From cultural aesthetic to performance technique: continuities and contrasts in improvisational milieux of Vimbuza and Jazz*

Watson Msosa

Introduction

A broad-based survey of Malawian dances that I undertook several years ago aimed rather ambitiously to identify persistent regional forms of these dances as well as their governing aesthetic(s). In the course of the field work, a recurrent question emerged: how do we approach dance as cultural performance? Alternatively, how do we approach dance as performance embedded in (or overarching) other social performances?

Available literature on Malawian dance offered no definite clues. For one, writers laid no specific claims to familiarity with dance as a discipline of study. The technical contribution tended to emerge from musicologists such as Kubik (1970), (1984), Tracy (1972) van Zanten (1980) Friedson (1996), Strumpf (1983), whose preoccupations with form and style in local music often transposed to dance. Other writings focused on theatrical, sociological, literary and historical dimensions of dance, or more appropriately institutions in which dances feature (for instance, Schoffeleers (1972), Soko(1984), Chilibvumbo (1972), Ranger (1975), Nazombe (1994), and Kamlongera (1992)). This literature extended to a growing body of student research papers spread unevenly across the various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. Two somewhat related doctoral dissertations had been defended (Schoffeleers, 1968; Soko 1984). Finally, cultural columns in local newspapers and magazines yielded a more populist corpus on what was often portrayed as a fragile cultural heritage.

In these writings as well as most literature on African dance elsewhere, there is a general convergence on patterns that recur in performances of the sort that I surveyed. These patterns include circular arena formations, audience engagement, call and response idioms, and improvised routines. For me, however, the question was, how

does this language translate into context-specific performances? The question I now pose is, can we in fact distinguish one context of improvisation from another?

In my view, the data that I collected is best summed up in a dictum of one transcendental phenomenologist: language is worlded and the world is languaged.[1] It seems to me that despite the common currency in which accounts of African performances are framed, diverse lived experiences are in fact reenacted in these forms. Thus, we may inquire as to what specific knowledge bodies inform these forms or are articulated in them but also, how that knowledge is mediated. For the moment, the question is, how is improvisation contextualised? I shall refer to the performance contexts of vimbuza, a popular possession dance, and jazz in North America, to explore this possibility.

Improvisation as cultural aesthetic in vimbuza

Vimbuza belongs to a large family of spirit possession cults in Malawi and Southern Africa more generally. The syndrome and its attendant therapeutic dances is variedly known as *vyanusi* and *virombo* among the Tumbuka-Ngoni, *maskawi* among the Tonga, *mbira* among the Shona, *malombo* among the Chewa, and finally *mpwesa, mutuwaukulu, madzoka, chikwangali* and *mazinda* among the Yao and Sena-Mang'anja of Southern Malawi.

A *vimbuza* dance is part of a curative ritual intended to rehabilitate an individual who is diagnosed as possessed by an accredited shaman. Dance sessions are held in the evening. The shaman moderates the event and acts as a medium between the afflicted individual and the spirit world. There are three players at a *vimbuza* performance. First, there is a choral ensemble that sings in a characteristic multi-part format. The choral ensemble includes one or more cantors. On other occasions, the shaman leads the singing. Second, there are two or three drummers who perform interlocking rhythms on tuned conical drums. Finally, there is a central dancer. I ignore for convenience, the audience, which often merges with the chorus.

A *vimbuza* performance does not lend itself to a tidy description. In part, this is because *vimbuza* sessions are not, strictly-speaking, rehearsed. Indeed, performers' interpretations of the dance revolve around a hysteroid state as a consequence of the *vimbuza* affliction. Nonetheless, there are culturally specific rhythms and movement patterns that shape the contours of the performance, as is the case with other rural Malawian

dances. I shall not dwell on this aspect since it leads into technical questions beyond the scope of the present argument (see, for instance, Msosa 1996a and 1996b, also Sparshott 1995, 420-451).

A patient's initial response to *vimbuza* drums is usually to mark the beat with a nod of the head. This evocation of metronome continues as the patient rises to her feet. A full engagement of the drum rhythms is characterised by a pelvic swing. This swing defines what is called a single kineme. The right hip is thrust forward on the beat of the song. The curve of the swing, however, creates the impression of a counter left thrust which auguments the off-beat in the rhythm. As the performance gets more energized, other metronomic devises are infused such as alternate left and right glances, or recurrent arm gestures. Eventually, the dancer begins to circle the arena and to execute stepping sequences. As already noted, however, *vimbuza* performances are rarely sanitised events. In the psychologically charged atmosphere of a séance, performers succumb to a "vigorously rhythmic .. personal expression of high/intense emotional involvement" marked by foaming, groaning, and speaking in tongues (Chilibvumbo 1972: 8). My remarks focus in part on how the interaction between a dancer and a master drummer is mediated.

