

Tonga Funeral Songs: A Path to understanding the Tonga People of Southern Zambia

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on the Tonga funeral songs as a path to understanding the Tonga people of southern Zambia. A funeral song also known as dirge is 'a highly stylistic form of expression that is governed by specific poetic recitative conventions used to express the feelings of the mourners in a determinate form and performance procedure' (Akorobaro, 2001: 66). Funeral songs (dirges) are ubiquitous in Africa and indeed in the Tongaland when death strikes in the community. There are a number of activities that take place during and after the mourning period and these include song performances, cleansing, animal sacrifices, burial, memorial ceremonies and many others. This article however concerned with the funeral songs that are performed during the funeral among the Tongas. Being a qualitative study, ten informants were purposively selected from Gwembe, Choma, Namwala, Mazabuka and Kabwe districts respectively. Thematic analysis was employed during data analysis as it was found befitting of the qualitative research being undertaken. The article restricted itself to songs such as Kuzemba, Kuyabila, Bukonkoolo, Zitengulo, Buntibe and Nyeele songs as conduits through which one can understand the Tonga people since music is an expression of the social fabric of the culture.

Keywords: Tonga, funeral song, culture, understanding

Introduction

Funeral songs abound in many African societies and are considered to be an integral part of the mourning traditions among many cultures. Funeral songs rather dirges play an important function during the mourning period. Funeral songs fall under the umbrella of traditional music. Traditional Zambian music once had clear ritual purposes or was an expression of the social fabric of the culture. Songs were used to teach, to heal, to appeal to spirits, and for mere enjoyment. Among the Tonga people of Southern Zambia, performance of funeral songs is common. Finnegan (2014, p. 147) submits that many of these songs are topical and ephemeral. That is, they are composed for use at the funeral of one individual and relate to him only, though they naturally use the accepted idioms and forms. Finnegan cites the *zitengulo* mourning songs among the Ila and the Tonga of Zambia which are sung only once: they are very short and composed by a woman who mourns and thinks over the life's work of the deceased; she bases her song on this, starts to sing little by little, and adds words and melody until the song is complete (Jones, 1943, p. 15).

It is important to note, however, that this article confined itself to the lyrical content of the songs and not the actual musical elements or instruments associated with the songs. The lyrical content is analysed for its literary significance. In this regard the lyrics are like poetry because poetry has an element of musicality while music can be poetic. Music, like poetry, is anchored on rhythm. Additionally both are anchored largely on words. While there are songs that are purely instrumental, most songs are word-based. Hence this article was concerned with lyrics as words that can be analysed and appreciated. In many societies, in fact, words of poems were sung by the poets. They thus qualified to be classified as songs as the minstrels told their stories. The bards were masters of the use of words and were able to tell history through words that were sung. This indeed was the case with ancient Greek society when epic poetry thrived (Aristotle, 1970).

CiTonga funeral songs are therefore a fertile ground for the study of the Tonga people's culture particularly with regard to verbal art. The songs whose lyrics and social function are discussed in this article, despite the funeral or sorrowful context in which they are produced, are a form of verbal art. They may therefore be studied just like any other form of verbal art such as proverbs, wise sayings, tongue-twisters, riddles and, in the case of the Tonga people, even such verbal performances as *kulibanda* (Chilala and Jimaima, 2020, for a fuller treatment of the art of *kulibanda*). Thus this article analyses some of the Tonga people's funeral songs including: *Kuzemba*, *Kuyabila*, *Bukonkoolo*, *Zitengulo*, *Nyeele*, *Kweema*, *Cikaambe-kaambe*, *Ndikiti*, *Buntibe* and *Kalyaba*. These songs, a form of poetic expression, are an important part of Tonga folklore and play an important social function just like the oral narrative (Chilala, African Oral Narrative).

