

Women and Sungura music in Zimbabwe: Sungura Music as a Culturally-Gendered Genre

*Ženske in Sungura glasba v Zimbabweju: Sungura glasba kot
žanr pogojen s kulturo in spolom*

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Abstract

Women in Zimbabwe, continue to be looked down upon in most disciplines particularly theatre. Yet theatre has grown to become a big industry in the world in general and Zimbabwe in particular. It is not surprising that, people import and export cultures through theatre. Intercultural, intra-cultural and cross-cultural dynamics have been found to be easily communicable through theatre. Theatre is everywhere in both private and public spheres of life. Politicians have found the power of theatre not easy to resist in performing the magic power of courting the attention of potential voters. Zimbabwe music as part of theatre has culturally other genres where women cannot enter. Interestingly Zimbabwean women are musicians in Mbira, gospel, Rhythm and Blues and other genres but no or possibly few women are into Sungura music.

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Interestingly the role that women have been made to play in Sungura music is culturally gendered as in the case of Zimbabwe. Men have crowned themselves as kings of Sungura where queens seem not welcome and the media have created that gendered space where women are yet to break into. This paper seeks to argue that women musicians have not entered into Sungura music because of cultural gendered factors which are not economical as some might think.

Key words: Sungura, gender, culture, loose, decent, genre, prostitute

Povzetek

Ženske so v Zimbabweju pogosto deležne slabše obravnave na različnih področjih, še posebej v gledališču. Slednje je postalo še posebej očitno, odkar je gledališče postalo velika industrija tako v svetu kot v Zimbabweju. Glasba je v gledališču odraz kulturnih in ostalih žanrov, ki odsevajo medkulturne ter čez-kulturne značilnosti. Besedilo prikaže, da je Sungura glasba kulturno pogojena in je omogočila vstop v gledališče le moškim. Ženske so lahko glasbenice v ostalih žanrih, v Sungura glasbi pa niso zaželjene.

Ključne beside: Sungura, spol, kultura, prostitucija, dostenost

Introduction

Theatre is part of communication in African society and can be in various forms that include: dance, music, drama and art. This paper will focus on *Sungura* music in relation to the low status that women have been made to occupy in that genre of music. Music is regarded as the heartbeat of every society as it portrays the joys and sorrows of the community. This was the case during time immemorial where music and dance among the Shona people were used to communicate what had happened in the hunting expedition, for example, men would act out how they managed to capture an antelope through the *Chidzimba* dance. Women on the other hand would enact the planting, sowing and harvest of the plants through *Mbakumba* dance (Zimbabwe Music Festival, 2010). It is important to note that, dance and music has always been part and parcel of people's lives. New styles of dance and songs were composed in line with the context of the Shona people. It is therefore not surprising that of late, *Sungura* music has been found to be popular amongst Zimbabweans. What is surprising is that, as of now there are no females who are into fulltime *Sungura* music provoking this study to look at the possible reasons that lead Zimbabwean women not to engage in it even though it is one of the biggest growing industries that is economically performing well. One is justified to ask the following questions: Does it imply that women musicians are not economically alert to the fact that, *Sungura* music is performing well and economically promising? What are the barriers that cause women not venture into *Sungura* music? It is our argument in this paper that, the cultural dimension is the major factor that feeds into the religious, economical and social dimensions as shall be shown in this study.

What is *Sungura* music?

