

Journal of Arts, Music, Design & Creative Industries



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How to cite this article: Musau, N., D., Mukasa, S., W. & Mutuku, J. (2026). Cultural Contexts and Musical Content of Akamba Farm Work Songs in Kenya. *Journal of Arts, Music, Design and Creative Industries*, 1 (1), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t3190>

Abstract

This article looked at how the musical content of Akamba farm work songs was influenced by underlying cultural contexts. Only the first specific objective of a qualitative ethnographic study conducted in Machakos Sub County was used to extract the article. Twelve simulated farm work performances were observed, five focused group discussions were conducted, 59 informant interviews were conducted, and Kamba farm work songs were gathered and examined. Thirteen of the twenty recorded songs were chosen for analysis. Participants' accounts were connected to the musical and performance aspects of the songs through the use of content and narrative analysis. The results demonstrated how communal farming, religious belief, oral transmission, social organization, moral regulation, and agricultural labour were all intertwined with Akamba farm work songs. Song texts, themes, rhythmic organization, mood, gesture, participation, instrumentation, and language use were all impacted by these settings. While songs like Kaveti kaanu used mockery to deter laziness, sacred songs like Tũthi Kurthembeonũge reflected prayer, sacrifice, and reliance on Ngai for rain. Tonal inflection in the Kamba language influenced melodic treatment because shifts in pitch could alter word meaning, while rhythmic movement and the sounds of farm tools were integrated into the performance. The study also discovered that the initial performance contexts had been undermined by changes in land tenure, formal education, migration, mechanised farming, colonial experience, modernisation, and shifting modes of music consumption. The article comes to the conclusion that the cultural contexts that gave rise to and maintained Akamba farm work songs are inextricably linked to their musical content.

Keywords: Akamba Farm Work Songs, Cultural Context, Musical Content, Oral Tradition, Kamba Music, Ethnography

1.0 Introduction

Recontextualization involves moving discourse or cultural material from an original setting into a new one, a process in which some material may be retained, changed, added or removed (Fryer, 2021). The underlying concern in the source study was that cultural contexts are dynamic and that musical practices also change as the circumstances that sustain them change. The Akamba farm work songs examined in the study were songs associated with communal agricultural activities, including preparation for farming, work on farms, harvesting and thanksgiving. They functioned as cultural expressions as well as practical accompaniments to agricultural life. In the traditional Kamba community, song and dance were used in many areas of life as media of communication and cultural expression. Farm work songs were closely associated with communal work on land and drew their meanings from the cultural environment in which people farmed, worshipped, socialized, transmitted values and organized labour. The study noted, however, that performance of these songs had declined as a result of changes associated with individual land ownership, mechanized farming, urbanization, education, religion and other social transformations. The weakening of the original work contexts therefore raised concern about the continuity of the songs and the knowledge embedded in them. The study was grounded in the view that musical activities are best understood in relation to the cultural background from which they arise (Simon, 1986). This is especially relevant to Kamba farm work songs because their texts, rhythms, gestures, performance roles and expressive character were intertwined with farming practices and community values. The present article isolates the first specific objective of the larger study and focuses only on how the underlying cultural contexts influenced the musical content of the Akamba farm work songs.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

A community’s musical expression reflects its social and economic activities, and changes in those activities can alter the communal relationships and cultural expressions connected to them (Simon, 1986). In the source study, the shift from communal to individual land ownership reduced communal farming activities, while mechanized farming increasingly replaced the manual labour that had provided a setting for farm work song performance. As these performance contexts declined, the songs themselves, together with the cultural knowledge and compositional practices associated with them, faced diminished use. The study therefore documented and examined the songs in order to understand the cultural contexts that shaped their musical content before those contexts and their associated knowledge became further weakened.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The objective of this article was to examine the influence of the underlying cultural contexts on the musical content of the Akamba farm work songs.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Context, Indigeneity and Kamba Music

Indigenous music was treated in the source study as the traditional music of an original ethnic community inhabiting a particular geographical region. Nketia (1964) observed that African musical traditions were historically associated with linguistic groups and cultural units that shared beliefs, values and ideals. This perspective was relevant to the Akamba because their farm work songs were understood within a particular cultural and linguistic environment. The study therefore treated the songs not merely as melodies but as expressions of community identity, belief, work practice and language. Kamba traditional music is functional in nature.

