

The Place of Music and Dance in the Reconstruction of African Cultural History: a Case of the Abagusii of South-Western Kenya

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview exposition and critical reflection on the evolution and functionality of the pre-colonial African Music and dance among the Gusii of south-western Kenya. It seeks to address fundamental issues that are on the verge of being forgotten especially by the youth of this generation. It argues that music and dance among the Gusii have traditional roots as serves as a source of understanding the cultural history of the community. Indeed, without knowledge of a community's cultural history, the historical destiny cannot be easily comprehended. This history makes it one of the most essential genres that the Gusii community's ethnographic studies. It employs historical approach to explore the past musical and dance generic forms. This paper proceeds from the premise that, in the pre-colonial times, the Gusii had evolved elaborate music and dance forms conditioned by their social and natural environments. It was also established in this discussion that African music and dance, as practiced by the Gusii nurtured, enhanced, preserved and brought up emotionally, psychologically, ethically, socially stable and a unitary indigenous community. The theories employed to explain the phenomenon of the pre-colonial music and dance were, Evolution, Diffusion, functionalism and theories of dance. The Study methodology into historical enquiry of the place of pre-colonial music and dance was carried out in three major phases as follows; employing data collection techniques on a systematic basis beginning with secondary sources in libraries, the marshalling of primary source materials in the Kenya National Archives, and the gathering of data through oral interviews and observations in the research field. In this study, respondents were selected through snowball and purposive sampling techniques in order to obtain key custodians of the Gusii cultural history, who at the end of the study proved to be handy by providing up to date valuable information. Oral interviews were conducted between 1996 and 1998. Respondents included sixty elderly men and women from drawn from various parts of Gusii land, both professional and non-professional thought to be knowledgeable on the community's cultural history. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources was sorted and analyzed qualitatively. From the study findings, it was established that music and dance practices among the Gusii reflected the community's identity, since they are all, a vital artistic medium, through which people embody the self. This study will contribute to the understanding of African cultural history. Planners in the ministry of culture and social services may use these findings in the planning of socio-cultural activities in perpetuating cultural identity and African history in General.

Key words: Abagusii, Reconstruction, Gusii, South-Western Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Music and dance have been known to be the most powerful cultural medium of communication in any society. The history of many developing countries where colonial domination was evidenced, indicates that the colonized people were always able to express themselves through song and dance in complete defiance of their oppressor. The Africans resisted cultural domination, with as much vigour as they resisted economic exploitation.¹ African songs, dances and musical instruments were used by many African communities to express resentment against the existence of the colonial system and its structures.² Their important role has been recognized by variety of scholars for many years. It is against this background that a study was undertaken to establish the role of music and dance in the reconstruction of the cultural history of the Abagusii of Kenya as part of African ethnographic studies.

Objectives of the Study

The central objective of this study was to examine the place of songs and dances and their role in the cultural history among the Abagusii of Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were:

- (i) To trace the historical evolution of the Abagusii songs and dances in the context of the nature,

¹ B.A., Ogot and W.R., Ochieng Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-1993, Nairobi, East African Publishers, P26.

² Ibid, P.26.

- the kind of songs sung, instruments made and played, as well as the dances performed by the Gusii community.
- (ii) To investigate the changes that occurred in the Gusii songs and dances as a result of contact with other African communities in Kenya in pre-colonial period.
 - (iii) To examine the impact of western culture and policies on the Abagusii songs and dances during the colonial period.
 - (iv) To examine the role played by songs and dances in the economic, social and political lives of the Abagusii to post-colonial period.

Research Premises

This study operated on the following assumptions that:

- (i) Before the coming of the Europeans, Gusii songs, dances and the accompanying musical instruments were “traditional” in nature.
- (ii) The pre-colonial Gusii songs and dances continued to change greatly as a result of the interaction with other African communities and the physical environment.
- (iii) Western culture had a great impact on the Abagusii cultural history particularly songs and dances
- (iv) Songs and dances fostered solidarity and self perception among the Gusii in the First and Second World War periods and after.