Sungura is a common name for a Zimbabwean style of popular music that draws heavily from Congolese rumba. It is arguably the most popular style of music in Zimbabwe, perhaps rivalled only by gospel music (Tony Perman, 2003). *Sungura* music uses instruments that include drums, guitars and keyboard. *Sungura* music in Zimbabwe is normally associated with popular night clubs, hotels, and beer gardens as *KwaMereki* in Warren Park of Harare. *Sungura* musicians usually perform in cities, growth points that are littered around the country. There are many theories that explain the origin of *Sungura* music in Zimbabwe. According to Fred Zindi (The Standard, 2007), *Sungura* music was influenced by *Rhumba* sounds from Congo. He added that, people used to imitate *Rhumba* sounds from Congo and translate them into Shona, and this is how it came into being. With the passing of time, musicians such as John Chibadura, Knowledge Kunenyati, James Chimombe and others started fusing it with such sounds as *jiti*, and all this has resulted in the birth of *Sungura*. *Sungura* music then became popular in the 1980s pioneered by Ephraim Joe and his *Sungura Boys*, which groomed future popular *Sungura* kings who include John Chibadura, Simon Chimbetu, Naison Chimbetu, Ronnie Chataika and Michael Jambo. It emerged as one of the popular genres of music in Zimbabwe. Now there are many male *Sungura* musicians like: Tongai Moyo, Alec Macheso and the Chimbetu brothers. Others would like to refer this type of music as Zimbabwean *Rhumba*. The *Sungura* music has been popularised in neighbouring countries like Mozambique and South Africa.

***Sungura* Music as a Culturally-Gendered Path**

The Shona group of people constitutes more than three quarters of

Zimbabwe's population and speak one or other of the dialects of what the linguists call the Shona cluster of languages (Gelfand 1973, 19). When it comes to the Shona culture, it puts men as heads and leaders of society with women and children as followers. The Shona culture plays a key role in defining space, designating and differentiating space and assigning it to specific gender categories (Pascar Mungwini and Kudzai Matereke, 2010). Generally, the Shona Traditional Religion and culture gendered the socialization of people even in music, something important in the analysis of *Sungura* music and women. There were certain instruments that were particularly for men and for women, for example, drums were played by men whereas rattles were played by women. Few women save those spiritually possessed were allowed to play the drums at traditional ceremonies like *kurova guva*. *Kurova guva* is a ceremony held amongst the Shona people after a year when one is deceased. The function of the ceremony is to bring back home the spirit of the deceased so as to guide the living (Ranger 1975, 261; Banana 1991, 76). Women were religiously and culturally not allowed to play drums as such an action was regarded as defiling the instruments particularly during the menstruation periods of women. Drums are highly regarded amongst the Shona people because of their religious role in evoking spiritual possession. In order to keep the ceremonies pure, women were therefore not allowed to play drums. The religious and cultural prohibitions put women at the bottom of society and this can still be related to the contemporary *Sungura* music. It is always men as leaders who culturally allocate roles to others particularly women and that cultural hierarchizing of social roles is seen in *Sungura* music. It is men who dominate as directors, composers and managers whereas women are only dancers and vocalists. In real life few women are fully employed in theatre as the industry is culturally considered to be of people with 'loose' morals. Unfortunately, theatre which should be at the forefront in offering space to women has not been culturally spared in the gendered

demarcation of what is regarded as “respectable” and “unrespectable” for women.

The Cultural Impact of costuming and make up on women dancers in Sungura

Some critics have looked at the cultural influence of how the African culture prescribes what is to be worn and not worn by women in public, something that has topped the debate in relation to the reasons why the general public are against women who dare become part of *Sungura* music. Pascar Mungwini and Kudzai Matereke rightly noted something on the Shona culture that:

The consigning of people to specific spaces ensures that they occupy and co-opt space through action, so that they realize their agency. The separation of spaces into private and public, and the allocation of bodies to the specific space is also a way of investing power in the body. Ideas such as ‘decency’, ‘beauty’ and ‘culture’ are at the core of this investment of power in the body. Within this framework, bodies partake in routines to perform tasks and roles.

