

## **Joys of Oppression: The Poetry of Urban Vimbuza**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper explores the poetry used in urban Vimbuza songs. This is done by studying the background of the Tumbuka, followed by Vimbuza before linking it to urban Vimbuza. The paper later concludes that the songs in urban Vimbuza are completely tied to traditional Tumbuka thought and not linked to modern society.*

**Keywords:** Vimbuza, Poetry, Tumbuka, Zambia, Spiritual dance, Healing, Contemporary

### **1. Introduction**

This paper examines the poetry of the Vimbuza, a spiritual healing dance of the Tumbuka people of Eastern Zambia. The aim of this paper is to explore how the Vimbuza poetry (songs) has been manipulated by the modern day performers, particularly academics, to reflect the society in which the performance takes place. To this end, the paper delves into the history of the Tumbuka people. The major source of this section is *A History of the Tumbuka from 1400 to 1900; The Tumbuka under the M'nyanjagha, Chewa, Balowoka, Senga and Ngoni Chiefs* by Chondoka and Bota. This section is followed by a background to Vimbuza. While the section is also informed by the author whose wealth of information on Tumbuka culture can be employed, Chilivumbo's 1972 article *Vimbuza or Mashawe: A Mystic Therapy* will play a huge role in the study and interpretation of Vimbuza. The final section outlines how urban Vimbuza songs as manipulated (in selection) by academics, particularly teachers of applied drama at the University of Zambia, have employed the traditional art in the modern society.

### **2. Tumbuka Background**

The Tumbuka are a group of people found chiefly in the Eastern Province of Zambia. They are also found in other places such as Malawi. 'Tumbuka' refers to both the ethnic grouping and the language spoken by the group.

This paper will, using Chondoka and Botha (2007) as the main source of information, outline the origins of the Tumbuka, their movement from their place of origin and the groups they have been in contact with.

Like many other Bantu speaking people of Africa, the Tumbuka originate from the Luba-Lunda empire that was once headed by Mwata Yamvo. The Tumbuka come from the Luba portion of the Luba-Lunda. This is located in the Kola region of Democratic Republic of Congo. Reasons for their breaking away are generally that they were not happy with the manual labour they were subjected to by their leaders. The Tumbuka, in the early 1400s, therefore, with three other groups, the Hehe, the Gogo, and the Mwakyusa each with their own group leaders though all still under the leadership of one overall leader known as Mudala, left the kingdom and proceeded to form their own distinct groups. The groups continued until somewhere in central Tanzania where the death of Mudala led to succession disputes and the groups split into their distinct groups before 1415. They ended up settling in different parts of central Africa most prominent being Lundazi and Chama in Zambia, and parts of Malawi.

Apart from the above groups that including the Tumbuka split one from the other, the Tumbuka have been in contact with many other groups. This could have been through trade or merely by coincidence as these groups could have had been migrating from one area to another. One such group is the Chewa which up to date has strong relations with the Tumbuka. Our source indicates that the Chewa left the Luba Kingdom before 1500. This shows that this was after the Tumbuka had left. It is further stated that the Chewa reached Kalona in about 1500 where they found a small group of the Tumbuka that decided to permanently remain there to the present day.

With the passage of time, as the Chewa leaders, Kalonga and Undi, allowed their (junior) chiefs to move farther away, the chiefs found themselves on the Tumbuka grounds though they still allowed the Tumbuka headmen to rule their people peacefully. This made the Tumbukas not to be bothered by the presence of the Chewas though it remained true that the chiefs were Chewa even if the headmen were Tumbuka.

Apart from the Chewa, there were the Balowoka who came from the east of the Tumbuka kingdom between 1770 and 1780. Named after the realisation that they were the only group of traders that came from the east which meant that they had crossed the lake, the Balowoka were traders specialised in commodities lacking in the Tumbuka kingdom such as salt, cloth, European beads, conus shells, and various ornaments. This they exchanged with chiefly ivory.

To have an advantage over trade options in the area, the Balowoka married in influential Tumbuka clans and therefore managed to amass commercial power as they settled in the area.

