SENGENYA DANCE MUSIC: ITS INSTRUMENTAL RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE

by

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Introduction

Sengenya is a ceremonial dance of the Digo who live in Kwale District at the Coast province of Kenya. The Digo are one of the nine Bantu groups of coastal people – the Giriama, Duruma, Wachonyi, and others – who form the Mji Kenda cluster (of people).[1] Like many traditional dances in the Digo area, *Sengenya* is performed by men, women and girls joined together in formally institutionalised social groups, with officers, by-laws, etc. *Sengenya* ensembles are widespread among the Digo and other Mji Kenda groups, but they show different degrees of sophistication, different levels in the quality of their music and dance performances. The performances of the Mwamanga *Sengenya* group which consists of adult men and women in Diani location, for example, are much more elaborately organised and certainly much more interesting than that of the Mwaluphamba ensemble which is made up of adult male drummers, dances, flautist and teenage girls who are dancers.

Sengenya is performed mostly during the celebration of *harusi ya kuoa* (wedding ceremonies), national days, end of Ramadhani and on other occasions, like harambee (fund raising) meetings and barazas, which call for the performance of traditional music and dance for entertainment.

Instruments of the dance ensemble

The standard instrumental ensemble of *Sengenya* consists of six membranophones (drums) of different sizes, two aerophones – an oboe (*uzumari*) and a flute (*chivoti*), and an idiophone – a metal tray (*patsu* or *ukaya*). Occasionally, a couple of the instruments are dropped during performance when not enough players are available to handle all of them. A *chivoti* flautist, for instance, may play the melodic interludes for *nzumari* when this oboe is absent, and *vice versa*. The absence of both aerophones in any performance renders the music incomplete. Some of the drums of the ensemble are played in pairs during any organised performance. However, when one of the two of the same drum type is not functioning as part of the ensemble, the other drum can stand on its own and provide the drum's basic rhythmic patterns required.

Membranophones

The six basic drums of *Sengenya* ensemble are a pair of *Puo* (at times called *Chapuo*), a pair of *Nchirima*, and a pair of *Bumbumbu* (or *Mabumbumbu*). *Puo* is a double-headed cylindrical laced drum; the two skinheads are of unequal diameters. It measures about 37 cms, in length, 22 cms diameter at the bigger end and 20 cms at the smaller end. The drum shell of *puo*, as well as those of the other *Sengenya* drums are carved out of solid *mchumbu* wood and the skin used on the heads is that of *chingo* (cow-hide). The drums are laced with ropes made of sisal fibre.

Like most of the Digo drums, the skin heads of *puo* are laced to tension rings made of strong flexible twigs. This lacing of the skin to a tension ring, which runs around the drum at one end just where the drum head begins to thin down, is often Y-shaped. Two vertical thongs are looped together in a noose knotted into a horizontal lacing to achieve the Y shape, or W shape.

Nchirima, also laced, is a 50 cm long cylindrical drum with both ends of different diameters covered with cow-hide. The bigger end measures about 34.5 cms in diameter and the small head 30 cms. The lacing technique employed on *nchirima* is the same as that used on *puo*.

The *Bumbumbu* drum, which stands on three legs, is carved in one piece out of the mchumbu log of wood (of which the drum is always made). The top of the drum, which is covered with goat skin, is about 28 cms in diameter and measures 48 cms, in height; the legs alone are 18 cms high.

Aerophones

Nzumari is a conical double-reed instrument (which sounds like the oboe). It has three sectional parts i.e. it is made in three articulated sections: the bell (conical part), the middle section, and the mouthpiece. The overall length of the Digo *nzumari* is about 30 cms.

The bell is carved out of the root part of the *mchumbu* tree. The diameter of the large end (of the bell proper) is about 7.5 cms. and the perpendicular height of the whole conical part is 9 cms. The diameter of the smaller end of the conical part, inside of which one end of the middle section is fitted, is about 2 cms. This conical part of *Sengenya nzumari* has, at times, simple carved line or geometric motifs as decorations on the body. Graham Hyslop (1975:43) talks of a highly decorated Digo *nzumari* but I never came across one of such *nzumaris* during my research visits to the area and, my informants claim Digo normally do not carve elaborate designs on their *nzumari*. Perhaps the one Hyslop saw in Digo land might have come from Lamu where *nzumaris* are highly decorated with motifs and designs.[2]

The middle section, which is about 12 cms long, is often made out of bamboo (*mvumgo*) tube with a uniform bore of about 1.74 cm diameter. This section carries the four equally spaced finger-holes of the instrument; each finger hole is about 0.6 cm. in diameter with a distance of 1.75 cms. between them.