Since *Sungura* musicians are known to perform in public places like beerhalls, night clubs known to be associated with certain lifestyles that are shunned by society, such public places have been associated with people of loose morals. Culturally the Shona people stereotypically associate women members of music bands particularly *Sungura* ones as divorcees, unmarried and commercial sex workers. Critics have looked at the role of culture in the socialization of people especially on the allocation of roles and characterization of dressing. Culturally the Shona people have specific dress codes that define the characters of their members particularly women. Mini-skirts, tight trousers and revealing

clothes are associated with deviant people. The Shona females are taught to kneel before elders (especially men), to sit with legs crossed, and to dress appropriately to cover specific parts of the body. It is regarded a taboo amongst the Shona people for a woman to expose her tummy in public let alone expose her breasts. The Shona people consider matters relating to sexually inviting dances as in most of the *Sungura* dances as taboo or unspeakable (Mashiri 2002, 221). It is within this context of cultural expectations that rape and the narratives of the victims of rape are usually explained away, for example, that it is a woman who provokes a man; or that the woman was not supposed to have been in that place in the first place; or that any normal man could not have behaved any different considering how the lady was scantily dressed. Some of these cultural norms are written down but the Shona people just know them. Traditional, as well as modern Shona society encourages stylised communication that is orally passed but with impact on the contact and attitude of people. Charles Pfungwa (2001, 25) noted that, this orientation derives from the unwritten Shona moral or ethical code which venerates verbal and nonverbal behaviour that maintains respect, stability and group solidarity. Anything that culturally undermines these values is censored and has contributed to the attitude towards *Sungura* music. It is important to note that, *Sungura* Shona women dancers are censored for their dressing and taken as social outcasts. This has a negative effect on women who are interested in becoming *Sungura* musicians for economical empowerment, they find the heat of being censored and labelled by society unbearable to stand.

What is interesting is that, women who are incorporated into *Sungura* music as dancers or backing vocalists normally put tight jeans and tops, sometimes with topless costumes and bodices on the public stage exposing their feminine features something culturally censored. Yet the male *Sungura* counterparts put on casual clothes that do not expose

their masculine features leading people to question, why is it like that? Critics add that, when male *Sungura* directors and musicians force their female dancers to perform on stage with tummies out, the message about women is loud and clear. Shona cultural traditionalists argue that, the type of costume that women dancers are made to wear clearly show the general attitude of men towards women. For both cultural conservatives and liberals, women are masqueraded and marketed as uncultured, prostitutes and sex objects in the eyes of society whilst their *Sungura* male counterparts are portrayed with decency. The attitude of the male audience is clearly shown after the show, when some men would try their luck by proposing to the dancers. It would then imply that, *Sungura* musicians deliberately select costumes that leave women dancers half-dressed as a marketing strategy but at the same time putting women at the mercy of society. The strategy is there to lure big crowds with big cash inflows not for the benefit of women dancers but the male *Sungura* musicians. In Zimbabwean Shona culture, for women to be appreciated they should dress according to what the society sees and describes as decent (Sheehan, 2004, 109). These dancers find it difficult to complain since the managers are men. Interestingly, male dancers and the *Sungura* musicians are mostly not prepared to be half-dressed arguing that, it makes them lose their dignity in society. Teresa Barnes (1999, 129), quoted some African men who reported that, "girls and women were spoiling *Tsaba-tsaba* dance (just like *Sungura* dance) as they do degrading things by flinging up their dresses moving their behinds and fronts in a bad way as if to expose and advertise their bodies to possible clients, not befitting good girls and women". The above citation clearly shows how African society defines, demarcate and relate bad and good women through arts. Women who dare join *Sungura* groups suffer discrimination from the members of the society and their immediate families. If the costumes are chosen as a marketing and business strategy as raised above it still leads society to culturally

stereotype women musicians as immoral. Therefore our argument is justified that, that women musicians have not entered into *Sungura* music because of cultural gendered factors which are not economical.

A Cultural Discourse about Sungura Music and Married Women

Even though *Sungura* music has turned to become one of the leading music industries, it is the worst challenge for married women to venture into it. The Shona culture stipulates that, married women are expected to stay at home tending their families. As long as women move into public spaces considered male territories, they are branded as prostitutes (Gaidzanwa, 1995, 7-11). Ethel Dhlamini (2003) in her interview with Patience Musanhu, also said,

‘One of the main reason for women not to stay long in theatre is that family obligations, called for most of their attention making it difficult for them to come for rehearsals and let alone the show.’

