



The Line between Traditional Dances and Bongo Fleva: a Case Study of Youth Participation in Dance Groups in Tanzania

Daines Nicodem Sanga

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ABSTRACT

This paper development of traditional dances in Tanzania by using the lens of youth involved in performance activities. The paper uses firsthand information from four dance groups; Livangala, Lumumba, UMATI and Bongo fleva artists to argue against less participation of youth in dance. The paper revealed that culture; economic and administrative factors undermine the motivation of youth to participate in traditional dances and, thus, increased their enthusiasm in Bongo fleva. The paper offers a critical analysis of challenges that youth faced in traditional dances and how such challenges forced them to turn their interests to Bongo fleva. Following the shift of interests from traditional dances to Bongo fleva, the paper suggests for social, economic and political transformation to increase the participation of youth in dance.

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Introduction

Much has been done pertaining to youth and new culture in Tanzania. This is particularly Hip-hop and Bongo fleva. Efforts have been done to trace the history of Bongo fleva and its role in shaping youth identities and bringing change to Tanzania society (Suriano 2006, Suriano 2007, Birgit 2008, Birgit 2003, Omari 2009). Besides above studies, much works have been done to explore the role of Bongo fleva in politics (Reuster-Jahn 2005, Birgit 2005), and the function of Bongo fleva as an industry with special attention to youth's investment in relationships as a method of achieving success (Reuster-Jahn 2007). Moreover, researchers have made inventiveness to analyse forms and content of Bongo fleva music, above all, the connection of it to traditional culture (Birgit 2003, Reuster-Jahn 2007). Turning to traditional dances, Studies have been conducted to explore the continuity and change of traditional dances, analysis of form and content, movements and formations in traditional dances (Kaduma, 1972, Kapingu 1990, Songoyi 2005). An evolution of traditional dances from societal to commercial tool and choreographic changes as an outcome of this shift was also explored by Songoyi 1988 and Makoye 1996. In 2009, Browning conducted her study on the subject of traditional dance. Her study was mainly on transformation of Tanzania traditional dances as a result of westernization and globalization. Edmondson 2001 explored the manifestation of female body in Tanzania traditional dances in feminine point of view. Through female dance movements she reveals the low status of women in Tanzania as an erotic device.

Notwithstanding a plenty of studies conducted on the subject of traditional dances and Bongo fleva, scant attention has been paid to find out the participation of youth in traditional dances in comparison to Bongo fleva. The issue of concerns in this paper is, therefore, to examine youth's participation in traditional dances, factors that hold back their participation in dance and, thus, increase their membership in Bongo fleva. The intention of this paper is to disclose the factors which subvert the participation of youth in dance which we posit are unnoticed yet.

This paper uses first hand information gathered between the year 2010 and 2012 with Livangala, Tanangozi, UMATI and Lumumba dance groups, of which the current two groups located in Iringa countryside whereas the later two situated in town centres. To be more precise, Iringa and Dar es Salaam. Information concerning Bongo fleva was assembled through interviews with Bongo fleva musicians, online sources ranging from you-tube and several blogs established by various individuals on and about Bongo fleva. Information from you-tube and blogs is handled informally as unofficial sources. The paper was once presented in the international Swahili colloquium which took place at Bayreuth University in Germany between 17th and 20th of May, 2012.

To start the discussion, it is vital to provide a snapshot of what it means to be a youth in Tanzania and the meaning of the term tradition and Bongo fleva as it is applied throughout this paper.

Who is the Youth in Tanzania

According to African youth Charter youth is referred to one whose age ranges 15 and 35 (2006:3). Tanzania Youth Development Policy suggests that youth is anyone between 18 and 24 years (1996: 5). This definition, though, needs to be reviewed for the reason that it was just adopted a UN definition without taking into account the reality that is currently on the ground. A common understanding of youth in Tanzania goes beyond a life course perspective to include anyone whose survival depends upon his/her parents irrespective of the age. In other words, an individual who does not have a family is categorized as youth (Reuster-Jahn 2007:226) even if his/her age exceeds 45. In some context being a youth depends upon individuals and the way they portray themselves in a society. When an old person resemble youth in either one or two of the following deeds; clothing style, hair cutting style, movements and language, might be at risk of being labelled as youth with the special name of *mzee-kijana* (an elderly-youth), the name which always has a negative connotation since it is taken to be a symbol of an individual who, due to different reasons including culture, was not able to experience his/her youthful and therefore trying to make it in the course of adulthood. Following

the categorization of youth in a life course perspective, we argue that similar to the concept of gender and race, the concept of youth is socially constructed (Falk and Falk, 2005:67), consequently, cannot be merely adopted or generalized. For the context of this paper youth is the one who begins to consider him/her as youth and being able to act out this consciousness. Youth dancers and Bongo fleva musicians are regarded as youth for their courage to join groups and sustain a living through such involvements.

