

IDEOPHONIC ASPECTS OF SOME NYANJA DRUM NAMES

by

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The Nyanja language is quite rich in ideophones. It has been calculated that they comprise about nine per cent of the total vocabulary.¹ Ideophones still play an important part in everyday speech; they give to Nyanja much of its characteristic flavour and provide a fair indication of the value-judgments of the people who speak it. Few languages can as vividly and incidentally convey the quality of a pain, or the changing surface texture of a trodden path. The consistency of food or wood, the speed and direction of movement, and varieties of light and shade, can be expressed with precision and economy. Considering the extent to which a preliterate culture is aural, it is not surprising that so many ideophones have reference to audible phenomena, and that it is possible by using them to differentiate so minutely between sounds. What is more difficult to explain is the comparative paucity of ideophones which apply specifically to music.

Some early, and even some quite recent, writers on Bantu languages have described the ideophone as an onomatopoeic interjective.² As Fortune has pointed out, however, "the fact . . . that ideophones can be used to indicate complete silence makes the term *onomatopoeic* an unrepresentative term for ideophones as a whole."³ Nevertheless, there are a certain number which do appear to be verbal attempts to reproduce, rather than describe, particular sounds. Many such as Nyanja utilize the ordinary vowel and consonant phonemes of the language but employ a range of tone which is not found in the other parts of speech, even when those parts of speech are closely related to ideophones. For example, the tone of *go go go*, "of knocking", is higher than that of any of the syllables of the equivalent verb *kugogoda*, "to knock", and the first syllable of *psipe*, a reed pipe, does not rise and fall in tone as the much longer related ideophone *psi*, "of squealing", does. Instances such as these suggest that there is a tendency for the ideophone, which is not modifiable without change of meaning, to retain an onomatopoeic element which is in the process of being lost by allied words subject to inflection. This may be an indication that the ideophone anteceded the words related to it, but there is little likelihood that it would apply in every case.

The majority of the Nyanja ideophones which have direct musical connotations refer to drumming, and almost all of them are onomatopoeic. Moreover, they use tonal exaggeration not so much to imitate the pitch of the drums to which they refer to but to describe their pitch in comparison with that of other drums. The result is that few use ordinary conversational tone at all; most are either very much higher or lower than the other words of the sentences in which they figure. An ideophone can be applied in connection with more than one kind of drum, and a single drum may have both its timbre and its rhythm expressed by several ideophones. The *mpiningo* drum, for instance, when it opens a dance makes a high-toned *pi pi pi*, which later changes to *piti piti*; but there are occasions when it must be compared with *kalikalanje*, also high-pitched, also going *piti piti*; and then its only relatively lower sound is described as *gu-gu-gu*. Ideophones never convey the pitch or the rhythm exactly; they tend to be impressionistic, and are in no sense technical; however onomatopoeic they may be, they remain words

¹ Nurse, G. T.: "A Quantitative Lexical Comparison of Ideophones in Nyanja, Yao and Tumbuka". Unpublished.

² Cf. for example Paton, R. A.: *Elements of Southern Sotho*, 1946, revised 1957; Horton, A. E.: *A Grammar of Lwale*, 1949, and even Doke, C. M.: *A Text-Book of Zulu Grammar*, 6th Edn., 1965, and *The Southern Bantu Languages*, 1954, all of whom lay some stress on the occurrence of onomatopoeic ideophones.

³ The noun-classification is that of Meinhof, C.: *Grundzüge einer Vergleichenden Grammatik der Bantusprachen*, 1906.

and exist in a verbal context. There are occasions when their tone appears to conflict with the real pitch in the interests of timbre, as when the deep *sonjo* drum is said to go *ti ti ti*, the unvoiced dental keeping the front vowel immutably higher than the sound of the instrument, but conveying the impression of the release of the beat rather than the beat itself; voicing the consonant gives an equally applicable ideophonic reference to the beat and enables the vowel to sound lower, *di di di*. Changes of this kind are commonly used to represent contrasting aspects of the same sound. The drums which go *piti piti* can also go *mbindi mbindi*, losing in voicing and nasalization of the consonants the urgency and excitement with which the dance began, settling down as the movements become routine or the person talking of them moves away. The *garanzi* which says *depete* close by, is heard softly as *thephethepethethe* in the distance.