Women’s participation in theatre is limited due to cultural barriers. Many *Sungura* plays and performances are staged during the night in public places like restaurants, night clubs or beer halls. Therefore occupying these places bring in bad comments or being violated against because they are regarded as outside the boundaries of male control. Kathy A Perkins (2009, 2) interviewed the late Tisa Chifunyise, who explained that, as women in theatre there is need to change the attitude of the community towards female theatre workers. Families sometimes always want to know when they are at work, like any other person. Some even go to the extent of making their own private interrogations to find out if they are not going out for prostitution. The major influence being that, *Sungura* music is deemed as unthinkable for a decent woman. By the same token, the Shona society particularly men control the behaviour of the Shona women as it modifies the ways they carry themselves, and

prohibits them from occupying some spaces. Paschal Mungwini (2010) observed that, patriarchal Shona men usually describe vocal women who stand up for the rights of women as morally loose. The usual question is: "*mukati ane murume iyeyu mukadzi or Ule ndoda hini umfazilo?*" Or By the way, is this woman married? She cannot be really married". Such questions are usually raised against women who are *Sungura* band members or *Sungura* lovers frequenting places where *Sungura* musicians perform. Thus marriage is conceived as a way of social control. If it is confirmed that she is married, there is usually a condescending response that the husband is weak and has failed to discipline his wife. The weakness of the men, in this case is that of men who allow their wives to think of entering *Sungura* music or even becoming fans was noted by Paschal Mungwini and Kudzai Matereke (2010) as in two levels:

First, the husband is perceived to have physical weakness, in that he has failed to use persuasion, violence or the threat of it, to control his wife. *Second*, the husband's perceived weakness is in terms of his sexual potency, since it is believed that women who become active in the public sphere are those who do not get satisfaction in their sexual lives, so that the public sphere is a relief for their unfulfilled sexual appetites or is a place where they can get men to 'quench their thirst'.

Culturally the Shona husband is regarded as having total control over the life of his wife and this includes time-tabling the places that his wife should visit or avoid at all cost. In the public places like beerhalls, there is alcohol consumption, prostitution and some men who frequent these places tend to believe that any women who is there is a potential customer for sex. As Gaidzanwa (1999) pointed out, images in society are socially constructed, continually reconstructed, struggled against, reinforced and renegotiated. This is true of the images relating to sexual relations among the Shona. Married women are mostly barred from

such places by their men as a result of socially constructed images about the *Sungura* music. Women then dare not venture into *Sungura* music as a result of cultural stereotypes associated with such genre of music. Moffett (2006, 132) explains that societies use 'justificatory narratives' or 'narratives of normalisation' to legitimize the violence or suppression of the dominant males against the disenfranchised women. Thus the man as the head of the household wields power because he carries with him the 'seed' of the clan, an aspect that is highly regarded amongst the Shona people. In order to have order in society, men are culturally encouraged to take charge of women. A closer observation on most of the *Sungura* lyrics belittle women and portray them as objects that must be always under control of men. Tongai Moyo's wife, Barbara Muchengeti, committed suicide after her husband indicated that he wanted to marry another wife and composed a song justifying polygamy. Tongai Moyo's behaviour in fact revealed the popular attitude of a patriarchal Shona society towards women where women are ridiculed, stereotyped and made to accept what is good for men. Men sing and dance out their superiority beliefs through *Sungura* music and this can only be reversed and countered if there are *Sungura* women musicians.

