

## An analysis of Kilumi ritual songs among the Akamba of Kitui, Kenya

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### Abstract

*Kilumi* is a sacred ritual dance among the Akamba of Kenya. It consists of psychotherapeutic practices, however, the rituals continue to adapt. There is paucity of scholarly research done on *kilumi*. Consequently, this article intends to fill in a significant gap in literature as it relates to *kilumi* as one of the cultural therapeutic interventions used by the Akamba during difficult times. The author endeavors to classify *kilumi* songs in different categories. Also, the religious beliefs and experiences of the Akamba as reflected in the *kilumi* songs are explained. Hopefully, this article will be used by different academicians and researchers as a primer for their further research to understand the Religiocultural significance of African religious dances. Furthermore, they may make reference as they review their literature.

The scope of this article is limited to the Akamba of Kitui County. It documents analysis of some *kilumi* song texts and their translations. This article has been adapted from the author's Master of Arts thesis in which data collection was done through observations, interviews, and examinations of relevant documents. Content analysis approach was adopted in analyzing the data. Further, the researcher participated in *kilumi* dances. The respondents were sampled from the five divisions of Kitui District by then. A flexible questionnaire was used to obtain the necessary information from the respondents; traditional and church elders. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. These raw data augmented by information from literature review were analyzed and interpreted to yield desired result. The findings indicated that *kilumi* songs are functional in contemporary Akamba society. They are used for socio-cultural and therapeutic purposes. It is hoped that the documentation of this article will influence further scholarly research by those who may be interested in this field of knowledge.

**Key words:** *Dance, Kilumi, songs*

### Introduction

African music, dances and songs as embodied in the entire concept of African culture, were a cherished treasure and a source of pride for African peoples everywhere which could help to identify the African and champion his dignity. African songs carry meaningful, inspiring messages that convey the true picture and personality of the African (Senoga-Zake, 1986). The Akamba of Kenya are viewed as a singing people and song occupies a prominent part in their lives (Lindblom, 1934). For them, *kilumi* is a therapeutic rite comprising libations, offering, and prayers to Ngai,

the Creator and Supreme Being, and Aimu, the spirits of the departed (Ndanu, 2020). The *kilumi* sacred dances are means of divine communication through which the spirits impart their essence or intentions to the adherents. Therefore, *kilumi* is used for socio-cultural and therapeutic purposes. For example, one of the objectives of the ceremony is to seek spiritual intervention that produces rain (Koster, 2011; Akong'a, 1987). It is also believed to be a therapy for those possessed by the spirits.

Rosil and Buniel (2020) propose rituals can be interpreted as an attempt to improve and maintain the equilibrium between man, nature and the spirit world. For example, the indigenous Filipinos engaged in ritual dances that determine the future, relax the spirits, ensure good harvest, invoke protection from the unknown, provide guidance and advice, heal the sick, and bring good luck. The *kilumi* dance, songs and rituals are believed to have therapeutic functions during times of individual or communal challenges. *Kilumi* is performed during times of sorrow such as drought and famine (Gumo, 2017); during social occasions or times of joy such as harvesting, planting and initiation of medicine people; and as a means of protection, especially after the death of a person or after a child is born out of wedlock (Musau, 2013).

The World Federation of Music Therapy proposes Music therapy aims to develop potentials and/or restore the individual's functionality so that he or she can achieve better intra- and inter-personal integration and a better quality life through prevention, rehabilitation and treatment. Therefore, Music Therapy facilitates and promotes a client's or group's communication, relationships, learning, mobilization, expression, organization and other relevant therapeutic objectives (WFMT, 1996). Similarly, the positive contribution of music and music therapy in decreasing levels of depression has already been demonstrated (Aalbers et al., 2017). In addition, Mokuia (2017) interrogates extant data on the ethnoscience of rainmaking rituals, song and dance for climate

change in the making of livelihoods in Africa. He concludes that once a context is defined, music may be created and/or performed to evoke feelings that are significant in healing, among other things.

In the traditional African setting, songs prove to be an authentic expression of the outlook of the people, as observed by Blacking (1973) and Mbiti (1975). For example, when sung as the drummers beat the *miase* “*kilumi* drums” rhythmically, it is believed by the community that the songs literally express the Akamba hopes, fears, thoughts and beliefs. In the same breath, in an analysis of the *kilumi* songs and their religious interpretations, Musau (2013) concluded that frequently, songs and dances fulfil socio-political and religious functions. In agreement, Phibion (2013) focuses on the spiritual *wosana* and *mayile* rain praying song types as practised by the Bakalanga people of Botswana and Zimbabwe. Both males and females perform the *wosana* type, while females only perform the *mayile* type. The findings indicate, both are invoked when people find it hard to survive and their anxiety is high because rainfall has either failed to come at the expected time or when the rains are not sufficient.

