

Guitar Song Composers from Botswana and Malawi: from Live Performance to Recording Studio and Back

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 19th century, European record companies such as Gramophone or Odeon used to record African musicians while they were visiting Europe since there were no branches of international record labels or independent studios in Africa. In December 1907, the Gramophone Company recorded a delegation of Swazi chiefs in its studio in England who performed six hymns by 19th century composers David Sankey and Dwight Lyman Moody (Chandler 2002). These hymns are among the first examples of African music recorded in the studio for commercial purposes.

In 1912 the Gramophone Company decided to make its first commercial recording sessions in Johannesburg and Cape Town thanks to a 'portable field unit' (Bender 2019). Sales of these recordings had a great success on the South African market, which is also why Eric Gallo established the first South African independent record label in 1932 in Johannesburg, i.e. the Gallo Record Company together with Gallo Recording Studios. In these studios numerous hits were recorded, including *Mbube* by Solomon Linda and his Evening Birds (1939),¹ songs with guitar by the Congolese Mwenda Jean Bosco, in addition to *kwela* and jive music that had a great influence on the development of southern African music genres and, furthermore, the legendary Miriam Makeba whose recordings were sold all over the world. Nowadays, Downtown Studio based in Johannesburg and set up in 1979 is one of the most important recording studios in the country and in southern Africa in general, as we will see later. This studio is also popular among scholars thanks to the significant research conducted by Louise Meintjes, whose book *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (2003) made an in-depth investigation of how musicians, arrangers and producers collaborated during the recording process of *mbaqanga* music in the 1990s.

After South African Gallo, foreign investors established record labels and studios in central and southern Africa that had a very important impact in shaping African popular music genres. In Kenya, Guy Johnson and Eric Blackhart from England established the East African Sound Studios in 1947, where different Kenyan popular music genres were recorded, such as *benga* and *omutibo* (Low 1982a, Ondieki 2019). In the former Belgian Congo, today the Demo-

1 The sad copyright and royalties issue for this song reveals how Eric Gallo treated African musicians in that period. Solomon Linda was paid just a few shillings for the recording session and did not even sign a contract. The copyright belonged to the record company, which is why he never received royalties although *Mbube* would later become an international hit (for further details see Malan 2012).

cratic Republic of the Congo, the Greek businessman Nicolas Jérónimidis created the Ngoma record label in 1948, thanks to which Congolese rumba, also known as *soukous*, became popular in the country as well as in central Africa (Bender 1996, Stewart 2000).

Established in 1965, Radio Botswana (former Radio Bechuanaland) was the only broadcaster in the country at that time and the only one to deal with recordings both in its studios and around the country. Nowadays, unlike the neighbouring South Africa, there are no branches of the most important international major labels in Botswana, such as Sony and Warner Music, because the country has a rather small population (two million inhabitants) and is consequently an 'unattractive' music market. As we will see later, the recording studios in both Botswana and Malawi are closely linked to private and local initiatives and the music recorded is mainly local or national. One of the first recording studios in Botswana was the Nosey Road Studios, founded in the early 1970s. However, Gaborone Virgin Brew, The Booth Royale and XLT Studios are the most renowned in the country today and all based in Gaborone. They are cutting-edge recording studios especially for their updated technologies 'produced elsewhere' in which hip-hop artists are mainly recorded using the so-called globalised 'wired sound' (Greene 2005).

The first part of this paper will be dedicated to Monaga 'Stiger Sola' Molefi and Batlaadira Radipitse, four-string guitar song composers I met in 2018 and 2019 during my field research in Botswana. I will investigate these musicians both as live performers and music-makers in the recording studio to see how these musical fields interact with each other in their activities. I had the opportunity to carry out 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). Initially, the aim of my field research was to document composers and musicians in two different areas: Gaborone (the capital city in the south) and Maun (a northern village, which is very popular among the tourists thanks to the stunning Okavango Delta area). I have documented not only guitar song composers, but also *setinkane* (lamellophone) and *segaba* (bowed string instrument) players (Cosentino 2021).