The mouth-piece section is about 8 cms. long. It consists of a small wooden circular disc (half of a sewing thread spool) which connects a 7 cm. piece of fine metal (brass or copper) tubing with a thin bore and a circular coconut shell wind-guard, plus a double reed, to the bamboo (tube) middle section. The double reed is made out of dry *mvumo* palm leaf. The coconut wind-guard is funnel-shaped and it is about 5 cms in diameter at the wider end. As the name implies, this coconut shell disc is put there to shield the mouth or lips from wind and, also, to support the lips against the puffed cheeks of the player during performance. The reed is placed fully in the mouth with the lips pressed against the small coconut shell disc. The reed is 2 cms wide and 3 cms long.

Chivoti is a transverse bamboo flute, the length of which differs from location to location in the Digo area. The average length of Digo chivoti is about 23 cms. with an even diameter throughout, of not more than 2.5 cms. The chivoti I studied, which is used by a popular flautist at Mwabuga village, is 21.5 cms. long with six stops (finger-

holes) and the end nearest the plain oval mouth-hole (embouchure) is closed naturally by a node or knot. The oval mouth-hole, across which the player blows to obtain his notes, measures 1.75 cms in diameter across the wider section of the hole. The embouchure can also be circular or rectangular. The finger-holes are not spaced evenly but the average distance between two adjacent holes is about 1.25 cms. Each finger-hole is about 0.5 cm in diameter. To make the flute lighter, some of the thickness of the wall of the bamboo tube is chopped off and this leaves the thickness of the wall to be about 0.3 cm. *Chivoti* is often decorated with small beads of seven different colours, in patterns and, at times, with tassles of strung beads which are suspended from the bottom of the flute.

Idiophones.

The basic idiophone, which is the time-keeper for the whole ensemble, is the *patsu,* sometimes called *upatsu* or *ukaya*. This is an imported stainless steel circular tray (shaped like a frisbee) and sold in the household goods shops in towns; it is used in serving chips and other snacks in some restaurants. This modern instrument, which accompanies an all traditional instrumental ensemble, varies in size, but the one generally used in *Sengenya* is about 26 cms in diameter. The flange of the tray is about 2.5 cms high.

Another type of idiophone employed in *Sengenya* performances is *Nzuga*, a set of small rattling vessels, each of which contains about two loose small spherical pellet bells. These percussion idiophones have their rattling vessels joined together; they are strung on sisal strings or thin skin thongs or may be attached to solid skin belts. The strips and belts are slipped through in each vessel (bell) on the opposite side of the orifice which serves as a sound hole. The strips/belts serve as fastening straps as well; they are used to tie the rattles round the ankle or leg of the dancer. These composite ankle-bells/rattles emphasise and inspire the dancer's movements and they also accentuate the beats of the music.

Tunings of the melodic instruments.

Although Digo drums are usually referred to as 'tuned drums', nowhere in Digo land are drums 'tuned to notes of a particular pitch' in the strict sense.[3] As has been observed elsewhere in East Africa, during tuning of drums before music and dance performances, "what is important is not a specific frequency of vibrations, but contrast of pitch when several drums sound simultaneously".[4]

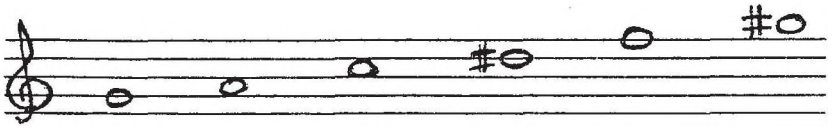
This is also true with 'talking' (master) drums and the supporting drums of the 'Adowa', 'Kete' and 'Atsiagbekor' drum ensembles of Ghana. The dance modes of drumming of these (drum) ensembles are characterised by their "use of selective combinations of rhythm and tone patterns, both of which are used in recurring and constrasting sequences unilineally or multilineally".[5] The usual practice, during *Sengenya* performances, is to combine all the drums graded in tone and function with the melodic instruments and the accompanying idiophones, whose beats of which provide a common point of reference for all the drums and the melodic instruments.

