

ITINERANT BANJO GROUPS IN MALAWI

GRUPOS DE BANJO ITINERANTES NO MALAWI

ABSTRACT: Banjos hand made by their instrumentalists belong to the most widespread musical instruments in Southeast Africa. This article explores the organology, manufacture and use of these instruments in Malawi, based on field research conducted by the author.

KEYWORDS: Malawi; Banjo; Organology.

Moya Aliya Malamusi

RESUMO: Banjos feitos à mão por seus instrumentistas pertencem ao conjunto dos instrumentos musicais mais disseminados no Sudeste da África. Este artigo explora a organologia, a fabricação e a utilização destes instrumentos no Malawi, baseado em pesquisas de campo realizadas pelo autor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Malawi; Banjo; Organologia.

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ITINERANT BANJO GROUPS IN MALAWI

Moya Aliya Malamusi ¹

The home-made banjos on which itinerant musicians and bands of adolescents perform in different places across the country of Malawi, south-east Africa, count among the musical instruments known by nearly everyone here. Banjos have been used for a long time in southern Africa as musical tools that can be made locally, for solo performance or playing in a group. To manufacture such an instrument, all that is necessary is to look out for a variety of materials that can be found in the villages, materials which others often have thrown away, such as an old pot or wires from a fence, or other metals. Such “industrial debris” can be productively applied to make a banjo.

There are three basic types played by itinerant musicians in Malawi:

- Banjo with a skin cover



Fig. 1: A type of banjo covered with goat skin on one side, a common banjo used by young boys in Malawi. Photo by the autor.

In order to construct a banjo of this type, the maker begins with carving the fretboard or long wooden “neck” (*nkonjowa banjo*). In Chichewa we would not call it neck, however, *nkonjo* refers to something long for holding an object, e.g. a long handle.

Thereafter he finds an old pot to function as the banjo’s resonator (*nkuzamau*). When he has put together all the materials needed, he begins his work. For the fretboard any kind of wood can be used, but often it is necessary to use fresh wood (*wauwisi*), not yet dried up. The tool used for the work of carving is an adze, called *kasemasema* in Chichewa. This work needs a lot of experience, so that the fretboard should be measured out well, so that there would be no problem

when mounting strings on the instrument. Frets are not always carved in; in many home-made banjos the fingerboard is a plane surface.

Sometimes, when the wood from which the fretboard is carved turns out to be uneven, the maker can use parts of a broken bottle, or even break one and take the broken pieces, and use them to scrape the surface in order to make it smoother. Then some other thing that has to be done is to bore holes into the top end of the “neck”, for the tuning pegs (*zokungila*) to be attached. But when the wood, after scraping, is still not completely dry, he can leave it under the sun for two days.

While waiting for the fretboard to become dry, the maker tries to find a suitable piece of goat skin (*chikopa cha mbuzi*), but one that is completely dry; and he also needs to find strong wires so that he can fasten or screw the skin to the pot which serves as a resonator.

Now, when the fretboard has become dry, what remains to be done is to connect it to the resonator. Before covering the resonator with the skin, it may be necessary to steep the skin in water (*chikopachabviikidwammadzi*); then it can be easily cut to a round shape so that it will cover the resonator well. After fastening the skin he will scrape off the hair on top of it; when that is done he puts the instrument into the sun, to dry up again.

He is now ready to mount the strings on the banjo. For this purpose four holes have been bored into the top part of the fretboard (*ntibowa banjo*) to receive the tuning pegs which will be in vertical position. The wires are then mounted and the maker begins the tuning process until he is happy with the sound.

- Banjo with a solid resonator



Fig. 2: A banjo with metal container used as a resonator, made by MoseYotamu from Zambia, 1988. Photo by the author.