Thanks to this project I also had the opportunity to investigate why Botswanan guitarists play with four strings only and why some of them fret the chord positions from above the fingerboard of the instrument and not from below which is 'normal' (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Solly Seboto frets the chord positions from above the fingerboard of the guitar using his left hand. 2 July 2018, Molepolole, Botswana (a frame shot from an unpublished video of the author).

When I landed in Gaborone in 2018, my only contact was Tomeletso Sereetsi, a journalist and former Botswanan liaison officer of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM).

Today he is a very popular singer in the country. He is also a very talented guitar player and the author of a book regarding the Botswanan guitar style that he called ‘Tswana four-string guitar’ (Sereetsi 2013). In his book, Sereetsi gives a brief history of this guitar style, shows all the possible chords of the instrument and analyses the ‘grooves’ and styles of the most seminal guitarists.²

Tswana is the main ethnic group of the country and they speak Setswana which is a Bantu language. The Batswana (plural of Tswana) live in Botswana and in the northern part of South Africa. The first Tswana four-string guitar players were documented at the end of the 1960s thanks to Radio Bechuanaland operators. At that time, they played a homemade instrument using a tin oil box as resonator and four strings obtained by unrolling the brakes of a bicycle. This homemade instrument was called *motontonyane* or *senara* in the Setswana language.

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. [...] And like many other folk artists of the time, after a recital, the guitarist would beg for a cow in return. The four stringer then was paid with the alcoholic sorghum brew at drinking holes/shebeens where he was used as a customer-drawing card. A lot of performance artists around the time of independence, [...] toured across the country. They typically lived on the road [...] They did not take to formal employment or farming, [...] They never had a permanent address. [...] The four string guitar like much of musical instruments among Batswana was largely about recreation (Sereetsi 2013: 11-12).

Moreover, many mineworkers in both Botswana and South Africa used to play the guitar for pure personal pleasure or to entertain the onlookers in shebeens and beer gardens.³ According to Sereetsi, the vocal and guitar pattern of jive and *mbaqanga* music from South Africa was very popular all over southern Africa during the 1950s and 1960s thanks to radio airplays and records, and it inspired the four-string guitar players in Botswana. In particular, the loud melodic lines of the electric bass played with a plectrum and the electric guitar parts of these musical genres were reproduced on a single instrument: the first Tswana homemade acoustic guitars. With the addition of the vocal line the musician turned into a real one-man band. Nowadays, Tswana guitarists play industrially manufactured guitars, both acoustic and electric, with a thick electric bass string and three guitar strings with open tuning: usually E - E - G# - B (from the lowest to the highest). Both the melodies of the voice and the guitar mainly arise from the chord progression I - IV - V (for further details see Cosentino 2019c).

The second part of this paper will be dedicated to the Malawian guitar song composer Giddes Chalamanda and his activity in the recording studio. In 2010, I had the opportunity to spend a month between May and June at the Oral Literature Research Programme, Chileka (Malawi) in order to video and audio document acoustic guitar players of the area. At that time, I was mainly interested in Christopher ‘Khilizibe’ Gerald (Cosentino 2019b), pupil of the late Donald Kachamba (Cosentino 2019d), whose compositions became the main subject of my PhD thesis (Cosentino 2013). On May 22, Moya A. Malamusi and I met Giddes Chalamanda in Mazwa, a small village surrounded by coffee plantations (9 km from Limbe): on that occasion, we video documented eight of his own compositions and he told us about his activity in the recording studio.

When I was in the field in both Botswana and Malawi, I unfortunately did not get the opportunity to analyse guitar song composers while they were in the recording studio since it was not in their plans, also because, as we will see later, it is very expensive for these musicians to record an album. Nevertheless, I did get the chance to discuss extensively with the guitarists mentioned below both the creative process and the collaborations with other ‘studio music-makers’ (Meintjes 2003) for the realisation of their album.

2 My field research in Botswana was also conducted thanks to the valuable help of Mosako Sego Lee Rakobe in the Gaborone area and Anthony Molosi in the Maun area.

3 Gerhard Kubik (1995, 1997) and John Low (1982) described the same musical practices for the spread of the Katanga guitar style (former Zaire) in the 1950s.

