

The convergence and convenience of talent, traditional knowledge and performance in the Chewa drumming tradition

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Abstract

The research that I conducted to support this study aimed at investigating, documenting, describing and analysing the drumming practices of Malawi's Chewa ethnic group, vis-à-vis the elements that constitute the Chewa art of drumming, the application of this art in the traditional medium of music and dance, and the adaptation of the art by Malawi's contemporary music performers. The research focused on the ethnographic study of drumming artistry within major Chewa dances of *Mganda*, *Gulewamkulu* and *Chimtali*. Consequently, among others, the study established that talent, skill, competence or aptitude alone do not necessarily constitute adequate merits for a good drummer. In addition to understanding and applying the different technical drumming interpretations effectively, the Chewa drumming student is tasked with acquiring various aspects of traditionally prescribed self-protection knowledge as a performer, and with carefully executing the different sound combinations and their meanings. In general, the Chewa drumming processes operate through a nexus of traditional and mystic beliefs regarding drum construction decisions, drum handling, material choice, sound production and relationships that exist between the drum and the entire performance experience.

Keywords: Theory, drumming, skill, tone quality, charm, mnemonic rhythm

Introduction

This article is a culmination of findings of field research that I conducted for academic purposes on a different but related topic. I conducted my research in conservative Chewa communities of Dowa and Ntchisi districts in the Central Region of Malawi. Conservatism in these two Chewa districts finds expression in culturally and ecologically homogeneous environments, in the sense that they represent Malawi's typically underdeveloped communities with insignificant or no influences from urban lifestyles. As such, the forthcoming discussion about Chewa drumming beliefs and theories is restricted to these two conservative Chewa districts, although they may be applicable to other neighbouring Chewa districts in some instances. My original research aimed at investigating, documenting, describing and analysing the drumming practices of Malawi's Chewa ethnic group, vis-à-vis the elements that constitute the Chewa art of drumming, the application of this art in the traditional medium of music and dance, and the adaptation of the art by Malawi's contemporary music performers. Consequently, my field research unearthed other peripheral issues linked to the topic of study.

The "philosophies" that surround the Chewa drum as a musical instrument relate to construction decisions, handling, material choice, sound production and existing relationships with the entire performance. Some of the philosophies are gender-related while others are power-specific. Power in this case refers to belief in cosmic relationships between the human society and mystic forces. The drumming philosophies discussed in this article may be applicable to African cultural practices in general, but the descriptive examples provided are specific to the Chewa culture. Hence, in this study, the term "philosophy" encompasses a system of beliefs and values regarding the drum as a musical object. The term also defines traditional drumming concepts (cognitive interpretations), principles (fundamental performance laws), and assumptions (standard analytic observations). In general, these drumming philosophies are applicable to drumming contexts, concepts and intangible elements linked to the drum by the larger Chewa society.

According to the Chewa traditional drumming beliefs documented during my field research, high tones excite, lighten, entertain, stimulate and inspire while deep tones command, persuade, demand and manipulate. Deep tones are thus associated with ritual (sacredness), rigour (severity or seriousness of

performance), and performance's *raison d'être* (cause or basis of performance). On the other hand, high tones are associated with performance socialization (relaxation), sublimation (emotional uplift), and symmetry (regularization or balance) as they contrast with the deep tones. In view of these observed local interpretations, this article discusses Chewa theoretical and traditional aspects of drumming by linking them with innate performance talent of Chewa drummers, in order to draw relationships between inherent abilities and acquired traditional and practical knowledge.

1. Methodology

Available literature on research, culture and ethnography was consulted before embarking on published material related to Chewa culture, in general, and Chewa music and dance, in particular. A qualitative method of inquiry and data collection was used in the field research supporting this study. Additional literature on Chewa history, Chewa music and dance, and Chewa social life was consulted in order to relate the research question to Chewa peripheral issues that have a direct impact on drumming.

In order to collect raw research data, both face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire, oral narratives about Chewa culture in general and history of Chewa drumming were recorded. Respondents of oral interviews were singers, dancers, drummers, drum makers, village elders, centre directors and researchers, academics, and ordinary Chewa experts. I made a total of twenty-six individual and group recordings during my field research between 2007 and 2009. Thirty-four individuals and six performing groups responded to my questionnaire-based interviews.

