

Transitions in the Social Functions of the *Muheme* Music Tradition of the Wagogo People of Dodoma, Tanzania

Kedmon Mapana

Department of Fine and Performing Arts
University of Dar-es-Salaam
Tanzania

Abstract

This article examines transitions in the social functions of the muheme music tradition of the Wagogo people of Tanzania. It argues that the musical tradition of muheme, with the disappearance of its original social context, is a living tradition- one that has made a transition from the now illegal Wagogo girls' initiation ceremony to its acceptance as a Wagogo muheme church music genre in the Anglican Church in the Dodoma region of central Tanzania (Mapana, 2007). There are implications of this journey for other global music traditions, the socio-cultural contexts of which are no longer viable. Interview quotations from Wagogo cultural-bearers and the literature are documented to support the argument.

Introduction

An earlier article (Mapana, 2007) concentrated on the performance of the *muheme*¹ music tradition and not on changes or transitions in the social functions it was serving. On February 13, 2005, I attended a concert of Wagogo music in the Anglican Church in Chamwino village in the central Tanzanian region of Dodoma. The concert involved twenty groups, six of which performed muheme music. The way muhemewas performed was different from the muheme performed during the Wagogo girls' initiation ceremony, *makumbigawadala*², which I had an opportunity to witness in the past, as I was born in Ugogo, as Mgogo (Mapana, 2007). This ethnographic article therefore examines changes in the social function of muheme in its transition from the original social context, the now illegal Wagogo girls' initiation ceremony (*makumbigawadala*) to its acceptance as a Wagogo muheme church music genre in the Anglican Church in the Dodoma region of central Tanzania. The researcher in an ethnographic study "describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 2007, p.68). In this sense, this article focuses on description and interpretation for understanding of the transition in social function of muheme music tradition of the Wagogo cultural group.

There are, it would seem, implications of this journey for other global music traditions, the socio-cultural contexts of which are no longer viable.

Social functions of music traditions in Africa

Music traditions in Africa have been described by many scholars as attached to a specific activity or function. According to Agawu (2003:98), music in Africa must always take into account the particular activity to which it is attached; it serves a 'function' for that activity.

¹ The name of this tradition has been spelled in a variety of ways in the literature, most commonly *muheme* and *mheme*. The spelling used in this study will be *muheme*, more closely representing the way a Wagogo would pronounce the word in Cigogo. The spelling "mheme" used frequently in the literature by non-Wagogo scholars (e.g., Hines and Eckman, 1993, Nyoni, 1998) appears less precise.

² *Makumbigawadala* is an initiation ritual (rite of passage). It includes the circumcision, *cigotogoto*, within the ritual. This initiation ritual marks the transition of the female from being a girl to becoming a woman. *Makumbi* refers to the house where, after their circumcision has taken place, the girls stay for the rest of their initiation. The girl's initiation ritual is also called *cigotogotocawadala* or circumcision of girls.

As one example, Turino (2008) writes that the music-making and dancing of the Shona people of Zimbabwe are central activities during social gatherings. People grow up making music and dancing as a normal part of social life. In fact, Turino(2008) found that “musical life in Shona villages of Murehwa District, northeastern Zimbabwe, is centered on community participation as a primary goal of performance. The ceremonies, beer parties, and other musical events renew bonds among Shona community members as well as with their ancestors, who remain vital spiritual forces in people’s lives. Turino continues by saying that“ group participatory performance was the main type of music making in Zimbabwe; drumming, hosho(shakers), and lamella phones such as the mbira were used to accompany communal dancing, singing and handclapping”(p.122).This illustrates the continuity that is provided by participatory music–making for social interaction in its context –sustaining the social fabric.

The muheme music tradition has its own historyand socio-cultural context among the Wagogo people, as Vallejo (2007) notes. There is not a moment in the Wagogo’s life that does not have musical support andmuheme, in its original context, is an example. Since this relationship is found in many Sub-Saharan African societies, this observation of a musical tradition has implications for music traditions in which contexts of music are disappearing or changing across the continent.

Social function of muhemein the context of initiation/circumcision

Muhemeas a music tradition appeared and was originally performed as part of the Wagogo girls’ initiation/circumcision (Mapana 2007,Nyoni 1998) to servethe following gender-related and generic social functions:

To hide or ‘mask’ the sounds of the agony of the girls

Normally, when girls were circumcised they felt great pain. The pain caused the girls to scream loudly and in order to keep the screaming from being heard by outsiders, especially younger girls who, it was anticipated, would go through the same pain in the future, loud muheme was performed.ElisabatiMasholi, who used to be a circumciser, noted that:

*Calakwanzagotolawana, ng’omazatowagwakwamlilomuwahambeka.
Sautizang’omazatazagakumbilizasautizawana,
sokowawonagausungumuwahahonowakugotolwa.*

During the circumcision, the drums were played at a very high volume, so as to mask the sounds of the circumcised girls. The circumcision was very painful for them (E. Masholi, personal communication, October 13, 2006).

