

SAMBA NG'OMA EIGHT – THE DRUM CHIME OF MÁRIO SABUNETI

by

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The group *Samba Ng'oma*, whose leader is Mário Sabuneti, about 20 years old, comes from Nnesa village, T.A. Mabuka, Mulanje District, Malawi. He and his two co-performers, Julias Sabuneti, 18, and Samuel Magwela, 17, have created a new type of music which they call *samba ng'oma* featuring a set of eight tuned drums to be performed by one person (Mário Sabuneti). Although the group originated in Mulanje District, at the time of my research they were living in the area of the city of Blantyre in southern Malawi, where they had rented a house; the exact place they preferred to stay was in a small township east of Limbe, called Bangwe.

Field work

I discovered this group by mere chance. In field-work it often happens that as a researcher you travel a long way searching for something you have in mind. In the middle of your research you discover that you cannot get it under any circumstances, but instead you suddenly meet something else that was not at all in your mind... Then you should just work on that and not miss this new chance!

This is exactly what happened to me. On the 12th of January, 1988 I thought of preparing a trip to town where I would see a certain guitar-playing group called Chinvu River Jazz Band, whose leader is a well-known Alani Namoko (cf. Mmeya 1983; Kubik et al. 1987:29). Asking many people in Blantyre for his whereabouts I was told that nowadays he was not seen very often, but at Bangwe township people might be able to tell me more. In Bangwe I inquired at the *talaveni* (from English 'tavern'), the beer-garden where he used to play. But there, too, people did not know where he had gone with his band, saying he had not been heard of for a long time. Next I went to the tailors and shoemakers in the township to ask whether they had seen him. The shoemaker told me: "If you want that band, ask his relatives who stay at Namatapa area". I did not know where that was, so he was kind enough to take me there. It was not very far. The relatives told us that Alani Namoko had gone to their home village, and that they did not know when he would come back. Now I asked where that was and they gave me his address. I was still determined to arrive there, even if it was far. I found a man with a car and negotiated a price for taking me to Namoko's home village called Mangazi near Nansadi in Thyolo District.

Just before arriving at Nansadi near Thyolo, we found boys with fishing-lines at Luchenza river and stopped to ask them for the way to Mangazi village. They told us to continue on the road we were driving. I asked whether they knew the Chinvu River Jazz Band and they said "Yes indeed, we know them, but you will not find them there, because they have just passed here (!) going to the other side of the river where they said they will play at a millet beer party (*mowa wa masese*)".

So then we left the car and began walking and asking people as we were walking on. Everybody said: "Yes, they have just passed here, but we don't know where they went!"

So much for the twists and turns of field-work! Now we were very tired and I began to think of having failed. Feeling defeated we went back to Bangwe township near Limbe, where we had come from. Suddenly, when we arrived at the market of Bangwe, we found many people assembled at a certain spot. I told the driver to stop, believing that perhaps Namoko was playing here after all. Instead, we heard the sound of a strange style of drumming (*ng'oma zamaimbidwe achilendo*). I approached the group; listening carefully, I became enthusiastic about this music to the point that I offered to pay for one song. This is called *kubecha nyimbo* in Chichewa. For musical groups which play in a public place such as a market, or at a bus station, much of the money which they earn comes from *kubecha*. People in the gathering audience pay for songs of their choice.

When the group had finished the song I had paid for, I approached the band-leader, asking him about his band, where they came from and what kind of music they were playing. Mário Sabuneti said:

"Gulu lathuli ndilochokela ku Mulanje, ndipo nyimbo zomwe ife tikuyimba ndizochokela mu sekhere chamba ch makolo athu, amakonda kuimba pa mowa, ndinso pamasewera ena aliwonse. Koma iwo saimba ngati momwe ife tikuyimbilamu ai, ife timaimba mwina ndipo tinachula dzina lina la chamba chimenechi timati Samba Ng'oma Eight, chifukwa ndimayimba ndekha ng'omazo. Choyamba ine ndinaphunzila ng'oma za sekhere kuchokera kwa bambo wanga ndipo nditadziwa ndinayamba kumaimba nthawi zonse pamodzi ndi bambowo, koma kenaka ndinaganiza kupanga ng'oma zanga zokwanila eight ndipo ndikumayesa kuyimba mofanana ndi sekheleyo koma kenaka ndinaona kuti zikukhala bwino ndipo ndinayamba kuphunzitsa anzangawa kufikila lero lino." (*From my original Chichewa field notes*).

"This our band comes from Mulanje, and the songs which we are playing are derived from *sekhere*, a type of music and dance of our grandparents which they like to perform at beer parties and also at any other kind of social event. However, they don't play in the style we are playing; we play in another way and also gave this music another name. We call it Samba Ng'oma Eight, because I play all these drums alone. First I learned to play the drums of *sekhere* from my father and when I knew well I began to perform all the time together with my father. Eventually I thought of making eight drums of my own, and I was trying to play in a way similar to *sekhere*. When I was satisfied with the instruments I began to teach my friends and this has been so until today."

Fearing the noise at the market, I asked him whether it was possible to take them to my place in order to record them nicely. He did not refuse. We all then travelled with the same hired car, whose owner luckily did not charge me again, to Chileka, with the drums loaded in the back. When we arrived at my house in Chileka I helped them unload their instruments, put them in the house, invited them to come in, sit down and first wait for food to be prepared. After the lunch I began with the recordings. We all went outside and the three boys started by drying up the skins of their drums, using fire.

