

KILUMI DANCE AS A HEALING MODALITY: AN INTEGRATION, CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Kilumi is an established cultural religious dance that remains very much alive to the Akamba, although its socio-religious occasions are on the decrease. In Kenya, there is limited empirical literature on kilumi. This article examines the role of kilumi among the Akamba of Kitui County. Specifically, the article analyzes, interprets and documents kilumi as a healing modality. Also, the factors contributing to the decline of the kilumi dances are highlighted. This article has been adapted from the author's Master of Arts thesis in which content analysis approach was adopted in analyzing the data. Further, the researcher participated in kilumi dances. The respondents were sampled from the five divisions of Kitui District by then. A flexible questionnaire was used to procure the necessary information from the respondents; traditional and church elders. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. These raw data were augmented by information from the libraries to provide the basis for analysis and interpretation. The findings indicated that *Kilumi; a sacred dance* comprises many rituals and is used for socio-cultural and therapeutic purposes. It is hoped that the documentation of this article will influence further scholarly research by those who may be interested in this field of knowledge.

KEY WORDS: Akamba; Dance; Kilumi; *Mundumue* (Diviner; Medicine man/woman); Therapy

1. INTRODUCTION

Kilumi is a form of therapy although its socio- religious occasions are decreasing. In Kenya, there is limited empirical literature on this cultural dance. There are few studies on Kilumi as a sacred rain dance used by the Akamba to “pray for rain” during drought. This article provides knowledge on kilumi as one of the cultural therapeutic interventions used by the Akamba during difficult times. This article examines the role of kilumi among the Akamba of Kitui County. It aims to create awareness to any interested stakeholder about the Akamba religious dances. Even with the few studies that have been done in Kenya none to the author’s knowledge has targeted kilumi from a psychological perspective; as a form of therapy.

The article discusses the therapeutic potential of kilumi. In addition, the factors contributing to the decline of the kilumi dances are explicated. By filling this gap in research literature, this study has provided scholars of cultural dances elsewhere with some useful insights.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is discussed herein. A multi-disciplinary approach was used because the nature of the study which combined both religion and music could only best be approached using tools developed in different academic disciplines.

Ray (1976:16) felt that: Polymethodic approach ... adopted is demanded by the very nature of African religions. As numerous scholars have recognized, African religions are part and parcel of African cultural life. Religious phenomena are thus closely interwoven with social, psychological, and moral dimensions. For this reason, the study of African religions must be polymethodic and multidimensional. The overall aim was to fuse several approaches to a coherent framework which was useful in the analysis of the kilumi dances, and rituals.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher participated in kilumi dances, observed and subsequently analysed the significance of kilumi rituals, and dances.

2.1 Sampling technique

2.1.1 Informants

The respondents were sampled from the five divisions of Kitui District by then.

- 1) The subjects and key informants were both female and male traditionalists (elders). They were either qualified Akamba *ngui* or *atumia* (elders) aged 60years and above. They were knowledgeable on the Akamba cultural and religious practices for they had gone through the Akamba traditional initiation rites. Also, they had participated in most of the religious dances. For this category, the respondents were selected by random and snow-ball techniques. That means, after contacting one *ngui*, he/she was able to direct the researcher to another.
- 2) The second group of informants consisted of Christians. The respondents were selected from the prominent churches in Kitui, namely: African Inland Church (AIC); Catholic Church and African Brotherhood (ABC).
- 3) The third category consisted of kilumi dancers and any other knowledgeable person who were interviewed afterwards in order to avoid bias from the first two categories of informants.

2.1.2 Sample size

Although the research included all the five divisions of Kitui District by then, forty respondents were selected from certain Locations in which, the Akamba traditional beliefs and practices are prevalent.

In Central Division which comprised 6 locations, 4 interviewees were interviewed from each location totaling to 24 interviewees. In the other 4 divisions, data was obtained from 4 interviewees from each division giving a total of 16 interviewees. Therefore, the sample size comprised 40 informants

2.1.3 Limitations of the study

The study did not cover the Machakos district. It was restricted to Kitui District. In addition, the researcher did not participate in all the kilumi religious dances.

2.1.4 Data collection methods

Research instruments

An open questionnaire was used for this research. Since most of the old traditionalists are not able to read in English, personal interviews were conducted orally in homes, places of traditional / religious activities or at other convenient places. A tape-recorder was used to tape some of the interviews although some of the informants were somehow uncomfortable with them. In most cases, open-ended questions were used and in cases where these proved unproductive, non - directive method was employed. This means the researcher had to digress from the questionnaire and the informant was allowed to talk on and on, and was only interrupted with questions where necessary. At times, some of the medicine people interviewed proved to be difficult probably because they were not ready to reveal their secrets. Therefore, the one-on-one in-depth questions helped to gather a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and the meanings that they attached to them as they share in their own words without limitation or direction.

