

Folklore

ISSN: 0015-587X (Print) 1469-8315 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfol20

Kumpolo: Aesthetic Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation of Bird Sounds in Tanzania

Imani Sanga

To cite this article: Imani Sanga (2006) Kumpolo: Aesthetic Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation of Bird Sounds in Tanzania, Folklore, 117:1, 97-102, DOI: 10.1080/00155870500480123

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00155870500480123

Published online: 19 Aug 2006.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 29

View related articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rfol20

Download by: [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] **Date:** 15 March 2016, At: 02:27

Folklore 117 (April 2006): 97–102

TOPICS, NOTES AND COMMENTS

Kumpolo: Aesthetic Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation of Bird Sounds in Tanzania

Imani Sanga

Abstract

This article deals with the aesthetics of the sounds of ring-necked doves and African ground hornbills among the Wawanji people of the Iringa region in the southern highlands of Tanzania. The Wawanji composed tunes by imitating the sounds of these birds. The essay argues that an aesthetic value was culturally attributed to the natural sounds of the birds, in so far as the lyrics set to these tunes and tales about the birds or their sounds concerned human experiences such as fear, work, joy, and hope.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016

Introduction

In recalling the days of my childhood in the early 1980s in Chimala village, Tanzania, I can still hear the early-morning, high-pitched sounds of the ring-necked doves in the trees around our house. We—the village children—knew the words associated with most of these sounds and we could sing them—"*kumpolo kumpolo*"—blending our voices with those of the ring-necked doves. We did this while waking up and preparing ourselves to accompany our parents to the rice fields located far away from the village in a place called Kumpolo (literally, "fields far away from human settlement").

Three approaches can be identified with regard to the study of bird sounds and their human appropriation, at least in an African context. In Feld's 1982 study of Kaluli music culture, the birds that produce various sounds are considered to be singing. They are thought to be the spirits of the dead returning to communicate through singing with the living. In this way, birds are believed to represent "different social categories (men, women, old, young)," as well as different human temperaments (angry, docile, hostile and cranky) expressed through sounds now considered to be songs (Feld 1982, 218).

A second approach to the human appropriation of bird sounds involves considering musicians to be birds; hence the singing of these musicians is regarded as being comparable with the singing of birds. Since the birds are thought to sing very beautifully, human beings who sing beautifully are likened to singing birds. This approach is succinctly stated by Lucy Duran in relation to the Mande people, among whom "musicians describe themselves as *konow* (singular, *kono*)," which means "birds" (Duran 1995, 101). What is significant in this account is the metaphorical connection established between musicians and birds. Birds are symbols of freedom, wisdom, beauty, bravery, and power. Thus *kono* musicians are viewed as also having those qualities. It is as a result of this perceived connection that *kono* musicians among the Mande have the freedom to sing criticism of social

ISSN 0015-587X print; 1469-8315 online/06/010097-6; Routledge Journals; Taylor & Francis
© 2006 The Folklore Society
DOI: 10.1080/00155870500480123

issues without fear or favour. This is expressed in a song by a Mande musician named Abdoulaye Diabate: "*Yayankono*: *kono bee be kasi le, wa kiri te bo a la*," which means "all the birds are singing, but no one can pass judgement on them" (Duran 1995, 125).

The third approach has been common also among western art musicians. This involves using bird sounds as materials for composition. Again the study by Feld (1982) is a good example. It discusses how Kaluli musicians imitated sounds of certain birds in their own music-making. Olivier Messiaen is an example of a western musician who employs bird sounds as a resource for his compositions:

> The French composer Olivier Messiaen, for instance, wrote music much of which consisted (he said) in transcription of sounds made by birds. He regarded birdsongs as a very pure form of music that human beings can hardly hope to surpass (Graham 1997, 74).

