with a pennywhistle at an early age. At the age of seven he led a pennywhistle band at the AME church in Riverside.

Philip Tabane's career as a guitarist also emerged quite early in his life. He started playing guitar at the age of ten in 1943. Philip started using one of the many guitars that were used by his brothers at home. His mother bought him his first Framers model in 1960.

Philip Tabane's career as a vocalist, also emerged at a very early age. He started singing in a natural vocal modulations and styles learnt from his mother's sacred

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Malombo chants. This style has come to characterise Tabane's very rich vocal texture that seems to blend speech with singing in a manner that made both inseparable.

Tabane, like any classical music communicator of any generation, always wanted to expand horizons of self expression to a much broader form. He picked up one instrument after another so as to have a much fuller capacity to express his feelings through music. As if it was not enough, Tabane experimented on a thumb piano at an early age too. Growing up in a multicultural community of Ga-Ramotshewa and later in Mamelodi, Tabane picked up a thumb piano from the Venda communities of Ga-Ramotshewa.

After the seventies, while he lived and worked in New York, Tabane adapted his guitar skills to the bass. He experimented on the Epephone make of the bass and used it in his own recording of the celebrated Malombo album, *Pepelepe*. Tabane picked up a lot of Sepedi, Xitsonga, Ndebele and Tshivenda oral praise texts from the multicultural communities of Mamelodi. He researched about elements of these cultures and transcribed the praise texts on paper. The researcher found amongst documents that he kept, several transcriptions of such dictations of oral praise texts. Appendix 4 is one such example.

Tabane picked up skills to play a harmonica from the "Malaeta" groups of the multicultural Mamelodi. Malaeta are groups that identified themselves with an ear ring and a barrette worn by men, and then played their music derived from the Ndebele and the Zulu idiom on harmonica. His later international recordings blended the guitar, harmonica, drums and voice.

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Growing up in a family of an astute *sangoma*, and being the curious youth that he was, there was no way Tabane could not experiment with the drum language of the *songoma* drumming repertoire. The track *Sangoma*, in the album *Malombo* (1976), pays homage to that typical *sangoma* drumming style. The drumming was not just used to sample a pattern of the *sangoma* style, but it also constituted a broader approach and musical outlook for Tabane. It became the trademark of his overall sound called *Malombo*.

Very little is known of Tabane’s writing skills. The researcher spotted a script of a play he wrote in 1952 called “*Ekufeni*”. The play is written in typical South African Theatre style of the time. The text is largely written in English, fusing Sesotho and IsiZulu expressions in the typical multilingual style of South African township theatre. The script has clearly marked stage directions for stage management as well as for the music overtures and interludes. The script is one evidence of Tabane’s determination to learn and practice different disciplines of the arts.

Table 3.1 Summary of Philip Tabane’s Capabilities	
Pennywhistler	Philip Tabane learnt pennywhistle at the age of seven and led a pennywhistle band at the AME church in Riverside.
Guitarist	Started playing guitar at the age of ten in 1943. Philip started using one of the many guitars that were used by his brothers at home. His mother bought him his first Framers model guitar in 1960 (pictures of the first guitar are available).
Vocalist	Indigenous vocal styles learnt from his mother’s sacred chants.

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Thumb Pianist	Self-taught (Apprenticeship with Venda communities in Riverside and Mamelodi).
Basist	Self-taught (Apprenticeship-on Epephone model in New York).
Poet	Self-taught (Apprenticeship-Dinaka communities of the Bapedi in Riverside and Mamelodi).
Harmonica Player	Self-taught (Apprenticeship with “Malaeta” communities in Riverside and Mamelodi).
Drummer	Self-taught (Apprenticeship with his mother who was a Sangoma - African healer).
Composer	Self-taught (Innate talent).
Music Arranger	Self-taught (Innate talent).
Performer	Self-taught (Driven by his spiritual communication between himself and the audience through music).
Band Leader	Self-taught (Acquired the discipline after long years of solo guitar playing i.e 1940-1958).
Philosopher	Showed evidence of being reflective and thinking deep about life showing rationalism that turns towards sublime goodness.
Playwright	Wrote “Ekufeni” in 1952.