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There is a second type of construction used in southern Africa for this genre of instruments, universally called banjo in Malawi. It is more easily manufactured, and therefore it is the type most frequently encountered in youth groups. The resonator is simply made from a closed metal container, such as a can of motor-oil. No skin cover is needed. Many itinerant adolescents can be encountered at street corners and in markets across the region with this kind of banjo. The maker has to find a suitable empty oil can, preferably 5 liter size. That found, he carves the fretboard. Then he pierces a hole into the can at the side where its cap is found (*chitsekelelo cha galoni*). Now he tries hard to insert the lower end of the wooden fretboard into the hole, until it touches the opposite wall of the can. There he hammers one or two nails in to stabilize the fretboard in its position. At that side of the resonator he also attaches a small piece of sheet-metal to support the ends of the strings to be mounted, with four tiny holes bored in. A wooden bridge is carved to be put on top of the resonator. The strings run over the bridge and are hitched to this sheet-metal “tail piece”. With this the process of manufacture is finished, and the boy will have to look out for finding suitable strings, preferably those from the brakes of a bicycle. Sometimes no metal strings are found, but nylon strings from fishing lines are available. They can also be mounted and used for playing this kind of banjo. The other ends of the strings are attached to the tuning pegs at the top end of the fretboard, so that the tuning process can begin. There are many individual tunings. And also, nylon strings give a sound very different from the timbre (*kalidwekake*) obtained when using metal strings.

- A unique type of banjo found in the area of Nkhoma



Fig. 3: Nyaliyagalasi -- the type of kerosene lamp whose bottom is used for the construction of a high-tuned small banjo. Photo by the author.

Although there are many different types of banjo that we can observe in the groups shown on my recent DVD Vestapol 1335, 78 min, published 2016 by Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop. Inc. I wish to explain one more basic type which is found in only one specific area in Malawi, and apparently nowhere else. That place is known under the name Nkhoma, it is in the Lilongwe Region; it is situated on the road to Blantyre from Lilongwe, about 35 km south. There

is a hospital and a school of the CCAP (Church of Central African Presbyterian) mission, established very long ago. This is where a very small type of banjo was developed which produces a very high sound.

The construction of this type of banjo is characterized by the fact that the bottom of a kerosene lamp is used as a resonator (*nkuzamau*). People who manufacture this type take the bottom of one specific kind of lamp which is known under the name *nyaliyagalasi*. When such a lamp has stopped its work of giving light (*ntchitoyowunikila*), it is transmuted into this other usage, to be part of a banjo with a very short fretboard and no skin cover. However, with this type of banjo, nylon strings cannot be used, because the resulting sound would not go together with the other instruments used for accompaniment. Only metal strings can be used.

All the three types of banjo which I have described here as characteristic of the instruments found in Malawi, exist in several variants due to the fact that in the different places from where the banjoists come, these youths are extremely creative and idiosyncratic, they always try to invent a special version of their own which should not resemble that of another group. The same applies to the home construction of guitars and bass guitars.

Various styles of banjo playing

Many people who knew how to play banjo long ago, used to play in a finger picking style (*mokodola*); there were very few instrumentalists who would want to know or learn to play in vamping style (*mokhwacha*). When I began to conduct interviews with veterans in the 1980s it turned out that many of my interlocutors who had played the banjo when they were adolescents, had played it plucking the strings with the fingers, because in those days, the 1940s and 1950s, they used to play banjo together with a guitar. According to their narratives, it was the guitarist who played in the vamping style, but the banjoist played in melodic finger-picking style. Instead of saying *mokodola*, some of them would call this technique of playing *pikini*. Perhaps this term comes from English “picking” to describe the movement of the fingers plucking one string (*nsambo*) at a time. Among the people who used to play banjo long ago, everyone was trying to play in a very personal way (*mwaluso lake*) so that his style would not resemble that of other performers on the banjo, because competition was strong; there were many young men who had become superb players of the banjo.

Since there were not very many distractions long ago, and -- as concerns the musical instrument called banjo -- many people had a desire to know how to play it, there were soon

young men with perseverance in making music just for themselves; but others became professionals, up to becoming renowned for their way of playing.

There were many names of famous banjo players in those days, such as for example Black Paseli and his brothers, Kapiye and Tayero; there were also Jozaya, Chikuni, Baton Harry and many others who became famous because of banjo playing. They played in many different ways, but the picking style (*mokodola*) dominated, because they often played as duo or trio, in which one of them played banjo, the other guitar, and perhaps a third one played rattle (*nkhocho*). The technique of picking was wide-spread, not vamping. But it would also happen, that some who had learned the single-note picking style, would try to vamp on their instruments, and yet they did not do it for long, did not develop great interest.