In this article I provide an aesthetical appreciation of selected bird sounds in Tanzania and show how these natural bird sounds were culturally appropriated and integrated into people's daily experiences. I argue that it was through this appropriation that human beings attributed cultural aesthetical value to the natural aesthetics of bird sounds. In this way, these sounds acquired an added value by entering into a humanly-conceived musical world where birds are heard as singing something or saying something. Following Carlson (2001), I argue that, through these songs and stories, the Wawanji interacted with the natural world making it part of their life, and themselves, likewise, part of it.

Aesthetics of Bird Sounds in a Cultural Context: From Sounding to Singing

The sounds of birds have been referred to as "bird songs" in many cultures. In the English language we talk about birds singing or about birdsong. For example, a church hymn "Oh Lord my God/How Great Thou art" portrays birds as singing "sweetly in the trees." In his list of natural *products* of living things, Budd (2004) also includes birdsong. Duran (1995) gives a number of examples from different cultures in which the sounds of birds are associated with singing—beautiful singing. Conversely, the Wawanji talked of birds as making sound (sounding: *kikuta*), while a person who imitated sounds of birds was considered to be singing (*ikwimba*).

The appropriation of bird sounds among the Wawanji did not change the vocabulary for the sounds produced by birds. As I will illustrate in this article, however, musical conceptualisation of bird sounds was done mainly in two ways: by imitating and by interpreting the sound. By hearing bird sounds, children among the Wawanji could imitate these sounds and sing words along with them. The children were singing, using the bird sounds as a resource. Secondly, some bird sounds were understood to be conveying a message; that is, the sound was understood as having a meaning that could be humanly understood. A question "what does it say?" (*kiti keki?*) was common when one wanted to know what message the bird was believed to be conveying. A similar question could be asked when a person was singing and one wanted to know exactly what meaning the singer was communicating. One would ask, "what does he/she say?" (*iti keki?*). Consequently, I have avoided using terms such as "bird songs" or "singing birds"

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016

in this essay except when I refer to human appropriation of these sounds in which the birds are viewed as singing.

The view that music-making and, in particular, singing are human activities is not a novel one. Blacking for example, defines music as "sound that is organised into socially accepted patterns" (1995, 33), a definition that Agawu recommends as an "appealing" one (2003, 2). Blacking gives the same definition in another book (1973, 25). In this text he does not emphasise the exclusion of non-human sounds in his definition. He only stresses the involvement of human beings in creating, perceiving or selecting sounds (even the sounds from nature) in music-making. Thus, referring to this text, Agawu observes:

> Blacking used the word "socially" to indicate the presence of human originators and to confine the domain of his theory of music making to what is practiced by community dwelling human beings rather than animals. *This is not to deny that crickets, frogs and whale make "music,"* nor is it to obscure the fact that composers draw on "non-human" forces or aids, including technological props (Agawu 2003, 2; my emphasis).

However, in a chapter entitled "Expressing human experience through music," Blacking emphasises the fact that non-human sounds in the music cultures he studied are not conceived of as music (Blacking 1995, 31–73). He writes:

> The regular beats of an engine or a pump may sound like the beats of a drum, but no Venda would regard them as music or expect to be emotionally stirred, because they are not produced by human beings. Familiar sounds and even the unfamiliar sounds of *Wozzeck or Le marteau sans maitre*, made by a record player or tape recorder, are regarded as music, because it is understood that they were originally produced by people (Blacking 1995, 34).

In this view, it seems imperative to highlight the difference between music and the "music" referred to in Agawu's text quoted earlier to be able to grasp Blacking's theory of music-making—which I find applicable to the study of the appreciation and appropriation of bird sounds among the Wawanji. The Wawanji considered birds to be making sounds (no matter how beautiful one found them) and human beings as singing (no matter how similar to the sounds of birds their songs could be). Therefore, the sounds of birds that were musically appropriated by human beings may be regarded as "music." It should be noted, however, that this is not to deny the aesthetic beauty of those bird sounds that were not appropriated musically by human beings.

