

LITERATURE IN ACTION THROUGH SHI FOLK MUSIC

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ABSTRACT: This work is entitled “literature in action through Shi folk music”. Literature and Music are two inevitable and inseparable elements in the traditional Shi folklore. They always go together. In this way, dealing with the present paper we wanted to side with **Eno BELINGA** who confirmed that “In their traditional aspect, literature and Music are in Black Africa (...) so intimately all together that they most of the time constitute one and same activity. To talk of one without the other is to practice an artificial division that nothing can legitimate” (1965:19). To bring more light to this, we have described some useful musical instruments and collected a folk song entitled **Segese** which was translated from Mashi, the mother tongue of the minstrel who sang it into English. Thanks to the song in question, it was noticed that the features are highly various, complex and related to both literature and music. We have disclosed along our study that Shi folk Music bears numerous situations and other occurrences which can be interpreted in a literary way.

KEYWORDS: literature, folk, satire, enigma, personification.

1 INTRODUCTION

We have been motivated by a number of reasons to choose the topic under discussion. Firstly, most people think that Shi folk music is only useful for singing and dancing. That is, they fail to push their thinking further so as to know what music is actually made of or how it functions. Secondly, the same people do not know that literature can intervene in Shi folk music. They mostly keep in mind that literature is only a matter of reading or writing novels. Thirdly, many people fail to recognize that literature and Shi folk music can function simultaneously.

Even though some people are interested in literature and folk music, both of the latter are still known vaguely by innumerable other societies and countries. This is the reason why when a person who is not of Shi tribe listens to a Mushi Minstrel (Shi folk singer) singing, he deduces that the Shi folk music is not interesting, ignoring that literature is being performed at the same time. And **Francis BEBEY** affirms: “...if it is true that the ignorance of where African musical art is performed can be a serious handicap for a foreigner who needs to penetrate it, it is also true that African Music is one of the most attractive music to those who makes an effort to understand it” (1969:13)

How can people know that literature is deeply rooted in Shi folk music? What can really prove that even Shi folk music constitutes itself literature?

In attempting to deal with “literature in action through Shi folk music”, we have based the work on the following hypotheses:

- It is difficult to separate literature from Shi folk music;
- Figurative language prevails in Shi folk music;
- Taking into consideration the content of Shi folk music, the latter is itself literature.

To collect the data of this work, we have used some techniques, such as interview and documentation. First, concerning the interview, we consulted a famous Shi folk musician. He has sung many songs among which we have chosen one, **Segese**, being considered as the most satisfactory. We had to record the song first; then copy it down and afterwards translated it

from Mashi to English. We should recall that only the translation of the song into English appears in the present paper so as to be shorter. Second, we read some books related to our topic, especially those talking fully about music and literature.

The present study enables people to discover the reasons why literature is said to act through Shi folk music. The same study also helps people discover and understand figurative language which exists in literature and that prevails in Shi folk music. The study which is dealt with at present helps as well people recognize that all of Shi musical instruments, the singers (minstrels), the audiences, and the folk songs are the main contributors to Shi folk music's literariness.

It has been quite impossible to study all folk songs existing in Bushi. Hence, the only song, **Segese**, is taken as a sample of other Shi folk songs. Besides, we could not deal with all elements of literature that exist in Shi folk music in toto. For this reason we found it better to get a glimpse of some literary terms which often manifests themselves in Shi folk music, including personification, imagery and especially enigmas that are the most detailed along the work.

In this research, our objective is to:

- prove fully that literature go together with Shi folk music;
- reveal that Shi folk music is dominated by literary elements;
- present clearly Shi folk music as literature in itself.

In our research, we came up against a lot of problems when carrying this work out. The collection of data from informants could not be done smoothly. Some informants who could provide us with more information were already dead or moved to unknown settings; the others could ask for some money. Sometimes, it was not easy to have access to books.

Fortunately, the data that we got were suitable and satisfactory to fulfill this paper.

The present work is subdivided into three sections. The first section consists of the introduction. The second section deals with the description and functions of some Bashi's musical instruments. The third section concerns the literary view of **Segese**, a Shi folk song.