Justification of the Study

This study will contribute to the understanding of Kenyan cultural history. In tracing the evolution, development and continuity of the Gusii songs and dances, the study illuminates and documents the cultural aspects of Kenya’s history often neglected by historians. Historians, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists and music specialists will benefit from this study in that it will contribute to their knowledge of Kenya’s cultural history. Songs and dances are educative aspects of our cultural heritage and hence there is need to carry out this study for documentation purposes. This study may be used by planners in the ministry of culture and social services in the planning of socio-cultural activities. The study may be of interest to those who would want to further their research and document the cultural history of the Abagusii and other communities in Kenya, The understanding of songs and dances may be used to enhance the preservation of cultural heritage which is in the verge of being forgotten especially by the young generations. Further, such an effort of African ethnographic studies will perpetuate the element of cultural identity and Africanism.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing Africa’s cultural evolution and dynamism, various theories have been advanced. These are; evolution, diffusion, functionalism, the product of change as a mixture of elements and modernization theories among others. In a sense, cultural evolution and change has been perceived as constituting significant alterations which take place in social structures and social practices.¹ In this study, we shall mainly applied sociological approaches and thus enriching the perspective of cultural change with the vigour of historical method.² The evolution theory which was proposed by Charles Darwin argue that cultures seem to have evolved and developed independently where they are found presently. However, this theory seem to work well with scientific studies as opposed to social studies. Diffusion theory seem to offer a more detailed explanation as compared to evolution theory.

According to diffusion theory, most of the content of modern cultures appear to have been gained through the process of diffusion. The term diffusion, refers to the borrowing of cultural elements from another society in contrast to their independent invention within the host society. In order for diffusion to operate on a substantial scale there must be separate societies that have existed long enough to have elaborated distinctive ways of life.³ Culture has grown, through a combination of the processes of invention and diffusion. It grew very slowly at first, mostly as a result of invention, and as societies became differentiated, the large scale diffusion of traits became possible and also the rate of cultural growth speeded up. In modern times, particularly in western world, the rate of cultural growth has become overwhelming.

Diffusion theory became important to our study of Gusii song and dances in that it has largely concerned itself, among other things, to the detailed study of the relationship between musical instruments in Africa with those of other parts of the world, particularly south west and south east Asia and to a much less degree the diffusion of instruments or their names within the continent, which also affected the Gusii culture in One way or the other.⁴

¹R.M. Kloss, *Sociology with Human Face* (Saint Louis, 1976), pp 79-81.

²B.A Ogot, “History, Anthropology and Social Change; The Kenya Case” in B. A. Ogot (ed.) *Anthropology, History and Social change East Africa* [Hadit 6] p. 1.

³O.D. Dudley, *Culture and Social Change* (Chicago, 1964).

⁴J.H. Nketia, “Historical evidence in Ga Religious Music” in the (ed.) *Historian of Tropical Africa*, p.279

According to Nketia these studies have been based on observation of materials, features of design and construction and certain ethnological postulations, the measurement of tuning systems and the application to the method of comparative linguistics to the analysis and the classification of names of musical instruments in selected culture areas.¹

B. Manfred has made large claims on the settlement by the Indonesian colonies not only of Madagascar but also to the East Coast of Africa, the Congo basin and parts of west Africa. These claims have largely been based on remarkable similarities of certain musical instruments which suggest something more than mere “coincidence”. The xylophone for example, is said to be too complicated to have been invented in two separate places.² We applied this theory in the study of the origin, development and existence of the Gusii songs and dances.