Monaga ‘Stiger Sola’ Molefi (Botswana)

Monaga ‘Stiger Sola’ Molefi, known as Stiger, was recorded by Radio Botswana for the first time in 1984. Born on 12 June 1959 in Maun, where he still lives today, he is among the best-known Tswana four-string guitarists in the country and his compositions are also played on South African and Zimbabwean radios. Stiger started playing a homemade four-string guitar in 1973, then in 1980 he bought his first industrially manufactured acoustic instrument.

In 1997 Stiger recorded his first studio album (*Khubama*) in South Africa at Downtown Studio in Johannesburg and the following year the second album entitled *Mamelodi*, winner of the South African Music Award and containing one of his greatest hits ever: *Kachire*. It is a love song: a man tells his beloved Kachire that whatever he will do, wherever he will go, he will love her forever and ever. In the 1990s, Downtown Studio in Johannesburg was ‘one of the best-equipped and most abundantly staffed state-of-the-art recording facilities in the country. It was run by five in-house engineers, a programmer who also engineered, a programmer-trainee/tape operator, a technician, and a team of administrative and executive personnel’ (Meintjes 2003: 81). Especially at that time, the studio’s main income came from the so-called ‘black stuff’, a term Louise Meintjes heard there. It was used by engineers and white people in the music industry to describe ‘the stream of low-budget productions geared toward the mostly regional, sometimes national market’ (Meintjes 2003: 83). Today, Downtown Studio is still one of the most important recording studios in the country.



Figure 2. Monaga ‘Stiger Sola’ Molefi playing his acoustic guitar. 11 July 2018, Maun, Botswana (photo: Silvia Montaquila).

The recording of the song *Kachire* (Audio example 1), which we can define as a ‘studio audio art recording’ using Turino’s categorisations (Turino 2008), is also available on YouTube.⁴ However, when I interviewed Stiger in 2018 he did not know that someone had uploaded it on the web. Referring to that recording he told me: ‘I wanted to record my music in a modern way, I wanted to catch the attention of the audience immediately. In Downtown Studio we had a good time, I worked with four people: one white and three black guys. They supported me during the recordings, and they helped me to make always the right choice in order to get the right sound. We used programmed rhythm and percussion tracks, while I recorded both the bass guitar and the guitars. The keyboards were played by a session musician’.

⁴ The YouTube link is the following <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdXhToEjAwY>, last access December 27th, 2023.

Link » Audio Example 1

Kachire, by Monaga ‘Stiger Sola’ Molefi, from album *Mameladi*, recorded at Downtown Studio (Johannesburg - South Africa) in 1998.

On 11 July 2018 I had the opportunity to video and audio document four Stiger compositions at Maun Old Bridge. He accompanied himself on his four-string acoustic guitar only. That day he also played *Kachire* (Video Example 1), and regarding that ‘high fidelity recording’ (Turino 2008) he said: ‘even if I miss the other instruments, when I play at traditional music cultural events, I prefer to perform alone with the guitar. These events are usually more intimate and there is no active participation by the audience’. We can consider the live performance described by Stiger as a ‘presentational performance’ (Turino 2008), where the composer prefers to perform his songs in a more ‘traditional’ way, faithful to the original compositional idea, accompanying himself on the guitar only. Among these events, I can mention the President’s Day Competition, a competition with rich prizes held every year throughout Botswana. The competition is organised by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture to promote Botswanan talents and includes a regional preliminary level and a final in Gaborone. The categories are: Traditional Songs and Dances, Contemporary music, Choral Music, Traditional Instruments as well as Visual Arts and Crafts. The Tswana four-string guitar is considered a traditional instrument along with the already mentioned *setinkane* (lamellophone) and *segaba* (bowed string instrument). Stiger has won the regional level six times and he has performed both on acoustic and electric four-string guitars.

Link » Video Example 1

Kachire, by Monaga ‘Stiger Sola’ Molefi, video by Alessandro Cosentino, July 11, 2018, Maun Old Bridge (Botswana).