Succinctly speaking, I am proposing a three-sided perspective for theorising aesthetics of bird sounds. First, there are those sounds of birds that have not been appropriated musically by human beings. These sounds are appreciated as pure sounds of birds. Secondly, there are those sounds of birds that have been appropriated musically by human beings. In the case of the Wawanji in the 1980s, these sounds were still considered to be bird sounds but they conveyed something that was perceived to be humanly conceived. I have suggested above that these sounds may be considered "music" in so far as humans conceive of them as being musical. Thirdly, there are those sounds made by human beings by imitating the sounds of birds. Among the Wawanji, these sounds were considered to be songs.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016

Sounds of Ring-necked Doves and African Ground Hornbills in Tanzania

Let me briefly introduce the peoples from whom I have drawn the two accounts I discuss in this essay. The Wawanji is an ethnic group that lives in Matamba (Uwanji) in the Makete district (Iringa region) in the southern highlands of Tanzania. They speak a dialect known as Kiwanji. Those who live in the Usangu basin in the Mbeya region—in Chimala, Rujewa, Mbarali and in the Igurusi villages, to name but a few—are migrants from Uwanji who come for business and/or agricultural purposes. I was born in Matamba in 1972. When I was seven our family moved south to Chimala, where my father was employed by the Lutheran church as a shopkeeper. Agricultural activities, however, were the main source of our family's income. In addition, my father worked privately as a carpenter. I was raised in this agricultural family—consisting of two parents and seven children. The sounds of various birds accompanied our daily farming activities. We were raised to be aware of these sounds through a number of folktales and songs about the birds and their sounds. The sounds became so closely associated with our daily experiences that the two are almost inextricably linked in my mind. In what follows, I provide a reading of the sounds of two birds—namely the ring-necked dove and the African ground hornbill—in relation to our farming experiences in the Usangu basin in the 1980s.

At this juncture, let me complete that little story I started at the beginning of this essay. In the afternoon, when the sun fiercely heated the tops of our heads, we put down our hoes and went to sit under a big tree, for food and water. It was then that we paid attention to the sounds of birds around us. We heard the alternating guttural sounds of a pair of big black birds (African ground hornbills). The first was pitched higher than that which replied. We—the children of the family—went and stood on anthill. From that stance we could clearly see the two birds walking majestically. We remembered the stories about those birds. It was said that they ate snakes and that they knew of a medicine to protect themselves from snake poison. When our parents would call us back to work, they would ask "what do the birds say?" We knew an answer. We replied by singing along with the sounds of the birds. "Iki iki kyekiki—ughu ughu ghwe nkota," which means "what is this?; this is a medicine."

With reference to the first part of this account, our morning activities were so closely associated with the sounds of ring-necked doves and other birds that when we heard these calls we knew we had to wake up early and be ready to go to the fields to work with our parents. Sometimes, this was an enjoyable activity. If you were told to remain at home for other duties you could break into a sorrowful cry. But sometimes it was a bitter activity, particularly if you had been going to the fields for two or more days consecutively. The sounds of these birds were part of our multifaceted morning experiences. *Kumpolo kumpolo*—the words we had for the sounds of the doves—and the tune to which we sang the bird sounds held echoes of all these experiences.

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of the second part of this account is to describe some of the characteristics of the African ground hornbill. The description of this species in the Honolulu Zoo website, which I find useful for our present discussion, is as follows:

> The ground hornbills are the only ground dwellers among hornbills … Hornbills are notable for their long eyelashes and rather stubby legs and toes, with broad soles … The African ground hornbill's throat skin is inflatable, and sometimes inflates when it makes its guttural call… The African ground hornbill's food consists largely of small vertebrates and larger insects, although they sometimes use their pick-like bills to subdue prey as large as hares, tortoises, *snakes* and squirrels (http://www.honoluluzoo.org/african_ground_hornbill.htm emphasis mine).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many snakes of various kinds were to be found in the Usangu basin in which we lived and cultivated rice. The inhabitants of this area identified them by colour and size. There were big black snakes that were known to be very poisonous. They ate hen eggs and sometimes killed the hens by biting them. We were told that they spat out poison that could cause blindness if it fell on one's face. It was said that on meeting such a snake, one should spit first to stop it spitting on you. Then there were slender green snakes. We were told they were also very poisonous, but very polite. They did not bite unless one attempted to harm them. In fact, we did not fear them so much when we met them in a forest where we were searching for bird nests. There were also slender long snakes with yellow and grey stripes on their backs that ran away very quickly, especially when they were in a grassy area. We were happy to see them swallowing rats because then they moved more slowly and we threw stones at them from a safe distance. But we were told that they, too, were poisonous. Suffice it to say, therefore, snakes severely threatened our daily life, work, and property.