<https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t3190>

Mwikali (1990) described music as accompanying activities such as journeys, sacrifices, planting and other communal events. This functional character means that the content and expressive features of the music are connected to the activity taking place. In the context of farm work songs, the cultural purpose of the event helped determine what was sung, the mood adopted by performers, how bodies moved, the roles taken by participants and the kinds of instrumental sounds that accompanied the singing.

2.2 Socio Cultural Transformation and Musical Change

Socio cultural transformation in the source study referred to changes in social and cultural norms, values, practices and behaviours over time. Akuno (2016) argued that musical experience carries knowledge of both a cultural and an aesthetic nature. Dube (1996) similarly showed that changes in performance context can lead to new relationships between musical traditions. These ideas were relevant because the study investigated a musical tradition whose original agricultural and communal settings had been altered. The source study further noted that colonialism, urbanization and Western cultural influences had changed many traditional practices, including music (Corntassel, 2010). In the Kamba case, changes in land ownership, education, migration, mechanized farming and modes of music consumption were reported to have reduced the settings in which farm work songs were normally performed. These changes were therefore important to understanding both the musical content that developed in the earlier communal setting and the present decline in performance.

2.3 Existing Scholarship on Akamba Music

The reviewed literature on Akamba music had addressed genres, gender and identity, linguistic analysis, performance and culture, but the source study identified limited attention to farm work songs as a distinct field of inquiry. Mwikali (1990) discussed the place and functionality of different forms of Akamba music and included farm work songs among the genres considered, but did not examine their functionality in sufficient detail within traditional and contemporary settings. The source study therefore addressed a gap by examining how the cultural environment of communal farming was reflected in the content and performance of the songs.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Location

The study employed a qualitative research approach using ethnographic techniques of data gathering, processing and presentation. Interviews, focused group discussions and observation were used because the research sought to understand Kamba farm work songs in relation to the contexts in which they were performed. The fieldwork was carried out in Machakos Sub County. The location was selected because of its agricultural activity and because it provided access to Kamba participants with knowledge of traditional music and farming practices.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised elderly participants, traditional Kamba musicians, resource persons, people inclined towards music performance and existing farmers within Machakos Sub County. Purposive and snowball sampling followed the procedures described by Kisilu and Tromp (2018). Purposive sampling was first used to identify five knowledgeable participants, after which snowball sampling led to 54 additional informants, producing a total of 59 interviewees. Five focused groups were also established through the same field network. The groups included elders, choir directors, selected music teachers and village elders from different wards in the study area.

Table 1: Distribution of Interviewees by Ward

Ward	Purposive	Snowball	Total	Percentage
Machakos Central	3	18	21	35.593%
Mumbuni North	1	8	9	15.254%
Muvuuti/Kiima Kimwe	0	9	9	15.254%
Kola	1	12	13	22.034%
Mumbuni South	0	7	7	11.864%
Total	5	54	59	100%

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected through interviews, focused group discussions, observations and performances of farm work songs. The researcher attended 12 mock farm work performances, of which two were held on farms, nine in homesteads and one in a church. During performance, attention was given to singing styles, body movement, expressions, posture, gestures, instrumentation and other musical elements. Audio recorders, photo cameras and video cameras were used to preserve the performances for transcription and analysis. Twenty farm work songs were recorded and 13 were selected for detailed analysis. Content analysis and narrative analysis were used to examine the songs and compare the responses of participants. The analysis related musical happenings to the research objective, with particular attention to the cultural information expressed in texts, rhythms, performance practices and other observable musical features. Permission for fieldwork was sought from the Technical University of Kenya and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, and participants were informed about the use of their contributions for research purposes.