2 DESCRIPTION AND FUNCTIONS OF SOME BASHI'S MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Both musical sounds and voices express songs whereas musical instruments give musical sounds. However, the combination of musical instruments and human voice touch the whole sensation of somebody's being. Musical instruments are not exclusively the privilege of white people. Africans also possess them. African musical instruments can be categorized as follows: stringed-instruments, wind-instruments, instruments of reverberation etc. Indeed, Bushi is one of African areas but it is not concerned by all existing African musical instruments. In addition to those above-mentioned categories of musical instruments, there is a more detailed classification which includes instruments of strips, drums with membranes etc. As regards Shi folk musical instruments, we can classify the following: stringed instruments, instruments of strips, and human voice.

2.1 STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

In Bushi, stringed instruments take up a very wide geographical area. These musical instruments provide harmonious musical sounds.

2.1.1 "LULANGA" OR EIGHT-STRINGED HARP

"Lulanga" is a kind of musical instrument with a hollow wooden body and strings which are stretched alongside the frame. Its serrated extremities are intended for holding cord in position.

None can definitely state when "Lulanga" came into being in Bushi. But it is definite that this musical instrument existed in pharaonic Egypt for a long time. "Lulanga" rhythm does not cease to crystallize Shi customs. It helps the Bashi act in keeping with moral standards, to follow basic precepts and people's advice. So, by dint of hearing Lulanga virtuosos, the Bashi learn through chronicles, myths, enigmas, legends, etc. about their ancestors' lives and achievement. A Shi minstrel sings about life or mirrors people's everyday life, including in what **Piersen William D.** calls "*African satire*" when he says: "*for a long time, Africanists recognize the cultural importance of satire in African societies and the impact of a derisive song as a safety-valve in the society (...). Almost in the whole Africa, songs favour the equilibrium of the societies...*" (1988:23-24).

In fact, **Segese** is a satire intended to show people's immaturity and thoughtlessness. The Shi folk song, **Segese** is a satire showing the way people sacrifice their own properties for the success of their fanciful plans. The same satire denounces

authorities' misbehaviors towards their men. In Bushi, however, the satire was often expressed by means of "likembe", a disappearing musical instrument and that legends, chronicles, epics, etc. were and are still expressed by means of "Lulanga".

2.1.2 "NZENZE" OR TWO-STRINGED INSTRUMENT

The word "NZENZE" is a Shi version, but it is a word from West African Kora which is the most used by the Bashi. However, "Nzenze" has two strings and a wooden resonance chamber. A "Nzenze" player plays so more rapidly than a "Lulanga" player. Meanwhile the audience goes further personifying the musical instrument, saying: "this Nzenze is speaking fast".

In this case, the instrument is given the quality of a human being, just as it is said: "personification" is "the representation of a thing or a quality as a person, in literature or art" (**Longman Dictionary of contemporary English, 1998:1054**)

The "Nzenze" player takes advantages of his musical instrument to boast, to express love, lyricism. Then he is compared to a lyricist.

2.2 INSTRUMENTS OF STRIPS

Along all musical instruments used in black Africa, the most known is certainly "Likembe" that the Bashi call also "kasayi" and which is called "Sanzo", "Ezanzo" in Western Africa (for example in Guinea). It has a wooden resonance box whose size varies according to the "likembe" player. "Likembe" has a sounding board on which strips of steel are fixed. The sonority of the "likembe" depends, especially on what the strips are made of. "Likembe" is not very successful to be admired for a "likembe" player often sings and dances on his way while he is walking. Most of the time people check the way the performer is dancing, whether it is good or bad, attractive or not. You may sometimes hear them say: "he dances but he does not eat the knee". They use this symbolic imagery to mean that the performer does not dance well. For the Bashi, to dance well (to eat the knee) is to put the knees in vertical position or make them upright repetitively that they can near the mouth during the dancing.