## **Methodology**

### ***Informants***

The researcher participated in *kilumi* dances, observed, tape recorded and transcribed the data which were subsequently analysed.

The respondents were sampled from the five divisions of Kitui District by then. They comprised:

1) Both female and male traditionalists (elders). They were either qualified Akamba *ngui* or *atumia* “elders” aged 60years and above. They were knowledgeable on the Akamba cultural and religious practices for they had participated in most of the religious dances. Random and snow-ball techniques were utilized to select these respondents.

2) Christians selected from the prominent churches in Kitui, namely: African Inland Church (AIC); Catholic Church and African Brotherhood (ABC). The overall aim was to procure the necessary information which was useful in the analysis of the kilumi dances, rituals and songs.

3) *Kilumi* dancers and any other knowledgeable person who possessed the rich and authentic knowledge I was seeking.

### ***Sample size***

Although the research included all the five divisions of Kitui District by then, forty respondents were selected from certain Locations in which, the Akamba traditional beliefs and practices are prevalent.

In Central Division which comprised 6 locations, 4 interviewees were interviewed from each location totaling to 24 interviewees. In the other 4 divisions, data was obtained from 4 interviewees from each division giving a total of 16 interviewees. Therefore, the sample size comprised 40 informants.

### ***Data analysis methods***

The data obtained was first checked for completeness. All the tape recorded data was transcribed verbatim in Kikamba then translated into English. Afterwards, the researcher grouped these data systematically according to their content and the objectives of the study. The oral data was incorporated and compared with relevant literature from the libraries, archives and other written sources in order to provide the basis for analysis and interpretation. After processing and analyzing the data, the findings and conclusions were presented in relation to the objectives of the study.

## Discussion

The Akamba community believed that unseen rainmaking ancestral spirits attended the *Kilumi* dances. The participants therefore were obligated to make excellent performances to impress the spirits (Ombati, 2017). In the *kilumi* dances, numerous spirits are believed to possess the participants. Each spirit has its own special song or music which depicts its character and which alone can summon its presence. In the dances, the possessed is expected to mime the character of the possessing spirit. During the dances, some of the possessed people dance in a strange fashion, while others become wild and uncontrollable. It is through the mouth of the possessed that the spirits reveal their names in order for the songster to sing their songs. Some make utterances which are received by the people as messages from the spiritual realm. However, it should be noted that in the *kilumi* dances, not all the participants are subject to possession. In *kilumi*, the spirits are enticed to come forward and dance to their satisfaction.

In most of the *kilumi* songs, the soloist sings through the song and the dancers repeat the chorus. In the *kilumi* dances, the songs follow no programme. They are sung as the spirits request for them. Sometimes, the spirits express dissatisfaction when particular songs are sung. The singing and dancing continues throughout the night.

All the songs express ideas of religious and psychosocial significance through symbols. In some songs, some aspects of social and cultural change and of Western cultures are represented. They range from symbols like planes and ships to such abstract qualities as "Europeanness".

The main themes (in the collected songs) include:

- 1) Rain (water) as from the ancestors who are the owners of Ukamba land and its produce.

The predominant characteristics of water are: (a) It fertilizes (b) It purifies (c) It dissolves.

Its functions are fertilization or regeneration of the material living world on the one hand, and the purification or regeneration of the spiritual world on the other.

- 2) Cleansing and fertility - The power of herbal medicine for cleansing and comfort of the people even lasting beyond this life (as for the ancestors).
- 3) Protection and good health as from the ancestors.
- 4) Lala, the ancestor cleanser and the mystery of her ways.
- 5) Symbols and images:
  - a) Medicine and harvesting basket.
  - b) Wind.
  - c) Death.
  - d) Life (water, lake, cloud).
  - e) Crowd.
  - f) Books.
  - g) General vehicle/carrier.
  - h) Train.
  - i) Heat (iron).
  - j) Raid.
  - k) Animals -snake; bird.
  - l) Cloth.
  - m) Mountain.

The songs were transcribed verbatim in Kikamba. The researcher translated the songs freely, not literally, into English so that a non-Mukamba would grasp their meaning without many complications. Also, the translation of some words was difficult and sometimes if they were to be

translated literally, the original meaning could be distorted. The original Kikamba text and translation, and explanation in English are presented for each song. This article does not analyse the musical aspects of *kilumi* songs.

