



A Semiotic Exploration of the Evolving Messaging in the Shona Traditional Songs: The Elusive Context, Categorization and Paralinguistic Features of the Song “Nyama Yekugocha

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Abstract

This study employs a semiotic exploration to investigate the evolving categorization and usage of the Shona traditional song "Nyama Yekugocha." Despite its association with specific occasions, the song's origins and cultural context remain elusive. The research, utilizing netnography and narrative interviews, aims to unravel the song's shrouded context, dissecting layers of meaning in its lyrics and exploring paralinguistic features. Acknowledging the song's transformative nature, from a cultural artifact to a symbol of victory, the study addresses challenges posed by contemporary shifts. The semiotic exploration enriches the evolving cultural value of "Nyama Yekugocha" within the Shona community and Zimbabwe's intangible heritage.

Keywords: Semiotics, Paralanguage, Song, Vocables, Culture

1. Introduction

In the vibrant and ever-evolving culture of the Shona people, the song "Nyama yekugocha" resonates across diverse arenas, from soccer stadiums to political rallies, boxing matches, and cricket games, marking triumphant moments for the winning team. Despite its ubiquitous presence, the elusive origins of this song remain shrouded in mystery, as does its cultural context, categorization, and the potent vocables that tie it to the emotive expression within Shona tradition. While previous studies have sought to classify the song *Nyama Yekugocha* based on its varied performances, there is a notable gap in the exploration of its lyrical content and paralinguistic features. This article aims to bridge this gap through a semiotic lens, by investigating the original layers of meaning embedded in the song's words and the non-verbal elements that shape its communicative power. The semiotics in the song provide cultural echoes which this study seeks to unearth and provide the fading connection between the song and the rich traditions of the Shona people. In this study, language is viewed in a dual role as a vehicle for communication and a bearer of culture [1]. Despite the evolving categorization of the song *Nyama Yekugocha*, this study aligns with Wa Thiong'o's assertion by positioning Shona traditional songs as linguistic artifacts that not only communicate contemporary mood but also carry the deep-seated cultural values and expressions of a people [1]. Through this semiotic exploration, this article seeks to trace the evolving multifaceted

layers of meaning and significance of *Nyama Yekugocha* offering an understanding of its role within the broader Shona cultural and contemporary landscape.

2. Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach which included Netnography, and documentary analysis. Netnography, or digital ethnography, is a research methodology that involves studying and analyzing the behavior, interactions, and culture of online communities and virtual environments [2]. Netnography was used as a method of data collection that is dependent on digital traces of naturally occurring public conversations on communications networks [3-4]. Netnography adapts traditional ethnographic techniques, typically used in anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences, to the context of online spaces. Researchers use Netnography to explore and understand the dynamics of online communities, social media platforms, forums, and other digital spaces. [5].

In this study netnography, involved observing and participating in online discussions, of the Zimbabwe College of Music Alumni Whatsapp group. The researcher analysed user-generated content and interpreted the cultural aspects of digital interactions on the traditional songs categorization. Netnography helped researchers gain insights into the lived experiences, social structures, and communication patterns within virtual communities, providing

a deeper understanding of online cultures and phenomena. This discussion is derived from the ZCM Alumni group discussion on the categorization of songs. One member requested the group members to help in providing three war songs and *Nyama Yekugocha* was categorized as a war song. The question that emerged was that is the song a war song in its original context. Some added that it was now a victory song which is even sung during soccer matches by supporters when their team is emphatically thrashing their opponents.

Furthermore, the researcher conducted a narrative interview which is a qualitative research method wherein individuals share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives [6]. It involved open-ended questions, fostering a detailed narrative [7]. The interview included an ethnomusicologist, two music lecturers, and a traditional leader in the chieftainship dynasty among the Shona people. Researchers analyze these narratives to gain insights into the interviewee's thoughts, emotions, and the broader context of their lived experiences.

3. Categorization of Shona Traditional Songs in Literature

Shona traditional songs exhibit categorization based on their suitability for diverse occasions [8]. Regarded as folk poetry, these songs manifest distinct types characterized by form, content, and performance practices [9]. Within the texts of Shona traditional songs, implicit political undertones emerge, notably in "Kudeketera" texts where lines are improvised during performances [9]. Berliner observed that war songs, naming traditional adversaries, can assume political significance by mentally substituting contemporary oppressors' names. He exemplifies this with the mid-19th-century song "*Baya Wabaya*," originally sung in wars against the Shangaani and the Matebele raids but later repurposed as a boxing anthem and, subsequently, at nationalist political rallies in the 1960s alongside songs like "*Kanda Mapfumo*" and "*Yave Nyama Yekugocha*." The dynamic adaptation of these traditional songs across historical contexts underscores their enduring socio-political relevance.

