

Research Paper - Lis Addison
Listening to the Local
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May 27, 2016

**The influence of the Catholic Church on the Circle Song/Dances
Of the Kamba Community in Matetani Village, Kenya**

A crisp \$100 bill paid the visa that got me into Africa. Shortly thereafter while struggling with my duffle, I was met by David Mutinda, Project Manager at the Green Belt Movement (GBM). GBM, formerly the Kenyan Women's Council, was founded by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, PhD, and has been responsible for planting 70 million trees in Kenya since 1978. The movement has been mobilizing rural communities for nearly 40 years to restore their landscapes by planting trees for food, for fuel and to bring barren land back to productive life. It also supports women's empowerment by teaching advanced farming methods and business skills. Maathai's staff in association with the Forestry Department has worked with many rural communities such as the Kamba, Kikuyu, Chuka and Chaga.

I travelled to Kenya not only to go on a tree-planting Eco Safari with GBM, but also on a personal mission: to explore the circle dance song tradition of communities in rural villages. My aim was to experience them in the context of Kenyan rural life, to deepen my understanding of that tradition and make an analysis of how and why it has transformed in the last 100 years. In the following pages, I will retrace my steps and attempt to answer some questions that arose after staying in Matetani, my favorite village on the journey. Are these dance songs, in which participants sing and dance simultaneously in a non-performance setting, a dying art form? Have they been shaped by the presence of the Catholic Church in Matetani Village? Do circle dance songs represent an important style of behavior that is being altered due to the differing attitudes of the Catholic Church?

Mutinda¹ and I had emailed at length about my interest and he kindly set up a personalized trip with two other women - a European and a Canadian - that allowed me to embark upon my self-styled research. A few days later, we were on our way to the Kamba Community of Matetani Village, in the Kangundo District of Machakos County, Kenya. This region, also known as Ukambani or Kambaland, is about 100 miles east of Nairobi. Ukambani is approximately 600 square miles of highlands bordered by Kitui on the east and Machakos to the southwest. The Kamba Community, also called Akamba, is the 5th largest tribe in Kenya. The language spoken is Kikamba. The majority are Christians (www.kenya-information-guide.com/kenya) and 15% of those are Roman Catholic. The people I stayed with in Matetani were Catholic.



Kamba woman circa 1910 (Hobley, Plate 11)

Prior to contact with Europeans at the end of the 19th century, Kamba men hunted, herded cattle and carved, and the women bore children, wove and farmed. Today, the women of Matetani still run the farms, but also pool their money from crop sales

¹ David Mutinda, called Mutinda by his friends, has been extremely generous with his time and information and I am utterly grateful to him. He has become a friend and colleague. In 2013 we created the Africa KiVo Project together, which has resulted in the planting of 1900 fruit and Indigenous trees at Kangundo Primary School, near Matetani. This project was established to thank the women of Matetani for sharing their dance-songs with me.

and run a business together, renting Rubbermaid chairs to organizers of civic and church events. I observed few men in Matetani and was told that most of them were away working in Nairobi, or in the military.

We arrived in Matetani late in the day after passing through the Kangundo town market where the Kamba women buy and sell food, charge their cell phones and go to the hair salon. Matetani didn't look like a village to me, but rather a collection of farms and homes on gently sloping hillsides. The homes, constructed of hand made bricks and corrugated roofs, were separated by fields pregnant with mangoes and delineated by rutty dirt roads, like the one we were bouncing along. Mt. Kenya loomed somewhere above us in the fog and forests ahead. These were the Kenyan Highlands, sometimes denuded, sometimes lush and green.

The dirt road leads us to a group of elder Kamba women waiting in the road for our arrival. Mutinda had given them a heads up on the cell phone, since we were late. As soon as we step out of the jeep they begin a joyous welcome song. Nzule, the leader of this song is the Ngui (Soloist) and the others respond in a call and response fashion. Nzule wears a white lace scarf tied behind her head, a new, hand-sewn green button down blouse with a broad white collar, a cloth of brown, tan and cream tied around her waist (which others also wear to delineate the GBM group to which they belong, and an old pair of Vans. She stays at the center of the circle, while the rest of us dance around the perimeter.