The master drummer enters the percussion rhythm like any other instrumentalist. He (I have yet to encounter a female *vimbuza* drummer) locates a background rhythm against which he plays. Typically, the background is the first drum in a two-piece drum ensemble or the second drum in a three-piece ensemble. He plays against this rhythm for some time to establish the rhythmic motif for a song.

There are three senses in which a master drummer improvises that I would like to distinguish.[2] First, he improvises in the selection of a structure against which to play. This structure may be a background percussion rhythm or other aspects of the performance environment such as vocal inflexion in a singer or recurrent gestures and other motions of a dancer. Deciding what element to augment depends largely on how the performance unfolds. Thus the drummer is guided by instinct as he shifts attention from one element of the performance environment to another.

The second sense in which the drummer improvises relates to the accent with which he sounds his notes. Drumming in *vimbuza* as in other Malawian contexts is highly expressive. The sharpness of a tone is, for instance, adjusted by striking different sound areas on the drum. In more stylish drumming, the elbow is manoeuvred around the drum head to modulate tension in the membrane. The effect is to regulate the duration

of a note or to stifle a note for dramatic effect. These techniques extend the tonal spectrum of the drum and so multiply possibilities for rhythmic intonation. Again, whether one note is sounded rather than another depends on the drummer's judgement at the point of execution. I should emphasize that to improvise on either of these two levels requires no more than a mastery of basic skills of drumming. The drummer must be able to locate the off-beat in a percussion pattern and to vary a note on a conical drum. In addition, he must have strong perceptual skills required to interpret background rhythms. Characteristically, these skills come with the many years of apprenticeship that go into the making of a *vimbuza* drummer.

The third sense in which a master drummer improvises is to mark the peak of a performance sequence. At this point, the drummer assumes a special role as cheerleader for the central performer. What is normally a routine rhythmic dialogue now transforms into a duo contest. In such sequences, the challenge is to mediate the heightened dynamics of the action by eliciting impromptu responses from each other. Thus the performance drifts into a race between two improvisations. For the actors, this calls for unmitigated attention on each other. Indeed, the integrity of the performance rests in their ability to interpret each other's cues here and now.[3]

Improvisation problematised

In his *Thinking in Jazz*, Paul Berliner explores the conceptual underpinnings of improvisation in jazz performance and apprenticeship. He observes that while jazz music emerges out of the African American community, it is now performed in a culturally contested setting of North America and Europe. I shall rely on a useful distinction that K. Pike draws between etic and emic units of analysis to highlight how Berliner's study reveals what is internal to jazz as a cultural practice and what is external to it, and in particular, how that distinction accounts for jazz performers' interpretations of improvisation.

Among several distinctions that Pike draws between etic and emic units of analysis are three that I find pertinent (Pike 1967: 38-40).

a. that descriptions from an etic standpoint dwell on criteria that are external to a system. By contrast, emic descriptions depict criteria from within the system, that is, they represent the view of one who can function within the system.

b. that the etic view is essentially atomic whereas the emic view proposes a larger

structure within which analytic units are distributed according to an internal hierarchy.

c. that etic data can be obtained with only partial information while emic data require "a knowledge of the total system to which they are relative and from which they ultimately draw their significance".

According to Berliner,(1994:6-7) jazz improvisation poses peculiar puzzles:

> If the object of improvising is for performers to create music anew, I asked, then what did it mean that their phrases "had a history behind them?" Moreover, if improvisers express personal feelings of the moment, what do considerations of form and logic have to do with this?

He rightly observes that these considerations undermine certain popular views about improvisation. In fact, he discovers that jazz artists themselves modify their views about improvisation over time. Yet the "mystic" around jazz persists and jazz musicians routinely perform together even though they "may never have met before the event nor played together in any other setting".

The mysterious aesthetic that Berliner explores is, however, one that is familiar to those who study improvisational routines in African performances. To return momentarily to the context of vimbuza, we can liken the jazz master to a seasoned drummer. In this respect, a master drummer is not defined solely by a superior technical repertoire although this is important. He is also a designated teacher with formal as well as informal apprentices at any given time. In addition, master drummers are conscientious students of their art. To survive as artists, they must be cognizant of how audience preferences fare over time. Note here how Arthur Rhames in Berliner (1994:16) characterizes his performance as a jazz musician:

> Improvisation is an intuitive process for me now, but in the way in which it is intuitive, I am calling upon all the resources of all the years of my playing at once: my academic understanding of the music, my historical understanding of the music, and my technical understanding of the instrument that I am playing. All these things are going into one concentrated effort to produce something that is indicative of what I am feeling at the time I am performing .

