

## Ngoma drums and musical performances of the Wasamba in Tanzania

This paper discusses a small portion out of an extensive field research I made in 2005 in East Africa. Although the major aim of this research primarily focused on the study of aerophones, the collected materials also include all types of traditional music practices of the communities residing in this geographical region including various other musical instruments like for instance *ngoma* drums of the Wasamba people presented in this paper.



Figure 1: Map of Tanzania<sup>1</sup>

The Wasamba reside among others in the Vuga village, Usambara –Mountains, of the Tanga region of northeast Tanzania. The Usambara–Mountains are located in Muhesa district between Mount Kilimanjaro and the Indian Ocean revealing a series of mountain ranges split into two sub-ranges: the West and the East Usambara that are accessible from the towns of Lushoto in the West, and Amani in the East. Some of these mountains are more than 2000 meters high whereas the entire area has ca. 110 km lengths and 30-60 km width. The Vuga village I visited belongs to West Usambara is approximately 1800 meters high and accessible from the town of Amani. My route started in Dar Es Salaam via the towns of Tanga and Amani, to the Vuga village (figure 1).

Prior to discussing the use of the *ngoma* drums and their musical role in the traditions of the Wasamba and neighboring communities, it is worth clarifying term “*ngoma*” that is widely used in sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://connectionkenya.wordpress.com/2008/08/11/tanzania-2008-dispatch-1/>

Depending on ethnic, linguistic and cultural affiliations the word *ngoma* is pronounced and spelled in very differently such as *e ngoma, goma, gomo, ingoma, lagoma, ng'oma, ngomba, nomm, ngomo* etc. whereby each of this term may bear similar or unlike connotation/s. In the broadest sense, *ngoma* is applied to **music/dance** reflecting all types of group and/or solo musical performances. In doing so, mostly, but not necessarily in all cultures, drumming plays a significant role<sup>2</sup>. Based on Kiswahili speaking East African populations, Kubik defines *ngoma* as „dance“, „dance performance“, „dance feast“, „music“, „music performance“, by stressing the fact, that in Kiswahili each of these terms is incomplete in itself, since these musical happenings may occur simultaneously and hence conceptually exist together<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand among Bantu-speaking populations of central, east-central and southern Africa, *ngoma* may refer to drums of various sizes, shapes and types, to drum ensembles or to individual drums or else to specific music and dance styles<sup>4</sup>. *Ngoma* music and dance performances may for example be observed among the Wagogo and a number of other communities of central and southern Tanzania<sup>5</sup>.

Likewise the Wagogo there exist a number of societies in Tanzania who use similar drum ensembles like for example the Wakisi, Wapanga, Walugru as well as the Wasamba. The usage of the term *ngoma* may though be understood in many different ways. So unlike the Wagogo who for instance use the word *ngoma* to denote music and dance performances, the Wasamba call their various types of drums *ngoma*. It may however, also be possible that music making or musical performance with drum accompaniment is included in the meaning of the word.

The *ngoma* drums of the Wasamba have diverse sizes and shapes. Accordingly they are played either only by men or by women in respected ensembles. Likewise, the major part traditional music performances are also differentiated in male and female groups. The female *ngoma* ensemble is therefore, called *ngoma ya kidembwa* “drums of women” and the male ensemble is known as *nogma dumange* “drums of men”.

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<sup>2</sup> Cooke, Peter (2001): *Ngoma*. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, vol. 17. Edited by Stanley Sadie. London, Macmillan: 855–856.

<sup>3</sup> Kubik, Gerhard (1988): *Zum Verstehen afrikanischer Musik*. Leipzig, Reclam: 61–62.

<sup>4</sup> Kubik, Gerhard (1988): *Zum Verstehen afrikanischer Musik*. Leipzig, Reclam: 140; Barz, Gregory (2004): *Music in East Africa: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York, Oxford University Press: 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Kubik, Gerhard (2001): *Tanzania*. New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, vol. 25, (ed. by Stanley Sadie). London, Macmillan Publishers Ltd.: 86.