3.2 Conclusion

Philip Tabane’s ability to push himself beyond the limits, is in itself a characteristic feature of a man who is in full communication with the world through a blend of different sounds using instruments from different communities and people. This has made him a well rounded human person.

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Talking to him, he comes across as a philosopher in his own right. He is undoubtedly a band leader, multi-instrumentalist, poet, composer, music arranger, spirited performer, playwright, philosopher, and critic.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Elements of the *Malombo* ritual practice and Tabane's popular music format of Malombo

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the elements of the indigenous *malombo* music and Tabane's version of Malombo music. The chapter traces differences between the two genres in terms of style, structure, and the performance features.

The chapter aims to refer to some of Tabane's actual compositions to exemplify observations it makes. The chapter aims to specify tracks from which particular elements are discernible. Above all, the chapter examines key elements of sound and style peculiar to the musicological structures and textures, idiomatic features of like compositional and performative form, that mark the Malombo style. The chapter discusses both Tabane's Malombo and indigenous *malombo*. Shying away from drawing this comparison will be expecting the reader to accept in faith the validity of the researcher's assumptions and conclusions. To provide more access to the outsider reader, the music of Tabane will be submitted with the research. Both insiders and outsiders to the South African popular and indigenous music landscapes will be able to access the recording to verify the examples cited in this chapter and elsewhere in the research.

4.1.1 Introducing Tabane's Malombo

Malombo is essentially a Venda word that means spiritual healing deity. Used as a singular noun in Tshivenda, it is called *lelombo*. In Sepedi, it is called '*lelopo*'. Without going much into the anthropological and etymological extrapolation of the concept, it suffices for the purposes of this chapter to point out that *malombo*

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is a known concept and phenomenon common to African healing practice in South Africa.

Tabane's Malombo music, though stemming from the indigenous *malombo* healing force, uses electric guitar, African drums, and a flute. Coplan (1982) calls this 'the urbanisation of African music'. On the contrary, the research views Tabane's Malombo as a different format of arranging indigenous music. Tabane's format of music could be viewed as a re-interpretation of the elements of an indigenous art form using additional western instruments over and above African drums and voice. Tabane exemplified the possibility of expanding the frontiers of African music, rather than to merely urbanise it. This explains why Tabane after naming his band and music Malombo, he worked with the same name of the music even if he had altered the format thereof. His new arrangement of the music is to date still called Malombo.

4.1.2 Novelty that remains new

Tabane's adaptation of the ritual *malombo* into popular music format was, for most of the time, done through a trio band format: Guitar, malombo drums, voice, and shakers. Tabane often doubled the guitar with a pennywhistle. His drummer often alternated drums with 'dipela'. The latter is Sepedi name for a thumb piano.

The study of the music life of Philip Tabane epitomises the reality that if we harness the true creative spirit of the young and nurture it to blossom fully within its own natural milieu and path, they can still produce novelty that remains timeless. There is no need of encouraging the cloning of fashionable trends and personalities in wanton pursuit of superstardom.

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Tabane grew naturally with Malombo music as his home language and culture. At the age of fifteen, Tabane evidenced natural self-expression through music. In 1964, Aggrey Klaaste (*The World*, October 27, 1964) traced back the report he heard of the young Philip Tabane, nine years before he was even known. He recalls:

At the age of 15 Philip was a student at the Catholic School in Vlakvontein. One day one of the fathers came across the truant Philip strumming an old guitar. The man was delighted with the 'gone' expression on the boys face and quietly called his colleagues. They stood there drinking in the peculiar mixture of Pedi, hymnal and sometimes savage chords that tore from the guitar.

The research forgives Catholic father's lack of knowledge of music terminology to describe the elements of Tabane's music, safe to call it "the peculiar mixture of Pedi, hymnal and sometimes savage chords that tore from the guitar". What he could have meant could be that Tabane sounded unconventional, not the way jazz or regular popular music of the time sounded.