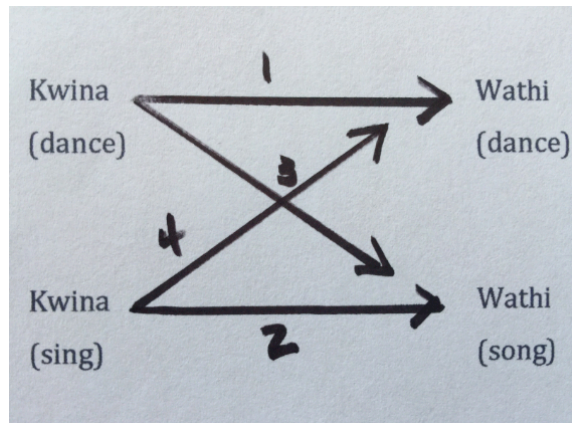
Nzule (in green) at center of circle

One woman parts the circle and walks down the dirt driveway in rhythmical steps. We all follow, stepping in unison. I do my best to catch the choreography and while I usually pick rhythms up quickly, was confounded by the pattern. The women stepped on their right foot 3 times in a row: 1and(right foot), 2(right foot), and(right foot), 3and(left foot-clap left), 4and(right foot-clap right) and it takes some time before I figure it out and do it with them. Some women swing their feet, while others put their weight down, so there were variations among the group and it wasn't clear whose version I should follow. I later learned this dance-song was "Kwatakatalu."



Feet of the Kamba Women dancing Kwakakatulu

Across Africa, song and dance are performed simultaneously. As a musician and dancer who has created a dance-song technique called KiVo, short for Kinetic Voice, I am fascinated by this trend. Anthropologists refer to these practices as "dance-songs," so I am adopting that terminology here. Coplan, a social anthropologist at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, explains dance-songs of the Basotho: "The domain of sounding (*ho luma*) matches and overlaps the domain of acting or doing (*ho etsa*), which includes dance . . . The highest category consists of dance-songs . . . songs sung with the feet" (Coplan 1994, 208). In Kikamba, Kwina, means to dance or sing and Wathi means a dance or song. In a Kwina Wathi it is possible to dance a dance, sing a song, dance a song and sing a dance (Kavyu 1972, 3):



In my experience, aside from the welcome processions, Kamba dance-songs were performed in a circle, however, not all dance-songs are. The circle formation is part of the larger tradition. Dance-songs may start in a circle, but will turn into lines depending on the style of movement and number of participants. Circles are meant for small intimate groups (Mutinda, David. 15).

As we sing a Kwina Wathi with the Kamba women, we make our way to a grassy area shaded by two broad-leafed trees. Corn and other crops grow behind them. A tawny colored calf crunches hay in a large pen, which is a hole dug out of the

ubiquitous red earth. Rimming the perimeter above the calf is a fence of hand-hewn poles. Above that, clean laundry hangs from a line between the trees and swings in the afternoon breeze. Two brick buildings (I later surmised were homes) rim the cozy scene and it is from one of these neat and tidy handmade structures that the women bring out food. Chai in big spouted thermoses and pots of arrowroot, pumpkin (malonga) and sweet potatoes are placed on a wooden table covered with a pink cloth. Behind the table sit five Rubbermaid chairs for the five guests. Mugs, still dripping from their wash in boiling water from the well at Regina's house, are nestled inside a plastic tub while the food stays warm inside insulated containers.

A young woman wearing a bright green and black hat plays a single drum that rests on a black, iron stand. The drum is painted red, black, white and green. She plays the rim and the side of the drum with a drumstick and hits the head with her hand. She has a killer, steady rhythm. While she plays, little children lean against the brick walls of the houses to watch us, while a young woman from the Mother's group begins the welcome song, which starts, this time, in English.



When the women are expecting guests, it is customary for them to bring out their songs. This Welcome Song is joyous and we are invited to sing in unison while doing movements on our shoulders, chests and waists. Each guest is brought into the circle to be welcomed personally. Mutinda, being Kamba and being familiar, goes by himself but the other guests are paired with a member of the community: Peter with Elizabeth, Francine with Regina, Lauren with one of the young Mothers. When it is my turn, I am paired with Elizabeth. So far, none of the guests have gotten the choreography correct, but I get it right on my turn, so they give a shout, a laugh and a special nod of appreciation and raise their hands toward me. ²

We walk up to Regina's compound where we are to stay with a step tap, step tap. We are led by Victoria, the director of the Kamba Women's Church Choir and singers dressed in blue, white and brown outfits that identify them as the Young Mothers GBM Group. Victoria sings a melody while the others reply in three-part harmony unlike the traditional song Nzule led which was in unison or at the octave. The drummer keeps a steady beat for us. When we reach Regina's compound, the Choir launches into another song that again has three-part harmony and a few simple movements that look like flute playing and kick stepping, but it is different from Nzule's song. At the end of a phrase, they clap on the 3rd beat, en masse and in unison.