**Ngoma ya kidembwa “drums of women”:** This ensemble (figure 2) consists of two single headed cylindrical drums carved from whole sections of tree trunks with approximate height of 38 cm and diameter of about 52cm. The drums have three carved-out legs at their bottoms, while the top is covered by skin that is nailed with a row of wooden nails and additionally tensioned by leather strips (figures 3 a-c). Further music instruments belonging to this ensemble are duct whistles with internal duct (figures 4 a-c).

name and classification	shape, material	measures/cm	additional information
<i>ngoma</i> 211.211.1	single-headed cylindrical drum made of wood; covered with skin, three carved out legs	height = 38 diameter = 52	skin tensioned with wooden nails and leather strips
whistle 421.221.11	two or more whistles made of metal or wood	length = ca. 9	belly shaped tube without sound holes, side holes fixed on two opposite sides, two blowing holes

**Figure 2: Instrumental setting of the ngoma ya kidembwa ensemble**



**Figure 3 a-c: single-headed cylindrical ngoma; skin tensioning method; the inside of the ngoma**



**Figure 4 a-c: internal duct whistles made of wood; side hole (profile); two blowing holes<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>6</sup> Collection: Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, Vienna; Collector: Barbara Plankensteiner; Photos: Timkehet Teffera 17.05.2006.

**Ngoma dumange „drums of men”:** The male *ngoma* ensemble (figure 5) I recorded consisted of three drums (figure 6 a) two rattles and a small side blown horn, probably a goat’s horn, and a whistle (figure 6 b-d). The drums are single and one double-headed. The first two double-headed cylindrical drums are called *ngoma kubwa* and *ngoma ndiola* whereas the third single-headed goblet drum is known as *ngoma ndogo*. Compared to the above explained female ensemble *ngoma ya kidembwa* only one whistle was used in this ensemble that was played by the song and group leader who simultaneously shook a rattle.

name and classification	shape, material	measures/cm	additional information
whistle 421.221.11	two or more whistles made of metal or wood	length = ca. 7 diameter = ca. 3,5	bellied tube, one sound hole, two oppositely fixed holes
<i>ngoma kubwa</i> 211.211	single-headed cylindrical drum <sup>7</sup> made of canister and covered with skin	height = 52 diameter = 36	skin tensioned with leather strips; laced in X and Y patterns
<i>ngoma ndiola</i> 211.212	double-headed cylindrical drum made of canister; covered with skin	height = 39 diameter = 26	skin tensioned with leather strips; laced in X and Y patterns
<i>ngoma ndogo</i> 211.26.1	single-headed wooden goblet drum; covered with skin	height = 31 diameter = 22	skin nailed in a row
rattle 112.13	vessel rattle with handle made of metal	length = ca. 20 diameter = 8–10	cans are used as resonators, numerous sound holes; rattling objects = small stones

**Figure 5: Instrumental setting of the *ngoma ya dumange* Ensemble**

At this point, however, mention must be made that the instrumental settings may vary from one ensemble to the other. Also the musical occasion would in many cases be an additional factor to determine the number of instruments to be played in such an ensemble as well as the quantity of active participants, i.e. singers, chorus group or instrument players, in the given ensemble. It is thus assumable that in certain ensembles more drums, whistles or rattles may be played to induce a “better” timbre or tonal quality to the already existing standard setting.

<sup>7</sup> This drum is actually a double-headed, but only one skin is practically used.





Figure 6a: drum set of the ngoma dumange ensemble



Figure 6b: vessel rattle



Figure 6c: metal whistle



Figure 6d: side blown horn<sup>8</sup>

Similar practices have been observed in a number of aerophone ensembles of East Africa. The waza trumpet ensembles of the Berta people of western Ethiopia and southern Sudan may be mentioned as an example. Apart from the standard set of 10-12 variously sized end-blown trumpets additional trumpets may be used occasionally to enhance the quality of the timbre or to accentuate specific pitches.