Methodology

Being a qualitative research, data were collected in two ways. The primary data were collected through unstructured interviews via phone and face-to-face while the secondary data were collected through reading of books and internet sources. The study involved six women and four men respondents who were selected purposefully to take part in the interview. Only elderly respondents were targeted for the current study as they were considered to be knowledgeable about the Tonga culture. Two female respondents were drawn from Gwembe valley, two from Choma district while two were from Namwala district. Two male respondents were taken from Kabwe district and the other two were from Mazabuka district in the Southern province of Zambia. The data were analysed thematically.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the current study were thus:

***Kuzemba* Songs**

Kuzemba is performed as soon as the funeral has been announced through the drum called ‘*ngoma yabukali*.’ when death occurs in the village, the news is conveyed by beating of ‘*ngoma yabukali*’ and people rush in all directions in preparation for the funeral. As Miyoba (2012), observed, ‘while people are putting in place what to use at the funeral such as water, firewood, members of the deceased’s family will be seen running in all directions in the yard while chanting songs known as *Kuzemba*.’ This song implies searching for the deceased and that is why members keep pacing up and down in all directions as if searching the whereabouts of the deceased. *Kuzemba* song performance is also extended to the grave on the day of burial. While at the grave, *kuzemba* is performed with some people yielding spears known as ‘*masumo*’ accompanied with instruments known as ‘*miyuwa*’. Miyoba defines “*Miyuwa*” as an instrument made in a special way by making holes in small tins field with small pebbles. Then a sizeable stick is fixed protruding through the holes of the tins and the results are ‘*Miyuwa*.’ *Kuzemba* songs are not the only songs performed at the funeral among the Tonga people. *Kuyabila* songs also abound in Tongaland.

***Kuyabila* Songs**

Kuyabila is one of the most interesting aspects of the mourning ritual among the Tonga people of southern province. It is believed that *Kuyabila* originated from the Tonga economic activities such as cattle rearing and arable farming. Chibballo (1983, p.2) adds that, “*Kuyabila*” is as old as the Batonga themselves that they brought with from wherever they migrated. Mulenga explains that *kuyabila* are the words of lamentation, exultation (to God), or praises emanating from an inner experience of the mourner (Mulenga, 2018, p. 59). *Kuyabila* can be done through an instrument called ‘*Namalwa*’, a flute, whistling and pounding with a mortar or guitar or by speaking and so on. In the context of the funeral, *Namalwa* is the commonest instrument used by men as they sing. *Namalwa*, also known as the ‘lion drum’ is a friction drum which is not struck at all but which has a stick inserted through the drum head that is rubbed. This drum is considered to possess supernatural power and is not supposed to be beaten for no reason; otherwise, an evil omen could befall the drummer. Mulenga explains that the lion drum is only beaten during war, ceremonies, funerals, weddings, social contests, and peacemaking (Mulenga, 2018, p. 46). It is important to state here that *Kuyabila* which is common among the plateau Tonga is not a preserve of men as it has been observed in most non-funeral occasions. Women too are also involved in *kuyabila* known as *Bukonkoolo*, especially when they gather in the funeral house.

***Bukonkoolo* Songs**

Bukonkoolo is another form of *kuyabila* performed by women while in the funeral house. These songs are usually performed early in the morning around 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. when women begin to mourn. The word *bukonkoolo* is derived from the verb *kukonkoola*, meaning beating, knocking or clashing sticks. During the performance of *bukonkoolo*, women mourners sing praises, lamentations, prayers, ribald songs

and even songs of derision without offending anybody. *Bukonkoolo* songs are also performed during memorial ceremonies known as *Mweesho*. In this ritual, as Mulenga (2018) observed, mourners remove yoke sticks known as *Cikkeyi* from the oxen yoke. They then take the pounding stick and place it on the floor near where they are sitting. Women sit around these instruments and they begin to sing while hitting (*kukonkoona*) the pounding stick with *Cikkeyi* removed from the oxen yoke. This produces a loud and piercing sound which reaches very far especially in the night. It is imperative to note that the removal of the *Chikkeyi* from the oxen yoke implies that there is no work at this particular time of mourning because the one who used to plough is no more. Therefore, there is equally no food since ploughing cannot be done.