Previous literature such as Kahari has classified the songs *Nyama Yekugocha* (Meat to Roast)" and Gwindigwi (Forest) as significant of traditional war during the early years of the occupation of Zimbabwe by the colonial master. In support, Vambe argued that such songs were indicative of the power the traditional Shona oral genre has for shaping present-day *chimurenga* (War of protest) [10-11]. In addition, Kyker clearly states that the song, "*Baya Wabaya*", belongs to the genre of *nziyo dzhondo*, or songs of war [12]. Gelfand categorizes the song *Nyama Yekugocha* as a song for *kurova guva* ceremony where drumming, singing, and mbira playing accompany the procession from the kitchen hut to the grave at night. In support, Kyker further stated that the song was now being sung during *Kurova Guva* ceremonies and it is sung during a moment of heightened ritual significance, as participants exit the home of the deceased and go in procession to his or her grave, then come back across the threshold of the house, symbolically enacting the spirit's return to the family's ancestral lineage [12]. Matiore also supports that the song *Nyama*

yekugocha is still being sung by some families when they escort the spirit from the grave [13].

While Williams states that *Baya Wabaya* literally means, "To spear, to spear," hence *Baya wabaya* is a song about a battle. Williams further states that the battle referenced in this song could be a conflict between two people, or an inner battle; the slaying of one's demons, or dealing with all manner of suffering. The essence of its sentiment is that a person in conflict is one whose world is turned upside down and that conflict can be resolved and life returned to its natural course [14].

Limited literature has, however, categorized *Nyama Yekugocha* as a funeral song. Funeral songs are sung to share the sad moments or to bear the same burden with the bereaved [15]. In short, singing consoles the bereaved who mourn and lament the departed. Men sitting around the corpse inside the hut mainly sang these songs as a send-off to the bereaved to his or her final resting place. Ganyata stated that different songs were sung in various areas and each time the songs were sung, it marked the apex of the somber atmosphere [15]. If the deceased was a king, songs such as *Nyama yekugocha* (Meat for roasting) could be sung. The song was considered sacred like any other funeral song. Literature that supports the categorization of *Nyama yekugocha* as a funeral song is has gaps in contextualizing the lyrics of the song and funeral process hence the prominence of scholarship favoring it as a hunting song or traditional war song.

4. Semiotics in the Shona language and culture

This study explores Shona traditional music in the Shona culture through the lens of semiotics, which is the scientific study of signs in expressing ideas [16]. A 'sign, can be regarded as any physically created form representing an object or a category of related objects, events, or feelings, known as a referential domain. Saussure states that semiotics emphasizes the interdependent relationship between the interpretant, semiotic object, and sign. In this context, Saussure highlights the linguistic sign's arbitrary connection, uniting a concept and a sound image, divided into signifier and signified components within this inseparable combination [17]. Peirce defines a sign as a conveyance from an external source into the mind [18]. According to Pierce, semiotics involves three branches which are icon (resembling the object), index (having a causal connection), and symbol (dependent on convention). This semiotic framework combines these elements, emphasizing representation's recursive nature and its pervasive role in human cognition [16].

Verbal expressions in a Shona funeral rite are not isolated; nonverbal elements play a crucial role in conveying profound meanings related to the deceased's identity and character. Paralanguage in the Shona traditional music such as vocables are regarded as expressive vocal aspects beyond language, including affective tone, prosody, and rhythmic patterns [19]. Notably, Saussure's linguistic sign alone is insufficient to encompass these nonverbal signs in the Shona cultural expression [17]. Henault underscores Saussure's semiotic theory's significance in signification for both conceptual and linguistic aspects, asserting its relevance in

explaining human experiences. In the context of a Shona funeral rite, this theory elucidates linguistics processes, unraveling the essence of the rite of passage and death experiences. In the dynamism of, human cognitive abilities encounter formidable challenges in interpreting sensory input, and guiding behavior in specific contexts. It is therefore important to trace cultural-semiotic processes that informed the original creation of the signs or symbols that may be in a traditional song or story. As culture transforms interactions with modernity and other cultures this will culminate in a revised self-understanding, and change the meaning and symbols of songs [20].