**Dance Set-ups:** the graphic representations in figures 7a and b show the rough positions of all possible participants during both female and male ensemble performances of the Wasamba that is predominated in many cultures of sub-

<sup>8</sup> Figures 5a-d: Photos: Timkehet Teffera, *Vuga* village, *Tanga* Region, North Tanzania, 13.06.2005.

Saharan Africa. It is thus very common that at the beginning of such a group music performance the participants immediately create a circle or a semi-circle. In a moderate tempo they move rhythmically one behind the other in response to the drum beating patterns. Drummers on the other hand, often take their position in the middle of the circle or semi-circle.

The traditional songs accompanied by both *ngoma* ensembles of the Wasamba consist of group songs in which a song leader and a chorus group perform their parts alternately according to given traditional song styles. Likewise in many African music cultures, everyone is able to sing may take the responsibility of a song leader. In many traditional music performances a song leader is not necessarily determined in advance and therefore, this role is not limited to certain individuals as long as the music performance is not carried out by a “professional” music group that has deliberately been engaged for such purpose.

It is one of the common features of many African cultures that singers, dancers and instrument players exchange their roles mutually during a music performance, since each song or instrumental piece and generally such a collective music performance usually lasts for a long time.

In the *ngoma* ensembles I was able to observe in the Vuga village, among others the drummers also served as song leaders, while they simultaneously played their instruments. At times he or she was replaced by other voluntary participants from the chorus and dance group. In such cases this person immediately takes part in the singing or dancing. Similarly all other accompanying music instruments, e.g. whistles and rattles, were also handed over from one person to the other.

The songs are usually divided in relaxation and tension parts that can simply be perceived through the specific body movements. In the case of the female *ngoma* ensemble for instance the initial moderate footsteps are changed into more intensive hip and shoulder movements during the intensive dance moments. These are one of the characteristic female body movements observed in many African cultures. Tension parts may among others be evoked by song texts accompanied by intensive instrumental playing like for example strong drum beats as well as ululations and emphatic shouts.

**Drum playing techniques and patterns:** The *ngomas* are played either with one or with both hands. The roles of the right and left hands are divided according to the pattern played. During a music performance every drummer has his/her own drum phrase to play that should remain constant throughout the musical piece despite of possible individual rhythmic variations. The *ngomas* are primarily played in interlocking patterns with each pattern consisting of its own reference pulse. Such cross or polyrhythmic (also cross rhythmic) patterns

belong to one of the distinctive features of vocal and instrumental music of numerous cultures of Africa.

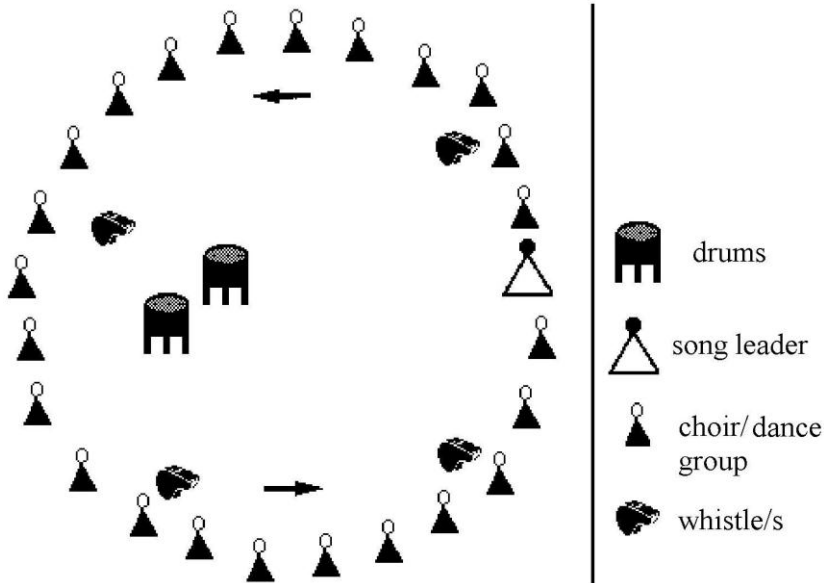


Figure 7 a: Dance set-up of the ngoma Ya Kidembwa ensemble (female)



Figure 7 b: Circular dance formation of ngoma ya kidembwa ensemble (female)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Photo: T. Teffera, Vuga village, Tanga Region, North Tanzania, June 13, 2005.