The tighter the membranes of the drums are, the better they sound and the pitches of the drums vary with the degree of tautness of the membranes. Before the *Sengenya* drums are used, they are tuned by tightening the lacing using a pole around which the

sisal rope of the lacing is wound. For fine tuning (for sharpening pitch), the end of a pole is used in beating, with downward movement, the tension rings round the drum head onto which are laced the skins to get the tightening on the skin. For flattening the pitch of a drum head, the centre of the skin is forced down with firm, steady pressure of the fist.

Chivoti.

The tuning of *chivoti* I studied sounds as follows:



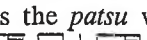
Nzumari.

The *Nzumari* used in Mwaluphamba *Sengenya* has the following tuning:

Performance technique.

Sengenya drums may be played alone as an orchestra. The general pattern, however, is one that combines drums with other instruments, frequently idiophones (patsu and nzuga), chivoti flute, nzumari oboe, and a chorus. Digo drummers generally play the instruments while others (usually the dancers) sing. They do not combine the functions of drumming and singing.

At the performance arena, the master drummer who plays the *nchirima* and *bum-bumbu* drums is flanked by the two standing *puo* players. The *patsu* player sits in front of the drummers, either on the right or left hand side. The *chivoti* and *nzumari* players stand on either side of the drummers.

The *puo* drummers introduce the rhythm sequences of the *Sengenya* instrumental pieces for the dance movements; their drums are tied in front of them (around their waists) with sisal strings in such a way that their hands, both of which are used in playing the drums, can reach the skin heads comfortably. The two *puo* drums play identical rhythmic patterns which complement those of the master drums. After the *puo* introduction follows the *patsu* which plays a steady time-line to provide the rhythmic foundation  of the *Sengenya* ensemble. To cut off some of the vibrations and produce a pleasant tone, the *patsu* is placed on a woven palm frond and is struck by the player with two plaited palm leaves (*mlala*). The master drummer, in a stooping standing position, then enters with very interesting complex thythmic patterns on the two pairs of *bumbumbu* and *nchirima* drums placed on top of each other. The master drummer uses both hands to produce the required rhythms on his drums.

When the rhythmic foundation is well established by the percussion, the *chivoti* takes its turn with the rendition of florid melodic passages and attractive variations on the three basic themes the whole ensemble music is based on. If the *nzumari* is present during performance, it takes over from the *chivoti* flute after the flautist has played for some time. The impressive alternating music of the *chivoti* and *nzumari* always sounds in combination with the cross-rhythms of the *Sengenya* drums and *patsu* at performances. There is a song or two introduced by the lead dancers with chorus response coming from the rest of the male and female dancers but the entries of the wind instruments (*chivoti* and *nzumari*) come only when the song has finished, with the drumming and the *patsu* accompaniment continuing.

The basic and fascinating breathing technique is one which is employed by an expert *nzumari* player who maintains a continuous stream of sound for a length of time by capturing air in his mouth and forcing it through the instrument with his cheeks and throat muscles while breathing in through the nose. This technique is emplyed by most expert *nzumari* players at the Coast province of Kenya and elsewhere (Boyd: 1977:2). It has also been observed when playing the *nzumari* that "while the stream of sound (from the *nzumari*) is continuing, stresses and phrases are executed most often with throat muscles or by the fingers, rather than by the tongue, which would interrupt the flow of air" (Boyd: ibid.).

Summary and conclusion.

The above review shows that the *Sengenya* instrumental ensemble lays emphasis on the use of drums of different pitches, flutes, oboes, time-keeping instruments and voices. The ensemble performs at merry-makings, such as weddings, parties, Ramadhani festival celebrations, as well as on national days and state occasions where people enjoy the music and dance styles of *Sengenya* as an additional form of entertainment. The instruments of *Sengenya* are manufactured locally by specialists (particularly the drums and leg bells), but the flutes and oboes are more often made by the instrumentalists themselves. Differences in design or in the level of craftmanship are noticeable. In general, however, the emphasis on ornate instruments is not common. The musical instruments of the Digo are simple with some exterior decorations of beads on some *chivoti* flutes, carved geometric designs on the bells of the *nzumari* and the Y- and W-shaped patterns on the drums formed by their laces. The details of construction of these instruments are often as simple as the acoustic requirements would allow.