5. Findings: Tracing the lost Funerary Semiotics in Nyama Yekugocha

The findings on the categorization of the song *Nyama yekugocha* indicate that it was a ceremonial song for the mummification process of the chiefs and the public funeral ceremony of the chiefs. One participant who is an alumni member of the Zimbabwe College of Music stated that

“...based on the teaching of Dumisani Maraire, the song was neither a hunting song nor a war song but a funeral song. The song was a funeral song and it was sung in a sacred and sombre song at the funeral of a traditional chief.”

In the Shona tradition when a chief was seriously sick and in the throes of death he was moved out of the family compound and they would build a camp known as musasa (with tree branches) usually close to the river or under sacred trees or in a mountain. Another participant also added that when the chief was seriously ill an echelon of top-ranking family members, clan leaders, the chief's witchdoctor, and a Dunzvi (a nephew of the chief) would carry the chief away from his home to a secret place, and prepare him for death.

In support of the above findings, it was also established in an interview with one ethnomusicologist who is also a member of the Shona chieftainship dynasty that the original context of the song *Nyama Yekugocha* was that it was a funeral song. He stated that

“When the chief was terminally ill, he would be carried out of the first wife (Vahosi) 's house clandestinely, and if people ask where the chief is she will say he has traveled. The team that would escort the king will be his first son who is the heir apparent (Nevanji), nephew (muzukuru), and all his cabinet members (Machinda). The team will choose a location that is at the foot of a mountain and close to the river. The party would make a camp where the chief would be treated or just given palliative care. One of the leaders would perch on the mountaintop to spot if any spies were coming.

It was further established that when the chief would have succumbed to death pallbearers would begin the process of mummifying the body of the chief. The Shona people were not as sophisticated as the Egyptians in the process of mummifying so they used open fire for the process.

Furthermore, the alumni participants confirmed that,

“when the fire was set up the pallbearer would kill an ox and they would cut out pieces of beef and roast it in the fire so that they would block the smell of the human body being roasted. As the human body was being roasted some parts of the body would decay and bulge out with watery sacs about to explode. The pallbearer will take prickles to pierce out the bulging sacs and it was called the release of the spirit of the chief (Mhondoro). So the water would ooze out together with blood. The process was meant to make sure that the body was properly mummified. At this stage, the nephew or grandchild known as Dunzvi would then start to sing the song “Sekuru yave nyama yekugocha” (My uncle/grandfather is now meat for roasting). Baya wabaya (stab stab-the body is being pierced everywhere by everyone) “Yowe rere” (vocables and embellishments)”

In a similar narrative, it was further established in an interview with a traditional leader that the concept of *nyama yekugocha* (meat to roast) came in three forms during the mummification of the chief. He stated;

“When the chief dies, a bull is slaughtered and immediately its testicles will be roasted and eaten without salt. The rest of the meat will be roasted thereafter. The body dead chief will morphed into a sitting position laid on top of large clay pots (magate) and then roasted using the same fire which is roasting the meat this marks the beginning of the mummifying of the body of the chief for a period of almost four weeks. This became the original context of Kugocha nyama (roasting of meat) in three phases which are the testicles, the rest of the carcass, and the chief's body. At this stage, the song Nyama yekugocha will be sung in a sacred, somber, and sorrowful tone to ease the pain, grief, and gory process of roasting the chief.”

The lyrics *baya wabaya* can also be tracked to the mummification process of the chief. This was also supported by an ethnomusicologist who is also a member of the royal dynasty of chiefs when he stated that

“ The chief's body would start oozing out water as the body was starting to decompose and the water would be dripping into the large clay pots. The elders would use a tree called Mubaya Mhondoro and sharpen it and use it to roast the meat while the prickles of the tree will be used to perforate the watery sacs on the decaying body of the chief. This is where “baya wabaya” originally came from. Since the water was coming out of the decomposing body it would have a strong stench and become a habitat of maggots. The roasted meat smoke will be used to cover the stench but to no avail. As the maggots increase they would try to crawl out of clay pots but because of the shape of the clay pots, most will have difficulties. When the first maggot crawls out the elders will celebrate the coming out of the Mhondoro (medium). The emergence of the first maggot marked the end of the roasting process. The chief will be covered by the hide of the slaughtered beast and carried to the sacred cave at night. The king is buried

only by the few people who had been part of the mummifying rite.

A lecturer stated that the mummification created a prolonged funerary mood that was somber and sacred only the music helped to ease the sorrow and pain.