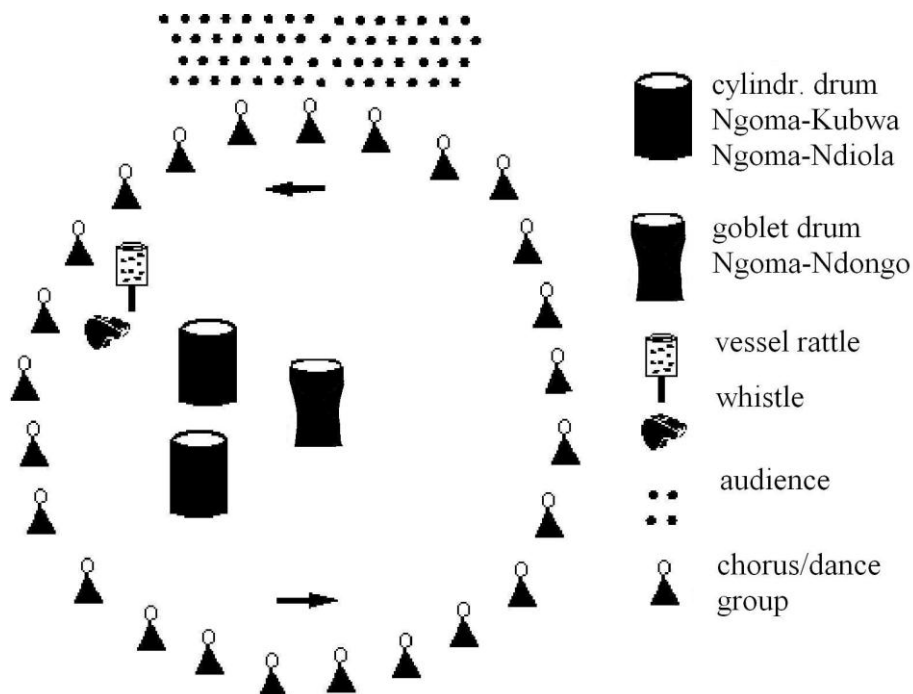


Figure 7 c: dance set-up of the ngoma dumange ensemble (male)

The two *ngomas* of the female ensemble reveal such distinctive patterns and playing techniques. In doing so, the first drummer (figure 8 a) starts playing her drum part with her right hand, whereas her left hand mainly colors the sound through pressing the membrane. Now and then she uses her elbow instead of her left hand to achieve the same effect. This spot is to be considered as her reference point. The second drummer (figure 8 b) plays the first somewhat weak beat with her left hand by tapping the drum with the middle finger. This beat is simultaneously her reference point which matches with that of the first drummer once in two rounds of the triple group. The other two beats belonging to the triple group played with her right hand are relatively stronger than the first.

The example in figure 8 c demonstrates the individual drum patterns of the two *ngomas* with the corresponding reference points and/or accentuations, the division of the right and the left hands, the meeting points of both drum patterns indicated with the shaded boxes. Analogous to figure 8c the virtual spectral frequency display of the recurring phrases of the two drum patterns is shown in figure 8d which illustrates the logarithmic scale of the rhythmic patterns (music example 1/film example 1).