Nine years later from that day at school, when Philip Tabane was twenty four, Aggrey Klaaste described Tabane as follows:

The Malombo Jazzmen, winners of the Orlando Jazz Festival this year, believe they may be chasing exciting Spirit. These three bashful men - a veritable silent menace - always cause a furore, wherever they go. The word Malombo is a Venda word meaning something like "Spirit". The type of thing that moves you. Very appropriate term to choose, for the music these men produced at Orlando Stadium moved thousands of semi-hysterical jazz fans. One gets delighted to come across such unusual titles.... Philip is the leader of the Trio. He has just turned 24. ...At Dorkay

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House, nobody spoke to them. Not because they were strangers. Philip for one, featured and won a prize in the last year's contest [1963 Jabulani Amphitheatre]. He hates mimicking any other jazzmen, and considers the Montgomery brothers the real thing in jazz. (*The World*, 1964).

4.1.3 Indigenous *malombo* music

Indigenous *malombo* music is spontaneous music that uses voice, drumming, and feet rattle idiophones. It is often in fast tempo of four pulse measure. It has antecedent and consequent structure. Like in most music, call and response yield a melodic statement, and so is the case with the indigenous *malombo*. It is played with drums in healing contexts. There is dancing. There are segments without drums and segments of drumming and dancing only.

In *malombo*, the *lelombo/lelopo* or the lead singer and initiate practitioner leads the song and the other initiates or *malombo/malopo* respond. The structure is cyclical with a constant chorus and varied solo sections. The language of indigenous *malombo/malopo* is often the indigenous language of the initiate.

4.1.4 Philip Tabane's *Malombo*

Philip Tabane's *Malombo* has taken every element of *malombo/malopo*. His adaptation has a cyclical structure with a constant chorus phrase with varied solo sections, *as* described above. Like in the indigenous *malombo*, Tabane's adaptation also has segments without drums and segments of drumming only. Segments without drums are sections when Tabane plays either guitar or flute, while mbira and percussion create a supporting textural blend to the melody. The melody comprises the antecedent and consequent structure which Tabane plays with his guitar, flute or voice.

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4.1.4.1 Short lyrical text

Philip Tabane keeps the nostalgic timbre and feel to his voice to paint a picture and to create a definite solemn mood like in '*Ngwana wa kgaetsedi*'. He repeats phrases or parts thereof. The use of repetition is not used for emphasis as is normally the case with many repetitions. Tabane uses repetition of phrases and individual words used in regular speech of Sepedi as a feature of the content of his lyrics.

[Guitar intro]

Ebile ke utluile

And I have heard

Ebile ke mmone

And I have seen [him]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is is my sister's child [from home]

Ebile ke utluile

And I have heard

Ebile ke mmone

And I have seen [him]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

Ke ngwana ...

He is the child ...

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

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Ebile ke utluile

And I have heard

Ebile ke mmone

And I have seen [him]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

Ebile ke utluile

And I have heard

Ebile ke mmone

And I have seen [him]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

Ke ngwana.

He is a child

Ke ngwana wa kgaetsedi ko gae

He is my sister's child [from home]

4.1.4.2 Vocal timbre

The song above is sung in falsetto, but not like high pitched voiced akin to the West African griot recital style. He employs the falsetto in *Ebile ke mmone*, and *Lenyora*. Often in the song above and in other classics like *Lenyora*, Tabane's falsetto singing evokes a melancholic and nostalgic feeling. He also uses vocalic lilted technique in his singing of *Malombo* tunes.

4.1.4.3 Phoneaesthetics

Tabane uses phoneaesthetics like '*ilili lalala, ila holalal, hila lalalala, hi hao lalalalala, lile lelalala, welele le walala*' with natural spontaneity, as part of the flow of the

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integral parts of one melody. It comes across as an aesthetic feature to his music. A transcription of the composition of the *vhaVhenda* combines onomatopoeia and phoneaesthetics, as a unique form of guitar scattling.