This is called *kuwamba ng'oma*. In the meantime I got my recording equipment ready. Since it was the first time that such a group had been brought to my place, I was very interested in seeing how the people here would react to it. When Mário began to sound a few passages on his drums, some people wondered very much what this was and what was going to happen. From the moment the group really performed, many people from around flocked to the place to see and to listen. It was interesting that some were dancing immediately, although they had never heard this music before. What I observed was that the people here at my place danced with movements as in the *manganje* dance of Yao communities which marks the opening of the *jando* circumcision ceremonies. This is how they re-interpreted Mário Sabuneti's music in terms of movement patterns. After some time they even formed a circle, dancing anti-clockwise, as in *manganje*. It must be noted that the two rattle players in Sabuneti's group performed their instruments dancing at the same time in one place; it is evident that the people in our village were first looking at the dance movements of the rattle players, imitating them.

Description of the instruments and their way of performance

Mário Sabuneti's percussion set consisted of (1) seven single-skin drums whose shape varied from roughly cylindrical to slightly conical. All of them were closed at the bottom. The skin was from a cow's hide and attached to the drum's body with wooden nails (nail tension, cf. Wieschhoff 1933). Some of them had a shaped piece sticking out of the body for the attachment of a carrying-strap. Some of them also had numbers written on the side. These drums were tuned in the manner of a scale like a xylophone. (2) An additional double-skin bass drum of a type used, for example, in *mganda* (cf. Jones 1945). The two skins, also from a cow, were laced with leather straps to the drum's cylindrical body. On the skin of this drum which was pointing away from the player there was a tiny sound-hole. The band's name and origin was written with white paint on this skin, as follows: SAMBA NG'OMA BAND NNESA VGE. P.O. MULANJE. Five of the drums were bound together – the large bass drum below and the four smaller drums on top – with rubber straps to a wooden stand (see Fig 1). Three more drums of the smaller type were placed in a line to the right hand of the performer. From his position as performer, the five drums on the stand were set up facing him. In front of the bass drum there was a 'foot-machine', home-made but obviously copied from jazz-drum equipment as used in urban dance bands all over southern Africa. A spare, additional drum was used by the player as a seat. In addition to his drums Mário also had an iron bell attached to one of the right vertical sticks of the stand. The bell was broad and extremely flat, unlike any of the 'traditional' iron bells known in Africa. He used it only to mark the beginning of a song.

Mário operated all the eight tuned drums alone. He used short, straight beaters (*tindodo tating'ono*), each about 30cm long, to strike the seven high-tuned drums. During performance he also constantly operated the 'foot-machine' producing a continuous beat on the big bass drum: *di di di di di di di*. The seven tuned drums – four in front of him with their skin facing him and three at his right-hand side – he struck in strange movement patterns, unknown in my research area, using his two sticks. The drum skin was always hit with the tip of the stick in the middle; this can also be seen from the light spots in the centre of each drum in the photographs, where the drum-skin's hair has gone off. My analytical photograph taken the next day after my recor-

dings show the performance technique of Mario Sabuneti and his companions very clearly.