The three drums of the male *ngoma* ensemble are played by two musicians only. As illustrated in figure 9a the first drummer plays the two cylindrical



drums *ngoma-ndiola* and *ngoma-kubwa*. In doing so he positions the *ngoma-ndiola* on his lap and the *ngoma-kubwa* on the ground on his right side. He beats the *ngoma-ndiola* on both sides while the *ngoma-kubwa* is played only one side (the position of the drum also allows only this option). While playing the drums, the right hand of the musician moves from one membrane to the other. The single-headed goblet drum *ngoma-ndogo* is played by the second musician who positions the drum between his legs. In a bent position he beats the membrane with both hands in standing, kneeling or in a seated position (figures 9 b-c).



8a



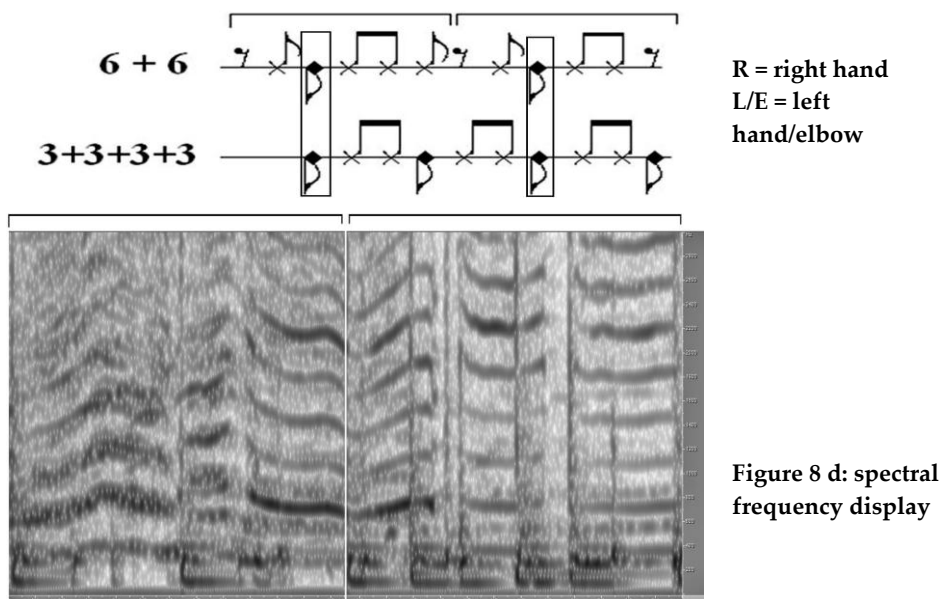
8b

Figures 8 a-b: playing positions and individual beating patterns of the female *ngomas*<sup>10</sup>

1 <sup>st</sup> drummer (8a)	R	L/E	R	R	R	.	R	L/E	R	R	R	.
2 <sup>nd</sup> drummer (8b)		L	R	R	L	R	R	L	R	R	L	

Figure 8 c: beating patterns of two female *ngomas*

<sup>10</sup> Figures 7a-b: Photos: T. Teffera, Vuga Village, Tanga Region, North Tanzania, June 13, 2005.



Likewise the drum patterns of the female drums, the phrases of the three drums interlock with one another, each pattern consisting of its own reference point. While the combined pattern of the first drummer roughly reveals a triple metre (3+3...etc.) the pattern of the second drummer possesses a continuous duple metre (2+2 ... etc.) of which the first beat apparently falls together with the reference pulse of that of the first drummer (figure 9 d; see also shaded boxes referring to the meeting points and reference pulses).



Figures 9 a-c: playing positions of the male *ngomas*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Figures 8a-c: Photos: Timkehet Teffera, *Vuga* village, *Tanga* Region, North Tanzania, June 13, 2005.