Here is a part transcription of *vhaVhenda* to exemplify Tabane's use of phoneaesthetics as a natural part of his style. It is amazing that, *vhaVhenda*, a song comprising literally of phoneaesthetics became so popular that it is used in a television series called *Muvhango* in South Africa and Channel Africa's omnibus broadcast. The phoneaesthetic lyrics of the song are:

Vhe vha vha vha vha vha

Vhe vha vha vha vhaaaa

Le lela la vha vha

Vhe vha vha laaaa

Pe le vhe vhe vha vha

Vhe vha vhe vhe vha vhaaaa

Vhe vha vha vha vha vhe vha aaaa

Vhi vhi vhi vhi vhavhaa

Ilili li le le la laaa

Lilila lala ala

Dzz dzzz dzzzz

Ke ni ninini, ba yaaa

TI! li vha vha vha vhaaa

TI! li vha vha vha vhaaa

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K! liii vhe vha vha vhaaa

Tl! li lele la la

K! li vhe vhe vha vhaaa

Chu chu chu chu kh kh khap

Didududud dud thuthuuu

Thut thut thut thip thip thip thip

Didududud dud thuthuuu

Thut thut thut thip thip thip thip ...

Hand clapping [tl-p! Tl-p! Tl-p!] ...

Lebe lebe lebe lee

Lebe lebe le leee

Le vhe le vhe lee

Nga nga nga nga nge

The phoneaesthetics used in another composition called *Ngwana wa kgaetsedi*

O la lala lala laa

Hi lala lala laaa

Ho hooo lala lala laaa

4.1.4.4 Crepitating, scattng and onomatopoeia

Tabane uses crepitating, scattng and onomatopoeia when he sings. This is another prominent feature of his vocal technique. Almost all his songs have this feature. Tabane sings the guitar lines that he plays, but not as George Benson

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does. He sings the same melody that he plays using phoneaesthetics, sometimes creating harmony and then singing again in unison with the guitar, adding crepitating vocal variations as well. He uses a raw voice that resembles natural *malombo* textural blend. It is a kind of spontaneous expression of an intense feeling than actually singing with the guitar. He does not arrange it for particular compositions. Tabane uses the technique spontaneously and may use it in every instance of performing that particular song. This unique feature of crepitating and scating characterises Tabane's style of music. It is the most unique style that stands out in all South African music.

The other feature of Tabane's vocal technique in his Malombo music is his use of onomatopoeic sounds. This is the most distinct feature of Tabane's music. Almost all his songs have this feature. He sings some exclamatory words like 'Dzzz! Mm! Tl! Tla tl tlzzzzzzz! Tlebedio! Tlebedio! Ga-ge ga-ge ga-ge ga-ge gee! Dlh!' By doing this, Tabane imitates the bass sound of his guitar as well as interesting parts of the melody. He uses onomatopoeia to create harmony in other instances. He does not use onomatopoeia and scating in the jazz sense of the words. In his evocation of the *malombo* spirit, he adds these sounds to echo the sound of his guitar.

4.1.4.5 Guitar carpet motif

The guitar often creates a backdrop motif rather than dominate the main melody of the song. Tabane creates an ambiance of a thunderous sound by playing randomly on all positions of the fret board of his guitar. This sustained thunderous rumble is used to build tension that is followed by a sudden stop, then one beat rest and then he returns to the beginning of the song. The stop creates a break from cyclical structure of the melody that would have been

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hypnotising if it continued on and on. Therefore the stop after the guitar rumble is used as partial cadence, as well as a full cadence.

Tabane does play chords in standard voicing of chords. He creates his own harmony, often playing repeated motifs, double stops, rumbling sound effects, and a constant bass root to complement a harmony structure to create the intended emotion. No wonder Enoch Dumas (1961) criticised his style and recommended that the great guitarist of the time, General Duze, must teach Tabane how to play the guitar using acceptable conventions.

4.1.4.6 Talking drumming

The *Malombo* drums create a groove and danceable rhythm in a composition, but once this becomes predictable, Tabane will be quick to punctuate it with a stop. Depending on the feeling and mood of the song, the drums play a more sound effect role, responding to the guitar call spontaneously.

The *Malombo* drums are also used in a dialogical section of Tabane's compositions. They are given a moment to play solo, followed either by Tabane's solo, or the melody. Tabane uses drums to explore melo-rhythmic timbre that creates a textural blend with the overall harmony of the voice and guitar.