2.3 HUMAN VOICE

It may seem paradoxical not to speak of human voice for the human voice plays an important role in musical production. And **Francis BEBEY** affirms: "...among all musical instruments, the human voice is the one the black African mostly makes use of". In the same way, **Eno BELINGA** adds: "with his mouth shut, the solist or the choir hums the whole song (...). The human voice, the dwelling place of the word and song is therefore generative of literature and music"(1965:20). That is, in Shi folk music, the performer produces both literature and music. When a "lulanga" player plays it very nicely, his admirers say that he has the mastering of his art. They go further saying that "olulanga lumuli omu minwe n'omu kanwa" to mean that the song of "Lulanga" called "olulanga" is in his fingers and the mouth. What they use here is simply imagery to mean that "olulanga" (here the song) is in the fingers and the mouth. In a word, the audience admires the sheer verve of the player's performance. Then the artist captivates his audience by varying melody; there can appear syncopation, sometimes recitations and pantomimes.

It should be worth mentioning that like **COLLE, Alan MERRIAM**, presents the names of different musical instruments used in Bushi as we have just shown some of them. He sometimes talks about "techniques used by musicians when playing those musical instruments". As a recall the Bashi are people who belong to Shi tribe (one of the tribes of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the East, in South-Kivu province). Then Bushi is the area occupied by the Bashi.

3 THE LITERARY VIEW OF SEGESE, A SHI FOLK SONG

3.1 TRANSLATED SONG: SEGESE

I am BACIOLERE Ntamwira

The son of BWISERA, BWISERA the son of MWILARHE. I live in Chagala; in chief NTAGANO'S village. I am true Munyambala. I am of Kaziba origin. I am going to play my music, **Segese**.

5. Look, Segese lived among other people,

He was rich enough;

- Segese was milking hundred cows;
Thousand else were about the drop;
And he had one thousand female calves;
10. He had twelve children,
Among them Sarugigi that
He wanted to curse assuming that
He was puny-looking;
But his people beseeched him that
15. Instead of cursing him
He had better send him to the pasture,
And so he did.
Then the Rwandans became jealous of Segese's wealth,
They went to talk with Rwabugiri, their Mwami (King)
20. They told him, "Segese has grown rich" ee;
They added, "e chief! Deprive him of his wealth,
And pierce him with a spear".
At that time the chief (Rwabugiri) answered,
"How can I deprive a richman of his wealth and pierce him?"
25. They answered, "ask him to give you what he cannot find;
He also replies, "What cannot he find that I can ask him for?"
They said, "tell him to give you a "world protector",
Then tell him to give you a "Mwami-protector",
Then tell him to give you a barren fat cow slaughtered without being dismembered,
30. Then tell him to give you a formless thing,
Then tell him to give you a grey-haired old Woman whose hair turned grey overnight,
Then tell him to give you a grey-haired old man whose hair turned grey overnight wee,
Then tell him to give you a sword which cuts of water ahe e,
Then tell him to give you a worthless thing.
35. Segese was summoned to royal court,
Courtiers told him what he would give the chief,
Segese bowed and held his head high,
He began to think.
Segese was unable to know what they meant.
40. The chief told his people,
I am scared, evil spirits must have been sent to me wee ajeee!
They answered: "where are they, our chief?"
He replied: "they ask me for what I cannot find"

- They retorted, what cannot you find, you, our chief?
45. He said, they want me to give them a “world-protector”,
They want me to give them a “Mwami protector”,
They want me to give them a barren fat cow slaughtered without being dismembered,
They want me to give them a formless thing,
They want me to give them a grey haired old man whose hair had turned grey overnight.
50. They want me to give them a grey-haired old woman whose hair had turned grey overnight,
They want me to give them a sword which cuts off water,
They want me to give them a worthless thing,
Oh oh I am going to be deprived of my wealth weeee
At that moment he called for his people and his children.
55. His sons asked him, what had happened?
“I am going to be deprived of my wealth and be pierced”,
They asked him how that could be possible;
He replied: they ask me for what I do not know;
He once more told them what he was being asked for.
60. His people said: “we do not know either what you are being asked for”
His children said: “we do not know either ho! Ho! Ho! We are afraid, our father is going to die weeee
He sent his messengers out to the pasture.
He said: “tell that fool Sarugigi that I am going to die”
Sarugigi asked, “what is my father dying of?”
65. “Does my father lack young cows?
Does my father lack old cows?
Does my father lack bulls?
They went back home:
The messengers told Segese what Sarugigi said.
70. He said that you do not lack young cows,
That you do not lack old cows or old bulls,
Then he said again, I come there alone to see what my father is dying of,
The following day, Sarugigi went there by himself;
He asked: “what are you dying of father?”
75. And his father answered: “hold on!”
I am going to tell you what I am dying of, son.
His father went on: “they asked me for a world-protector,
And they asked me for a mwami-protector,
And they asked me for a barren fat cow slaughtered without being dismembered.
80. And they asked me for a formless thing,