1 <sup>st</sup> drummer (see fig. 9a)	ngoma-ndiola	.	L	R	R	.	R	.	L	R	R	.
	ngoma-kubwa	.	.	.	.	R	.	.	.	.	.	R
2 <sup>nd</sup> drummer (see fig. 9b-c)	ngoma-ndogo	.	L	R	.	L	R	.	L	R	.	L

R = right hand, L = left hand

**Figure 9 d: one of the possible beating patterns of three male ngomas according to my perception**

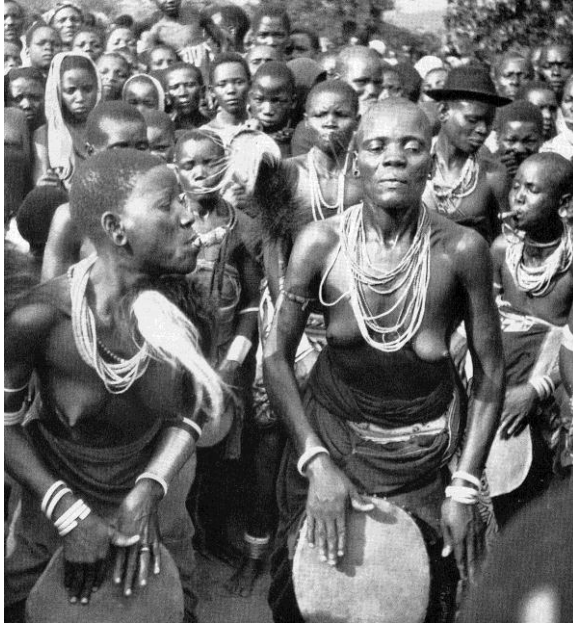
Compared to the second drummer who is playing a clearly perceptible duple beat, it is complicated to transcribe the complex pattern of the two drums played by the first musicians separately, because during the music performance the sound of both drums melt into one pattern. Furthermore, the drums are generally played in very fast tempo so that it is nearly impossible to perceive the different patterns both auditive and visual. In music example 2 we may listen to the different pitches of the two drums *ngoma-kubwa* and *ngoma-ndiola*. The right membrane of *ngoma-ndiola* drum positioned on the lap of the musician has a higher pitch than the opposite side and also than the *ngoma-kubwa* placed to the right of the musician on the ground. This relatively higher pitch enables the attentive listener to detect which beats of the given phrase this membrane is played. And yet, due to the individual variations of the drummer, this specific pitch does not occur in regular gaps as it is usually expected.

As a comparison we may take a look at drum patterns of the Wagogo community of central Tanzania observed and examined by Kubik. According to him the traditional *ngoma* songs and dances of this ethnic society are accompanied by 10 to 12 variously sized hourglass drums called *sero*, *nyanyulua* and *ngoma-fumbua* and *minzi* consisting about 40-70 cm height, whistles and as well raft rattles called *kayamba* usually made of tinsplate that are filled with stones shaken from right to left and vice versa. With the exception of the *kayamba* rattles, which are shaken by male participants, the drums and whistles are played by women, an indication that drumming in African communities is not only limited to male activities and symbolized exclusively as manly instruments<sup>12</sup>, but that is also allowed to women.

Taking the picture shown in figure 10 into closer consideration, Kubik describes his observation how three of the women play their drums. According to him this picture demonstrates that under particularly convenient circumstances, it may even be exceptionally possible to transcribe the movement structure of an African musical piece from silent films. On this picture we are able to observe the positions of the hands and detect the possible rhythmic patterns applied as well as the organological characteristics of the drums. The

<sup>12</sup> Kubik, Gerhard (1982): *Ostafrika*. Musikgeschichte in Bildern, vol. I (Lieferung 10) Leipzig: VEB Verlag für Musik: 140-141.

interplay of cross-rhythms and individual accents is also practiced in this culture. Thus the drum patterns are not synchronic.



**Figure 10: female drum players of the Wagogo<sup>13</sup> (Kubik 1988: 141)**

The woman on the right plays the large drum *ngoma fumbwa* with the right hand while the left hand is just serves to support the drum between the legs<sup>14</sup>. The woman on the left also plays the drum with the right hand only while she uses her left hand to battle the sound. On the other hand, the young girl in the rear plays the drum with both hands.