Women performing Bukonkolo while the researcher looks on

Even the use of the pestle by implication suggests that women cannot work and now everything has come to a standstill. So as women pound or hit the pestle with sticks, it is a way of mourning. Melancholy songs which explore the gap left by the dead and how much that person is being missed by the relatives and friends punctuate the occasion. It can be argued that *Kuyabila* is a skill as it reflects the excellence of traditional wisdom, understanding, evaluating, processing, and creative language among the plateau Tonga. As for the valley Tonga, funeral songs accompanied with *Budima* drums and other instruments are also common. Such songs include what is known as *Nyeele*.

***Nyeele* Songs**

The valley Tonga, according to Siakavuba (1989, p. 9) are distinguished by the two outstanding practices called puberty rite and *Buntibe*. He defines *Buntibe* as a funeral dance performed during the funeral of an adult. There is, however, another art among the valley Tonga called *Nyeele* which is performed by blowing the horn while drums such as *Budima* is sounded. *Budima* are drums of the valley which are used specifically for funeral ceremonies. World Heritage Encyclopedia describes

the *Budima* as drums with a goblet shape and come in different sizes ranging from large to small. Among the drums used during the funeral, the lion drum (*Namalwa*), like their plateau Tonga counterparts, is used at traditional funerals. The *Buntibe* performance is characterised by high tones of happiness and in some instances displays a war-like spirit (p. 23). *Nyeele*, like *Buntibe*, is predominately associated with the valley Tonga. During the funeral, they play instruments made from animal horns called *Nyeele*. *Nyeele* songs are performed using an interlocking technique with individual musicians each playing a single horn and interlocking with other musicians who have *Nyeele* of different pitches. Usually *Nyeele* songs are usually instrumental with rare interpolations of chanting amidst instrumentals. Many other songs among the Tonga are sung during the funerals including the *Zitengulo* songs among the Ila and Tonga plateau mourners.

***Zitengulo* Songs**

Finnegan (2012) notes that women lament at funeral feasts and the *Zitengulo* songs among the Ila and Tonga of Zambia are sung by women mourners. These songs are only sung only once and are very short and compiled by a woman who mourns and thinks over the life's work of the deceased. She bases her song on this, starts to sing little by little, and adds words and melody until the song is complete (Jones, 1943, p. 15). Finnegan further argues that since *Zitengulo* songs usually involve wailing, sobbing and weeping, makes them particularly suitable for women as in the world at large, women are seen as the weaker sex who can freely express themselves emotionally in public. (Finnegan, 2012, p. 146). It is commonly held that women lament at funeral feasts and this probably explains why the *Zitengulo* songs among the Ila and Tonga of Zambia are sung by women mourners.

***Kalyaba* songs**

It is believed that *Kalyaba* was probably the most popular dance of the Batonga in the yesteryears. It can be played on different occasions such as funerals, initiation (*Nkolola*), and memorial service (*Mweesho*), and beer parties. It is performed by both men and women. During the performance of *Kalyaba*, two drums are placed at the Centre of the arena and the dancers dance in a circle while singing songs such as the one given by some respondents:

Ndabwene maanda aba taata acaala: I am seeing my father's homestead has remained

Acaala maanda The homestead has remained

Acaala They have remained

Acaala maanda The homestead have remained

Acaala They have remained

Ndabweene maanda aba taata acaala I am seeing my father's homestead has remained

Akaile kucaala maanda aba taata My father's homestead has just remained

Acaala. They have remained

Since losing a beloved one is sorrowful, such songs help to lighten the sorrowful occasion.

Ndikiti songs

Like *Kalyaba* songs, *ndikiti* could be performed at initiation as well as at funerals and beer parties. It is important, however, to note that *Ndikiti* seems to have been consigned to oblivion as it is no longer performed either at initiation or at funerals among the Tongas. At funerals, it was danced before the deceased was buried and at the actual burial. It was performed while encircling the grave and the drum was in the middle. The *Ndikiti* songs were also performed at a memorial service (*Mweesyö*). The songs and style of dancing at a funeral were performed to suit the sorrowful occasion. It is argued that *Ndikiti*'s lyrics were well developed compared to other simpler forms of Tonga singing. Some people say that *Ndikiti* is called by different names in different areas of Tongaland. For instance, *Haamatika*, *Mayanze*, and *Bukonkoolo* are such names.