Dilemma of the Term Tradition

Besides the concept of youth, it is essential for the term tradition to also be explained and what it means for this paper due to the fact that this term is repeatedly seen problematic in perceptions. In many situations somewhat traditional is continually linked to conservatism, barbarism, and old fashioned behaviour and practices which makes civilization process not viable (Huntington 1993). However, it was suggested that, when one culture is identified tradition and the other modern it is significant to ask several questions ranging from; who identifies it? From which perspective? For whose interests? More importantly, the source of criteria for identification (Santos 2006). It was argued that the concept of tradition is a western intellectual concept which was coined not just to justify other cultures as ill-fated cultures but also to authorize western culture as a global culture (Hatar 2001). It is within this line where Santos argued that classifying some cultures as 'other' while certain cultures as high class cultures shall be viewed as ignorance and those who have such thinking need to seeking knowledge about culture before reaching a universal justification (2006:18). We are extremely aware that some of traditions are problematic and therefore, need to be discouraged. Towards resolving this, undoubtedly, there are countless policies which deal with eliminating problems varying from early marriages, FGM, polygamy and many others (WYR 2007) in Africa, India and elsewhere where problems exist.

However, similar to other cultural practices, some traditions, traditional dances for the case of this paper, need to be recognized for the reason that they played a great role during the pre-colonial era, during struggle for independency and are currently useful in mobilising developmental issues. Mlama (1991) is in the view that projects which habitually ignore the vital aspect of traditions of the people constantly achieve mysterious failure. In this respect we argue that failure to recognize other traditions and customs has to be perceived as a sign of ignorance which hampers individuals to celebrate diversities as a outcome of global interactions

For the purpose of this paper the concept of tradition does not mean an exactly reproduction of the past. Tradition for this paper is somewhat characterized by continuous change and modification of the past experience to suit the current needs and interests (Hammer 1992:398) of people who leaves today. Much has been done pertaining to youth and new culture in Tanzania. This is particularly Hip-hop and Bongo fleva. Efforts have been done to trace the history of Bongo fleva and its role in shaping youth identities and bringing change to Tanzania society (Suriano 2006, Suriano 2007, Birgit 2008, Birgit 2003, Omari 2009). Besides above studies, much works have been done to explore the role of Bongo fleva in politics (Reuster-Jahn 2005, Birgit 2005), and the function of Bongo fleva as an industry with special attention to youth's investment in relationships as a method of achieving success (Reuster-Jahn 2007). Moreover, researchers have made inventiveness to analyse forms and content of Bongo fleva music, above all, the connection of it to

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Conceptualizing Bongo Fleva

The name Bongo fleva which is also called music of new generation was formed by combining two terms. Bongo is a Swahili word which means brain and fleva is an English term borrowed from English expression "flavor" to mean *radha ya hapahapa* or *radha ya nyumbani* / a taste from home (despite the penalty that it fuses together elements varying from Hip hop, R&B, Zouk, Reggae, Congolese Bolingo and Indian music (Suriano 2006, Reuster-Jahn and Hacke 2011). Bongo was derived from a word *ubongo* which initially meant people living in Dar es Salaam. The word came out to justify that surviving in

Dar es Salaam is not an easy task. One needs an active brain to sustain living unlike in countryside where farming activities and a support from one another can, without doubt, assist one to sustain living even without the use of intelligence. Linking the idea of *ubongo* (brain) and Dar es Salaam, there is an ongoing proverb which states that living in Dar es Salaam is form six by itself. Such a proverb signifies that since Dar es Salaam is the city where no farms or any service available for free, an individual qualifies to be considered a graduate of Advanced level once he/she manages to survive in Dar es Salaam. Bongo fleva is also called Bongo clever to mean a carrier of the clever few and, not at all, profession of everybody. It is conceived that the name Bongo clever is a product of rapid increase of artists (Reuster-Jahn 2008:44), who some of whom are completely incompetent in the field but they force to enter the carrier because of the belief that it is among carriers which are straightforward enough to be managed by everyone.