And they asked me for a grey-haired old man whose hair had turned grey overnight,
And they asked me for a grey-haired old woman whose hair had turned grey overnight;
And they asked me for a worthless thing,
And they asked me for a sword which cuts off water.

85. His son asked: "is that all?"

"Yes, that is all my son",
His son exclaimed twice
"You see! You see!"

You see how much your people claim to be old because their hair turns grey!

90. Yet they are immature!

Father! The world-protector they want you to give them is a cow with a white skin and its calf;
And the "Mwami-protector" they want you to give them is a cow with a brown skin and its calf,
And the formless thing is beeswax,
And the old woman with grey hair is cassava which has mould on it.

95. And the old man with the grey hair is sorghum which grows again after it has been harvested,

A worthless thing is a very young child because he can unconsciously piss on a chief whereas a grown-up cannot,
A fat barren cow slaughtered without being dismembered is a bunch of bananas,
The sword which cuts off water is a straw,
His father enquired: "how am I going to take all these things to them?"

100. He replied: "hands everything over to me so that I can take it to them for. You said I am to be cursed,

When Sarugigi arrived at the evil spirits' place he was given a thousand cows because of his success,
The Rwandans addressed the chief Rwabugiri again:
"Chief, tell him this once more"
Our metal which we made use of in the solving of the problem has become blunt.

105. They called for Segese and told him: "you are needed in the chief's home"

When he arrived at the chief's home he was told this:
"Our metal we made use of in the solving of the problem has become blunt".

Segese was about to bow when his son Sarugigi told him:

"Please father, let me report this to Rwabugiri in person"

110. Tell him: look for your people's hair,

Look for your people's tears,
After burning your people's hair, you keep the ash in a sack,
After getting your people's tears, you keep them in a mortar.
Rwabugiri collected all his people for the matter but he failed the test.

115. When they called for Sarugigi and gave him thousand of cows;

A few days later they once more plotted against Segese;
They said: "build for us a house in the sky"

- When Segese wanted to bow down and think about it,
Sarugigi intervened: "let me tell the chief of the Rwandans, father".
120. Ask Rwabugiri to look for someone to get to the roof,
He has to look for someone to reach the top of that house and build it.
Then a person who can do so will become the chief of Rwanda.
They looked for the person in question but they could not find him.
When they failed, they gave Sarugigi a thousand cows.
125. Another plot against Segese is made by Rwabugiri's men;
They told Rwabugiri to call for Segese,
Then they brought the eggs,
They said: "May Segese also bring an egg he has laid by himself",
When Segese arrived, he found seven eggs already there.
130. "Lay your own egg here" they asked him.
Segese cackled like a hen and realized that it fit him.
They told him: "then, lay an egg"
When he tried, he found himself unable to lay it,
Rwabugiri's people said: "this time, Segese is caught"
135. Sarugigi told his father: "let me keep you alive, father".
Sarugigi asked: "who is now the cock?"
The chief of Rwanda and his people lacked the cock;
Then Sarugigi crowed like a cock,
And he said: "Segese (my father) and I have laid these eggs.
140. However, Sarugigi who was supposed to be fool has become wiser and more appreciated by all the others,
He is asked to get married;
He was engaged to the daughter of Semahoro
Semahoro has twelve daughters, among which Sarugigi married one,
Once at Sarugigi's home,
145. Her mother-in law told her this: "cook one bean"
Mmm, aha a a a e dear mother! Ahe he he he
How can one cook a bean?
In the end, she decided to cook it,
And went back to her parents' home forever.
150. Then Sarugigi married the sister of the first who disappeared.
This second was also required to cook one bean;
This too, went back to her parents;
He took then the third from the same family;
This third woman was also requested to cook one bean;

155. She went back to her parents as well.

Later on, Sarugigi got married to the youngest sister of all.

