

Music and Dance: Timeless Mediums in Uganda

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During music's analogous rise with agriculture and sedentary communities around 10 thousand years ago, it took on the important responsibilities of integrating, unifying, and educating communities. This paper explores both music's ancient origins and its parallel use in contemporary Uganda; tribal histories are preserved in musical form, and the public is educated on current issues through the lyrics of grassroots movements. Beyond these two tasks, music has taken on the role of elevating the status of children in society despite the poverty, political instability, and war that they face. Music is no less a means of expression today than it was thousands of years ago, and it is a considerable feat that as traditions, power, and technology have changed, music remains a constant in a society that draws on its expressive, creative, and unifying powers.

Thousands of years ago, before radio and records were ever conceived, ancient agriculturalists and pastoralists linked hands and danced under the night sky, with soft drums beating syncopated rhythms in the background, and a flute made of bear bone emitting delicate melodies. The next day, most began sowing their millet and sorghum, while a few recorded the happenings of the night before on stone walls for us to find millennia later and consequently speculate about the meaning of art forms in prehistoric times. Of course, they did not actually have modern humans in mind when documenting the dance. Rather, they knew that dancing and music were means of education in a preliterate society and a method of unifying the different families that comprised the village. Music was more than entertainment; it reinforced and coordinated the community and connected the population through public activity.

Although the exact date and place of the development cannot be pinpointed, it is clear that music is innate to human culture. It has been an integral part of every known society, and beyond providing a means of expression, it has played a central role in unifying communities while conveniently tying them to a rich, shared history. When employed for its original use in current societies, music has the ability to root communities in tradition and the power to become the stirring soul of the people, providing them with an education that allows a proactive citizenry to form. Music in Uganda, however, has recently inherited another important role; in an age of political instability, music empowers a generation of children who have never experienced life without violent conflict, poverty, and the AIDs epidemic. This paper aims to reconstruct a brief history of music's development and its use in ancient societies in order to connect these original uses of music to its current implementation in Uganda, focusing on music's role in keeping ancient traditions alive, unifying members of the same ethnic heritage, educating society on current issues, and giving children a means to transcend the turmoil they face.

Reconstructing Music's Past

To write about the utility that music provides in Uganda today, it is important to understand the development of music in ancient societies and the role that it filled. Prior to the rise of agriculture, which occurred around 10,000 BCE, humans lived in small groups of hunter-gatherers, not usually exceeding a hundred and fifty people. Their foraging lifestyle dictated the way in which their communities formed and functioned; a smaller population meant fewer mouths to feed. A foraging band was usually composed of a single extended family, and personal items were kept at a minimum as mobility was most highly valued in a community whose survival was

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contingent on their ability to follow food sources, be it natural plants or wild game (Sahlins 1972, 12). Although the archaeological record shows that music may have been present in some communities – a bone flute found in Slovenia was dated at 53,000 years old – it was not widespread (Gray and Krause 2001). Carrying instruments during hundred-mile journeys would have been highly impractical.

The shift to agriculture uprooted this ancient way of life. Foraging communities were exposed to farming as the knowledge diffused across the known world, changing their way of life in many significant ways. The most obvious change was the settling of former foragers into sedentary, agricultural villages that could support up to two thousand people (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008, 46). When large families or clans began living together, a form of communal unity was needed. Archaeological evidence suggests that music and dance forged these deep ties, by “invent[ing] a fictional common ancestor as a way to integrate the community.” By studying modern day farming villages, archaeologists and ethnographers are able to test this hypothesis; for example, the Pueblo people of Southwest America “believe that they were all descended from a common supernatural ancestor like the...Great Eagle,” a relation reinforced through ritual music and dances, creating a communal commitment to one another (Wilford 2001). This mythical ancestor often became the deity to whom ancient peoples would pray for a successful harvest, and rituals were performed at intervals throughout the year, correlating with an important agricultural event, such as sowing the seed or harvesting. Depictions of such ceremonies are often the events documented on cave walls.