Wellington Mutyoza interviewed William Tsandukwa, band member of Orchestra Mberikwazvo who revealed that, women are not integrated in *Sungura* band basing on social and cultural beliefs. It depends on ones marital status as most husbands believe *Sungura* is a style of music which only women with loose moral can venture. As a result women venture into gospel music which is perceived to be decent. For Dutton (1995, 13), emphasis on decency, deportment, presence and absence from space and the offer of reward and punishment are evidence of the ways the body is a social construct and a means of self-expression or performance by which identity and value are created, tested, and validated. Women particularly those intending to get married or already

in marriage fear the consequences that come with either being a *Sungura* musician or just a mere *Sungura* band member. Fear is the self-expression of women and the majority avoid identifying themselves with *Sungura* due to above named consequences. Men are usually discouraged to marry women in theatre as they are viewed as everyone's wife. Such views were raised by the manager of Tongai Moyo's Utakataka Express Band (one of the popular *Sungura* bands), that, women lack confidence and need a lot of attention whenever they participate in groups as most end up being impregnated by male *Sungura* band members or fans (The Herald). Utakataka Express manager's statement shows the myth surrounding how married women and those who want to have families cannot venture in *Sungura* music. As Haber (1996, 138) rightly noted, a woman's body, its parts and her life are "judged from the standpoint of male desire". Women who enter into these spaces are negatively labelled. The following quotation from Moreblessing Chitauro, Caleb Dube and Liz Gunner (2003, 177-204) reveals the struggle that women musicians face:

Women *sungura* artists, be they singers or actresses are often perceived as 'women of the night' or 'women of the streets' perhaps this is because they exist in these roles in the unmarked territory outside domesticity and also in urban space which for historic reasons relating to both colonial and indigenous patriarchy has been officially defined as the territory of men.

It is as a result of these challenges that, women artists need encouragement to venture into those fields deemed men's territories. They must declare *Sungura* as their virgin land waiting for the touch of women to bring meaningful life to the Shona society where all members are given opportunities to show their talents in whatever discipline or area. In this regard, this reflects on the role that the Shona culture and socialization of gender roles play in nurturing an environment conducive

to the perpetuation of patriarchy.

Women can be fully employed or employ others into *Sungura* music if patriarchy is to be ignored or challenged. The fact that women are not into *Sungura* music does not mean that they cannot compose songs or run *Sungura* bands or lack commitment and financial power as some would like to say. It is because of cultural values and norms that put women on the receiving end where they are disadvantaged from grasping life-long opportunities. Women, if given equal opportunities with men can also become Queens of *Sungura* music. Women in gospel music have proved that they can do even better than men. There are examples like: Olivia Charamba, Shingisai Suluma, Ivy Kombo, Fungisai Zvakavapano, and Mercy Mutsvene who have done well in Zimbabwean's gospel music. They became successful as gospel musicians since gospel music is considered decent; something that can also reap results if society's attitude changes towards women who would like to venture as *Sungura* musicians. The society must be culturally educated that *Sungura* music just like another type of music is a form of employment that is meant to benefit all members of society, women included. Joyce Jenje Makwenda, who has been teaching music at the Zimbabwe college of music from 1991-2005, said

Most women, whom I taught at the Zimbabwe College of Music between 1991 and 2005, had problems of balancing between looking after their homes and the course. Because of the problems they faced they ended up dropping out of the course. In a class where there was around 25 percent women and 75 percent men, a ratio of 1:4, less than a quarter of women would continue with the programme.

Society must be culturally transformed and move with time in terms of affording all the people equal opportunities in all the forms of theatre,

be it *Sungura* or not. Many women would like to see a proliferation of music schools in Zimbabwe manned by women, where female musicians will be able to attend music lessons with no cultural strings attached.