Having conceptualized the terms, in the next part we offer an insight regarding how traditional dances travelled successful from one generation to the next during the pre-colonial era. We assume that this discussion may possibly offer a background image of why there is a rapid decrease of youth participation in dance.

Youth and Traditional Dances in the Pre-colonial Tanzania

In Tanzania similar to any African country in the pre-colonial era, people learned to dance from their childhood. It happened involuntarily as mothers in Africa tended to carry infants and very young children on their back in social activities including cultural gatherings. Funeral and harvest ceremonies constitute examples of cultural activities which parents taught their children to dance by dancing with them on their backs (Nketia, 1992:60). Following such a tendency, youth as they crossed frontiers to the adulthood were likely to possess a practical knowledge as an outcome of this early experience. Being a youth in a pre-colonial society had its own connotation. Commonly, the concept of youth meant someone submissive, respective and passive receptor of culture (Riccio, 2001:137). Such a condition, therefore, signified a need for supplementary training to enable unskilled youth gain proficiency in dancing.

In contrast, the older generation were taken to be experts, active participants of traditional dances and their role was to guarantee the transmission of dances from one cohort to the next (Semali 1999; Riccio 2001). It was possible for the reason that youth of the pre-colonial era, their socialization to culture depended much upon the older generation (Muchira, 2001:2). The role of preparing youth to get used to traditional dances was the responsibility of the whole society apart from uncle, cousin, niece, and nephew. In absence of biological mother an African child was likely to be raised by the neighbour and taught all necessary values (Dike 2004:85) including the art of dancing. Involvement of youth in traditional dances was not a choice but rather a necessary step for every youth to acquire knowledge, skills and moral values of a society in question. Through their involvement in traditional dances community was able to know them better and select for them the best choice for their future through critical analysis of feelings, thoughts and mood during the act of dancing (Muchira 2001:5). It is through dancing where youth's careers were revealed, nurtured, and later, internalized in youth's actual lives. In this way, dance was seen as an institution on itself which had power to determine youth's future.

Irrespective of the fact that traditional dances were smoothly handled down from generation to generation, currently

the situation is quite different. Most of youth their interest are on transit to Bongo fleva; the next part then, discusses the factors behind such a transition. Involving in such a discussion, we will be elucidating between the two.

From Traditional Dances to Bongo fleva: the Authentic Challenge

Authenticity refers to an act of being sincere to the source. However in the face of transformation, something authentic seems to be not necessarily a copy of the origin, but rather somewhat flexible and negotiable (Peterson 1997:6). In the context of performance, for instance, Peterson cites that authenticity is an outcome of negotiation between performers, diverse commercial interests and fans. Basing on the changes that are increasingly taking place throughout the world and the demand which is currently in the market, it was contended that a performance to be authentic depends upon intended spectators (Thompson 2008). For performance that is prepared for both, local and international audience, for instance, a mixed performance which appeals to both groups is crucial. Such a truth may perhaps be supported by Taylor's view who also believes hybrid, in our time, is increasingly becoming a new authenticity.

The issue of authenticity was among constrains which faced youth who employed themselves as dancers. This was manifested during interviews with youth of UMATI Dance Group of Iringa municipal. They provided an example of when they were presenting their creative dance namely in *Simalanga* events. This dance was formulated by combining movements from Sindimba dance of southern Tanzania, Akasimbo dance from Haya ethnic group, Mdundiko from coastal region and series of movements from Bongo fleva and Hip-hop. The dance was censured by the older generation because of mixing variety of movements from diverse sources. It was censured on the basis of faithfulness and validity of it to Tanzania society. This is what Paulo, one of members of the group, who played a drumming role, said;

"Once we perform the *Simalanga* dance, some people say we combine movements from different ethnic groups together with Bongo fleva because we don't know tradition dances in their full length. It is the poor knowledge that makes us mix various steps altogether."

Discussion with youth from UMATI dance group showed that they combined various movements from different traditional dances to capture the interests of youth, older people, but even children who, many of whom, have certainly not been exposed to traditional dances but only modern styles aired through TVs and other current media such as You-tube. They argued that combining both movements, modern and traditional was a means to help new generation learn their own culture because of seeing some movements with which they are also familiar. Youth showed to have a sort of disappointment from adult generation due to challenges they faced as towards making traditional dances suit the current realities.