Audio recordings of live performances were done in three phases namely, recording of singers, recording of drummers, and recording of the audience simultaneously with the help of research assistants. The drummers were specifically recorded in order to document the different drum rhythms and their relationships; the singers were recorded in order to relate the melody to the drumming; and the audience was recorded in order to document their reaction and comments. Kamlongera, Soko, Mvula and Nambote (1992: 7) suggest that a music and dance researcher should make every effort to study

the shared evaluation, that is, the critical assessments of dance and other integrated art forms, expressed by the artists and audience alike. In this study, the shared evaluation was further enhanced by showing audio-visual recorded performances to the performers and members of the audience soon after each performance for their natural reactions, comments and evaluations. This helped to determine both aesthetic and outstanding features of the just-ended performances.

This primary data collection exercise was conducted in the research participants' and performers' natural settings, such as village domestic work places, dwelling units, and village dancing arenas. My physical presence enhanced thoughtful responses from the participants and use of visual signs helped participants to clarify their points. As a native speaker of the Chewa language, I personally conducted the oral interviews, while occasionally relying on a group of local leaders who had undergone my day-long orientation to clarify my questions directed at the research participants. My research focused on the Chewa as a community, and on a selection of research participants who had adequate knowledge of the community's activities. Participants were interviewed multiple times, using information from previous participants to elicit clarifications and deeper responses upon re-interview, and in particular to verify gathered information. Recording of live performances in their natural setting also ensured flexibility of the performers, availability of supporting audiences, and observation of necessary rituals required by the performers. In addition, this ethnographic approach allowed the functionality of the hierarchical administrative system at village level for such performances.

The methodology used in this study follows Gray's (2003: 12) recommendation that a wide variety of methods should be used when "investigating complex sets of relationships which are present in cultural processes". Marshall and Rossman (1999: 105) also conclude that qualitative researchers typically rely on four methods of gathering information namely, participation in the setting; direct observation; in-depth interviewing, and analyzing documents and material culture. Applying these methods; among others, helped determine which cultural elements are formerly or informally prescribed and which are not.

The following sections give a detailed discussion of the findings of my research with regard to aspects of Chewa drumming theories and philosophies and how they are applied in music and dance as a culmination from the Chewa belief systems and socially prescribed interactions. Theory in this case refers to analytical structures that explain a set of observations in the construction, preservation and performance of the Chewa drum. These observations are identified as explanatory thoughts or notions that are at times speculative and certain assertions are made about their underlying reality.

2. The History of Chewa People

The Chewa people form the largest ethnic group in Malawi (Chanunkha, 2005: 3). There are ten main ethnic groups in Malawi and over 16 languages spoken (Chilora, 2000: 1; Chanunkha, 2005: 10). Kalipeni (1997: 154) claims that Malawi is a conglomeration of 15 different ethnic groups. The Chewa themselves migrated into Malawi from Zaire now the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the 16th Century and they now occupy the central region as a majority ethnic group.

Speaking at the 2007 *Kulamba* ceremony, an annual thanksgiving ceremony involving all the Chewa living in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, Chief Lukwa of Kasungu explained that the Chewa people have been nomadic throughout their history (Lukwa, 2007). Their origins can be traced to Sudan, before they settled in Zaire. He further explained that Sudan was the first more permanent settlement of the Chewa people, implying that Chewa history did not necessarily start in the Sudan (see also Gough, 2004). According to Nurse (1974: 32), the Chewa kingdom was already stable and peaceful when the Portuguese arrived on the Zambezi in the late 15th century. He indicated that the Chewa migrated from the Luba country of what is now Zaire, and that their ancestors once lived under the rule of Mwata Yamvu and after being denied the privilege of keeping cattle, they left his domain (Nurse 1974: 35). Nurse further states that the Chewa once lived near Lake Chad, or Lake Tanganyika, or Lake Victoria before moving on to Luba (Nurse 1974: 36).