When the mummification was completed the chief would be covered with the hide of the slaughtered beast and he would be carried at night to the sacred burial cave (Nhingwa). The death of the king was not in the public domain, it was only announced only after the secret burial of the chief where a public funeral would be held for many days. In support of this, it was confirmed in an interview that the song was also a ceremonial song at the public funeral of the chief well after his secret burial. It was established in an interview with an ethnomusicologist who stated that

“After the burial of the chief, the announcement of the death is made through the beating of the funeral drum. The mourners will gather at the chief’s palace where all his cabinet members will slaughter a beast each and the chief’s family will also slaughter other beasts. The meat will be plenty and people will start to sing the song Nyama yekugocha again”

In support, a lecturer at the Zimbabwe College of Music also confirmed that the song *Nyama yekugocha* was indeed a ceremonial song for funerals and the vocable “*Yowe rere*” signified a form of wailing of a person who was mourning openly and uncontrollably.

6. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that the original context of the song was that it was sung during the mummification of the chief and the public funeral of the chief. The traditional context, of the *Nyama yekugocha* song in the findings, is in line with Ganyata's funerary categorization and with some inference similar to Kyker and Maraire *kurova guva* category. The song contents clearly show the performance rites of a chief and the somber funerary atmosphere that engulfed the gory mummifying process of roasting a dead man. This is supported by Vambe who agrees that within rites of passage, songs unveil cultural energies, bearing the essence of a people's heritage [11-12-15]. In ritual settings, songs transcend mere mythic content, becoming intricate narratives reflecting realities subtly.

Kugocha nyama (roasting meat) creates a triple image of the ritual where there is the roasting testicle of the slaughtered bull, the roasting of the rest of the beast through the whole ritual, and the actual mummification of the chief. Roasting without salt was significant of the pure communion of the chief as he was making his passed to the ancestral world. The sight of maggots and stench which was covered in the beef roasting smoke underlies the cultural energy and heritage preservation [21].

The findings also differ from previous literature on the use of the lyrics *baya wabaya* (stab and stab). The words *baya wabaya* symbolise some form of indiscriminate stabbing which is derived

from the roasting of meat and the continuous perforation of the watery sacs on the body of the chief during the mummification process. *Baya wabaya* also refers to the roasting of plenteous meat during the public funeral ceremony of the chief. This contradicts the hunting images or war symbolism such as the Williams translation of *baya wabaya* to mean “to spear to spear”[14]. The use of the spear suggests bloodshed either in war or during hunting yet roasting stabbing was done with some sharpened sticks or prickles from a tree known as *Mubaya mhondoro*. *Baya wabaya* was also a freeing process of the deceased’s spirit in the form of perforating the bulging water sacs which later created the habitant of maggots whose emergence from the clay pot signified the passage of the chief’s spirit into the ancestral world.

The vocables in the song *Nyama yekugocha* help in categorizing it as a funeral ceremonial song. The transcription of the vocables “*Yowe re re*” by Matiure reveals a distinctive tonal characteristic, with the pitch situated prominently high in the base range within the Shona musical spectrum. In Shona culture, such elevated pitches traditionally connote expressions of intense sorrow, mourning, or lamentation, commonly associated with funeral dirges or poignant cries [13]. The deliberate placement of these vocables in the upper tonal range reflects a nuanced cultural coding, aligning with the Shona musical traditions' established conventions and emphasizing the emotive resonance embedded within the lyrical and sonic dimensions of the song “*Nyama yekugocha*.” The paralinguistic in these vocables provides semantic prosody that can assist in interpreting the meaning and context of the song [19]. In support of the previous studies, it can be noted that voice modification in this song was tailored to the funeral ceremony through the use of factors like voice set, physiological characteristics, and recognizable speech events [19]. This categorization of the song as dirge is mostly elaborated by mood, pitch range, articulation, rhythm, resonance, tempo, and specific vocalizations like crying which provide a comprehensive understanding of human utterances [19-22]. In essence, the song was an African dirge that served as a communal expression of grief, offering reflection and solace to the bereaved after the death and burial of the chief hence a funeral ceremonial song.