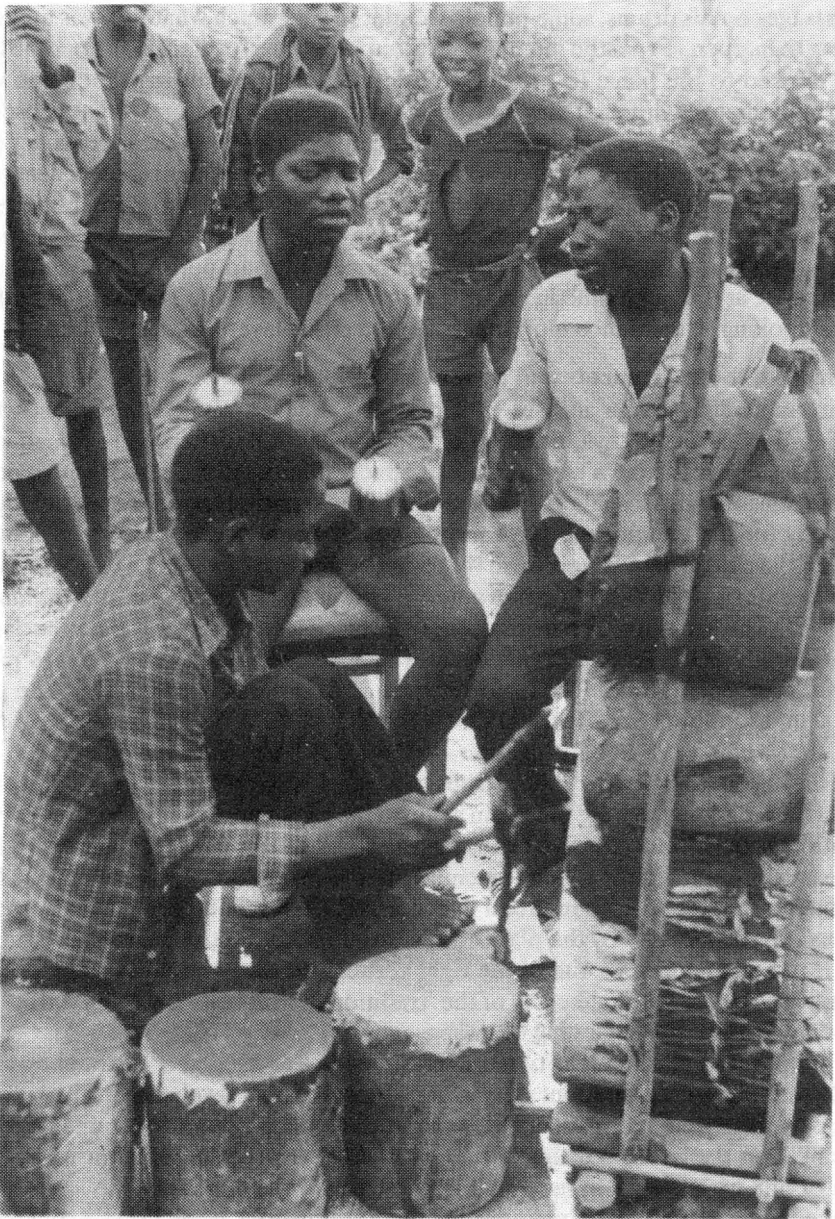


Fig 1: This is the way Mario Sabuneti sits when playing his drum-chime. The three high-pitched drums are set up on his right side. The photograph also shows how the two rattle players used to sing their songs: Julias Sabuneti, who is Mario's brother (left) and Samuel Magwela, January 13, 1988. Chileka.

While playing his eight drums Mário was also the lead-singer in many songs I have recorded, with his companions singing the chorus part. In some songs, Julius Sabuneti was the lead-singer. Julius (Fig 2, left) and Samuel Magwela (right) each played two tin-rattles (*maseche*) of the type with a handle. Together they created the structure of a time-line pattern.



Fig 2: Close-up showing the way the rattles are played. Chileka, January 12, 1988.

Both of them also operated police-whistles (*wenzulo*) from time to time which they wore on a string round the neck (cf. Fig 3, below, taken the next day) The syllables to characterize the whistle sounds are *pyo pyo*.



Fig 3: From time to time the two rattle-players, while they are singing, also use a police whistle. This picture shows one of them whistling. Chileka, January 13, 1988.

It is not easy to find an appropriate descriptive term in English for Mário Sabuneti's instruments. The facts are (a) one performer, Mário himself, operates eight drums; (b) the seven single-skin drums are tuned like a scale to produce a melody; (c) the double-skin bass drum operated by him with a 'foot-machine' was inspired by the common jazz drum equipment as used by urban dance bands. I discussed these facts with several people, including a musicologist, and I came to the conclusion that the seven tuned drums might best be called a drum-chime. In English the word 'chime(s)' refers to 'a set of bells rung to produce a tune' (cf. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1987:168). By analogy, we may define drum-chime as a set of tuned drums struck to produce a tune (melody). Klaus Wachsmann used this term repeatedly to describe certain tuned drum-sets in East Africa with one performer playing more than one drum (Wachsmann 1965). Multi-drum instruments, although different from Mário Sabuneti's set have been reported from Nsanje District in Malawi, for example the *ntanda* drum-chime (cf. photograph in Kubik 1968: 32).

Personal history and musical concepts as revealed by the interview

What follows now is the text of a recorded interview in Chichewa which I conducted with Mário on the 13th of January 1988. I have conducted many interviews of this kind with musicians and specialists of oral history in Malawi since 1983 without the help of interpreters. To preserve the diction and the original concepts as expressed by the interviewed person, it is important to publish such texts in the original language (with a translation) and not only in an English translation whose fidelity could never be verified.

Tape 87/61, side 1/4

(M = Moya; S = Sabuneti)

M: Choyamba ine ndikufuna kuti tidziwane inuyo ndi ine kuti inuyo dzina lanu ndinu yani?

S: Ndine Mr Mário

M: Labambo nanga ndi ndani?

S: Ndi a Sabuneti.

M: Tsopano inu monga chamba chimene mukuimbachi ndi chamba chantundu wanji?

S: Chambachi ndi chamba cha samba ng'oma.

M: Samba ng'oma kutanthauzila kumeneku nkuti chiyani?

S: Samba ng'oma kutanthauzila kuti, nanga kalepo makolo athu amaimba sekhere ndiye amatenga ng'oma zawo ziwiri choncho kumaimba, ndi ntondo.

M: First I would like that we get to know each other, you and me, so then, what is your name?

S: I am Mr Mário.

M: And what is the name of your father?

S: He is Mr Sabuneti.

M: Now the music-and-dance *chamba*¹ which you are performing, of what kind is it?

S: This type of music-and-dance we call it *samba ng'oma*.

M: How would you explain what you are calling *samba ng'oma*?

S: I would explain *samba ng'oma* this way: A long time ago our grandparents were playing *sekhere*² using two drums and a mortar for their performance, was it not so?

Ndiye paja ife timakhala nawobe, ndiye tikuimbaimbabe nanga samabvina okha okha achikulire. Ndiye ife tinalowa gululo ndiye tinaona kuti aaa, nanga azingovina okha. Nafenso achinyamata tikhonzepo zathu za chinyamata ndiye basi tinakatsila dalamu lija, bacha monga mukuonelamu.

M: Tsopano dzina loti samba ng'omali ndiye kutino munapeleka ndinuu kapena kuyambira kalekale lomwelo?