4.1.4.7 Use of sudden stops

Tabane uses sudden stops to create a break in the circle of cyclical theme. He makes a conscious choice not to use transitions or bridging motifs to break the monotony in the circular form of the music. Several stops in the same song work for Tabane to mark different sections of the cycles. In some way the stops mark paragraphs, but not in a regular predictable metric. The stops that punctuate

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feelings cannot be predicted in most cases. Tabane would also use a guitar to create myriad natural sounds.

4.1.4.8 Creating soundscapes ambiances

Besides himself and the drummer, Tabane often uses a third member of the band to create percussive sounds and to recreate sounds of birds, squirrels and other natural sounds. The percussion creates accented, smooth, and coarse sound textures to create different soundscapes and mood in different songs. These range from rain sounds using the rain stick to the sound of school bell. These sounds are created through the use of simple hand and feet rattles, cabasa, bird whistles, kudu horn, chimes, maracas, to name but a few. They are also used to create man made sounds like the sound of a motor car passing by, a hooting train, or a galloping horse. The latter is evidenced in tracks like *Pelepele* and *Mirengo*. Percussion is used in Malombo music to heighten the mood of the song carried by Tabane's guitar and the drummer's melo-rhythm.

4.1.4.9 Praise text

In some songs like *Ngwana o ya lela*, Tabane stops all music and bursts into solo praise rendition. The researcher discovered that this particular praise text is borrowed from existing poetic texts that Tabane gathered from his own family's ancestral praise texts, and those of other South African cultures. Evidence of this is in Appendix 4: "Tabane's Literary Sources". In the track *Katlhogano*, Tabane clearly reads from a script of family ancestral praise texts.

4.1.2 Performance format and style

Tabane usually performs as part of a trio: guitar, Malombo drums, and an assortment of percussive sound effects. In songs that convey deep emotion, Tabane plays guitar solo. *Lenyora* is one special song he performs alone. In an

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interview, Tabane (1998), points out that one day he could not locate two of his fellow musicians who took a walk in the morning when Tabane was still asleep. He got lost in a huge house where they were accommodated and was so thirsty. When he finally found his room he composed *Lenyora*, which literally means 'thirst'. From that day, Tabane performs the song as a solo, because he composed the song in solitude, when his two colleagues were not there. Interesting to note how Tabane's real life experiences impact on his music. That is how the song became a solo performance arrangement, and it was recorded as a guitar and voice that evoke melancholic feelings of solitude.

Tabane's performances are driven by the spirit of Malombo. Tabane does not do well in programmatic performances. Spontaneity defines Tabane's approach to performance. Anyone who performs with him has to be in tune with the spontaneity that marks the style of Malombo music that uses unpredictable stops and sensitive dynamics. Nothing is commonplace with Tabane's live performance. As Sepamla (1968) appropriately pointed out that Tabane's gimmickry is part of creativity. Tabane makes every instrument he plays, especially the guitar, do what he wants it to do. The guitar has no conventions for him. He uses his fingers, a plectrum, mallets, slides a flute on the guitar strings to create wailing sounds, he uses his feet to play clear melodies on the guitar, and he plays his guitar with his chin, and even uses his elbow to play it. All in unpredictable, spontaneous trance.

Tabane, like a real *lelombo/lelopo*, does not perceive performing on stage as part of show-business. The stage, for him, is a sacred space of engagement with his ancestors, evoking the Malombo spirits on stage. Therefore he never greets his audience, nor make interlude commentary while on stage. He assigned the role of stage commentary to his percussionist. He only speaks in gibberish

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phoneaesthetics with his guitar. He always keeps a fixed gaze in the firmament. He seldom fixes a conscious gaze with the audience. Often his eyes grow squint with his fixed gaze. He could attain a state of altered consciousness while performing on stage.

In a rare occasion he does entertain, but he does not set out to merely entertain. Tabane does not do well with pre-rehearsed collaborations with other bands who want to perform set arrangements. During the performance, he takes off to his own unmitigated direction. He occupies a space of his own, and loses everyone in a collaborated ensemble. The spontaneous response to his inner evocations makes his performances electric. It is best to leave him with his own usual trio: guitar, talking malombo drum, and an assortment of sound effects percussion.

