INNOVATION: A MEASURE FOR THE CONTROL OF CULTURAL CHANGES IN THE SURVIVAL FOR THE LUO THUM TRADITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Thum as known today is amorphous in that its corpus has been broadened to include not only the Luo lyre, but also the fiddle, the accordion and the guitar musics unlike what it stood for before the coming of Europeans. The art of thum tradition consists of solo vocal performance by jathum, the instrument player accompanied on his instrument most often with a chorus who may or may not be involved with other instrumental accompaniments. Whatever the case, the other instrumental accompaniments would be subordinate to that played by jathum. The traditional concept of thum performance includes wach, song texts that is either sung, recited or spoken; and puch, oduong’o and gara, instrumental accompaniments which include all the accompaniments used in performance. Although thum differ in the way they are made and played, the Luo have learnt to make them fit the social requirements by improving the physical conditions of the traditional thum, the Luo lyre and socially upgrading the acquired instruments such as oruta (the fiddle), onanda (the accordion) and gita (the guitar) to the same status. The players of the acquired instruments also increased their social status by becoming jathum, like the traditional thum players. As the acquired musical instruments became known as thum, it became necessary to prefix the original names to the instruments for easy identification. The Luo lyre (see the plate attached). Therefore was referred to by its other names such as Nyatiti, sidika, or Thum nyalu.

The Looming Threat and the Innovations

The introduction of the newly acquired musical instruments became a threat to the well being of the traditional thum. In order to counteract the looming threat, and assure traditional thum of its former position in society, the traditional thum players first increased their popularity by adopting some of the trappings of the accordion, guitar and fiddle players developed after the introduction of the genres. This was followed by the changes in the manufacture of the lyre, which involved the reduction of its size to what it is now, painting the resonator and parts of the yoke, and tuning it an octave higher than before, so that it is in level with the voice part, which used to sing an octave higher. Further changes included the introduction of oduong’o (toe-ring), the reduction (in number) and transfer of bell-rattles into ankle-bells, and the singing of songs, which are in line with the newly incorporated songs. The transfer of the sound hole from the membrane to the back of the resonator also improved the quality of the sounds, that is, thum would now be heard at a distance like the incorporated thumbe. The players also changed their costumes and increased the size of their dance teams. Among other...
innovations, the composers introduced songs which were shared antiphonally between jawer (the main singer) and simo (his helper). With the spread and development of antiphonal style, performance of thum became more tied to the techniques and styles of particular individuals; and audiences were unable to join in as they had in the earlier responsorial songs which I knew in my youth. These changes were precipitated by the developments in accordion guitar and fiddle musics, in which the solos were composed and performed by the same person. Traditional thum composers decided to copy this. Once this was achieved, traditional thum composers felt that there was no way in which the performers of the newly acquired instruments could dwarf them. Through solo singing, they freely used their powerful voices to express and render with great feeling the praises of the subjects who gave great gifts. As Omondi (1980: 64) noted.

The solo song was the most suitable medium for praise, which is the leading theme for thum songs. Being un-repetitive, the composition and performance of these songs, no doubt, also became more intellectual. Their texts became more meaningful, thus making them more conducive to listening to than the responsorial and the antiphonal songs. In them, therefore, the musicians would pour their praises and eulogies without the limitation of having to share a song. The above changes and the admiration for the incorporated musical instruments were the result of Western civilization - through churches and schools. These were the two most powerful weapons that Europeans used to make the Luo hate and despise their traditional music and musical instruments. Some members of the Luo community who passed through these systems became so much alienated that they could not help viewing the Luo system of life as primitive and uncultured. The European way of life was full of promises and their music so that the intensity of song and instrumental accompaniments by the practice of the guitarists and other two (thum) performers as additional visual entertainment, inspired by the practice of the guitarists and other two (onanda and orutu) acquired instrumental genres. The thum sounds changed so that the intensity of song and instrumental accompaniments were at the same level. Other changes in the techniques of thum playing with variations included preludes or postludes to songs and/or interludes during performances.