At the end of the 1970s the preferences changed. Very many groups of young people in the following generation, as could be seen in various locations, began to play banjos in vamping style (*mokhwacha*). These were often very young boys, and their ways of behavior and making music were very different from musicians of long ago, due to incisive differences in the kinds of songs, in performance style and in the variations. Those new adolescent groups began to play banjo in a fast vamping style, though not only. And yet, if others could be found to play in single-note melodic style, it was never the same as how the generation before them had played. The young boys, little by little, began to follow songs that were coming from other countries via the media, particularly from Kenya and Zimbabwe. They adopted those songs and transferred the style to their home-made banjos. Such small groups of adolescents began to appear in many different places in Malawi, in the towns, or at markets that convene once a week.

It was at that time, from the end of the 1970s into the 1980s, that adolescent groups of musicians with home-made banjos began to be seen everywhere. These groups did not only play home-made banjos, but many new instrumental developments took place. They constructed various other stringed instruments, guitars, bass guitars, and percussion devices to be played with astonishing technical expertise. An example is the huge, home-made bass, which many times has just one string (of a strong wire) which is struck with a little stick (*kantengo*) held in the right hand, while the left hand stops the wire in different places with a bottle (*amakhwekhwetsandibotolommalomokanikizansambozondidzala*). The verb -- *khwekhwetsa*, to describe the action with the bottle, contains the idiophone *khwe* which imitates the scraping sound that emerges when the bottle presses lightly against the string. There are also other boys who have constructed a big bass guitar with four wires, but they do not fully operate all the four wires when they play. They just employ the right hand to sound any of those strings, without stopping them with any fingers of the left hand. All they conceptualize is that at such and such

moment they agitate such and such string in agreement with the chords of the other instruments. Sometimes they call this big instrument bass guitar. Sometimes they play it laid down on the ground, but at other times they play it in upright position, such as we can see in some of the video-shots showing those boys performing their instruments.

These are some of the devices that have come out nowadays from the shift to home-made banjo production, because the people who used to play banjo long ago with their songs, did not employ any of those new instrumental devices. Most often they bought and combined two factory-manufactured instruments, such as guitar and banjo, or otherwise played banjo as soloists.

I would like to emphasize that the style of music propagated by banjo players in Malawi long ago, is very different from that displayed by the adolescent banjo players nowadays. Members of the present-day generation cannot understand and would not appreciate the songs of their predecessors, because they have become immersed in a different musical culture, with songs coming from various countries. All their songs are an amalgam of musical styles, with songs from other countries, and also they follow models established by groups using electrically amplified guitars and other instruments propagated by the media.

But even if the style of the songs changes all the time, the manufacture of the instruments and everything that is associated with it does not really change; all those for example who have constructed their home-made banjos always include four strings, one rarely finds a boy who would have made a banjo with more than four wires.

Madetsa Band

Madetsa Band is a group of musicians who started to play a long time ago in a place known as Nkhoma. It was from that area that by 1988 a special style of banjo playing originated that became known with a band that was famous at that time, the Ndingo Brothers Band. In fact, their style was not much different from that of the Madetsa Band; obviously the latter had taken the Ndingo Brothers Band as their model.

Madetsa is the name of the village where those boys and men with their banjo band come from; they have just taken the name of the village to give it their band. Their leader is Chiyembekezo Karonga, who was about 40 years old when we recorded the group in 2007. He can play any of the instruments in the band; also the other band members are not limited to a specific instrument; they all constantly interchange, which means that anyone among them is capable of carrying out the functions of every instrument they use in their group. Actually, they

use two small banjos (*mabanjoawiriang'onoang'ono*), and one big banjo that was manufactured with an old 5 liter oil container to serve as a resonator (*nkuzamau*). They also use a big guitar of three strings and small drums with additional percussion devices (*ting'omandiponsotidzikhwecherekhwechere*).



Fig. 4: Madetsa band being recorded at Madetsa village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District, August 23, 2003. Photo by the author.

These boys and men most often play their songs in areas surrounding their village, but occasionally they are invited by people from other places, like “hiring“ them for a performance. It seems that because they all stay in one and the same place, they continue as a group to play their songs together, in contrast to others who are good musicians, but would not stay together for a long time, before they separate. This is what happens quite often with banjo players in various places.