When Stiger performs at popular music festivals both in Botswana and South Africa, just like at the Okavango Delta Music Festival, he prefers to play the four-string guitar and sing along to the playback instrumental studio recordings of his songs. In 2018 he said to me: ‘I love studio recordings! Thanks to playback studio recordings I feel stronger and more comfortable on stage. The concert is more animated, and everyone can dance and sing with more energy’. The ‘studio audio art recordings’, in addition to being played by radios all over the country, are thus also of great support at the ‘participatory performance’ (Turino 2008) of the guitarist, where the audience is an important part of the show. That is why, at popular music festivals, he uses playback recordings when he does not get enough money to pay other musicians to perform with him. So, the playback studio recordings can substitute human beings in Stiger’s ‘participatory performance’, even if he prefers playing together with his companions.

The ‘studio audio art recording’ of *Kachire* (Audio Example 1) ‘immerses’ the song in a ‘globalized sound’ composed of electronic drums, loops and keyboards. This produces an ‘in your face sound’ (Neuenfeldt 2005) which was strongly desired by Stiger. He managed to obtain this thanks to the help of Downtown Studio producers, arrangers and engineers. On the other hand, the ‘high fidelity recording’ (Video Example 1) is more intimate and mellow, it shows us the refined and continuous interlocking game between the bass string and the melodic lines played on the treble part of the guitar. This very important feature of the Tswana four-string guitars totally disappears in the version of *Kachire* recorded at Downtown Studio, but this does not matter to Stiger, since the main purpose of this recording is to achieve a ‘modern sound’, not to represent the Tswana four-string guitar tradition. A ‘modern sound’ could be achieved only in the recording studio: thanks to his first two studio albums, Stiger Sola’s songs crossed the national borders.

The important interplay between the four categorisations proposed by Turino (2008) in Stiger Sola’s musical activities is also significant: the studio is not only a place to share ideas and experiment with other studio music-makers, but it is also in great continuity with his ‘participatory performances’ where he frequently uses playback instrumental studio recordings of his songs.

Batlaadira Radipitse (Botswana)

We will now move to the south, more precisely to Mmankgodi a small village 40 km from Gaborone. Batlaadira Radipitse was born in this village in 1989 and he still lives there. He is one of the youngest talented Tswana four-string guitarists in the country. He started playing the instrument in 1998, but decided to become a professional musician only in 2009: 'I am a self-taught guitar player. In my village, there are a lot of guitarists who play the instrument from above the fingerboard. In order to be different, I started playing it from below. Now I play both ways, it does not really make a difference to me, even if there are some songs or part of songs that it is better to play in one way or the other'.⁵ He has won the President's Day Competition three times (2013, 2014, 2016, 2019 and 2023) and thanks to the first prize money (10,000 pula, about 850 euro), he was able to record his first studio album. His songs are very popular in Botswana, especially the 'studio audio art recordings': 'I never wanted to play for small tips in shebeens. When I decided to become a professional musician, I wanted to be famous. And now I have done it, I make my living playing my music'.



Figure 3. Batlaadira Radipitse playing his guitar. 1 July 2018, Mmankgodi, Botswana (frame shot from Video Example 2).

I bought Radipitse's first album from a stall outside the Broadhurst Mall in Gaborone. The CD was not produced by any record label and had no box or booklet (Figure 4). Radipitse himself 'distributed' the copies of the album to music shops and stalls like the one outside the main malls in Gaborone. Like many professional musicians in other African countries (Olivier 2017), album sale is not Radipitse's main income, since he makes his living mainly playing at government-sponsored traditional events and official ceremonies. The album was recorded in 2016 at Bullet Music Production in Mogoditshane, very close to Gaborone. Radipitse paid 6,000 pula (around 500 euro) to record the six tracks of the album entitled *Ke tshwennga ke mmamanthwane* (I am nagged by a black bat), which is also the title of a song contained on the album about a bat 'sent' by someone to torment the guitarist's sleep every night.

⁵ All Radipitse's statements in this paragraph were collected on 1 July 2018 during our meeting at his home village Mmankgodi.



Figure 4. Batlaadira Radipitse, *Ke tshwenngwa ke mmamanthwane*, CD released in 2016.