The African ground hornbills were well recognised as snake-eaters in the Usangu basin. They have large sharp bills and long nails, but these characteristics are not sufficient to explain their ability to catch and eat snakes. People in the village said these birds knew of trees that possessed medicine effective against snakebite. This knowledge was the source of their fearlessness and gave them the reputation of being powerful birds akin to those few very influential people in the village who also possessed similar knowledge.

Other African stories about ground hornbills include the following details:

> The Masai believe that the African ground hornbill should never be killed because it will bring bad luck. Aside from many indigenous tribes in South Africa using the ground hornbill for "muti" (tribal medicine), there are others in Africa who believe that the African ground hornbill is a rain prophet (http://www.honoluluzoo.org/african_ground_hornbill.htm).

These stories point out how people in various places attempt to explain the presence of these birds around them and they also elucidate how people integrate the sounds of birds into their daily life. The sounds of these birds gave resonance to all the stories that we—the Wawanji children—had heard about the birds in connection with our fear of snakes in the Usangu basin.

Another interesting observation focused on the form and content of birds' conversation. The first bird is imagined as asking "What is this?," and the other is thought to reply "This is a medicine." Since the birds' survival was seen as depending on their knowledge of the medicine, it was necessary to preserve such important information in the forefront of their memory. This they were thought to do by repeatedly asking each other the same question and receiving the same reply. Our parents posed similar kinds of questions to us as children, so as to keep important knowledge foremost in our minds—a device typical of oral traditional

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016

practices. Grandparents, parents, older siblings and ourselves could keep telling the same or similar stories for years.

Conclusion

Let me summarise the essay with a few remarks. Firstly, our lives were so closely connected with the sounds of ring-necked doves and African ground hornbills that these sounds were an integral part of daily existence. Secondly, our verbal appropriation of these sounds was a way of living our life in which work, fears, beliefs, and hopes were seen as important experiences.

References Cited

Agawu, Kofi. "Defining and Interpreting African Music." In *Musical Arts in Africa: Theory, Practice and Education*, eds. Anri Herbst, Meki Nzewi, and Kofi Agawu. 1–12. Pretoria: Unisa, 2003.

Blacking, John. *How Musical is Man?* Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 1973.

———. *Music, Culture, and Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Budd, Malcolm. "The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." In *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art—The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, eds. Peter lamarque, and Stein Hougon Olsen. 543–53. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Carlson, Allen. *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2000.

———. "Environmental Aesthetics." In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut, and Dominic McIver Lopes. 423–36. London: Routledge, 2001.

Duran, Lucy. "Birds of Wasulu: Freedom of Expression and Expression of Freedom in Popular Music of Southern Mali." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 4 (1995): 101–34.

Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiments: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

———. "Dialogic Editing: Interpreting How Kaluli Read Sound and Sentiment." *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (1987): 190–210.

Graham, Gordon. *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Websites

African ground hornbill http://www.honoluluzoo.org/african_ground_hornbill.htm (accessed 20 November 2004)

Ring-necked dove http://www.birdingafrica.net/page76.html (accessed 20 November 2004).

Biographical Note

Imani Sanga (Ethnomusicologist and Composer) is a PhD Candidate in Music at University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and Assistant Lecturer in Music at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His writings include a songbook entitled Nyimbo za Tanzania *("Songs from Tanzania") and papers on music and feminist theory, popular music in Africa, cultural globalisation, and music aesthetics.*

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM] at 02:27 15 March 2016