Functionalist theory of culture is another model than can be used in our study. The most important principle lies in the functional concept of culture. The modern anthropologist of the functional theory is fully aware that he has to organize his evidence, relate the customs, ideas and practices to the fundamental core round which they are built.³

To the functionalists, culture is the whole body of implements, the charter of social groups, human ideas, beliefs and customs. It constitutes a vast apparatus by which man is put in a position which is better to cope with the concrete and specific problems which face him in his adaptation to his environment, in the course of satisfaction to his needs. Technical skills as well as organization are based on the development of symbolism of abstract concept primarily embodied in knowledge, belief of legal systems and societal constitutions. To the functionalists. the use of language, tradition and education, that is, the continuance of tradition are made possible. This theory became meaningful to our study in that it recognizes the fact that creative activities such as singing, dancing, decorative arts and sculpture are functional in nature. The theory argues that artistic activities are forwarded on the physiology of sense stimulation and muscular as well as nervous processes. Dance, games and sports have practical importance I expressing people’s inner feelings and the sharing of experiences. A functionalist approach to the role of songs and dances, is that, the basic condition for an orderly social existence depends on the transmission and maintenance of culturally desirable sentiments.

Associated with this model is the cathartic theory. It is rooted in the notion that dancing may have some therapeutic value. Music and dancing especially rhythms, effects of musical instruments such as drums, can create tension, anxiety and stress under certain condition and release the same.⁴ The history of dances was then of great importance for the study of mankind. It is the hump of social anthropology, we will apply this theory in our study of Gusii dances and their accompanying songs.

Review of Related Literature

African scholars who have studied African music and dance traditions such as Ball Anta, Mwau, Joe, and Kyambidwa emphasize the usefulness of music and dance as avenues of communication and expression of people’s inner feelings thus enabling us to understand people’s way of life and their cultural history.⁵

Nketia discusses the contact of African Music and dance with external cultures,⁶ Dietz has studied the origin and development of musical instruments in Africa,⁷ Mbotela looks at the influence the missionaries on African music and dance,⁸ and Tudor et.al have assessed the usefulness of song and dance as both being educative and entertainment tools. There is enough historical evidence that western influence impacted on the Africans in terms of borrowing and cultural exchange all of which affected African music and dance idioms.⁹ Regionally, Ranger has studied “Beni Ngoma”, a form of music and dance tradition which originated in East Africa between the first and Second World War and has been growing and spreading through time and space.¹⁰

Odwar has commented on the development and dissemination of music education in Kenya, and underscores the educative and cultural value of music and dance in the society.¹¹ Khayota, et al have extensively discussed on the

¹ J.H. Nketia, “The Instrumental Resources in African Music” in (ed.) Papers in African studies, No. 3, 1965.

² B. Manfred, “Observation on The Study of Non-Western Music” Paul, C. (ed) in Les colloques of Wegmont. (Brussels, 1956) p.6

³ B. Malinowski, *The Dynamic Culture change: An inquiry into Race Relations in Africa* (London, 1945)

⁴ P. Spencer, *Society and Dance*, (New York 1985).

⁵ Nketia J.K., “Issues in African Musiology” Proceeding of the Forum Revitalizing African Music studies in Higher Education, Frank Gunderson (ed.) An arbor The US Secretariat of International Centre for

African Music and dance, University of Michigan, 2001, pp.154-155.

⁶ Nketia, J.H.K., (1974), *The Music of Africa*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London University (unpublished Thesis).

⁷ B.W. Dietz et al., *Musical Instruments of Africa* (Chicago, 1965).

⁸ J.J. Mbotela, *The Freeing of Slaves in East African* (London, 1956).

⁹ Tudor, D. and Tudor R. (1979), *Black Music*, Libraries Unlimited, Inc., Litelton, Colorado USA.

¹⁰ O. Ranger. *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890 - 1970. The Beni Ngoma* (London, 1975), p.5.