S: Zina loti samba ng'omali choti pofuna kwauza anzathu kuti tikavine nanga si amacha sekhere kalepo. Ndiye poletsa dzina la sekherelo kumauza anzathu kuti tikavine kasambeni lero tikavine ng'oma, kasambeni lero tikavine ng'oma ndiye tinangocha zina loti samba ng'oma.

M: Tsopano inu kaimbidwe kamenekaka anakuphunzitsani ndi ndani?

S: Oho Kaimbidweka tinatengera makolo athu, ndimmene anali kuimbira makolo athu zikuoneka ngati chimodzi modzi ndi mmene tikuimbiramu.

M: Tsopano monga mwanena kuti makolo anu anali kuimba ng'oma ziwiri pamodzi ndi ntondo, tsopano inu kuti mudzipezeka kuti mukuimba ng'oma 8 nokha pamenepa zinakhala bwanji? Mutandifotokozela bwino bwino.

S: Oho ai ndithu izi poyenjezela ng'oma nanga sitimaona kuti poyimba ng'oma ziwiri zija amakhala ngati amavina achi-kulile okha, ndiye ife poti anyamata izikhala ngati dasi anyamata azizikonda, tinafika kuyenjezera ng'oma zija chachiw-rinso mmene tikuimbilamu tikuona kuti anyamata ena ndi ena akuvinapo akusangalala.

At that place (where they were dancing *sekhere*), we children were just sitting without a chance to take part. Now we are playing continuously, but at that time the adults were dancing themselves alone, was it not so? Later we entered their dance group, because we felt: Ah! Should they just dance themselves? We youngsters we should also organize ourteen-age things! So we stretched tight the skins on the drum called *bacha*³ which you have seen.

M: Now, this name *samba ng'oma* was it you who coined it or was it started a long time ago?

S: This name of *samba ng'oma* came up when we wanted to tell our friends that we should dance. Was it not so that long ago people were calling it *sekhere*? After we had abandoned that name *sekhere*, whenever we wanted to tell our friends to dance we said: "Go and bathe today, we should dance *ng'oma*! Go and bathe (*kasambeni* today." Then we abbreviated this phrase and just said *samba ng'oma* (= Bathe! drum).⁴

M: What about your style of music, who was teaching you?

S: Oho! We adopted this style from our grandparents; how they were playing seems identical with how we are playing now.

M: As you have said that your grandparents were using two drums together with a mortar, how did it come about that you should play eight drums by yourself alone? Explain this ell to me.

S: Oho! No matter! Indeed, by increasing the number of drums — was it not so that playing those two drums we felt that this was as if the adults were dancing alone? We, since we are boys, we want it to be like a dance to modern records (*dasi*)⁵ which youngsters should appreciate. So we arrived at increasing the number of those drums, and in addition, how we are playing them we notice that such and such boys who dance to it, are greatly rejoicing.

M: Koma nanga mungandiuze kuti chama chimene mukuimba inuchi musanachule kuti samba ng'oma kale kale inali sekhere?

S: Kale kale inali sekhere inde.

M: Kodi sekhere imeneyi amaimba pochita chiyani?

S: Sekhere amaimba oti pali phwando kapena pa nsembe moti mwina panaoneka zina zake ndiye pamafika muyeso oti anthuwo akasangalale. Ndiye makolowo amalowa mnyumba kumaimba ndiye gulu lawo limavina kumazungulila ng'oma zija.

M: Kuimba kumeneku kunali koti kapena patachitika nsembe nthawi ina, ndimmene amakhala ngati kuti akuthira nsembe eti?

S: Eya akuthila nsembe kukumbukira makolo amene anatisiya kale kale.

M: Tsopano inuyono amene anakutha ndizani kupanga luso loti mudziyimba ng'oma 8 ndi ndani?

S: Ooo ndikuona ngati luso limeneli tangotengela paife tokha, kachiwirinso makolo athu akudabwa kuti kodi zimenezi mwazitha bwanji. Ndiye titi aaa ifenso tangengela sitayilo mmene mukuimbilamo, tangochita kusintha kuenjezela ng'oma zokhazi kupangilapo chopondachi, tsopano ndimmene mumaimbila inu ndi chimodzi modzi monga mmene mukuonelamu.

M: Tsopano nthawi imene ya sekhereyo ndiye kuti ng'oma ziwiri zimene munazichula zija amaimba munthu mmodzi kape-na awiri?

S: Amaimba anthu awiri ng'oma ziwiri zijazo, ndiye pamapezekanso wina mamuna ndithu wamphanvu zake kumamenya tsopano ntondo uja. Ndiye limalira ngati bacha lija akamamenya kukamwa kwa ntondo uja.

M: But would you claim that this dance which you are playing now before you named it *samba ng'oma* was called *sekhere*?

S: Long ago it was indeed *sekhere*.

M: On which occasions is *sekhere* performed?

S: The people perform *sekhere* when there is free food and free drinks perhaps on the occasion of *nsembe*-gatherings⁶; it can be that perhaps something had happened long ago and has reached the point that people should gather and rejoice. Then our grandparents used to enter a house and sing; then their group used to dance moving around those drums.

M: Was it that the performance took place at a fixed date for the *nsembe*-gathering and the people made a sacrifice?

S: Yes, they make a sacrifice for remembering their grandparents who left us behind a long time ago.

M: Now regarding yourself, who helped you find the inspiration (*luso*) to play eight drums yourself?