Mchombo (2004) reports that the label *Chewa* was reportedly acquired during a sojourn in Zambia before the people moved into Malawi. Apparently, the title *Chewa* was derived from the word *Cheva*, *Sheva* or *Seva*, which referred to the migratory nature of the group, and it literally means “foreigner”. This nickname and subsequent phonological changes resulted in the group name

becoming *Chewa*, with their language being called Chichewa (Mchombo 2004: 1). Upon coming to Malawi, the Chewa ethnic group spread throughout the central and southern parts of the country, into eastern Zambia and into parts of Mozambique, albeit known by different labels as Nyanja, Mang'anja, Nyasa, and others. Recent statistics indicate that close to 13 million Chewa people are scattered throughout these neighbouring nations, eight million living in Malawi alone (Lukwa, 2007). As Kalipeni (1997: 154) suggests, when the Chewa and the related ethnic groups are counted together, they form a majority ethnic group.

In the course of my field research I identified three major dances that the Chewa people perform, namely, *Chimtali*, *Mganda* and *Gulewankulu*. These three dances are described in detail in the course of this article.

Among the Chewa people, there is a strong relationship between dance and drumming. Almost all Chewa dances have drumming accompaniment. Therefore, to understand Chewa dance philosophies, one has to study the corresponding art of drumming that accompanies the different Chewa dances. Consequently, it becomes imperative to determine what constitutes the Chewa drumming artistry in terms of its technology, ideology, and practice. Another important aspect that requires particular attention is the fact that Chewa drumming does not function in isolation. There are relationships between the drum sound and other forms of sound during every performance. For some dances, these other sound sources include hand-clapping, sound from costumes, feet rattles, shakers, whistles, and bells.

The identified three major Chewa dances are used in this article as relevant contexts for explaining the Chewa drumming theories and beliefs as cultural devices applicable in music and dance performances. The subsequent discussion represents views of research participants that I documented, especially at Chitete Village of Traditional Authority (T.A.) Kalumo in Ntchisi district. Some views were also documented during the field research that I conducted earlier at Jere Village far north of Chitete within the same traditional authority. Beliefs about *Mganda* drumming and associated rituals were recorded at Mavwanje Village and Chayazaminga Village of T.A. Kalumo in Ntchisi and Kayaza Village of T.A. Dzoole in Dowa district.

Suspicion, skepticism and the withholding of information are typical of the Chewa in many aspects of life. In general, suspicion in Chewa societies originates from the secrecy that characterises Chewa ritual practices (Nthala, 2011: 54). As such, I allowed the research participants to withhold their identities when I gathered what they considered as sensitive information concerning especially drumming beliefs. In addition, the participants gave group responses and descriptions regarding such sensitive information in order to avoid attributing it to particular participants. The following section documents such information based on participants' reports and my own interpretations drawn from the participants' intimations.

3. The drum construction process

Historically, the Chewa drum is considered as an anthropogenic music instrument, that is, it originates in, is related to, and is determined by human activity as a result of many factors. One such factor is that sculpting a drum requires patience and endurance. The sculptor uses a special axe known as *sompho* to carve a tree trunk until it becomes smooth. He later makes a hole through the wood using a chisel. Long cylindrical drums require that the drum maker observe specific measurements for both the wider and the narrower sections of the drum. Therefore, apart from deciding on the different drum circumferences, the sculptor must also decide on diametric dimensions. For comfortable handling, the sculptor smoothes down the drum surface and prepares the drum skin. Traditional tools used to carve the drum are not as sharp as modern technology would provide. Therefore a lot of energy and effort are required to produce one drum.

Depending on the role that the drum will play in a performance such as a dance, a particular animal skin is chosen for the drum head. The choice is also based on the skin durability and the common Chewa beliefs. For example, the cow hide is chosen for its thickness and hence durability. Again, since cows are strong, slow and patient animals, drums made from cow hides are generally deep-toned and are traditionally believed to produce a stable, strong and authoritative sound thereby helping to fortify the dancers' bodies for well-accentuated dance movements and steps.

On the other hand, antelope hides are used for making high-toned drums because they are light and sturdy. The antelope is also associated with speed, sleight and reflex. These characteristics are believed to help in producing

drums with a more projected sound (in relation to the animal's speed); a manipulative or persuasive sound (as a characteristic of the animal's reflexes); and a paranormal sound (as an effect of the animal's sleight).