¹¹ Adwar A.H., *Music Education in Kenya, A history perspective*, Zapf Chancery Tertirya Level publications Eldoret Kenya, 2005.

origin, development and artistic as well as the anthropology of Kuria Music and dance traditions,¹ Mwaniki, has looked at the role of music and dance in the overall culture of Embu songs and dances in Eastern Kenya.² Ogot, on the other hand has carefully studied and documented about the role played by Mau Mau hymns in the struggle for independence, Kavyu, has an attractive and well documented works on performance of Kamba Music,³ and Okumu, on the development of guitar music in Kenya, which indeed has inspired many of the contemporary ethnomusicologists.⁴ Zake has extensively studied on the folk music of Kenyan communities and their role in character building and cultural identity of Kenyan communities.⁵ While acknowledging such endeavours by the above scholars, most of whom were sociologists, anthropologists and conservationist, it became clear that historians should also contribute to the study of the dynamism of African music and dance through time and space as an important source of learning the cultural history of a people. And hence this study of the Gusi music and dance was timely.

Study Area

A study was carried out among the Abagusii of south western Kenya to ascertain the extent to which music and dance could be used to understand the community's dynamic cultural history. This arose out of the need by historians to also contribute to new knowledge in the area of popular culture and its functionality in the reconstruction of African history in general. The study took Gusiiland as its area of focus. Abagusii, who are designated as Bantu speaking people, live in a territory called Gusiiland. This region is occupied by several districts at the moment. During this study period (1996-1998) there were ten districts as follows; Kisii Central, Nyamira North, Kisii South, Masaba North, Masaba South Marani, Manga, Gucha, Nyamache and Borabu. Gusiiland has since had two large counties namely Kisii and Nyamira with many sub-counties. The area has a climate of the highland equatorial zone. It receives rainfall of up to 1500mm. Gusiiland has a highland which lies between 2000 and 2,350 metres above sea level. The area has permanent streams which include; Gucha, Sondu and Mogonga. Gusiiland is endowed with unique rock structure. For example soapstone, used for carving and making electric installations. The region is also endowed with many resources. For instance it has pleasant climate with a variety of attractive features. It has well-drained and fertile soils. The area has woody and bushy grasslands.⁶

Abagusii: The Gusi people

The Gusi, who are sometimes referred to as Abagusii, are linguistically Bantu, who inhabit the south-western part of Kenya in the African Continent, tracing their origins to a place called Misiri⁷. This place does not seem to be the Biblical Egypt but a location just to the north of Mount Elgon⁸. In this area, the Abagusii are believed to have been together with the Ganda and Soga of Uganda, the Agikuyu, the Kamba, Meru, Abasuba, Avaragoli, the Bukusu and the Abakuria who also live in Kenya. The Abagusii refer to all these people as *abanto baito* (our people)⁹. Suffice it to note that linguists, anthropologist and historians, who have studied Bantu societies agree that traditionally and linguistically, the Abagusii are related to the people they claim as their people, the Bantu. According to the Gusi tradition, the Abagusii and other related people like the Kikuyu, Akamba and Bukusu among other Bantu communities resided originally in "Misiri"¹⁰, a place whose exact location is not known before migrating to the place where they are found currently. The entire Gusi people recognise a common ancestor, *Mogusii*, who is thought of as the founder of the Gusi community and the person after whom it was named. Following centuries of migration, the Abagusii settled in the present Gusi highland (hereafter referred to as Gusiiland) during the closing of the nineteenth century¹¹. Today they are surrounded by non-Bantu speaking groups. Between them and the Lake Victoria, are the Luo, a Nilotic speaking people. To the south and south-east are the Maasai, and to the east and north-east are the Kipsigis, who are both Nilotic groups. To the south, though separated by a corridor of the Luo, are closely related Abakuria, a Bantu speaking community. Gusiiland was until 1961, part of the large south Nyanza district in western Kenya. And also until 1988, both Kisii and Nyamira were under one district named Kisii. But presently, the Abagusii occupy the Kisii North, Kisii Central

¹ Khayota m.o. et al, *The Abakuria of Kenya: The Art of Music and Dance* (Nairobi, 1989).

² H.S.K. Mwaniki., *Categories and substances of Embu traditional songs and dances* (Nairobi, 1986).