When she was told to cook one bean,

She found wiser to cook many beans instead.

Then the mother of Sarugigi (the youngest's mother-in-law),

160. Agreed with this one and said: "this is the true wife"

He gave the bride price to the family of his wife,

He brought thousands of cows and sheep;

And it is he who happened to inherit his father's properties,

Though he had been assumed to be idiot formerly.

3.2 DEFINING SOME LITERARY TERMS

It is worth defining some literary terms before going on with the next point.

When **Romain KONKA** defines literary, he says: *"It is in general, the whole of oral and written cultural expressions of people. It is the social reading of that people. It is concrete through the word (oral literature) or works (written literature) (1983:9)*

"Folk" is known as what is *"traditional and typical of the ordinary people who live in a particular area"*(*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1998:543*). However, when we talk of Shi folk music we mean the traditional music that has been played by ordinary people in Bushi for a long time.

"Enigma" is *"someone or something that is strange or mysterious and difficult to understand or explain"* (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1998:451*). It is sometimes defined as a question that is deliberately very confusing and usually has a humorous or clever answer.

Then *"satire"* is defined as *"a way of talking or writing about something, for example politics and politicians, in which you deliberately make them seem funny so that people will see their faults"* (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1998:1260*). It is agreed that a play, book, story etc. written in this way is a satire.

3.3 THE CHARACTERS IN SEGESE

- Segese: a king, living in Bushi. He is the father of Sarugigi who is thought to be idiot. He is wealthy and has millions of cows. He is from Rwandan origin.
- Sarugigi: son of Segese. He proved in the end that he was wise. He answered all the questions asked to his father by leading the latter.
- Rwabugiri: King (mwami) of the Rwandans. He has many skilled warriors; these warriors pushed their king to deprive Segese of his wealth. Rwabugiri failed to do so because of Sarugigi's wisdom.
- The mother of Sarugigi: She asked sarugigi to test daughters of Semahoro in order to find a girl to marry among them.

3.4 ENIGMAS IN SEGESE

Here is a matter of trying to grasp the aspect of enigmas in **Segese**. We have paid much more attention to the meaning of an enigma than to its beauty. Yet literature is expressive and persuasive. It also has beauty like the Bashi oral culture.

It is true that the literary treasure of the Bashi do not all contain in books. Most of them are still within living memory and are expressed when the right time happens. This is why shi literature is considered to belong to oral tradition. And this literature has got a meaningful language in which enigmas prevail. However, in the song of **Segese**, enigmas prevail over any other literary genre. The enigmas which are found in Segese reach the definition given in the work of **Buhendwa MULUM'ODERWA** saying *that an enigma is a "puzzle, word game, guessing game and hidden meaning"*. It is noticeable that

Segese continues to recall the enigma of Sphinx: “what is the animal that has four feet in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?”

Only Oedipus gave a satisfactory answer when he said: “that animal was a human being who during his childhood which regarded as the morning of life often uses his feet and hands to move. The noon when the child begins to grow, he needs only his feet; but the evening, it means during his old age, he needs a staff as a third foot”.

In fact, Shi folk music bears a whole of customs which are often transmitted from one generation to another. As for Shi minstrels, they do not create anything new. And **Bulambo ISALIMYA** said: “*in the domain of oral literature in general and epic in particular, the oral art makes people think of minstrels and narrators*” (1976:20). Nevertheless, grown-ups also contest among themselves in specific circumstances. In such cases, the function of the enigma is no longer to entertain people, but it plays a judicial function. This function is put into practice in Segese where the people of Rwabugiri influence him to use enigmas in order to lay hands on Segese’s properties. Afterwards Rwabugiri’s courtiers ask him to summon Segese together with other people who will be present at his verdict. In **Segese**, the characters consider enigma as an effective means of outmatching one’s opponent.

