

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

...African performance is a tightly wrapped bundle of arts that are sometimes difficult to separate, even for analysis. Singing, playing instruments, dancing, masquerading and dramatizing are part of the conceptual package that many Africans think of as one and the same (Stone, 1998:7).

Many African ceremonies go hand in hand with music performance. Music is used as a carriage that embodies relevant messages. The structure of most African songs entails various forms of short solo-response phrases. More often the language used is proverbial. A proverb has hidden meaning, which has to be interpreted by the targeted listeners. African music is functional in that whenever it is performed there is a specific role it usually accomplishes. It is the venue and avenue for social controls in the communities in which it is performed.

The content of the music is dictated by the day-to-day occurrences in the respective societies. Technological development, the growth of towns and industries has contributed to changes in the ways of life in African communities. These changes have given rise to new concerns and by extension to new compositions with new themes together with new performance styles. This research focuses on the form and content of Bukusu circumcision music. Consequently, structures, functions, meanings and performance styles of the music were investigated. On the basis of the fact that African music is culture-specific, this chapter presents the geographical, cultural, anthropological, historical, psychological and philosophical setting in which Bukusu circumcision music is deeply rooted.

**1.1.1 DYNAMICS OF AFRICAN MUSIC**

According to Mwamwenda (1995), circumcision has been part of many African cultures for as long as anyone within such cultures can remember. Long before Western nations sent their people to Africa as traders, missionaries and colonial administrators, circumcision was already practiced. He further observes that numerous attempts were made by missionaries to bring to an end the circumcision of girls. Similar attempts have been made by some national African governments, but for all we know, both sets of attempts have been unsuccessful, because of the extent to which the circumcision rite is embedded in the cultures in which it is practiced. All African ethnic groups that practice circumcision view the ritual with strong personal pride as well as cultural significance. In many African traditional circumcision rituals, music is used to generate spiritual disposition, and thereby humanizing instincts. On the basis of the foregoing emergent cultural controversy, the focus of this study is the assessment of form and content of the traditional Bukusu circumcision music in the modern times.

Since the pre-colonial period, traditional music was performed on social occasions such communal work and during ritual ceremonies such as wrestling competitions, spiritual worship, ceremonies for twins, marriages, circumcision, and funeral rites. On music as an essential cultural component, Fortes (1938:89) states that “from whatever angle music is viewed, it is only embedded in the matrix of the culture and thus, shares the general trends which the general culture development follows.” This argument attests to the fact that, music is part of culture, and any change in culture affects it. Changes in the overall Bukusu culture have triggered changes in the circumcision ritual structure. For instance, some of its phases are no longer performed according to traditional customs. As such, the form and content of the music is tailored to fit into the new circumcision practices.

**1.1.2 WHO ARE THE BUKUSU?**

The Bukusu are one of the seventeen sub-tribes that comprise the Luyia cluster of Interlacustrine Bantu tribes of Eastern Africa. Specifically, they inhabit Bungoma district of Western Province in Kenya. Other sub-tribes are Batiriki, Barakoli, Banyole, Bakhayo, Bamaraki, Banyala, Basamia, Babesukha, Babetakho, Bakisa, Bachochi, Bakabalasi, Batachoni, Bawanga, Bamarama and Barechea (living in Gem location of Luo-land). In the absence of standard orthography for ethnonyms of sub-tribes constituting the Abaluyia, the researcher resolved to spell them according to the Bukusu phonetics. Thus 'Maragoli' is spelt 'Barakoli', 'Abamarachi' is spelt 'Bamaraki', etc. as shown above. The Bukusu inhabit Bungoma District which is bordered by Kakamega District in the east, Mount Elgon in the West, Trans Nzoia District in the North and Busia District in the South as shown in maps 1.1 and 1.2. This research was conducted in all the eight divisions that make up Bungoma district; namely: Kanduyi, Bumula, Sirisia, Webuye, Ndivisi, Nalondo, Tongaren and Kimilili. Bungoma is blessed with many rivers and streams, and has open, undulating grasslands that in some places are interrupted by rocky hills and patches of forest. The land is fertile and well watered, experiencing a two months dry spell between December and late January. The main rainy seasons occur in the months of May and August. The soil is largely an association of dark red friable clays (with deep humic top soil) and dark brown sandy loams, both belonging to the well drained soil types; and 100 per cent of the agricultural land is classified on a rainfall basis as high potential. These conditions contribute immensely to the cultivation of food crops like millet, sorghum and maize, and rearing of farm animals like cows, goats and sheep which are mainly used for sacrifice in the month of August of every even year when the Bukusu circumcision ceremony is carried out (See photo nos. 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3).