Cikaambe-kaambe (Kukambilana) songs

Kukambilana or *Cikaambe-kaambe* was also said to be performed at initiation, funerals, and beer parties, in each case suiting the mood of the occasion. In the context of the funeral, the *Cikaambe-kaambe* was performed at the conclusion of the funeral by grandchildren to the deceased clad in the deceased's clothes. The dancers formed a circle then each one would enter in turn to dance. Songs are sung as they clap for them while two drums are beaten (a small one and a big one) and in the process, contributions are made and donated to the widow or widower to lighten the burden. It is also a way of helping by picking it up from where the deceased has left. The performance is usually punctuated with happiness to celebrate the life of the deceased and the occasion is also meant to make the widow or widower forget about the loss. Some scholars have submitted that *Cikaambe-kaambe (Kukambilana)* was characterised by mimics. The dancer would mimic people or animals, usually in amusing situations. Songs such as the one below were performed as given by some respondents in Gwembe valley:

<i>Uma Ngoma muume lubayi, yaa</i>	Slap the one drumming
<i>Oyaaya oyaaya oyaaya, yaa x 2</i>	<i>Oyaaya oyaaya oyaaya, yaa x 2</i>
<i>Uma Ngoma muume lubayi, yaa</i>	Slap the one drumming
<i>Sena mwalya, peepe, peepe x 2</i>	Have you eaten? No, no, x 2
<i>Cisondele, Hoka! Hoka!</i>	Look at it, Hoka! Hoka!

Apart from such songs as *Kukambilana*, Tonga people perform what is known as *Kweema* songs.

Kweema songs

Kweema is a form of poetry that is performed at a funeral and it implores, commemorates, and venerates even those who have died before. Like *Kuyabila*,

Kweema is accompanied by the friction drum (the Lion drum) locally known as *Namalwa*. *Kweema* is performed when people have gathered at the funeral house. The performer who is usually alone eulogises the deceased by outlining all the good things he or she used to do (*Kutembaula*). In a nutshell, *Kweema* expose the mourners to the life history of the deceased. Through *Kweema*, one gets to know more about the personality of the deceased.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that funeral songs abound in Tongaland and they occupy a special niche in the lives of the Tonga people. A number of songs are performed when death strikes in the village. These songs include *Kuyabila*, *Kuzemba*, *Bukonkoolo*, *Nyeele* and *Zitengulo* songs. The beauty of these funeral dirges is that they are sung spontaneously by expressing the inner experienced feelings which could be either exciting or sorrowful but at the same time provide a therapeutic function to the deceased family. Funeral songs among the Tonga are an expression of the social fabric of the culture and act as a path to understanding the Tonga people.

The article has also shown how significant funeral songs are among the Tonga people of the southern province in Zambia. We have seen that dirges or laments in the form of songs or poetry are used as a means of consoling bereaved families. These songs are part of the Tonga culture and as such, help us understand the Tongas. In addition, the songs demonstrate an element of gender. There are some songs that are gender-natural or may be song by both men and women depending on the occasion. On the other hand, also depending on the occasion or context, there are songs that are preserve of women. They reflect gender roles (see also: Boahen, 1987; Barry, 2002; Chilala, 2003).

The songs discussed in the study, as is the case with other such songs in the African context, are authentic expressions of African verbal art. Unlike rhymed forms of poetry which African poets have appropriated from western forms of artistic expressions (Chilala, Caliban, on the subject of appropriation of language in African literary works). The western writing traditions may be traced back to ancient Greece when poets such as Homer produced *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* (Bulfinch, 1979; Evslin *et al*, 1967). However, African writing traditions may not be detached from African folklore which influences even appropriated western forms of writing to create writing traditions associated with particular African societies (Chilala, Tradition or Transition?) These songs are therefore not only important as a form to be studied but also as an art form to be included in narratives as is the case with *Things Fall Apart* (1958) when Chinua Achebe includes some songs and oral narratives from Ibo folklore.

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