This is supported by the function of the *igunda* musical instrument observed among the Wakaguru people from the Morogoro region of Tanzania which was played during boys’ circumcision. Mlama (1973) found that “the one musical instrument which appears, [the]igunda, has limited significance in the play as such. The main purpose of its being blown is to make the boys’ cries of pain inaudible to the people at the village. This is important because this society expects men to be able to endure hardship...Making cries inaudible, therefore, helps to maintain [the boys’] manliness (p.60).

To educate the young girls

The song texts, learned by the girls in singing sessions after the circumcision and during the training sessions in the *makumbi* [initiation], provided the main teaching materials for training girls to learn behavior acceptable in the society. For example, these song lyrics contain instructions on how the girls should act when talking with their parents:

*Ane kongo gwe-kongo nomliga kaya
Hamba sogo-Mwiko nomliga kaya
Hamba nyina- Mwiko nomliga kaya.
I swear that I cannot disrespect my elders
I cannot disrespect my father
I cannot disrespect my mother.*

The initiated girl is singing that she should behave herself as a grown woman. She should always be respectful of her elders. This kind of cultural education through muhemesongs was described by different Gogointerviewees, including this one:

*Cagotolagawana, nakwimbazinyimbo ho ciwapelemahweso,
wawenaheshimakwawalezinawanhuwose.*

We used to circumcise girls and dance for them in order to give them the discipline to respect their elders and other people, as well

(M. Ngoli, personal communication, October 18, 2006).

To celebrate the communities acceptance of the girls change of status

Traditionally, a Gogo girl could not be considered an adult female until she had undergone this procedure. Consequently, a female could not marry without being circumcised. Communities celebrated the change in the circumcised girls' status from children to women:

*Catowagang`omayamuheme, soko ye nyemo. Ai
yalisherehevyonowanawavinwanawawahapa, wanzawanhumtutu*

Muheme was played because it was a sign of happiness after circumcision [whenthe] girls danced because they [were] happy to be [recognized as] grown up, now (J. Yohana, personal communication, October 16, 2006).

To console the circumcised girls

Because the act of circumcision was painful, different songs were sung to comfort the circumcised or initiated girls. The following song lyrics provide an example:

*Mpelawalimubigwe, mpelawalimubigwe, sesecausesanembazo
Mpelawalimubigwempelawalimubigwe, sesecausesanembazo
Look how beautiful you are; before circumcision you were not that beautiful.*

This kind of song attempted to make the initiated girls feel that the circumcision process helped them to have a healthier body stronger physiologically. These songs texts were intended to save the girls accept the process as expected by the society:

*Ng`omayamuhemeyawatazagawanawonowagotolwewehuliceviswanuhononyimbozikwimb
wa, zanozagawehulicevyonoainkhaniyasinjenzi, langakilamunhuyopkolelamumo.*

The dance was used to console the circumcised girls so that they could see the action as a normal thing which everybody had to go through. Masholi continues by saying that:

Ng`omaaiwatowelwagawanyamuluzi, ikuwakumbucizavyonocivinilwa, nawacisangalaza.

It was used by the circumcised girls to build a feeling of pride and of being superior because they had gone through the process of circumcision (E. Masholi, personal communication, October 13, 2006).

This is similar to the Wagogo boys' circumcision in which the *cipandemusic* tradition is played for the same purpose. Vallejo, (2007) suggests that "it is also used as a way to relieve the pain of the future initiated in the precise moment when the cut in the skin is being done. In order to achieve this purpose, the men surround the boy that is going to be circumcised and, at the warning signal of the *honondulele* (antelope horn), they project their voices towards him while they sing the polyphonic section of the *cipande*.

To entertain

The music was used to entertain people in the community. During the initiation period, people, particularly women, used to come together to celebrate the event. Songs were sung and the dance appeared for the purpose of entertainment. In one song, for example the text says:

*Chazahoihe, ahechazakumlamusenyi. Mnyakayanhoweleluchenzetezajehiyihio,
ahechazakumlamusenyi*

We have come to celebrate the circumcision. Children and parents, do not feel lonely, we have come to celebrate.