Chewa drums exist in two key categories: the round double-headed drum and the cylindrical single-headed drum. Such drum categories exist in different sizes and structures based on the role that they play in a given performance. Another critical aspect about Chewa drums is that every drum is identified by a specific name. Often, each name signifies the function of the drum in relation to the other drums in a particular performance. Hence, drums are identified interchangeably with the rhythms that they are associated with as well as their role in a performance as will be shown later in the study.

Single-headed cylindrical drums have *phula* (tar) fixed in the centre of the drum head. The *phula* is made from special tree sap or honey comb. The purpose of the tar is to make the drum head dense for desired resonance. Strumpf (1999: 120) refers to the *phula* as tuning paste when he observes that elsewhere the "tuning paste, made from melted tyre rubber, is placed in the middle of the drum-heads to lower the pitch and offer an additional percussive tone quality". The drum maker then tunes the drum by passing it above fire flames several times (see Figure 1). In the process, he keeps checking whether the drum is properly tuned by beating it at intervals (see Figure 2). The skin of the tuned drum is sometimes also smeared with *nsatsi* (castor oil) for preservation purposes. Drum tuning is also done prior to every performance by the drummers themselves.

The processes of drum making described above inevitably makes the drum an important community property. The drum maker cherishes his product, the society preserves this product of hard work and skill, and the performer protects this increasingly difficult-to-get commodity.

4. Chewa drum categories

As earlier alluded to, the two types of Chewa drums are the long cylindrical single-headed drum in its different forms and sizes, and the double-headed drum in small and large sizes. Traditionally, the long single-headed drum is used to accompany ritual dances while the big double-headed drum accompanies entertainment dances. Chewa ritual dances include *Gulewamkulu*, a mask dance performed by initiated male community

members, and *Chisamba*, a women's initiation dance. Examples of entertainment dances include *Mganda*, a men's military-like formation dance, and *Chimitali*, an exclusively women's dance performed in a circle.

Other Chewa dances are either associated with traditional rites or adopted from neighbouring ethnic groups. Such dances include *Mnjedza*, *Kazukuta* and *Gwanyasa* and are all accompanied by sets of single-headed drums. The *Mnjedza* is performed by male and female community elders as a prelude to the *Gulewamkulu* dance; the *Kazukuta*, which adopts the *Gulewamkulu* dance movements, is performed by senior community members especially during beer celebrations; and the *Gwanyasa* is believed to have originated from the Ngoni people of Mchinji district as an entertainment dance. Currently only young men and women perform the *Gwanyasa* in the Chewa communities where this field research was conducted, according to the participants' report.

Usually several single-headed drums are used in one particular dance, while only one or two double-headed drums may be used in a particular dance. The drum has three basic parts: the frame, the skin, and the pegs or cords. The skin is fixed on the frame to form the drum head. Pegs are used to tighten the skin on long cylindrical drums (see Figure 3). Round double-headed drums do not require pegs in order to tighten the skins. Sliced, soft and dried cow skins (*nsinga* or *nthambo*) are instead used as cords that pull together the drum skins from both heads (see Figure 4).

Frames for all cylindrical drums are made of wood. In contrast, frames for modern double-headed drums are made of old 200 litre barrels locally called *mgolo*, although traditionally, they too had wooden frames, but due to scarcity of large trees such wooden frame double-headed drums are on the decline. Drum makers choose specific trees to make these drum frames. Making drum frames from any other tree leads to premature cracking of the drum frame or general deformation of the drum. The most common trees used to make drum frames are the *m'mbale/muwale* (*Erythrina Abyssinica*) – the red hot poker tree and the *mvunguti* (*Kigelia Africana*) – the sausage tree. My research participants provided three reasons why the *muwale* or *mvunguti* trees are preferred for drum frame making, namely they are soft hence easier to burrow; they are lighter when dry hence portable; and they are durable.

5. Beliefs and rituals associated with the Chewa drum

There are a number of Chewa beliefs and rituals associated with the drum as an object and drumming as a performance. Such beliefs and rituals are sustained and performed prior to and during song and dance performances that are accompanied by drumming. As mentioned earlier, drumming beliefs are partly gender-specific and partly power-specific and are linked to mysterious traditions. Again, it is incumbent upon every drummer to be familiar with such beliefs and rituals in order to be a successful drummer.

