

THE RESILIENCE OF TRADITIONAL DANCE AS A REPOSITORY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE CASE OF INGOMA OF MALAWI

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Abstract: This paper explores how Ingoma, a dance of the Ngoni of Malawi can be described as an identity marker and a cultural text of the Ngoni. The Ngoni constitute one of the nine major ethnic groups of Malawi. Unlike the other eight ethnic groups, however, the Ngonido do not have a language with which they are identified and use for everyday communication. This is largely due to socio-cultural and political influences that they experienced in the areas they settled. Notwithstanding this aspect of their identity, their dance Ingoma has stood the test of time and continues to be transmitted from one generation to another. Since language is key to the transmission of dance, the paper also examines the implications of transmitting dance in other people's language. The paper focuses on three main groups of the Ngoni, namely, the M'mbelwaJere found in the north, the MpezeniJere found in the west and the GomaniMaseko in the centre. The Ingoma performances by groups from each of these areas were investigated.

Keywords: group identity/ethnicity, unity, cultural preservation, transmission, cultural text, cultural history, collective memory

INTRODUCTION

The Ngoni constitute one of the 9 major ethnic groups in Malawi, (Malawi Population and Housing Census 2008). Each of these ethnic groups, except the Ngoni, has a language with which they are identified and use for everyday communication within its region and beyond and which enjoys air time on both public and private media houses. The Tumbuka in the north, the Chewa in the centre and the Yao in the south for example are identified by their languages, Chitumbuka, Chichewa and Chiyao, respectively, just to mention three of the major groups. Furthermore, these ethnic groups have two or more prominent dances with which they are synonymous and that are transmitted in their mother tongues. The Ngoni, however, having settled amongst the Tumbuka, the Chewa and the Senga in the northern, central and western parts of Malawi, respectively, have been assimilated into

the above mentioned groups and mostly no longer use their original language in everyday communication.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that although the Ngoni do not have an effective and vibrant language for everyday verbal communication with which to be identified as is the case with the other major ethnic groups, their language is expressed and maintained in part in Ingoma, which literally means music or song in Zulu language. This is evidenced through some linguistic expressions in the dance; mostly expressed in the form of chants, praise poetry and song lyrics. This is supported by – among other things – the expressions such as ‘Ezwanayoo!’/ ‘Hozanayoo!’ (Ngoni, for attention or do you hear!). To concur with this, Margaret Read, a folklorist and story teller says, ‘The old Ngoni language was closely akin to Zulu, and was used in all ritual occasions, including recital of praise songs of chiefs and war heroes’.¹

This paper’s purpose is mainly to present preliminary results of my fieldwork which I conducted among the Ngoni of Malawi in the summer vacation of the 2012/13 academic year between the months of July and August 2013. The fieldwork research was conducted in three regions of Malawi where the Ngoni people are found. These are: the Northern MmbelwaJereNgonis, the Western MpezeniJereNgonis and the Central GomaniMasekoNgonis; in the northern, western and central regions of Malawi, respectively. The research project was conducted in Malawi, South East Africa. The dance being studied is called Ingoma. This is a predominantly male dance, which was originally performed as a warrior and hunting dance of the Ngoni.

Ingoma, in Ngoni language, means a song or music.² In the old days of the Ngoni the dance was usually performed when going to wars or after successful battles in which they fought to expand their territories. Today, with no such wars being fought, the dance is performed at various social occasions such as the installation of chiefs, funerals of chiefs, wedding ceremonies, traditional festivals, public events and other important related social occasions.

It is interesting to point out, however, that my findings reveal that although the name of the dance means song or music in Ngoni language and the Ngoni language dictionary, most people, especially those with little or no education, do not know about this. When you ask them, all they say is, Ngoni is their tradition, Ngoni is their dance.

AUTHOR’S POSITION IN CONNECTION TO THE TOPIC

Let me from the outset clearly state that in this field my position is that of an outsider. My position is such because I come from a different region and have never participated in the dance before this project. I was born to parents both of whom were of the Chewa ethnic group, one of the major ethnic groups of Malawi predominantly found in the central region of the country. It is interesting though to point out that although the Ngoni of Central and Western Malawi are settled among the Chewa, I did not have any direct contact with the dance.

¹ READ 1938.