These song lyrics indicate that the initiated girls and their parents were not celebrating alone, but they had other people accompanying them. During the celebration, women used to drink local beer and sometimes cows were killed. The celebration was a very big event:

Yaliinanhuninzyombahasana. Ng`omayasangalazagawanhu, hanjiwaulagagang`ombe, wakutelekaujimbi, nawakung`wa, aluhonowagala, howakutowang`omamunomuno, so nyemoyacigotogoto.

The dance was performed because it had great importance; the importance was reflected in their happiness. People were happy and used to drink local beer to celebrate the initiation event (E. Malebeto, personal communication, October 18, 2006).

To mobilize the community and emphasize the strength of the Wagogo culture

The circumcision and its' music tradition was performed every year. It brought many people to a particular place. By making it an annual event, in a specific place in Ugogo, the practice was planted as a tradition in the society. It was inherited and there was social continuity in its performance:

Cigotogotocanzakatalicilawahenga. Cavinagawanakuwapelaelimu, watujemahwesomaswanu. Cembaga ne zinyimbokuwaletawahnu ho watugemafundishoganamnayakuheshiana.

Since the time of our grandfathers, female circumcision brought people together. This was a school to educate the girls and the society as a whole to be respectful and pleased with Wagogo customs (G. Maile, personal communication, October 17, 2006).

The transition of muheme begins

It is believed that the natural life of muheme began as music for girls' initiation, or makumbigawadala (Nyoni, 1998). Muheme music and girls' circumcision culture were inseparable. The literature provides evidence that the Wagogo culture of circumcising girls was already strong in the 1800s in which neighbors started imitating the culture. This indicates that muheme music was strong too. Peterson, (2006) found that "in 1889, the missionary Wood spent several days in the Kaguru village of Chief Sekwao. He was disconcerted to find that some of the girls there had recently been circumcised, because Kaguru did not normally cut their girls. "I asked Sekwao why he allowed them to follow the Gogo custom in this respect", wrote Wood. He said it was because the women and young girls were so anxious for it (p.995).

This was followed over time by a period of transition during which it became music widely used for political gatherings, celebrations and other secular entertainment events in the 1960s, after Tanganyika became Independent. This transition, similarly, was followed by another transitional period leading to the present in which it serves as a church music tradition. It is anticipated that, if it continues as a living tradition, muheme may go through additional periods of transition, serving other social functions for the people of the Wagogo culture (Mapana, 2007).

Of course, the transition of a cultural activity over a period of time causes a change in that activity. There is movement from one way of doing things to another, the second sharing at least some elements with the original (Tanner 1967). These transitions, clearly, are similar to other cultural transitions in life: the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the transition from unemployment to holding a paid position, and so on. Almost always, "change is the outcome of the transition" (Bascom 1959:25).

Traditions in African cultures, as with other cultures of the world, are always in transition. Kubik (1987) emphasizes that cultural traditions are not merely changing now, but perhaps from the moment they establish themselves as 'traditions' have always been changing. Traditions change at different speeds and, Kubik adds, they have their own history, socio-cultural context and structure. He suggests, specifically, that music traditions change their form and structure in accordance with new emerging relationships, creating a different experience in the course of the transitions.

When studying music that is going or has gone through a transition, understanding the original music tradition as much as possible is as important as understanding the tradition after changes have taken place. It is, however, also of great importance to comprehend the reasons for, and type of transition that has taken place.

Functional change of muheme

The main factor to have been influenced the functional changes of muheme from initiation to secular muheme appears to be a call by the Tanzanian government to revive and preserve Tanzanian culture. This call was made immediately after Independence (1961) by then President Julius Kambarage Nyerere. Mbuguni (1974) quotes Nyerere as saying “I believe that culture is the essence and spirit of any nation. A country which lacks its own culture is no more than a collection of people without the spirit which makes them a nation, Of all the crimes of colonialism, there is none worse than the attempts to make us believe we had no indigenous culture of our own or what we did have was worthless-something we should be ashamed of rather than a source of pride. Some of us, particularly those of us who have acquired a European type of education, set ourselves out to prove to our colonial rulers that we had become ‘civilized’. And by that we meant that we had abandoned everything with our own past and learnt to imitate only European ways(p.16-17).

Of course, Nyerere was using the term ‘nation’ in a way the colonials were, and was not reflecting an African perspective on the socio-cultural/political unit represented by (then) Tanganyika. That issue, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Nyerere continued by saying that “I have set up this new Ministry to help us regain our pride in our own culture. I want it to seek out the best of the traditions and the customs of all our tribes and make them a part of our national culture”(p.17). This was reinforced in 1995 by the Prime Minister Rashid Kawawa in 1995 who said that “the main objective of national culture is the development of Tanzanian nationalism and personality through the promotion of our own cultural activities” (p.17).