As part of the drum construction process, the drum maker deposits a talisman inside the double-headed drum. Known by different names, the charms serve different purposes, namely:

- a. As a repellent against mysterious attacks on the drum by rival groups during village dance competitions. The repellent charm is called *mtela*, translated as ‘medicine’, because it is not meant to harm anyone.
- b. To enhance an appealing or a ‘melodious’ drum sound. This kind of charm is locally called *nthetemya*, which is translated as ‘sweet melody’.
- c. To mobilize people to a dance event through its power of attraction. The charm for attraction is called ‘*chikoka*’, and is translated as ‘to draw’ or ‘the ability to pull’.
- d. To agitate hearts, cause anxiety, or create restlessness. The local term given to this kind of charm is *phulankhali*, which means ‘take the pot from the fire’. This speaks about women who must stop household work and rush to the dance arena upon hearing the drum sound.

It is possible to deposit charms only in the double-headed drums and some cylindrical drums that have neither side slits nor bottom openings. For the slit or open-bottom cylindrical drums, the charm is rubbed against the drum skin and/or the drum frame. In this case, all Chewa drums are believed to literally survive on the power of charms.

In addition to the belief in the power of magic concerning drums, breast-feeding mothers are forbidden from touching drums to avoid diluting the power of the charms. Dance group members are also obliged to abstain from

sexual activity a day or days prior to every performance to avoid experiencing a failed performance. In relation to this, Linden (1974: 119) also observes that traditionally Chewa dancers are obliged to observe complete sexual abstinence for a period of five days when taking part in a performance. If the drums are stored in a house, occupants of such a house must be single individuals, who are not involved in sexual activity, in order to avoid cracking the drum. The Chewa believe that sexual union before a dance performance, a hunting assignment, during girls' and boys' initiation ceremonial periods, and during other rites of passage, such as birth or death, will cause a sickness, a failure, or death of certain individuals. This is locally called *mdulo* (to cut short) or *tsempho* (to miss). All the Chewa rituals that necessitate the forbidding of the practice of sex for a period of time are connected to this belief (Nthala, 2013: 33).

There are several other beliefs with regard to drum performance that I recorded during my field research. For example, spittle in the drummer's hands is used to neutralize any possible magical attack from competitor drummers especially when drummers exchange drums. Similarly, rubbing one's hands against the ground before playing somebody's personal drum is believed to serve the same purpose.

Research participants also explained that all drummers for a variety of dances keep special charm objects in their pocket during the entire performance for self-protection against jealous friends who may use the power of magic to make them fail, feel dizzy or fall sick suddenly. In particular, one local participant, John Manyusa, explained during follow-up interviews that drummers protect themselves by rubbing magic repellents in their palms every time they exchange drums. Manyusa (28 June 2008) reports:

When you see drummers doing strange things as they exchange drums; things like: spitting in their palms, rubbing their hands against the ground, putting their hands in the pocket as if they are putting back something, or doing such other strange things, just know that they are protecting themselves from the magical power that the earlier player or the "owner" of that drum may have placed on the drum.

The different protective methods always agree with the prescription [*chizimba*] described by the one who gave the medicine.

Therefore, it is clear that among the Chewa people, the ability to perform a particular drum, graduate to more important drums, become a specialist for a particular key drum, maintain dominance for the performance of a particular key drum, protect oneself from competitor attacks, and learn to “silence” rival players, are all indicators of successful drumming.

In essence, drummers are believed to occupy the heart of every performance. Their absence or failure to perform well translates into a failed performance. During the recording of the *Mganda* dance in Jere village, an incident that proved the importance of a drummer occurred whereby the usual main drummer was involved in settling some cultural disputes and was not available for the performance recording session. An equally good drummer from a nearby village was contacted to assist in the drumming. The dancers later reported to me that what I recorded was not their best performance since they missed the services of their own key drummer.