2.1.5 Participant observation

The researcher partially participated in some of the kilumi dances. Participation gave the researcher direct experience and a chance to observe and appreciate these dances from a distance. Bearing in mind that kilumi is danced at night, after every dance, the researcher recorded her experience immediately upon reaching home.

This study is not an exception from other researches. There were problems encountered during the field research. Some of the informants had no time to spare for questions. Therefore, sometimes the researcher was forced to enquire about some issues and leave others. Some of them refused to part with information unless snuff or beer was bought for them. Others refused to sing because they believed kilumi songs and drums were sacred songs and instruments respectively. Hence, they were supposed to be sung and played at a specified particular time. They strongly believed that if they sung at odd times, the spirits could be annoyed and hence, possess (or inflict) some people there and then.

Again, some informants had problems remembering the old kilumi songs. Memories of some had faded away and they could not remember the systematic procedures of how the kilumi rituals were performed. Transcription and translation of these songs was not easy. Occasionally, the researcher

had to go back to the field to obtain some enlightenment from one who was acquainted with the figurative expressions and sayings.

Ethical considerations

The researcher obtained approval from Kenyatta University to allow her to carry out the study. She also explained the purpose of the study and sought consent from the participants. The participants were assured of their safety and confidentiality as they participated in the study. The participants were given liberty to participate in the study and they gave their consent. They were also allowed to withdraw from it if they sensed discomfort or difficulty during the study.

2.1.6 Data analysis methods

In analyzing the data, this study adopted content analysis approach. Content analysis is a systematic research technique that provides a method for the qualitative and quantitative analysis of a corpus of information, generally text (Ward, 2012). According to Travers (1958), content analysis is the analysis of the properties of verbal materials; although the same term is applied to the analysis of all forms of symbolic communication regardless of whether it is printed or not. Shapiro and Markoff, (1997) defined content analysis as any methodological measurement applied to text (or other symbolic materials) for social science purposes. A common starting point for qualitative content analysis is often transcribed interview texts. The data obtained was first checked for completeness. The researcher went through all the tapes, transcribing them verbatim in Kikamba. Afterwards these data were translated into English. An attempt was made to group the answers systematically according to their content and the objectives of the study. This was done on index cards but these were raw data, not compared with the other existing literature. The oral data was incorporated and compared with relevant literature from the libraries, archives and other written sources in order to provide the basis for analysis and interpretation. After processing and analysing the data, the findings and conclusions were presented in relation to the objectives of the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Kenya, kilumi as an established cultural dance remains very much alive to the Akamba. However, its socio-religious occasions continue to adapt and are on the decrease. Kilumi is a sacred dance and is used for socio-cultural and therapeutic purposes. For example, one of the objectives of the ceremony is to seek spiritual intervention that produces rain (Koster, 2011). It is also a therapy for those possessed by the spirits.

For purposes of this study the term “rainmaking” is restricted to “the rites which accompany prayers for rain” (Mbiti 1975: 111). According to Mbiti (1969), “making” rain is entirely God’s mandate nonetheless it is the responsibility of people to summon God’s rain. Hence, “rainmakers” are the people bestowed with the power to lead traditional practices, rites and rituals thought capable of controlling the weather.

The role of kilumi dance, songs and rituals and its psychosocial effects among the Kamba is crucial. The kilumi dance and songs are therapeutic during times of individual or communal challenges. Kilumi is performed during times of sorrow such as lack of rains, drought and famine; during social occasions or times of joy such as harvesting, planting and initiation of medicine people; and as a means of protection, especially after the death of a person or after the birth of an illegitimate child.

Kilumi is a therapeutic rite comprising libations, offering, and prayers to Ngai, the Creator and Supreme Being, and Aimu, the spirits of the departed. These spirits are invoked for psycho-social and spiritual blessings. Both Akong'a (1987) and Korster (2011) explain that Kilumi dances were also accompanied by the pouring of libations and offering of sacrifices to appease the spirits. This is because droughts were considered as curses for wrongdoing. Kilumi allows for community strengthening, cleansing, restoration and healing. For example, during the Kilumi occasions, everyone was expected to observe peace and purity by abstaining from quarrels and "contaminating" activities such as sexual intercourse (Gumo, 2017). In addition, in Kitui Central, there was a belief that a newly arrived stranger possessed unfamiliar powers which were displeasing the ancestral spirits. This caused drought, epidemic or any other natural disaster. Such a stranger would be peacefully expelled from the community by a large group of married women carrying small drums (Akong'a, 1987; Korster, 2011).