Regarding the ‘studio audio art’ recording process, Radipitse said to me: ‘I wanted to record my album in a modern style to reach all people, even those who don’t love our traditional music. When I compose a new song, I have it on my mind with the sound of electronic drums as well, I love that sound’. What Radipitse seeks in the recording studio is an essential and ‘in your face’ sound that does not distort the essence of his songs. For this reason, he does not use electronic keyboards; the only instrument played live is his electric four-string guitar which is accompanied by his voice, of course.

He loves the sound of electronic drums in his songs and that is why he decided to record his first album at Bullet Music Production Studio. The owner of the studio is Bullet Ketshabile (Figure 5), who is also the sound engineer, arranger and producer. Just as happens in other African countries (Olivier 2017, Meintjes 2005), the owner of the studio plays the role of all these professional studio figures in order to keep recording fees low. Bullet Ketshabile is the only studio music-maker, and Radipitse is well aware of this, since he loves Bullet’s way of programming the electronic drums. Bullet played the midi master keyboard in the studio album using an electronic click track metronome in order to play as regularly as he could. The master keyboard controlled the Virtual Instruments (VST) of Cubase 5, i.e. the popular digital audio workstation (DAW) developed by Steinberg thanks to which he generated the eight digital drum tracks (kick, snare, rattle, hi-hat, conga, etc.). Then Radipitse ‘played along to’ the electronic drums instead of ‘performing with’ the drummer (Porcello 2005): the composer recorded simultaneously the electric four-string guitar (directly wired to the PC) and the vocal melody.



Figure 5. Bullet Ketshabile in his Bullet Music Production Studio. Mogoditshane, Botswana (photo: Facebook).

Banyana ba tricky (The girls are tricky) is a song in the Setswana language composed by Batlaadira Radipitse; it is popular throughout Botswana thanks to the radio airplays. It was written by the guitarist after he had suffered a broken heart, which is why he states in the song: 'girls only want men's money, we are used for their purposes'. The song is included on his first album (Audio Example 2). In the recording the bass string of the guitar is very loud, it is 'in your face', while the other three strings of the instrument are in the background. Furthermore, the bass line seems to be overdubbed with a synthesised sound, although both Bullet Ketshabile and Batlaadira Radipitse told me that this was not so: what we can hear is just the sound of the bass string of the electric guitar.

[Link » Audio Example 2](#)

Banyana ba tricky, by Batlaadira Radipitse, from album *Ke tshwennga ke mmamanthwane* (I am nagged by a black bat), recorded at Bullet Music Production Studio (Mogoditshane - Botswana) in 2016

On July 1st, 2018 I got the chance to video and audio document *Banyana ba tricky* performed by Radipitse with his Ibanez four-string acoustic guitar outside his house in Mmankgodi (Video Example 2). This 'high fidelity traditional recording' shows us the 'Tswananess' of the composition: the guitarist frets with his left hand the four strings of the instrument from above the fingerboard, and the three treble strings of the instrument rhythmically interlock with the very regular bass line. Furthermore, Radipitse plays very fast and loud solos on the bass string of the guitar between the verses of the song, a very common feature characterising Tswana four-string guitar players. In the 'studio audio art recording' the bass line is always regular, as it does not produce solos. Furthermore, the bass line and the treble strings of the guitar are 'placed' on different sound levels: listening to the song one might perceive that the two guitar parts come from two different instruments.

[Link » Video Example 2](#)

Banyana ba tricky, by Batlaadira Radipitse, video by Alessandro Cosentino, July 11, 2018, Maun Old Bridge (Botswana).

When he performs live, just like Stiger Sola, Radipitse also loves playing the guitar along to the playback drum tracks recorded in the studio: ‘the audience dances mainly thanks to the drums, I always use them. I play without the drums only in more traditional contests, such as the President’s Day Competition where it is not even allowed’.

