Nyimbo Za Kiswahili:  
A Socio-ethnomusicological Study 
of a Swahili Poetic Form

by

Carol Ann Arneson Campbell

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The purpose of this study is to examine one form of Swahili sung poetry, nyimbo, and the communicative competence which underlies the performance of that poetic genre. It is an investigation of the context of appropriate performance behavior surrounding the use of nyimbo in Swahili culture. The two types of nyimbo which are the focus of this investigation are children's nyimbo and the adult nyimbo which are sung in the context of ngoma performance.

The components of the performance of these nyimbo are described following an adaptation of the sociolinguistic approach developed by Dell Hymes known as the ethnography of speaking. A set of categories of nyimbo performance have been developed which are analogous to Hymes' components of a speech act.

The Swahili people of Mombasa, Lamu, and Tchundwa share an understanding of the rules for the performance of nyimbo and are the community of this study. A brief overview of the geography, history, and literature of this community appears in Chapter II.

Ngoma, a musical event which includes song, dance, and the playing of musical instruments is the appropriate context for the performance
of adult nyimbo. The performance of the ngoma styles vugo, kishuri, chakacha, msondo, mkwaju, mdurenge, goma, kirumbizi, chama, and ngoma la panga are described in Chapter III. The components of the performance of nyimbo za ngoma are those of setting, participants, ends or goals, act sequence and content, key or manner of performance, and norms of performance. The features which distinguish one nyimbo za ngoma style from another emerge as these categories are compared. The instrumentalities or medium of the performance of nyimbo za ngoma is the singing voice, accompanied by musical instruments. The musical structure of nyimbo za ngoma is analyzed in Chapter IV.

The categories employed in the description of the nyimbo za ngoma are applied to the performance of children's nyimbo in Chapter V, and the musical structure of these nyimbo is analyzed in Chapter VI.

This ethnography treats a sung poetry form in the context of the total event in which it is performed. This method would have value in application to other musical events and in comparison with sung poetry in other cultures.