**Photo no. 1.1; taken by the researcher: Field cleared after harvest in the month of August. Bukusu circumcision is carried out when there is plenty of food for the participants (see DVD video clip nos. B1 and B2).**

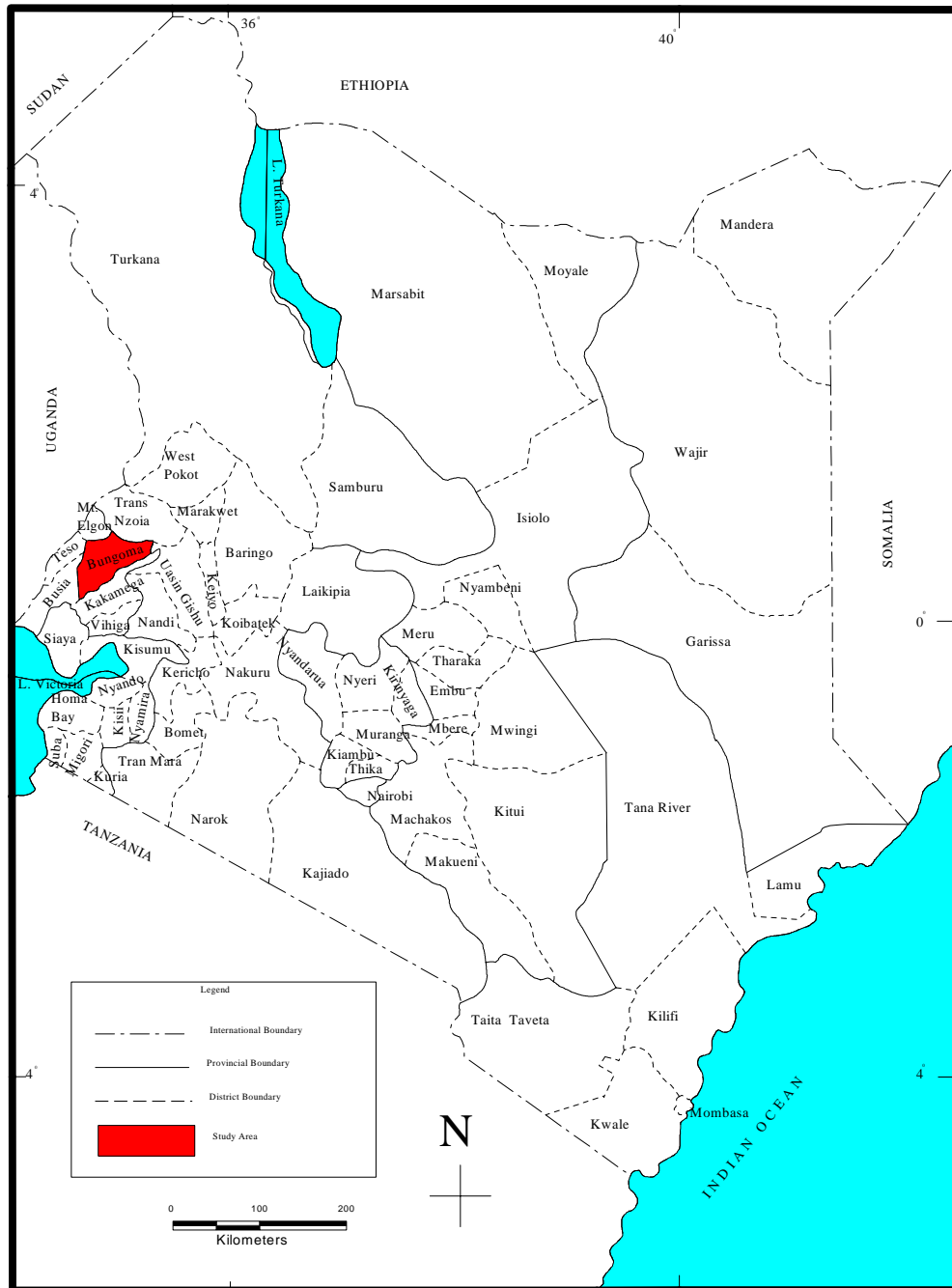


**Photo no. 1.2; taken by the researcher: Harvested maize drying in the sun. The maize is used to prepare maize meal and the local brew called *busaa/kwete* for the visitors who come to witness the initiate's circumcision (see DVD video clip nos. B1 and B2).**



**Photo no. 1.3; taken by the researcher: In the background is a maize field cleared after harvest (see DVD clip no. B1)**

**MAP NO. 1.1      MAP OF KENYA**



**Source: Moi University Geography Laboratory (2005).**

**MAP NO. 1. 2**

**BUNGOMA DISTRICT MAP**



**Source: Moi University Geography Laboratory (2005).**



### **1.1.3 STUDY AREA**

This study was conducted in Kenya among the Bukusu, a sub-community under the umbrella of the larger Luyia community, in the Bungoma district of Western Province. The map of Kenya with the location of Bungoma district highlighted and that of Bungoma district are separately shown in maps 1.1 and 1.2 respectively. According to Singleton (1993), the most suitable place for research is where the researcher can reach fast and easily. Bungoma district, the home district of almost all the Bukusus is also the home area of the researcher who has the basic information about the socio-cultural practices of the Bukusu. Moreover, he understands and communicates well in *Lubukusu* – the language spoken by the Bukusu people. Knowledge of a culture, especially the language is important in ethnomusicological studies. Kunst (1959:1) supports this aspect when he states that “a most important factor for the success of an ethnomusicological expedition is the knowledge of the language current in the territory of one’s investigation.” Language as a factor helps the researcher to delve deeper into the field of study.

### **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

As earlier alluded to in section 1.1.1, vast changes in the organization, form and performance of Bukusu circumcision music have been caused by foreign socio-economic and technological trends. It may be argued that currently, most Bukusus circumcise their sons in hospitals because of three main reasons. First, since the school system provides a vacation period of more or less a month, the modern hospital mode that has no initiation procedure and extra-surgical/clinical associations is preferred. More often, the traditional ritual spans over a period of one month or more. Considering that most initiates are of primary school-going age, embracing the traditional procedure automatically interferes with the school calendar. Therefore, the modern brief version has become popular. Second, because most people are hard-hit by inadequate finance due to other survival/subsistence demands, they

would rather go for the modern circumcision practice the expenses for which are minimal. And third, since the spread of HIV/AIDS has widely been attributed to traditional circumcision practices, the modern practices are gradually gaining currency.

Despite the above argument, traditional Bukusu circumcision music embodies aspects of social controls that are worth preserving by being repackaged anew for the benefit of the youth and the society at large. Therefore, there is an urgent need of capturing and analyzing structures and functions of the music due to the fact that cultural meaning may be lost as a result of acculturation taking place in the organization and performance of Bukusu circumcision ritual and by extension the music that accompanies it.