A shaman and his master drummer may mesmerise audiences with the harmony of their duo improvisation but here again jazz practitioners respond:

> Every jazz musician wants to be locked in that groove where you can't escape the tempo.

> You are locked in so comfortably that there is no way you can break outside of it, and everyone's locked in there together .. it's special for the musicians and for the aware, conscientious listener. These are the magical moments, the best moments in jazz (Berliner 1994: 388).

For Curtis Fuller (Berliner 1994: 389), jazz is about "listening to each other", so that the performance is like "talking to each other through music."

Other findings in Berliner's study recall familiar patterns in musical apprenticeship for African contexts. S. Arom (1991: 14-15), for instance, notes that musical apprenticeship for the peoples of Central Africa occurs through "simple observation and imitation":

> When drums that have just been used in some ceremony are laid out in the centre of the village, it is a common enough sight to see four or five-year-old children doing their utmost to produce a sound or two from them. When there is a musical occasion, it is equally common to see eight or ten-year-old children seated next to the drummers, observing them very closely as they play. Nor is it uncommon to encounter, amongst the latter, boys of no more than twelve years old, carrying out the alloted task quite successfully.

In his turn, Berliner affirms that among African Americans, the community church "typically provides children with their first experiences as performers." It is only after this collective exposure that unequal opportunities open up for formalized training and contact with the world of musical innovators (see Chapter 4).

The essential discontinuity between the context of the jazz musician and that of the shaman in *vimbuza* occurs in the distinctive manner in which the two music traditions serve their respective cultural milieux. In respect to *vimbuza*, the music is "an inseparable and indispensable part of the social and religious life of the community" (Arom 1991: 7). By contrast, jazz is by virtue of its international and multicultural setting constantly performed to alien and untutored audiences, as Berliner himself affirms.

In my view, Berliner's insight then lies in his critical exposition of how a member of this culturally diverse audience comes to appreciate jazz music and its internal logic. The point is that in the context of the shaman, the question of how a member of the audience comes to appreciate *vimbuza* music does not arise in the same way as it does for the jazz maestro and his/her broad-based audience. This is notwithstanding the fact that the two performance traditions privilege a similar logic, one that Berliner goes to such length to expose.

Berliner errs, however, in assuming earlier in his study that the artist's mind is a "relatively clean slate" that is subjected to a variety of learning processes or stages of development that shape the emerging artist (Berliner 1994: 13). The reality is that clean slates are hard to come by. P. Roulon's account cited in Pike (1967:10) of how Gbaya women pacify their babies is revealing:

> A similar phenomenon [a reference to how funeral wailing is socialised] of emergent music takes place when a mother seeks to pacify a crying baby .. During those brief intervals in which a baby catches its breath, the mother punctuates its crying with a meaningless syllable, an 'oe'. Little by little, a dialogue is set up between cries and responses, the latter being regular and tending toward isochrony. Gradually the child adapts its crying to the pulsation provided by the mother, and this has the effect of pacifying it. This also presents a sort of unconscious musical socialization, the first stage in the future musician's apprenticeship thus beginning at the earliest possible age .

In the context of our argument, what Gbaya women socialise the child into is what we characterise as the first improvisational format in *vimbuza*. This concerns the ability to locate the off-beat in a background rhythm and to respond to it accordingly.

In the culturally contested environment of North America, however, early influences may not be complementary to the jazz aesthetic. According to Berliner (1994:493), jazz apprentices often require a more rigorous immersion into their art:

> aspiring jazz performers peruse their music's multifaceted oral literature, acquiring and analyzing a repertory of compositions, classic solos, and discreet phrases, which embody the aesthetic values of jazz tradition and bring to light the underlying principles of improvisation.

This picture of the jazz musician is also affirmed earlier on by Berliner (1994:12):

> Within individual parts, artists fashion gestures from small musical components, phrases from gestures, and complete solos or accompaniments from phrases; within the ensemble, they interrelate their music ideas .

In both passages, Berliner clearly privileges what Pike terms an etic description. His characterisation is atomic, dwelling on the respective components of the musical piece rather than the internal logic by which the components cohere. It follows, therefore, that the "underlying principles of improvisation" that aspiring jazz performers seek must lie beyond his description. Berliner's jazz apprentice requires what Pike terms "an emic re-training – teaching what not to do, the breaking up of old patterns and substituting new ones" (Pike 1967: 52). Our contention is that this dilemma stems from the

fact that most jazz apprentices initially encounter jazz music as recorded and not as performed.