As Kuthemba-Mwale (1977: 142-143) also observes, drummers are key players in any Chewa performance worth respecting and appreciating in a special way. If drummers refuse to play for any performance there is great panic among organizers. According to Kuthemba-Mwale (1977: 142), “[a] performance is a fiasco without drummers. The drummers constitute a class of specialists who enable the success of the performance”. In addition, certain individual players specialise in particular drums. Kuthemba-Mwale further observes that some Chewa drums are [considered] more important than others; hence each drummer gets an economic reward for his services.

The payments are determined by the type of drum one plays and the richness of the sponsors of the performance...This [practice] enhances rivalry and jealousy among the drummers...In most cases they rival very much when they meet at a performance where

a lot of experts converge....only one may play at a time (Kuthemba-Mwale 1977: 143).

Paying drum experts is not only a motivation for the drummers; it is also an act of appreciation. While dancers receive their monetary rewards from the audience and those that hired them as they dance, drummers are usually separately recognized. One reason for this is that they cannot receive money while playing on the drum at the same time because this would disrupt the performance. Even during the special recording sessions of the *mganda* performance, members of the audience gave their money to the dancers throughout the performance and either placed money on the ground for the drummers to share later or directly in the shirt pockets of the drummers. It was clear during my field research that the success of each performance was largely focused on the healthy existence of the drum and the drummer.

6. Beliefs and theories about the drum sound

My interaction with research participants unearthed a number of critical observations with regard to the application of the drum sound. Among the Chewa people, the sound of the drum serves different purposes. A high drum sound serves the purpose of announcing an impending event or merely informing, according to the participants. On the other hand, a deep drum sound serves the purpose of inviting people to a performance or articulating specific dance routines. As such, participants reported that careful drum sound production and combinations are observed in order to communicate these relevant concepts.

There are two sounds or tones – low tone and high tone – that one is able to produce from any type of drum. Among the Chewa people, the high tone and the low tone are verbalized as *di-* and *nti-* respectively. Music rests or silences are pronounced with a deep nasalized *m-* sound. This was consistent with the participants' demonstration at Chitete village.

In practice, all lead drums are perceived to produce only the high tone. However, Chewa people have a way of distinguishing the high tones played by the different hands – left hand and right hand – on these 'high-toned' lead drums. In essence, there are two contrasting high tones produced on lead drums depending on which hand one uses to play the high tone. In general, all deep tones on any type of drum - lead or main drum, double-headed or

cylindrical - are played using the right hand, while all high tones are played using the left hand: the stronger the accent the deeper the perceived tone; the weaker the accent the higher the perceived tone, according to what the participants demonstrated.

Therefore, as research participants agreed, in order to communicate a message through drum sound, the comparative combination and number of deep tones and high tones matters. Drum communication that demands action involves more deep tones than high tones. On the other hand, drum communication that is made for mere information does not necessarily emphasize deep tones, and may incorporate more high tones than deep tones.

This researcher learnt that before *Mganda* dance rehearsals, the drum is played to mobilize members of the group for the rehearsals. The drum player uses more deep tones than high tones. This is equally true for *Chimtali* rehearsals. Similarly, during *Gulewamkulu* festivals, especially on the final day, prolonged drum sounds are heard prior to the ceremony. These are meant to remind about and mobilize the community to the event. Again, deep drum sounds are predominant, according to the participants. In contrast, where no community reaction is required, the drum playing is done casually without emphasis on the deep tones, such as when general drum tuning is done by exposing the drums to sunlight for a few hours. To determine whether the drums are fully tuned, several players beat them for some time.

This type of playing is casually done and, while the community may enjoy listening to it, no one is compelled to get closer except for curious children. (Chitete villagers, 27 June 2008)

In these examples, playing of deep tones and high tones effectively communicates different messages to the society. In addition to these observations, Chewa societies regard deep drum sounds as being more authoritative than high drum sounds. Therefore, it is common to associate a relatively deeper sounding drum with more power of attraction (*chikoka*) or charm than a high “pitched” drum. As observed earlier, some of the charms that are deposited inside drums are meant to make the drum produce a much deeper sound. Because of its power of attraction, this deeper sound is believed

to draw people to performances and ensures maintenance of a large audience. A large audience signifies a performing group's success. Those performing groups that do not attract large audiences are often termed as *ana* (children), meaning they are not yet advanced in using charms.