In view of the above scenario, it becomes necessary to address the relevance of Bukusu circumcision music in the modern context. Consequently, the study concerns itself with the major research question: which peculiar structural elements constitute the form, theoretical content and performance of Bukusu circumcision music? In order to obtain detailed data, the following subsidiary questions were raised:

- (a) Is it possible to have a traditional Bukusu circumcision without music?
- (b) What is the role of music?
- (c) How is Bukusu circumcision music composed and performed?
- (d) Who are the performers of Bukusu circumcision? What is the role of each?
- (e) What are the functions of performance characteristic features/styles such as repetitions of song texts and melodies, use of vocalizations and other paramusical features in Bukusu circumcision music?
- (f) What types of instruments, costumes and body art are used in Bukusu circumcision music, and what roles/significance do they serve/encode?
- (g) Why do the Bukusu use satire/allusions in their circumcision music?

- (h) What changes are evident in the organization and performance of Bukusu circumcision music and what are the main causes and functions of the changes?
- (i) In view of the emergent/current socio-economic and technological developments, is it relevant/necessary for the Bukusu to continue with the traditional circumcision ritual and the performance of the traditional circumcision music?

### **1.3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the form, content and performance of Bukusu circumcision music, which give it cultural meaning and social relevance. The objectives are:

- (a) Analysis and explanation of the cultural/traditional setting in which the Bukusu circumcision music is rooted.
- (b) Identification of characteristic forms and structures in Bukusu circumcision music.
- (c) Analysis of the functions of the various structures in (b).
- (d) Identification of virtues embedded in the Bukusu circumcision music.
- (e) Interpretation of proverbs used in Bukusu circumcision music.
- (f) Explanation of the philosophy and function of social controls, which determine stages and styles of performing Bukusu circumcision music.
- (g) Identification and explanation of the emerging changes in the organization, structure and performance of Bukusu circumcision music.
- (h) Transcription and explanation of Bukusu circumcision music.
- (i) Analysis of various forms of Bukusu circumcision songs.

### **1.4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

This study is based on the following research hypotheses:

- (a) The function of some structures in Bukusu circumcision music such as ululations, vocalizations and other embellishments is to inspire the performers (the singers, initiates and dancers). The messages

embodied in various songs encourage the initiate to face circumcision bravely.

- (b) Bukusu circumcision music through the use of proverbs, satire/allusions, has an educative and social control value for the initiates and the community at large.
- (c) Changes in the organization, content, context and performance of Bukusu circumcision music are as a result of new socio-economic influences.

### **1.5 JUSTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study aims:

- (a) To preserve in a scholarly manner the various aspects of Bukusu circumcision music for future reference. This is necessary because Bukusu circumcision music is preserved orally and there is a danger of distorting the traditional structures and the essence of the music in the process of passing it on from generation to generation by word of mouth.
- (b) To contribute to the already existing knowledge about the indigenous concept and performance of African music.
- (c) To articulate the philosophy and function of African music as exemplified by the Bukusu.
- (d) To contribute music education study materials for schools, colleges and universities in Kenya and perhaps elsewhere. Currently such materials are inadequate.
- (e) To create a reference source for scholars such as anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and educationists in understanding culture as a dynamic phenomenon.
- (f) To stimulate further research in ethnomusicology and related fields such as anthropology, history and sociology.

## **1.6 STRUCTURE OF THESIS**

Chapter one deals with: background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose and objectives of the study, research hypothesis and; justification and significance of the study.

Chapter two covers the review of related literature on form and content of traditional African music in general and its performance in the modern context. The chapter relates the literature to the context of Bukusu circumcision music. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding the study are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter three dwells on research design and methodology, where data collection techniques, sampling methods, data validity, processing, and analysis procedures are discussed.

Chapter four discusses the context of the Bukusu circumcision ritual. The origins of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony, the significance of the main phases of the ceremony, different roles played by various participants, taboos, beliefs and symbols are discussed.

Chapter five focuses on the analysis of thematic, ensemble and presentational forms of Bukusu circumcision music where aesthetics, performance, content, form and structure of the music are presented and discussed.

Lastly, chapter six focuses on the summary of the research findings, conclusions, recommendations of the current study and suggestions for further research.