Many ethnic groups in Tanzania responded to Nyerere’s call by performing some traditional music genres which were brought forward outside their socio-cultural contexts. Some ritualistic or function-specific traditions were adopted for secular occasions. Muheme was one of these, as Mchoya Malogo suggests:

*Tulianzaku che zangomazamuheme zakisiasa (utamaduni) mwaka 1966.
Tulichezawakati wakuwakaribishawageni wakisiasa,
kwenyemikutano yahadharanawakatimwinginetulichezambeleyawagenirasmii.*

Our group started playing secular *muheme* in 1966. We played to welcome political leaders at political meetings; sometimes we even played in front of presidents (M. Malogo, personal communication, October 17, 2006).

Social functions of secular muheme

Since that time, the use of the muheme music tradition among the Wagogo of the Dodoma region can be found in political contexts, education, mobilization of the population and entertainment. The basic social functions of secular muheme became:

To raise challenges among the groups

In order to promote Wagogo music, competitions were held annually. This encouraged groups to compose special songs, some praising themselves as singers who were better than others. These kinds of songs helped to create challenges among the groups, hence, each group in every corner of Nyaugogo was active. However, according to a recent interview with Mchoya Malogo, “These days competitions are not organized because there is less interest in such things from members of the society, youth in particular” (M. Malogo, personal communication, October 17, 2006).

To create support for political campaigns

Muheme music was and is used during political campaigns to encourage people to attend political meetings and support a political party. The Nyerere muheme group from Chamwino village has supported the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party. During elections, the group has always been used by the CCM for their campaigns in different areas in Tanzania. It is believed that using the muheme songs create unity among people.

The transition of the muhememusic tradition from political usage to the church began to gain popularity in the 1998 when the government banned female circumcision in Tanzania (Mapana 2007)..

Social functions of themuheme music tradition in the Anglican Diocese of Central Tanganyika, Dodoma.

Early missionaries held the musical traditions of the Wagogo in very low esteem. Peterson (2006:1008) found the following: “In 1898, Miss Pickthall adopted an infant she named Hephzibah. When the girl married a teacher in 1912, Pickthall organized a church wedding and taught local villagers to sing “a very pretty Welsh tune...[which is] to take the place of every objectionable song that they have hitherto sung in their own villages on such occasions”(p.1008).

The fourth Bishop of the Anglican Church of Central Tanganyika, Bishop Madinda, was the first Tanzanian Mgogo diocesan bishop to give emphasis to the intergration of Wagogo music traditions in church services (Mapana, 2007). Muheme, in this case, was a priority. Muhemein the church is believed to serve a number of social functions. Muheme:

A tool for encouraging people to join the church

In this section there are two sub-factors that were mentioned by Wagogo who were interviewed. First, many people join the church because the church has permitted traditional music to be performed in the church. During one concert, the by then Assistant Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Central Tanganyika, Bishop Kusenha, addressed the audience in Chamwino village, pointing out some historical facts. From the earliest days of the Anglican Church in Tanganyika in the late 1800s through the 1960s the number of churchgoers in the Anglican Church in Dodoma increased slowly. From 1970s to 1990s, however, the number of churchgoers increased more rapidly. This, Kusenha believed, was because the Anglican Church began using indigenous music traditions in the church.

Second, after female circumcision was abandoned by the Government in 1998, many muheme adherents joined the church because the music was already in the church. It has been also noted that this music is a cultural cornerstone among Wagogo women. Many women appear to have joined the church because of the use of muheme music. This was strongly supported by the Assistant Bishop when he said:

*Hatakamakikongweatapitabararani, akisikiangomayamuhemeinaliakanisani,
lazimaatageukanakujakisikiliza,
nahivyondivyoataanzakuzoekakanisakidogokidogonakuhamia.*

If it happens that an old woman passes by the church and hears muhemein the church, she must turn back and follow where the drums are, then slowly she can join the church (A. Kusenha, personal communication, February 13, 2005).

Adds beauty to the church service and makes the service active

This is accomplished through performance of different sections of muheme at different points in the church service. This includes introducing the church service, welcoming the preacher, singing during thanksgiving and ending the service.