The integrity of Berliner's study then lies in that it clearly affirms our claim that improvisation, far from being a timeless technique, is itself contextualised, that is "worlded". Getting into the language of jazz may well be the primary obstacle for aspiring musicians in North America but that is because the background of the jazz apprentice tends to be inconsistent with the requirements of that language. It is this discrepancy that engenders but also enhances the mystic surrounding this improvisational art. In the shaman's community, by contrast, the emic logic of *vimbuza* music posits no insurmountable mystery. It is only in exceptional instances, for instance, where a master drummer challenges a dancer to a duo contest, that the language of improvisation acquires special significance. Thus, what is of interest in a given improvisational context depends in part on who is improvising.

Crossing [out] boundaries

I began with a broad caution concerning the value of a generalised theory of Malawian dance. Nonetheless, dance like language is a special sort of patterned behaviour with its own common terms of reference. In a banal sense therefore, it can be described etically. The point of concern is that there are questions about performance technique that cannot be answered (or indeed raised) without situating the actor in other canvasses or cultural performances.

To understand dance as cultural performance entails at least two considerations. First, what a dance expresses as culturally patterned behaviour, and second, what it articulates as embodied knowledge. The parallels with language are worth emphasizing here. According to Pike (1967:26), language does not constitute a self-contained discourse. As he puts it,

> Language is behavior, i.e., a phase of human activity which must not be treated in essence as structurally divorced from the structure of nonverbal human behavior. (Our) activity...constitutes a structural whole, in such a way that it cannot be subdivided into neat 'parts' or 'levels' or 'compartments' with language in a behavioral compartment insulated in character, content, and organization from other behavior. *Verbal and nonverbal activity is a unified whole.*,

How then does the linguist proceed? According to Pike (1967:68):

> ... we may say that the linguist wishes to discover the structure of language behavior, but that since this behavior is part of total human behavior, and obtains its structuring only in reference to that larger behavior field, and relative to the structural units of that larger field, the linguist must on occasion refer to that larger field in order to get access to that frame of reference within which the linguistic units obtain part of their definition .

Our intent is to translate the letter of Pike's recommendation to the analysis of Malawian dance. To do so, we have urged in a preliminary way for a culturally situated perspective on improvisation. In this way, we undermine a general conception that improvisation is only a method, a way of proceeding. This view usually posits other realms of activity be they dance, theatre, or conversation to which the method is applied. Thus improvisation becomes sterilised, an acultural process. We are urging instead that improvisation should be understood as a practice. Rather than a timeless method, it is in fact tied to place and context. We can, therefore, ask what improvising means to different subjects in their respective locales. This in turn reduces improvisation to a performance that is embedded in other performances. From this perspective, to acknowledge that Malawian dances share a similar logic need not entail that performers in different cultural contexts conceive of that logic similarly. What the conceptual differences are and their relative significance remain the outstanding challenges for students of Malawian dance but also other cultural analysts.

Concluding remark

In attempting this synthesis between performance theory and Malawian dances as fora for embodied knowledge, a key aim is to reconcile research in Malawian dance to theoretical developments in the study of African ritual performance in general (see Drewal 1992 and 1990, Myerhoff 1990, Conquergood 1995). The issues are complex and cannot be adequately addressed here. Suffice it to note that the two approaches anticipate interdisciplinary intersections that in fact define complex social realities such as rural Malawian dances. As is well documented, these dances serve a wide range of community forums such as curative rituals, funerals, coronations, and rites of passage. Thus the synthesis aims to attain a more coherent approach to dance as cultural expression but also, in light of the theoretical shift, recognizes the agency of the actor who executes the activity. To approach these dances etically brings to light variation in dance forms as culturally defined expressions while an emic approach highlights the agency of performers and their conceptual schemes. We submit that at either level, Malawian dances are more diverse than they are similar.

Notes

*An earlier version of the paper entitled "Improvisational Worlds: Epistemic Trajectories in Dance as Cultural Performance in Rural Malawi" was presented at the Improvisation and the Practice of Everyday Seminar Series, Northwestern University, Evanston, 1996.

1. Jitendra Mohanty used this phrase at a panel organised in his honour during the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, April, 1996. See also Mohanty (1989).

2. Although he does not focus on the concern of this paper, Steve Friedson (1996), attempts a theory of vimbuza drum rhythms that leads him into gestalt theory (see Chapter 5). The eclectic framework that he outlines there affirms, in my view, Friedson's struggle for an emic account of this improvisational art. In this respect, the study recalls Berliner's dilemma of the culturally alienated jazz apprentice.

3. This feature is similarly present in other Malawian dances that highlight solo dance routines such as *gule wamkulu*, *likhuba* and *madzoka*. See, for instance, Msosa (1998).

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PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT
CHANCELLOR COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI
P.O. BOX 280
ZOMBA
MALAWI