Indeed, there is a battle between older and younger generation concerning the issue of authenticity in traditional dances. Whilst younger generation strive for change, the older generation strive for retention. Through interview some elders discovered such a move. Interview with mzee Fabian Kalinga, an old man of 85 from Tanangozi located in Iringa countryside, shades light on the matter. This is what he commented,

"Combining modern values into traditional dance is nothing rather than muddying traditional dances. It is symbol of *ulimbukeni* of some youth who think that every practice from

the west is the best. Youth in our groups do not hold such a power."

(Mr. F. Kalinga, July 2012, own translation)

Drawing from mzee Fabian we learn that the older generation is reluctant to accept transformations especially those established by the youth in traditional dances, somewhat confirmed by Munoz and Marin (2006) who also cite that it is normal to see something introduced by the youth in culture to be considered pessimistically as a buying-off of culture or cultural illiterate (Suriano 2006, Suriano 2007).

Basing on this fact, we argue that, it is the authenticity challenge that pulls into Bongo fleva to escape challenges; the practice we think does not predict a good future of traditional dances in Tanzania.

Administrative and economic Exclusion of Youth in Dance Groups

Besides the challenge of authenticity, youth working as dancers face a challenge of exclusion in groups particularly in groups where youth work jointly with adults, somewhat observed by Landson (2005:1) who supports that in groups where youth work in collaboration with adults youth are often seen than heard. In other words, they were not given opportunity to demonstrate potentials as being and becoming leaders.

In Both groups, Livangala and Tanangozi dance, involvement of youth in leading roles was extremely limited. In Livangala Dance Group the act of selecting leaders was never done since 1989. Virtually entire team of leaders was purely adults. The rationale for such a leadership system was well pronounced through village chairman statement. As he argued,

"We choose matured people to lead the group because youth are short tempered, result oriented and are not courageous to stay longer in a group, especially when results are not instant. We consider this attribute to be extremely dangerous for a survival of our group."

(Chesco Mwinuka, July 2012, own translation)

The situation was even worse in Tanangozi Dance Group. The chairman of the group, who was also the traditional healer in the village started to lead the group since early 19080s when the group was established. He was extremely old but he continued to lead the group on the ground that he was perceived stable and wise. No one had power to argue against him. We observed that once the question was asked and the chairman answered, none of them mentioned anything. However, less involvement of youth in leadership caused a serious problem on issues related to cash. In productions that the end result was money, youth were rarely selected. Adult dancers were given priority than youth dancers. Division of responsibilities in special performances may perhaps offer an interesting example of such a fiscal exclusion.

"*Kwenye maonyesho yanayoandaliawa hapa kijijini ambayo yanahusisha pesa, mara nyingi sisi hatupewi majukumu makubwa. Mara nyingi tunapewa kazi ya kuandaa onyesho kama vile kubeba ngoma mpaka sehemu ya onesho na kuwasaidia wachezaji katika uvaaji mavazi ya kuchezea ngoma.*"

"In performances which have connection with cash, we are often not involved in taking major roles. We are frequently given a role of preparing performances ranging from warming drums, carrying drums to the location and helping adults with putting on costumes which we found to be not enough."

(Mwalole, January 2010, my own translation)

Further discussion with youth shows that central roles varied from dancing in solos, music drumming and in some cases the dancing itself were chiefly done by adults members whereas very minor roles were given to youth. This situation caused youth to earn lower while their counterpart earn higher since the earnings were divided not on the equal basis but on the basis of the workload carried by each members during the production.



Figure 1: A youth assisting adult performer to wear *Njuga* (small bells), source: field photo 2010

Because of this some youth had had their own Bongo fleva lyrics which they thought to record in future once they get money to do so. As one youth said,

Wenzetu wa Bongo fleva wanaenjoy bwana. Akitoa albam moja au mbili tu mambo yake yananyooka kinoma. Mtu anajenga, ananunua gari yenye akili na kupata pesa ya ziada kwa ajili ya kutoa albam nyingine.

