

## BRASS BANDS AND THE BENI PHENOMENON IN URBAN EAST AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

by

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, East Africa<sup>2</sup> experienced an era of colonization, long distance trade, and world war. This was also a period in which the people of inland Tanganyika, in particular, experienced an intense transformation of their political, economic, religious, and cultural lives as Europeans penetrated the interior from their coastal footholds. Although the history of interaction between the coast of East Africa and the rest of the Indian Ocean rim dates back to the pre-Christian era,<sup>3</sup> the penetration of the interior of Tanganyika by foreign powers was a much slower process, begun first by the Arabs, followed by the Portuguese<sup>4</sup> and later by the Germans and British.<sup>5</sup>

With the advent of the German and British colonial administrations to the coast of East Africa in the late 1800s came also the complements of military machinery and military music. This paper will investigate the impact of the music of the European military brass band on the coastal and inland areas of Tanganyika as manifested in the development, florescence and demise of *beni ngoma*.

The arrival of German military brass bands along the coast was concomitant with the German military operations there in the late nineteenth century. The center for this activity was the coastal city of Dar es Salaam, the largest city in Tanganyika. One of the earliest accounts of the impact of German military music on Dar es Salaam is that of the German ethnographer, Karl Weule, who, in describing the situation in 1906, asserts:

Where there are Germans, there is also music. Dar es Salaam enjoys the advantage of two bands — that of the sailors of the two cruisers, and that of the *askari* (1909: 412).

The *askari* band that he mentions was composed of African recruits in the German military service.<sup>6</sup> These men were given instruction in brass instrumental music and then quickly thrown together as an ensemble. The *askari* band indulged thoroughly in music making, despite the rough and unpolished sound it produced to the European ear. Nonetheless, the Germans, who, if nothing more during their campaign in East Africa, emphasized education and left behind a remarkable legacy of schools, continued to both teach and support the brass band of the *askaris*. Additionally of course, they exercised a critical ear towards the *askari* band's performance. Weule remarks that though "both bands are under official patronage.....I cannot say much for the proficiency of the native performers; in any case, their music was accompanied by a great deal of noise" (1909: 412). The "noise" referred to by Weule was very likely a battery of actual or simulated African percussion used by the *askari* band to aid in ensemble coherence as well as in rhythmically embellishing for them the otherwise bland rhythms of German military band music.

The arrival of the German military band was probably received just as warmly elsewhere on the East African coast as it was in Dar es Salaam. In Zanzibar, for instance

the Universities' Mission to East Africa, which supported large freed slave settlements, was both philosophically and spiritually in favour of the indoctrinating potential of the military band. As Terrence Ranger asserts:

... the rhythm of hymns and of European band music was thought to be an excellent way of introducing the freed slave children to the necessities of industrial time. For the missionaries European music represented a world of order to the inexplicable monotonies and sudden passions of African drumming; musical ability was taken as a sign, a promise of potential for civilization (1975: 13).

With the arrival of World War I, Germany had to decide whether to keep her East African colony neutral or to fully involve her in the war. Realizing that the fate of her East African colony would be determined on the battlefields of Europe, Germany determined to exploit her East African holdings for purely military strategy. Tanganyika would be used as a battlefield to create as great a distraction to the Allied forces as possible, luring them away from more important battlefronts (Ilfie 1979: 241). By the end of the war, German East Africa was under British occupation, and by 1922 came under complete control as a British Mandated Territory under the League of Nations. It was during the developments between 1919 and the Mandate of 1922 that the Territory received the name Tanganyika.<sup>7</sup>

By the time that the British entered Dar es Salaam in 1919, they found it quite easy to recruit African soldiers who were capable of manning a military band. Additionally, they found that numerous fife, bugle and drum performers were available as well. The former German recruits were not at all unfamiliar to the British:

Early in the war many prisoners captured by the British had joined the KAR, where they had won a reputation for efficiency on parade...(Ilfie 1979: 248).

The British also played a major role in the development of band music in East Africa, even before their arrival in Dar es Salaam. In fact, according to one military history (Moyses-Bartlett 1956), the first drum and fife band was formed as a part of the Central Africa Rifles (C.A.R.) in 1900 under a Goanese bandmaster named De Souza. With the formation of the King's African Rifles (K.A.R.), which was essentially an absorption and reorganization of the C.A.R. and other similar regiments, the band became a full military brass ensemble which began performing in 1906. Although most of the players were new recruits, many included the former buglers and transferees from the C.A.R. band. This new band was situated in former Nyasaland (Malawi) as most of its performances were at Zomba and Blantyre.

