

**CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION: MUSIC, SONG AND DANCE  
AS MEDIUMS OF COMMUNICATION IN AFRICA\***

**Asante Darkwa  
University of Nairobi  
Institute of African Studies**

**Introduction**

In traditional African societies, song and dance are used as an avenue for praise, blame, for social criticism and commentary and for inciting people besides their use for entertainment and for marking different occasions through the life cycle.

Traditional music, song, and dance were in the past closely integrated with social life – with the pattern of social organization, with religious behaviour, economic activities and with political organization. Music and dance were very functional in the sense that they accompanied many activities of the daily life of the people. Although the recent forces of acculturation have had some impact on the traditional music, song, and dance practices in many parts of Africa, many of the performing arts traditions which have continued to be closely identified with traditional institutions, ceremonies, rituals and others, have survived the impact and still exist, mostly in the rural areas. The many raiding and war songs of the people which are not heard these days because of social changes, have

\* Paper presented at the World Association for Christian Communication Seminar on Programme Content and Management in Nairobi, Trinity College, March 1985.

now become a feature of political rallies. These songs are sung by contemporary dance groups which praise politicians and other important personalities in song and dance.

Besides the traditional music and dance types, there are contemporary idioms of music, song, and dance – Christian church hymns, songs and dances (performed during church services and anniversaries), school part-songs, and popular dance music and songs played or performed in the night clubs and elsewhere. Some of these new idioms are hybrid types – a fusion of traditional African and Euro-American music and dance elements. Others are purely Western. These contemporary idioms of music, song and dance are used also as effective modes of communication or as means for putting across issues or problems and needs of the society to government officials and other members of the community.

*Song:* Traditional and contemporary music (and dance) lay stress on the use of vocal resources. Although pure instrumental music is performed, it is the exception rather than the rule, for the peoples prefer to sing. Song and dance provide at once the most ready and most convenient means of group participation and an avenue for verbal expression. Song provides a means of recording tradition, of expressing community sentiments, of praising or criticising, and a way of expressing personal thoughts and feelings, as mentioned above.

Some topical songs – songs of comment on aspects of daily life – for example, are concerned with direct social control, in other words admonition, ridicule or more direct action are made through song to effect actual change in behaviour of erring members of society. Such songs may be directed toward a wide variety of social ills, among them sex offences and theft.

The Luo, as well as other ethnic groups in Africa, have topical songs which are a reflection of the concerns of the culture of which they are a part. While they contribute to the correction of those aspects of behaviour to which they call attention, putting them in the public eye, their major function seems to be one of comment on various aspects of everyday life. At the same time such songs exhibit a keen eye for scandal and gossip.

*Huwege* song, for example, is said to be one of the most effective forms of punishment the Luo use in the process of education – a means by which individuals or a group of a clan are induced or compelled to conform to the traditional conduct as represented by their traditional heroes or mores of the people. If a child or a grown-up married person steals food or money, a man beats his mother or father, or a married man or woman enters his or her parents' sleeping room, young girls and boys will, at

times, expose the theft or the occurrence through the community through *huwege* songs which psychologically humiliates the person. This may prevent a grown-up man or woman from getting a mate or it may cause divorce.

*Huwege* songs may be sung in the fields when cultivating or looking after cattle, when going to get water from the river, when going to look for firewood in the bush, when playing outside the homestead, or at public performances. Such songs may also be sung in the evening when most people are at home. They are sung and passed from one home to another, telling people of what has taken place.

One such song is as follows:

"O huwege, wege, wege, ee wege, o huue!  
Omolo Otiemo otimo tim mikwero  
Omolo Otiemo njawo gweng'....."

("O *huwege* wege wege ee wege O huue!  
Omolo Otiemo has committed a taboo.  
Omolo Otiemo has committed an offensive act  
in our locality.....")