Young (1931) says that before the invasion of Tumbuka land by the Ngoni who brought their own customs and other ways of life, the Tumbuka followed a matrilineal way of life. This is also seen in the Chewa who, as it has already been pointed out, have the same origins as the Tumbuka.

### **3. *Vimbuza Background***

Discussing diseases among the Tumbuka, Fraser (1914) identifies one category of diseases: spirit or demon possession. He says that each of the spirit/demon possession disease type has its own way of treatment. However, he seems to suggest that each of them is treated through dance as it is only the dance type and dress that differs between each possession type.

Through one of his respondents, Mwale (1974) says that spirit possession emanates from the spirits of the earlier possessed people who have since died. It follows that these same spirits inhabit the bodies of the living. It is these who are living that become the possessed. Others have claimed that the disease comes from being bewitched. Once one has been bewitched, they are unable initially to tell that they have been bewitched as the illness appears like any other illness such as malaria. It is only after all ordinary forms of treatment fail that one is able to tell that it is bewitching. The ng'anga (witchdoctor) who Fraser (1914) has called the exorciser, therefore takes the role of diagnosing and curing the ailment.

Chondoka and Bota (2007) point out that the spirits initially attacked foreigners such as the Bisa, Senga, Bemba, and Ngoni who settled among the Tumbuka. With the passage of time, the spirits of the forefathers of the foreigners who had since become part of the culture of the Tumbuka started attacking Tumbukas. The spirit possession diseases that are healed through dance have been identified as: Vilombo, Vimbuza, Fumu za Pasi and Vyanusi. The major source of this section, Chilivumbo (1972) basically calls the possession diseases Vimbuza or Mashawe in his essay *Vimbuza or Mashawe: A Mystic Therapy* and gives a detailed study of the dance. Chilivumbo uses Vimbuza and Mashawe in reference to what is generally referred to as Vimbuza in this paper. He says both words mean the same thing. He actually identifies two meanings carried by the two words: the illness which is discussed in detail below, and the dance which targets the illness for the healing of the patient. Regarding the illness, he says it is a mental case as most patients are people that have social problems, and have had distorted social relationships. It seems here that the social disintegration could actually be attributed to the illness.

Other oral sources have linked the beginning of Vimbuza to the colonial period when due to the introduction of taxes on the people, most men went to urban areas in search of employment predominantly on the mines. The women who were left behind by their husbands were forbidden from engaging in sexual activities as, it was claimed, it would put the lives of their husbands in danger where they worked underground on the mines. One is therefore made to conclude that the restrictions placed on the women could have contributed to the 'spirit possession'.

Chilivumbo (1972) identifies healing and relief for both the dancer and audience of the Vimbuza performance which takes place in the evening. Interestingly, the performance involves the audience in singing as men take turns at drumming even though drumming is reserved strictly for a specific group of drummers.

What ultimately has been identified here is the therapy achieved through the dance. This therapy is achieved by both the audience and the performer. This leads to questioning the spiritual attacks claimed by many as the disease.

#### **4. Urban Vimbuza Poetry**

Urban Vimbuza was developed by the late Mapopa Mtonga then Associate Professor of African Arts and Culture at the University of Zambia. He used urban Vimbuza as a process drama approach in Community Theatre for Development. The objective of urban Vimbuza was to heal psychologically affected members of society based on the understanding that Vimbuza is primarily meant to heal patients who are the dancers. This also took into account the point that Vimbuza heals the audience as well through its cathartic effect upon them. The author, who was Mtonga's student, has used Vimbuza in workshops in Zambia and Europe.

"Vimbuza songs are not just ordinary songs. They are songs which pass on to the audience certain messages reflective of the feelings and the tensions experienced by the dancer who sings the solo part. Vimbuza, through its songs, offers a structural and socially sanctioned means for the expression of tensions, without leading to consequences which disrupt social relationships within the family or community. It is the structural outlet for tensions" (Chilivumbo, 1972; 8). The implication here is that the dance is not divorced from the poetry of Vimbuza. The songs are as important as is the rest of the spectacle. It is for this reason that the major thrust of this paper is the poetry, the songs, performed alongside the dance. This paper restricts itself to the songs of the urban Vimbuza as crafted by University of Zambia academics, particularly Mapopa Mtonga who developed the area, and how this responds to their objectives.