The Africans' fascination with the sound of the brass band is illustrated in a Commissioner's comment in his report for 1906-07:

Those natives who have visited Zomba during the past year have had the advantage of also being able to listen to the brass band of the King's African Rifles, an innovation which has materially enlivened the social life of Zomba. The band appeals to the native visitor (for the Nyasaland Negro has undoubted musical proclivities) and they generally prefer

the music to the mysteries of the electric light or telephone (Moyses-Bartlett 1956: 694).

Economic hardships in 1911 took their toll on the K.A.R. and its Nyasaland band, and on the first of January, 1912, the band was officially dismantled, despite exhaustive efforts on the parts of both Sir William Manning of the K.A.R. and the European residents of Zomba and Blantyre. Meanwhile, however, the foreign office in Zanzibar had just officially granted permission for the establishment of a band there. Thus, twenty one N.C.O.s and men departed Zomba on April 5, 1912, bound for the new Zanzibar band (Moyses-Bartlett 1956: 694).

In Kenya, meanwhile, another K.A.R. band was being developed out of the former East African Rifles which had been organized since 1901 under a Goanese bandmaster, F.C. Pinto. Following the military reorganization of 1908, the E.A.R. became the Three K.A.R., and the new regulations specifically called for the maintenance of a military brass band, similar to the one formed in Nyasaland. Subsequently, the following events took place:

The appointment of a European bandmaster for 3 K.A.R. was sanctioned in March 1913. When the 2nd Loyal North Lancashires reached East Africa after the outbreak of war in 1914, they were accompanied by their bandmaster, M.C.A. Harvey. In 1916 he was seconded to 3 K.A.R., and set about training drummers and buglers for the new 3 battalions, and a full band for use on recruiting tours, as well as to play at concerts for war charities and similar objects. Harvey is said to have taught his Sudanese and Swahili recruits musical notation by showing them a rupee and its divisions into halves and quarters to represent the semi-breve, minim, and crochet, and the copper coins (ten, five and one cent pieces) to represent the quaver, semi-quaver, and the demi-semi-quaver. The men proved apt pupils and the band was much in demand. Harvey wrote the Kiswahili words, representing the askari at war, to the battalion march 'Men of Harlech' (Moyses-Bartlett, 695).

The establishment of a K.A.R. band in Tanganyika got underway very soon after the British arrived in Dar es Salaam, but not without some difficulty.<sup>8</sup> As was the case throughout much of the British presence in East Africa, financial problems plagued the K.A.R. On April 1, 1919, only the Three K.A.R. Band (Kenya) was given official sanction. The Six K.A.R. (Tanganyika) was rejected in its quest to form a similar band due to the limited funds available for operational costs. Tanganyika persisted, nonetheless, in its efforts to secure such a sanction for Six K.A.R.:

In June, 1919, the question was raised again, with the support of the newly appointed administrator, Sir Horace Byatt...It was pointed out that at Dar es Salaam the sole cost involved would be the services of an Indian Bandmaster (thus alleviating the expense of importing a British bandmaster), and the cost of the music (approximately 300 pounds), as trained men were serving with 6 K.A.R. and the instruments had already

been purchased. On this basis the consent of the Colonial Office was obtained; the 6 K.A.R. band was formed officially, and made its first public appearance at a Bachelor's Dance held at Dar es Salaam on 24th July, 1920 (Moyses-Bartlett, 696).

The available pool in Dar es Salaam from which the Six K.A.R. drew its band personnel had two sources. The older was the body of former askari band players of the former German forces. Many of these men, although originally from the Songea highlands in the southern inland region of Tanganyika, had remained in Dar es Salaam following World War I. They kept both their instruments and their uniforms from their former German service. Also included in this group were the Sudanese and Ngoni mercenaries who had been employed by the Germans (Ranger 1975: 38).

The second resource tapped by the Six K.A.R. consisted of men from the former drum and bugle band of the old Six K.A.R. (Somali) which had been dismantled in 1910. Thus, by late 1920, the populace of Dar es Salaam had become quite accustomed to the sight and sound of the military brass band manned by Africans.

The advent of the band in East Africa was quite late in comparison to similar developments in West Africa. There, "British-style brass bands began to develop out of native military-fort bands as early as 1750." The French West African Territories, on the other hand, did not develop such bands quite so early. Local dance and marching bands were generally manned by French musicians, "so that Westernized African musicians were few and poorly skilled" (Coplan 1978: 98).