Afterward, the young women sit in a circle and serenade us with three beautiful Kamba Hymns in three-part harmony, while Victoria plays the drum. These songs Mimi Mtumishi Wako (I Am Your Servant), Natamani Kuingia Kwake Bwana (I

² I feel welcomed, at home and included like never before, by the song and gestures. I experience first hand how dance and song move beyond entertainment and into the realm of ceremony. This greeting changes me from a stranger to a friend. It feels authentic to the Kamba, not a western salutation.

Desire To Enter In The House Of The Lord) and Jooni (Let All Come) are sung in a lively, yet more subdued manner than the earlier songs.



The Kamba Women's Choir (and GBMs Young Mother's Group)

As we prepare dinner outside on the pounded earth, Nzule stops shelling soybeans and from her Rubbermaid chair, with beans still in her right hand, begins to sing and move rhythmically in the chair. Her voice and body are one, and that voice-rich, low and raspy-reaches across the compound where the others are also preparing food. They begin, as if on cue, to step together in a circle, clapping and dancing in simultaneous rhythm. Nzule stands up and joins them in the dance-song, still the skilled Ngui she was in her youth when she performed traditional dance-songs of the Kamba for Founding Father Jomo Kenyatta and other delegates, in the 60's. At that moment in time when the entire world was involved in social change, Nzule was part of a movement to bring African pride to the new country of Kenya, now ruled by Africans and not colonists.



Nzule singing with soybeans in her hand

I later ask Mutinda why the older women sang more traditional sounding Kwina Wathi and younger women sang Church Mwali (songs sung without movement). He said that the older ones "grew up at a time when the traditional way of dancing and doing the music was still vital, but the younger ones grew up in a time when all that had passed, so they are used to the Christian way of life. What they have seen is what is done in the Church. So the older ones are restless because they used to dance around when they were young. Even if they are going to Church they used to do the traditional music. So it's still in them," (Mutinda, David, 2016, 9).

French and Irish Catholic Missionaries arrived in East Africa at the end of the 19th century. By the 1920s missionaries were well established and it was during his decade the Kamba dance-songs started disappearing (Kavyu, 1973, 1). While traditional songs remain in the memories and bodies of the elders, many have been changed or modified and two in particular have been lost completely. The first, Ngoma, has not been performed since the 1920s. The word Ngoma has two meanings: drum and spirit. The word drum is spoken on a monotone, but the word spirit, rises in pitch on the second syllable. (Kavyu, 1973, 7)

The Ngoma dance-song was practiced to clear spirits when someone was possessed. According to Kavyu, those possessed were typically women. Both good and bad spirits could enter a host. Good spirits chose certain women to communicate

through. Bad spirits possessed a host with nothing to communicate, but left the host twitching or even crying. The Medicine Man (Mundu Mue) would visit the home of the possessed to arrange for treatment and fees. Treatment consisted of singing to the spirits connected to that which had entered the host, or to other spirits. Then women would join the dance-song. Dancers could become temporarily possessed so women sometimes chose to stay away from the ceremony. Afterward, a gift was given to the spirit in the form of ghee, a goat, bulls, etc. Ngoma lasted for four days and included a sacrifice on the third day. The meat was thrown away, not eaten.

Mundu Mue, dubbed Witch Doctors by the missionaries in the early 20th century were considered to be the "greatest obstacle to Missionary work" (Evanson, 1991, 120). They were accused of practicing evil and carrying bitter medicines and instruments of torture. Missionaries felt they had to subdue or discredit the Mundu Mue in order to Christianize the people. It is likely they banned practices like the Ngoma as a way to do so. Medicine Men and Witch Doctors were lumped into one evil personality; however, Medicine Men did not work exclusively in the realms of magic. They were dreamers and seers that could see and solve social and health challenges for their people and they knew the herbs and trees that cured people and livestock. Even today, they sing songs and beat instruments that take them to the spirit world where they have power to diagnose (Skype conversation with Mutinda, May, 2016).

Mbalya, formerly a popular dance-song performed throughout Ukambani, has been non-existent since the 20s. Mbalya was a courtship dance that had a strict time for performance. It was not to be done between the start of the short rains and up to the early harvest. Young men and women, ages seventeen to thirty, danced Mbalya, but married men had more freedom to dance than women. Young married women could not dance.³ Forty to fifty dancers would form two lines that faced each other, one for

³ Author's Note: Prior to the arrival of the Christians, the Kamba practiced polygamy. My theory is that since Mbalya could have been a place where married men discovered additional wives, it was banned by the Church.

men and one for women. The men lined up first, then the women, making their lines opposite those with whom they wanted to dance. This was a way of choosing a partner that led to friendship and then to marriage. The men sang boasting songs and short poems to attract the women's attention (Kavyu, 1972, 9-10).