To remind people in the church of their sins

EliaMalebeto, a church catechist, said:

*Mlimomuwaha wan
g`omaazinikuwakukwegawanhunanyimbozonowakwimbazikuwahomelelawanhuwubiwaow
amnhumbula, au zikuwakumbucizawubiwao we hayohayo,
nyimbozikuwafundawanhuwampitucilemulungu.*

The muheme songs serve a major function in the church in that the songs are used to remind people to stop their sins and turn back to God. If somebody is going against God's will, the songs remind him or her to stop following the devil. Therefore, songs are used to teach people to be obedient to God (E. Malebeto, personal communication, October 18, 2006).

Other factors that led to changes in social functions from secular uses of muheme to its appearance in the church include:

Cultural awareness of the Wagogo

As the Wagogo have realized that the use of their own music in church is not sinful, the use of muheme in the church among the Anglicans of the Diocese of Central Tanganyika has become widely accepted. People are now free to use their own traditions to bring them closer to God:

*Hukonyumawatuwalikuwawanazikataangomahizi, lakinibaadayewalianzakujiuliza,
mbonatunatumiautamaduniwakizungukuabudu, nakwaninitusitumieutamaduniwetu?
Tulipogunduahilo, watuwalianzakutumiangomahizimpakasasa.*

In previous years, people used to ignore [their own traditions]. Later, people started to question themselves: why are we using the European way of worship, and why don't we use our own traditions for worshipping? After that realization, the muheme drums started being employed in the church up to this moment. (I. Msulwa, personal communication, October 16, 2006).

Song texts are composed and sung to express the glory of God and to suggest ways in which the community should follow God's will. All compositions are based on biblical stories and general knowledge about the word of God.

Reading the Bible

A quotation from the bible which appears in church muheme was referred to by many respondents when they said praise God by using the musical instruments that you have. Psalm 150 emphasizes "the call to praise [God] and the universality of that in all the earth, by every creature and with every instrument that can make music" (Meeks, et al., (1993:936). This provides the support necessary for the integration of muheme into the music of the Anglican Church.

Conclusion

The Wagogo's muhememusic tradition, in its original initiation context (makumbigawadala) served specific social functions. Changes in the functions of this music tradition occurred as it has made its transition from the initiation context to muheme's use in a variety of secular contexts and onward to its use in the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Central Tanganyika, Tanzania.

Muheme is a living tradition widely performed outside the specific socio-cultural context within which it originally appeared. In the future, muhememay fulfill new social functions for the Wagogo and other Tanzanians as it makes additional transitions in the course of its lifespan.

References

- Agawu, K. (2003). *Representing African music: Postcolonial notes, queries, positions*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bascom, W. (1959). *Continuity and change in African cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Hines, D. & K. Eckman. (1993). Indigenous multipurpose trees of Tanzania: Uses and economic benefits for people. Retrieved on 4th May 2009 from Available from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5327e/x5327e11>.
- Kubik, G. (1987). *Malawian music: a framework for analysis*. Zomba: University of Malawi Press.
- Mapana, K. (2007). Changes in performance styles: a case study of Muheme, a musical traditional of the Wagogo of Dodoma, Tanzania. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 19 (1) 81-93.
- Mbuguni, L. (1974). *The cultural policy of the United Republic of Tanzania*. The Unesco Press. Retrieved on 6th September, 2009 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0001/000115/011514eo.pdf>.
- Meeks, W. et al., eds. (1993). *The harper collins study Bible* (New revised standard version). London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Mlama, P. (1973). *Music in Tanzanian traditional theatre: the Kaguru as a case study*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Nyoni, F. (1998). *Conformity and change: Tanzanian rural theatre and social political change*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, School of English, UK.
- Peterson, D. (2006). Morality plays: Marriage, church courts, and colonial agency in central Tanganyika, ca. 1876-1928. *American Historical Review*, 3(4) 983-1010.
- Ritzer, G. & G. Douglas. (2004). *Modern sociological theory* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schaefer, R. (2005). *Sociology* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Turino, T. (2008). *Music as social life: the politics of participation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vallejo, P. (2007) *Logic and music in black Africa (II): Social function and musical technique in the Gogo heritage, Tanzania*. Retrieved on 7th August, 2009 from <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans11/art02.htm>.

Interviews conducted in Dodoma, Tanzania

- Bonifasi Paul, personal communication, October 17, 2006.
- Elia Malebeto, personal communication, October 18, 2006.
- Elisabeth Masholi, personal communication, October 13, 2006.
- Grace Maile, personal communication, October 17, 2006.
- Isaya Msulwa, personal communication, October 16, 2006.
- Janeth Yohana, personal communication, October 16, 2006.
- Mchoya Malogo, personal communication, October 17, 2006.
- Mwendwa Ngoli, personal communication, October 18, 2006.