**Occasion for Performance**

Occasions for thum performances were modified or dropped. These were: nyombo (marriages); masira (funerals); guto (cleansing after homicide); nyasi (ordinary celebrations); omo thum (private invitations to jothum), and tugo (community festivals) among others.

**Nyombo (Marriages)**

During marriages, thum was performed on donjo oche pacho (the first day the bridegroom entered the home of the bride’s parents) and during mako nyako (when the bride was abducted). On these two occasions, the lyre entertained guests and the bride respectively. Traditionally, the lyre strings were believed to hasten pregnancy. Although thum continued to be used during marriages, some of the marriage styles such as abducting brides and the belief in the power of thum strings to hasten pregnancies were considered primitive and were soon discarded and replaced by Western wedding in which Western musical instruments are used to entertain the brides and the guests.

**Masira (Funerals)**

In funerals, the lyre played different roles at different stages. One of these was to dispel grief among the bereaved by
keeping them company and by expressing and sharing with them the feeling of loss of the departed, and giving them a platform on which to release their frustration and tension through the system of pakruok. The lyre was also used on special funeral occasions such as chieng’ romb oche (the day of the affines); chieng’ uch or chieng’ tak ng’at motho (the final funeral celebration or rites of deceased individual). There were occasions when thum could be performed at a funeral long after or before the above special occasions, for example, when a musician was a friend of the deceased or of the deceased’s relatives, and the musician felt indebted to their families and therefore wished to pay his last respect by performing music at the funeral. The tradition of performing music at funerals survived among both the traditionists and the elite.

Fig. 1. Thum: The Luo lyre

Guto (Cleansing after Homicide)

If a Luo killed a human being, he/she had to be cleansed. This is because the slain’s ghost was believed to hover around the killer, and unless purification was carried out, the ghost could lead the killer to do more damage. Therefore, if a Luo committed homicide, he/she was not allowed to enter a village until he/she was purified. Before the purification, a hut was built for the subject of homicide, somewhere in the bush or at the place of the homicide. During the purification, jathum had to be present to sing to the subject the history of those who had also committed homicide. All these were done to balance the psyche of the subject so that by the time the purification was over, his/her mind would be restored to its normal state. A similar occasion would involve those who had killed taboed animals. Although these occasions were wholly for thum, during the final day of purification, that is, when the subject was taken home, different types of music were used to entertain the audience that came to witness the occasion. At first, the elite did not want to associate themselves with such occasions, but as time went by, they relaxed and started attending such occasions.

Nyasi (Ordinary Celebrations)

Apart from the special occasions above, there were occasions in the form of celebrations that required the presence of jathum. These celebrations varied from the inauguration of weapons (such as tong’ [spear]; kuodi and okamba [big and small shields]) to preparations of games (such as amen [wrestling] and adhula [football]) where those involved were supposed to spend a night in one place, away from women before the event. On most of these celebratory occasions, traditional thum and oratu were used.

Omo Thum (Private Invitations to Jathum)

On these occasions, members of the village and the surrounding villages would gather to be entertained. They would dance and participate in pakruok. They would also give and promise to huwo jathum (give the lyre player great gifts). Some of these promises would be honoured and others not. When one was specially moved by a particular performance and thus promised a gift, in either kind or money, which for one reason or another he or she could not pay at the time, he would invite jathum in question to his home. This was referred to as “reclaiming the token”. The host would then give jathum the gift he/she had promised at the end of his visit. On such occasions, jathum would sing praises of heroes and the generous and ridicule those who never honoured their promises to jathum - thus reflecting on the past as a source of examples for the present.

Other Occasions

There were occasions when jathum performed during their inauguration. There were times when wealthy or important patrons without prior invitation ambushed Jathum. Those who went to seek employment outside the Luo territories also occasionally invited jathum to their work places.

Tugo (Sports and Festivals)

Sporting occasions such as Migwena, Jokaba and jorinda (social meetings) were some of the many festivals in which thum performance were night extensions of the day sporting activities in which those who participated during the day went to dance at night.