² ERLMANN 1989: 259.

Even as an outsider, however, I knew that there are two variations in the name of the dance being studied. Among the northern MmbelwaJere and the western MpezeniJere-Ngonis the dance is called Ingoma, while it is called Ngoma among the central MasekoGomanis. Just like most people in Malawi, especially those outside the Ngoni groupings, I used the two terms interchangeably without paying attention to the morphological distinctions in the name of the dance and which group calls it what. It was not until I had joined my current profession as Choreographer and Arts Administrator that I realised there are these differences. I discovered this from write-ups on the dance in form of brochures.³ It is through this study that the differences have been discovered through interacting with the Ngoni communities and consulting other sources such as dictionaries.⁴

Based on these facts, for practical purposes and for consistency's sake this paper is going to call the dance Ingoma.

INGOMA DANCE AND PRESERVATION OF NGONI HERITAGE

The first thing is that the dance has maintained the same meanings and functions among all the three Ngoni groups. This observation is strengthened by the fact that in all the three regions the dance is mainly performed at three similar occasions. Furthermore, each of the three occasions has its own specific form.⁵

The second finding is that the dance has maintained the same forms and structures despite some variations among the three groups. This is especially true in terms of music structure and dance movement patterns: The two Jere groups tend to be more similar than the Maseko group.

Thirdly, the research found that the transmission of the dance, ranging from song composition to the actual passing on of the dance is mostly not done in Ngoni language. Among the central MasekoNgoni, it is done in Chichewa, a language of the Chewa. It is done in Chinsenga and Chichewa among the western MpezeniJeregroup. On the other hand, the northern Jere group do it in a mixture of Chitumbuka, a language of the Tumbuka, and the Chingoni language. It is interesting, however, to find out that there is an area among the northern Ngoni where the old language is still spoken, albeit at a small scale though.

³ Very famous dances among the Ngoni of Malawi. Ngoma is performed by the Ngoni of Ntcheu and Dedza in Central Malawi, while Ingoma is performed by the Ngoni of Mzimba and Mchinji Districts in the Northern and Western Region of Malawi, respectively. Both Ngoma and Ingoma were originally war dances performed after a successful battle. Today the dances are performed at wedding ceremonies, funerals, as well as at entertainment occasions. Brochure: 'THE MALAWI NATIONAL DANCE TROUPE PERFORMING DURING THE PUBLIC CIVIL SERVICE COMMEMORATION (20TH – 23RD JUNE, 2013) AT CIVIL SERVICE STADIUM LILONGWE ON 23RD JUNE, 2013.

⁴ The fieldwork, however, revealed that the most appropriate version of the name of the dance is supposed to be Ingoma. According to the 'Zulu-English Dictionary', both words belong to the Ngoni language. Ngoma, however, is the stem and it is only with the prefix does the term refer to a song or music.

⁵ First, there is Ligubo, which is said to be Ngoni for marching. In Chichewa the word means to march, this form of Ingoma is performed at installation and funeral ceremonies of chiefs. Then there is Mngeniso, which is performed at wedding ritual ceremonies. The third one is Hlombe, this one is the Ingoma for all festive occasions such as festivals.

In this regard, it was noted that the falling out of use of the original Ngoni language – in general and in connection to the transmission of Ingoma in particular – is an issue of great concern among all the three groups. Nonetheless, a notable finding is that the dance has managed to preserve some verbal and non-verbal human expressive tools that are largely unique to the Ngoni. These are expressed in forms of chants, slogans as well as ululation. In the same connection, it was found out that in all the three areas the song text acts like a repository of the collective memory.

A fourth finding is that the dance has managed to preserve the Ngoni traditional dressing and implements. This is in form of the animal skin costumes; these represent their old traditional clothes. On the other hand, the shield, knobkerry and spear have a long and important historical meaning to them owing to the wars that they fought.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED INGOMA DANCE SAMPLES

The analysis is based on three samples selected from the three main forms of Ingoma common among the three Ngoni groups, according to the research findings. The three forms are: Ligubo, Hlombe and Mngeniso.