Singing can be satirical among the Samburu people of Kenya. There are songs which subtly condemn liars, adulterers, thieves. There are also songs that give the opportunity for a variety of emotional expressions – the release of otherwise unexpressible thoughts and ideas; songs which give opportunity to "let off steam" and, this helps to resolve social conflicts. One of the major functions of Samburu music, song and dance is therefore, the enforcement of conformity to social norms. Songs of protest also call attention to propriety and impropriety.

Other African societies also have satirical songs and songs which lament lost traditional values or draw attention to individual grievances. The wide variety of songs which are performed all over Africa include game songs, harvest, digging and general work songs, love songs, boasting songs, songs of advice, praise songs, funeral dirges, song-interludes in stories, and lullabies, the texts of which may create a tool or weapon for organisation, action and development. Rituals with song and dance are performed in times of stress such as prolonged drought, illness, any recurring disaster, and certain disorders, or for treatment of certain diseases.

There are birth and cradle songs, both to calm and to drive away evil spirits such as those which attend the birth of twins. The texts of these songs have the 'power' to calm, treat and drive away evil spirits or demons

possessing 'sick' people. There are again children's play-songs, songs for initiation ceremonies when the younger members of the society are specifically instructed in proper behaviour, the customs and history of the society through music, song, and dance. Marriage songs (especially those sung by the bride's female supporters, praising her and, at times, rudely criticising the bridegroom abound in Kenya and elsewhere.

There are insult songs, songs which sly-dig at the pompous, songs which condemn those who neglect their duties and songs which criticise injustices in the society. Special songs are sung to indicate the importance of having children.

Among the Iteso of Kenya, men who go to the kitchen or visit the cooking place to see what is cooking on fire are mocked at in song at public performances.

The following example is a case in point:

"Omaune<sup>1</sup> ebala akan taa – Omaune's hand is shining with fat  
Ebala amot kaberu chu-kul – He must have dipped it in a woman's cooking fat.

The following song also criticises a man who is never satisfied with the meals his wife serves him.

"Epoe mam kepoe Omaune lo,  
Eguri man keguri Omaune lo,  
Ekori mam kekori Eurama lo,  
Enyemi mam kanyemi Eurame lo!"

(I cook, Omaune is not satisfied,  
I dish, he is not happy,  
He eats and he is never contended,  
Ei! what kind of man is this?)

Praise songs are also many and varied. Spontaneous singing and dancing arise sometimes when people meet at informal gatherings or at organised beer parties to drink the locally brewed beer. The people drinking may use music, song, and dance as a means of praise. A Luo *nyatiti* player, a Luyia or Gusii *obokano* lyre player, on such occasion, may sing of generous and hospitable men. He may sing in praise of himself, and a local chief who has initiated development projects, such as the establishment of a *posho* (ground maize) mill and a school in the

<sup>1</sup> Omaune is the nickname for "a man who looks into cooking pots". At times, proper names of such greedy men are used in the song-text.

community. He occasionally makes up songs about mean men; the singer is careful that his allusions are not too direct but those who live in the location may know who the songs are "talking" about.

Singers and instrumentalists may remember the dead and extol them in songs at funerals. Songs are sung by young married women when they meet to reminisce about absent friends. Boys have songs to flatter a girl. Pastoral people have praise songs about their bulls and cows, some of which have names. Iteso children have special songs which teach them names of the months of the calendar year, as well as names of vegetables commonly used by the people.

Narrative songs which tell stories are also many all over Africa and elsewhere. Songs are often interpolated as part of the story and some stories may take the form of narrative songs in verse. Subject matter in such narrative songs covers a wide range of aspects of life, mainly stressing social virtues such as the value of hard work, or desirable qualities in wives, husbands and children. Military exploits and aspects of political organization may also feature, as well as traditional religion. As with stories, through narrative songs the elders pass on to the young the accumulated knowledge, skills, the mode of behaviour and the beliefs they should have for playing their social roles in adult life. They are also advised through the stories and songs to grow up together and share and do things together – a sense of belonging which is an important aspect of the traditional cultural system.