The Invitation and Preparation for Performance

Jathum is invited by a patron who requires the presence of thum at an occasion, such as, the funeral celebrations of one of his late relatives or during ceremonial rites. If jathum is free, that is, there are no early invitations coinciding with the date in question, then, jathum accepts part payment of the invitation and transport fee. Immediately after the invitation, jathum sets out to protect himself, so that if he encounters another jathum who uses charms, his charms will not affect him. When the thum has been protected, jathum will then summon his team. The time to begin the journey is controlled by the distance of the destination. Jathum, according to tradition, were supposed to arrive at their hosts’ home by five in the evening. If the occasion is a funeral, then jathum announce their arrival by playing one or two songs of lament before they are taken to the place prepared for them. If not, they are shown where to sit by an appointed guide.

Siwandha (The Stage for Performance)

Jathum marahuma, famous musician performs in siwandha, a built enclosure. After the welcome, jathum gi lange (the musician and his team) take their position in siwandha. The musician and his co-players sit a step in front of the other members the team, who then form a protective arc behind the players. Members of the audience sit on either side of the arc leaving a space in the centre of the enclosure. The type of instrument used controls the size of the space in siwandha. If it were the lyre, then the space would not be as big as if it were the newly acquired instruments, because both sexes dance to their music, whereas only a small number of maidens dance to the music of the lyre. When everything is ready, jathum
begins by tuning his instrument and then plays introductory tunes to which his associates dance. However, if the occasion is a funeral, then after tuning his instrument, he would play one of his lament tunes before he plays for the dancers. The exact time for performances to begin varied from one occasion to another. On some occasions, jathum began their performances immediately after their arrival, with short breaks for meals. On others, the performances began at eight in the evening and continued until six or eight in the morning. The performances also resumed at two in the afternoon after the musicians and his teams had slept, washed and taken their midday meals. The two o’clock performance continued for an hour or up to six, depending on whether or not the jathum would be leaving for his home. If he were to leave for his home, then the two o’clock performance could only last for an hour, but if the performance was to go on for one or two more days, then the performance would go on up to six, before they break for the evening meals. After the break, the performance could resume at eight or nine to go on again until six or eight of the next day.

In addition to using the space in the centre of siwandha for dances, it was also used by those who liked to take part in pakruok (panegyrization). Unique to such occasion are the difri or kapten, both words coined from the two English words referee and captain respectively and performs the duty of the master of ceremony. The difri is usually a member of the village, appointed by the members of the village to preside on the occasion. He is chosen because of the respect he commands among the members of the community (within and outside the village). He is known to be physically strong, reasonable where reason prevails and unreasonable to those who are not reasonable. It is the work of the kapten to organize the occasion. Once performance starts of the Luo lyre, unless interrupted by pakruok participants from members of the audience, it becomes a continuous event. As for the acquired instruments, the kapten organizes the performance to suit the dance teams, which could be as numerous as the surrounding clans and sub-clans. According to tradition, the Luo lyre was only danced to by maidens and not the males. The male members of the community only took part in pakruok, and if specially moved, would join the maidens in the dancing space and do a bit of yong’o. This is the reason why the dance space in siwandha is not as big as it would be when the acquired musical instruments play.

Unlike the lyre dancers, those who participate during the performances of the acquired musical instruments do so in pairs of men and women. The pair may not hold each other depending on the style of the dance in question. The dance styles are modern and are the Luo adaptation of the foreign pop dances that accompanied the Western and other foreign pop music that invaded Luoland.

An examination of the structure and meanings of the music genres in the context of Luo society and culture reveals the great influence of traditional lyre music on modern styles. However, the lyre music itself has been changed because of the innovation of individual musicians. Thus, although the similarities of style may be due to the influence of a common cultural tradition and musical conventions, and the peculiarities are partly determined by the different instruments, the decisive factor in the distinctive style of the genres is the composers own personality and individual creativity.

REFERENCES


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