This group has a broad repertoire of songs, but most of them are concerned with happenings in the village, what such and such people do. The musicians then take the news and work it into songs which in turn make people very happy. Many people rejoice at listening to those banjo songs, especially if in the middle of a song some real event (*nkhaniyenyeni*) is commented upon, instead of just singing anything without relationship to what goes on between people in the area. For this reason, when they compose their banjo songs, they always try to insert references to events that took place somewhere nearby, or even in their home village. When people listen to many songs of this kind, they often develop keen interest (*amakhalandichidwikwambiri*) to learn what has happened to such and such a person, -- but all transformed into song.

The recordings that can be heard from the Madetsa band in the DVD were made on August 21, 2010 and August 23, 2003 at Madetsavillage, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District.

“*Imfailibechisoni*” (Death has no compassion). This is a song of complaint about Death which strikes anyone, even a child that was just born. The musicians of Madetsa Band had heard the story about a woman whose child had died immediately after birth, and this woman in her misery had said “Death has no compassion. Death has taken my child, just after it was born, without knowing anything yet about this world.” At this point the musicians decided to support that woman in her misery with that theme worked into a song.

“*Pang'onondipang'ono*” (Little by little). This song is based on what was once composed by people involved in politics (*ndale*). They composed songs for their parties to be performed at their political rallies (*misonkhanoyawo*). Occasionally, they may invite banjo groups so that they should play there, before the politicians give speeches about their concerns and programs.

This song is then to be considered within the kind of songs performed at political rallies, but the composer is not known, although he works for the rally. In view of this the musicians of the Madetsa Band have taken one such melody, but they fill it up with different words from performance to performance, without any political rally taking place. This happened also on the day we recorded them. Just the title of the political song, as a slogan, is what remains. The song was once sung by an opposition party in the country saying that little by little we shall win and take the government soon.

Evans Manyozo

From time to time one can find a young man in a village who knows how to play banjo very well, and who composes many different songs, but he plays alone, just for himself. Evans Manyozo, 21 years old, from the village of Nkoloweka, T.A. Kalolo, Lilongwe District, was one of those. And yet he called himself Evans Manyozo Band. In our recordings he played solo, but allowed one boy to join him just for singing the voice part.

It is an interesting phenomenon that from time to time one can find such adolescents who know to play their instrument, a banjo, very well, but have no desire to stay in a group, and play together with others; they prefer to play their music solo. Evans Manyozo was one of those individualists; he used to compose his songs and play them from time to time for his personal enjoyment (*modzisangalatsayekha*). He would not ramble, travel to the markets or other places where crowds gather, as is normal for other bands. This also shows that his interest was not

focused on money, but he used music for self-delectation (*kudzisangalatsaiyeyekha*). Actually, in many places one can find boys like Evans Manyozo, and they are known by the people in their environment, so that we researchers often get news that in such and such place there is an adolescent who knows how to play banjo and compose songs about events taking place in the villages around. And through the channel of his songs, the knowledge about those events begins to spread.



Fig. 5: Evans Manyozo thinking for what item to play with his banjo. At Nkoloweka village, T.A. Kalolo, Lilongwe District. September 3, 2010. Photo by the author.

“*Aids kupitakumanda*” (Aids – going to the graveyard). These kinds of song nowadays are in no way unusual; it is common to hear a singer trying to spread instructions about Aids awareness for people who stay in their villages, because it appears that some people behave as if they had never been informed about how the aids virus can be acquired or picked up by carelessness (*kungonyozelachabe*). Although they know that a person can get infected, they continue with their questionable practices. So singers like Manyozo try to make sure that boys and girls in their villages understand what is told to them about the Aids affliction.

“*Amasiye*” (Orphans) The topic of this song is connected with the song he was singing shortly before. It follows up the question why nowadays one can find so many orphan children, and that it was so because of the Aids epidemic. Therefore, people should come to an agreement to take care of those orphans.

Zatiopsya Band

The leader (*ntsogoleli*) of Zatiopsya Band is Howard Kadolo; he was 20 years old when we met him for the second time in 2008. He comes from the village of Changatigula, T.A.

Dzoole, in Dowa District, Central Region. It was on August 29, 2008 when we arrived there and found those young men who had their band. We had known them before when they were youngsters and recorded them during an earlier visit in 2005. We had recorded two of them with banjos, but the name of their band at that time was different. They called themselves Tombole Band and they had come from Tsilizani village. The two villages are not far from each other. But now those boys, together with one new member, had started another group and they were calling themselves Zatiopsya Band which means “this has threatened us Band” I believe they were construction this name because of our visit.