Song texts were grouped according to context or according to the various spirits which are believed to possess individuals in the *kilumi* dances. It should be noted that this is not a complete repertoire of all the *kilumi* songs in Kitui. Out of the 50 songs collected, 10 were selected for analysis in this article. The themes of these songs portray issues for cleansing, powerlessness and scarcity, diagnosis, protection as well as hope.

### **Powerlessness, scarcity and protection songs**

#### **Song 1:**

"Ai, eitu ithyonthe ui,

Twithakya Wali u wi miveke,

Mue umbaniwe ni wanda na akekalilwa malovoto,

Ai, eitu ithyonthe ui".

(Nditi Mwanza, 0.1. 16/9/89)

(Oh! all you daughters of Wali,

We praise the resplendent Wali who possesses miveke,<sup>1</sup>

The mue surrounded by a huge crowd and is seated on drops of rain,

Hail you all!).

### **Explanation**

This song is in praise of the ancestral Akamba spirits which are believed to be peaceful and benevolent; to protect and take care of their living descendants by bringing riches and good harvests. As a practice, the first *kilumi* song must be dedicated to these spirits.

This song is sung when the participants have gathered to seek for rain. In it, they make references to the spirits by using praise names such as Wali “praise name for any influential person” in order to invoke the spirits and Mulungu “the Supreme Being” to heed to their request. As expert medicine people (Mue (singular) Awe (plural)), the spirits are surrounded by huge crowds of people eager to draw from the fountain (source) of life.

Again, herbs (miveke) is the praise word of some of the possession of the spirits. Normally, these herbs are possessed and used by special people, (e.g., medicine people). They are to be aspired to by a Mukamba because they are extra-ordinary. The phrase "Wali who possesses miveke" brings in the idea of divination which symbolises the people's search for meaning in the events of life.

The singers are anticipating that the ritual will be successful, i.e., it is going to rain. Hence, miveke and drops of rain symbolise the cleansing aspect of the herbal medicine and fertility brought about by the rain.

### **Song 2:**

"Aa, wakya Mue,

Mue wi mithumba; Mue nimwonie akithia?

Nikethya Ngemu na Syomangala,

Mue wa mbeke na mwatu,

Mue ndyamwie nukathi uu kwi ndia,

Akwete mithumba na mioswe,



Ukai twolelye wanda"

(Nditi Mwanza, 0.1., 16/9/89).

(I greet you Mue,

Mue with herbs; did you find Mue grinding?

Greetings both Ngemu and Syomangala,

The owners of grains and beehives,

I told you, Mue will go to the pools,

Holding mithumba and mioswe<sup>2</sup>,

Come ye! Let us enthuse the crowd.

### **Explanation**

In this song, the ancestors (who are grinders of herbs and owners of grains and honey) are sent greetings. In it, the Akamba belief that the ancestral spirits (for example, Ngemu and Syomangala) were the first owners of the Ukamba land is highlighted. And in remembrance of the ancestors, before any tilling of the land was done, the Living had to propitiate the spirits first.

The song also reflects the Akamba's religious beliefs as well as their social customs or occupations. As indicated above, traditionally the women were the grinders of corn while men were the apiculturists. Therefore, the song controls the awareness of the social structure. There are four symbols used in this song. The first one is pools, an indication of plenty of water which symbolizes life. The second and third are grains and beehive which refer to subsistence and continuation of fertility which the ritual is meant to secure. And the last is the crowd which points to multiplicity. That is, the ritual will revitalise the community. The idea of life gives the worshippers hope of living and strengthens their faith, hence the adherents keep on multiplying.

This song could be sang during the planting season when the adherents gather to ask for rain from the ancestral world. They sing with confidence that the harvest will be successful after the powerful spirits intercede on their behalf. Grinding is the practice of a medicine person who mixes the herbs in order to save life. Therefore, like the medicine people, the spirits are seen as the protectors of their living kinspeople.

### **Diagnostic songs**

#### **Song 3:**

"Mekalila mitambo nimekulauna no mbola ii,  
Mundu wa mundu ii ndathambwa akathea;  
Syomikindo ndumanzie meli Ngunga, tuthambie ndia,  
Mekalila ndia mokie kuthambia".

(Nditi Mwanza, 0.1, 24/9/89).

(They are quite pre-occupied sitting on the rails,  
Nobody can forsake one's kinsperson,  
Allow Syomikindo to find floating vessel for our swimming in the lake,  
The swimmers came for the swim).

### **Explanation**

In the *kilumi* songs, proverbs are useful communicators and perpetuators of the traditional understanding of the world and people's attitudes towards it.

