

Lecture 8 - Music

Prof. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga

MIT OpenCourseWare

Europeans did not go deep into African music to understand its place in people's lives as such. They looked for the melodic and rhythmic characteristics and the outward-looks signs (aesthetics). This tradition of looking and judging African music is particularly clear in the 18th-20th centuries. They saw it as largely pagan and worship of ancestral spirits, warlord, release of tensions and conflict of everyday life.

In the late-19th century, mobilizing African knowledge was used to confirm western anthropological thought: structure and function, labor, structure between young and old men for the control, production and supply, women are held responsible, the controlling and dominant group of elders, challenging and emergent generation. It's this struggle between modernity and tradition.

The Uses of Music Among the Tsonga

Music is used in all of the following ways: the birth of a child, a marriage, a man's going hunting, the taking in of harvest, to help guide the moral order of society, to aid in the reduction of social stress, the announcement of eligibility of an individual (for pre-marital sex relations, for marriage, for passage to the spirit-world, etc.), group conviviality, the acquiring of prestige, the validation of power, the maintenance of lineage solidarity, and the disposal of maize surpluses.

Music, dance, and drink are a rite of incorporate, of physical union, and a sacrament of communion. Hence the important of call and response –the leader calling, the rest chorusing. There are children's songs, drumming school songs, circumcision school songs, puberty school songs, exorcism songs, work songs, funeral songs, praise songs, epics, and solo instrumental music. The dances are *xichayachaya* for men, *xilala* for women, *rhabela phikezano* for both, but the Tsonga's national dance is *muchongolo* which involved men and women.

Non-work-related dances were conducted at specific times of the year, viz., after the harvest and before the planting to eh crops. They were to ask for fertility of everything from the ancestors and to thank them for it. Hence the Tsonga tipping the calabash and pouring contents onto the ground, chanting "This is for the land!" in reference to the earth that produces crops and in which the ancestors are buried. And the small flute or whistle (*nanga*) is made of the leg-bone of *chapungu*, the bird-of-heaven or "lightning bird" (known as the battler eagle), because it zigzags, swooshes and swishes as it flies, in a whistling sound. This whistle, the Tsonga believe, possesses the power to bring rain and to protect the flute's owner against lightning, which occurs regularly in this Southern African countryside.

Among the Tsonga, communal vocal music and drumming "would sour the beer" so it was not to be held near where women were brewing beer from nkanyi or marula fruit.

Music as Lubricant, Smoothing Hard Labor into Workatainment

Also called *nhimbe* (chiShona) and *humwe* (in chiTshangana), *jakwara* (work party) was a day set aside for collective work to plant, weed, and harvest the fields of the orphaned, the widowed, the elderly, the poor, and the master farmer. Because *chara chimwe hachitswanye inda* (one finger cannot crush lice), it made sense to mobilize the community to create a large labor force.

The beneficiary of this collective labor brewed beer and hosted a work party to provide not only an incentive to come but also the energy to continue working. Beer and food aplenty were served; after all, adage *ukama igasva hunozadzi swa nekudya* (friendship is an empty calabash, it can only be filled up through a

meal). Food and material possessions did not substitute for collective belonging; and food and material possessions were contents of a vessel called *ukama* (community). That is why *chivanhu* (culture) said that *vana vanyamunhu* (children of the same ancestor) must eat, drink, work, and pray together.

The collective was the water; only within it could the fish (the individual) find strength, hence *simba rehove riri mumvura* (the fish's strength is in the water). Then, like one organism, one body with many different but mutually coordinating parts, the village descended on the field as one, each bringing their own *mapadza* (hoes) ready to weed and *matemo* (axes) ready to chop. The individual increased his or her mechanical means from a pair of hands to tens and hundreds of hands making the task light.

Singing and song lubricated difficult work into fun and sport, pacing it, giving it rhythm, and taking the mind away from the arduous task, and placing it in a parallel universe of recreation and entertainment, thereby shutting it from communicating "evil thought" of *nungo* (laziness), *kuzeza* (dreading the task), and *kuneta* (tiredness). Singing transformed and coordinated this critical mass of individuals and their limbs into one vast organism marching in lockstep. The food provided the fuel for the body and mind to remain energized and to perform the work at hand.

The release of beer to the workers was paced and dispensed in quantities designed to give them *simba* (strength) without driving them into *kudhakwa* (drunken stupor) that neutralized efficiency. The volume of the singing picked up, powerful arms swung the hoe this way and that. Soon work became just another excuse, another occasion, to drink, eat, and party. Work became a medium of entertainment. Soon the work itself was finished, and there was only beer, food, and singing to be partaken. With the hand, feed, and body now freed from the "small matter" of hoeing, *ngoma* (drums), *mbira* (hand pianos), and *hosho* (percussion gourds) were brought out, *magagada* (ankle percussion gourds), and dancing headgears were brought out.

The *maridzahosho* (expert drummers) and *vanagwenyambira* (expert *mbira* players) set store, and *makate* (beer pots, singular gate) came out, and the community danced late into the night. As each individual at long last retired home without any goodbyes (for *adhakwa haaoneke*/a person who is full/drunken does not say goodbye), they sang discordantly along the way home, staggering this way and that, their voices dragging, perhaps imitating the equally complicated striding of their beer-wizened feet.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

STS.089 Technology and Innovation in Africa
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.