This band of four members had become very famous in the area, because of their expertise (*ukatswiriwawo*) in song composition (*kapekedwekanyimbo*) for their own repertoire, but also because of their skills and the sound quality of their instruments (*kaimbidwekazipangizozawo*) which included one banjo, one big guitar and a set of drums.

A good thing with this group was that they had been playing together for a long time, and that it was no problem for anyone among them also to play any of the other instruments in their band, because from time to time indeed they used to change roles according to the song they wanted to perform. And so it turned out that a member would play another instrument even better than the one he used to, according to the song he was to perform. It was characteristic of this group that for many songs that we recorded that day, they were changing between their instruments. No matter who was playing bass guitar, or banjo or the little drum, anyone among them was demonstrating a high level of performance skills.

The songs which are played by those young men very much concern the behavior of individuals in their social environment; they contain a lot of criticism and blame (*malangizo*) of the people settled there.



Fig. 6: ZatiopsyaBand, Changatigula, T.A. Dzoole, in Dowa District, Central Region. Photo by the author.

“*Wanthualikumwa tea*” (People are drinking too much tea). In this song they criticize certain men in their area, who like to go and spend time drinking tea in the local canteen, while their children and their wives stay with hunger in the house. The husband drinks tea up to seven cups until he gets satisfied, but when he returns home, he gives the impression of having not consumed anything. The news which is spread by the song is that there are too many tearooms in the area, and -- like that man – many others go there regularly, as if it were a place of gossip, but for the time spent when tea is consumed there, the children are being deprived of anything. Things like that are seen by the local people as manifestations of a bad personal character. Instead of buying sugar and tea leaves for his wife to prepare tea at home for the family, the man leaves them with nothing in order to spend his time elsewhere. The manner in which the musicians present that song not only blames this kind of behavior, but also portrays these men as laughable.

“*Malondaachonaansakha*” (A cat for sale is hidden in the sack). In the Lilongwe area they call a cat *chona*, in other places *mphaka*. It refers to the custom that if someone wants to sell a cat, he carries it in a sack, a big bag, to where he wants to sell. The title of this song is like a proverb. The singers denounce itinerant girls (*atsikanawoyenda-yenda*), that they go to town in order to sell their merchandise, but without a shop! The merchandise they have is within them in their own body. The song text compares this with the content of a certain proverb (*mwambi*) that

says *malondaamphakaalinsakha* which can perhaps also be translated this way: the sales value of a cat is encased inside the sack. Things are being sold while a person cannot see them. The song refers to the trade of prostitutes who would travel from place to place with their internal goods carried along, up to reaching an agreement about their price, while the man cannot see the goods whose price they have negotiated.

“ *Bwanjitheng'eneng'e?*” (Why overdo things!?) The Chichewa term *theng'eneng'e* comes from the language of the very people called Achewa. In that area the term is descriptive of the behavior of people who work themselves up into a frenzy desiring this and that, while they do not have sufficient resources or skills to reach those aims. Such people get into serious trouble, if they do things for which they do not have the necessary qualifications. In the song the musicians say that many people just follow their peers and try things which they are not able to accomplish, and therefore, within a short time they end up in troubles.

Chenyumbu Band

This band is actually a duo, consisting of two performers who are no longer adolescents, but men in their adult age (*azibamboamisinkhuyawo*). They are Macson Gwetsani, 43 years old and Kaston Nkumbatila, 34 years old, from village of Chelenje, T.A. Kalolo, Lilongwe District. It was on August 19, 2010 that we met the duo, when we were taken there by a person who used to drive a “bicycle taxi” (*njingazakabaza*). He was the one who guided us to the place where they stayed and used to play.

Macson Gwetsani, the banjo player turned out to represent a style of playing that was quite different from other musicians who nowadays play banjo. His style seems to be based on songs that were played by people of a generation before him; because youngsters today play the banjo in an easy and relaxed manner, quite different from performers who had learned an old-style vamping technique (*kuimbamokhwachamwachikale*). What Macson was doing in his banjo playing style, was that he often moved his hand fast (*akuimbakwambirimofulumila*) in a kind of double-stroke vamping technique (*kukhwachakwaketikawirikawiri*). Other banjo players never reach such expertise, because the right hand in its movement pattern has to be extremely fast; anyone not used to this, would find that his hand gets quickly tired. Therefore, many other people fail to learn to play in the double-double (*kawiri-kawiri*) vamping style.