S: Oh! I see that this inspiration we just got it ourselves alone. Our grandparents are also wondering "How did you manage to accomplish these things?" And we say "Aaa! we have taken the style how you perform and just introduced some changes by increasing only the drums and by making that 'foot-machine' (*chopondachi*), but the way you are performing is the same as ours."

M: During the era of *sekhere* were the two drums which you have mentioned played by one or perhaps two persons?

S: Two people play those two drums, and it also happens that another man who is strong enough strikes that mortar. When he strikes (with sticks) at the edge of the orifice of the mortar (*kukamwa kwa ntondo uja*) it sounds like the *bacha* drum.

M: Kodi tsopano inuyo makolo anuwo anachokela kuti?

S: Makolo athuwo ndi achilomwe.

M: Nanga inu pazoimba zanuzi tingati mwaphunzitsa anthu angati?

S: Aa anthu ambiri mbiri amene atibela, koma ndimmene akuimbilamo mmene akuimbila anthuwo aaa munthu sanga-
vinenso iyayi. Inenso ndimakhala chete kufika kwapeza akuimba palibe amene amavinanso ai. Amangoimba ngati ku-
seweretsa, koma ine ndi aphwangawa ndi-
mayesetsa kuwaphunzitsa koti mwina ine nditadwala akhoza kutsogolela gulu ku-
maimba.

M: Kodi chenicheni chimene mukuwa-
phunzitsa Sabuneti ndi Samuel ndi-
chiyani?

S: Ndikuwaphunzitsa kaimbidwe ka
ng'oma ndi zonse zimene, maka kuti kodi
kuti munthu avine tiyimbe bwanji. Kuti
munthu azikonde timbe bwanji, ndiye
ndikwauza kuti tiyambe motele motele,
maka kusintha kwake poimba kuti ti-
kaimba apa tipite apo ndipo kumenya
ng'oma zija molingana, ndizimene ndiku-
waphunzitsa aphwangawa.

M: Nyimbo zonse zimene mukuimbazi
amapeka ndi ndani?

S: Ndimapeka ndi ine, ndine pano Mário.

M: Kodi luso lakuti mudzipeka nyimbo za
nthundu umenewu inu munalipeza bwan-
ji?

S: Luso lopeka nyimbo zimachitika
motere, timakhala tikuyenda mosiyana
siyana, koti mmene mukutionelamu si-
makhazikika pakhome ai, ndiye timapeza
zina zake zodomeka ndiye pazijazo ti-
mayala kukhala nyimbo.

M: Regarding yourself again, where did
your grandparents come from?

S: Our grandparents are of Lomwe origin.

M: How many people have you instructed
to perform on your instruments?

S: Aa! There are many who steal from us,
but how these people play, aaa, nobody
can dance to that. I also remain a quiet
observer when I happen to find them
playing, there is nobody who dances.
They just play as if they were toying. But
I have tried to teach my young brothers,
because otherwise should I become ill they
are able to lead the group and perform.

M: What exactly have you been teaching
Sabuneti and Samuel?

S: I am teaching them the performance
technique of the drums and everything
else necessary for playing properly so that
people would dance, and how to perform
so that a person could like it. So I tell them
let us start in this way and in that way,
especially the variations (*kusintha kwake*)
when playing, how to proceed from one
drum to another and to strike those drums
in agreement (*molingana*), that is what I
am teaching my younger brothers.

M: All the songs which you are playing, by
whom were they composed?

S: It is me who composes them, myself
here at this place, Mário.

M: The inspiration (*luso*) that you should
compose songs of this kind how did you
find it?

S: The inspiration for composing songs
comes about in the following way: We are
usually travelling to many different places
and, as you have already noticed, we are
not nailed to the veranda; so it happens
that we come across amazing things, then
we spread out (*timayala*) such subject
matter to become a song.

M: Pakaimbidwe kanuka ndiye kuti palibe nyimbo zimene munatengela kuchokela ku sekhereko zimeneno amaimba makolowo kale kale, inunso ndikuzitembenuza kukhala nyimbo zanu zanu?

S: Ai nyimbo za sekhere zilipo koma ndi zoelengeka mwomwe tikuonelamu chimene taimbira nyimbo izi sitinayimbe-po ata imodzi.

M: Tsopano ine ndikhala wokondwa kuti pomaliza pomaliza kulankhulaku kuti mundiyimbire nyimbo ngati zimene amaimba kale kale sekhereyo mwazina ngati mungazikumbukilabe.

S: Chabwino.

M: Ndinyimbo zina zomwe mukudziwa kuti izi mudayamba yamba pophonzilapo za kuyambirila kweni kweni.

S: Ai tiyimba ndithu bwana.

M: Zikomo kwambiri.

S: Zikomo.

Notes

1. *Chàmbà* in Chichewa means any kind of dance, dance festival or gathering of many people for the purpose of dancing.
2. *Sekhere* is a music/dance genre common among the Alomwe of Mulanje District and neighbouring areas. It is a dance of entertainment at a beer party. People dance in pairs, a man and a woman.
3. *Bacha* is the common designation in Malawi for a double-skin bass drum, as used in dances like *mganda*, *malipenga*, *chiwoda* etc.
4. The word *samba* is the imperative mood of *kusamba* (v.), to wash one's body (or body parts).
5. *Dasi* from English 'dance' – referring to 'modern' dancing as performed in front of a 'gumba-gumba' radiogram.
6. *Nsembe* has been translated as 'sacrifice' – *kutsira nsembe* (to offer sacrifice to the spirits of rain; cf. The Student's English-Chichewa Dictionary 1986:129)

I have the following information about *nsembe* from my own personal experience in the village I grew up. Somebody may dream that a grandparent or parent who dies is no longer happy and requires *nsembe*. With regard to the *sekhere* dance of the Alomwe, for example, it could be that a long time ago, someone was very well known as a dancer of *sekhere*, then he died. The relatives in the village suddenly dream that 'our uncle

M: Are there no songs in your repertoire which you might have adopted from *sekhere* such as your grandparents were singing long ago and modified them to be your own songs?