Our fellow youth doing Bongo fleva are real enjoying. Once they manage to record one or two albums, often become well-off. They regularly buy expensive cars, build houses and save some money for recording more albums in the future. (Kauzeni, January 2012)

Despite the fact that youth take for granted that Bongo fleva is a shortcut of becoming rich, research shows two albums not necessarily a not a pre-condition of becoming rich (Reuster-jahn, May 2012),¹ but rather it depends with the degree the song may hit in the market.



Figure 2: Diamond's live show in Dar es Salaam. Reproduced with the permission of Abdalah Mrisho, a general Manager of Global Publishers

But since this notion is still in the mind of youth, majority do not believe that there is a straightforward means to transform life than involving in Bongo fleva. As a result majority of youth doing dance are on the view that they have made a wrong choice.

A Pass to Bongo Fleva: Dancers' Ill-fated Cooperation from key Figures

¹ Is a scholar who did number of studies on the subject of Bongo fleva. During the International Swahili Colloquium Conference, she contributed that it is wrong to think that to release one or two albums is a pre-condition for Bongo fleva for becoming rich.

Cooperation is central to any activity that aims at achieving better results. It was argued that cooperation facilitates members to be more effective and viable (Tyler and Blader (2000:2), which in turn assist them to be more productive in which they have been involved.

Despite the fact that cooperation helps people to be more productive and attain brilliant results, cooperation was a major constrain to youth working as dancers. Youth dancers explained the poor cooperation they were receiving top officials who had power who they thought could smoothly connect them to the market.

It is the youth from UMATI dance Group who explained distress that they repetitively face from cultural officers of the Iringa Municipal who used their energy for their own gains. A one female youth, who was also a mother of three months baby confirmed,

“The lack of cooperation between us and cultural officers make us to suffer as we do. We sometimes connected to customers through Cultural officers. Once they receive the money they give us very little. We are very sure that they are given an adequate amount to pay us they pay us very little instead. Once we attempt to bargain for an increase of performance charges, they don't bother. What they do is to simply assign another. Because of hunger people agree. This is real absurd.

(Subira, July 2012, own translation)

Problem which youth dancers increasingly experience, on one hand, and the success which some Bongo fleva musician acquire which more and more exceeds financial gains, increasingly set a positive image of Bongo fleva in the minds of the younger generation while on another hand the establish negative image of traditional dances. Success of Joseph Mbilinyi (Sugu) who is now a member of parliament of Mbeya city through an opposition ticket of *Chama cha Demokrasia* (CHADEMA) may be used here as an example to illustrate the point. Through his songs which were purely political he was able to defeat his opponent irrespective of the fact that it was not an easy task. As a result majority of youth are on believe than Bongo fleva is a pathway to political is currently a new pathway for the youth to gain political office and financial gains. Interview with one Bongo fleva musician provide a general impression of Bongo fleva versus traditional dances.

“I cannot engage in traditional dances. I have a family. I have to feed them. To feed the family I need money. Have you ever heard about traditional dancer who became success through dancing traditional dance? Bongo fleva is now in chart. After all, the government itself does not care about it, who you think will care for it?”

Concluding Remarks: How do we Confiscate this Line?

We eventually argue that since both genres play significant in youth's lives, we persuasively suggest that existence of both genres for economic and cultural good of Tanzania society. Following the problem which younger generation faced particularly those involved in traditional dances, we will try to offer some possible solutions. To begin with authenticity,

In case of authenticity which was seen we encourage society to bear in mind that there nothing authentic in the world that is changing over time. Perhaps here we have to also remind the older generation the Baba wa Taifa statement who argued in the very beginning of his leadership that countries should be open to learn from other cultures. A country which is not ready to do so must be regarded as an idiot. In this sense hybridity should be taken as a means where culture enriches from one

another to enable growth of cultures. Although we suggest that it should be done with all attention.

For a problem of poor payments as result of exploitation cultural officers, we suggest a serious involvement of BASATA to take up responsibility of setting up a guideline for which youth will probably use in their groups as most of youth involved in these groups have a less exposure in education which could help the in bargaining for their rights. encouraging groups to set guidelines which could enable youth earning living through dance enjoy their professional. We are positively sure that such an opportunity will give them a room to bargain regarding prices, more importantly, will become aware of terms, conditions and financial benefits of signing contracts.

Dealing with problem of exclusion, we finally argue that groups, whether in rural or urban, should formulate constitution that could guide them in handling issues. Constitution will make possible justice to be made to all members regardless of their ages.

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