In this song, mundu wa mundu ndathambwa akathea literally means no one is without blemish or stain. No one is perfect, no matter how good we pamper, project or present them. In other words, there is no way in which one can disassociate himself/herself with his/her own people. Therefore, "Blood is thicker than water". When they sit leisurely on the rails, the spirits are quite preoccupied

to look here and there gently. They are seen as fully engaged, inspecting (prospecting) the situation because they cannot forsake their descendants.

The singers (swimmers) are asking Syomikindo to get them ships (floating vessels). In this case, a ship is taken to symbolise the idea of sailing or navigation. The swimmers as navigators are living in order to transcend their physical beings towards the supernatural realm. That is why they came for a swim. Therefore, they are requesting Syomikindo to help them to sail through.

Also, mitambo “rails” and meli “ship” bring in the idea of engines which symbolise warmth. In a wider context, the warmth points to the warm personality of the spirits which give rain to the people. (Mutie Kithunu, 0.1, 29/11/1989). This idea could be supported by the fact that, this song was sang during the droughts in order to beseech Syomikindo/Syokitundumo to bring them a thunderstorm. It was also sang around June, when people went to the medicine man to be given ng'ondu “herbal medicine, purifying medium” for spraying in their fields.

The song is a reminder to the spirits that the adherents are their kinspeople who constantly need some assistance from them.

**Song 4:**

"Amba kwiyumba, nzungululu, katheka maia,

katheka va?

Kasuni kelu mbingilite,

Katheka utana mbingilite

Katheka maia, kathekaa va?"

(Nditi Mwanza, 0.1, 20/11/89).

(Nzungululu, the lover of lakes,

The spotted white bird!

Rock and Roll,

The beauty and singer of lakes,

Rock and Roll,

Oh, where are you?).

### **Explanation**

This song is an important exception. It is diagnostic and in praise of the spirit. It is merely identifying the spirit. The spirit needs only attention.

Nzungululu are the swallow-tailed kites; and from the lakes they get dirt for building the nests. The birds symbolise spiritualization, the spirit of goodness and activity; the spirits' supernatural aid. They could also point to the creation myth where the first creation was beautiful. (Syombua Kalungu, O. I, 25/11/1989). The white colour could be a constant reminder of purity, whereby the living are expected to be blameless before the spirits and Mulungu at large.

This song has a good lesson, that is, like the swallow-tailed kite, people should enjoy and be happy with whatever they are going through. They should be busy bettering the world for a harmonious living.

### **Song 5:**

"Wa Lala witya ki we?

Kwata kwoko na uindavya,

Muthamba wendaki we?

Muthambi ni vata nake iya uu waya".

(Musangi Muveva, 0.1, 10/12/89).

(Daughter of Lala, what do you need?

Please shake my hand and tell me,

Muthamba, what do you need?

Muthambi, I adore you).

### **Explanation**

This is an example of a song which is sang when the soloist is interrogating the spirits in order to hear their demands. It is the medium through which she diagnoses, to divine what the problem is. The singer is addressing directly the possessed, questioning her and she is expected to give answers. In this song, the person believed to be possessed by Lala spirits is being asked for her demands. Therefore, the function of such songs is to directly implore the spirits for answers.

### **Powerlessness and scarcity**

#### **Song 6:**

"Nthyululuke Kayolaa uu wa maia,

Ndinona ngai uu uwetawa,

Nthyululuke Kayolaa uu wa maia,

Ndinona ngai uu uwetawa".

(Kasina Mwengu, 0.1, 26/11/89).

(As I swim around Kayolaa, that mother of lakes,

No traces of that god who is mentioned,

Let me swim along Kayolaa,

No traces of that god who is mentioned).

### **Explanation**

The indigenous Akamba believe that some spirits live in the waters. In fact during the research of this study, most of the medicine people stressed on how, they are transported in their dreams to

places where they see spirits walking on waters. And in this case, the participants are looking for the god in the lake.

In this song, Kayolaa refers to Mt. Kilimanjaro. The singers assume that Kilimanjaro is the mother of lakes (in that area, there is plenty of rain). They emphasize that they are in a long spiritual search until they meet Mulungu! The song is an expression of their impatience and frustration of not getting co-operation of the spirits. They are in a spiritual need, longing to meet that sacred Being. By dancing, they go round Kayolaa trying to trace that god. They are looking for the bridge which will unite their world with the sacred one.

The mountain is taken to symbolise their rock of salvation. In other words, the people have reached the limit situation of powerlessness and scarcity.

They have to hold firm on their rock until they are united with the spirits. In Kayolaa, the mountain of sacredness will they reach a reconciliation stage.