S: No, there are some *sekhere* songs but not many. As you have noticed, from the moment we have played here on this spot, we have not played for you even a single *sekhere* song.

M: I would be pleased if when ending our conversation you played for me one song of the kind sung long ago in *sekhere*, just some if you can remember them.

S: Alright.

M: In addition perhaps some others of which you know that you initiated them at the beginnings of your band, when you were still learning.

S: Don't worry, we are surely going to play, Sir.

M: Thank you very much.

S: Thank you.

wants beer to be brewed and sacrificed'. Such beer is called *mowa wa nsembe*. The *nsembe* gathering always begins with a dream. But it may take place some time after the dream was reported, a month later. But a date for *kuthira nsembe* will be fixed by the relatives.

Kuthira nsembe implies that the relatives concerned and other people gathering sacrifice beer (millet beer) and perhaps flour (*ufa*) under a certain tree in the village, chosen for that purpose. This tree is then where *nsembe* always takes place. After this ceremony they begin to dance. The expression *kuthira nsembe* also refers to the ceremony in the old days when people used to go to the mountain to pray for rain. *Nsembe* is not the same as *sadaka*; the two terms are sometimes confused.

In the interview, Mário Sabuneti explains how he came to call his drums *samba ng'oma*. He says that the name was started when they had stopped using the term *sekhere* for their music to show that they were trying something different from the grand-parents. An expression by which the young boys used to tell each other to go and bathe at the river before playing (*kasambeni lelo tikabvine ng'oma!*) became more and more abbreviated until it was reduced to *samba ng'oma*. Eventually, this phrase became the label of the drums.

In addition, however, I think that the term *samba* (from the verb *kusamba* (to wash one's body) also alludes to the way Mário moves his hands over the drums when performing, in a sort of 'wiping' or 'washing' movement, as if he were washing his body at the water (*kusamba m'madzi*). At rivers there is often a pool of standing water protected by a dam. This is precisely where boys like to bathe, and I believe that it is in the *dziwe* (pool, dam) where one uses this type of movement.

These two explanations, Mário's and mine, do not conflict but rather supplement each other.

After this interview I asked Mário to identify his drums by their individual names, striking each drum and indicating its name (see Fig 4). This was recorded and is transcribed below.

Tape 87/61, side 1/5

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Ng'oma iyi timacha ng'oma yaing'ono. | 1. This drum we call it 'small drum' |
| 2. Pali ina iyi timacha zengereya. | 2. There is this other one, we call it <i>zengereya</i> . |
| 3. Pali ina iyi timacha ndeke, chifukwa ili ndi mau akulu. | 3. There is this other one, we call it 'aeroplane', because it gives a loud sound. |
| 4. Pali nzake wa zengereyayu, timachanso zengereya. | 4. There is a companion of that <i>zengereya</i> , we also call it <i>zengereya</i> . |
| 5. Ndiye pali iyi timacha namazoma chifukwa choti ng'omayo tinagula kwa Namazomako. | 5. And there is this one we call it <i>namazoma</i> , because that drum we bought at Chief Namazoma's place. |
| 6. Ndiye pali ng'oma iyi, chigalu. | 6. And there is this drum, <i>chigalu</i> . |
| 7. Nzachenso ndi iyi, chigalu. | 7. Its companion again is this one, with the same name, <i>chigalu</i> . |
| 8. Pali yaikulu iyi, timacha bacha. | 8. There is this big one, we call it <i>bacha</i> . |

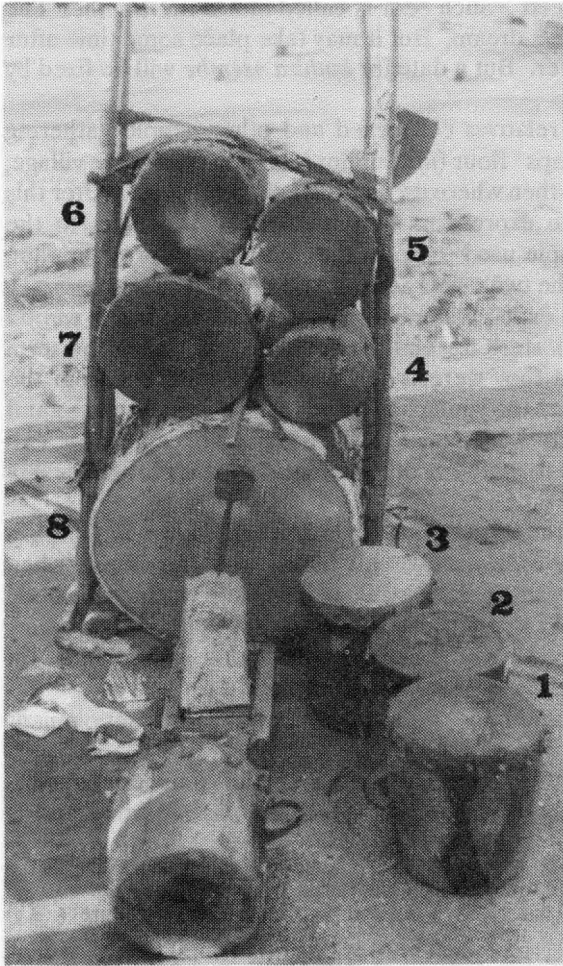


Fig 4: Front view of Mario Sabuneti's drum-set properly arranged for playing. Chileka, 13 January 1988. 1 ng'oma yaing'ono; 2 zengereya; 3 ndeke; 4 zengereya; 5 namazoma; 6 chigalu; 7 chigalu; 8 bacha.