The development of dance bands in Tanganyika seems to have had its beginnings in Tanga. The impetus for their early development must be credited to the Germans whose brass bands preceded those of the British along the coast of Tanganyika. One of the earliest African predecessors of the dance bands in this area was the famous Boy's Band of Tanga. Unlike the askari band of Dar es Salaam which, according to Weule (1909: 412), was publicly funded:

The Boy's Band of Tanga is a purely private enterprise. Tanga is a scholastic centre par excellence, hundreds of native children being instructed in the elements of European knowledge and initiated into the mysteries of the German tongue...The more intelligent in whom their teachers discover, or think they discover, any musical gift, are admitted to the famous Boy's Band. This is just now in excellent training. While the passengers from the *Admiral* presented themselves in the evening on the square in front of the Club, the band turned out to welcome them, and the playing was really remarkably good.

Out of the brass band tradition developed a fascinating array of dance band traditions. In East Africa, this tradition was known as *beni ngoma*.<sup>9</sup> One scholar has interpreted the development of *beni* as an outlet for the frustrations of defeat by the former German recruits who, having fled the German East African Territory following the defeat of the Germans, had returned from exile in Mozambique (Iliffe 1979: 248). But regardless of the motivation, one fact is certain, i.e. that this mode of performance was essentially an African ingestion and reinterpretation of the European military band phenomenon.

The treatment of this phenomenon is not so unlike the development of brass band traditions of eighteenth century Jamaica, the marching bands of Brazil, or even the black syncopated orchestras of New Orleans of the turn of the century. However, unlike these other dance band phenomena, the East African *beni ngoma* utilized several other elements which make it peculiar to the time and place of its occurrence. The *beni* drew upon African, European, and even Arabic elements which were all mixed variously, depending upon where in East Africa this phenomenon was found.

Although the *beni ngoma* was a widespread phenomenon throughout East Africa, the Tanganyikan style was readily distinguishable from the Kenyan *beni*. In a general sense, however, the *beni* exhibited certain common features wherever it occurred; for instance, the use of the brass band, the preoccupation with European military titles and hierarchy, mock military drills in the dance steps, and the use of Swahili song texts. There were always officers associated with *beni*, ranging from General to Sergeant, whose primary function it seems was the organization of the dances, which included both male and female participants.

The tunes that were performed by these groups were often attractive to Europeans as well as Africans, and in several instances, they were "incorporated into the repertoire of the famous regimental band of the battalion of the King's African Rifles then stationed in Nairobi" (Lambert 1962/63: 18). This, of course, was the Three K.A.R. mentioned earlier.

The distinctions of the Tanganyikan *beni* were intimately tied to the nature of the Swahili culture of the Tanganyikan coast — the area from which *beni* began its extraordinary penetration of the interior. Unlike the close ties that Lamu and Mombasa had with a high Swahili poetic literature — Mashaira (see Campbell 1974: 31-42), Tanganyikan coastal Swahili people exhibited a less self-confident and more permeable and secular culture. Also, the modest beginning of its cultural centre, Dar es Salaam, could not permit the very lavish displays often associated with Kenya's coastal *beni*.

Early in its development, the *beni* splintered into various competitive dance associations, the two most prominent of which were the Marini and Arinoti. Their first appearance in Dar es Salaam was around 1914, and they were evidently offshoots of two *ngomas* of Tanga and Pangani, namely, Dar-i-Sudi and Dar-i-Gubi, both friendly competitors. The younger section of the Dar-i-Sudi *ngoma* formed the Marini while the Dar-i-Gubi similarly developed an offshoot called Arinoti Band (Ranger 1975: 37).

The Marini societies, which contained a large number of former askari recruits, were high status organizations, while the Arinoti, consisting largely of porters, were considered low status. While the askari were associated with military service of the colonial regimes, the porters had served in a much more demeaning and often more miserable situation as members of numerous carrier corps, bearing heavy burdens over many miles through hostile terrain. As one scholar has stated: "It was fitting that porters joined the Arinoti, for they were the human misery on which rested the edifice of European fear and greed" (Iliffe 1979: 249).

In his discussion of the development of *beni ngoma* Terrence Ranger (1975: 36) points out that, though certainly influenced by German military music and the Tanga Boy's Band, its development was not necessarily a straight outgrowth of these forms.

As he explains, “in Tanganyika, as in Kenya, *beni* grew out of the pre-existing dance association tradition and was an indication of the adaptability of Swahili culture”.