³ B.A. Ogot and W.R Ochieng, *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-1993*, Nairobi East African publishers, 1995.P226.

⁴ Okumu C.C., *The Development of Guitar Music, a Study of Kiswahili Songs in Nairobi*. MA, Thesis, Kenyatta University, 1998.

⁵ G.S. Zake, *Folk Music of Kenya* (Nairobi, 1986).

⁶ G.S. Were and D.Nyamwaya, *Kisii District Social Cultural Profile*, (Nairobi, 1986), pg. 8.

⁷ W.R Ochieng., *Op.Ci t.*, p.12.

⁸ O.I., with Birongo Obundi, at Keroka market, on 6/8/2004.

⁹ O.I., with Franciscah Kemunto, at Ichuni village on 17/8/2004.

¹⁰ W.R. Ochieng, *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusi of Western Kenya from C. Ad 1500 - 1914* (Nairobi, 1974)

¹¹ S. Moenga, Omwoyo, "The Colonial Transformation of Gusi Agriculture", M.A. Thesis, Kenyatta University, 1990, p.2.

and Kisii South districts. The Abagusii had been migrating as clans and over the three centuries of migration, clan identity assumed a prominent form. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, such clans as Kitutu, Nyaribari, Mogirango, Bassi, Majoge and Wanjare had become prominent in Gusiiland.

Study Methodology

This study was both qualitative and quantitative and which utilized both primary and secondary sources in data collection to obtain a valid and valuable data. Archival materials, oral interviews and field observation methods were all useful in achieving this goal.

A population of 61 knowledgeable informants formed a study sample. The community has properly organized and distinct political, economic and social structures. Samples were selected as objectively as possible to represent the area of study. Purposive and stratified sampling techniques were employed in this study. A list of administrative locations was obtained from the respective district offices and the researchers then proceeded to the various locations for the study. Area chiefs were able to identify the knowledgeable informants who formed a study sample. Respondents were classified into male and female informants for objectivity purposes. A sample of each group was then interviewed using questionnaire schedules.

Data collection was done with the assistance of well-trained and in-serviced research assistants using various data collection techniques. These were, direct observation especially on Gusii musical instrument as well as music and dance performances, questionnaires and field interviews. Documentary sources viewed to be relevant to the research study were used for secondary data. This mainly included; library materials such, as books journals, articles, theses, dissertations, conference and seminar papers, mainly obtained from libraries of institutions of higher learning, such as; Kenyatta University, Maseno university's library, Kenya National Archives among other relevant institutions for the study. Every effort was made to visit the National Museum establishments in Kisumu, Kitale and in Nairobi to study musical instruments which were not easily found in the field during the study. The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Music libraries in Kisumu and Nairobi as well as the Kenya Repertoire of music were useful resources centres for the study. Print and electronic media as well as newspapers were also useful for collation, corroboration and theoretical interpretation of primary data.

Data from the field was subjected to research analysis to validate its accuracy. The aspects of accuracy, completeness and uniformity were achieved through proper editing of data. Materials with serious errors were discarded. Library research materials and archival sources were subjected to accurate and careful content analyses for validity. The originators of data were examined to verify their authenticity. Final data was read repeatedly for proper judgment. The tape recordings from oral interviews were transcribed and analyzed to avoid misinterpretation of meaning that could have emanated from too little translation. In the qualitative method of data analysis, two levels were distinguished as descriptive and thematic. At thematic level, the principal researchers established the main themes that were carried by the various songs and dances. At descriptive level, the various musical and dances were classified and described in terms of nature, forms as well as their dynamic trends. The work was chronologically arranged in terms of chapters to capture the historical dynamism of Gusii music and dance in various periods.

