

AFRICAN NGOMA

Stephen Raleigh

February 7, 2011, 2011

Among its many expansive countries, cultures, and languages, East Africa comprises a vast plurality of music-making styles and traditions. In much of this region (where to the outside ear even conversational speech may sound musical), the concept of “music” is not something separate from the essential fabric of everyday life to be isolated and studied. Indeed, in this regard the line between what is and is not music is often blurred.¹ Music is inexorably integrated into almost all levels of African social life, and can even serve as the “process by which the individual is integrated into his/her society.”² The term *ngoma*, which is often used to describe this holistic integration of music, dance, poetry, and storytelling as it is conceived in African culture, can likewise be employed as a teaching paradigm in Western educational settings as suggested by such scholars as Minette Mans, Carol Gartrell, and Emily Akuno³. In this paper, I shall review the essential principles of the African concept *ngoma*, the methods of its cultural implementation and transmission, and its application to Western educational systems outside of Africa.

Central to the music of much of Africa, the term *ngoma* is often used to refer to “traditional music or a traditional music performance, particularly when drumming and dancing play a prominent part.”⁴ It may indicate “both something specific—that is, music intended for dancing that is accompanied by drumming—and something general—such as a cover term for ‘music’.”⁵ Of *ngoma*, Chiteri writes; “Whatever you sing, whatever you do where the

¹ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2-3.

² Eric A. Akrofi, “Major Problems Confronting Scholars and Educators of the Musical Arts in Sub-Saharan Africa,” MaydayGroup.org. <http://www.maydaygroup.org/php/ecolumns/comparativemusiced-reports/africa-akrofi.php> (accessed January 18, 2011).

³ I am referring here to the articles “Epera and Oudhano” by Mans, and “Two Children’s Songs from Africa” by Gartrell and Akuno.

⁴ Steven Cornelius, “Week 3 – Music of East Africa,” Boston University Online, <http://vista.bu.edu/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct> (accessed February 1, 2011).

⁵ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, 5.

instrumentation is dominated by drumming, that *is ngoma*.”⁶ Beyond this meaning, ngoma may further embody “the complex relationship between music and all other aspects of life.”⁷

As music and ngoma are so deeply integrated into traditional African culture, children do not learn music (or of their history and social values) in school institutions per se, they learn through their own gradual integration into society. They learn from their parents, from village elders, and through celebration and ceremonial or recreational dances and songs. Among the Swahili of the East African coast, ngoma are (plural, as indicated by Campbell and Eastman) closely linked to the Swahili social structure “particularly in so far as they involve the reaffirmation of appropriate sex-role behavior, status, and values.”⁸ Through involvement and participation in the many songs and dances of the society, women learn of proper sexual behavior, social values, fidelity, respect for elders, and faith in God. For men, songs address warnings of occupational hazards, group competition and combat.⁹ In such societies, the student/teacher relationship is not isolated to a school classroom; it is integrated into all levels of daily life. The “student” observes and imitates, and the “teacher” is in fact the entire community around him or her. *Kishuri*, the dance component of the Swahili *chakacha*, functions both as entertainment and to “teach the proper form of hip-rotation associated with sexual intercourse.”¹⁰ Campbell and Eastman further describe young Swahili women learning to perform *chakacha*; “As the young girls dance, older women will often place their hands on the girls’ hips and guide them in the correct movement.”¹¹ East African musician Centurio Balikoowa recalls of his youth

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Steven Cornelius, “Week 3 – Music of East Africa,” Boston University Online.

⁸ Carol A. Campbell and Carol M. Eastman. “Ngoma: Swahili Adult Song Performance in Context,” *Ethnomusicology* 28, no. 3 (September 1984): 467, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/851235> (accessed February 2, 2011).

⁹ Ibid., 489.

¹⁰ Ibid., 472.

¹¹ Ibid.

in the Ugandan village of Busoga that music was everywhere. After beginning his musical education learning musical games at the age of three, “he eventually learned to play the *ntongoli* himself by observing his father, just as his father had learned by observing his grandfather...Music is typically passed along this way, through imitation and repetition.”¹² In that traditionally, African music is transmitted orally and not through books, village elders are a vital repository of knowledge of culture and traditions. “Our books are the old people. This is where we get our knowledge.”¹³

It is important to keep in mind that within the African construct of ngoma, artistic and social concerns are integrated into a single unified event that cannot be separated from their purpose and the moment. “Music and dance are things people do. They are immediate.”¹⁴ They lie at the heart of African cultural practice and “are conceived within a holistic framework inclusive of ritual, rites, arts, power, meanings, values, and beliefs.”¹⁵ They therefore cannot be truly understood if removed and examined out of their cultural and temporal context. They are “sonorous happenings embedded in actions and behaviors.”¹⁶

Herein lies the challenge of trying to bring the concept of ngoma into the Western classroom of music education. School classrooms are not rural African villages and its students do not share the cultural background and religious beliefs of such environments. Mans suggests however, that a strong connection between African ngoma and the integrative principles

¹² Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ Minette Mans, "Using Namibian Music/Dance Traditions as a Basis for Reforming Arts Education," *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 1, no. 3 <http://www.ijea.org/v1n3/index.html#table1> (accessed February 1, 2011).

¹⁵ Mans, Minette. “Epera and Oudhano.” In *Many Seeds, Different Flowers: The Music Education Legacy of Carl Orff*, ed. André De Quadros, (Perth: CIRCME, 2000), 124 (accessed February 1, 2011).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

advocated by Carl Orff make it possible to create a seamless connection between the two.¹⁷ To achieve this, Mans suggests that the implementation of ngoma into Western classrooms requires the criteria of proper context, such as historic and socio-cultural background and underlying principles, material traits, and vernacular terminology, be ensured in order to avoid artificial cultural experiences.¹⁸ Through the involvement of learning and performing an African *epera* song/dance or *oudhano* within the framework of ngoma, students may gain intercultural insight and experience a sense of holism “in the connection found between aspects of the music and dance, the context, the atmosphere, the meaning.”¹⁹ Such approaches may serve not only to familiarize students with musical concepts and practices of other cultures (without representing them as isolated topics “thereby emphasizing the strange and exotic”²⁰), but can also “develop children’s skills and concepts in a manner which puts their own musical development to the fore.”²¹

As the world increasingly becomes a global community, the need and relevance of multiculturalism in our school’s curriculum grows concurrently. Efforts to include holistic approaches to musical and cultural learning such as African ngoma, when applied appropriately, can surely be viewed as a positive influence toward a truly inclusive global outlook in education. Teachers must be vigilant however not to become complacent simply with the inclusion of a few sections of ngoma inspired lessons in their classroom curriculum. The spirit of ngoma can have far-reaching implications into many facets of Western attitudes towards the arts in general and indeed in our role in the world around us. As such, we as educators must strive to further

¹⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸ Ibid., 126.

¹⁹ Ibid., 140.

²⁰ Carol Gartrell and Emily Akuno. “Two Children’s Songs from Kenya.” In *Many Seeds, Different Flowers: The Music Education Legacy of Carl Orff*, ed. André De Quadros, (Perth: CIRCME, 2000), 67 (accessed February 1, 2011).

²¹ Ibid.

incorporate such powerful paradigms as ngoma into our regular curriculum so that music may become an even stronger and positive part of our student's daily lives, just as it in so many other parts of the world.

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