It is very obvious that there is a great divergence between the auditive and the visual perception of music. The ana-

lytical films I made of both male and female *ngoma* ensemble performances of the Wasamba as well as the observation of the musical happening on the spot have enabled me to perceive the drum beating patterns and the playing techniques in a much better way. Thus compared to a recorded sound, the visual perception paves the listener a way to interpret musical materials more precisely. In some cases one may even come to completely different results.

Since every listener possesses a subjective metronome that derives from his/her own cultural, musical and psychological backgrounds it is also obvious that in the case of the so far discussed drum patterns of the Wasamba and the Wagogo also very different perceptions would be the result. While listening to such an ensemble performance a stranger perceives the different drum patterns as a unity, although the one or the other might try to fight against this oneness of rhythmic structures in order to be able to identify the pattern played by each drummer. The rhythmic intricacy may sometimes even cause a shifting of patterns in our perception that most probably depends on our rhythmic awareness. Likewise Chernoff notes that “rhythmic complexity is the heart of African music, an understanding of the way in which African rhythms are structured is our best analytic tool”. Chernoff furthermore states the following

<sup>13</sup> Kubik, Gerhard (1988): *Zum Verstehen afrikanischer Musik*. Leipzig, Reclam: 141.

<sup>14</sup> A typical holding position. See Ibid.

with regard to African rhythms<sup>15</sup>: “We should be able to see ... the validity of musical “metronome sense” as a cultural index. Certainly the African rhythmic orientation is quite different from our own [Western]. The fundamental characteristic of African music is the way the music works with time in the dynamic clash and interplay of cross-rhythms”.

**Gender roles and ngoma drums:** In many societies of sub-Saharan Africa the determined roles men and women play are not only reflected in the everyday life, but also in music making. Drumming is primarily a male activity while females usually participate in dancing and/or singing. Especially certain types of drums had been and still today are absolutely taboo for women in many cultures. Let alone playing them they are even not allowed to touch specific drums.

The everyday life of the Wasamba is accompanied by various social events in which music making plays a significant role as one of the major components of culture. Such events may among others be the birth of a child, recreation, before and after harvest, wedding, funerals, ceremonies, religious and possession rites and circumcisions. During such events we may observe song and dance performances that are usually accompanied by various music instruments, primarily drums.

Although it is unknown when female drumming exactly begun among the Wasamba and other neighboring communities such as the Wagogo and Walugru, it is assumable that it most probably began around the end of the 1960s. During the long lasting reign of the Bugandan kingdom in southern Uganda for instance drumming and dancing were strictly gendered. In the various music performances taking place in the Bugandan court among others in the baakisimba<sup>16</sup> dance performances drum playing was absolutely a male activity, since the drum also served as the symbol of authority and thus it should accordingly be controlled by men. Women were only tolerated to dance and sing outside of the palace until the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between the 1940s and 1960s they were gradually welcomed as drummers in the baakisimba performances within the court. However, after the abolishment of the Bugandan kingdom in 1967, radical changes took place in the traditional music scene of this community and thus among others female drummers became more access to drums through baakisimba performances that were

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<sup>15</sup> Chernoff, John Miller (1979): *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and social Action in African Musical Idioms*. University of Chicago: 93-95.

<sup>16</sup> The *baakasimba* was originally a royal court dance; since the abolition of the kingdom in 1967 it is also performed in other contexts. In doing so, the traditional roles of men and women have changed; i.e. men are not only limited to play drums, but also to perform the dance while women play the drum ensembles.



accompanied by new social, cultural and political structures and meanings, as also by new gender identities and roles.

As in the case of the Wasamba and other Tanzanian communities mentioned above as well as other communities of sub-Saharan Africa, it is likewise assumable that social, cultural and political changes have to a great extent played similar roles in shaping the musical landscape and to evoke new positions for female musicians, also as drum players.

Regardless of my short stay among the Wasamba and the sparse information I could collect, the distinction of roles and the gender related aspect were noticeable in both the music performances I recorded as well as the everyday life of this community.

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