Comparatively, the song has similar paralinguistic features as in the song by Xavier Matias called “Tormented Soul” popularly known as “*Yei Yei*” which is purely a mourning or lamenting funeral song. Xavier Matias's distinctive composition, “Tormented Soul” features a solitary acoustic guitar, its slow, mournful tones harmonizing with the artist's heartrending vocals. Though the artist's indigenous background remains unknown, the repeated vocables convey profound reflection and dejection [19]. The use of vocables “*yei yei yei yeee yeeeeee*” denote deep reflection, as well as dejection, is distressing and captivating. Furthermore, the refrain is a high-pitched or piercing guttural vocable “*aaaaayi ayi, ahhhh yayayaaa*” highlighting the intensity of the pain experienced at the time [19]. Unlike *Nyama Yekugocha* which is a funeral ceremonial song, the Tormented Soul’s high-pitched refrains symbolising intense pain, akin to literal weeping. In support of Teya and Guvamatanga interpreted as a blend of deep groaning and wailing,

the composition resonates as a poignant, melancholic expression of sorrow, as noted by Xavier Matias's unique song makes use of a singular instrument an acoustic guitar whose slow, sonorous, and mournful strains accompany the vocables of the no-word or wordless song [23]. In Zimbabwe, the song has now gained diverse interpretations with a predominant usage when a national hero has passed on. Despite the song's indeterminate cultural origin, the song has transformed to serve as a unifying force, bringing together various cultures in the collective expression of grief [19-24].

7. Semiotics beyond the funeral dirge

The song Nyama Yekugocha like many other songs has transformed to have other symbolic meanings from the early 19th century to the present. The most popular meaning has been the *Kurova guva* categorization which has spiritual links with death more than war. *Kurova guva* was a process of bringing the spirit of the dead into the family as a guiding and protecting ancestor. In this case, the song *Nyama yekugocha* might have been the last song that was sung as the *mhondoro* (medium) was being sent to the ancestral world upon mummification and burial. Being a familiar song it would be sung to invite the spirit and create a supernatural pathway for the spirit to travel from the forest to the home. Maraire and Gelfand identified the commonest the commonest song for this ritual being *Nyama yekugocha*. The process of bringing back the spirit is in most cases as somber as a funeral and the song invokes the sad loss of the chief who may be causing sickness as a way of demanding his return through *kurova guva* [25]. Its performance during *kutora mudzimu* (bringing ancestor home) transcends sacred and secular space, bringing participants who have spent much of the ceremony in the ritual realm of the kitchen outside as they move into the symbolic wilderness inhabited by the spirit of the deceased since his or her death [26]. The song becomes a touchstone of the spirit of the dead as it was the last melody that sent him to the netherworld [27-30].

It is pertinent to acknowledge the transformation of the song into a victory anthem. However, Maraire's classification of the song within a war context appears strained. He suggests that "*Yave nyama yekugocha*" may signify the spirit's triumph over dwelling in the forest, enabling it to reunite with ancestors in the spiritual realm. This categorization lacks contextualisation of the song's content but assigns it a transformative status as a victory anthem in hunting or war. Consequently, *Nyama yekugocha* is portrayed in this new category as either the adversary or the slain wild animal undergoing roasting.

The song has evolved to encapsulate symbols associated with the national colors, tracing its origins to the historical wars of the Shona people and extending to the liberation struggle, as well as victories in national sports events. It has emerged as a significant emblem within the realm of sports, contributing to the cultivation of a cohesive national identity and representing the collective aspiration for triumph over prevailing national socio-economic challenges. This transformation underscores its multifaceted role in

not only commemorating historical struggles but also in fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose in the face of contemporary societal issues.

Notably, the diminishing sanctity attributed to *Nyama yekugocha*, coupled with the confidentiality surrounding Shona burial customs, particularly attended only by the elderly, has resulted in a diminished awareness among the younger generation. Consequently, the song has transitioned primarily into an entertainment context. Factors such as the impact of funeral companies, the prevalence of Christian beliefs favoring religious songs, and technological advancements further contribute to the diminishing prominence of indigenous funeral songs.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the diverse contextual transformations and symbolic meanings associated with the Shona song "*Nyama yekugocha*." Originally sung during the mummification of a chief and public funeral ceremonies, the song's traditional context aligns with funerary categorization and *kurova guva* category. The song vividly depicts the solemn funeral rituals and the primitive process of roasting the deceased chief during the ritualistic stabbing in the mummification process, challenging interpretations linked to hunting or war symbolism. The vocables in the song contribute to its categorization as a funeral ceremonial song, with their tonal characteristics and cultural coding conveying intense sorrow and lamentation. Beyond its contested categorization, the song has acquired additional meanings, such as its association with national victories, sports events, and the cultivation of a unified national identity. However, the diminishing sanctity of the song, coupled with evolving burial customs and societal changes, has led to a decline in awareness among the younger generation, relegating the song to a primarily entertainment role. Despite the evolving symbolism of the song language preservation is important and community engagement is essential, in promoting the original paralanguage, symbols, and contexts through bottom-up approaches that encourage Shona community involvement in preserving and promoting their cultural legacy.

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