4.0 Results and Findings

4.1 Cultural Embeddedness and Functional Music Making

The findings revealed that Kamba farm work songs were embedded in the cultural contexts of the Kamba community. Participants described them as functional music that transformed demanding agricultural labour into a more enjoyable, engaging and communal activity. The songs supported socialization, agricultural productivity, motivation and the discouragement of practices considered unacceptable within the community. They also formed part of oral tradition through which religious practices, moral values and labour ethics were transmitted from one generation to another. The communal farming context influenced the organization of music and work. Respondents explained that responsibilities were shared according to age and gender within mwethya, and the songs helped coordinate collective effort. Social control was also expressed musically. Songs could praise hard work, mock laziness and encourage participation in farming so that the community could avoid famine and poverty. The musical content therefore reflected not only the physical act of work but also the community’s expectations about responsibility, cooperation and productivity.

Religious belief strongly shaped the content and expressive character of the songs. Participants described Ngai as the divine being associated with rain, agricultural success and community wellbeing, and also referred to names such as Mülungu, Mūmbi and Mwatūangi. This understanding was consistent with the source study's use of Mbiti (1987) on Akamba belief in a supreme creator. Songs connected with prayer and sacrifice therefore used sacred texts, and performers adopted a solemn mood when addressing the deity. Tūthi Kīthembeonī, for example, called members of the community to go to the shrine, offer sacrifice and ask for rain. The song functioned as both music and prayer within the farming culture. The belief that wrongdoing could anger God and contribute to failed rains also entered song texts. Ūla ūkūthaūka na Ngai warned against offending God and reflected the community's collective responsibility for maintaining moral and religious order. During performances of sacred material, observation showed restrained movement, reverential posture and softer expressive qualities compared with celebratory settings. This demonstrated that cultural belief influenced not only lyrical themes but also mood, gesture and the manner of performance.



The cultural context also shaped songs as instruments of social sanction. Kaveti kaanu was identified as a song used to mock a lazy young woman and provoke inactive members of the community to join farm work. Participants explained that laziness was shameful because it could lead to hunger and dependence on others. Through public singing, the community converted a social expectation about hard work into memorable musical text. The song

therefore linked entertainment with moral regulation and communal responsibility. Other songs carried meanings beyond the literal farming activity. Nithia kakautwa was performed in relation to grinding, yet participants explained that its deeper text could refer to a woman whose husband had been taken by another woman. The use of coded meaning allowed the song to address social behaviour while remaining embedded in a work setting. The findings therefore showed that farm work songs could communicate at several levels, combining the immediate activity with wider community commentary.



Figure 2: Augustine Kiio Demonstrating The Grinding Posture During Performance Of Nithia Kakautwa in A Focused Group Session

4.4 Language, Tonal Inflection and Musical Meaning

Kamba language itself influenced the musical treatment of texts. Participants identified seven vowels, namely a, e, ĩ, i, o, ũ and u, and emphasized that incorrect substitution could distort meaning. They also described Kamba as a tonal language in which pitch inflection affects semantic meaning. For that reason, the setting of words to melody required sensitivity to the tonal direction of speech so that the intended message was preserved. The source study illustrated this relationship through the word Ngai. In the musical example reproduced below, one melodic treatment communicated “God,” while alteration of the final pitches changed the intended meaning to “squirrel.” This example demonstrated that musical content was constrained and shaped by the linguistic culture of the performers. Melody was therefore not independent of language; it interacted with tonal inflection in the production of meaning.



Figure 3: Tonal inflection and semantic change in the word Ngai. A represents the setting described as “God,” while B represents the altered setting described as “squirrel” in the source study

4.5 Rhythm, Gesture, Work Movement and Instrumental Sound

Participants reported that farm work songs matched the rhythmic actions of the tools being used and helped workers maintain a steady pace. The sounds produced by hoes, shovels, threshing sticks and grinding stones could also contribute instrumental effects. In this way, the physical environment of work became part of the musical texture. During performances, body movement and gesture likewise reflected agricultural action. Upward and downward movements could represent digging, while grinding songs were accompanied by the seated posture and hand motions associated with grinding grain. The observed expressive character also changed with cultural purpose. Preparation related performances were prayerful and solemn, while other farm activities and thanksgiving could be joyful and celebratory. Whistles, ululations and vocables accompanied several performances, and the use of instruments varied according to whether performers needed their hands for work. These findings showed that rhythm, movement, instrumentation and expressive quality were shaped by the practical and cultural demands of the activity in which the song was situated.