The order of the numbers above reflects the order of layout of the drums as conceptualized by Mário himself. He counts his drums beginning with the one tuned highest, i.e. *ng'oma yaing'ono* and ends with the deep-tuned *bacha*. I observed that drums 2 (the *zengereya* to his right hand) and 6 (*chigalu*) were often played jointly in repetition while in between he produced fast passages on the other drums.

With the exception of the name *bacha*, none of his individual drum names are known in other dances. It seems that he named them after different villages where he had bought them. He confirmed this for the name *namazoma*, but *zengereya* and *chigalu* are very likely also place names. Two drums are called *chigalu* (6 & 7) because simply he bought them in the same village. There are also two *zengereya*, probably because both are from the same place.

Ndeke (aeroplane) for drum No.3 characterizes the loudness of this drum, which can be heard from far away, comparing it to the sound of a jet engine at an airport. *Mau akulu* in this case refers to the loudness of the sound, not the pitch.

The songs of Mário Sabuneti

In the area of Chileka to where I invited Mário Sabuneti's group the style of music performed by them was perceived as very unusual; probably this was so everywhere in the Blantyre area. Many people were amazed by this music and particularly that one person would play so many drums himself alone. In addition some of their songs were sung in the Elomwe language, although the texts were extensively mixed with Chichewa.

Below I have transcribed and translated three of the songs that were sung in Chichewa. The texts are not very long such as for example those of the *bangwe* player

Chitenje Tambala, whom I recorded in 1989 (cf Malamusi 1990). In my research area I have generally observed that songs which are sung in a group usually have relatively short texts. Individuals (solo) singers on the other hand — because they are unrestricted by the requirements of coordinating their texts with partners — often develop their text-lines into long poems or narratives (cf. some of the *bangwe* zither performers such as Limited Mfundo, Mulimanthewe etc. on our double album MC 15, Musician-composers, Southern Malawi, Berlin 1989).

Song No. 1: "Awa aMário adzafera moyenda" (This is Mário he might die away from home)

Tape 87/59/2

Awa aMario iyayi ee iyayi eee (3x)
Ndikhale khale ndidazfera moyenda eee
Mwane aMario ehe ehe eee (3x)
Pang'omaye amayimba monyadira yeee

This is Mário! no! ee, no! ee (3x)
Should I stay on I might die away from home eee
Brother Mário ehe ehe eee (3x)
At those drums he play with ease, yeee

Amaikolo yeee
Amaikolo mudzafera moyenda yee
Inu aMaikolo uyo yeee, dzana lija mumanena zonama pa dziko lapansi

Maikolo yeee!
Maikolo you might die away from home, yee
You Maikolo, that one! yeee, that day before yesterday you were just telling lies on earth!

E e inu aMaikoloye iyaye iyayeee
Maikolowe iyaye iyaye (3x)
Dzana lija mumanena zonama pa dziko lapansi.

Ee you Maikolo ye iyeye iyeyeee!
Maikolo you! iyeye iyeye (3x)
That day before yesterday you were just telling lies on earth!

Explanation

Moyenda refers to a state of staying in a place away from home; *mo-* is an adverbial prefix; the verb *-yenda* simply means: to walk. By implication, *moyenda* refers to a state resulting from 'moving' instead of being settled at home. I have translated it with the phrase 'away from home' rejecting other translations such as 'abroad', or 'in a foreign country' or 'moving around' which have slightly different meanings. There is also a subtle difference between *adzafela* — as in the song — and *adzafa*; the first phrase implies the possibility of death, the second that it will surely occur.

In the first line of the song, the composer is singing like someone else in his village who saw him (Mário) moving here and there without a permanent place to stay. He assumes the role of the observer, warning him. In the second line he replies with his own 'voice' developing the thought that he might really die away from home.

The first line also expresses disagreement. Some people in the village see Mário coming. One of them says: "This is Mário!" Another one replies: "No! It is not him!" The sung syllables "ee" have one function: they 'bind the song' (*kulumikidza nyimbo*).

The term *monyadila* (4th line) describes the ease with which an experienced performer like Mario plays his drum-chime, in contrast to a learner who would play *mojejema* (= unsure of himself). This is the opposite category.

In the next lines the composer identifies the person who warned him as *Maikolo*, name of a boy. The singer turns the tables, in Chichewa I would just say *kubwezela* (= to give back) – addressing Maikolo and telling him that he will die himself and that what he had said "the day before yesterday", was nothing but "lies on earth".

Mwane is a word in Elomwe equivalent to *chimwene* (brother/sister) in Chichewa; but one uses this term to refer to someone of the same age, not in an honorific way (*kulemekeza*) as in the Chichewa address: *achimwene*.