Besides unifying the community, the music and dance of early rituals were central in educating adults in a society that had no means of written word or documentation. Music provided the medium through which traditions and stories of common ancestors were to be passed through generations. Songs also held information and instruction about vital tasks; for example, during the millennia-old process of iron smelting, the Haya people in Tanzania sing traditional songs that detail the steps in the iron making process, as well as explain the symbolism of such an act. From this, ethnographers gather that this sacred process, which further changed the face of agriculture through tools, was comparable to giving life; the men producing the iron were, in a sense, giving life to a community. The process of iron smelting has varied very little from ancient times, perhaps due to the music that keeps the important process alive and detailed (O’Neill and Muhly 1988). It is thus apparent that music and dance played a vital role in early sedentary communities, both in unifying and educating the people.

Continuity of Music’s Role in Present Ugandan Society

Because music and dance have such rich origins, traditional forms are of immense historical value to current societies in revealing their common past. This has been especially true since colonization, as national governments in Africa have attempted, often successfully, to undermine ethnic relations. Modern rulers fear that an attachment to tribal kings, about whom much of the music is written, will weaken the political power of the wider state. In all of Africa, there was a failure to account for the many diverse “tribes” that were grouped together within European constructed borders. In regards to Uganda specifically, there has long been tension between President Museveni and the kabaka, or chief, of the Buganda, Uganda’s largest tribe, because tribes are not considered a political entity with a legitimate head, but a lesser cultural institution. Although the downplay of tribal roles was in part an effort to bolster Ugandan national pride in hopes of cohesive development, tribal distinctions have been a long standing method of forming one’s identity. While political life eradicates this identity, traditional music and dance help to elevate it by “communicating and affirming communally held morals and values” and keeping historical accounts of tribes active (Barz 2004, 17).

A specific example of expressing tribal identity through music is found with the Baganda people of southern Uganda whose traditional dance is called the Baakisimba.¹ The date of its origin is unknown, but the story that precedes it is of an early kabaka who drank a local beer made from ripe bananas. The kabaka became intoxicated, but since according to a Ugandan musician it is taboo to call a king “drunk,” the people said he was “happy.” He praised the abaakisiimba, or those who had planted the banana trees, and became “so happy and relaxed that he began to move and dance.” The women imitated the kabaka’s swinging hips, and the men, with their drums, mimicked his steps. This dance is now performed by every generation of the Buganda tribe to commemorate the abaakisiimba who had pleased their kabaka (Barz 2004, 14).

Other dances of the Buganda tribe are meant to express values that are of importance to the community. The amaggunju tells the story of one kabaka’s trouble in producing a male heir; when he died he left multiple pregnant wives, but no son. A doctor determined that one wife was expecting a boy, so she was placed on the throne during her pregnancy. When the baby was born, he was laid on the throne but since it is taboo for a kabaka to cry, the royal court performed a dance to keep the baby boy smiling. The amaggunju thus tells us of the Buganda traditions of male lineage and polygamy and also of the values that a kabaka must possess: bravery and strength. Another value-driven ritual dance of the Buganda warns against involvement with witch doctors, showing a triumph of both Western and traditional medicine over the evil witch. In a region where witchcraft is a very real concern, music communicates the need to avoid what is thought to be inherently evil.

Although music is actively involved in the historical world of Uganda, it also has a considerable responsibility in the contemporary world, specifically in education about current issues. When I arrived in Uganda this past summer to teach music and guitar lessons in a primary school, the second song that the class of ten to twelve year olds performed for me addressed the AIDs epidemic. The lyrics were as follows:

Oh Ugandans, lend us your hearts
Let’s unite and fight the disease
Meant to kill both young and the old
Let’s unite and fight the disease

Between verses, the whole class would hum the tune of the song while classmates took turns standing and reciting information about the high death toll, the importance of being tested, and ways of avoidance; I was shocked when a ten year old girl launched into a monologue about means of protection and obtaining United States provided condoms at the local health clinic. During my two month stay in Lukaya, Uganda, it became apparent that these songs were the most influential mediums through which the community could become aware of such issues.