The *garanzi* has, in fact, a further peculiarity. Its name is one form of the noise it makes, the ideophonic representation of its most familiar rhythm and timbre; though here once more the second and third syllables have lower tone in the noun than in the ideophone. The fundamental constituent of both words is the monosyllabic ideophone *ga* (usually triplicated as *ga ga ga*), which can stand for any sharp blow, a chopping sound, or the clapping of hands. It is also the ultimate radical of the name of another small drum, *mgaga*, and carries the additional connotation of steadiness or firmness. The last-named attributes appear to be prized in drums and drumming, to judge by some of the other drum names and can be expressed in a number of ways and by means of a number of ideophones. The first two syllables of *didinde*, (the name of a wide-cut drum), represent the ideophone perhaps most frequently used to describe loud or rapid footsteps or any other form of low-toned beating or thumping, including drumming, *di di di*. The third syllable seems to be the ideophone *nde*, of being "firm", "full" or "clear." The large war-drum *sonjo* can perhaps be related to two ideophones, *so*, "of steadiness", and *njo*, "of being perpendicular", "upright." The latter can also figure in an unvoiced form, *mco*, and denasalized as *co*, which is possibly a constituent of *mcoma*, the name of one of the drums held at the chest. The names of two other drums played in the same position also contain elements apparently having a similar meaning. The second syllable of *lingaka*, the drum which is used with notable frequency in the services of some indigenous separatist churches, probably because it is mentioned in the Nyanja translation of the Bible, may be either the nasalization of *ga* or the possibly related ideophone *nga*, which means firm or tight; and in the name of the drum *jinje* the first syllable, *ji*, can signify upright or firmly placed.

In the final syllable of *jinje* there occurs an element which seems to be incompatible with its first part. The ideophone *nje* stands for the opposing qualities, softness, weakness, indeterminacy, even silence. In fact, this syllable is to be found as the termination of the names of several other drums, such as *kalikalanje* and *kampanje*, the latter of which is an apparent derivative of *mpanje*, a rather larger and certainly firm-sounding drum. But a considerable number of other words also end in *-nje* without any indication that it is ideophonic in origin or significance, and so that possibility can be rejected. It is probably no more relevant than the *-ma* ending of *mcoma* or the *-la* of *mpangula*. Yet rejecting all of these may seem to call into question the connection between ideophones and the names of drums suggested in the last paragraph. There are, however, numerous instances in which ideophones, particularly monosyllabic ones, make up only part of a related word, the rest consisting either of grammatical formative elements or, as in the case of the word *psipe* quoted earlier, other elements which are often difficult or impossible to explain. *Sonjo* and *didinde*, if they have been analysed correctly, are exceptional rather than regular.

Where a relationship exists between an ideophone and another word, it most commonly lies in the first part of the root of the word; examples are *fe*, "of sniffing", with the verb *kufenthera*, "to sniff", and *tawa*, "of long lines of things or people", with the