Giddes Chalamanda (Malawi)

Giddes Chalamanda was born in 1930 in the village of Mazwa (Malawi) and still lives there with his wife and six children. He taught himself to play the guitar when he was twelve years old, and now he is teaching his children to play the instrument. His first guitar was a present from a friend; he also used to play a homemade banjo.⁶ Today his songs are very popular all over Malawi, especially among teenagers. Giddes’ compositions are frequently played by local radios, and he furthermore plays at the main musical events around Blantyre and Limbe and also at the Lake of Stars Malawi Arts Festival, the most important festival in the country which takes place during the summer. On the occasion of these music festivals, he is usually accompanied by a band. In 2007, Giddes Chalamanda flew to Europe to sing and play his own compositions at seven concerts: Berlin, Hannover and Munich were some of the cities he performed in. Three years later, on Moya A. Malamusi’s recommendation, Giddes was invited to Germany to perform at a guitar music festival.



Figure 6. Giddes Chalamanda sings and plays the guitar outside his own house. Mazwa village/Limbe, Malawi, 22 May 2010 (frame shot from Video Example 3).

⁶ Factory-manufactured banjos were introduced into southern Africa in the 1920s and homemade banjos were very popular in Malawi starting from the end of the 1970s. Young boys with such instruments started playing on street corners, on country roads and in the towns. For further information see Kubik (1989) and Malamusi (2015).

Giddes' songs talk about everyday life experiences, most of them are about his wife or his children and some of them are about relevant problems of contemporary society. On 22 May 2010 I got the chance to video document eight compositions by Giddes Chalamanda, which he played by himself on a Tanson acoustic guitar sitting on the porch of his house. The recording session contained *Abiti Alfuledi* (Miss Alafuledi), a sad song in Chiyao, Chichewa and English about a Malawian girl who decided to move to Zambia, but on her return to her native village, she realised that her ex-boyfriend had married another woman (Video Example 3). On that occasion I could appreciate the guitarist's unique and very interesting 'manual vamping style' (Low 1982b: 21): his left hand produced only basic chords (G, C and D major), while his right hand created a very structured motional pattern (Kubik 2010: 329-381), which produced a refined rhythmic game on the instrument (Cosentino 2019a).

Link » Video Example 3

Abiti Alfuledi, by Giddes Chalamanda, video by Alessandro Cosentino, May 22, 2010, Mazwa village/Limbe (Malawi).

In 2002, the Malawian producers Dean and Albert Khoza sensed the 'appeal' of Giddes' compositions and decided to record some of his songs on an album: *Ndife Mbeu* containing ten tracks (seven were his own compositions). Giddes was 73 years old at that time and had the opportunity to work with younger musicians and arrangers to produce an album in a studio. When I met him in 2010, Giddes told me that the atmosphere was very relaxed, because the owner of Studio K in Blantyre, like many other recording studio owners in Malawi (Deja 2013), was also the producer and sound engineer of the album and he always fostered 'hi-fi sociality' (Mejntes 2017, see also Bates 2012) among the different studio music-makers. Giddes' composition *Abiti Alafuledi* is also contained on the album (track 3), but the sound of this 'studio audio art recording' (Audio Example 3) is very different from the 'high fidelity recording' I made in 2010. The acoustic guitar played by Giddes is in the background while the electric bass played by Kondwani Nyirenda is in the foreground together with the electronic drums programmed by Albert Khoza and Hendrix Kalaya. Furthermore, the two musicians distinguished the arrangement of the song with two different keyboard sounds that imitate a marimba and a flute.

Link » Audio Example 3

Abiti Alfuledi, by Giddes Chalamanda, from album *Ndife Mbeu*, recorded at Studio K (Blantyre - Malawi) in 2002.

In 2002, Malawi was still living the last years of the 'cassette culture' era (Manuel 1993), so both the producer of the album and Giddes decided to publish *Ndife Mbeu* on a cassette in order to create a suitable and user-friendly product (Figure 7). The 'independent' studios in Malawi used to spread local musicians' recordings throughout the country on cassettes, which were cheap while cassette players were very easy to repair. Thanks to his album, Giddes became very popular all over Malawi, a 'local star'. This is the reason why the Government of Malawi decided to send him to the Library of Congress concert in Washington to represent the 'musical tradition' of Malawi, and on 5 July 2016 he played there, accompanied by the Malawian musicians Davis Njobvu (voice and acoustic guitar), Edgar Kachere (voice and rattle), Uncle Lai (acoustic guitar) and Chimwemwe Maloya (voice and rattle).⁷ Giddes finally got the opportunity to visit the USA, as he had always dreamed of doing, as expressed in the lyrics of his song *Buffalo Soldier*, an adaptation of the popular composition by Bob Marley.