Music has, in fact, come to be a force that controls AIDs and keeps its diffusion in check. This music has grown out of Ugandan grassroots efforts based on the knowledge that music is the best way to reach a wide audience. In a country where only ten percent of the population has access to health care and federal money for educational programs fails to trickle down to villages, music is the best way of communication with people who often cannot read pamphlets and flyers because of a low literacy rate. In most countries, this responsibility would stem from health care officials, but in Uganda, where there is only one doctor for every 20,000 people – the United States has one doctor for every 400 – curable illnesses that cost relatively little to treat, such as

¹ In Uganda, the prefix Bu- refers to the name of a tribe, the prefix Ba- refers to the people of the tribe, and the prefix Mu- refers to an individual member of a tribe. So for example, you would say the Buganda Tribe, the Baganda people, and a Muganda person.

malaria, take the front seat. When traditional forms of education “disappoint, musicians sing and dance, thereby creating meaning out of chaotic lives. If one person can make a difference in the ongoing struggle with AIDs in Uganda it will be a musician, a dancer, or an actor” (Barz 2006, 4-5).

Even when sought out by a listener solely for entertainment, music has the ability to change a person’s habits and to alter the way in which he or she views the epidemic in a social setting. According to Jackson Muteeba (Bartz 2006), a Ugandan minister, music is able to pierce “deep into you” and communicate important “life messages” because almost all Ugandans know of someone who has suffered from the illness, if they are not battling it themselves (215-216). For this reason, music is a better tool than lectures and seminars; music has always played a central role in society, and people will therefore always make time to listen. People are more likely to be interested in and remember about AIDs through music. Scientific awareness about the disease has also removed the religious stigma that was once attached to AIDs, and there is large movement away from the treatment of people living with AIDs as sinners and social outcasts. Instead, those infected take pride in spreading knowledge about the disease so as to prevent others from contracting it (Barz 2006, 215-216).

The faith in music’s ability to instruct has been practically implemented at multiple levels. In many villages, groups have formed to write songs and host medically informed performances. These groups are often solely organized by and composed of females because AIDs is frequently viewed as a women’s disease. Traditional teaching dictates the submission of women, often to older men who desire to take a virgin as a wife while simultaneously forcing the life altering disease upon their partners. Women in village singing groups aim at empowering other women to challenge the outdated behavioral pattern of submission and at encouraging all people who are living with the disease to “live positively” rather than “HIV positive.”

Larger not-for-profit groups have also formed to spread AIDs awareness. One such organization is the Meeting Point Kampala. Beyond offering care and friendship to those who fight the disease alone, there is a singing and drama group comprised of children and adults from all regions of Uganda who perform both contemporary and traditional songs, the latter in many different local languages. They have individualized messages for different audiences, but a significant focus is placed on making youth aware of the option of abstinence. The music of both women’s village groups and non-profit organizations has had tangible effects; over the past twenty years, the percentage of people living with AIDs in Uganda has dropped from thirty percent to five (Barz 2006, 4, 67-68).

While the AIDs epidemic has been a defining factor of Africa since the 1980s, the corruption of central government is also a widely known stigma attached to the continent as a result of its colonization by European powers in the mid-nineteenth century. British colonial rule has had deep-rooted implications in Uganda. During Great Britain’s rule, Northern Uganda was politically and economically ignored. Even today, the region remains a war torn, underdeveloped backwater, whose two decade conflict, brought on by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), is still disregarded by President Museveni’s regime. The LRA is led by Joseph Kony, a man who, over twenty years ago, claimed to be possessed by the spirit of an Italian soldier who would fight government corruption and defend the politically overlooked North. Kony’s people, the Acholi, were tired of war and the change of political regimes – power has switched hands seven times since independence in 1962 – and did not fully back Kony’s new army. Kony began a spiritual purging of his people, whom he believed had turned against him, with the help of child soldiers who were abducted and required to fight for the LRA cause.