4.1.3 Philip Tabane's music literacy skills

This section presents ethnographic evidence of Tabane's blending of music transcriptions: tonic solfa and use of alphabets names of keys. Earlier in the chapter, reference was made to the ethnographic records of indigenous praise texts hereto attached as Appendix 3, from which he borrowed the praise texts. This section evidences that Tabane also borrowed from the Western tonic solfa and staff notation. He used the latter systems in his own way of representing motifs without giving full transcriptions.

Tabane uses tonic solfa to transcribe music for flute melody. As a self taught musician he does find a way to represent his transcriptions. Even if he would play a guitar, he uses the flute as reference for keys. Tabane in this instance does not refer to keys as A, B, C, etc. He describes them, for himself, as either "a fifth hole key", "second hole key", "fourth hole key", etc. *Plate 4.1* is one such tonic

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solfa transcription of the song 'Ebile ke mmone' in which Tabane uses the flute to determine key:

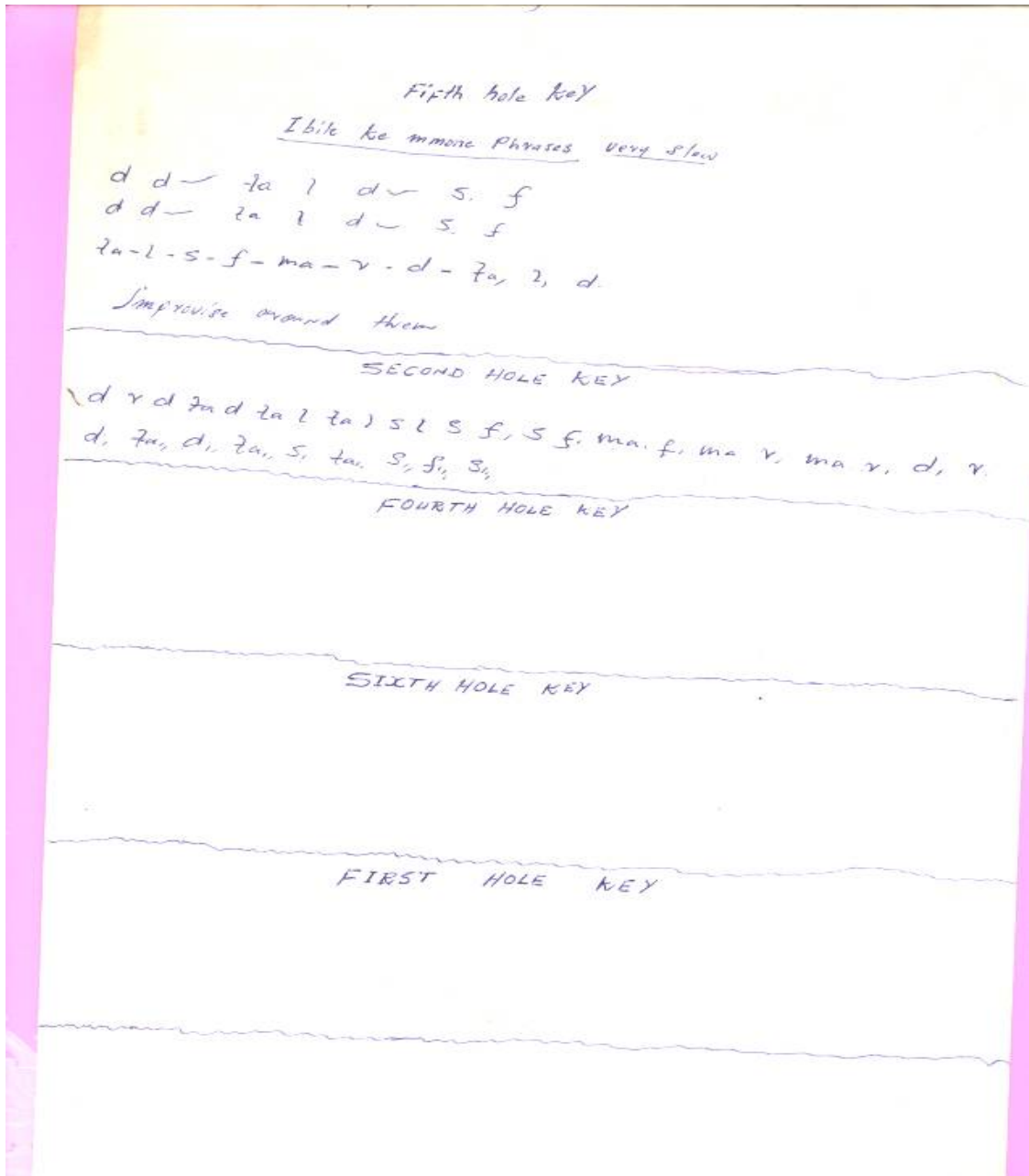


Plate 4.1: Tabane represented his melody using tonic solfa.

The other ethnographic data of Tabane's use of the elements of the staff notation is provided in Plate 4.2. The data is evidence provided as a 'set up for a

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recording' sheet in which Tabane planned the arrangement of eight out of ten songs on the sheet. Here is an example of how Tabane arranged his chords for different instruments.

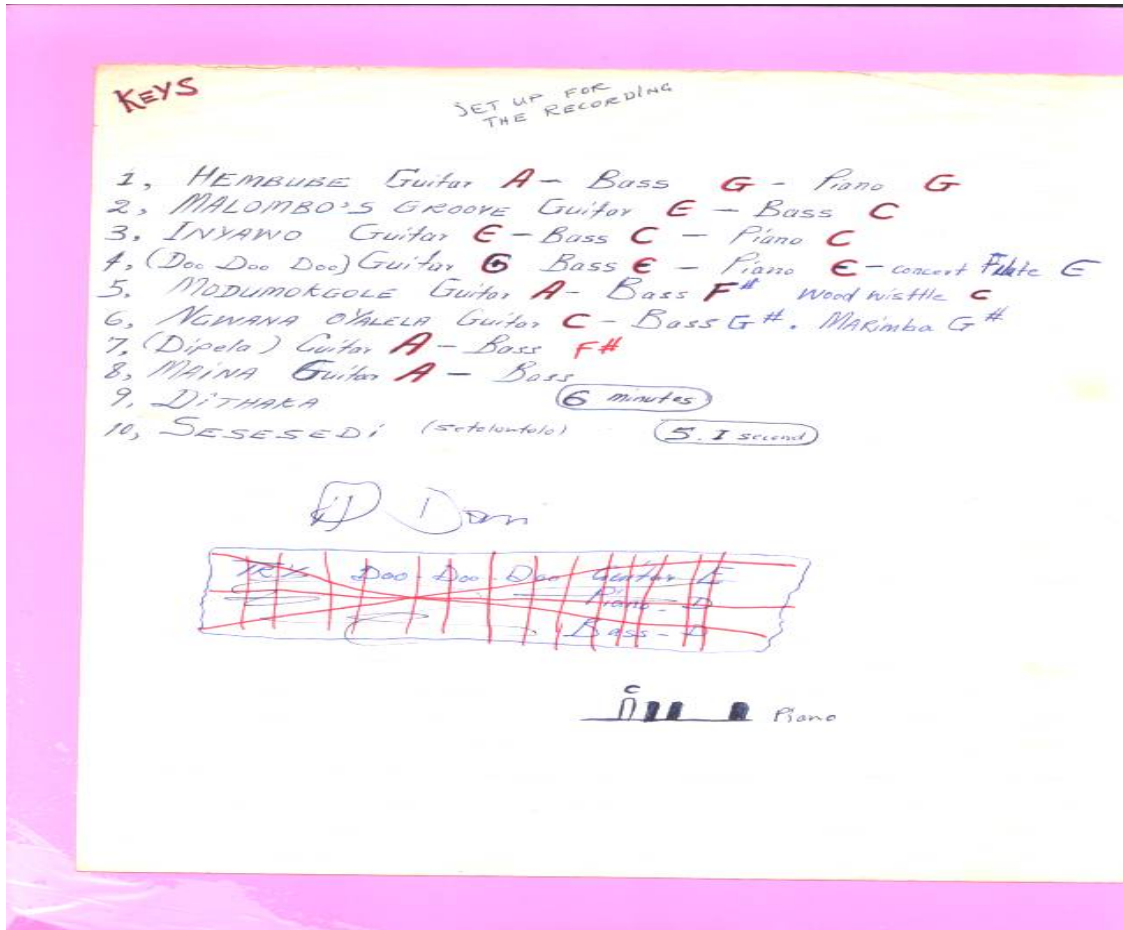


Plate 4.2: Sample of Tabane's guitar tuning system. He plays bass and chords on the same guitar at once.