Ideally this analysis would have been better done alongside music and song text. This is based on the fact that music, song and dance are difficult to discuss as independent elements in most traditional African dances. This is no exception as in Ingoma dance as well the rendition of its music and song cannot be easily separated from the dance. This is largely due to the fact that the music is derived from the hand clapping, the singing and stamping of the same bodies that do the dance movements, as Rycroft concurs.

Rhythm is always expressed through simultaneous action, by the singers themselves. Depending on the type of item, this may take the form of gestures, postures, dance-steps or other organized body movements, or the wielding of real or symbolic weapons or implements. Stamping or equal-spaced hand-clapping may supply audible emphasis. These actions are normally considered inseparable from the music: music and action are blended in the production of a larger artistic whole.⁶

Considering that song texts of Ingoma contribute quite a lot to the meaning of the dance, this topic is reserved for a separate treatment.

COMPOSITION AND ORGANISATION OF SONGS

In this dance, as is the case with most dances, song composition and leading are natural talents which are developed and promoted by members in the group. There is always someone talented in composing. When one has a song he or she brings it to the group during rehearsals. He tries to sing it to the members; they all try it as a group until they learn it while polishing it up in the process.

⁶ RYCROFT 1967.

Sometimes one may think of a song and take it to a drinking place. When drunk, the singer starts by dancing it alone, some join by handclapping; two or three more may join him in the dancing. Out of this process, a song is composed. This is how it used to be in the past, wherever the Ngoni were drinking they started dancing Ingoma, according to my interviews with Jere and Aupson.

Sample of song text Title: Sagolozela	
Women:	SagolozelaUmkhwenyanawethu! <i>We have gazed waiting for our bridegroom</i>
Men:	Hoohalilanga ×2 <i>Hoo whole day</i>
Women:	Halilanga <i>Whole day</i>
Men:	Hoo <i>Hoo</i>
Women:	Halilangaliyashonilanga <i>Whole day until the sun has set</i>
Men:	Hoohalilanga <i>Hoo whole day</i>

The title of this song ‘Sagolozela’ (*We have gazed*), is in the original Ngoni language. It is not a surprise that the song is in this language because it was sourced from the northern Ngoni area where you still find the language in use. This is a ‘Mngeniso’ – wedding ritual – song for a ceremony in which the bridegroom is introduced to the wife’s family. In the song, the people from the bride’s side are complaining that they have waited for the bridegroom the whole day. The sun has now set with no sign of him coming. They do not even see the ‘Malobolo’, (pronounced malowolo), the dowry-bride price, which is a common marriage custom among the Ngoni.

INGOMA DANCE MUSIC-MAKING

In Ingoma dance, unlike in most dances in Malawi, there is no use of drums. As Read observes, ‘The group songs of the Ngoni have no instrumental accompaniment, and the absence of all drums in Ngoni music is one of the outstanding characteristics, in comparison with the music of the local tribes.’⁷ Their music-making heavily relies on foot stamping and sound produced by ‘mangenjeza’ – the rattles and hand clapping. This is further supported by Margaret Read,

⁷ READ 1937.

This humming and the rhythmical stamping of the men's feet which reverberates in the dry dung of the cattle kraal or the newly softened earth of the first rains, are the most characteristic as well as the most aesthetically beautiful, forms of accompaniment.⁸

MOVEMENT ANALYSIS

As indicated above, there are three main forms of Ingoma. These are: Ligubo, Hlombe and Mngenisio; movement analysis follows in line with these forms of the dance. Ligubo is Ingoma performed at occasions for installation of chiefs and their funerals in all the three Ngoni territorial regions. In Ngoni culture, they say, a man does not mourn to the point of shedding tears.

There is one movement for both occasions. It is only the songs that change; there are separate repertoires of songs befitting each occasion. Under normal circumstances this dance when it is being performed in its natural setting for both occasions, the dancers' starting point is that they form four lines, male dancers standing on the inner lines while the females on the outer ones, with bodies upright and feet parallel to each other. The leaders of the group, who are usually male members, take the front positions with the ladies playing important leading roles also taking the same positions.

Before they start the group leader shouts the slogan 'Ezwanayoo!' or 'Hozanayoo!'. In Ngoni language *ezwana* means to hear. In the dance, it is used to call for attention. This is responded to with a 'Yoo!' chorus from the rest of the dancers. Immediately after this, there is an ululation by one of the lady dancers. This is a way of confirming the group's readiness to start at the same time encouraging the rest of the members for the performance.