The basic problem facing traditional music and dance practices in Kenya and elsewhere are the extent to which they should adapt themselves to changing social conditions and values while keeping on to their traditional materials. The continued existence, promotion and development of music and dance types should be the concern of the Ministries of Culture and Social Services, and Education, as well as musicians in general, who should take upon themselves, with Government support, to help preserve, promote and develop these traditional performing art forms.

New musical instruments, for instance, could be developed and some old ones improved upon to acquire new structure, tone production and range. Simple and light-weight instruments, such as flutes, horns, time-keeping instruments (idiophones) and some drums, could be constructed in numbers for use in schools, colleges and in other institutions.

Traditional music and dance practices will survive if the teaching of them becomes an essential part of the school and college curricula. The serious teaching of traditional music and other performing arts in schools and colleges will contribute a great deal to the rehabilitation of the arts in contemporary society and through this to the integration of traditional and contemporary society. Emphasis, therefore, needs to be placed on traditional arts in formal education and there should, also, be opportunities in the country for intensive music training which should include systematic training in traditional instrumental playing as well as in singing and dancing.

Musical and dance skills were in the past, and still are, acquired in traditional societies largely through the process of enculturation. Since we cannot rely so much, these days, on exposure of the individual to musical situations (at festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and other activities), it is necessary that opportunities for learning through participation, as well as opportunities for intensive systematic training mentioned above, should be provided in educational institutions. Wherever formal education becomes well established, particularly in the rural areas, and the number of children attending school increases, the pratice of passing on traditional musical and dance knowledge from parents to children in the home or through social experience becomes less and less the rule.

Today, fewer children learn through the old system to sing, dance or play traditional musical instruments. School children and students learn to play instruments, sing and dance mainly for the annual Kenya Music Festival. Once the festival is over, the opportunities for 'systematic training' in singing, dancing and playing of musical instruments cease to exist in the schools.

Percussive accompaniment to songs and dances is emphasised in many parts of the country. Even people whose music is essentially vocal depend, at times, on the percussive beam or stick clappers, hand clapping and the use of leg or ankle bells to emphasize the regulative beats of their songs and, also, to inspire and articulate their dance movements. If we need to encourage our school children and students to take on to the music and dance practices in the country, we must introduce them first to the traditional songs and dances and provide them with accompanying instruments which can easily be available and handled before introducing them to complex musical instruments and their respective dances and songs.

The Ministries of Education and Culture and Social Services should encourage musicians, and they should help to promote and develop music and dance in Kenya. These Ministries should, for instance, commission makers of traditional musical instruments to construct, in large quantities, flutes, time-keeping instruments (like *kayamba* raft rattles), light stringed instruments, xylophones, and small drums to be acquired by schools for their regular music and dance classes. The melodic instruments, for instance, will have new developments, such as better tone production and range, as well as stronger construction materials to prevent easy breakage and many more.

These new developments in musical instruments, including non-melodic ones, will prompt the formation of more instrumental and dance ensembles in schools and colleges in addition to the already existing groups and choirs. The composition of these ensembles will be modelled fairly closely on the lines of traditional music and dance groups. Drums, bells, flutes, lyres or lutes will accompany the tunes or songs that will

be suitable for the performances of these groups. They may perform simultaneously or in alternation with a chorus.

The coming into being of these music ensembles will encourage more writing of new music for the ensembles in addition to the traditional tunes that are to be played in the original folk song style. But the standard of the music to be composed and the quality of their performances by these new musical groups will depend on the availability of highly qualified composers, performers and other musicians who are scarce in Kenya and are, therefore, badly needed in the country to help in implementing the national arts development programmes. The highly qualified performers, for example, will translate the ideas of composers into a living experience and the other trained musicians and artists will help to promote and develop performing and creative arts in the country by, among other things, presenting theatre or concept programmes and exhibitions to foster the new national spirit which is to supersede the old 'tribal' outlook.

These new music and dance groups will, if they surface, reflect in many ways the spirit and outlook of contemporary Kenya – traditional in conception and modern in outlook. They will draw on the cultural heritage of the country, as well as on the new resources adopted as worthwhile additions or enrichment of the cultural and social life of contemporary Kenya.

Notes

1. W.T. Morgan, 1972.
2. J. de V. Allen, 1983. Alan Boyd, 1977.
3. Graham Hyslop, 1975, p 54.
4. Paul van Thiel, 1977, p 50.
5. J.H. Nketia, 1963, p 29.

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