noun *tawala*, "length", "extent." Nyanja drum names occur mainly as nouns of class 1(a), with class 2 plurals, or class 3, with plurals in class 4. A notable exception is *lingaka*, which falls into class 5.⁴ Names beginning in *ka-* might deceptively appear to be class 12 diminutives,⁵ but both *kampanje* and *kalikalanje* take class 1 agreements and have class 2 plurals, and there is an ideophone, variously *ka* or *kha*, "of knocking" or "beating", which is simply an unvoiced (and on occasion aspirated) version of *ga*. This accords very well with Fortune's⁶ observation that there are times when ideophones seem to behave like class 1(a) nouns; such behaviour may explain why all the prefixless drum-names happen to fall into class 1(a) rather than into the more obviously suitable class 5. In *mgulugulu*, *mpangula* and *mpanje* the initial *m-* is the class 3 prefix, and the sounds made are deep-toned *gu* and *pa* and medium *pa* respectively. *Mgulugulu* may also be related to the ideophone *gulugudu*, "of the knocking together of pots", taking into consideration the close connection there is in many Bantu languages, including Nyanja, between *l* and *d*. Curiously enough, the unvoiced form of this ideophone, *kulukutu*, has no connection with sounds, but refers to the stripping of bark or the peeling of skin. The sound of *kampanje* either nasalizes *pa* or incorporates the class 3 prefix, which is in any case no longer operating as a class determinant: it is a very high-pitched *mpa mpa mpa*. The big drum *kbuntha* makes the low sound *du du du*, but its name seems to derive from *khu*, the aspirated and unvoiced form of *gu*; no doubt *gu* and *du* are aspects of the same sound.

With the termination *-ntha* we find a possible complex of non-ideophonic reference, also present in another drum-name, *mfintha*, to a set of verbs which convey the idea of beating or thumping — *kubumuntha*, *kupantha*, *kuguntha* — or to words with the general meaning of series or sequence — *kusantha*, "to arrange neatly", *nthalanga nthalanga*, "of having spaces between", *nthanga*, "the seeds of cucurbits". It is surprising, given such semantic consistency, that there is no ideophone *ntha*; it might not be too fanciful to regard this evidence as very suggestive of its once having existed, and now fallen into disuse. The initial syllable of *mfintha* is also, incidentally, difficult to fit into an ideophonic context, as *mfi* means "of pressing" or "squeezing", and *fi*, "of piercing."

Most of the ideophones mentioned so far have been monosyllabic ones, duplicated or triplicated. The sound made by *mpiningo* has been given as *pi*, but another ideophone appears to refer non-onomatopoeically to the same drum. Derived from the verb *kupininga*, "to begin the dance", is the ideophone *piningu*, "of twisting and turning"; it seems to be as readily applicable to changes of rhythm as it is to the movements of the dancers. The causative of the verb *kutamba*, "to spread" or "to dance ceremonially", is *kutambitsa*, and it is related to the drum name *mtambitsa* and to two ideophones, *tamba-tamba*, "of hovering" or "hesitating", and *tambe*, "of spreading." It is possible to continue along such lines, extensively exploring the relationships of drum names with other parts of speech whose connections with ideophones are incidental; but that would be outside the scope of this article.

The drum names investigated constitute only a sample of those occurring in Nyanja, but since they were selected at random the sample is probably representative. They provide a sufficient indication of the strong link between them and onomatopoeic ideophones, and suggest that this may also be a fairly common relationship in other Bantu languages.

Summary

Though the Nyanja language is rich in ideophones, there are comparatively few with specific musical connotations, and the bulk of these refer to drumming. While it is incorrect to classify all ideophones as onomatopoeic, those which are connected with

⁴ Fortune, G.: *Ideophones in Shona*, 1962.

⁵ Cf. Nurse, G. T.: "The Name 'Akafula'," *Society of Malawi Journal*, xx, 2, 1967.

⁶ Fortune, G.: *op. cit.*

drumming, and some others, do in many instances appear to attempt to imitate as well as to describe sounds. Their tone is often exaggerated in comparison with that of the equivalent parts of related words, though a few ideophones seem to represent timbre or rhythm rather than pitch. The names of some drums incorporate either the ideophone of the sound they make, or an ideophone of a valued quality, or both. Despite their onomatopoeic content, ideophones remain essentially verbal. It seems probable that a link between them and drum names may be found in other Bantu languages besides Nyanja.

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