Results

It was found out that the history of African music, dances and musical instruments seem to contribute to our knowledge of cultural history of the Africans. Among the Abagusii, traditional songs and dances were functional. They were closely integrated in the community's social life. Such aspects of popular culture accompanied many activities such as cattle herding, harvesting, house construction, soapstone quarry works, grinding grains, and when soothing babies to sleep. Gusii women and girls mixed pleasure with work in their ebisangio, daily cooperative work groups. At tea plantations and farms, tea pickers sang to inspire themselves. Birth, naming, circumcision, marriage, and funeral ceremonies were all momentous events among the Abagusii which incorporated singing and dancing. Rituals were performed in times of stress such as prolonged drought, illness and impending disasters and certain disorders caused by certain diseases. Emergencies in the traditional life of the Abagusii such as cattle raids, crop destruction by pests or attacks by wild animals and warning for an invading enemy, were all marked with songs and dances. Christian missionaries and western policies in Gusiiland affected Gusii music and dance greatly since converts were only allowed to perform western songs and dances at the expense of traditional music and dance.

Findings

It was realized that music and dance could probably be the latest in arsenal tools of analysis in the study of African history. Merriam observes that music has been part of culture which moves through time and space. And therefore, through music, we can approach certain kinds of history¹. The study, of the dynamism for Gusii music and dance in the colonial and Post colonial period, adopted in-depth investigative and descriptive approaches which found out that the changing nature of Gusii music and dance was mainly as a result of both

¹ Merriam, A.P., *The Anthropology of Music* (North Western University press, 1964) pp.188,280,281,290,300.

internal and external interactions, especially with their neighbours and the Europeans upon colonialism. As Merriam further points out, the European brought many currents which crisscrossed the musical scenes of Africans. New idioms of music and dance were introduced which increasingly gained popularity. This also affected the Abagusii. It was realized that Gusii music and dance traditions reflect the various changes that were taking place in the many spheres of life among the community. Findings from this study are expected to be of interest to historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and music and dance scholars. It will make a contribution to their scholarship in terms of topic, methodology and theoretical framework in establishing the functionality of music and dance as a source of knowledge cultural history and material culture of African communities.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research, researchers arrived at the following conclusions. First, Gusii music and dance was integrated in all their social events whereby there were programs with careful regulations that governed the performances of music and dance. Secondly, music and dance among the Abagusii was functional in accompanying such activities as herding cattle, harvesting among others.

Third, colonial period and post independence years witnessed rapid changes and expansion of musical resources. The language of music and dance was indeed enriched by new conceptions brought about by new policies and practices. For example Western education introduced through missionaries encouraged the performance of Western Music and dances in African schools. The early Gusii christen converts were not allowed to perform traditional songs and dances neither were they allowed to play traditional musical instruments.

Fourth, the introduction of new art of writing music and Western musical instruments enabled Gusii musicians to compose, arrange and transcribe music in Western language. Fifth, the introduction of cinema, radio, television and imported film shows, dancing styles and other forms of entertainment in Gusiiland influenced traditional music and dance of the Abagusii.

Recommendations

What the Ministry of Education in Kenya needs to do in order to encourage the performance and preservation of traditional arts and recreational activities is to emphasize serious teaching of cultural values in preparatory, primary and secondary schools as well as teachers' training colleges, universities and other institutions of higher learning. This can also be achieved through strengthening of the existing Kenya music festival Foundation; an annual event in Kenya to ensure the continuity of traditional music and dance practices. Steps need to be taken to ensure that material culture are preserved and promoted. Artists should be properly enumerated for their artistic works in order to encourage them for further creativity. The knowledge of the country's heritage should be transferred to the present and future generations. Performing arts can only live through performances. Traditional music and dance should, therefore, be made part of any active programme designed to promote cultural life. The new music and dance traditions from Europe, America and elsewhere, which we have embraced, should be considered as additions rather than substitutes for our indigenous music and dance. Our music and dance traditions still serve very useful purposes in the ceremonies and activities of the communities which practice them. Further research should be carried out on the changes that have taken place in the Gusii music and dance since 2002 to the present day.

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