Kilumi is a form of a religious or sacred dance comprising of many rituals. Specific dance movements are used and referred to as kusunga or kwina. The dancers and musicians are all in a transcended state, giving them power, and eventually leading to the healing of the community. In the climax of the dance, it is believed that there is a connection with the rain spirit. The arrival of the rain spirit in the ritual is symbolic on several levels: 1) the community can expect rain and fertile crop production; 2) the eventual healing and revitalization of the community which has been afflicted; and 3) the Akamba ritual was successful and the community will be blessed. According to Gumo (2017) successful Kilumi dances culminated with celebrations as the community expected favourable response of rain from the spirits. The absence of the spirit during the ritual means that the community can expect hard times.

In the traditional African setting, songs prove to be an authentic expression of the outlook of the people, as observed by Mbiti (1975). For example, when sung as the drummers beat the *miase* (kilumi drums) rhythmically, the songs literally express the Akamba hopes, fears, thoughts and beliefs. In the same breath, in an analysis of the kilumi songs and their religious interpretations, Musau (2013) concluded that frequently, songs and dances fulfil socio-political and religious functions.

In summary, kilumi rituals and dances can be classified into four categories suggested by the Akamba elders (Musau, 2013), namely:

- 1) Worship kilumi (*kilumi kya ithembo*).
- 2) Therapeutic kilumi (*kilumi kya Aimu*).
- 3) Cleansing kilumi (Kilumi danced at the *isyuka*; New grains/harvest kilumi; Birth/death kilumi).
- 4) Initiation kilumi (kilumi for initiation of *mundumue*/medicine person; *ngui*/songsters).

3.1 Kilumi dance as a therapy

Monteiro and Wall (2011) stated that in the African worldview, dance is a conduit of individual and community healing. According to Pinniger, Thorsteinsson, Brown, and McKinley (2013) mindfulness interventions and physical activities can produce positive effects on mood disorders; such activities may be options for individuals who search for non-traditional therapies, or whenever mainstream psychological treatments are not effective. Similarly, Karkou, Aithal, Zubala and Meekums (2019) concluded that Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is an effective intervention in the treatment of adults with depression.

Boas (1972) speaking of the function of dance in human society stressed that dance fulfils a vital role in the lives of people. Dance could be a therapy for the mentally and emotionally ill. It is not only expressive but also creative. It has powers to cure and vitalize, to appease and aggravate, to satisfy and discover. Dance may promote dissociation (trance induction) which is believed to be therapeutically effective. For example, dance may be viewed as a way of letting off steam in which behaviour not tolerated in everyday life may be permitted. Therefore, dance becomes a relief of anxiety which may be definitely therapeutic.

As Eliade (1987) explained, the power of dance in religious practice lies in its capacity to communicate. The efficacy of dance depends upon the beliefs of the participants particularly their faith in their ability to affect the world around them. Like the other people, the Akamba dance to effect change in individuals and community.

3.2 Prescription of kilumi dance as a therapy

In Ukamba, at times of sickness, a diviner may prescribe kilumi dance as a therapy for the patient. The dance precedes many rituals and an elaborate process of divination. The diviner asks the patient as many questions as possible to obtain the necessary information. Afterwards, a fee is determined which could range from a goat to a chicken or grains. The diviner then unwraps and sets down his/her apparatus which mainly consist of half-gourd, a musical bow, small calabashes, mutaa (Bot. Vertiallatae) a plant with a strong aroma or smell) and long narrow rattle containing seeds or marbles among others. He picks up the bow and starts communicating with the spirits through mysterious spiritual songs. Then he shakes a rattle, and jerks out the marbles several times while uttering mythical incantations to the spirits. He counts and reads the oracle from the distribution of these marbles several times.

Thereafter, the diviner informs the relatives on the detected causes such as witchcraft, the spirits' annoyance due to a breach of taboo or failure to observe some ritualized behavior.

He prescribes the right medicine although in connection with this Dundas (1913:530) observed that:

Frequently, a sacrifice is offered and names of many deceased members are called until that particular spirit molesting is mentioned and the trouble will be abated. Frequently the medicine man recommends a dance to be performed, in which the drumming and singing are his duty.

Spirit possession means more of spirit mediumship (Musau, 2013). The spirits are seen as using the possessed as their vessel (medium with a spiritual message). Also, it should be noted that it is not always the duty of that particular medicine person diagnosing, to sing and drum. There are other qualified songsters who carry out these duties.

For further elaboration, the following account could be representative of traditional kilumi practices carried out in Kitui whenever a patient is believed to be possessed by the spirits and a therapeutic kilumi is prescribed for her.