Table 2: Observed Cultural Context and Performance Expression

Context	Performers	Expression	Body movement or gesture	Accompaniment
Preparatory stage	Men and women	Prayerful and solemn	Open hands; solemn shoulder movement	Whistle
During farm work	Men and women	Joyful	Up and down movement demonstrating digging	Whistle, ululation, vocables
Harvesting and post harvest	Women	Celebratory	Hands demonstrating harvesting actions	Whistle, ululation, vocables
Thanksgiving	Men and women	Celebratory	Vigorous shoulder and body movement	Whistle, ululation, drum, mūkanda, vocables

4.6 Oral Transmission and Intergenerational Learning

Farm work songs were reported to be important vehicles of oral literature and intergenerational transmission. Through repeated participation, younger members learned religious values, work ethics, traditional farming methods and community knowledge from older people. The study described this process as a form of apprenticeship in which the younger generation learned by observing and imitating elders. Musical performance was therefore also a learning environment, and the content of the songs carried practical as well as cultural knowledge. The findings further showed that this form of transmission had weakened. Formal education reduced the amount of time younger people spent with elders, and participants reported that school music had given greater emphasis to Western music than to African traditional music. Oral transmission was additionally affected as elders aged or died without passing on some of the repertoire. These changes reduced opportunities for young people to learn the songs in the cultural settings in which their meanings and performance practices had previously been transmitted.

4.7 Changing Cultural Contexts and the Decline of Performance

The study found that the contexts that formerly sustained Kamba farm work songs had changed substantially. Communal land ownership had supported collective farming and frequent gatherings, but subdivision of land into individually owned plots reduced the need for large communal work groups. Smaller rotational work groups known as mwethya continued for a time, but the shift from communal to more individual economic arrangements gradually reduced such practices. Mechanized farming further altered the performance environment by replacing human labour with animal drawn ploughs, tractors and other machines. Participants explained that even oxen pulled ploughs did not reproduce the coordinated human movement that had supported rhythmic singing during manual labour. Migration also weakened intergenerational transmission as Kamba people moved to towns and other rural areas, where children could grow up with less exposure to Kamba music and dance. Participants additionally associated decline with colonial policies, displacement, forced labour, missionary influence, modernization and changes in music consumption. Some reported that traditional songs and dances had been discouraged as primitive, while contemporary audiences increasingly encountered commercially promoted genres through radio, television and streaming services. The result was not the complete disappearance of farm work songs, but their movement away from the mainstream and the weakening of the social settings that once made them central to communal agricultural life.

4.8 Synthesis of Objective One Findings

Table 3: Cultural Contexts and Their Influence on Musical Content

Underlying cultural context	Influence on musical content	Illustrative material from the study
Religious belief and worship	Sacred texts, prayer, sacrifice, solemn mood, reverential gesture	Tũthi Kĩthembeonĩ; Ũla ũkũthaũka na Ngai
Communal work and labour ethics	Motivational texts, social sanction, coordination of collective effort	Kaveti kaanu
Kamba language and oral communication	Melodic setting sensitive to vowels and tonal inflection	Ngai tonal example
Physical farm work	Rhythms aligned with work movement; tool sounds used as instrumental effects	Digging, threshing and grinding performances
Oral tradition and apprenticeship	Songs carried values, knowledge and cultural memory across generations	Religious values, work ethics and farming knowledge
Social and economic transformation	Reduced performance opportunities and weakened transmission	Land subdivision, mechanization, migration, formal education and modernization

5.0 Conclusion

The study concluded that the musical content of Akamba farm work songs was inseparable from the cultural environment in which the songs were created and performed. Religious belief shaped sacred texts and expressive mood; communal labour shaped motivation, participation and rhythmic coordination; Kamba language shaped melodic treatment; and physical work shaped movement and instrumental sound. The songs therefore functioned simultaneously as music, work accompaniment, oral literature, social regulation and cultural transmission. When the underlying cultural contexts changed, the opportunities to perform and transmit the songs also diminished.

6.0 Recommendation

Documentation and preservation of Akamba farm work songs should retain the cultural information attached to the music, including the meanings of texts, religious functions, work practices, language, gesture, movement and performance setting. The source study showed that these contextual elements are necessary for understanding the musical content and for maintaining the cultural knowledge carried by the songs.

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