### **Issues of cleansing song**

#### **Song 7:**

"Mwiitu uu wa Kathambi ta watwaiwe,

Nzoka utindae weka kithambioni?

Nangathamba na savuni ta nawaie;

Nzoka utindae weka kithambioni?"

(Syornbua Kalungu, 0.1, 25/11/89).

(Has the daughter of Kathambi been married;

Leaving Nzoka alone at the cleansing pool?

Like a patient washing off with soap;

You, Nzoka alone at the cleansing pool?).

### **Explanation**

This song is sang when a person is supposedly possessed by nzoka “snake” spirits. It is worth noting that the pool is not merely a rain symbol, but also a cleansing symbol. In the song, the singer inquires whether Kathambi got married, i.e., moved elsewhere. In other words, are the ancestral spirits not around leaving bad spirits alone in the cleansing pool? The possessed, like a patient needs a bath (purification) to get off bad things. She needs regeneration through the effect of the transitional powers. But, Nzoka seems to block the cleansing. Therefore, the song is a kind of complaint that the people are without the ancestral spirits which are supposed to help in cleansing. It is designed to communicate certain religious grievances.

### **Hope song**

#### **Song 8:**

"Kondo ke nziani kati,

Ni ka mwanamue, aka mwosie,

Syana mwendela ku, ni matheo ii,

Kirinyaa nukutunduma,

Syana mwendela ku, ni matheo ii".

(Mutie Kithunu, 0.1, 29/11/89).

(There is a small basket in between the path,

It belongs to the son of Mue, but the women took it,

Children, there is no way because of clouds,

There is a thunderstorm at Kirinyaa,

Children, there is no way because of clouds).

### **Explanation**

Kirinyaa is another name for Mount Kenya (also known as Kirinyaga). In this song, the basket of Mue being referred to is the rainmaking or magic means. But "the women took it", symbolically suggests that these means are effective, but the women somehow assumed them. The dark clouds are the symbolic precursors of an on-coming rain. Therefore, the children (people) are asked where they will pass through because the rain is so dense that they cannot see. This song is sang when the women have gone to a medicine person to ask for rains. Indirectly, the singers have hope and are encouraging rain to pour. One could conclude that, they refer specifically not to Mount Kilimanjaro or Kenya, but tracing ones origins from the mythical heights. That is, being closer to the gods as mentioned in the Akamba creation myth. Again, a second theory that the Akamba came from Mount Kenya areas is also reflected in this song.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the *kilumi* song texts showed that the themes vary depending on the situations. This analysis revealed the songs are functional in contemporary Akamba society. Some of the songs are in praise of the benevolent ancestral Akamba spirits which are believed to be protectors and caregivers of their living kinspeople. Other songs depict the Akamba beliefs in situations of powerlessness and scarcity in which people need spiritual intervention. The spirits are deemed to be uncooperative and therefore, the people express their grievances, impatience and frustration in the songs.

The *kilumi* songs give the most intense expression of the traditional worship for they give the assurance of continuous contact with the spiritual world. These songs are also a pre-requisite to spirit possession and they validate the rituals through recitation of myths and legends.



It is evident that in the *kilumi* rituals and dances, the indigenous Akamba express their faith through the songs. These songs are of paramount importance because getting in and out of trance can be aided by them. For example, the mood of the worshippers could be affected through the content of the songs or even the singing style.

According to Kigunda (2007) healing is a life-long process of eliminating, adjusting to, or preventing ill-health through culturally situated practices. In some of the *kilumi* songs, the spirits are venerated for the healing that they conduct through their human representatives, e.g. mue “medicine person”. In others, the Akamba implore the spirits to secure for them safety presumably against malevolent spirits. The spirits are esteemed for their provision of health and protection.

**Endnotes:**

Miveke,<sup>1</sup> - These are herbs used for treatment. They are ground and mixed with rain water as a protective medicine so that even if people drunk this water, they would not fall sick.

Mioswe<sup>2</sup> - Traditional herbs for healing and cleansing.

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**NB:** Ethics approval for the research study was obtained from Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. Informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study was obtained from all research participants. Research participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in respect to their data. All information was kept confidential and all processed data was securely stored.

## **Declarations**

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The researcher sought permission to reuse the MA Thesis on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2020 and Digitization Section KU PML granted the request.

### ***Availability of data and materials***

The dataset analyzed during the current study is available with the First Author, the Corresponding.

### **Authors' contributions**

This article has been adapted from the Master of Arts thesis of Josephine N. Musau (Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya) which was completed under the supervision of Drs. Ted Groenewegen and Anne Nasimiyu (Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya) in May, 1991.

### **Competing interests**

The author declares that she has no competing interests.