Singing and dancing may take place during work-situations as an incidental activity to accompany daily domestic chores or for organising 'effort', or for regulating rhythmic flow of movement in other work-situations. Women accompany their domestic tasks, such as breaking, threshing, and kneading grain, and washing with songs which sometimes make commentary on the work being done. A Burji gardner in Marsabit district in Kenya sings the *Suletha Suludo* song when his sorghum is ripen.

He moves around in the *shamba* admiring the cereal and sings in praise of himself, the oxen used in ploughing the field, the sorghum itself, God who gave him strength, provided rain, and made it all happen.

Among the Pokot (Suk) of Kenya, ritual ceremonies are observed on clearing the land for cultivation, and prayers are said or sung to *Tororut*, the Sky-God, to bring the rains before planting. One of such prayers recorded by Beech (1969), and which is still in use, is as follows:

An elder: "Tororut Kune' Mwagh  
Kiop'che pich  
Kisop sapon."

Chorus Response: "Ny'anyin"

(An elder: "Sky-God, give us fatness<sup>2</sup>  
And we thy people shall be well.  
We shall be well with health".  
Chorus: "That is sweet").

## Dance

Even though some African dance movements are performed for the joy of dancing and have no significance or purpose beyond entertaining the spectators, some gestures suggest an implicit stylization of work and they also make comments on some activities of the people. The gestures of the arms and of the hands at dance performances frequently serve as a means of detailed communication; some are made for symbolic reasons.

In Kenya, the dances of the women and girls of the Boran, Gabbra, Rendille and other pastoral societies are remarkable for their grace, fluidity and sustained quality of the arm and body movement. Aspects of the beauty of their cattle, including the shape of the horns, the colour and hide-making and other characteristics of their bulls and cows are attributed in the songs and dances.

When, for example, Boran women are singing songs about their cattle, two or three women lead-singers or dancers stand inside a semi-circular formation made up of other singers and dancers. As the lead-singers take turn in singing songs extolling their bulls and cows, they dance and move their arms into a formalised horn-shape to indicate the horns of the bulls and how gracefully they walk.

The work movements involved in the daily routine of farming form the basis for many of the stylised movements in Tiv dances in Nigeria. These movements also take the form of explicit mimicry in the Kwasa dance of the Tiv (Harper, 1966).

## Instrumental Music

Some instrumental musics have verbal basis. Horns with variable tones, like the Gusii *egetureri*, and that of Kasighau or Saghala *nderero*,

<sup>2</sup> Fat is considered to be symbolical of rain and prosperity in general.

are played to convey messages to the people when danger threatens the community.

To the Akan of Ghana and the Yoruba of Nigeria 'the drum can and does speak'. Words, phrases and sentences may be transformed into drum sounds which are then re-interpreted in verbal terms by the listener. This is particularly true with the Akan *Atumpan* and the Yoruba *Iyalu* talking drums which are used to send messages. As observed by J.H. Nketia (1963:32), "the association of drum sounds with texts finds its greatest expression in the speech mode of drumming..... In the speech mode of drumming, texts are used solely for their communicative value."

Below is an example of a fragmentary text played as *Kete* (*Akatape*) drum music of the Akan courts (Nketia, *ibid*: 40).

"Sresre bi di - (To beg here and there for something to eat  
Nye akorommo Is not stealing).

Similar to what has been observed by Carrington (1949) among the Lokele of Zaire who beat the drum to announce births, deaths and marriages, the Lobi of northwestern Ghana also play xylophone (*gyil*) tunes to announce deaths. Those who can decipher the message in the tune would know if the dead is an adult male or a female child.

Melodic musical instruments, such as flutes, lyres, lutes, harps, which can be played to reflect or imitate the tonal inflections of speech, entertain, inform and educate people with their tunes during music and dance performances all over Africa.