4.2 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the elements of the indigenous *malombo* music and Tabane's version of *Malombo* music. The chapter has traced differences between the two styles in terms of structure, and the performance features. The chapter has referred to some of Tabane's actual compositions to exemplify observations it has made. This chapter specified tracks wherein particular elements of Tabane's

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music are discernible. The examination of key elements of sound and style peculiar to the musicological structures and textures, idiomatic features like compositional and performance form, that mark the Malombo style have been done. The result is that, while the traditional *malombo* initiates real healers and soothsayers, Tabane's Malombo is a personal reincarnation of *malombo* spirits to the audience of outsiders. The research therefore discovered that Tabane's Malombo is characterised by the following traits: short lyrical text; indigenous vocal timbre that uses crepitating scating, phoneaesthetics, vocalic lilt; onomatopoeia, guitar sound effects and simple motifs, and drumming.

Tabane's use of spontaneous breaks in the music has become a feature of arrangement and style of his music. His creation of different soundscape ambiances in his music, adds the mystical touch to his music. Tabane uses indigenous *malombo's* praise texts in his music. The research has discussed his performance style as a real lived Malombo interlocution of Tabane and his ancestors on stage. For him, it is never a gig. It is a real moment of intercession.

The research has made the observation that Tabane pursued inner harmony. To him, the biggest prize of performing Malombo music is spiritual edification. Performing Malombo does not afford him material survival, but being in full communication with his inner self, and being true to those feelings, is the biggest reward Tabane earns from performing Malombo music.

Tabane's popular realm format of Malombo presents the strengths and discrepancies of the approach. Some examples of such discrepancies include challenges of Tabane's placing of the ritual music format in the realm of popular music. The other challenge is that *malombo* is a Tshivenda name yet Tabane sings his entire repertoire in Sepedi, and has no single composition in Tshivenda. His

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attempt of championing an indigenous sacred ritual discourse using a foreign music instrument, a Gibson guitar could be seen as a betrayal to his own course. Perhaps he could have used an African instrument like Dipela, which can take the place of both the guitar and the piano. The development of *Malombo* through a band format that has more affinity towards the established jazz band tradition of using bass, piano, guitar, and flute while retaining the indigenous name of *Malombo* on the one hand and rejection of jazz on the other, obfuscated the clarity of his mission to the eyes of his critics and fans. The use of the Gibson guitar strongly associated with Kenny Burrell, George Benson and Wes Montgomery earned Tabane the indelible stigma of a jazz musician that he persistently tried to ward off his image and brand of music to date. The fact that for many people *Malombo* remains a kind of jazz, says that his experiment may not have succeeded to radically depart from the image of jazz, in some way. This paradox of Tabane's development of an indigenous sound in the context of jazz festivals and talent contests affected his mission of mainstreaming the *malombo* sound into the realm of popular music.

The next chapter evidences the twelve phases and faces of Tabane's *Malombo* and how each phase added to the stigma of jazz in that each one gravitated towards the jazz band format. Perhaps, as Agawu (2003) argues, that there are no limits to 'creating new possibilities' in the development of a genre. The research therefore gives Tabane the benefit of the doubt in placing *malombo* in the realm of popular music. The 46 years attempt of recreating a powerful indigenous sound of his mother's musical art form of *malombo* through *Malombo*, must be investigated within the two paradigms of intents: that of his own, and that of his management and promoters together. Two music CDs and a DVD of Tabane's music have been included to exemplify the elements of Tabane's music that have been discussed in this chapter.

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The chapter focussed on Tabane's music and Appendix 3 presents additional information on his discography, while Appendix 6 presents evidence of the fact that Tabane wrote a drama script in addition to music.