The second phase is the actual dance movements. The dance movements are basically right foot forward, left beside the right, then a stamp on the right foot. This is repeated as they move forward and backward. The stamps are accented on the right foot while the left is dragged. The stamping is in coordination with the rhythm of the handclapping by the women. At each movement, either forward or backward, they bend the knees slightly as they accent the stamp and thrust the arms forward in a middle position while holding a flywhisk, stick or knobkerry in the hands. In this way, the lines move in a forward direction until they reach the arena for the event's performance. Under normal circumstances, for instance in an installation ceremony, the lines are part of the procession that flanks the chief as he is being led to and from the crowing place. This movement is repeated as many times as possible, only changing songs that are relevant to the occasion until they reach the designated place.

Ligubo, however, when performed with the other two forms at festive events, is used for moving from the non-performing space to the main area of performance. It is used for entry and exit to and from the performing space

Hlombe is the main part of Ingoma, whose music is heavily characterised by rhythmic hand clapping. The dance starts with both the female and male dancers standing in a

⁸ READ 1937.

circle. They stand, bodies upright with the torso tilted, the feet parallel to each other. In performances where the women are leading the singing they are put inside the circle. The male dancers hold a knobkerrie in the right hand. Unlike in Mngeniso and Ligubo, in this one the tempo of music is high and has loud thuds of accented stamps.

Mngeniso is a form of Ingoma usually associated with marriage rites. In a normal performance, when presented as a whole, this one normally comes soon after Ligubo. The name of this form of Ingoma is derived from a Ngoni marriage ritual called Mngeniso at which it is performed. The term mngeniso is from the Ngoni verb “ukungenisa”, which means “to cause one to enter another person’s house”.

The movement is basically slow; this is owing to the slow tempo of its music. The starting position is that the body is held upright with the torso tilted. The feet are parallel and flat on the ground. The movement starts with a stamp on the right foot alternating with sliding feet and twisting leftward. This sequence is then followed by a stamp on the left foot. The arms, which normally hold a shield in the left and a spear in the right, are coordinated with the movement of the legs going forward middle and then low. This is repeated as many times as possible until they change into another form.

THE CHOREOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE

When performed for festive purposes, for instance at festivals, Ingoma combines all the three forms and these are presented as one big piece of presentation. Ligubo is normally performed as dancers enter and exit the performance arena. When entering, the choreography is as described above: men in the inner lines and women in the outer one. Since the men are considered to be the chief’s soldiers, the idea is that they should cover the chief who is in the middle of the lines. Upon reaching the centre of the performance space, they start to form straight lines: men occupying the front lines while the women are at the back.

It is at this stage, as they are organizing themselves into straight lines, that Mngeniso comes in. This is a slow tempo phase in which no hand clapping is done. The dancing is only to the rhythm of the tuneful singing by both the male and female folks. This can be repeated as many times as possible until the leader is satisfied they are in an organized pattern in readiness for the third phase.

The third and final phase is Hlombe. Unlike the two preceding phases, this one has a high tempo with rhythmic hand clapping and singing. Sometimes, especially among the western MpezeniJere group, two or three men leave the line or circle moving forward while dancing to display their dancing skills and going back to their initial positions. This is done in turns as they move from one song to another.

THE THEMATIC BACKGROUND BEHIND THE CHOREOGRAPHIC SEQUENCE

It is important to point out that there is an interesting aspect about this choreographic sequence. According to AupsonThole, a Ngoni elder of the northern Ngoni group whom I interviewed, the logic is that as they enter the performance space with Ligubo, the dancers

are reminiscent of leaving the village for the battle field. I find this logic correct and would relate the Mngeniso phase to the moment of getting organized while in the battlefield in readiness for the fight. Then Hlombe, the main phase would represent the actual fight in the battlefield. Finally, they exit with Ligubo again, this time marching back home after the war.

Among the northern MmbelwaJere group, however, another reason for putting the women inside the circle is when they do “Hlombe”, the hand clapping. Tracing from the old Ngoni customs it is responsibility of the man to protect the woman. Even when walking on the road they did not leave women behind but always put them in front, so that in the event that you meet dangerous animals on the way you should be able to protect the woman.

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