An anonymous Swahili manuscript published in 1938 gives a detailed description of the make-up and function of the two rival branches of the *beni ngoma* that existed in Tanganyika at that time:

*beni* is an organized society... Every inscribed member must agree to follow the laws of the *ngoma* and to obey all orders given by the heads thereof... The society is hierarchically organized... Thus there is a king, kaiser, obas (colonel), captain, lieutenant, judge, minister of finance, and sergeant. These officers wear a tape on the shoulders and dress according to rank. The officers are called *Mabwana* (“Masters”), while those who have no high rank are called *askari*... There are also two singers, one a man and the other a woman, who are called *kinguru*... three other members are chosen to beat the drums; these three are called *buruki*. The Society is a disciplined one. Officers are respected just as European army officers are. The head of the society army takes command of his soldiers, and beats them with a *kiboko* (hippopotamus hide) when they march badly or are late for school or any other exercise. The army captain drills those who are called *Moaskari* (soldiers)... The activities of the two branches (Alinoti and Marini), and the official ranks for men and women (kaiseress, queen, etc.) are the same. The songs, too, are the same, except that slight changes are made in order that the Alinoti may scoff at the Marini and vice versa. The Marini seem to consider themselves superior to the Alinoti (Anon, 1938: 75-77).

By the mid 1930s, the decline of coastal *beni* could already be perceived. In Tanga, the birthplace of Tanganyika *beni*, though its presence could still be felt in performances which displayed the highly hybridized nature of the form — the sense of the tribal *ngoma* mixed with the European military instrumentation, the clothing inspired by uniforms or by movies, and the names of the *ngoma* themselves: “Young Rich Men”, “Settlers”, etc. — the pageantry and lavishness of the earlier days could no longer be seen. The country was suffering the pains of an economic depression. As Baker (1934: 99) describes the scene, “The pageantry, which in days of prosperity was the chief feature of the *ngoma*, has now disappeared and shortage of money has reduced the affair to a bedraggled march past in which the riff-raff of the town take part.”

There were several factors which contributed to the eventual demise of *beni* in Dar es Salaam. One of the earliest of these was the economic depression which beset the entire country in the 1930s. This situation effectively limited the extent and degree of performance possibilities for the badly strapped urban associations. The organization of the other social welfare groups also detracted particularly from the elite ranks of the *beni* organizations.

Furthermore, from a social standpoint, *beni* had, by the 1950s, gone ‘out of fashion’. This phasing of ‘fashionableness’ was, in some ways, precipitated by the impact of the second World War on Tanganyika. Unlike World War I, which was responsible for the large scale dissemination of *beni* from the coastal urban centers throughout the interior

and also for giving this urban *ngoma* a clearly military association which became easy for post-war Africa to identify with, the effects of World War II were quite different. In this war, Africans left their home soil and saw action in new areas of the world. They saw and heard things which, though common where they occurred, were for them whole new cultural experiences. One of the greatest impressions that seems to have been made on the African soldiers abroad was the new world of music to which they were exposed. While in the dance halls of Europe, they saw and heard, first hand, music that the Europeans and Americans were 'swinging' to. This broadening cultural experience did little to bolster their support for *beni ngoma* on their return. In fact, many of the more musically inclined soldiers brought back new forms of music and dance which they then attempted to recast in an African mold.

The dissemination of these musical innovations is reflected in their organization of new kinds of social groups. In Dar es Salaam, jazz clubs began to appear as the basis of group formations:

Jazz clubs tend more to the dominance of those who actually play an instrument, but they too have a social side and the members often stay together for years...there is a struggle for leadership among the organizers, and constant permutations not uncommitted with money: for the bands are beginning, the best of them, to enter into comparatively big money now that takings may be eighty pounds a night gross (Leslie 1963: 101-02)

The growing encroachment on *beni* by modern dance forms in Dar es Salaam culminated in the 1960s when the performances of the *beni ngoma* seem to have disappeared altogether. It appears to be no coincidence that the end of the *beni* occurred at about the time of the granting of independence to Tanganyika. The *beni*, which was made possible by and grew out of aspects of European colonialism in Tanganyika, can be seen, then, as the musical metaphor for that colonialism. *Beni's* death symbolized the end of formal colonialism in Tanganyika. Yet what it achieved was the epitome of musical acculturation in Africa. Though *beni* died, the process of musical acculturation in Dar es Salaam had been very actively and creatively developed.

This urban *ngoma* had been disseminated to the remotest corners of the country. Its display ranged from full brass band with singers and uniformed dancers in polished array decorating the streets of Dar es Salaam in parade, to a single drum beating accompaniment to a no less enthusiastic array of tattered village dancers transforming the European military rites of rigor into an African musical carnival.