After constant disturbances by the spirits for about three months, Syombua consulted Kakunu (a medicine woman) who attributed the illness to the spirits of her grandmother. It was revealed to her that during her wedding, a goat from her natal home, which was to be sacrificed to the spirits was never delivered. Syombua and her husband went for this goat. On arriving, the songster applied some herbs on Syombua and covered her with spiritual costumes. She was instructed to dance to the beat of the drums. After dancing for a while

the diviner invoked the spirits to reveal themselves and make their request. The spirit was Mumbi (Syombua's grandmother) who requested for a dance and some blood.

The spirit was invited to dance and after dancing for a while, Kakunu shook Syombua's hands. She was led outside where the other participants joined in the dance. Meanwhile, the goat was taken round the compound and then killed (Syombua Kalungu, 0.1, 25 November 1989).

This example illustrates the traditional Akamba belief that the ancestors control their social relationships. The shaking of the hand symbolises peace making which appeases the spirits. It also serves as a sign of a friendship bond between the spirits and the society. Therefore, therapeutic kilumi is restorative. It is an attempt to re-integrate the patient into a state of harmony with his/her body and the community.

Kilumi rituals, songs and dances are signs of reverence to Mulungu for rain, fertility and health. As Ndeti (1972) observed, they signify people's satisfaction with the new harvest. In addition, they signify people's gratitude or reciprocation to the benevolent beings (Musau, 2013). They are also manifestations of communal fears and uncertainties. They are means of obtaining the assistance of superhuman beings and protection against their wrath. The beings are honoured so that they do not mar festivals. For example, in Kitui before a medicine person prescribes a kilumi dance for a patient, he/she calls upon the spirits to render some assistance. During the diagnosis, she/ he ties wild roots (herbs) round the patient's body and draws a circle leaving a gate through which the patient must enter. These herbs serve as an insurance, i.e., protective charms against any spirits which might wish to attack the patient. The circle, a symbol of veneration ensures the diviner against the malevolence of the spirits invoked. Through the gate, the patient symbolically enters into the realm of spirits for treatment. It is also a means of acquiring some power in order to enter into the spiritual realm. Therefore, such a therapeutic ritual is meant to procure protection from any malicious spirits.

The kilumi dances are means of divine communication through which the spirits impart their essence or intentions to the adherents. The dances are therapeutic in that they have the ability of giving one confidence and a feeling of power. These dances induce a meditative and devotional frame of mind and even ecstasy.

3.3 Healing

According to Turner (1982) the instrumental symbols used in Akamba rainmaking rites vary. For example, color is symbolic, and the dancers wear black, white, and red during these ceremonies. Turner views the therapeutic nature of the color white as "strength, life, health, making visible, sweeping clean, and washing impurities from oneself" (Turner, 1967). The dancers and musicians wear white to symbolize the desired state of good health. Red is associated with power and life while black symbolizes impurities, suffering, and misfortune (Turner, 1969). Black is symbolic of the initial problematic state of the community, which aims to transition into a pure, healed, and prosperous state. Thus, the colors symbolically represent the therapeutic conversion taking place during this ritual phase.

During the healing aspect of the ritual, musicians and dancers continue to harmonize and wait for the healing power of the spirit (Wasserfall, 1997). Slow chanting, singing, dancing, and in some cases stillness and prayer are evident. The community believed that unseen rainmaking ancestral spirits attended the Kilumi dances in the form of a possessed dancer or other participant. When the

rain dance spirits arrive they assess the situation. In the case of favor, the community is healed by generating rain. The ultimate goal of this ritual is spiritual presence and healing.

3.4 Rain dance socio-cultural implications

Rain dance rituals in Kenya reveal some very important socio-cultural functions that may be applied to rituals in general. In this article, the functions identified are framed against the analysis of Tribhuvan (1998) as follows:

- 1) The rain making dance presents an excellent example of how dance fosters cohesion and community togetherness. Drought creates a crisis in which the community needs to work together.
- 2) The rain making dance ritual is instrumental in the movement of the community from a state of affliction to a state of healing. The ritual symbolically represents the universal movement of the community from a state of sickness to one of good health and good standing.
- 3) The rain making dance ritual shows spiritual intervention. Therefore, rituals can be applied to resolve conflict in the society.

CONCLUSION

Musau (2013) explicates the factors contributing to the decline of the kilumi dances. Formal education, urbanization, Western technology and Christianity were identified as the major influences which have made the kilumi rituals and dance occasions to decrease. However, it was discovered that the medicine people and the strong beliefs of the Akamba have contributed to the survival of kilumi. Despite the impact of cultural flux, Kilumi dance continues to be a reality and fulfils a vital role in the lives of the Akamba.

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NB: Ethics approval for the research study was obtained from Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. Informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study was obtained from all research participants. Research participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in respect to their data. All information was kept confidential and all processed data was securely stored.

Declarations

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Availability of data and materials

The dataset analyzed during the current study is available with the First Author, the Corresponding.

Authors' contributions

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Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.