The generic names for deep-toned drums, the *phulankhali* and the *gunda* are in direct reference to the authoritative sound that such drums produce. The following section deals with issues of Chewa drum nomenclature in more detail.

7. Ramifications of the Chewa drum/drumming nomenclature

Chewa drums or drumming rhythms may be placed into four categories namely, the foundational or lead drum or drumming; the support foundational drum or drumming; the mother drum; and other support drums or drum rhythms.

The Chewa foundational or lead drum/rhythm is generically termed *kaperegede*. However, for ritual and related dances, the lead drum is specifically called *mjidiko*. The support foundational drum is called *kankumbe* or *mkowolo*. This term applies only to the single-headed drums that are usually performed as a set of three or more drums. The mother drum is called *gunda* or *phulankhali*. This term is exclusively applied to the big double-headed drum or its sound. When used as the main drum in an ensemble of two accompanying drummers, the term *phulankhali* is used to signify its commanding sound. Otherwise, it serves the purpose of a kick drum in a larger drum ensemble. Translated loosely, the word '*gunda*' stands for 'to bang'. Other support drums act as master drums, such as the *mbalule*, or complimentary drums, such as the *mtiwiso*. In this study, I will dwell on the two foundational drums (*mjidiko* and *kankumbe/mkowolo*) in order to illustrate the quintessence of Chewa drumming that is applied as an accompaniment for all their dances.

In essence, there are two foundational drum rhythms, one main or lead rhythm and the other support lead rhythm, so to speak. The lead rhythm or lead drum bears the name *kaperegede* for any particular Chewa dance as a generic term. But when applied to a ritual dance it is termed *mjidiko*, a term used interchangeably with the identity of the drum itself. In the *Mganda* dance, the *kaperegede* rhythm is played on a small double-headed drum. For *Mganda*

and *Chimtali* dances, the term *kaperegede* refers to the drum itself and/or the rhythm. Strumpf (1999: 119) reports that the small double-headed drum is locally called *parekete* among the Tonga *Malipenga* dancers of the northern lakeshore district of Nkhata Bay. This difference in name seems to be the result of linguistic differences between the performers of the two dances. The Tonga *Malipenga* dance itself has several similarities with the Chewa *Mganda* dance.

The syllable *ka-* in the Chewa term *kaperegede* is a diminutive expression for “small”, i.e. small *peregade* or *parekete* in the other case. In the Chewa context, the term *kaperegede* connotes ‘one who escorts or goes ahead to show the way’. The lead drum’s synonymous term *mjidiko* comes from the mnemonic sound ‘jidi-jidi’ as oralised from the rhythm of the drum itself. It is also imitated as ‘mbite-mbite’ rhythm or ‘tiya-tiya’ rhythm according to different research participants that I recorded at Chitete and Kayaza, respectively. When applied to entertainment dances such as *Chimtali*, the lead rhythm is much faster and is orally imitated as ‘khethe-khethe’ (Compare the transcriptions below).

Example 1: The *mjidiko* rhythm for *Gulewamkulu* lead drum

♩ = 140

12/8

Ji -di ji - di ji - di ji - di Ji -di ji - di ji - di ji - di

Example 2: The *mjidiko* rhythm or the *kapelegede* for *Chimtali* dance

♩ = 160

12/8

Khe-the khe-the khe-the khe-the Khe-the khe-the khe-the khe-the

The mnemonic rhythm for the support lead drumming (*kankumbe* or *mkowolo*) is ‘*Kali kumunda n’ka mbewu*’ or ‘*Chili kumunda n’cha mbewu*’. The term *kankumbe* seems to mean ‘go and dig it’ probably referring to mice hunting, which is common in the research area. The drum’s synonymous term *mkowolo* means ‘someone who burrows or digs a hole’, again probably referring to mice hunting. In essence, the lead drum leads the way, and this support lead drum, having been shown the way, does the digging.