Song No 2: "Musadabwe zabwino ndi zomwezi" (Don't wonder, the good things are the very same ones which are good).

Tape 87/60/2

Musadabwe ee eeye

Musadabwe ee eeye abale musadabwe eee

Zabwino ndi zomweziyeee

Eeee hooo

(kuimbila muluzu)

Musadabwe eee eye

Musadabwe ee eye abadwa ndi maso eeye

Don't wonder, ee eeye!

Don't wonder, ee eeye, brother and sisters, don't wonder, eee!

The good things are the very same ones which are good, yeee!

Eeee hooo!

(Whistling)

Don't wonder eee eye!

Don't wonder ee eye, they were just born with eyes, eeye!

Musadabwe eee

Amai musadabwe eeee

Anyamata musadabwe eeee

Don't wonder eeee!

Mother, don't wonder, eeee!

Boys, don't wonder, eee eee!

Azibambo musadabwe eee wooo
Inu Wanja eeee
Mai wawo alibe eee
Bambo wawo alibe eee eeyiee
Anzanu muwawonawa eee
Bambo wawo alibe eee
Mai wawo alibe eee eeyiee

Gentlemen, don't wonder, eee wooo!
You Wanja, eeee
She has no mother, eeee
She has no father, eee eeyiee
Those people whom you see eee
they have no father, eee
they have no mother, eeyiee

Explanation

The singer/composer says that the things which are happening (where he stays or perhaps where he plays music) every day are the good things. Nothing better will happen than what has happened all the time.

There was a girl named Wanja who had no father and no mother. She was always worried and complained to the people about her fate. Perhaps someone said to her, "All these people you see every day, some also have no mother and father!"

Song No. 3: "Mwana wa masiye kubvuta kulera" (It is difficult to raise an orphan)

Mwana wa masiye kubvuta kulera bambo wake
Akamalira amai ndilibe ndilibe ine eee
Ndichite bwanji eehe
aNgwazi mutitani ife
mwana wa masiye kubvuta kulera bambo wake

For a child without mother to be raised by her father is difficult
When she cries "I have no mother! myself, eee!
What shall I do, eehe!
Ngwazi, how would you help us!"
For a child without mother to be raised by her father is difficult

Maka maka nthawi ya njala
mwana wa masiye kubvuta kulera bambo wake
Akamalira amai ndilibe ndilibe ine
ndichite bwanji ine

Especially in times of hunger
for a child without mother to be raised by her father is difficult
When she cries "I have no mother! myself, eee!
What shall I do, myself!"

Explanation

Mwana wa masiye is usually translated as 'orphan' (see: Salaun 1978:132). When a child has no mother, but only a father, one also says *mwana wa masiye* in Chichewa. This song refers to a small girl whose mother had died and whose father remained. In such a case, the father suffers very much to raise the small child. This is what Mário's song is about.

Nthawi ya njala refers to 'seasonal hunger' (see: Nurse 1975) during the months of November to January, when food may become scarce.

Ngwazi (the hero) is an honorific title of the Life President of the Republic of Malawi, Dr Kamuzu Banda. In the song, the orphan girl is even asking the highest authority for help.

Summary

According to Mário '*samba ng'oma*' is specifically the name of his drums. But the dance, he said, came from *sekhere* which Lomwe people used to dance during beer parties. *Sekhere* is often played with three drums and several rattles, the drums are played by individuals. First, he said he learned to play *sekhere* drums from his father, afterwards he decided to form his own group with friends who were also interested in *sekhere* music. Those were Julius and Samuel, he said. Mário Sabuneti did not want to play music in the style of *sekhere*, but he thought of doing something different from how *sekhere* was played. Then he and his young brothers began to build a big drum which is a common drum of the type called *bacha*. But they could not manage to make the small drums for their set themselves, so they bought them from various villages nearby. After they had found all the individual drums they tried to create something new, using eight drums. Four of the small drums they bound on top of the big drum, which was operated by a 'foot-machine' which they also constructed themselves. The drums forming the set were given names according to the village where they had come from.

In the interview Mário links his *samba ng'oma* music quite insistently to *sekhere* which is a Lomwe tradition. (Cf. recordings Djenda/Kubik 1967 in Ph.A. Berlin; my own recordings since 1983 etc.) However, my impression is that the way he plays his drum-chime is not like *sekhere*, only the style of singing and the patterns played on the rattles conform to *sekhere* tradition.

One question I have been asked is whether Mário Sabuneti – Mário being a Portuguese first name – and his music have a Mozambican background. According to what I know, Mário was not born in Mozambique, but his father. Another question I have been asked was about the origin of the term *samba*. Regarding his Lomwe background and Lomwe roots in Mozambique, our Brazilian friends might ask the question, whether he could have picked up the term 'samba' from the popular Brazilian records played for example on Radio Nampula or Maputo. Or, alternatively, that some other group might have used the Brazilian word 'samba' and Mário might have heard it and adopted it understanding it in terms of the Chichewa language.

I was in Brazil myself in 1980 and I am familiar with Brazilian 'samba'. I do not find any connection between 'samba' and Mário's style and patterns of drumming. Although it is difficult to say a final word on this question without research in Mozambique, Mário himself insists that it was his idea to give the music the name of '*samba ng'oma*'. He

said that because in the afternoons he used to tell other boys "*Kasambeni, tikabvine*" (Go and have a bath, so that we dance!) he eventually named his music like that.

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