Often the first people that child soldiers are forced to kill are their family members, proving their allegiance to the LRA. If they cry or protest, they are mutilated or killed. Because child soldiers do not act of their own accord, there is much confusion when they return to their communities after an escape from the bush, as many question whether they should be treated as

murderers or innocent children. Often, communities forgive their wrongdoings before they reconcile their own actions. Music is an integral part of the healing process, both for former child soldiers and children who have lost family in LRA raids. Take the story of Dominic for example, an Acholi boy who escaped from the LRA after he was forced to kill three farmers with their own hoes. Or look to Rose, a young girl who found the heads of her parents boiling in a pot days after they disappeared. Both children are now a part of their school's choir and were invited to perform in the National Music Competition in Kampala. Northern schools rarely qualify, and they spoke of their desire to be the first to musically represent the Acholi by performing the royal Bwola, the traditional dance of the tribe (Hecht and Fine 2007). This experience not only connected the young generation with their ethnic heritage, but also served as a healing process:

“What I want people to know is that children from Northern Uganda, even though we may live in the war zone, we can do great things in life.”

– Dominic

“I feel proud to be an Acholi when I dance... In my heart I am more than a child of war. I am talented. I am a musician. I am Acholi. I am the future of our tribe.” – Rose

From this conflict in the North has emerged one of the largest contradictions in Uganda: the disempowerment of children through war, poverty, and AIDs, and the government's desire to use children as the basis of a developing nation, recognizing their integral role in Ugandan national identity and world status. Although President Museveni has largely ignored the war in the North, his political party, the National Resistance Movement, launched a Children's Rights Campaign after ratifying the United Nation Convention on Rights of the Child (Cheney 2007, 3, 122-123, 29). The government has not done much in the way of practical application of these rights, but they do recognize the importance of music; with the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1997, it was made mandatory that schools sing the Youth National Anthem, which portrays children as the pillar of the nation and asks parents and teachers to support the young generation in their endeavors. The National Music Competition has also become a major outlet for primary school choirs to express their ethnic identity and communicate current issues. Moreover, because of the wide audience that attends these competitions, “the government [is able to] position children as important purveyors of an emergent sense of collective national culture as well as civic messages crucial to Uganda's social and economic development” (Cheney 2007, 220).

When I traveled to Uganda, I did so with the image of the documentary *War Dance*, which tells the stories of Dominic and Rose, in my mind, but knew that my flight home would precede the National Music Festival by two weeks. Fortunately, a Ugandan friend David organized a trip to a local school that was preparing for the competition, and I was able to experience first-hand the pride that children take in performing their tribe's traditional dance. The girls who could afford traditional cloth made skirts that were tied around their waist with their school sweaters, but many girls had no costumes at all. Everyone, however, danced and sang with a pride that I have never seen in American choirs; the children knew that their performance reflected upon the Buganda tribe. I saw the traditional Baakisimba dance and others that reflected social issues, such as AIDs and witchcraft. During the short two hours that I watched them perform, it became abundantly clear just how expressive their music and dance are.

Music is not only a part of school during competition preparations; Ugandans have a large opportunity to partake in music during school even beyond usual lesson time. Thirty minutes before school starts, students at the Mustard Seed Academy, the primary school in which I taught, gathered in the courtyard for their morning parade, which consisted of multiple songs, including the National Anthem, the Youth National Anthem, and the school's anthem. Every time I entered a

classroom, the students stood and sang a song of welcome to their visitor. The curriculum of baby and top class – the equivalent of American preschool and kindergarten – was taught almost entirely through music. The students even sang songs quietly to themselves during exam time when they needed help remembering the material. Each class also had an hour of music every day, a period that I was responsible for teaching during my summer-long stay. I also had the opportunity to teach the headmaster of the school how to play the guitar. The language barrier provided quite a challenge, but he was determined to learn to play the songs that I was teaching the children so that the school could host a concert for the village of Lukaya – without realizing it, the headmaster demonstrated a desire to fulfill the central role that music plays in connecting a community.

During music's analogous rise with agriculture and sedentary communities around ten thousand years ago, it took on the important responsibilities of integrating and educating communities. In contemporary Uganda, music is used much in the same ways; tribal histories are preserved in musical form and the public is educated on current issues through the lyrics of grassroots movements. Beyond these two tasks, music has taken on the role of elevating the status of children in society despite the poverty and war that they face. Music is no less a means of expression today than it was thousands of years ago, and it is a considerable feat that as traditions, power, and technology have changed, music remains a constant in a society that draws on its expressive, creative, and unifying powers.

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