The support lead drum’s rhythm ‘*Kali-kumunda n’ka mbewu*’ translates as ‘what remains in the garden is for seed’. This statement is the advice given by parents to wasteful children to save some maize as seed, or to act responsibly by not over-indulging themselves as they harvest green maize (Nthala, 2011:68). The ‘*Kali kumunda n’ka mbewu*’ rhythm is transcribed as follows:

Example 3

The image shows a musical staff with a 6/8 time signature. The rhythm is transcribed as follows: Ka - li ku - mu - nda nka - mbe - wu. Ka - li ku - mu - nda nka - mbe - wu.

The two foundational rhythms discussed in this article form the basis for the other drumming rhythms in Chewa dances. It is easier to understand and follow the two foundational rhythms from the *Gulewamkulu* and *Chimitali* points of view. These rhythmic expressions become somewhat complex when applied in the *Mganda* context, for example, as there are many emerging variations that need to be studied carefully (Nthala, 2009). The same variations form the basis for the other support drums that this study has not focused on. The drumming student is expected to develop an understanding of the foundational rhythm before he/she can learn to apply improvisatory creativity.

Both terms (*kankumbe* and *mkowolo*) and the phonation of the drum rhythms seem to have their origins in the Chewa farming background. Hence, the aspect of farming or digging the ground is used in practical drumming lessons in this predominantly agricultural community.

With regard to applying general life or cultural situations to music and dance performances or lessons, Ballantine (1984) asserts that social structures

crystallize in musical structures in various ways and with varying degrees of critical awareness. He thus discourages the viewing of music performances in an atomized way, by cutting them off from a fundamental structural intimacy with its social order. This is a call to view music activity as belonging to a wider context, which extends spatially and thus embraces the totality of our social, physical, economic, historical and cultural world. For the Chewa drumming expert, such familiar contexts become teaching and learning devices for the perpetuation of the drumming tradition.

8. Linkages between drumming beliefs, talent and performance

The Chewa drumming tradition in its various forms and applications chronicles Chewa history and the concerns of daily life; it is a display invested with social significance as well as symbolising cosmic and extraordinary phenomena and interpreting culturally embedded musical expressions. Drumming exists to accompany song and dance performances. Chewa music and dance songs are synonymous with explicit packages of narratives laden with instructional content, and often conveyed through riddles, proverbs and other literary expressions. Song creation, dance patterns, and drumming are communally invented and assessed. Therefore, there are striking relationships between the utilisation of cultural tools within song creations, dance and drumming accompaniment. In addition, cultural and philosophical implications surrounding the drum and its performance inform the Chewa aesthetic values specific to dance and drum accompaniment.

Consequently, this study has observed that Chewa drumming requires inherent talent, systematic training, ability to link ordinary life situations to performance, and application of improvisational skills. The drumming interprets the way local people live and defines issues that can easily be related to by practitioners of the dances in question. It also deals with laws that are traditionally accepted by all and conveys shared meanings in addition to community beliefs in mystic forces.

Essentially, the Chewa drumming is a communal cultural property that demonstrates the people's emotional, spiritual (extra-human) and psycho-social expressions. These expressions allow both the performers and the audience to experience harmony (inter-relationships), balance (social equilibrium), and rhythm (social progress) as they share common beliefs, traditions and aesthetic values. It also affords them the opportunity to

experience the mysterious, express their imaginations, communicate ideals, and execute ritualistic and symbolic functions associated with music and dance performances. In all these, one can easily observe the convergence and convenience of talent, traditional knowledge and performance in the Chewa drumming tradition.

9. Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to demonstrate that among the Chewa, drumming is the essence of every form of music and dance performance. As such, drummers are key players in achieving performance success. Their innate performance abilities are critical in the achievement of this success. In addition, drummers, just like singers and dancers, are required to be conversant with traditionally prescribed ways of executing their roles in any performance. The ability to link their talent with mystic beliefs, the capacity to apply cultural laws in performance, and the readiness to competently translate and perform theoretical requirements as a drummer all seem to be the guiding principles for a successful drummer. It is hoped that the observations made in this study will in turn stimulate debate and engender curiosity leading to future research projects.

Figures

Fig. 1: Fire used for tuning cylindrical drums



Fig. 2: Men testing the tuned drums



Fig. 3: The double-headed drum



Fig. 4: The long cylindrical drum



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