Segese, the king is asked to explain meaningful things but he fails to do so. As no enigma is devoid of sense, Sarugigi, the son should give good answers to all the questions. Thereafter are some quotations from enigmas that Segese was asked to explain:

Question 1: Our metal which we made use of in the solving of the problem has become blunt (see verse 100...)

Answer: ... your people’s hair

..... your people’s tears

And make a banana leaf ready in which your people’s hair will be put.

Question 2: They said: “build for us a house in the sky” (see verse 115...)

Answer: - the chief has also to find someone who will get to the roof

- The chief has to find someone to reach the top of that house to build it.

The mother of Sarugigi as well makes use of enigmas to test her daughter-in-law (see verse 145).

Generally speaking, Shi folk songs are full of enigmas, proverbs or parables.... Therefore to grasp the meaning of Shi folk musical language, one should not limit oneself to studying structural processes but rather to understanding. In addition, Shi folk music like any other literary work possesses a content which sometimes belongs to a certain order to follow. Thus, Shi folk music matches with what has been said at a meeting set in Yaoundé (Cameroon) about African music: “*the African knows his music so to speak at home*”.

He lives out his music, he perceives it with intensity that a non African can hardly reach. In other words, it is the “poetic content” of that music, it is what is very much alive”(ALMEIDA & Alii.1970:5)

An enigma proper comprises a double problem:

- The first problem is in the question, an obstacle that a person collides with when he is asked the question;
- The second is the answer that the contestant gives after he has brushed aside the obstacles at the psychic level.

In **Segese**, the question is very important because it has the predicate which contains the enigmatic feature. So the question is the enigmatic part proper. In addition, the question is divided into two constituents: the subject and the predicate. It is the subject that symbolizes the metaphoric representative of the answer to the question, for instance: ... a grey-haired old man whose hair turned grey overnight (see verse 80...) (**subject**). Otherwise, the predicate contains everything that is asked in the question, it means for example: ... a grey-haired old man whose hair went grey overnight (**predicate**).

FAIK NZUJI M. adds: “*Enigmas, in the Congo may take on the following forms: interrogative, affirmative, negative or imperative*” (n°104/76:236).

After skimming through the song **Segese**, we noticed that enigmas contained in it take on only imperative and affirmative forms.

Examples: - Affirmative form:

Question: ... our metal which we made use of in solving of the problem has become blunt (see verse 100...)

Answer: look for your people's hair

Look for your people's tears

After burning your people's hair, you keep the ash in a sack

After getting your people's tears, you keep them in a mortar.

- Imperative:

Question: ... tell him to give you a formless thing (see verse 30)

Answer: beeswax

Question: Build for us a house in the sky (see verse 115...)

Answer: ... look for someone to get to the roof. Look for someone to reach the top of that house and build it.

Segese was always failing, fortunately his son Sarugigi was helping him. For instance, when they asked Segese to say what the "world-protector" was (see verse 25...), it is Sarugigi who asked him to say that it is a "white skin cow and its calf".

Another question to Segese:

- Tell what a "mwami-protector" is (see verse 25...)

Answer: it is a brown skin cow and its calf".

Question: say what a "barren fat cow killed without being dismembered" is (see verse 25...)

4 CONCLUSION

This paper was entirely about "literature in action through Shi folk music". In dealing with the present topic, we have provided Shi musical instruments and some details about them. Then we pointed out useful literary elements that the instruments in question bear. We showed for example that there is often symbolic imagery or metaphor when a Shi folk singer is playing a "kasayi". We also disclosed that a Shi folk singer becomes a lyricist when he plays a "Nzenze". We also displayed that the human voice which is the most prolific musical instrument bears metaphor and satire when a "lulanga" is played. We went on explaining fully how figurative language dominates Shi folk music. Thanks to Segese, a Shi folk song, we furnished some literary genres. We noticed personification, and especially enigmas that are always prevailing elements in Shi folk music. From all this, we have shown that literature and Shi folk music remain inseparable; we have gone on revealing figurative language since it is inevitable in Shi folk music; we have afterwards shown that even Shi folk music is in itself literature because it mirrors Shi people's everyday life. In the end, we have agreed that literature acts in Shi folk music.

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