The songs form a pattern of entry, performance (communality) and finally exit. This corresponds to the coming of the spirits, manifestation and communality with the rest of society and finally rest through healing.

The opening song is *Balala Bafika* literary translated to say the elders have come. The elders in this case refers to the spirits which are seen to be superior to the living. The spirit possession of the patient is symbolic of the coming of the spirits. It is for this reason that this song is performed first. While simply signifying the coming of the spirits, one learns that this symbolises the announcement of a visitor as per tradition in the culture.

While also using the figure of personification in the title, the song continues saying, sendelelaniko, balala bafika (please move aside, give room as the elders have arrived). As it has already been mentioned above, the spirits are held in high esteem as can be noted from the living being asked to give room. The living have to be submissive to the spirits for them to create room for the spirits. The patient becomes an embodiment of the spirits because the spirits inhabit that body. The most room, in a theatrical sense, is created for the performer who takes the central stage in performance in the case where the major stage type is arena stage where the performer is fully surrounded by the audience.

From the welcoming of the spirits into the village, the next performance is the song that one would have probably expected to come earlier. The song *Bananyanga ya Moto, M'mudzi uno* which literary translates into this village has portent witch medicine or charms. This links the Vimbuza sickness to witchcraft which was earlier identified.

Showing the potency of witchcraft, this song also shows the strong belief in the power of witchcraft and how much it affects the lives of the people. However, one further sees in this song the identification of the fact that there is a problem in the society. This leads to the expectation that the problem will be solved.

The third song is about the problems faced by a married woman in her husband's home, and she asks her parents to return the cattle which served as dowry so that the marriage ends. This shows that patrilineal society followed by the Tumbuka does not favour the women. They are treated as labourers and what one might term child-bearing machines. This song further shows that Vimbuza is chiefly a preserve for women. As it was indicated earlier, it was the women that suffered in the absence of their husbands as they had no sexual relations during that time. It is necessary here to realize that, as stated earlier, the Tumbuka inherited the patrilineal system from foreigners. It is this system, as it has been argued here, that has contributed to the degrading of women in their society.

The fourth and fifth songs basically are the epitome of spiritual manifestation as, at this point, the whirlwind is personified in *Kwela-Kwela* literary translated 'rise, rise'. It calls upon the spirits to rise like the whirlwind. This is what leads to the cathartic effect on the performer and the audience. The personification of the whirlwind shows how they interpret nature. Through this song, they are seen to attach spirituality to natural phenomena and hence create the relationship between nature and man.

The final song, *Mwam'muzi Uno Mkumwankhu Maji* (people of this land, where do you drink from), is the communion between man and the gods or the spirits. Through this song, the spirits that have fully manifested at the fourth and fifth song stage ask the living where they drink from. The drinking place places importance on water in the lives of the people. The water also plays an important role in establishing the relevance of spirituality in water as some of the spirits are referred to be those of water in Vimbuza.

In the urban Vimbuza performance, *Mwam'muzi Uno Mkumwankhu Maji* usually sees the rest of the audience involved in the performance.

The choice of an easy to follow step enables members of the audience to be part of the performance. This marries well with the theory that the performance is meant for both the audience and the performer.

In *Mwam'muzi Uno Mkumwankhu Maji*, the spirits insist that they would like to drink where the living drink from. This will bring harmony in society and there will be social and spiritual balance.

## 5. Conclusion

The poetry of urban Vimbuza explores the journey of the spirits in society through the body of the afflicted. While Vimbuza is meant for the sick, urban Vimbuza is meant to heal a 'sick' society. The poetry of urban Vimbuza, interestingly, is highly dependent on traditional beliefs. The worldview of the Tumbuka shows the relationship between the spirits and the living. The major metaphorical use of language is personification of the spiritual and natural world leading to the linking of them to living.

What one learns from this relationship is that there is not much 'urban' about urban Vimbuza poetry as it is completely dependent on traditional Tumbuka thought.

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