Courtship dance-songs were still in practice during the 60s. Students would meet at dance performances and competitions, which were performed in outdoor arenas. Dancers were considered to be lovers rather than scholars but were enticed to opt out of the traditional way of life and adopt modern ways (Mutinda, David. 2016, 17). By the 70s and 80s, students were going to schools run by the missions, and learning different social practices.

A traditional dance-song that is still active is Kilumi. Also called Kilumi Kikamba or Kilumindi, it is a spiritual-religious dance-song that releases spirits. The people dance until the spirit leaves them. Until the mid 1940s, Kilumi played a part in a big ceremony on days of offering, to the goddess Lala. Lala, the goddess of rain was believed to live beneath two pools of water under Mututi hill in the Kitui district. She controlled the rain and informed people when to expect it. The Mundu Mue would make offerings to the rain, to purify people and bless crops. When the dance stopped, the woman Lala had entered, would tell the people how and what to plant as directed by Lala. Then they would sing pleasant songs to Lala and escort her as she went home.⁴ Traditionally, Kilumi Ngui were also required to be Mundu Mue, dancers, instrumentalists and poets (Kavyu, 1973, 2).

According to Hobley's accounts from 1910, the performers of Kilumi were solely old women who had borne more than one child. If a woman who had had only one child joined the group, it would "break up in confusion" (Hobley, 1910, 53) and the

⁴ Author's Note: Given the practice of hiding information from Mzungu (white person) inside songs, my conjecture is that the Kamba may have hidden the spirit cleansing aspect of Ngoma inside Kilumi to hide it from the Church. Kilumi blessed crops so it may have been less fierce and therefore more palatable to the Church.

dancers would loot her property. During a Kilumi, women might fall into a cataleptic trance.

Dance-songs are also shared for entertainment and instruction. Following is a translation of such a song:

"Those who do not come to join us and do whatever we are doing, they are the people who are causing trouble in the Village, stealing chicken from others, bothering the security person, our leaders, who are in charge of this place, because they are trouble-makers. They are stealing chickens from others because they do not work." (Field Notes, 2016)

In Colonial times dance-songs of that nature were used as a sort of code. The people would come together when they wanted the community to know certain things. They'd take a traditional song and change the words, like "Don't steal the oranges of the Mzungu . . . The Mzungu (white person) thinks that 'these are the natives doing their own stuff' but they're communicating!" (Mutinda, David. 2016, 18-19).



Mutinda translates a song about stealing chickens.

On the night before my departure, I help wash the dinner dishes in big plastic tubs and set them out to dry on a rack near the cow. Kevin and Jacqueline, Ann's 11 year-old twins come outside with a bunch of other kids. We sing and talk and then Kevin brings out the drum and plays the same steady rhythm we had heard when the Mother's group played. We dance for an hour behind the clothesline which acts as a curtain that sets our stage, sharing moves and laughing like crazy. It was a bonding moment! The next day Elizabeth sings a song to me "Lis is official. She's not here slacking and taking other people's cattle."



With my friend Lorna, Lauren and the children

When it is time to leave, I don't want to go. The people, the land and the dance-songs have made me feel at home. The circles I enjoyed were more than just entertaining, educating and welcoming past times. They were a joyful, shared experience that built community and it was an honor to be included. Sadly, these dance-songs are at risk of being lost. Nzule and her group are occasionally invited to schools to teach them, but doing so requires a budget and a syllabus to support it. And though the Kamba Choir is creating a new and beautiful hybrid form of Kamba and Western music, dance-songs do not seem to be a part of their repertoire.

Though many factors of contact with western society have caused the change in Kamba traditions, the Catholic Church, being so well established in Matetani, can be said to be the root cause for the decline of the dance-song tradition. While the Church and colonialism came hand in hand, the Catholic Church had an investment in banning or demonizing those dance-songs that were perceived as witchcraft so they could Christianize the Kamba community members. Throughout the 20th century, as Christianity gained a stronghold on the lives and psyches of the people, the children learned new traditions. Simultaneously, the elders died without passing on earlier traditions. Soon, radio, tapes, CDs and the Internet would provide new sources of entertainment and compete with the old ways.

But there is a light on the horizon for the dance-song tradition. Today, we see a resurgence of interest in global Indigenous traditions. This interest extends from wisdom about farming methods, to solving social and health challenges, to spirituality. There is the potential that dance-songs may be resurrected by the Kamba and others in the world, like me, as part of education, spiritual ceremonies, courtship, rites of passage, entertainment, and good old-fashioned fun.



Victoria (left), Kamba Women's Choir Members, Regina (right)

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