

Traditional music healers

Magicians performing in the dark

It is common only to look at the economic implications of globalisation. In this case study of Zimbabwe music healing practitioners, **Claudio Chipendo** shows how their cultural practice has been severely undermined by Western ways of life.

African traditional music in healing practice was in existence long before the advent of colonialism, globalisation and travelling cultures, long before the coming of the West's modern music therapy. The indigenous people of Africa developed unique healing traditions which were adapted and defined by their cultures, beliefs and environments which maintained the health of their communities over centuries.

This musical health practice mostly takes place during traditional ceremonies which include the *bira*. A *bira* is an all-night ceremony in which family members come together to call upon certain ancestors for help. People use musical instruments to accompany the ceremonies including singing, clapping, ululating, *ngoma* (drums) and *mbira*.

The *mbira* was considered a sacred instrument and was given the utmost respect. It was kept in a special way, in a safe place. The person who played during the traditional ceremonies needed to be clean and the instrument was not allowed to be touched or played by anyone who had just been involved in sex or other related activities because of the role the instrument played.

Indigenous people believed that the *mbira* had the power to project its sound into heaven, bridging the world of the living and the world of the spirits. Members of the *mbira* ensemble were responsible for the possession of the spirit medium that in turn facilitated the healing process. The music puts villagers into a meditative state and inspires their tireless participation in the dancing, clapping and singing.

MUSIC HEALING FROWNED UPON

But all this has changed due to the advent of colonialism, globalisation and travelling cultures. These have brought about social changes, dilemmas and challenges which have had a strong bearing on the lives of African people and African traditional music in healing has not been spared.

Recent interviews I conducted revealed some of the dilemmas encountered by the music in healing practices. Some of the challenges relate to how the music is being undermined and looked down upon within communities. This is mainly because when missionaries came to Africa, many people were converted to Christianity. These missionaries forced their own values onto

African people which made them abandon their healing systems and ways of worship.

As a result of Christianity, healing practitioners, use of music is denounced and stigmatised by pastors and reverends who preach against them in some of their sermons during church services.

On the same note, the indigenous people of Zimbabwe have been made to believe that music in healing and indeed all forms of African traditional religious practices are evil.

Further, they believe that the practitioners themselves are wicked, black magicians and witch doctors who only perform in the dark. This makes it difficult for practitioners to speak freely about their practice.

The practitioners also lamented the effects of modernisation. Many indigenous people are leading a westernised way of life. Education and scientific research have made them believe that scientifically proven systems are more effective than traditional systems which are based on belief and ancestral spirits. This has led to the notion that music healing practitioners are uneducated and untrained.

Lack of knowledge on African traditional music in healing,

especially on the part of the youth and westernised African communities, poses a challenge for music in healing practitioners. Without adequate knowledge, it is very difficult to prepare and conduct successful *bira* ceremonies which embed music in healing practice. There are requirements, procedures and 'does and don'ts' that have to be accurately followed.

Unfortunately, most modernised indigenous people of Zimbabwe are not aware of these. For example, the beer for the ceremony has to be prepared by elderly women who have reached menopause and no longer have monthly periods. If it happens that a woman begins her periods during the preparation, then the beer is said to be unclean and will be thrown away. If she does not inform people that she prepared the beer whilst menstruating then the goals of the ceremony will not be achieved.

Also a woman who has just given birth, or who is breast feeding is not allowed to attend

the ceremony. She can only attend three months after giving birth. Further, a woman who had an abortion or a miscarriage can only attend after two months.

Unclean people in attendance can cause the healing ceremony to fail or develop at a very slow pace.

Such things as carpets, shoes, watches, spectacles, coins, cigarettes and food with red or orange colors are not permitted. Anybody who has recently had sexual intercourse is also not allowed into the ceremony. Disregarding the above requirements can be disastrous and it will be difficult to make the instrument produce sound. Finger manipulation on the *mbira* will be difficult. Everything becomes dull and the ancestral spirit will not come and the event fails.

The process requires honest people who respect and observe the sacredness of the event. It is important to ensure that proper procedures are followed and that all unclean people are weeded out before the ceremony starts.

The question therefore is, 'How will the practitioners monitor and ensure that the correct procedures are followed before and during the *bira* ceremony. This is not an easy task, especially with today's youth who want to experiment and see what happens if they don't observe the rules.

The world is changing. Modern ways of life have come to stay. Both Africans and Europeans are now living as one community and their cultures are interacting and sharing similar traits. Societies are becoming more and more multiracial and multicultural in composition, making processes complex.

Some people are now living in a dual system of health care where sick patients consult both African and Western systems thus compounding the challenges and dilemmas of the music in healing practitioners. LB

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