Fig. 7: Chenyumbu band in action during the recording session at Chelenje village, T.A. Kalolo, Lilongwe District, August 23, 2010. Photo by the author.

The duo also employed a curious instrument which greatly enhanced our understanding when we saw it. It is what they called *basigita* (bass guitar), but what it actually represents within instrument classification derives from the mono-heterochord zither. This “guitar”, because of the form of a guitar body chosen, had one steel string which was acted upon with a plectrum (*choimbila*) held in the right hand. In addition, on the same hand the performer had an object attached to function like a rattle (*nkhocho*), while in the left hand he used a bottle as a slider, to press it against the wire with a sound like *khwe-khwe*, changing between different positions (*botolokumakhwekhweletsa pa wayayo*). While playing this “bass guitar”, it produced a variety of different tones due to the action with the slider. Kaston Nkumbatila was highly experienced in playing this kind of bass in agreement with the sounds produced by the banjoist. The coordination was stunning, because each of the two was playing without fear of any mistake. It was obvious that they had been playing together since long.

“*Inuamalume*” (You maternal uncles!) The message spread by this song concerns a warning coming from the nephew of a certain man, telling his uncle that a person who has received a plot of land by pawn or mortgage (*mundaomwemunthuwapinyolitsa*), may plant his maize there, but he must not start planting trees, because any time the original owner can come

to take back what was in pawn (*kudzaombola*). In the song the young man rebukes his uncle saying that to do so, was not good.

“Joyce *ku* Bar yayi!” (Joyce in the Bar, no!). This song is also a song of blame. It comes from a young man who blames his sister for working in a bar; because there she might contract a disease, just because of the need for money coming from men. He tells her that she should return to the village; but these words actually come from his uncle (*amalumeawo*) to say that she should come home.

TiyeseNawo Band

Sila Chaphadzuka, 13 years old, is the one who plays tuned metal containers (cans) used instead of small tuned drums. With him is Eliya Nice, 15, who plays banjo, and there is Pililani Thomas who strikes a big container, as if it were a drum to mark the beat. The trio comes from the village of Suya, T.A. Machinjiri, in Blantyre District. They are one among several groups of small boys, still children, that can be found in the vicinity of Blantyre, roaming the streets and playing their music upon request by pedestrians, for a small gift of money (*nkumabechetsanyimbozawo*). This way of support is an old custom in Malawi traceable to the 1950s and 60s in the history of popular music. It is called *kubecha* (from the English word to bet). Someone in the crowd surrounding the young musicians tells them the title of the song he or she wants to hear and pays a standard amount of money for it. The one in the audience who makes the offer gets the song played first.



Fig. 8: SilaChaphadzuka playing percussion with his TiyeseNawo Band, at Singano village, T.A. Kuntaja, September 12, 2005. Photo by the author.

Although many banjo groups are organized among themselves in a way that their leader is the banjo player, this was not the case with the band of SilaChaphadzuka. Here it was the youngest boy, Sila, who had the role of the leader, also because of his self-constructed instrument of tuned metal containers which he played like a drum chime.

It was on September 16, 2006 that the group was on a ramble with their instruments through our area, and by chance, that day they also arrived in Chileka. It was in our place that I recorded several songs played by them. Listening to their songs, it is clear that the manner in which the leader Sila operated the tins, was creating astonishment and interest in many people. He also had good song texts. It was obvious that they had undertaken a lot of work to polish the arrangement of their songs, so that people would rejoice everywhere they went.

However, what often happens to an excellent and tightly knit group of youngsters like this, is that they do not hold for long. When the boys grow older they stop playing music and begin to engage in other things and interests of their lives. Soon after our recordings in 2006 Sila and his trio were not seen again in Blantyre. All of a sudden, on a certain day in 2007, I happened to come across one member of the group near the market of Chirimba, a Blantyre township. I asked him immediately about their band, and he said that their band was finished, they had separated and everyone was now doing his own things. This is exactly what happens to many of these adolescent banjo groups. They play for a while, even for a few years, and then separate, giving up their music.

“*Achemwaliwosanva*” (The sister who does not listen) This song of rebuke (*nyimboyamalangizo*) blames girls who by all means want to do things on their own, such as entering relationships with various men, with the result of picking up a venereal disease. Then they return home and tell their mothers “I have picked up such and such disease”. Her parents would then say: “This young person did not listen to any advice. Whenever we were warning her about something, she did not pay attention to our words. Now she has come home with the result.”