Colonialism, Christianity and women musicians: *Sungura* Music as Evil

Besides the Shona culture being regarded as contributing to the exclusion of women in *Sungura* music, the coming of colonialism and Christianity are also mentioned as the major factors. Some critics argue that, the stigma that is meted against women in theatre can be traced back to the colonial era that separated men from women; the ideal space for women became the rural areas where they lived through subsistence farming. However, women were not barred from participating at traditional ceremonies, though they were certain traditional instruments that were gendered. Critics note that, Colonialism, Christianity and the western culture contributed to the gendering of spaces and places in Zimbabwe. Critics dismiss any suggestions that put the Shona culture as the contributory factor to the lower number of Zimbabwean women in *Sungura* music. They point to the western culture and Christianity that were adopted and adapted in the colonial Zimbabwe. Lucy Green (1997, 21, 52) noted that, European men controlled all activities and deliberately excluded women from the public space like: theatre, literature, music and other performing arts. Young boys and girls were socialized in such a gendered society where they experienced music as a reflection and legitimation of their own gender identities (Carter, 2010, 69). The coming of Christianity and the eventual attitude on traditional theatre and music changed the whole scenario with a negative impact on women. Traditional music and dance were labelled unchristian and not good for development. Thus many women shunned any type of traditional African music, dressing and

dance deemed unchristian so as not to affect the newly found Christian religion. The *Ruwadzano* movement or women's church club or ladies union became popular in most traditional and protestant churches. Women were taught to dress modestly (wore uniforms with long skirts, sleeves that cover the shoulders, and hats or *dukus* (head scarves) and respect the authority and views of their husbands (Gurli 1991, 64). The form of decent dressing and the concept of modesty were regarded as lacking in *Sungura* music. Rudo Gaidzanwa claims that, Christianity further contributed to female subordination since missionaries were nurtured in the context of ideologies of female subordination, which made them less open to other possibilities of gender organization, education and women's participation in public life. Thus, their Christian evangelism confined women into domestic life whilst shaping men into public domains. Women began to shun public life other than Church-led ones and singing and listening to secular music became a sin.

Claude Mararike (1999, 36) adds that, women had to informally work to feed their families and if they chose to formally get employed, they were expected to be employed in "decent careers as domestic workers or clerks" where they wore decent clothes, work during the day, have plenty of time for the family and interact less with opposite sex. In years of colonial rule, critics argue that women were not included in the scheme of things by urban designers. As is evident in most towns and cities in Zimbabwe, bachelors' flats were designed for the married men. These flats acted as brothels for men who wanted short time activities with women of the night. So the colonial system encouraged male sexual immorality in the cities and women inferiorisation. The colonial legacy also made *Sungura* music to be associated with those people interested in enjoying life especially the 'unmarried immoral women' who were categorized as those thronging cities and were usually arrested for loitering and engaging in prostitution. *Sungura* music in Zimbabwe was

and is still associated with beerhalls, night clubs and prostitution. This then leads women singers, actors and dancers in secular music to be labelled as *loose* as a result of the: places where this type of music is mostly performed, the costume they wore, vigorous and energetic dance movements they perform. Isabel Mukonyora observed that those who are called ideal women were those who care for the family and husband and are fully committed to prayer meetings. These were the standards set by the missionaries, hence prohibiting women to enter into art. Christianity made women to become domesticated to the kitchen as their private important space and then the Church as their important public space (Mano, 2009, 192). The Zimbabwe society with the influence of Christianity has defined and set 'gender behaviours' considered appropriate for males and females. The cultural socialisation that women are nurtured into makes them believe that the exact place for women is the house and the Church. This unfair division of labour is nurtured into girls as they are growing up; they are always prepared to be good mothers who will give care to the husband first and then the extended family

Conclusion

This paper has clearly shown that, the failure by Zimbabwean women to venture into *Sungura* music is as a result of cultural gendered factors which are not economical as originally thought by some people. Even if critics pointed out the influence of colonialism, western culture and Christianity as other factors; we still believe that other factors fed into the already existing Shona cultural dynamics that put women at the bottom of the heap of society. As a result of the cultural images that are set against women with interest in becoming *Sungura* musicians and performers, they avoid it so as not to be labelled as deviants. In conclusion, there are no *Sungura* musicians in Zimbabwe due to cultural

dynamics and not economical factors.

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