The urban character of early *beni ngoma* established several precedents for the current wave of urban musical forms in Tanzania. One such precedent was the multi-ethnic make-up of the Arinoti and Marini segments of *beni*. Prior to the development of urban musical forms, musical performance in rural Tanganyika was characterized by two features: (1) music events were ethnic-specific, i.e. all performances were identifiable in terms of their tribal or ethnic origins; (2) the participants in rural musical activities were generally members of the ethnic groups with which the music was associated.

Thus, for many migrant workers coming to Dar es Salaam for the first time, participating in *beni ngoma* was their first experience in a multi-ethnic musical activity. The ethnic music that would predominate would be that which had the best musicians represented in the group, since everyone was generally invited to contribute to what may be called an eclectic musical event. The pan-ethnic character of *beni ngoma* is somewhat analogous to the development of East Africa's lingua franca, Kiswahili, i.e. *beni* was a musical lingua franca, not only among the various East African ethnicities, but even to the predilection and perhaps sympathetic understanding of some Europeans.

Another precedent established by *beni* was the use of European instruments for the performance of African music. An interesting paradox here is that the major kinds of European instruments used in *beni* were brass. Yet the style of urban music which later became associated with much of East Africa was the so-called 'dry guitar' music. The sudden popularity of the guitar in Africa affected urban musical developments in almost every region of the continent.

The third precedent established is closely related to the first, i.e. the use of Kiswahili as the language of urban music in Dar es Salaam. Even the *beni* which had penetrated the remotest rural areas of Tanganyika used Kiswahili as the language of the songs.

From a musical standpoint, one of the most important precedents made was in the ability of the *beni* to absorb Western music and to restructure it into an African framework. This situation is somewhat analogous to black musicians in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century adapting the French military marching band style into the famous black syncopated brass marching/dance bands of that era.

Though the *beni ngoma* is not known to presently exist in Dar es Salaam, vestiges of this tradition are vaguely present in the *ngoma* forms that are found there now, as well as in the urban popular bands which are indigenous to Tanzania (see Martin 1982).

The impact of the European brass band tradition, along with indigenous institutions, has had a profound effect on the history of urban music in Africa. This paper is but a glimpse of one aspect of this process, and hopefully a stimulus for further historical studies dealing with this phenomenon.

## Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of one presented at the 1987 Southeastern/Caribbean Chapter meeting of SEM at Duke University. It also received a hearing in Professor Chris Waterman's African Music Seminar at the University of Washington in the summer of that same year. Field work in connection with this topic was carried out in Tanzania in 1976 on a Fulbright grant. Subsequent research was supported by the Research Grants Committee of the University of Alabama in 1987.
2. East Africa refers to the area contained within the boundaries of the modern day countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. (It also originally included the countries of Ruanda and Burundi, but not within the context of this paper). The reader should note the distinctions made throughout the paper between the general area of East Africa and the specific territory of Tanganyika.
3. Although historians speculate that the seasonal monsoons which blow north-easterly and south-westerly respectively, made possible commercial intercourse between India, Arabia and the coast of East Africa for several centuries prior to the birth of Christ, it can only be stated with certainty that such regular contacts took place at least in the first century A.D. when the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea was written by an anonymous Greek merchant seaman (see Blaankart, ed. 1683).
4. The only trade route from the coast of Tanganyika to the shores of the inland Lake Nyasa in 1776 was one pioneered by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century (Iliffe 1979: 40).
5. The Germans first arrived in Tanganyika as missionaries in the late 1840s, many years before the territory was called Tanganyika. By 1885, German colonists had penetrated the area, finally gaining complete

control by 1907, thus the original European name for this area, Deutsch Ostafrika (German East Africa). The British gained control in 1919.

6. The term 'askari' is Kiswahili for soldier or policeman, referring here, of course, to the African military recruits.
7. In 1920, the occupied territory was renamed 'Tanganyika' by the British (Kiswahili: 'the land beyond Tanga', a coastal town) and eventually Tanzania in 1964 (merging mainland Tanganyika with the island of Zanzibar). The official title for the country today is Jamhuri ya Muungano wa Tanzania (United Republic of Tanzania).
8. For a short summary of the formation and activities of the Sixth K.A.R. (Tanganyika), see Moffett 1958: 391 - 400.)
9. The term 'beni ngoma' itself, is an interesting example of the adaptability and flexibility of Swahili language and culture. 'Beni' is an adaptation of the English word 'band' and 'ngoma' means drum and, by extension, any kind of dance or music in general. In modern usage, it generally refers to traditional dancing and music. Thus, 'beni ngoma' is the absorption of the European military band into the framework of traditional East African music.

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