⁷ The complete video of the performance is available on the YouTube link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwyxOZM_r4w&t=2455s, last access December 27th, 2023.

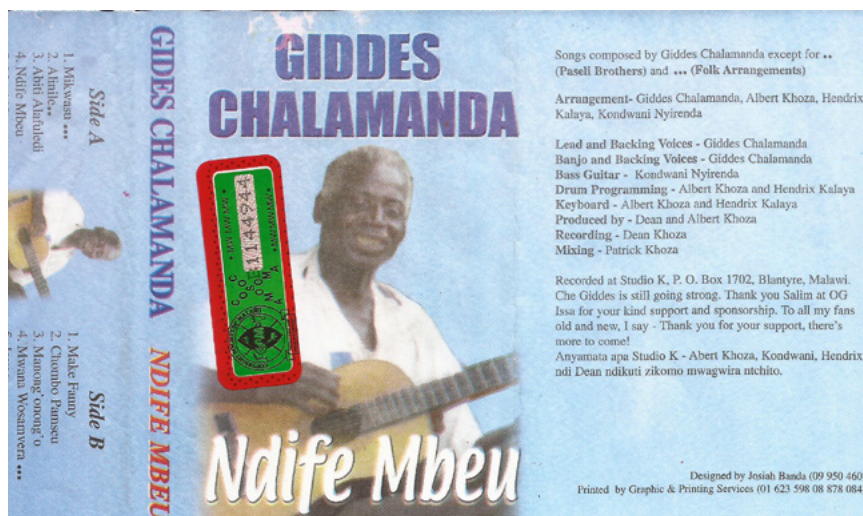


Figure 7. Cassette cover of *Ndife Mbeu* by Giddes Chalamanda.

Concluding remarks

Although there are no branches of international record labels (the so-called ‘major’ labels) in Botswana and Malawi, there are small recording studios working with local musicians to produce studio albums mainly for the national market. Despite the fact that both Botswana and Malawi now have their own cutting-edge recording studios equipped with professional technologies, there is still a ‘historical gap’ if compared to those in South Africa, both in terms of technologies and the reference musical market, since South African records are sold all over the world. South African studios are still today a ‘reference model’ for producers, arrangers and sound engineers from Botswana, Malawi and southern Africa in general, even though the gap is getting smaller and smaller thanks to the more affordable prices and availability of professional studio technologies in central and southern Africa.

The recording studios examined in this paper are places of cultural creation from where culture can be disseminated all over the world through recordings and, in the last decades, the web (Wallach 2005). Not all the guitar song composers can afford to record a studio album because it is quite expensive, and that is also the reason why the government of Botswana supports artists through the President’s Day Competition. Studio recordings can be the first step for these musicians in making their living as musicians to support themselves and their families.

As regards the guitarists’ approach to the recording studio examined in this paper, two trends have emerged: the first is that of Stiger Sola and Giddes Chalamanda who let themselves be guided by different studio music-makers (producers, arrangers, engineers and musicians). These two guitar song composers prefer elaborate arrangements (electronic drums, bass guitar, choirs and keyboards) for their guitar songs. The recording process is a proper musical practice among different individuals who, on the basis of an original idea, create a totally re-shaped product. We could define this first process as a ‘multi-input musical practice’.

The second approach is the one adopted by Batlaadira Radipitse, which is totally different: before entering the studio he already has in mind how his songs should be recorded. He prefers to work with only one studio music-maker, Bullet Ketshabile: a digital drum programmer who is also the owner and sound engineer of the studio. He is very good at ‘creating’ what the guitar song composer desires.

The activities carried out by these guitar song composers show their will to operate not only in oral tradition contexts but also in those related to popular music, such as the recording studios, where their songs are first ‘dressed’ and then recorded through various processes and paths in which different professional figures are involved.

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