“*Kuimbatikuimbachifukwa cha Yesu*” (As to music, we make music because of Jesus). In this song they express their thanks, saying that everything they do in their boys’ group comes about because of Jesus, and Jesus gives them the strength (*mphanvu*) of their music. Even anyone else should remember that everything which he or she accomplishes is because God is the one who creates.

Final considerations

To conclude my writings, I would like to raise a few more points that concern itinerant banjo bands moving through villages and towns. Many people are not aware of the immense experimental spirit that pushes them, and that these young people invent or discover new things in acoustics and performance technique. As an example, let us take the 13-year old SilaChaphadzuka and his group on this DVD (last item). He had the idea of using a number of discarded cans, tune them and then play them like a chime of little drums. This and many other inventions are tried out by those banjo-playing boys, demonstrating their wit and ability to solve technical problems.

But due to the fact that those groups do not usually stay together for a long time, to display their technical devices and sing their songs, it only takes a short while until everything they have invented and the thoughts they have invested in constructing their musical tools, is lost again. The group separates, as it happened with Sila Chaphadzuka. It is for this reason that, when we encounter some of those banjo groups in the middle of towns or in the townships, we have to know that it is always a glimpse of a momentary situation. One group may have just disappeared and another one has taken its terrain.

And also, many of these groups we watch on the present DVD do not necessarily roam the streets in towns, but play their banjos, bass guitar and percussion devices in their home villages and vicinity. Only from time to time do they play elsewhere, provided that they find an

audience that would pay for their songs; upon request, as if it were an auction. This is called *kumabe chetsa*.

Many times, those groups playing in front of people, do not even have a band name. It may happen that one of us researchers asks them about the name of their band; then they quickly invent one, such as *Tingoyesa Band* (We are just trying Band) or *Tiyesenawo Band* (Let us try with them Band), etc. This indicates that they have had no proper name for their group, but construct one the moment they are asked such a question. It is for this reason that among the groups shown on the DVD there are sometimes band names resembling each other.

The boys of many groups have been teaching each other auto didactically while they were still based in their home villages. When they discover that people in their village like their songs, they begin to think of widening their area of operation, and migrate to town, in expectation that if they performed there they would get money to satisfy all their needs. However, towns are expensive; and the problems they encounter are many. In town they need a place to stay, and enough money for food. Soon they discover that their earnings from street performances are not enough to pay for more than just to cover those expenses. Gradually, everyone feels uncomfortable and begins to doubt whether it is worthwhile at all to continue with music. Some begin to think of different solutions for themselves, and soon the band dissolves or is reduced to a hard core that wants to continue by all means.

On the other side of the social spectrum, promoters and those in control of the media and the music business selecting songs for the radio, the TV or CDs to be produced in studios, look upon those banjo playing bands as trash. They would not promote them with their songs. Music business bets on urban customers with a lot of cash and quite different tastes. Without promotion, the music of the roaming banjo bands is doomed to an underground existence, while those bands with electric guitars, amplifiers, synthesizers etc. as promoted by the media and the music business, are considered to represent popular music in Malawi.

It is in this situation that I myself with my team decided long ago to cover this culture for history. I began to record banjo-playing adolescents in Malawi already in the 1980s, after I had recorded one such group in northwestern Zambia in 1979 (cf. MALAMUSI, 1984). Some of my research materials have been published on two CDs (MALAMUSI, 1999, 2011) and I also began to screen the literature on home-made banjos in southern Africa (KIRBY, 1934 etc.).

However, comparing the results of our field research in neighboring countries, notably Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania with Malawi, I found that the roaming banjo bands are a phenomenon particularly concentrated in southern and central Malawi, not anywhere else. Here,

in these areas, it is normal, that groups replace themselves every few years. So there is constant replenishment of such groups in this country, and that process has started long ago.

This culture continues in spite of neglect and disinterest in the media relegating an important part of music history in Malawi to “non-existence”. This is where our research center in Chileka, the Oral Literature Research Programme, comes in, because it is our strategy to put all existing cultural traditions on record and not only those that are sponsored by the massmedia and the music business. Here, at the OLRP, we now keep recordings dating back to the early 1980s.

Further Readings

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