## Conclusion

The foregoing is a short review of the use of music, song, and dance as tools for communication in African societies. Music, song and dance reach much wider audience and, if used positively or effectively, they can effect changes that may provide better living standards for the people. They can also be used to create a better and a just society free from robbery, cheating, nepotism, and other social vices. Topical songs which reflect concerns of the society, particularly those concerned with development, for instance, need to be composed and performed more often at social gatherings, at church functions, on the radio and television, and elsewhere. They may contribute to the correction of those negative aspects of behaviour to which the songs call attention. Such songs should

include songs of advice, corrective songs, songs for jeering or humiliating thieves, drunkards, songs of social consciousness and others. More new Christian church songs which offer solace to the congregation and others alike need to be composed to educate, inform and entertain.

Song-texts have always been important sources of historical material. As a development tool, historians need to pay more attention to historical songs when attempting to rewrite or reconstruct the past (history) of the people. The exploits of the successive age-sets of communities, for example, tend to be remembered and sung by older men and women. All sorts of events, both local and general ones – from wars, cattle raids, victories, and defeats to migrations, droughts, and epidemics – are recorded in songs as having occurred in the time of a particular age-set.

The same emphasis and interest placed on active and communal participation in traditional and contemporary music, song, and dance in the rural and urban areas should be directed towards community commitment in providing social services like schools, clinic/health centres, pit latrines and many others. Attempts by women dance groups in Nairobi and elsewhere in Kenya to build houses for renting, rear poultry, start knitting and sewing business to earn some money for the groups should be emulated.

The new idioms of popular and art music, dance, action and school part-songs and games as well as other recreational activities (from Europe, America, Asia, Kenya and other parts of Africa) that have come to stay in our countries in Africa, should be accepted as 'good' additions to the indigenous ones. They should not be considered as substitutes; they are to be used as encouragement to creativity to foster the growth of our music, song, and dance, as well as other performing and expressive arts as living arts.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akivaga, S.K. and A.B. Odaga  
1982  
*Oral Literature: A School Certificate Course*, Nairobi: Heinemann Education Books Ltd.
- Beech, Mervyn W.H.  
1969  
*The Suk: Their Language and Folklore*, New York: Negro Universities Press

- Carrington, John F.  
1949  
*The Talking Drums of Africa*, London: Carey Kingsgate.

- Darkwa, Asante  
1980-84:  
"Music and Dance Traditions" of the various Ethnic Groups in Elgeyo-Marakwet, Turkana, Busia, South Nyanza, Marsabit, Samburu, Kisii, Baringo and Taita-Taveta Districts of Kenya. In *Draft Reports: District Socio-Cultural Profiles*, Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi/Ministry of Finance & Planning, Nairobi.  
1982  
"The Marakwets and Kelyo in Kusic: A Socio-Cultural Study", *The Black Perspective In Music*, Fall issue.  
1984  
"Traditional Music and Dance Practices of the Iteso of Kenya", *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol. 9, N<sup>o</sup> 1.

- Harper, Peggy  
1966  
*Studies In Nigerian Dance N<sup>o</sup> 1: Tiv Women – The Icough Dance*, Ibadan: The Caxton Press/Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

- Mackay, Mercedes  
1950  
"Traditional Musical Instruments of Nigèria", *Nigerian Field*, Vol. 15, N<sup>o</sup> 3.

- Nketia, J.H.  
1955  
*Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, Exeter: James Townsend & Sons Ltd.

- Nketia, J.H.  
1963  
*Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, Legon: Univ. of Ghana/Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., London.

- Ocholla-Ayayo, A.B.C.  
1980  
*The Luo Culture*, Studien zur Kulturkunde 54, Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH.

- Trowell, Margaret and K.P. Wachsmann  
1953  
*Tribal Crafts of Uganda*, London/New York: Oxford University Press.

- Wachsmann, K.P. (ed.)  
1971  
*Music and History in Africa*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.